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Spiritual Tourism: A Grounded Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual tourism constitutes a rapidly expanding segment of the travel industry, characterized by journeys oriented toward personal growth, self-discovery, and engagement with sacred or transcendent experiences. Utilizing a qualitative grounded theory approach, this article examines the evolution, contemporary trends, and future trajectories of spiritual tourism. Historically anchored in ancient pilgrimages and religious traditions, the phenomenon has evolved into a confluence of traditional and contemporary spiritual pursuits, significantly influenced by globalization and the proliferation of New Age spirituality. Employing Bali as a critical case study, the analysis highlights the island's ascendancy as a global nexus for spiritual tourism, propelled by its distinctive cultural and natural endowments. Concurrently, the article critically examines challenges, including cultural commodification and sustainability imperatives. Identified lacunae in the extant literature necessitate deeper qualitative inquiry and exploration of technology's role in mediating spiritual tourism experiences. Ultimately, spiritual tourism manifests significant potential for fostering cross-cultural understanding and advancing sustainable development paradigms.

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1. Introduction

Spiritual tourism represents a niche yet rapidly expanding segment within the travel industry, defined by journeys undertaken to explore, experience, or deepen spiritual or religious beliefs (Olsen & Timothy, 2022; Hussain & Wang, 2024). Distinct from conventional tourism emphasizing leisure or sightseeing, spiritual tourism prioritizes personal growth, self-discovery, and connection with sacred or transcendent dimensions (Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Collins-Kreiner & Wall, 2015; Norman, 2021; Buzinde, 2020). Conceptually and practically, it constitutes a domain intrinsically linked to the human pursuit of existential meaning, holistic well-being, and communal or transcendent belonging. These core motivations demarcate it from typologies prioritizing leisure, recreation, or cultural consumption, underscoring its scholarly significance through interdisciplinary intersections with anthropology, psychology, sociology, and religious studies, thereby enriching tourism literature via its focus on subjective transformation and introspective journeys.

The phenomenon's complexity arises from historical antecedents, such as ancient pilgrimage traditions (e.g., the Camino de Santiago, Hindu tirtha yatras), evolving into contemporary practices blending sacred and secular aspirations. Culturally, it is shaped by diverse interpretations of spirituality, ranging from organized religious rituals to personalized, eclectic practices influenced by globalized New Age

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movements. This plurality foregrounds tensions between authenticity and commodification, as sites and experiences are increasingly marketed to a global audience seeking "self-actualization" (Maslow, 1943) or "existential authenticity" (Ning, 2017).

Globalisation profoundly complicates spiritual tourism, simultaneously fostering homogenisation (e.g., standardised yoga retreats commodified globally) and hybridisation (e.g., Buddhist mindfulness repackaged for Western wellness markets). This dialectic is exemplified in Vietnam, where spiritual tourism and corporate religious models accelerate the diffusion of Tibetan Buddhism. Our analysis centres on Samten Hills—a luxury Buddhist resort in Đà Lạt, a Central Highlands region historically framed as a French colonial hill station and now marketed for its "natural beauty and spiritual possibilities." Samten Hills operates as a Drikung Kagyu spiritual enclave, predominantly staffed by Ladakhi monks, thus transposing Himalayan Buddhist branding into a Vietnamese context. Through curated tour packages, spiritual camping experiences, and discourses emphasising mountain hierophanies, the resort epitomises a new iteration of hybridised spiritual tourism.

Concurrently, societal trends—secularisation, digital connectivity, and Pine and Gilmore's (2011) "experience economy"—redefine engagement: modern participants increasingly prioritise inner peace amid societal fragmentation or utilise digital platforms for virtual retreats, reflecting a broader shift from institutionalised religiosity toward fluid, individualised spirituality (Liutikas & Raj, 2024). Crucially, Samten Hills embodies a spiritual business model that strategically blurs economic and religious activity. Aligning with the Vietnam Federation of UNESCO Associations (VFUA) and pursuing Guinness certifications—while planning a 2,000-seat Buddhist university—it positions itself as Southeast Asia's most public-facing Vajrayana site. This operational approach leverages a for-profit business licence under the guise of "heritage preservation" and regional tourism development, effectively concealing Tibetan Buddhist practices to navigate state surveillance. Such tactics reveal how spiritual tourism negotiates political constraints while commodifying sacred space, ultimately reinforcing globalisation's dual capacity to homogenise and hybridise spiritual landscapes.

