Concept and Value of Current Religious Tourism in Thailand: A Case Study of the Thailife Wellness & Meditation Resort

แนวคิดและคุณค่าของการท่องเที่ยวเชิงศาสนาของประเทศไทยในปัจจุบัน: กรณีศึกษาไทยไลฟ์ เวลเนส แอนด์ เมดิเตชั่น รีสอร์ท

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Abstract

Buddhist meditation retreats have traditionally been associated with temples, but the rise of religious tourism businesses represents a unique and innovative approach. Balancing mental, physical, and spiritual well–being through innovative techniques and processes is a growing challenge. This research aims to examine the conceptual design religious tourism, particularly meditation tourism, to address contemporary needs, focusing on a case study of the ThaiLife Wellness & Meditation Resort. It also evaluates to analyze the value of current religious tourism in Thailand by exploring the practices at this resort. The study is qualitative in nature, drawing on a literature review, and document analysis of the resort's websites, social media platforms, interview clips in online media, and other relevant documents.

The findings reveal that the resort plays a significant role in promoting Buddhism by offering a distinctive meditation experience outside traditional temple settings. Located in Phang–Nga Province, this seaside resort integrates Buddhist meditation practices with relaxation, combining physical and mental rejuvenation. Course feature chanting, sermons, and both sitting and walking meditation, alongside optional wellness activities led by both monks and lay Buddhist practitioners. The course is structured around the core Buddhist principle of Threefold Training (Tri–Sikkhā), incorporating Sīla (morality), Samādhi (concentration), and Paññā (wisdom), It emphasizes the cultivation of mindfulness and concentration through the Six Senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind).

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The Course design is also informed by the Buddhist principle of “Sappāya,” in relation to the Six Senses (Āyatana), creating an environment that fosters peace and happiness. This approach to meditation tourism offers a valuable and accessible introduction to Buddhist practice, particularly for beginners seeking peace of mind through Buddhism. It also remains an effective means of encouraging the Buddhist faith and serves as a niche business catering to specific groups. Consequently, the resort provides an innovative platform for disseminating Buddhism, offering participants a contemporary experience that fosters faith and appreciation for Buddhist meditation practices in the modern era.

Keywords : Buddhism, meditation practice, religious tourism

บทคัดย่อ

การปฏิบัติธรรมตามแนวทางของพระพุทธศาสนาแต่เดิมนั้นมักจะเกี่ยวข้องกับวัดวาอาราม ในขณะที่ธุรกิจการท่องเที่ยวเชิงศาสนาได้กลายเป็นแนวทางใหม่ที่มีเอกลักษณ์และส่งเสริมการสร้างความสมดุลในองค์รวมทั้งทางด้านจิตใจ ร่างกาย และจิตวิญญาณด้วยเทคนิคและกระบวนการใหม่ ๆ ซึ่งกลายเป็นความท้าทายหนึ่ง งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อการศึกษาแนวคิดการออกแบบท่องเที่ยวเชิงศาสนา โดยเฉพาะการท่องเที่ยวเพื่อการปฏิบัติธรรม เพื่อตอบสนองความต้องการของคนรุ่นใหม่ โดยศึกษาผ่านกรณีศึกษาไทยไลฟ์ เวลเนส แอนด์เมดิเตชั่นรีสอร์ท และเพื่อวิเคราะห์คุณค่าของการท่องเที่ยวเชิงศาสนาของไทยในปัจจุบัน การศึกษาเป็นเชิงคุณภาพโดยอาศัยการเก็บข้อมูลผ่านการทบทวนวรรณกรรม และการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลจากเว็บไซต์ สื่อสังคมออนไลน์ คลิปสัมภาษณ์ในสื่อออนไลน์ และเอกสารที่เกี่ยวข้อง

