

Article

Sustainable Tourism Development in Jeddah: Protecting Cultural Heritage While Promoting Travel Destination

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Abstract: For a long time, tourism in Saudi Arabia has been predominantly religious and business-related. In 2019, the kingdom opened its door to tourism for the first time. It produced a significant change in the tourism industry. This research explores the balance between heritage conservation and tourism development, focusing on social, environmental, and economic aspects. The methodology is based on qualitative analysis through 15 in-depth interviews and on-field observations, with Historic Jeddah as a case study. The results confirm that tourism has profoundly changed the city of Jeddah, facilitating new opportunities and presenting new challenges. So, the new aspects that emerge, such as heritage value, economic growth, overtourism, and the travel experience, impose a new management strategy for upcoming opportunities and also challenges. These aspects highlight the management and the authenticity of the place but also provide evidence of the high costs and scarcity of services. Sustainability seems to be the framework that can guarantee an equilibrium in the development process, reducing the impact on the cultural heritage. The originality of this research is to provide a view on this tension between heritage conservation and tourism development from the perspective of an emerging travel destination.

Keywords: tourism; heritage; tourism development; heritage management; UNESCO; sustainability; Saudi Arabia; Historic Jeddah



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1. Introduction

For a long time, Saudi Arabia was mainly known as a religious destination due to Makkah and Al-Madinah al-Munawwarah, the two holy cities for Muslims worldwide [1]. Apart from pilgrims, the tourist target was initially represented by local tourists, diplomats, regional tourists mainly from the Gulf countries (GCCs), and businessmen/women.

However, in 2019, there was a significant turning point. The announcement of Saudi Arabia's opening to tourism [2] changed the country's image at an international level, showing other aspects of this geographical area that were hitherto less evident. There are already numerous pilgrims, diplomats, local tourists, and businesspeople who were also joined by cultural tourists, cruise passengers, and meeting, incentive, congress, and events participants interested in discovering the destination from new perspectives [3].

The various tourist destinations in Saudi Arabia have had to change their management models to welcome and satisfy the needs of new customers quickly and under the pressure of international solid competitiveness [4,5]. In light of this unique event from a tourism perspective, this research intends to investigate the relationship between the conservation of cultural heritage and sustainable tourism development.

The hypothesis is that opening Saudi Arabia to tourism has led to a significant change in the approach to the cultural heritage, which has suddenly become an international tourist attraction. On the one hand, the travel destination sees a considerable increase in visitors and incredible notoriety [6]. Still, on the other hand, there is an immediate need to resort to effective strategies for managing tourist flows to make tourism sustainable [7].

For this reason, Jeddah has been chosen as a case study because it presents two essential elements for this study. On the one hand, it is one of the six UNESCO sites in Saudi Arabia [8]. On the other hand, it has been among the first cities to welcome tourists starting in 2019 with events and attractions that immediately highlighted the main challenges of managing a cultural travel destination [9].

The methodology adopted is based on a continental critical analysis of the difficult balance between protecting and valorizing cultural heritage, taking the old city of Jeddah as an example.

2. Literature Review

Sustainability is “the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [10]. This definition links sustainable development to tourism through holistic application, projection toward the future, and equity. The concept of sustainability is based on indicators used for long-term planning in Agenda 21 [11] and the valorization of the human aspect of tourism as in the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism [12]. However, sustainability has evolved from a dichotomous approach to a global objective [13], closely linked to the governance model of the tourist destination [14]. More recently, the “Sustainable Development Goals” [15] have proposed sustainability objectives to be achieved by 2030 through various strategies linked to carrying capacity [16], tourism intensity, its regulation [17], the creation of impact indicators [18], and integrated application forms [19].

However, if tourism has been defined as “Travel refers to the activity of travelers. A traveler is someone who moves between different geographic locations for any purpose and any duration” [20], then culture “can be considered as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional attributes that characterize a society or social group. It includes, in addition to art and literature, ways of life, fundamental human rights, value systems, traditions and beliefs” [21]. In particular, McIntosh and Goeldner [22] introduced the term cultural tourism to indicate a form of tourism that combines travel with a place’s historical, artistic, and traditional aspects. Subsequently, Bonik and Richards [23] isolated four types of cultural tourism: the product-based one, based on cultural heritage, and the process-based one, based on the travel experience. Thus, Richards defines cultural tourism as “a process which, through tourism, transforms culture into a product” [24].

So cultural heritage development and tourism development are both interconnected [25,26]. Among the main challenges that emerge in the combination of tourism and heritage, heritage management occurs [26,27].

In Saudi Arabia, sustainability is a determining factor in promoting tourist destinations [28–31]. It is mainly linked to the theme of ecotourism, as in the cases of Al-Ahsa [32], Al-Khabra [33], and Taif [34], also present in the cases of archaeological sites such as Al-Najran [35] and urban contexts, as in the case of Al-Baha [36]. In this sense, the conservation of cultural heritage is considered essential for sustainable development [37,38].

Tourism development in Saudi Arabia is part of a project to diversify the country’s economy [39–43], from essentially religious tourism [44,45] to leisure tourism [46].

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia opened its doors to tourism in 2019 [2]. Today, through the fast and easy-to-use online portal, international visitors from 57 eligible countries can apply for an e-visa. This e-visa can be a one-year, multiple-entry visa, allowing tourists to spend up to 90 days in the country. The visa will enable tourists to participate in activities such as events, family and relatives’ visits, leisure, and Umrah, excluding Hajj, business, and studying movements [47].

However, Saudi Arabia has often linked the concept of heritage to architectural heritage [38] due to its past before the petroliferous development of the second half of the last century. Therefore, the buildings have become the symbol of a previous tradition that current legislation protects based on the cultural interest in tourism development [48].

Although urban architecture can be distinguished from rural architecture, the approach to managing cultural heritage presents a series of affinities. Contrary to the Western

vision [49], the common denominator in the sustainable approach to the conservation of architectural cultural heritage in Saudi Arabia passes through the concept of reuse [50]. It concerns specific parts of an architectural building: the interior, the exterior, or the addition of new integration elements [42], as happened for the historic Saudi buildings, recently restored as part of the promotion program tourism promoted by the Boutique Group [51].

In particular, the Old City of Jeddah has been profoundly modified by the demolition of the ancient over the last seventy years, which has significantly changed the urban fabric [52] preserved precisely through their reuse [50–53] for a more sustainable approach [54].

In the past, Jeddah's fortune was due to its role as a mercantile city and trade route of the Hijaz and as the Gate to Makkah.

However, the relationship between urban development and cultural heritage has changed profoundly [55,56]. It is further at the center of the debate following the opening of Saudi Arabia to tourism. The approach to managing cultural heritage in Jeddah has been predominantly based on its protection [57], with particular attention to the commitment to preserving the heritage for future generations [58]. However, there has also been a commitment to valorizing the cultural heritage, as in the case of the Al Balad neighborhood [59,60], aimed at the tourist development in various travel markets [61] and through the promotion of events that take place at the cultural destination, as in the case of the Jeddah Season [62] or the rise of the Hajj Route [63], bringing together past and present, as also happened previously in Dubai [64].

Indeed, the opening to tourism in 2019 has profoundly changed the profile of tourists and the demand for services. In particular, cultural tourism has highlighted a greater diversification of the tourist offer, which ranges from food road experiences [65,66] to cultural backgrounds. There are interactive museums [67] and the promotion of the artist quarter as the valorization of the Rama Museum [68]. A second category of tourists is represented by cruise passengers [69–71] and by coastal tourism, which combines relaxation on the beach with culture [72]. Finally, leisure tourism is widespread abroad and prominent in Saudi Arabia. In addition to visitors of major attractions such as the aquarium [73] or the Shark Aqualife Research Complex [74], there is also a considerable representation of tourists interested in shopping [75] and entertainment places such as large malls [76], which have required redevelopment of the urban fabric, as in the case of the Jeddah sky tower [77] or the economic area of Prince Fawaz neighborhood [9].

Umrah+ refers to a package for Muslim pilgrims that combines the traditional Umrah pilgrimage with the opportunity to visit additional cultural and historical sites in Saudi Arabia, enhancing their spiritual journey with cultural exploration [78]. So, if tourism in 2018, before the opening to tourism, was mainly for religious purposes, in 2023, the reasons for traveling may be very different [3] (Figure 1).

