Tourism and Hospitality Sustainability Modules
Module 3: Cultural Heritage, Sense of Place, and Visitor Responsibility

Overview

This module focuses on the relationship between tourism, cultural heritage, and local identity. Students examine how tourism can help protect, promote, and fund cultural heritage, but also how it can damage heritage sites, commodify local traditions, disrupt everyday community life, or reduce culture to a visitor experience.

The central idea of this module is the sense of place. Sustainable tourism should help visitors understand and respect the distinctive cultural, historical, spiritual, and everyday meanings of a destination. It should not simply turn places, people, traditions, or rituals into products for consumption.

This module also emphasises that cultural sustainability is not only about protecting heritage from visitors. It is also about ensuring that local communities retain the authority to decide how their culture is represented, shared, interpreted, and managed. Visitor behaviour matters, but heritage outcomes are also shaped by governance, storytelling, interpretation, marketing, ownership, and community agency.

Students will explore cultural heritage as living heritage: something practised, adapted, negotiated, and passed between generations. This means asking not only how tourism can protect culture, but also who has the right to decide what is shared with visitors, what should remain within the community, and how cultural meaning can be sustained over time.

Key SDG Links

- SDG 4: Quality Education
- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities
- SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities
- SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production
- SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, students should be able to:

- Explain how tourism can both support and threaten cultural heritage.
- Identify different forms of cultural heritage, including tangible, intangible, everyday, sacred, historical, and living heritage.
- Recognise how tourism can affect sense of place, community identity, and cultural meaning.
- Evaluate visitor behaviour and tourism marketing through a cultural sustainability lens.
- Identify strategies for protecting cultural heritage while allowing meaningful visitor engagement.
- Propose practical actions that support cultural respect, community benefit, and responsible tourism.

- Evaluate how community participation and cultural authority influence sustainable heritage tourism.

Required Academic Reading

Students should choose one of the academic readings below and use it as a lens for the pre-class response.

- Cohen, E. (1988). Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. Annals of Tourism Research, 15(3), 371-386. https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(88)90028-X
- Wang, N. (1999). Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. Annals of Tourism Research, 26(2), 349-370. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00103-0
- Leong, A. M. W., Yeh, S. S., Zhou, Y., Hung, C. W., & Huan, T. C. (2024). Exploring the influence of historical storytelling on cultural heritage tourists' value co-creation using tour guide interaction and authentic place as mediators. Tourism Management Perspectives, 50, Article 101198. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2023.101198
- Zhang, Y., Zheng, Q., Huang, L., Lee, T. J., & Hyun, S. S. (2024). Alienation and authenticity in intangible cultural heritage tourism. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 32(12), 2459-2478. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2023.2284642

These readings allow students to approach cultural tourism through authenticity, commodification, storytelling, living heritage, host authority, and cultural governance. Students do not need to master the whole reading. They should identify one useful concept and apply it to a real cultural tourism setting.

Pre-class Activities

Purpose

The pre-class activities prepare students to think about cultural heritage as something more complex than a tourist attraction. Students use one academic reading to examine what is being shared, who has authority over it, how it is interpreted for visitors, and what risks tourism may create. They also begin to ask who has the authority to decide how culture is interpreted, shared, protected, and managed.

Pre-class Activity 1: Reading Lens

Choose one academic reading from the list above. As you read, identify one concept that helps you think about tourism and cultural heritage. For example:

- staged authenticity
- commodification
- existential authenticity
- cultural representation
- sense of place
- tourist gaze
- community authority
- cultural meaning

- living heritage
- heritage storytelling
- host authenticity
- cultural governance

As you read, consider this guiding question: **How does this concept change the way we should manage cultural tourism?**

Pre-class Activity 2: Cultural Tourism Snapshot

Choose one cultural tourism setting in Vietnam or Southeast Asia. You may choose from:

- Hoi An ancient town
- Hue heritage sites
- a craft village
- a local food market or street food district
- a religious or spiritual site
- a traditional performance
- an ethnic minority tourism village
- a local festival
- a war museum or memory site
- a floating market
- a heritage walking tour
- Lo Lo Chai Village in Ha Giang Province
- a destination familiar to you

Create a short Cultural Tourism Snapshot by answering:

- What cultural features attract visitors?
- Is the heritage tangible, intangible, or both?
- Who owns, practices, protects, or interprets this heritage?
- Who decides how this heritage is presented to visitors?
- Which aspects of this culture are shared with visitors, and which should remain within the local community?
- What do visitors usually do in this setting?
- What benefits might tourism bring?
- What cultural risks might tourism create?

Pre-class Activity 3: Short Written Response

Write 200-250 words and post to the class discussion forum before the session.

Respond to the following prompt: **Use one idea from your academic reading to explain whether tourism in your chosen setting protects cultural heritage or risks turning culture into a product. What role should destination managers play in protecting this cultural heritage?**

In your response, include:

- the cultural tourism setting you selected
- the academic reading you used
- one concept from the reading
- one cultural value or meaning that should be protected
- one benefit tourism may bring
- one cultural risk or tension
- one stakeholder whose voice should be included
- one SDG that seems relevant
- one management question about how culture is represented, shared, or protected

In-class Activities

Activity 1: Heritage Value Map

Goal: Help students identify what cultural value is at stake before discussing tourism management.