ผลการวิจัยพบว่า กรณีศึกษาข้างต้นมีแนวคิดและบทบาทสำคัญในการส่งเสริมพระพุทธศาสนาโดยการนำเสนอประสบการณ์การปฏิบัติธรรมโดยมุ่งเน้นประสบการณ์ที่แตกต่าง รีสอร์ทตั้งอยู่ในจังหวัดพังงา ซึ่งเป็นรีสอร์ทริมทะเล ได้จัดคอร์สการปฏิบัติธรรมของพระพุทธศาสนามาผสมผสานกับการพักผ่อนเพื่อฟื้นฟูทั้งร่างกายและจิตใจ การจัดคอร์สปฏิบัติธรรมประกอบด้วยการสวดมนต์ การฟังธรรม การนั่งสมาธิและการเดินจงกรม ตลอดจนการนำเสนอกิจกรรมทางเลือกเพื่อสุขภาพกายและใจ นำโดยพระสงฆ์และฆราวาสผู้ปฏิบัติธรรม การออกแบบโครงสร้างของหลักสูตรตามแนวทางไตรสิกขา (ศีล สมาธิ ปัญญา) โดยเน้นการฝึกสติและสมาธิผ่านอายตนะทั้ง 6 (ตา หู จมูก ลิ้น กาย และใจ) การออกแบบหลักสูตรยังสอดคล้องกับหลักการทางพุทธศาสนาที่เรียกว่า “สัปปายะ” ซึ่งมีจุดเด่นคือสถานที่เหมาะแก่การพักผ่อนและการทำกิจกรรมเพื่อความผ่อนคลายอย่างอิสระ โดยเชื่อมโยงกับหลักอายตนะทั้ง 6 เพื่อสร้างสภาพแวดล้อมที่ส่งเสริมและเหมาะกับการปฏิบัติธรรม โดยเฉพาะสำหรับผู้เริ่มต้นที่ต้องการความสงบทางจิตใจ แนวทางนี้พัฒนาขึ้นเป็นธุรกิจการท่องเที่ยวที่ตอบโจทย์กลุ่มเป้าหมายในปัจจุบัน ดังนั้น รีสอร์ทแห่งนี้จึงเป็นหนึ่งในหลักการนวัตกรรมที่สร้างสรรค์อันมีส่วนช่วยเผยแผ่พระพุทธศาสนา โดยมอบประสบการณ์ใหม่ในการท่องเที่ยวเชิงศาสนาที่กระตุ้นให้เกิดทั้งความศรัทธาและความตระหนักที่ดีต่อการปฏิบัติธรรมตามแนวทางของพระพุทธศาสนาในยุคสมัยใหม่

คำสำคัญ : พระพุทธศาสนา การปฏิบัติธรรม การท่องเที่ยวเชิงศาสนา

Introduction

In Thailand, the tourism industry plays a significant role in attracting both domestic and international visitors seeking various forms of relaxation. A growing trend can be observed among Buddhists who recognize the value of innovative meditation retreats offered by emerging wellness enterprises. These retreats provide participants with novel experiences in Buddhist meditation through carefully designed settings that emphasize nature, holistic health, and mental development (Piuchan, 2021). This approach appeals to individuals seeking a new type of experience that transcends traditional temple boundaries. The focus is on creating environments where natural surroundings facilitate inner peace and emotional well–being, promoting a balance between physical and mental health. Such environments nurture positive mental states such as loving–kindness, forgiveness, tranquility, and equanimity. In this way, the choice of retreat location becomes essential for temporarily escaping the chaos of daily life.

This trend presents a unique opportunity for both religion and tourism to design experiences that resonate with the diverse lifestyles of different generations. However, a key challenge is how religion can adapt to modernity, merging spiritual dimensions with the value–based experiences offered through tourism. The task is to transform the "perceived monotony" of traditional religious practices into "transformative experiences" that meet contemporary needs. The goal is to encourage active participation in religious activities in an engaging and accessible way.

This study has two objectives. Firstly, it examines the concepts and emergence of religious tourism in Thailand, particularly through this case study, to investigate how a retreat can be transformed into a meditation tourism destination through well–designed courses, and secondly, to analyze the value generated by such religious tourism businesses by strategic application of Buddhist teachings and practices to their target audience. This article is divided into two sections: the first presents the findings from the data collected for the case study, while the second analyzes the data to draw broader conclusions.

Objectives

1. To examines the conceptual design of religious tourism through a case study on the ThaiLife Wellness & Meditation Resort.