Finally, Saudi Vision 2030 is a visionary project that has been promoted since 2016 and is in a phase of profound acceleration based on the local development of the 17 goals of the UN 2030 Agenda. It aims to develop Saudi Arabia under three main guidelines: an ambitious nation, a thriving economy, and a vibrant society. Among the growth objectives of a vibrant society are tourism development and the promotion of cultural heritage [79]. In particular, among the so-called giga-projects are Al-Ula, Diriyah, and the Saudi Historic Mosque. All these three projects, specifically, concern the conservation and promotion of tangible cultural heritage, particularly archaeological sites and architectural buildings.

In particular, the sustainable tourism development of heritage in Jeddah is a significant topic [80]. The main area of research concerns the old city of Jeddah [81] and, in particular, the conservation and the reuse of heritage buildings [53,82,83].

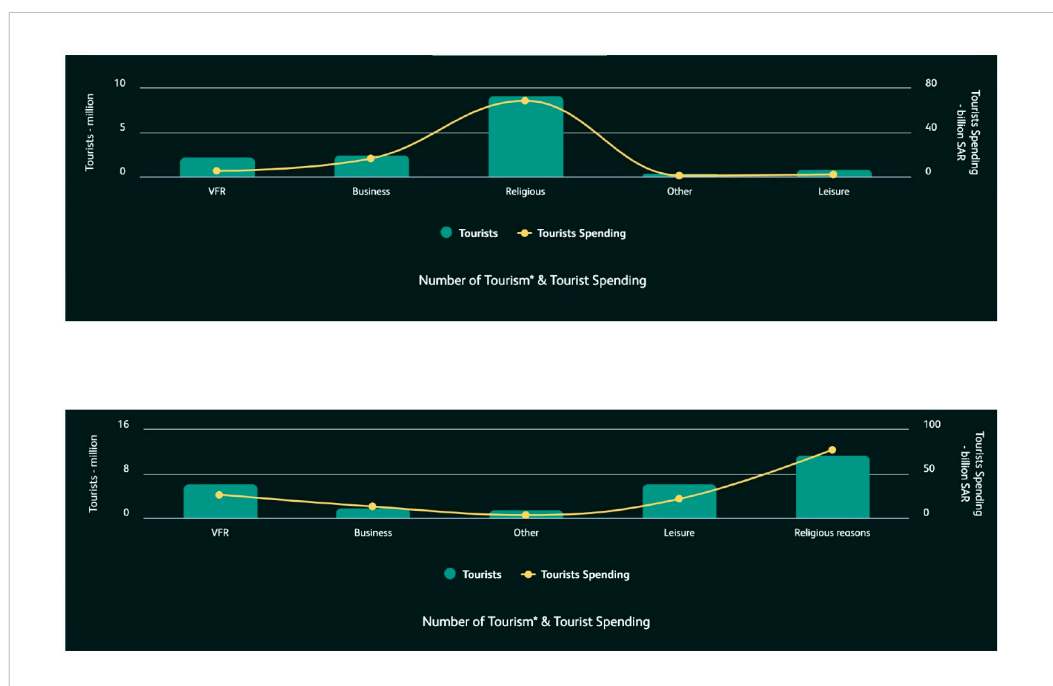


Figure 1. The purpose of the trip in 2018 and 2023 (Ministry of Tourism, 2024 [3]). * Tourist Arrivals.

3. Theoretical Framework

There are different perspectives on the management of tourism development. On the one hand, the evolutionary perspective analyzes the elements of interaction within the system and in the surrounding environment [84]. From this perspective, they provide a plurality of parts, order regulation, and calculation [85–87].

On the contrary, the co-evolutionary perspective, based on the principles of interdependence between micro (economic), meso (environmental), and macro (social) systems, highlights particular relationships [88], such as the interaction between companies and destination [89]; change, such as its evolution [90] and contradictoriness, i.e., discontinuity; and proposes a mutual adaptation of the parts involved [91] in the previous seismic model. It is based on an interconnected model [92].

The socio-cultural perspective, unlike the previous ones, adds the temporal value to the experience of the consumer for whom time is no longer only objective, as understood as the flow of time, but subjective, understood as experiential time, that is, as time lived [93]. Even time is interpreted as an evolutionary key, so much so that the time-consciousness combination becomes a co-evolutionary time [94]. Finally, more recently, the experiential perspective has established itself [95] in which the influence of the tourist in the co-evolution processes of tourist destination promotion models emerges [96,97], aimed at the methods of co-planning and co-production of the tourist experience [98].

However, lasting competitiveness emerges in sustainable contexts, producing good jobs and products [99].

In particular, cultural tourism has been considered as a transformative process [24]. Therefore, cultural heritage, understood as an attractor capable of triggering the mechanism of development, invites us to reconcile both the conservation and the valorization of rural areas and urban centers [100]. But since “heritage” is, above all, a concept strictly linked to the culture of the territories, tourism development through the promotion of cultural heritage also includes social responsibility [19,101,102] and involves the society through a bond that links territories innovation and sustainable development [103].

4. Tourism in Jeddah

Saudi Arabia’s GDP in 2022 was USD 34,000 per capita, with an annual growth of 26.82% [104]. However, if in 2021, the population of Saudi Arabia was equal to 35.95 million citizens [105], the number of people employed in the tourism sector in the same year was over 750,000 [104].

In particular, tourism spending in 2023 was SAR 142 billion, with 27 million inbound international tourists, 432,000 overnight stays, and a medium of 15-day stay in the country. In particular, the data concerning last year (2023) highlight that the heating season is in June, with tourists coming mainly from GCC, the Middle East, and Asia [3] (Figure 2).

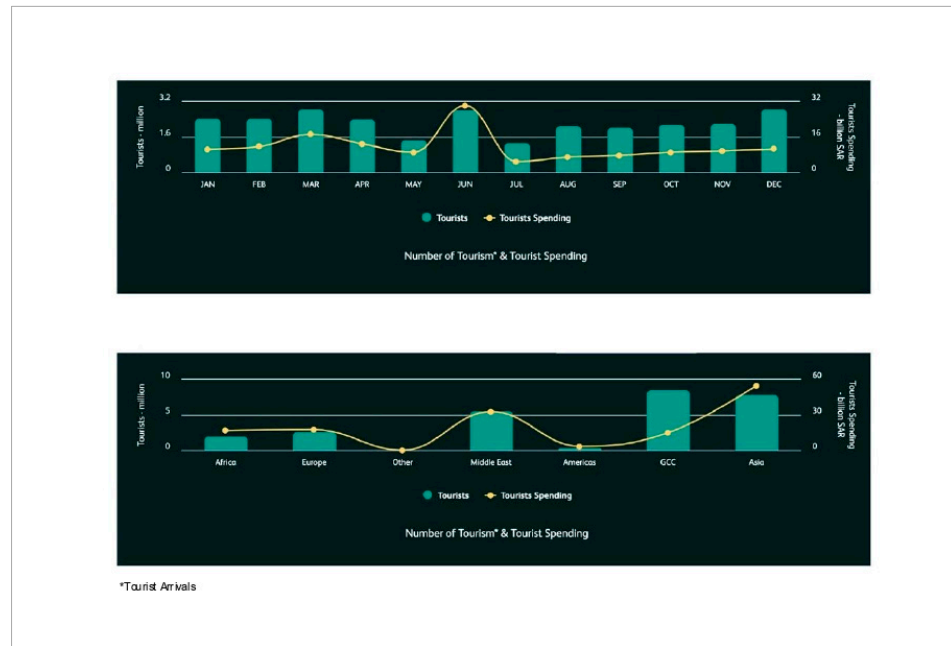


Figure 2. Monthly visits and origin of the travelers (Ministry of Tourism, 2024 [3]). * Tourist Arrivals.

Apart from Makkah and Medina, these tourists mostly visit Riyadh, Al-Ula, and Jeddah. The visitors and the main highlights are as follows (Table 1):

Table 1. Tourism in Riyadh, Al-Ula, and Jeddah.