In groups, students choose one cultural tourism setting from the pre-class activity and create a Heritage Value Map. Groups should identify:

- the main heritage element or cultural practice
- why it matters to local people
- how visitors encounter it
- who currently explains or represents it to visitors
- whose interpretation of heritage is currently presented to visitors
- what parts of the heritage are visible to tourists
- what parts of the heritage may be invisible, misunderstood, or simplified
- which cultural values local communities may prefer not to commercialise, and why
- where tourism may create pressure, distortion, or loss of meaning

Groups then discuss whether tourism in this setting is mainly:

- educational
- extractive
- respectful
- commercialised
- community-led
- poorly managed
- protective

- performative

Output: A short Heritage Value Statement, figure, or poster:

"The cultural value most at stake in this destination is _____. The academic concept that helped us understand this issue was _____. Tourism supports this value by _____, but may threaten it by _____. The stakeholder whose voice matters most is _____."

Activity 2: Visitor Behaviour Rewrite

Goal: Help students move from abstract respect for culture to concrete visitor behaviour.

Groups examine common visitor behaviours that may create cultural pressure. They choose three behaviours from the list below and rewrite them as respectful visitor guidance. Possible visitor behaviours:

- taking photos of people without permission
- touching fragile heritage objects or structures
- dressing inappropriately at sacred or religious sites
- treating rituals or ceremonies as entertainment
- bargaining aggressively with local artisans or vendors
- entering private or residential spaces for photos
- geotagging sensitive or overcrowded locations
- creating viral content that encourages crowding, imitation, or disrespectful behaviour at sensitive sites
- making noise in sacred, commemorative, or residential places
- buying mass-produced souvenirs marketed as local craft
- interrupting performances or demonstrations
- ignoring local rules about food, dress, behaviour, or waste
- expecting local people to perform culture on demand

For each selected behaviour, groups answer:

- Why might this behaviour be harmful?
- Who is affected by it?
- What would more respectful behaviour look like?
- What could tourism businesses, guides, or destination managers do to prevent this behaviour?
- How could a tour operator, hotel, guide, or destination manager communicate this clearly?
- How would you communicate this message without making visitors feel restricted or unwelcome?
- Which SDG is supported by improving this behaviour?

Output: A short Responsible Visitor Guidance Note with three rewritten visitor guidelines. Example format:

- Instead of: Taking photos of residents without asking.
- Try: Ask permission first, respect refusal, and avoid photographing private moments or sacred practices.
- Why it matters: This protects dignity, privacy, and community control over representation.

Influencer or viral tourism example:

- Instead of: Recreating a viral video trend inside a sacred, residential, or fragile heritage space.
- Try: Share content that explains why the place matters and follows local guidance on where filming, posting, or geotagging is appropriate.
- Why it matters: This reduces crowding, protects cultural meaning, and helps visitors feel invited to act responsibly rather than simply restricted.

Activity 3: Cultural Heritage Protection Plan

Goal: Move students from critique to practical management action.

Groups now design a simple plan to reduce negative cultural impacts and strengthen community benefit. Rather than immediately selecting three actions, groups first complete a prioritisation table. This encourages students to consider cultural impact, feasibility, and trade-offs before making recommendations. Possible actions:

- involve local residents in tourism planning
- train and employ local guides
- support local artisans and cultural practitioners
- create clear visitor behaviour guidelines
- limit visitor access to sensitive areas
- improve interpretation and storytelling
- ensure community members benefit from entrance fees or tour revenue
- protect sacred or private spaces from tourism intrusion
- reduce overcrowding at heritage sites
- create signage that explains cultural meaning respectfully
- discourage exploitative photography or performance
- promote local ownership of tourism businesses
- include community voices in marketing materials
- develop partnerships with schools, museums, elders, or cultural organisations
- create feedback channels for residents affected by tourism

Groups complete the prioritisation table below before choosing their final three recommendations.

Possible action	Cultural impact	Feasibility	Priority
Action 1	High / medium / low impact on cultural meaning, community	High / medium / low feasibility based on time, cost, stakeholder	High / medium / low priority

Possible action	Cultural impact	Feasibility	Priority
	authority, or living heritage	support, and management capacity	
Action 2			
Action 3			
Action 4			

After completing the table, groups choose three final actions. For each action, groups should explain:

- What cultural problem does this action address?
- Which stakeholder should lead it?
- Which community group benefits?
- Which SDG does it support?
- What challenge or resistance might appear?
- What unintended consequence could this recommendation create?
- What indicator would help monitor whether the action is working?