Defining spiritual tourism remains inherently challenging due to its profoundly subjective and heterogeneous nature. While traditionally anchored in religious pilgrimages and sacred site visitation (Cheer et al., 2017; Christou et al., 2023), the concept has significantly broadened to encompass secular and alternative practices—from yoga retreats to eco-spiritual experiences (Sharpley, 2022). This conceptual expansion mirrors societal secularisation and the ascent of New Age spirituality, which prioritise personal transformation over institutionalised religion. Yet, as this Special Issue identifies, a critical definitional tension emerges from the binary between spiritual tourism as intrinsically religious practice versus secular performance. Religious motivations typically centre on observance, ritual, and identity reaffirmation, whereas secular engagements prioritise self-focused goals like wellness or recreation. This dichotomy compounds the field's primary definitional challenge: its pervasive overlap with wellness, cultural, and adventure tourism. A visit to a Buddhist monastery, for instance, may simultaneously satisfy spiritual curiosity, cultural interest, and relaxation needs, thereby blurring categorical boundaries (Timothy & Olsen, 2021).

The creative growth in academic studies on spiritual tourism reflects humanity's enduring quest for transcendence through travel. However, knowledge remains fragmented and equivocal—a gap this critical review addresses through thematic analysis, offering a comprehensive synthesis of how contemporary researchers theorise and investigate the spirituality-tourism nexus. Central to this phenomenon is the geo-psychological separation from the everyday that travel enables, creating a 'laboratory' for individuals to explore spirituality in ways often inaccessible in daily life. This unique feature explains spiritual tourism's appeal both to spiritual novices and those seeking to deepen transcendent engagement. If spirituality is the ultimate pursuit, travel arguably furnishes an idealised setting for its pursuit and potential discovery. Ultimately, the significance of synthesising this field lies in its capacity to

inform interdisciplinary scholarship across sociology, management, psychology, and theology, advancing a more coherent understanding of spiritual tourism's fluid boundaries and motivations.

Spiritual tourism encompasses activities from traditional pilgrimages to contemporary wellness retreats, demonstrating adaptability to shifting paradigms. Destinations like the Camino de Santiago attract both devout pilgrims and secular travelers seeking personal growth, while locales such as Bali have emerged as hubs for alternative practices like energy healing and shamanic rituals (Choe & Mahyuni, 2023; Sutarya, 2024). This diversity is amplified by societal secularization, where declining traditional religious affiliation spurs interest in alternative spiritualities emphasizing personal growth, mindfulness, and nature connection (Sharpley, 2022). Consequently, contemporary spiritual tourists increasingly include younger generations, digital nomads, and culturally diverse individuals, driven by wellness culture, social media, and enhanced destination accessibility (Richards, 2015; Chevtava & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Yıldırım & Kaya, 2024). This evolution underscores the phenomenon's role in bridging traditional and modern aspirations.

The scope of spiritual tourism continues to broaden dynamically, incorporating emergent trends such as virtual reality pilgrimages, transformative travel, and wellness-oriented experiences (Cheer et al., 2023). This expansion reflects not only responsiveness to technological advancements but also the enduring allure of geo-psychological separation from the everyday—a defining characteristic embedded within spiritual travel practices. By transporting individuals beyond routine environments, spiritual tourism functions as a 'laboratory' wherein participants examine, contemplate, and practise spirituality in ways often inaccessible in daily life. This unique spatial-temporal context explains why travelling constitutes an idealised setting for pursuing spiritual discovery: if transcendence is the goal, journeying facilitates its pursuit through curated separation from mundane constraints. Crucially, however, this shared context accommodates a binary of performative motivations—spiritual tourism manifests either as intrinsically religious observance (ritual, identity reaffirmation) or secular self-actualisation (wellness, recreation). As boundaries between these domains blur and the phenomenon diversifies, researchers and practitioners must adopt holistic frameworks capable of reconciling spiritual tourism's technological evolution with its fundamental role as a conduit for existential meaning-making across sacred-secular spectra.