The City	The Destinations		Number of Visitors
	Name	Type	
Riyadh	Diriyah—Winter Season	Cultural (UNESCO listed)	5 million [106]
	Boulevards	Recreational	
Al-Ula	Al-Ula (Old Village)	Cultural	250,000 [107]
	Hegra	Cultural (UNESCO listed)	
	Dadan and Ekma	Natural	
	Elephant Rock	Natural	
Jeddah	Historic Jeddah	Cultural (UNESCO listed)	5.5 million [108]
	Corniche promenade	Natural/Recreational	
	The city walk	Recreational	

5. Methodology

The methodology adopted is based on qualitative analysis and empirical observation.

The qualitative analysis is represented by interviews [109–112] administered to 15 tourists in Historic Jeddah based on purposive sampling. In 2022, the population in Jeddah was around 3.7 million [113] and, based on the authors' observation and chat with local authority (the number is not absolute), tourists were 2.0 million. Therefore, the authors have calculated the number of interviews according to the total number of tourists in the city based on Salter [114] (Table 2).

Table 2. Sample size for interview was chosen based on the number of tourists that visit Historic Jeddah in 2024 (Source: Salter, 1989 [114]).

Population of Study Area	Minimum	Recommended
Under 50,000	1 in 10	1 in 5
50,000–150,000	1 in 20	1 in 8
300,000–500,000	1 in 50	1 in 15
500,000–1,000,000	1 in 70	1 in 20
Over 1 million	1 in 100	1 in 25

This qualitative research aims to understand the perception of protection (state of conservation and restoration activities) and promotion (enhancement and use) in Historic Jeddah. The questionnaire consists of 24 semi-structured open-answer questions (Appendix A). All the interviewees were asked the same questions. The qualitative interviews were conducted in Historic Jeddah from October 2023 to April 2024. At the end of the field investigation process, the interviews were decoded by a deductive method based on descriptive analysis, using NVivo 14 Software. In particular, “narrative analysis refers to a set of analytical methods for interpreting texts or visual data that have a form narrative” [115]. This method was used basically to create and organize the database, code texts, identify contextual elements, and define a significance and a sense connected to the research question [115–118]. The qualitative investigation was collected into four clusters, each comprising the main themes that characterize it. Then, the cluster was charted in tables (Tables 3–6).

The observations are the results of on-field research interviews in Historic Jeddah between September 2023 and July 2024 to identify the results of the evident action promoted in recent years and only empirically visible. This method allows for the verification of hypotheses through direct experience, enabling a deeper understanding of complex systems and ensuring that the findings are both replicable and reliable [119,120]. The role of empirical observation extends beyond merely collecting data. In fact, it also involves critical interpretation and contextualization within existing knowledge frameworks. Therefore, the reliance on empirical observation thus fosters a rigorous, evidence-based approach to research that is indispensable for advancing scientific knowledge [121,122].

Table 3. Precepted economic values (Source: authors).

Precepted Economic Values	
Human resources	“I think it’s essential to train the staff on the cultural heritage for them to promote properly the site” (I, 7)
Expenditure	“Currently, housing prices in historic Jeddah are considered high, but in the near future we aspire for prices to be lower” (I, 11)
	“It is considered expensive, and not affordable for everybody” (I, 4) “Too expensive compared to the other places in the world and the facilities are not yet available for the international tourists” (I, 9)
Tourist services	“I am happy to see the huge number of workers working under one goal: “Jeddah is our identity” (I, 3) “Too light if you want to attract tourists. But the organization during Ramada seems good” (I, 9)

Table 4. Heritage (Source: authors).

Heritage	
State of conservation	<p>“Per on the nature of what’s going on in historical Jeddah, I believe the conservation process started late, yet it’s more valued to keep what’s remained. . .” (I, 8)</p> <p>“The Historic Jeddah Project is making great efforts on this subject, which has a major role in preserving the region’s treasures and antiquities” (I, 3)</p> <p>“As a priority to preserve the traditional material to keep the heritage approach” (I, 9)</p>
Presence of private sponsors	<p>“It has a contributing role in raising awareness of the region and its sustainability” (I, 3)</p> <p>“It could be an option and an opportunity” (I, 4)</p> <p>“In the end, it’s a business strategy for increasing the tourism revenues. . .” (I, 8)</p>
Cultural values	<p>“It means a lot. We must all be interested in our heritage to be inspired by our ancestral techniques and knowledge to combine the present and the past” (I, 7)</p> <p>“It is true Saudi authenticity” (I, 11)</p> <p>“It means a lot to know the nobility, originality, customs, and traditions of peoples and nations and their differences and similarities. And watch the continuous ones and the ones that disappear. It means understanding it, respecting it, and not denouncing it” (I, 14)</p>

Table 5. The main reasons for limiting tourist access (Source: authors).

Main Reasons for Limiting Access to Tourists	
Preserving heritage	<p>“Limiting the number of visitors per entry helps preserve it. Not a ban” (I, 14)</p> <p>“Restricting entry in a way that ensures the preservation and sustainability of the area’s antiquities” (I, 3)</p> <p>“I think it’s important to limit the access in some areas to protect some specific buildings” (I, 7)</p>
Preserving memory	<p>“Most Saudis, especially the new generation, lack a sense of belonging to their history isn’t taking that space in their life; it’s more reflected as a trend other than the scenes of belonging to a certain history” (I, 8)</p>
Preserving local ancient traditions	<p>“Important to keep life and activities as per the past” (I, 9)</p>

Table 6. Sentiment analysis (Source: authors).

Sentiment Analysis Values	
Beauty	“ . . . to discover its beauty and identity that remains today” (I, 3)
History	“I saw the ancestors. . . I saw the glories. . . I saw history. . . I saw the ruins” (I, 11)
Authenticity	“An authentic urban heritage, to which thousands flock around the clock” (I, 3)

6. Results

6.1. Qualitative Analysis

The results highlight different types of users divided based on age, gender, work, duration of the experience, type of visitors, and link to the Historic Jeddah website. In particular, the profile that emerges is of local male citizens, those over 50 who have worked in the tourism sector for over ten years and are linked to the city precisely due to their work (Figure 3).

Link			Gender		Work		Duration	
Tourism (46%)	Family (20%)	Business (20%)	Female (53%)	Male (47%)	Tourism (60%)		More than 10 years (54%)	
	Visit (7%)	Residence (7%)						
Kind of Visitors			Year		Employee (20%)		5–7 Years (20%)	
Local Jeddah Citizens (46%)	International Tourists (27%)		Over 50 (40%)	30–39 (13%)				
	Saudi Citizens (13%)			40–49 (40%)	Education (6%)	Authority (7%)		
Other (14%)			Other (7%)		Other (7%)		5–7 years (13%)	Less than 1 year (13%)

Figure 3. Typology of interviewers (Source: authors).

The main motivation for travel to Historic Jeddah is linked to cultural themes, particularly the culture and memory of the place and the uniqueness of the site as a UNESCO heritage site, and less so to factors linked to leisure tourism and events (Figure 4).

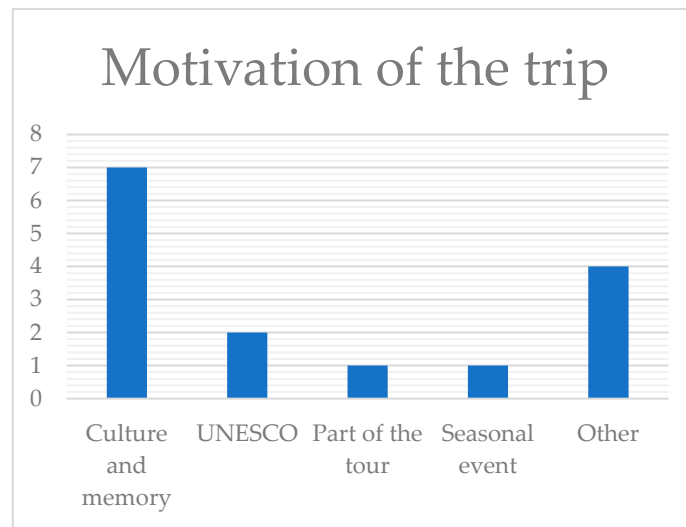


Figure 4. The motivations for the trip (Source: authors).

The results were divided into thematic areas. Among these emerge (1) the economic growth, (2) the heritage value, (3) the overtourism, and (4) the travel experience. Each cluster was then made up of specific classes and themes, which were analyzed individually (Figure 5).

