



EXPLOITATION OF SPIRITUAL TOURISM IN THUA THIEN HUE PROVINCE, VIETNAM: A PERSPECTIVE FROM TOURISM COMPANIES

Ho Thi Huong Lan*

University of Economics, Hue University, 99 Ho Duc Di St., Hue, Vietnam

Abstract: This study captures the current problems of spiritual tourism exploitation in Thua Thien Hue province from tourism providers' perspective. The author uses in-depth interviews with 6 respondents who are representatives of the local's tourism companies. The analysis of the data indicates that the great potential of the local's spiritual tourism can be developed via values spiritual orientations including Royal-based value; folk culture-based value; religion-based value, and historical heritage sites-based value. Besides, the author also clarifies the current problematic status of deploying spiritual tourism in this area. The findings of the study will be both a guideline to practitioners and a useful reference to researchers in local's spiritual tourism development.

Keywords: exploitation, spiritual tourism, Thua Thien Hue

1 Introduction

The search for spiritual significance is perhaps one of the main points that have motivated people to travel since ancient times. At that times, people were so preoccupied with existence, thus no one could travel for joy and excitement, but many pieces of evidence showed that most of them went traveling for spiritual and religious motives [8]. As far as we know, spiritual tourism is almost one of the oldest forms of tourism, which is derived from a kind of cultural tourism. Its form globally emerges from the human's need for spiritual awareness and development, which embeds in religion or in other cases that go beyond the spirit of religion. With this feature, spiritual tourism is presently considered as a niche special interest tourism segment, which is necessarily capitalized its full potential for developing successfully in the smokeless industrial branch.

Thua Thien Hue (TTH) province, considered to be the birthplace of Vietnam's Buddhism, is located in the middle of the country. Being well-known as an ancient city with a range of over 400 pagodas, ancient temples, churches, historical sites, as well as festivals and cultural events, TTH has a great potential for spiritual tourism development. However, for many years,

* Corresponding: huonglanmarketing@gmail.com

spiritual tourism has not been intensively paid much attention to and marketed as the local's unique tourism product. It seems that the exploitation of this kind of tourism is still not equally suitable for its potential of resources in terms of "spiritual tourism" in this place.

This paper approaches from tourism firms' perspectives to gain a better understanding of the development of spiritual tourism in TTH province. The paper is structured into five sections. Following this brief introduction, Section 2 presents a literature review regarding spiritual tourism. Section 3 describes the research methods used to solve the research problem. The results and discussion of the study are shown in Section 4. Finally, the conclusions and further research by noting the managerial and research implications are presented in Section 5.

2 Spiritual tourism – literature review

2.1 Spirituality and spiritual tourism

Spirituality is a familiar and popular term in our daily life. However, it is not easy to completely explicate its meaning. The vague perception of "spirituality" perhaps derives from its root of meaning – "spirit." In a basic sense, the first meaning of spirit refers to God. It means that those who are spiritual often believe in their relationship with God or the Sacred. Another meaning is that "spirit" is perceived in relation to the capacity of the human to search for their living life, which transcends the material well-being. Spirituality reflects a series of the deification of the human's self. Meaning that it is a search for basic, deep-rooted human values, and a relationship with a universal source, power or divinity going beyond the material well-being, spirituality helps people turn to the deeper layers of the self [12]. In a broad sense, thus, spirituality is defined as "*the ways in which people seek, make, celebrate and apply its meaning in their lives*" [17, p. 225].

It is posited that spirituality has not been attached to traditional dualistic religions in the modern approach. Accordingly, the practice of rituals or ceremonies or religious activities is no longer limited within each religion's framework. It has become a popular and widespread movement all over the world and is accepted as the human's spiritual needs [2]. Basically, "spirituality" and "religious" are not the same. Even though both terms are often used interchangeably, there is a little difference between them. People can get what they take to be 'spiritual' experiences without having to hold religious beliefs. In other words, spirituality is an individual experience that is outside religious beliefs. Thus, a person can see himself/herself as spiritual but not as religious and vice versa.