Crucially, academic interrogation must confront contentious ethical dilemmas, particularly the exploitative dynamics of cultural appropriation—where commodified practices (e.g., smudging, yoga) are divorced from sacred contexts—and the epistemic violence in reducing indigenous rituals to marketable "experiences" (Grimwood, 2014; Grimwood et al., 2024). These critiques expose a central paradox: spiritual tourism promises transcendence while potentially reinforcing neoliberal individualism and colonial legacies. This tension demands frameworks reconciling empirical rigor in quantifying socio-economic impacts with phenomenological sensitivity to lived spiritualities, prioritizing marginalized voices. Spiritual tourism epitomizes broader socio-cultural fissures, serving as a lens to interrogate how late-capitalist societies commodify meaning-making amidst crises of identity, ecological collapse, and communal disintegration (Ateljevic, 2020; Ateljevic & Sheldon, 2022). Its study thus becomes imperative for revealing tourism's role in global inequities and its contested potential to foster intercultural solidarity.

2. History of Spiritual Tourism

The origin of spiritual tourism lies in ancient civilisations, where journeys to sacred sites constituted an integral component of religious and cultural praxis from Greek pilgrims seeking divine guidance at Delphi to Vedic tirtha yatra in India and temple visits honouring Osiris and Isis in Egypt (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). These proto-forms, intrinsically tied to rituals and communal identity, served dual purposes of spiritual renewal and cultural cohesion. Today, this historical foundation illuminates the enduring binary within spiritual tourism performance: while ancient practices were predominantly expressions of institutionalised religiosity, contemporary manifestations increasingly accommodate secular self-actualisation alongside persistent sacred observance.

This evolution underscores a critical conceptual gap between religion and tourism nexus remains weakly theorised, particularly within the new mobility paradigm. The analysis addresses this by examining both supply-side dynamics (holy sites, destination commodification) and demand-side motivations (travellers navigating intersections of spirituality, religiosity, and leisure). As the scope broadens to encompass virtual pilgrimages and transformative wellness experiences (Cheer et al., 2023), the core mechanism enabling spiritual tourism's appeal persists—the geo-psychological separation from the everyday. This spatial-temporal disjuncture creates a 'laboratory' for spiritual experimentation, facilitating transcendent discovery through curated removal from mundane constraints.

Pilgrimage, a foundational element, developed as a structured practice across religions. Medieval Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela offered paths to penance and enlightenment (Timothy & Olsen, 2021). The Islamic Hajj to Mecca, a Pillar of Islam, has unified Muslims globally since the 7th century. Hindu pilgrimages to Varanasi, Rishikesh, and the Char Dham remain central to spiritual life, functioning as religious obligations and opportunities for transformation and bonding.

While pilgrimage is frequently subsumed within spiritual tourism, the concepts remain deeply interconnected through their shared pursuit of meaning, transcendence, and personal growth. Pilgrimage traditionally denotes journeys to religiously significant sites, whereas spiritual tourism encompasses a broader spectrum—including secular practices like meditation retreats (Norman, 2021). This interconnection manifests in modern spiritual tourism's hybridisation of sacred site visits with contemporary wellness pursuits. To critically unpack this relationship, our analysis intentionally conflates theoretical discourse with literary travel memoirs (Kojawa, 2017), revealing how spiritual travel transcends institutionalised religious frameworks. Drawing on Foucault's theory of discursive formations, we first deconstruct spiritual motivations as heterogeneous constructs distinct from traditional pilgrimage orthodoxy. Secondly, we map existing typologies against Joseph Campbell's (1973) mythic quest stages—departure, initiation, return to illuminate the archetypal narrative underpinning both pilgrim and secular spiritual traveller journeys.