Heritage value			Travel Experience	
Managing Cultural Heritage	Learning about workers	Presence of private sector conservation	Top of mind attractions	Sentiment analysis
Reason of travelling	Restore some parts of HJ			
Economic Growth			General evaluation	
Importance of HR	Promotion	Expenditure	Costs evaluation	Overtourism
Most usefull services	Donation of symbolic USD 1	Extra budget allocation		Limiting access
				Increasing number of visitors

Figure 5. Clusters' division (Source: authors).

Cluster 1—Economic Growth

The first cluster highlights some aspects linked to the economic sphere: (1) human capital, (2) spending capacity, and (3) tourist services (Table 3).

The general opinion of tourists on Historic Jeddah is predominantly upbeat. Regarding the quality of services, tourists highlight the need to strengthen some sectors such as catering, the hotel sector, and, to a lesser extent, the facilitators of the tourist experience: guides, transport, tours, cafes, maps, souvenir shops, and local products. One of the crucial factors is the preparation of employees, which most interviewees consider essential for the communication and promotion of cultural tourism and as facilitators of the tourist experience (Figure 6).

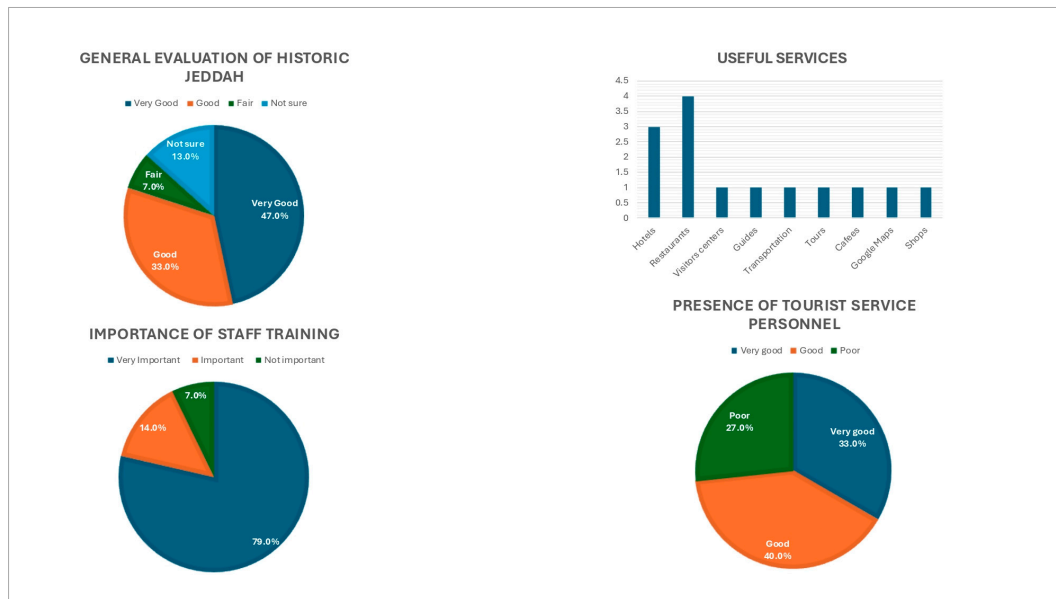


Figure 6. Economic value of Historic Jeddah tourism development (Source: authors).

The majority of those interviewed consider tourist spending to be fair, even though, in some cases, it may appear high. The sectors most involved in the evaluation are the hotel and restaurant sectors. Instead, imagine the possible allocation of an extra budget divided equally between different sectors: part destined for food and beverage, i.e., services, part for social voluntary activity, and part for the promotion of local craftsmanship and manufacturing tradition. Regarding the promotion of the destination, the main strategies are direct sales to the customer, social media marketing activities, and on-site information communication through info points. Numerous interviewees addressed the government for institutional aspects of heritage valorization, while a smaller number of proposed conservation activities and courses on intangible cultural heritage. However, in Saudi Arabia, cultural heritage is perceived as a common good: over 70% of those interviewed were willing to donate a symbolic amount to support the conservation and promotion of heritage (Figure 7).

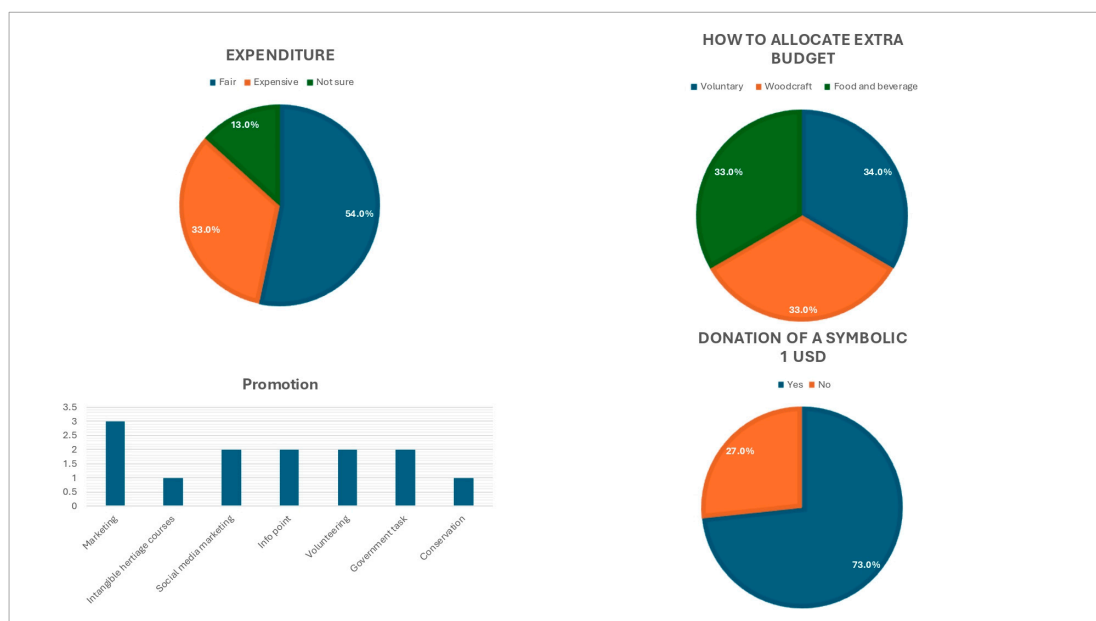


Figure 7. Evaluation of expenditure, financial support, and promotion strategies (Source: authors).

Cluster 2—Heritage Value

The second cluster highlights three main themes related to heritage: (1) the state of conservation, (2) the presence of private sponsors, and (3) the cultural values (Table 4).

Historic Jeddah’s conservation state is very good (70%) or good (33%). Less than 20% consider it sufficient or insufficient. Part of the state of conservation is the basis of the interest on the part of the interviewees toward the restoration activity: 87% of these consider it essential because it “is essential, it enriches historical tours for tourists. It may be the reason for motivating the tourist to make another visit in the future if the expiration period is indicated on the site” (I, 14), while 13% consider it useless. Consequently, most of the interviewees agreed to see some part of Historic Jeddah completely restored (73%) because “A renewed cultural feeling brings hope to visitors” (I, 11) and “They should be built as per the traditional method of construction to maintain the harmony of the heritage. To be controlled by a strong, accurate architect team” (I, 9) to “There is no objection to it taking the same historical form and character in all its aspects. To preserve historical identity” (I, 14). Only a minority did not agree to renovate parts of the city’s historic center.

For this reason, the presence of private sponsors and entrepreneurial activities has increased and is contributing to the growth of the historic center. Most respondents (67%) considered it good, while others considered it very good (13%). Only a minority was against it (7%) (Figure 8).