Spiritual tourism or pilgrimage or religious tourism is thus differently categorized [9, 16]. At the most basic level, pilgrimage is defined as a person's journey derived from religious causes to sacred sites for their purposes of spirituality and internal understanding as well [3]. In doing so, the pilgrimage will enhance the pilgrims' spirituality and is considered as a mean for

gaining their spiritual goals. Meanwhile, religious tourism “encompasses all kinds of travel that is motivated by religion to a religious site.” [1, p. 37]. Religious tourism focuses on the visiting of religious sites, monuments or destinations primarily to engage with or intensifying a specific faith. Hence, it is posited that religious tourism reflects tourists’ activities at religious sites such as visiting, participating or following-up religious ceremonies to fulfill their religious duties [10]. As for spiritual tourism, it explores the elements of life that lie beyond the self and contribute to body-mind-spirit balance. These may or may not have an affiliation with religion [15]. Recent studies on spiritual tourism show that pilgrimage and religious tourism are essential parts of spiritual tourism [4, 7, 15, 18] (Figure 1).

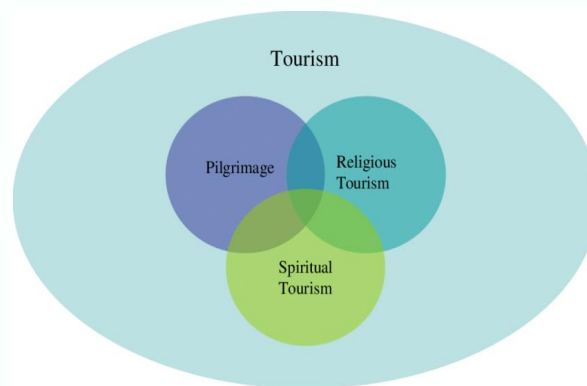


Figure 1. Spiritual tourism in relation to religious tourism and pilgrimage traditions¹

Briefly, spiritual tourism could be viewed as a broad concept that associated with spiritual values of tangible and intangible products and services. These values are derived from the visitors’ experience after visiting churches, mosques, temples, shrines or other sacred centers as well as organized spiritual events, seminars, festivals and gatherings with spiritual motivations.

2.2 Spiritual tourists

In the sense of spiritual tourism described above, it can be seen that spiritual visitors used to explore their spirituality through the other religious systems within the context of tourism. Thanks to experiencing spiritual tourism, people are able to gain spiritual values, which are relevant and can be applied to their lives. Furthermore, they can find themselves in spiritual situations or their life-changing significance. For the most part, spiritual tourists’ purpose is almost derived from their motivations of recreation or diversion. Besides, some of them are for

¹ Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, p. 200. (Cited from Norman, A., 2014. *The varieties of the spiritual tourist experience. Literature & Aesthetics*, 22(1)).

experimental activities or seeking alternatives within the spiritual context. It is seen that the needs for spirituality appear to be crucial and essential desires of human's social psychology whatever they belong to: race, color, creed, religion or other identified criteria [5]. According to Haq & Jackson, a spiritual tourist is defined as *"someone who visits a specific place out of his/her usual environment, with the intention of spiritual meaning and/or growth, without overt religious compulsion, which could be religious, non-religious, sacred or experiential in nature, but within a Divine context, regardless of the main reason for travelling"* [6, p. 145].