Possible indicators include:

- resident perceptions of tourism
- participation of local cultural practitioners in tourism planning
- visitor understanding of cultural meaning
- continuity of cultural events or practices
- local ownership of cultural experiences
- income retained by local cultural practitioners
- number of resident complaints about visitor behaviour
- visitor compliance with cultural guidelines
- reduced crowding or intrusion in sensitive spaces
- quality of heritage interpretation or storytelling

Output: A one-page Cultural Heritage Protection Plan with three recommended actions, their SDG links, one academic concept used, one likely implementation challenge, one unintended consequence, and one success indicator for each recommendation.

Educator Support Example: Mini Cultural Heritage Protection Plan

The example below shows the expected level of analysis. Educators may use it with the Lo Lo Chai case study or substitute another heritage destination.

1. Community-led storytelling guidelines

- Cultural problem addressed: Living heritage may be simplified for visitor entertainment.
- Lead stakeholder: Local elders, guides, homestay owners, and youth representatives.
- SDG link: SDG 11 and SDG 12.

- Challenge: Different generations may disagree about what should be shared.
- Possible unintended consequence: A single official story may still oversimplify local culture.
- Indicator: Resident feedback, visitor understanding of cultural meaning, and number of community members involved in interpretation.

2. Visitor behaviour guidance for photos, dress, and private spaces

- Cultural problem addressed: Visitors may unintentionally intrude on everyday life or sacred/private spaces.
- Lead stakeholder: Guides, homestay operators, and local tourism authority.
- SDG link: SDG 4, SDG 11, and SDG 12.
- Challenge: Visitors may feel restricted if the tone is too negative.
- Possible unintended consequence: Rules may reduce spontaneity or make the village feel staged.
- Indicator: Reported visitor compliance, resident perceptions, and guide observations.

3. Local craft and homestay benefit scheme

- Cultural problem addressed: Tourism income may not reach the cultural practitioners who sustain local heritage.
- Lead stakeholder: Community tourism committee, artisans, homestay owners, and local government.
- SDG link: SDG 8, SDG 10, and SDG 17.
- Challenge: Requires coordination and transparent revenue-sharing.
- Possible unintended consequence: Commercial promotion may increase pressure on artisans or encourage mass production.
- Indicator: Local ownership of tourism products, income retained locally, and participation of cultural practitioners.

Post-class Activities

Post-class Reflection

Students respond to the prompt: **"How can tourism help protect cultural heritage without turning culture into a product for visitors? Has this module changed the way you think about authenticity or cultural tourism? Explain why."**

In their reflection, students should include:

- one thing they learned about cultural sustainability
- one idea from the academic reading that helped them understand the issue
- one visitor behaviour they now see differently
- one stakeholder whose voice is important in cultural tourism
- one SDG that became clearer through the module
- one action that could make cultural tourism more respectful

- one way their thinking about authenticity or cultural tourism changed

Lo Lo Chai: Sharing Living Heritage Through Tourism

Case Scenario

Imagine you are part of a destination management team working with the Lo Lo community in Lo Lo Chai Village, Ha Giang Province. Once a quiet ethnic minority village, Lo Lo Chai has become one of Vietnam's recognised community-based tourism destinations. Visitors are drawn by its traditional rammed-earth houses, colourful Lo Lo costumes, local cuisine, handicrafts, and the opportunity to experience village life at the northernmost point of Vietnam.

Tourism has brought important benefits. Local families have opened homestays, young people are finding employment without leaving their village, traditional houses are being restored, and cultural crafts that were gradually disappearing are attracting renewed interest.

At the same time, tourism has introduced new questions that have no simple answers. Visitors often expect authentic cultural experiences, but what does authenticity mean when traditions continue to evolve? Should every cultural practice become part of the visitor experience? How can local people earn a living from tourism without feeling that they are performing their culture simply to satisfy tourist expectations? Who should decide how Lo Lo culture is presented to visitors?

For the Lo Lo community, protecting culture does not mean keeping it frozen in time. Their culture is living heritage: something practised, adapted, and passed from one generation to the next. Sustainable tourism therefore depends not only on visitor behaviour, but also on ensuring that local communities retain the authority to decide how their heritage is shared, interpreted, and sustained.

Discussion Questions

Use the Lo Lo Chai case to explore the following questions.

1. What makes Lo Lo Chai culturally distinctive? Identify examples of tangible, intangible, and living heritage found in the village.
2. Where should the community draw the line? Which aspects of local culture should be shared with visitors, and which should remain within the community? Explain your reasoning.
3. Who should shape the visitor experience? Consider the roles of community members, elders, young people, tourism businesses, local government, guides, and visitors. Who should have the strongest voice in deciding how Lo Lo culture is represented?
4. What are the opportunities and risks of tourism for Lo Lo Chai? Consider economic, cultural, social, and intergenerational impacts.
5. If you were developing a five-year cultural sustainability strategy for Lo Lo Chai, what would be your three highest priorities? Explain why these actions are likely to strengthen both community wellbeing and living heritage.

Teaching Note

This case is designed as an optional teaching resource that can be used throughout Module 3. Educators may use Lo Lo Chai across all workshop activities or substitute another heritage destination that is more relevant to their own teaching context. The case encourages students to move beyond thinking about heritage as something to simply protect and instead consider how tourism can support living heritage, community agency, and culturally respectful destination management.