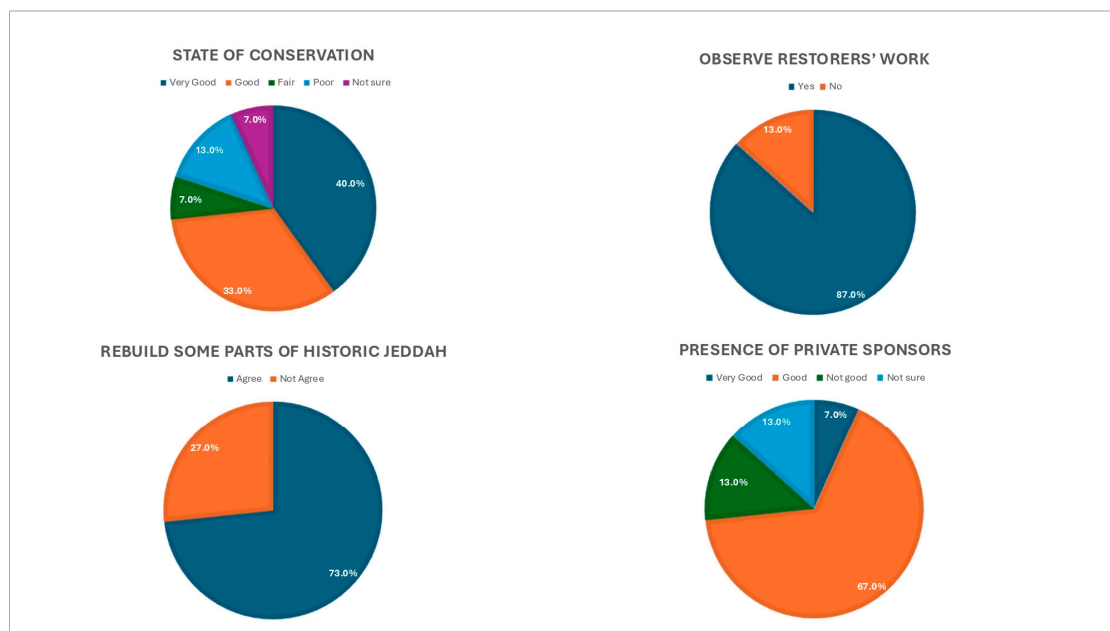


Figure 8. Heritage value on Historic Jeddah tourism development (Source: authors).

Cluster 3—Overtourism

In the third cluster, three main themes emerge associated with the limitation of tourist flows: (1) preserving heritage, (2) preserving memory, and (3) preserving ancient local tradition (Table 5).

Regarding the increase in the number of tourists, the majority of those interviewed (80%) do not consider it a problem and favor an increase in the number of visitors. Only a small number (20%) are against it. However, although the majority of those interviewed (53%) are in favor of increasing the number of tourists since “Still let the people who are interested in it access it” (I, 7), 47% are against access to Historic Jeddah and prefer to reduce or control tourist flows through “regulatory” approaches (I, 1) (Figure 9).

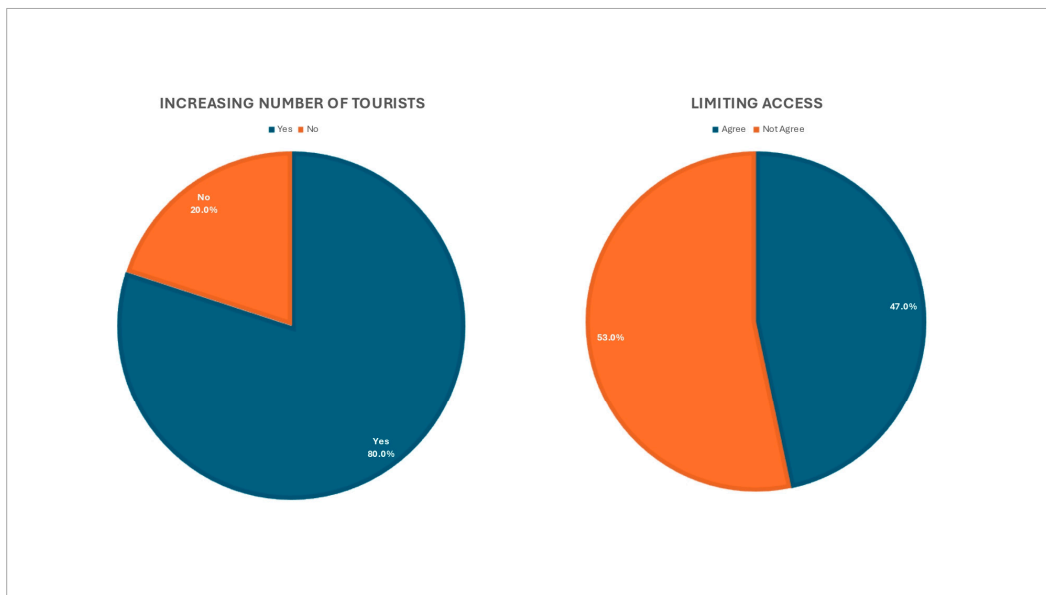


Figure 9. The main issues in the management of Historic Jeddah (Source: authors).

Cluster 4—Travel Experience

The fourth cluster concerns the tourist experience and is characterized by three recurring attributes: (1) history, (2) beauty, and (3) identity (Table 6).

A qualitative analysis reveals a positive evaluation of the tourist experience in Historic Jeddah. A total of 47% of those interviewed rate it very good or good (33%). However, 7% consider it adequate. There are no entirely negative findings, although 13% do not have a clear opinion of their travel experience. Most interviewees associate Historic Jeddah’s cultural heritage with several attributes. The site’s historical value prevails due to its extraordinary uniqueness. This is followed by aspects linked to the continuity of tradition, knowledge, and authenticity (Figure 10).

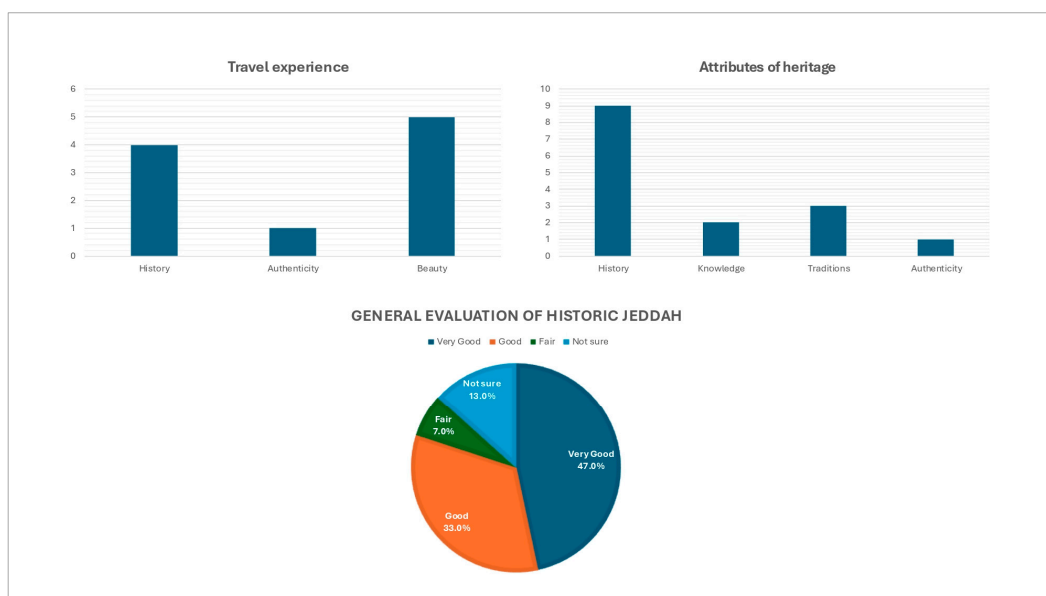


Figure 10. Travel experience is valuable for Historic Jeddah tourism development (Source: authors).

Observing the intersection of the main themes from this investigation, the prevailing aspect is the tension between economic development and heritage conservation. Travel

experience and overtourism are perceived as a product of the management and harmonization of these first two themes, and they capture the interviewees' significant concerns and hopes for the future. The word cloud associated with Historic Jeddah is based on the frequency of words in the open-ended responses to the different interviews. The most common words are "heritage", "tourism", "sustainable", "service", "protection", "promotion", "conservation", and "experience" (Figure 11).