Along with this sense, many researchers have categorized spiritual tourism participants as *"practicing pilgrimage, religious, special interest, cultural or experiential tourists"* [6, p. 142]. In many recent studies of spiritual tourism, spiritual tourists have been identified in several terms such as "pilgrim", "devotee", or "festival/event attendant" [13]. In fact, most of the spiritual tourists often visit places of active worship or sacred sites to achieve emotional insights as well as their life balance and spirituality by immersing themselves in spiritual activities [14]. Haq & Medherka see spiritual tourists as those who often visit and experience some religious or sacred destinations such as buildings, spiritual landscape, pilgrimage, ashrams, spiritual courses (guru) [9]. Their activities include practicing meditation, chanting, breathing, visualization, and yoga. Because spiritual tourism includes a series of activities with specific motives such as one's self-actualization, search for spiritual well-being, etc., tourists in this context are classified into different groups depending on their experience purposes. Norman has identified spiritual tourists' motives through the analysis of five spiritual experience types, including spiritual tourism as healing, spiritual tourism as an experiment, spiritual tourism as a quest, spiritual tourism as a retreat, and spiritual tourism as a collective [15]. In terms of spiritual tourism as healing, tourists mainly practice many spiritual activities for improving their daily life problems. As for spiritual tourism as an experiment, tourists seek spiritual tourism experiences as an alternative solution for solving their problematic life. For spiritual tourism as a quest, tourists join in spiritual activities as a discovery by themselves for gaining the knowledge and experience of spirituality. Meanwhile, spiritual tourism as a retreat, tourists seek the value of the spiritual experience through many retreat practices including meditation, yoga or some other activities at the spiritual sites for escaping from their problematic or troublesome life. In another term, spiritual tourism as a collective refers to tourists who have a strong desire to fulfill their curiosity of the well-known spiritual sites [15].

3 Research methods

From the literature related to spiritual tourism, it can be seen that an exploratory approach is appropriate to the context of spiritual tourism in TTH province. Thus, a qualitative methodology is applied in the first phase of this research. The researcher chooses the technique of in-depth interview for primary data collection in this research phase [11]. The secondary data

source is from the Department of Tourism as compliment materials for the analysis of the local's spiritual tourism. Specifically, six in-depth interviews with the representatives, who are well-informed and have directly exploited spiritual tourism in TTH province, were conducted. All the representatives were selected by drawing a snowball sample, including the operators of travel agencies and tourism companies such as Hue Tourist Company, Eagle Tourist Joint Stock Company, Huong Giang Hue Travel Company, Footsteps Outdoor Adventure Travel – Hue branch, Vietnamtourism Hanoi JSC – Hue branch, and the manager of Cat Tuong Quan Zen House. The unstructured interview questions were used to gain necessary information concerning spiritual tourism exploitation in TTH province as follows:

- Tourism firm's awareness and perspective of spiritual tourism.
- Evaluation of spiritual tourism potential from the tourism providers' perspective.
- Current situations of the exploitation of spiritual tourism in their firm.
- Advantages and disadvantages of spiritual tourism exploitation.
- Some suggestions for spiritual tourism development for the locals.

A total of six interviews were arranged and successfully accomplished. All the respondents were interviewed in Vietnamese; hence, the specific quotes were double-checked in English to be sure what the respondent exactly meant. From the participants' opinions on some issues related to the research topic, we captured a better understanding of the local's tourism status within the terms of spirituality. After that, we identified and categorized the interviewees' responses and search for some themes among the data collected.

4 Results and discussions

4.1 Potential of spiritual tourism in TTH province

TTH province belongs to the North Central Coast region of Vietnam, which is famous for the tombs of the Nguyen Dynasty. Along with a high density of historical monuments, festivals, cultural values, as well as several religious sites, THH province is considered as a place owning plenty of tangible and intangible resources. It is seen that each ancient pagoda/temple or historical site here is not only a unique architectural work but also a unique historical, cultural, and spiritual destination. The space of pagodas is typically with a model of "garden-pagoda" with the natural landscape surrounded by several trees. This helps the pagoda system here attract many visitors every year. At present, many pagodas have preserved precious artifacts with historical, artistic and spiritual values, which are considered as an available potential and positive advantage for spiritual tourism development.