This approach underscores Stausberg's (2012) assertion of religion and tourism's symbiotic relationship: religion acts as both resource (sacred sites, rituals) and source of extraction (commodified experiences) within tourism's "new mobility regime." Religious values shape tourist choices, while religious organisations actively participate in tourism economies—evident in pilgrimages as prototypical "tourism for religious purposes." Yet spiritual tourism, by analogy, extends beyond institutional religion, embracing secular self-actualisation through curated experiences. Literary excerpts from spiritual travel memoirs exemplify this blurring, where travellers navigate between ritual observance as pilgrimage's communal identity (Rountree, 2002) and individual mythmaking as Campbell's hero journey (Williams, 2019). Ultimately, this theoretical-empirical dialogue reframes spiritual tourism not as pilgrimage's dilution, but as a dynamic reconfiguration of sacred mobility one where boundaries between devotion, self-discovery, and commodification remain productively porous.

Historically, destinations like Mecca, Varanasi, Jerusalem, Bodh Gaya, Lourdes, and Mount Kailash emerged as major hubs due to their spiritual significance (Collins-Kreiner, 2020), continuing to attract millions annually. The institutionalized pilgrimage of the Middle Ages (e.g., Camino de Santiago routes, monastic networks (Timothy & Olsen, 2021) contrasts with the pluralism and democratization characterizing modern spiritual tourism. Advances in transportation and digital technology have globalized access, while New Age spirituality and neoliberal wellness culture have diversified its scope beyond institutionalized religion, evident in destinations like Bali where practices cater to secular seekers (Subadra, 2015). This evolution reflects a broader socio-cultural shift from collective religious obligation towards individualized pursuits of self-actualization and holistic well-being (Khalid & Ali, 2023; Subramaniam et al., 2024), propelled by secularization, consumerism, and spiritual commodification (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Consequently, contemporary spiritual tourism transcends traditional

boundaries, accommodating diverse demographics and syncretic practices, mirroring the fragmentation of institutionalized religiosity in late modernity.

3. Current Trends in Spiritual Tourism: A Case Study of Bali Tourism

Recent years have witnessed significant growth in spiritual tourism, catalyzed by heightened societal prioritization of mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being—a trend intensified by the existential precarity of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cheer et al., 2023). This growth manifests in practice diversification and necessitates critical engagement with commercialization, sustainability, and cultural preservation. The pandemic accelerated the proliferation of virtual experiences (e.g., online meditation, digital pilgrimages). Post-pandemic, demand has surged for transformative, nature-based "slow tourism," involving prolonged cultural immersion to address psychological aftermath (Subadra, 2022). These shifts underscore spiritual tourism's dual role: reflecting socio-cultural tensions (e.g., neoliberal commodification of holistic living) and serving as a contested space for renegotiating meaning and resilience amid global disruption.

A defining trend involves travelers seeking destinations integrating natural beauty with spiritual enrichment, evidenced by the rising popularity of forest bathing, eco-meditation, remote retreats, and virtual wellness, reflecting recognition of environmental-spiritual interdependence (Heintzman, 2009; Norman & Pokorny, 2017; Rahmani et al., 2024; Scheyvens et al., 2024). Bali exemplifies this trend, leveraging its landscapes and sacred rivers to offer eco-spiritual experiences framed by sustainability and nature reverence. Bali's cultural specificity is pronounced: Hindu-Balinese traditions like Melukat (spiritual cleansing) and temple ceremonies anchor offerings for authenticity-seeking visitors, demonstrating how regional spiritual heritage shapes tourism practices (Subadra, 2015). Such variations highlight sectoral adaptability yet problematize tensions between cultural preservation and commodification, raising critical ethical questions regarding appropriation and performative authenticity negotiation in globalized markets.

The commercialisation of spiritual tourism in Bali embodies a profound paradox, simultaneously enabling cultural dissemination while threatening ontological integrity (Subadra, 2015). On one hand, luxury retreats and curated tour packages democratise access to Balinese spirituality for global seekers, generating vital economic capital that sustains local communities. Yet this marketisation risks reducing adat (customary law) and taksu (divine inspiration) to consumable experiences, exemplified by the commodification of sacred rituals like Melukat purification ceremonies—once intimate village practices now repackaged as tourist "wellness journeys" (Sharpley, 2022). The proliferation of yoga studios and wellness centres, while ostensibly honouring Bali's spiritual reputation, frequently privileges Westernised interpretations over indigenous theological frameworks, catalysing what scholars term cultural aphasia: the gradual erosion of vernacular spiritual vocabulary and praxis (Widana et al., 2025).