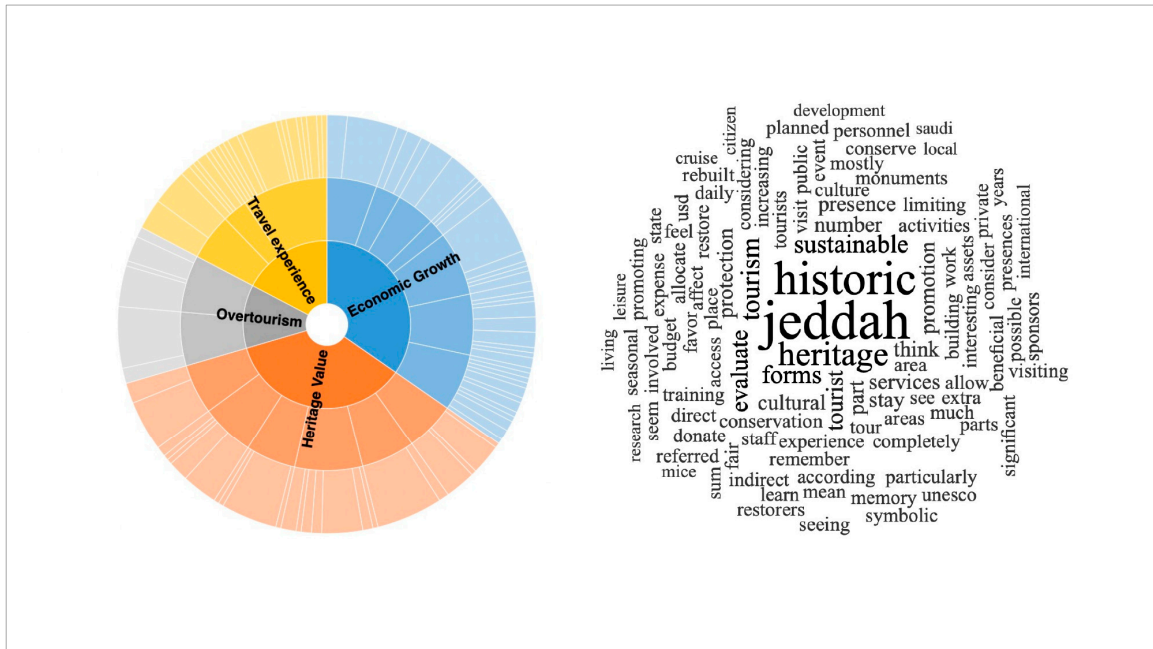


Figure 11. Intersection analysis (Source: authors).

6.2. Observations

The researchers collected formal and informal observations as an integral part of the research process, particularly throughout the data collection and analysis phases. Initially, informal observations were made through site visits around the historical area. This enabled the researchers to become more familiar with the existing heritage and local economic activities and the behavior of the local community and visitors (all types of tourists). This shed light on how Historic Jeddah has been sustainably developed as a tourist destination.

The authors visited Historic Jeddah several times between September 2023 and July 2024. Informal discussions with residents, tourists, and tourist guides took place often, for example, during the celebrations for the national Saudi day in September 2023 and the holy month of Ramadan in 2024. Many other opportunities were taken throughout the study to speak informally to residents and to hear their views on the impact of tourism on the heritage environment in Historic Jeddah during the different celebrations, occasions, and events, which enhances the research. The observation focused on two main elements: the tourism services provided and the authenticity of the place. Sustainable development has been considered the main element of attention in these three elements. It is worth mentioning that most of the observations were compared with recent studies [53,55] to trace the main tourism services provided to enhance the tourists' experiences.

- Provided tourism services:

During the various visits to Historic Jeddah, the authors noticed the huge development of the local authorities' services in the area. However, in the last five years, Historic Jeddah has been notably developed to embrace tourists' requirements (international, national, and local tourists) through a series of examples of sustainable development services. However, one of the main goals was to enhance the tourist experiences to be safe, enjoyable, and authentic. To achieve that, a new entity under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture

(MoC) was established, dedicated to preserving, monitoring, and developing Historic Jeddah called Jeddah Al Balad with the support of another new technical entity called “Jeddah Central Development Company (JCDC)” that also, under MoC. Jeddah Al Balad, for instance, has ensured that the historical area is safeguarded, in addition to being a walkable site (no automobile) with different touristic routes to provide proper tourism services. Jeddah Al Balad also needed different stakeholders to achieve its goals, for example, the Ministry of Tourism to provide enough tourist guides. Today, more than 150 trained and certified multi-language tourist guides in Historic Jeddah are ready for tourists. Additionally, 24 h surveillance cameras and security guards cover the area to protect the tourists and ensure their safety and comfort (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Security guard cars can be seen all over Historic Jeddah to ensure safety and comfort to all users (Source: authors, 2024).

However, to enhance the tourism experience sustainably, the local authorities have been working on different restoration projects for heritage buildings. More than 50 heritage buildings were restored, renovated, and rehabilitated. For instance, Prince Mohammed bin Salman Restoration Historic Jeddah finished in early 2024. In this respect, some heritage buildings have been transformed into new functions (adaptive reuse approach), such as Kedwan House, which was reused as a boutique hotel. It is worth mentioning that a special entity under JCDC was established, called Al Balad Hospitality. Kedwan House Boutique Hotel was restored carefully, considering the recent sustainable restoration method, which did not ensure the authenticity of the buildings. In this regard, Al Balad Hospitality described the house as follows:

“The house offers two luxurious rooms, each offering offers and style. You also have multiple lounge areas where traditional Arabian design merges with contemporary comfort. We offer dedicated guest bathrooms for convenience, ensuring comfort and accessibility throughout your stay”. [123] (Figure 17)

Additionally, with the support of the local authorities, many retail shops were founded, including mini markets, traditional restaurants, coffee shops, and souvenir shops, in addition to some cultural activities such as museums (Figures 13 and 14). The interesting thing was how they sustainably engorged only local brands to enhance the local businesses and local artisans and ensure their economic vitality. The idea establishes a feeling of attachment to the place, creating a state of mind and a nostalgic experience for the tourists.

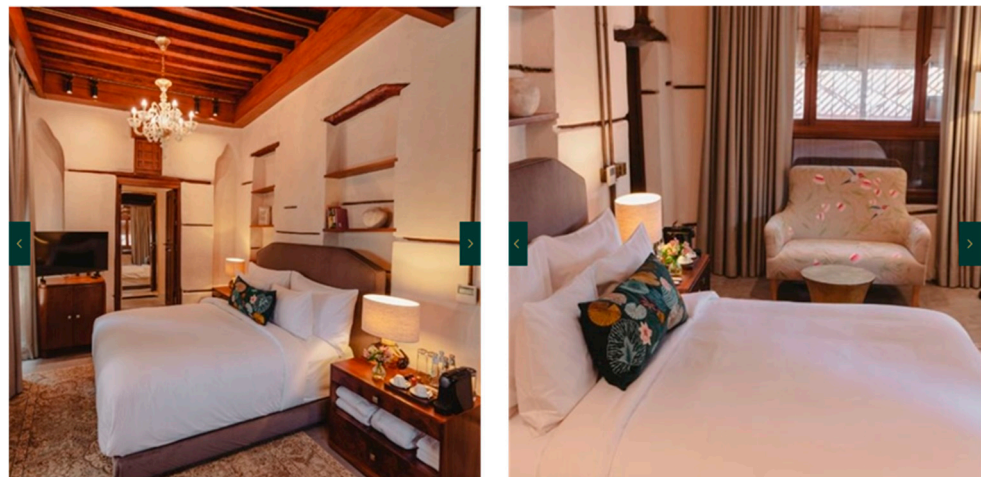


Figure 13. Photographs from Historic Jeddah of retail shops and cultural activities (Source: the authors, 2024).



Figure 14. New local retail shops in Historic Jeddah (Source: Jeddahabalad.sa, 2024 [124]).

- **Authenticity of the place:**

Historic Jeddah is intact due to its daily commercial activities, which keep the historical area alive. According to the UNESCO nomination file submitted in 2014, Historic Jeddah is well known for its social and commercial activities, plus the local communities created over the years. Old souks, mosques, and squares created the authenticity of the place integrated with the heritage buildings. The authors illustrate two main examples that summarize the concept of the new sustainable development.