The secondary data show that spiritual resources are of great potential for tourism exploitation including brief religious visits and festivals, Hue Buddhist ritual music (an

important Buddhism's heritage used for daily ceremonies and other spiritual activities), vegetarian cuisine, Handicrafts of religious sites (souvenir, food, incense stick, etc.). In terms of brief religious visits, they refer to pagodas (Thien Mu, Thanh Duyen, Tu Dam, Dieu De, Huyen Khong Son Thuong, Truc Lam Bach ma Zen Monastery), churches (Phu Cam Cathedral, Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, Thien An Monastery), and temples (temples of Nam Giao, Xa Tac, Tran Hung Dao, Am Hon, Huyen Tran Princess Cultural Center), which are known as the places for the local's worship and immolation in special events. Regarding festivals, they are festivities associated with the Nguyen Dynasty (Royal rituals, immolations), religious festival (Vesak (15/4), the ceremony of Quan The Am (19/6), Vu Lan (15/7), festival of Hue Nam temple (March and July) in the Lunar calendar, etc.

More importantly, the form of spiritual tourism sites is full of nature, which is an integration of the long historical development of TTH province, the local's daily life of spirituality, beliefs, and religion. This is considered as an essential and crucial element in shaping spiritual values for the locals. Also, this area has been well-known as the sacred land with the diversity of religions (Buddhist, Christian, Mother Goddess worship, etc.) and a large number of religious and spiritual sites, which are able to attract many domestic and foreign tourists. Besides, spiritual tourism is highly concerned by both the central and the local government. Interestingly, several pagodas are also ready to cooperate with travel agencies and local tourism companies in serving tourists demands of visiting and practicing rituals and religious activities. All of these mark the launch of spiritual tourism development to the locals. From the in-depth interviews, it can be seen that among various reasons for exploiting spiritual tourism, TTH province as "the place with great potential of spiritual tourism development" is repeatedly mentioned as a dispensable issue. Some respondents' opinions are as follows:

– *"The land of "live" heritage where visitors can search for their inspiration, enlightenment, and creativity."* (HGH Travel company, Hue tourist company, Footsteps Outdoors Travel Company – Hue branch).

– *"With plenty of pagodas, temples, and a large number of residents who are Buddhist followers, this land helps enrich the cultural and spiritual values."* (All interviewees have the same opinion).

– *"Pagodas, churches, temples, vegetarian foods, and Royal festivals, as well as Folk culture festivals, are so great materials for us to offer a variety of spiritual tourism products."* (All interviewees have the same viewpoint).

– *"Some pagodas are ready to coordinate with us for offering rituals and meditation practices."* (Vietnamtourism Hanoi JSC – Hue branch, HGH Travel Company)

In brief, it can be said that Thua Thien Hue province is one of a few localities in Viet Nam with a prime position to develop spiritual tourism and thus enrich the spiritual and cultural lives of people. In light of these potential resources, spiritual tourism in TTH province should

be categorized into four values directions including Royal-based spiritual value, folk culture-based spiritual value, religion-based spiritual value, and historical heritage sites-based spiritual value. In this sense, developing spiritual tourism in this local should rely on such values directions for searching for target segments and offering relevant products and services to the right tourists.

4.2 Exploitation of spiritual tourism in TTH province

It can be seen that spiritual tourism is originally known as a kind of cultural tourism. It has recently directed as one of the special tourism products that need to be marketed by the local authorities. Therefore, several travel agencies and local tourism companies, such as HGH Travel, Hue Tourist, Green Travel Viet, Dong Duong Tourism Company, Footsteps Outdoor Travel Company, Vietnamtourism Hanoi JSC, have begun to deploy some of their deliberate strategies by adding spiritual sites to their tours. As a result, a number of spiritual tours and routes have been interestingly conducted. However, the growth of this special tourism segment is still moderate. Most of the spiritual tourism products and services are offered on the basis of their available circuits. Because this form of tourism is new, most providers seem indecisive to invest in it. Hence, the products and services are either monotonous or analogous with unprofessionalism.