This tension manifests spatially through sacred-commercial zoning conflicts, where boutique resorts encroach upon temple hinterlands, and temporally via ritual compression, as ceremonies are abbreviated to accommodate tourist schedules. Crucially, local pemangku (priests) report ambivalence—welcoming revenue streams enabling ritual preservation while lamenting the detachment of spiritual acts from their desa-kala-patra (context-specific) cosmological foundations (Subadra, 2022). Ultimately, Bali's predicament epitomises the neoliberal spiritual economy's central contradiction: accessibility gained through commercial channels threatens to transmute living cosmology into heritage simulacra, demanding urgent ethical frameworks that prioritise cultural agency over extraction.

The political instrumentalisation of spiritual sites constitutes a critical dimension of their contemporary governance, wherein state actors strategically leverage sacred geography to simultaneously advance ideological agendas and capitalise on economic opportunities—a process epitomised by ritualised capital accumulation. India's development of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor in Varanasi exemplifies this dual dynamic: state-sponsored spiritual tourism reinforces Hindutva narratives through curated religious performativity (Norman, 2021), while simultaneously transforming the Ganges riverfront into a revenue-generating "spiritual marketplace" that disproportionately benefits corporate hotel chains and tour

operators. This sacred-commercial symbiosis manifests equally across Southeast Asia, where Bali's spiritual tourism economy—though generating significant employment and supporting small enterprises (Prabawa et al., 2023)—reveals acute distributive inequities. Foreign investors and luxury resort conglomerates capture up to 68% of tourist expenditures according to UNDP (2024), while local communities endure infrastructural strain from groundwater depletion, temple overcrowding, and cultural commodification.

The dynamic evolution of spiritual tourism necessitates an urgent reorientation of scholarly inquiry toward its increasingly multifaceted dimensions. While extant research remains disproportionately centred on traditional pilgrimage and commodified wellness tourism, critical emerging frontiers including virtual spiritual ontologies (e.g., AI-mediated pilgrimages), eco-spiritual resilience in climate-vulnerable sacred landscapes, and the neurophenomenology of technology-enhanced transcendence demand rigorous interdisciplinary engagement (Cheer et al., 2023).

4. Conclusion

This grounded theory analysis elucidates spiritual tourism as a dynamically evolving phenomenon characterized by the interplay of tradition and modernity, sacred pursuit and commodification, personal transformation and socio-cultural impact. Key findings affirm its evolution from historically rooted pilgrimage practices into a globalized, hybridized sector driven by secular spirituality, wellness culture, and technological mediation—exemplified by Bali's strategic leveraging of Hindu-Balinese rituals (Melukat, temple ceremonies) to position itself as a spiritual hub, albeit amid tensions between cultural authenticity and commercial exploitation.

The post-pandemic acceleration of demand for transformative, nature-integrated, and virtual experiences further underscores its role in addressing contemporary existential precarity. However, the study acknowledges inherent limitations: its geographical emphasis on Bali constrains generalizability to underrepresented spiritual landscapes; its qualitative methodology, while rich in experiential insights, necessitates complementary quantitative analysis of socioeconomic impacts; and its temporal scope cannot fully capture rapidly emerging trends like AI-driven spiritual interfaces.

To address these gaps, future research must prioritize interdisciplinary frameworks integrating tourism studies, digital anthropology, and environmental psychology; amplify marginalized voices (Indigenous communities, women, LGBTQ+ participants) through participatory methodologies; conduct cross-cultural comparisons between Bali and emerging destinations (e.g., Sedona, Rishikesh) to identify context-specific sustainability models; and establish longitudinal assessments of spiritual tourism's long-term effects on cultural resilience and personal well-being. Ultimately, spiritual tourism's potential as a catalyst for cross-cultural solidarity and sustainable development hinges on resolving its core paradoxes through ethically anchored policies, community-centered governance, and scholarly rigor that transcends commodification logics to honour the sacred in an era of global fragmentation.

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