Firstly, Souk Al Alawi, a historical market in Jeddah, is considered one of the oldest markets in the historical area. It is in the middle of the historical Hajj route (east–west) between Qabel Street on the western side and Bedouin Market Street on the eastern side (Figure 15). This commercial area was a gathering point for most merchants, containing many critical commercial houses at the time. The souk has a cosmopolitan atmosphere, especially the incense shops that imported from Oman and Yemen in the past (Incense Trail). The author argues that, in Souk Al Alawi, visitors can feel, see, and smell the history of Jeddah in one place. Therefore, this souk was developed by the local authorities to fulfill the sense of authenticity of the place. Many shops were renovated, and the shop owners

were encouraged to learn English, monitor the merchants, and provide ATMs that accept VISA to make it easier for international tourists to do their shopping.

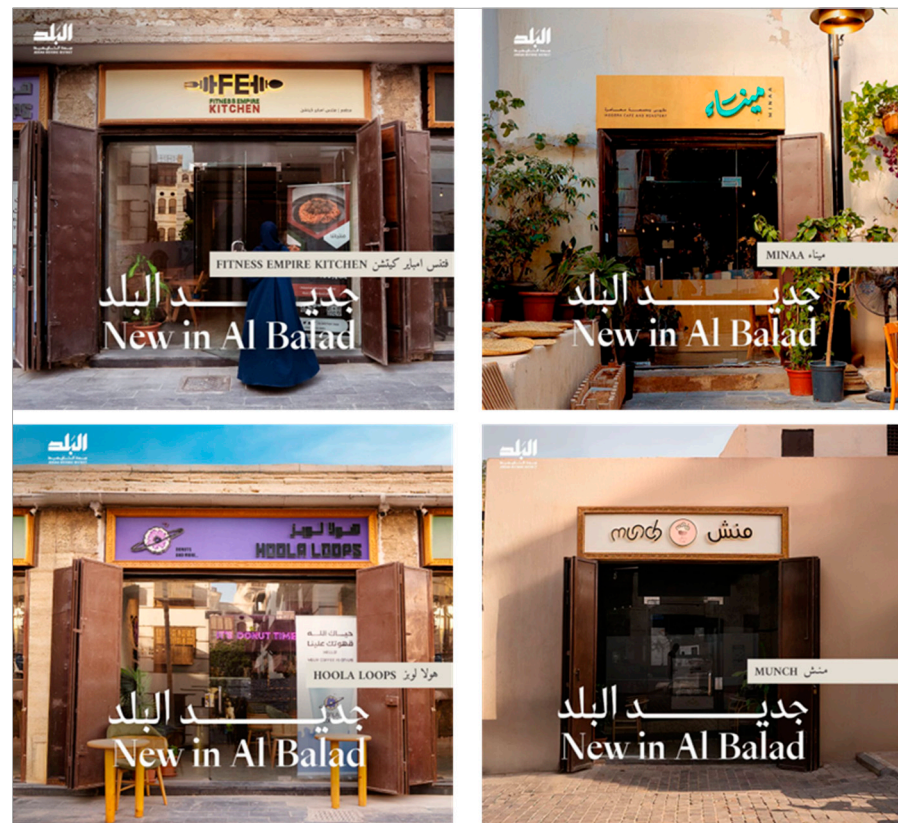


Figure 15. Souk Al Alawi (Sources: UNESCO, 2014 [125]; Google Maps, 2024; the authors, 2024).

Secondly, Nassif House Square, Nassif House (Bayt Nassif) is located in Souk Al Alawi. The house construction began in 1872, and it was finished in 1881 by Omar Nassif Efendi, a member of a wealthy merchant family and governor of Jeddah at the time (Figure 16). When Abdulaziz Ibn Saud entered the city in December 1925, after the siege of Jeddah, he stayed in Bayt Nassif. The house is considered one of the main attractions in Historic Jeddah, but this paper focuses on the house square on the eastern side of the house. One of the significant sustainable developments to preserve the authentic place was to rent it to a local young architect/artist, “Ahmed Angawi”, who created his studio called “Zawiya 97” and which is considered a public participation in conserving Jeddah’s cultural heritage. The idea of Zawiya 97 is to create a cultural approach to placemaking in Historic Jeddah. Today, the square is surrounded by heritage buildings that were adaptively reused to support the idea of the studio; for instance, carpentry, museums, exhibition spaces, and multi-use spaces were found. Zawiya 97 attracted many tourists, especially when they participated in safeguarding some traditional craftsmanship elements in the carpentry. Local craftsmen, artists, and others are always around the square to participate in the different workshops and activities.

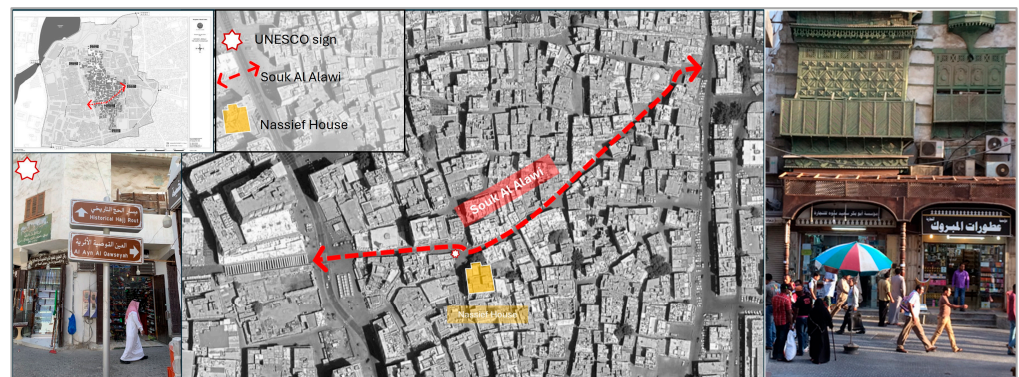


Figure 16. Nassif House Square (Sources: UNESCO, 2014 [125]; Google Maps, 2024; the authors, 2024).



Figure 17. The two luxurious rooms of Kedwan House boutique hotel (Source: Al Balad Hospitality, 2024 [123]).

7. Discussion

The historic city of Jeddah has seen rapid tourism development in recent years thanks to the Saudi Vision 2030 program, which has affected numerous aspects of the kingdom's society, economy, and territory. Furthermore, tourists highlighted the cultural aspect of the site through expressions such as heritage, tradition, authenticity, and history, linking the visitor to the past. Therefore, the management, quality, and tourist experience contribute to facilitating the visit, which was evident in tangible aspects during the research. For example, efficient management emerges in the security of the place through the continuous and constant presence of the police, which makes the place safer and more livable, according to the tourists' perception.

Furthermore, guides are considered facilitators of the tourist experience, capable of bringing the visitor closer to the place, showing its value and, therefore, its quality. The tourist experience is made more authentic and profound through visits to local markets (suk) and neighborhoods, which immediately communicate a sense of place to the visitor.

However, the research also highlights shortcomings such as high costs and lack of services. For instance, browsing the internet, one finds confirmation of the presence of costly hotel services, as in the case of the Boutique Hotel al Balad, recently renovated and famous for being a characteristic architectural example of the historic city of Jeddah, which offers a stay from USD 614 per night [123] (Figure 18). It seems that this type of choice is aimed at a market niche that guarantees high interest and sustainability in using the place.

If costs were lowered, a highly requested destination on the market would lead to the massification of tourism, as in the case of Barcelona (Spain) [126], where locals have recently demonstrated a form of hostile reaction toward tourists, exasperated by their presence [127]. Other countries, however, have already adopted a similar approach to Saudi Arabia, using the pricing system to control tourist flows. For example, in Thimphu

(Bhutan), the “Sustainable Development Fee” has been coined as a daily tax of USD 250 for adult tourists visiting the country: it enhanced the visit in the eyes of the public. It allowed local authorities to control tourist flows [128].

While high prices create market niches and guarantee sustainability, they can also cause social inequalities and injustices. It is possible to introduce some good practices to mitigate the adverse effects of this management strategy. For example, the Louvre Museum in Paris (France) has an entrance fee that is considered relatively expensive compared to the average European museum fee, especially for international tourists. However, the museum management has also activated some initiatives such as (1) complimentary admissions for minors under 18 and EU citizens under 26, teachers, unemployed, disabled people and their companions, and (2) complimentary admissions on the first Sunday of the month from October to March [129].

Figure 18. Cost of Al Balad Boutique Hotel per night [123]. (Source: <https://albaladhospitality.com/ar/kedwan/>, accessed on 6 September 2024).