So far, there have mainly been two types of tourism tours deployed by travel agencies and local tourism companies to meet tourists' spiritual purpose. The first one is mixed tours (offered by all the travel agencies and local tourism companies), which are combined from spiritual tourism products and traditional tourism products (heritage, eco-tourism, traditional festival, sea, etc.). The second one is pure spiritual tours, which take tourists 2 days to visit and experience a site (offered by HGH Travel Company and Hue Tourist Company). The mixed tours are appreciated as popular tour exploitation. Spiritual tourism visitors are mainly domestic participants from the North and the South of Vietnam, and the most visited sites are Thien Mu pagoda, Tuong dai Quan The Am shrine, Hue Nam temple, and Huyen Tran Princess temple. As for spiritual services, activities such as visits to spiritual sites, go sightseeing, and listen to Buddhism's preach are popular. Some activities of spiritual and religious practice have infrequently been concerned at the spiritual sites. In general, spiritual tourism has not been dramatically developed yet.

Among the spiritual tourism sites, Cat Tuong Quan Zen House is especially well-known as a new place for visiting and experiencing spiritual activities. This site attracts a large number of visitors every year. This is the unique site successfully offering spiritual tourism services with various packages with full of meanings such as meditating, Qigong and Yoga, and accommodation and vegetarian foods. Most tourists have to book these spiritual services at least 6 months in advance. Unlike other travel agencies and tourism companies in TTH

province, Cat Tuong Quan Zen House attracts mainly foreigners among them are the Presidents of countries. Hence, the spiritual packages provided in this site are well-perceived as luxury ones with high service quality.

Tourism companies' exploitation perspectives of spiritual tourism

In general, most of the interviewees have a full perception of spiritual tourism concept. However, two approaches are identified in practice. It is posited that spiritual tourism is an original kind of cultural tourism bringing the tourists' perception and understanding its values of the spiritual culture. In accordance with this sense, spirituality is associated with sacred sites such as pagodas, temples, and churches where tourists can explore for their spiritual motivations. Accordingly, spiritual services are presently provided through some main activities such as visits around the spiritual sites, going sightseeing, and listening to Buddhism's preach. Hence, for most tours offered by these companies, spiritual sites and activities of spiritual and religious practice have been added and combined with other tourism activities or destinations. The time for attending some spiritual activities is still too short compared with the total time of each tour. Some respondents' opinions are as follows:

– *“Offering a combined tour of cultural values and spiritual tourism is completely suitable for the local's advantages. Most of the spiritual products are presently just for an experimental purpose. (5/6 interviewees have the same perspective, except for Cat Tuong Quan Zen House's perspective).*

– *“Most of the pagodas are just for a religious purpose, so it is impossible to offer spiritual services. We only give tourists some main activities at these places such as visiting the pagodas and observe the local's ritual and religious practices.” (All interviewees have the same opinion)*

– *“Spiritual activities added in our tours are mainly visiting famous pagodas such as Thien Mu pagoda, Hue Nam temple, Huyen Tran Princess temple or Truc Lam Bach Ma Zen Monastery, and practicing some basic rituals. It depends on the visitors' choice.” (A representative of Hue Tourist Company, Vietnamtourism Hanoi JSC – Hue branch)*

– *“Experiencing vegetarian foods is not often performed in pagodas. We introduce tourists to enjoy the food in some vegetarian restaurants surrounding the pagodas.” (All the representatives have the same opinions)*

The second approach is that spiritual tourism is perceived as the aspect of values brought to participants. In this sense, the core value of spiritual tourism is to help visitors achieve their life balance and gain their emotional insights and spirituality from the experience of spiritual activities. Hence, in accordance with this viewpoint, spiritual tourism is considered to be spiritual activities focusing on creating its value. According to the manager of Cat Tuong Quan Zen House, *“to obtain the perceived spiritual value, tourists need to be experienced in the spiritual activities instead of visiting some spiritual sites only”* and *“spiritual tourism needs to be performed in*

the fully quiet space”, where tourists’ *“immersion of themselves in spiritual activities will help them escape the hustle and bustle in daily life and turn to the self.”* Therefore, spiritual tourism has deployed as a closed program including meditation retreat, Yoga, Qigong, and other services such as accommodation and vegetarian cuisine.