2. To analyze the value of the emergence of Buddhist tourism businesses in the case study.

Literature Review

This study aims to examines the concept of Buddhist tourism through a case study, focusing on strategies for creating value that aligns with contemporary needs. The literature review reveals the following conceptual framework:

Religious tourism encompasses various forms, with meditation tourism often broadly categorized as spiritual tourism and wellness tourism (Ryan, 2001; Aggarwal et al., 2008; Smith & Puczkó, 2009; Kelly, 2012; Norman, 2012; Piuchan, 2021). The term "meditation tourism" first appeared in academic discussions in 2004 (Santana, 2004) and was further explored by Tseng & Shen (2014a). Despite these contributions, research on meditation retreats within tourism remains limited. "Meditation tourism" encompasses a wide range of practices, from short meditation sessions in hotel meeting rooms to intensive, multi–day retreats. In contrast, "meditation retreats" involve dedicated, immersive practices in a controlled environment, with the aim of deepening the meditation experience. Meditation tourism refers to travel where participation in meditation practices is a central part of the holiday experience. It provides a secular mindfulness platform, especially for international tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds, allowing them to engage in meditation without requisite adherence to religious doctrines, as traditional religious elements may be omitted in secular contexts (Pelled, 2007; Schedneck, 2013; Britton et al., 2014; Sharf, 2015; Choe et al., 2015b).

Meditation tourism is a new form of spiritual tourism that converges with holistic health tourism. It offers mental and physical health benefits through activities such as yoga and wellness practices. Meditation retreats provide a unique opportunity for individuals to disconnect from daily distractions, enhancing their meditation practice. These retreats serve as structured environments where participants can refine their meditation techniques and develop habits that promote long–term well–being (Ryan, 2001; Eddy, 2012; Kelly, 2012; Tseng & Shen, 2014b; Norman & Pokorny, 2017; Piuchan, 2021). Integrating religious elements into this field creates an emerging area of interdisciplinary research with the potential to generate new knowledge across multiple disciplines. Whether spiritual or secular, meditation retreats offer a path to personal growth and well–being, with benefits extending beyond the retreat setting.

Recent studies on religious tourism have expanded the research scope by focusing on the influence of social media in promoting religious tourism. Chatzopoulou (2022) explores how virtual tourism, virtual reality, and other digital technologies can enhance access to and engagement with religious and pilgrimage heritage. These advancements offer new opportunities for promoting religious tourism while maintaining engagement with

traditional practices. Additionally, social media plays an important role in religious tourists' travel experiences, particularly in sharing their experiences and maintaining social connections and friendships (Caber et al., 2021). The growing use of digital technologies, particularly virtual reality and online platforms, has created new ways for tourists to experience and access religious and cultural heritage beyond conventional forms of visitation (Chatzopoulou, 2022). Virtual tourism also raises questions about authenticity, particularly regarding the differences between virtual experiences and the physical and sensory dimensions of tourism experiences (Mura et al., 2017).

In conclusion, meditation retreat tourism is defined by organized courses that provide participants with opportunities for self–reflection and growth within residential settings. These retreats create a structured environment that merges spirituality, wellness, and tourism, offering mental and physical benefits. Often, meditation tourism is detached from strict religious frameworks, broadening its appeal to both spiritual and secular audiences. This literature review demonstrates the expanding field of meditation tourism, emphasizing its potential to contribute to overall well–being beyond the retreat experience. The integration of religious elements into tourism offers a compelling frontier for interdisciplinary research. This study aims to investigate the conceptual design religious tourism in Thailand through the ThaiLife Wellness & Meditation Resort, aligning contemporary demands with value creation for both businesses and Buddhism. Ultimately, it seeks to offer insights into how traditional religious practices can be creatively merged with modern wellness trends to foster sustainable tourism in Thailand.

Benefits of Research

1. To understand the current state and emergence of the Buddhist tourism concept in Thailand.

2. To identify strategies for creating value through the relationship between the tourism industry and the response of Buddhists in contemporary Thai society and to explore sustainable approaches for achieving mutual benefits.

Research Methodology

This study aims to investigate the conceptualization of Buddhist tourism through the lens of meditation practices, focusing on the ThaiLife Wellness & Meditation Resort. The research methodology comprises five key components:

1. Comprehensive Literature Review: A thorough review of existing literature on religious tourism is conducted to establish a theoretical foundation and context for the study.