A second aspect, which emerged in the interviews, is the lack of services. Taking into consideration the fact that the historic city of Jeddah has only opened up to tourism in the last five years, i.e., in the previous period, it is, therefore, possible to make some considerations.

Increasing tourist services favors an increase in visibility and use of the site. On the contrary, the scarcity of visitors reduces visits to a site, slowly condemning it to oblivion. For example, at the Vijayanagar Ruins in Hampi (India), the local authorities have limited the number of restaurants and accommodations in the vicinity to preserve the site from excessive tourism and environmental degradation. This led to a decrease in tourist influx, especially visitors who preferred to stay longer. As a result, Hampi has lost some of its popularity among international tourists, becoming less prevalent than in the past [130].

On the contrary, sites with many accommodation services have seen the fame of their tourist destination grow together with over-tourism. For example, in Venice, there are over 12,000 accommodation facilities. Still, the average expense is around EUR 300 for travel, EUR 70 for accommodation, and EUR 64 for other p/d expenditures per capita, with an annual presence of approximately 13 million visitors [131].

Balancing the increase in tourist services and the impact of tourist flows on the destination required a careful analysis of its carrying capacity: (1) physical capacity—maximum number of people who can be present simultaneously in different parts of the site without causing damage; (2) social capacity—number of visitors that the site can accommodate while maintaining a quality visit experience and without overcrowding; (3) management capacity—capacity of the infrastructure and staff to manage the number of visitors; (4) implementation of management measures—develop and implement management strategies

to control and regulate visitor numbers. For example, Lucerne (Switzerland) is considered a sustainable destination for its ability to attract an ever-increasing number every year, regulating the conditions of use in collaboration with the UNWTO: being, above all, a tourist destination of landscape value, the use of public transport, bicycles, and walking routes in the city is promoted. The relatively high prices make the destination a niche and avoid overtourism. This helps ensure that citizens consider tourism a precious resource, not an obstacle to their daily lives. Businesses benefit from these tourist flows by offering diversified quality services (festivals, street food, exhibitions), guaranteeing efficiency and effectiveness [132] (Figure 19).

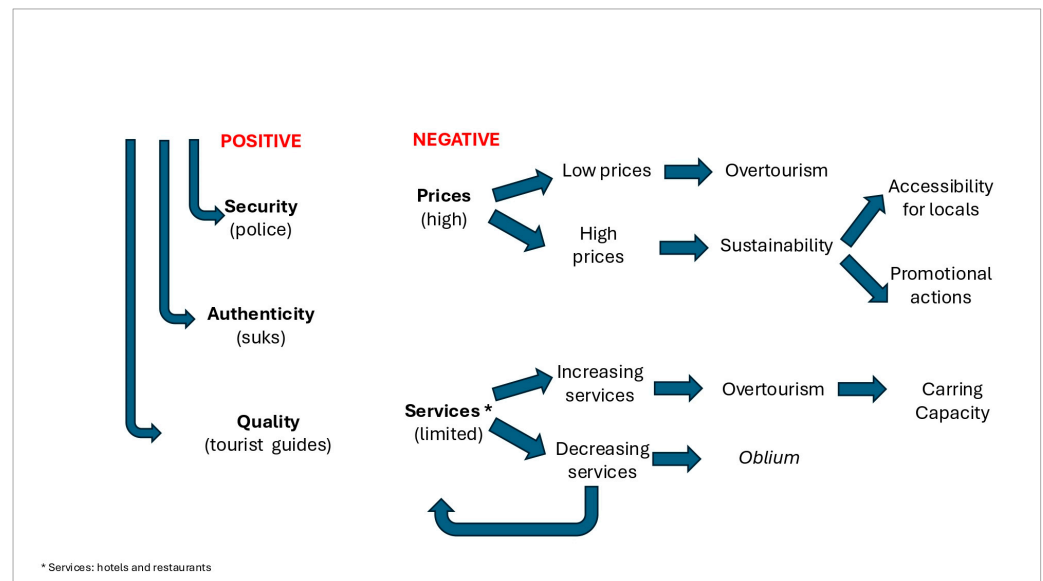


Figure 19. Primary evidence of on-field research (Source: authors).

8. Conclusions

This research investigates the balance between heritage conservation and tourism development for the promotion of a travel destination.

This study confirms tourists' interest in cultural heritage, including in emerging destinations such as Saudi Arabia. Among the most recurring themes are heritage value, economic growth, overtourism, and the travel experience.

These elements represent a common base that can unite different perspectives among the wide group of travelers, under the common values of tradition, authenticity, beauty, and history of the place.

In particular, the results highlight positive aspects in the management of heritage and the quality of services, in the management of tourist destinations, and in the authenticity of places, but also harmful elements such as high costs and scarcity of services. The complex tension between the protection of heritage, the universal value of what to enjoy, the transmission to all future generations, and tourism resources has triggered unprecedented economic growth according to the information in this study.

Sustainability is the right way to guarantee this balance; however, a complex picture emerges from the research based on a plural and diversified conception of sustainability: given that companies are orientated toward economic–financial stability, the institutions would like to promote the destination and protect the heritage. At the same time, civil society would like to benefit from the presence of tourists without being overwhelmed.

A standard framework, on one hand, can make sustainability easily actionable, but on the other hand, it excludes the nuance of the different players that are involved in the process. So, the risk can be to see the growth of some sectors, but not the development of all destinations.

Therefore, a complex scenario emerges in which there is not a single dimension of sustainability but rather that of the stakeholders involved.

9. Limitations

This study could be enhanced through an extensive analysis of sustainability in the national context of heritage tourism Saudi Arabia, especially during this period of significant economic and social transformation. Additionally, repeating this study in ten years would be useful to monitor the evolution of sustainability policies and their impact. Furthermore, expanding the target audience, particularly including international tourism, will be crucial, especially considering global events like the FIFA World Cup 2034, which will serve as a strategic showcase for the country and its commitment to sustainability.

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Appendix A. Sustainable Heritage Tourism in Jeddah—Interviews

1. Gender *
 - Male
 - Female
2. Age *
 - 20–29
 - 30–39
 - 40–49
 - Over 50
3. Job *
 - Tourism
 - Education
 - Employee
 - Authority
4. Duration of the experience *
 - Less than 1 year
 - 1–3 years
 - 5–7 years
 - More than 10 years
5. What is the link between Historic Jeddah and you? *
 - Residence
 - Tourism
 - Business
 - Volunteer

- o Family
 - o Visit
6. If you are a tourist, what kind of visitor are you? *
 - o International Tourist
 - o Cruise Traveler
 - o MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Conference, Event)
 - o Leisure
 - o International Tourists living in Jeddah
 - o Local Jeddah Citizen
 - o Saudi Citizen
 7. Why are you in Jeddah? *
 - o UNESCO
 - o Part of the tour
 - o Culture and memory
 - o Seasonal event
 - o Other
 8. Would you be in favor of increasing the number of daily presences to allow a more significant number of tourists to visit Historic Jeddah? *
 - o Yes
 - o No
 9. What would you allocate an extra budget to (referring to Historic Jeddah)? *
 10. How would you evaluate the presence of private sponsors in promoting public assets? *
 11. How do you consider the state of conservation of the monuments? *
 12. What do you think of limiting access to some areas for heritage protection? *
 13. Would it be interesting to learn about the work of the restorers while visiting Historic Jeddah? *
 14. What do you feel about seeing some parts of Historic Jeddah completely rebuilt? *
 15. Would you donate a symbolic sum (USD 1) to conserve and restore part of Historic Jeddah? *
 - o Yes
 - o No
 16. Does the expense of your stay in Historic Jeddah seem fair to you, considering your experience in this historic place? *
 17. How do you evaluate the presence of tourist services personnel in the area according to the planned activities? *
 18. Which tourist services are particularly beneficial for your stay in Historic Jeddah? *
 19. How much do you think staff training can affect cultural heritage's direct and indirect promotion? *
 20. How could you be involved in the promotion and protection of Historic Jeddah? *
 21. What is the building you most remember? *
 22. What did you see in Historic Jeddah? *
 23. How do you evaluate Historic Jeddah? *
 24. What does cultural heritage mean to you?

* Mandatory answers

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