In general, the exploitation of spiritual tourism in the locality is carried out by almost all travel agencies including Cat Tuong Quan Zen House. In terms of motives, the spiritual activities are in line with most of the tourists’ desires, including visiting, sight-seeing around sacred places (pagodas, churches, temples), and observing the local’s or the Monks’ ritual or religious activities. Besides, some experience activities such as ritual or religious practices at Thien Mu pagoda, Hue Nam, Hon Chen or Quan The Am temples are relevant to tourists seeking spiritual values as for healing or an experiment. Some experience activities of vegetarian foods, spiritual retreats, Yoga, and Qigong offered by Vietnamtourism Hanoi JSC, Cat Tuong Quan Zen House, Hue Tourist Company are suitable for the tourists whose motive is mainly to retreat and to gain the balance in life.

Spiritual or sacred destinations

Most of the spiritual attractions such as famous religious temples or pagodas or other sacred sites in TTH province have been identified as the potential resources of spiritual tourism. However, the locations of spiritual destinations are rather scattered, leading to the difficulties of tourism package design. Second, infrastructure as well as other requirements fails to fully meet the visitors’ needs at the sites. Opinions such as *“several spiritual sites without any support services such as accommodation, foods and beverages, and toilet”* and *“some pagodas are too small for welcoming tourist delegations”* are repeatedly mentioned as the tourism providers’ complaints. Hence, it can be said that the supply chains of spiritual tourism services are incapable of fulfilling tourists’ demands of spirituality in this area.

Besides, the planning of spiritual sites as well as organizing spiritual services at these places are still scattered and lack strong linkages between spiritual tourism sites and travel agencies as well as local tourism companies. In fact, it is easy to identify that there is a lack of the detailed planning of spiritual tourism sites, which are relevant and legal for exploitation. Compared with the availability of the local potential, the number of religious or sacred sites exploited is only a limited figure and their value of spirituality is not fully perceived in terms of services. In general, the exploitation of spiritual tourism is still untapped with its potential. Some of the interviewees’ opinions are as follows:

– *“We have organized tours to visit Hue pagodas within one day, mainly for sight-seeing.”* (The Deputy Director of Dai Bang Tourism Joint Stock Company, Footsteps Outdoor Adventure Travel)

– “...because of the long distance between the spiritual sites, it is too difficult to arrange an appropriate time for the tours.” (A representative of Hue Tourist Company)

– “...infrastructure and roads to spiritual destinations are not relevant to tourism, for instance, roads are too small for large vehicles to get access.” (The Director of Vietnamtourism Hanoi Joint Stock Company – Hue branch, the representative of Hue Tourist Company).

“Some religious sites do not meet the requirements regarding their infrastructure and sanitation facilities to offer spiritual tourism services.” (A representative of HGH Travel Company)

Moreover, the connection between spiritual sites and providers in deploying tourism services is not rigid and purposeful. This makes spiritual tours badly organized. The problem is that the pagodas’ perspective is not the same as the providers’ in offering spiritual tourism. As far as we know, spiritual activities in religious sites are crucial for religious purposes, not for economic interests. Hence, the pagodas only welcome tourists who want to study Buddha spiritual values. However, most of the pagodas in TTH province are not large-scale religious places, the requirements for spiritual tourism services such as accommodation, foods, and beverages are not met at these spiritual sites. Some respondents’ opinions related to this issue are as follows:

– “Pagodas or churches are for a religious purpose, even though they are ready to welcome visitors, services regarding accommodation and foods deny to offer due to their limited facility.” (A representative of Footsteps Outdoor Adventure Travel – Hue branch, the deputy director of Eagle Tourist Joint Stock Company, a representative of HGH Travel Company)

– “Religious sites are considered as formal places for rituals and worship which need to be clean, quiet and peaceful. It is not easy to keep this for serving tourism activities.” (A representative of Hue Tourist Company and the Director of Vietnamtourism Hanoi Joint Stock Company)

Promoting and advertising spiritual tourism and the role of local authorities

Although spiritual tourism in TTH province has been deployed for recent years, its development has not been equal to the potential. In fact, there are also many circumstances seen as obstacles in the development of spiritual tourism in this location, one of which is the promotion of spiritual tourism.