2. Data Collection: Data is gathered from various sources, including the resort's website, social media platforms, interview clips, and promotional videos. This multi–source data collection approach provides a comprehensive overview of the resort's operations and marketing strategies.

3. Documentary Analysis: This approach focuses on examining the course design, schedules, and activities included in the resort's packages. It allows for a detailed understanding of how the resort's meditation practices are structured and marketed.

4. Data Synthesis: The collected data are synthesized to identify key insights and themes related to the conceptualization and implementation of Buddhist tourism practices at the resort.

5. Analysis and Evaluation: The synthesized data are analyzed to evaluate the resort's effectiveness in addressing contemporary demands for Buddhist tourism. This analysis assesses how well the resort meets current expectations and provides value within the context of meditation–based tourism.

By integrating these methodologies, the research aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how meditation–based Buddhist tourism is conceptualized and its effectiveness in meeting contemporary demands as reflected in its operational and marketing strategies.

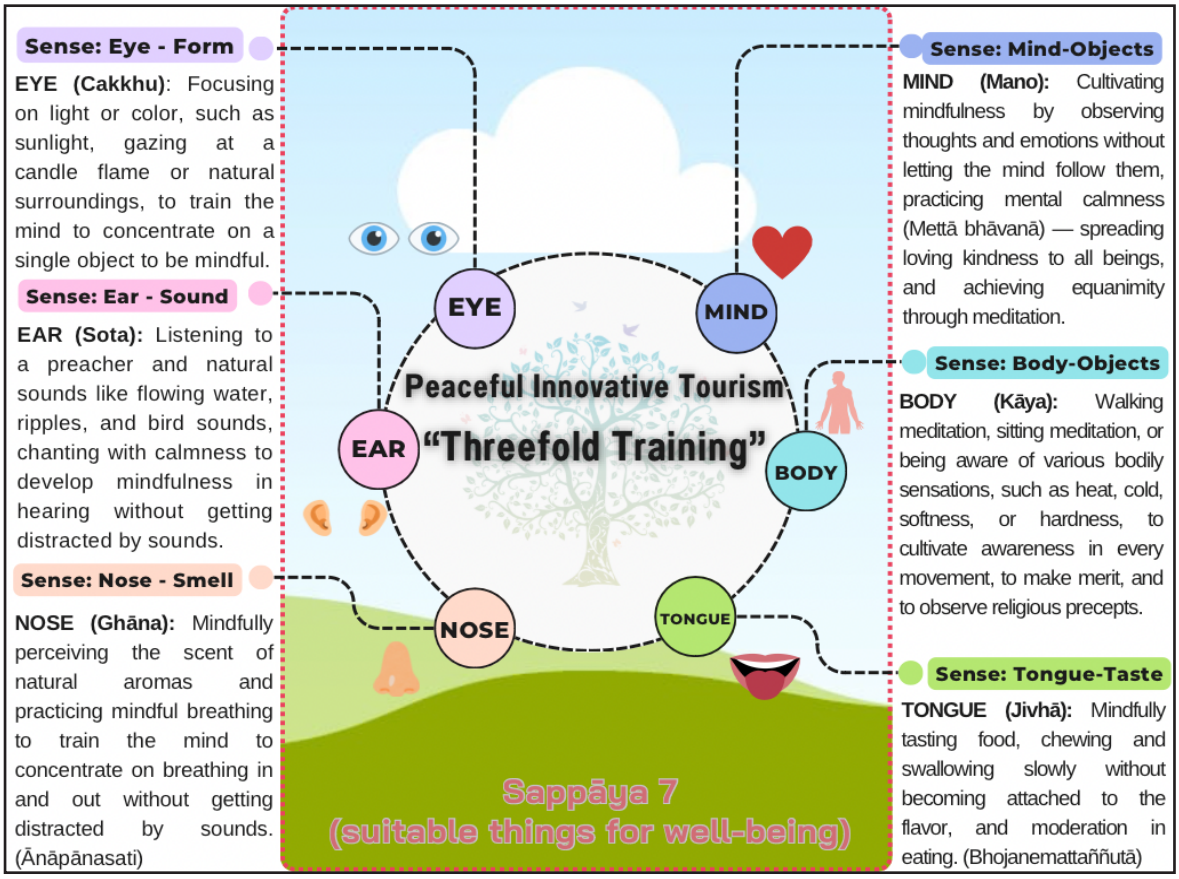
Conclusion

This study investigates the emergence of religious tourism concepts related to meditation retreats and the value of the religious tourism business, focusing on the ThaiLife Wellness & Meditation Resort. The results can be summarized as follows:

Objective 1: The study examines the emergence of religious tourism businesses, concentrating on the conceptual design of meditation retreat courses within the context of the resort environment in Takuapa District, Phang–Nga Province, in Southern Thailand. The ThaiLife Wellness & Meditation Resort has a storied history, starting as a small boutique resort built by owners Maneerat and John on the site of a former cashew nut farm. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami devastated the area, the farm untenable, and the resort was established to provide employment opportunities for the local community. The resort reflects authentic Thai living in harmony with nature. The owners continue to manage aspects of the resort, from engineering to organic farming, preserving the environment and culture while offering guests a unique holiday experience that blends wellness, meditation, and relaxation within a natural sanctuary.

The conceptual design is described as a “Peaceful Innovative Tourism” course (Santi Nawat Vithī), emphasizing a new form of tourism designed for Buddhists (Issaradhammo, 2022). It focuses on the Threefold Training (Tri–Sikkhā), The training incorporates Sīla (morality), Samādhi (concentration), and Paññā (wisdom) implemented through the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, The word satipatthāna can be translated as “foundations” or “the establishment” of mindfulness. The four foundations are: Mindfulness of body (kāyā), Mindfulness of feelings (vedanā), Mindfulness of mind/heart (citta), and Mindfulness of qualities (dhamma). By fostering awareness of both external and internal senses, the course encourages letting go and balancing one’s faculties, using the natural environment to support spiritual practice. Participants engage in Vipassana meditation practices following full courses on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, along with group meditation using Tibetan singing bowls for stress relief and holistic healing.

Based on the author’s observations, the resort does not limit the number of participants but primarily offers Buddhist meditation through the main course entitled the “Delight in Dhamma” course, which includes both three–day and week–long retreats. Additionally, there is a special monthly course tailored to individuals, incorporating a variety of therapeutic activities such as breathwork, sound baths, yoga, art therapy, and different forms of meditation surrounded by the sea and nature. The course integrates alternative health practices aimed at healing both the body and mind. The concept is rooted in the Buddhist principle of “Sappāya,” which refers to a “Harmonious and Conducive Environment.” This principle emphasizes the creation of experiences that align with participants’ needs while maintaining a balance between nature and comfort in an appropriate setting. The serene atmosphere and supportive service allow guests to fully engage in meditation practices, including chanting, sitting meditation, walking meditation, observing the Five or Eight Precepts, and practicing Buddhist mindfulness. The natural surroundings, such as beaches and green spaces, further enhance mindfulness practices.



Picture 1: Conceptual Diagram by researcher

This diagram illustrates the concept of Peaceful Innovative Tourism. The design of the course follows the Buddhist principle of "Sappāya" (conducive environments) based on the Six Sense Bases (Āyatana); creating an environment that fosters peace and happiness is the structure of this course is based on the core Buddhist principle of Threefold Training (Tri–Sikkhā). The training incorporates Sīla (morality), Samādhi (concentration), and Paññā (wisdom), emphasizing the cultivation of mindfulness and concentration through the six senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind).

The Peaceful Innovative Tourism retreat integrates the core Buddhist practice of Threefold Training, emphasizing moral conduct, concentration, and wisdom development. It applies these teachings through mindful engagement with the six senses. Participants in this retreat learn to live mindfully, whether observing nature, listening to sounds, practicing breathing control, tasting food, or reflecting on bodily and mental sensations. This holistic approach encourages balance, inner peace, and spiritual growth, helping individuals develop mindfulness in every aspect of their daily lives.

This religious tourism model capitalizes on resort spaces to commoditize commercial meditation retreat courses and offers accessible Buddhist practices. Selecting tourist destinations to promote fundamental Buddhist practices to younger generations is a key strategy. Combining tourism with spiritual practice, which is not limited to temple settings, and including both monks for spiritual guidance and laypeople for operational management, enhances the customer experience. These elements play a crucial role in attracting young Buddhists from diverse backgrounds. The Peaceful Innovative Tourism model integrates various activities aimed at the holistic development of body, mind, and well–being, offering a path toward inner peace and tranquility.