Regarding this issue, the local authority plays an important role. Although spiritual tourism has gained interest from the local government in recent years, the deployment of spiritual tourism activities in sacred and religious sites has still undeveloped. This is because spiritual tourism has not been advertised popularly and formally as a great possibility and advantages of TTH. Besides, the supports in combining other functional departments in the local government as well as connecting religious sites with travel agencies and local tourism companies are still weak. Most of the travel agencies and local tourism companies have

deployed spiritual tourism on their own. At present, there are no specific commitments of spiritual sites and tourism service providers, which describe their responsibility in the process of spiritual tourism exploitation. It can be seen that, to some extent, several spiritual sites in TTH province are rather sensitive places in terms of politics and security. In this sense, the local authorities need to show their role in controlling and connecting religious sites with travel agencies and local tourism companies. Hence, it is necessary to plan spiritual sites according to destinations' values and space as well as spiritual activities. Along with this activity and for the spiritual sites, a certification or license showing the legal organization and exploitation of spiritual activities needs to be issued early for gaining well-managed spiritual sites. Some of the interviewees' opinions are as below:

– *“There has not been any advertisement focusing on spiritual tourism or emphasizing the local advantages of spiritual sites or something like that. (The representatives of travel agencies and local tourism companies)*

– *“...the local potential needs to be spread out as a spiritual destination before offering spiritual services.” (all the representatives have the same opinions)*

– *“We have made our promotion of the spiritual service by ourselves.” (all the representatives have the same opinions)*

– *“There have presently not been any promotion programs in a large scale for spiritual tourism in this area.” (The Deputy Director of Dai Bang Tourism Joint Stock Company, HGH Travel Company)*

– *“We designed and packaged some spiritual tours, but we could not market and sell them successfully. It needs to promote this local spiritual tourism destination as a kick-off marketing.” (6/6 of interviewees who are the representatives of tourism providers have the same this opinion)*

– *“To make a difference, this local tourism should position its destination on the foundation of heritage – religions – spiritual values.” (The manager of Cat Tuong Quan Zen House)*

5 Conclusions and suggestions for further research

It can be seen that spiritual tourism has gradually emerged as a trend of modern tourism, which brings a lot of economic benefits as well as the spreading of significant spiritual values in the local community life. From the analysis above, it is admitted that TTH province has a great potential for spiritual tourism development. However, the local's perception and investment in developing this kind of tourism have still not shown intensive interest. For the obstacles of spiritual tourism development identified in this paper, it is necessary to get a high consistency of the local authorities for tourism operation perspectives in the development of this kind of tourism. Firstly, the enhancement of marketing spiritual tourism is considered as a vital and

crucial duty of the local authority. This includes well-planned relevant and legal spiritual sites, well-marketed local's spiritual tourism policy and destination, as well as well-managed spiritual tourism development. Hence, understanding participants' insights and needs regarding spiritual tourism is an important step to properly plan spiritual sites, design, and market suitable packages for the right tourists. In accordance with this issue, a great deal of investment is paid to market spiritual tourism in TTH province which could potentially attract more spiritual tourists in the years ahead. This paper also highlights the role of local authorities for their supports in advertising images of spiritual tourism in TTH province with tourists as the local's advantages. In this regard, the government has called for cooperation from many different investments in facilitating this development. This improves the local community's perception of connectivity with the depth and breadth of this local's cultural and religious value. This is considered as a significant contribution of this paper in exploring spiritual tourism development in the locality.

Another contribution of this paper is that its findings can serve as a platform for further research. A study on tourists' insights of spiritual tourism is a crucial work for researchers and practitioners to gain a better understanding of their needs and motives of spiritual life. Besides, it is essential to carry out the study regarding the planning of spiritual tourism sites that meet the visitors' needs of spirituality for offering relevant spiritual tourism services in the sacred and religious sites.

This study has conducted in-depth interviews with representatives of six tourism firms. Nevertheless, it fails to capture the multiple perspectives from the tourism operators. The conclusions of this paper would be more thorough if a quantitative method could be performed via surveys of private operators who deploy spiritual tourism in the local. Besides, it is necessary to conduct a survey of the tourists experiencing the sacred places and events in the local for gaining their evaluations of spiritual services offered by firms. Moreover, some measures for solving the difficulties of developing spiritual tourism regarding the role of the local's authorities should be conducted as soon as possible.

References

1. Blackwell, R. (2007), Motivations for religious tourism, pilgrimage, festivals and events. *Religious tourism and pilgrimage festivals management: an international perspective*, CAB International 2007, UK, 35–47.
2. Rogers, C. J. (2005), *Secular spiritual tourism*, Central Queensland University.
3. Collins (2009), The geography of pilgrimage and tourism: Transformations and implications for applied geography, *Applied Geography*, doi:10.1016/j.apgeog.2009.02.001.

4. Finney, R. Z., Orwig, R. A., Spake, D. F. (2009), Lotus-eaters, pilgrims, seekers, and accidental tourists: how different travelers consume the sacred and the profane, *Services Marketing Quarterly*, 30, 2, 148–173.
5. Fluker, M. & Turner, L. (2000), Needs, motivations, and expectations of a whitewater rafting experience, *Journal of Travel Research*, 38(4), 380–389.
6. Haq, F. & Jackson, J. (2009), Spiritual journey to Hajj: Australian and Pakistani experience and expectations, *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion*, 6(2), 141–156.
7. Haq, F., Medhekar, A. & Bretherton, P. (2009), Public and private partnership approach for applying the tourism marketing mix to spiritual tourism. *International Handbook of Academic Research and Teaching*, Intellectbase International Consortium, USA, 8 – Winter 2009, 63.
8. Haq, F. (2013), Islamic spiritual tourism: An innovative marketing framework, *International Journal of Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 4, 2(5), 438–447.
9. Haq, F. & Medhekar, A. (2015), Spiritual tourism between India and Pakistan: A framework for business opportunities and threats, *World Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(2), 190–200.
10. Kartal, B., Tepeci, M. & Atli, H. (2015), Examining the religious tourism potential of Manisa, Turkey with a marketing perspective, *Tourism Review*, 70(3), 214–231.
11. Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2011), Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited, *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, 4, 97–128.
12. Mitroff, I. (1998), *Smart Thinking for Crazy Times, The Art of Solving the Right Problems*, San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
13. Medhekar, A. & Haq, F. (2017), Development of spiritual tourism circuits: The case of India, *GSTF Journal on Business Review (GBR)*, 2(2), 212–218.
14. Norman, A. (2004), Spiritual tourism: Religion and spirituality in Contemporary travel.
15. Norman, A. (2014), The varieties of the spiritual tourist experience, *Literature & Aesthetics*, 22(1), 20–37.
16. Phukan, H., Rahman, Z. & Devdutt, P. (2012), Effect of spiritual tourism on financial health of the Uttarakhand state of India, *Int J Res Commer IT Manag*, 2(2), 1–7.
17. Schmidt, C. & Little, D. E. (2007), Qualitative insights into leisure as a spiritual experience, *Journal of Leisure Research*, 39(2), 222–247.
18. Sharpley, R. & Sundaram, P. (2005), Tourism: A sacred journey? The case of ashram tourism, India, *International journal of tourism research*, 7(3), 161–171.