The concept utilizes the resort space as a venue for meditation retreats and Buddhist practice aimed at self–discovery, relaxation, and stress reduction. This practice has been integrated into various contexts, including natural therapy through activities within the resort grounds. Meditation has evolved into a commercial enterprise through wellness and lifestyle resorts, offering meditation packages combined with health and luxury experiences. These resorts typically feature luxurious amenities and courses customized to meet clients' needs, reflecting a shift from religious meditation practices to commercialized ones. In contrast, meditation retreats at Thai temples are generally non–commercial, operating on a donation basis or charging minimal fees as an act of merit–making, emphasizing the non–commercial spiritual aspect. However, the resort in this case study offers meditation courses as a commercial product in a luxurious setting, complete with extensive facilities and a marketing plan targeting tourists through various social media channels.

The course is led by lay experts in Buddhism and monks who guide participants in full meditation practices. The target audience includes beginners in meditation and those seeking to deepen their practice within Buddhism through mindfulness and meditation in nature, engaging all Six Sense Bases (Āyatana), including mindful observation of visual objects (eye), sounds (ear), smells (nose), tastes (tongue), tactile sensations (body), and mental phenomena (mind). Each sensory experience is engaged in a way that encourages non–attachment and present–moment awareness, helping participants to see things as they truly are without mental fabrication or bias. This comprehensive approach facilitates an experiential understanding of reality, fostering greater inner peace and wisdom.

Results According to Objective 2: The analysis of the value of the tourism business shows that for current groups interested in practicing meditation, it offers new experiences and cultivates a belief in Buddhism that differs from previous perspectives. Additionally, it enhances the appreciation of meditation practice within Buddhism.

The concept of peaceful innovative tourism delivers substantial value to modern society. By emphasizing mindfulness through the body's natural senses and using Threefold Training as a foundation, participants gain tools to cultivate inner peace, emotional stability, and spiritual growth. This type of retreat fosters a deep connection with nature and oneself, helping participants navigate life with greater awareness, reduce stress, and improve mental clarity. It also aligns with contemporary needs for sustainable, meaningful travel that nurtures holistic well–being. Moreover, the integration of ethical precepts (Sīla) ensures that participants leave the retreat not only with improved concentration (Samādhi) and wisdom (Paññā) but also a commitment to living a moral life. These benefits extend beyond the individual, fostering a sense of interconnectedness with others and the environment, contributing to a more peaceful and harmonious world.

The tourism business model in this case study exemplifies an opportunity to enhance both business growth and Thailand's tourism image by integrating Buddhist principles with Thai traditions in popular tourist provinces. It combines a wide range of activities, including relaxation, meditation, and holistic health for wellness and temple tours in Phang–Nga and nearby areas, along with merit–making rituals. This fosters faith in Buddhism while creating a positive and relaxed approach to Buddhist practices. The business provides value to both the body and mind, making it accessible to all participants while leveraging the power of faith. This approach represents a strategic effort to re–establish Buddhism as a dynamic learning environment beyond traditional monastic boundaries, leveraging the power of faith through religious and meditation tourism.

Religion has both the teaching to be studied and propagated and the practice to guide its adherents on the way to reach the religious goal as well as to enhance their health and well–being. The main practice comprises morality, meditation, and prayer. Among them, meditation or concentration on a specific subject and prayer have been recognized for their therapeutic effects. The Buddhist holistic approach to health care is more realistic and more beneficial to human well–being; both meditation and prayer will enable us to have self–control over the appetites, sensations, and egoistic drives. Thus, this Buddhist meditation course is regarded as the initial step in fostering positive and valuable experiences for participants, which can be verified through their personal practice and ongoing self–development. Moreover, this Buddhist tourism claims that the concepts employed in this course represent a form of merit–making; the practice of merit–making is one of the fundamental activities of Buddhists everywhere. Through practice, participants accumulate merit in alignment with Buddhist principles. This is considered a continuation of these concepts among Buddhists.

Religious tourism, particularly in this context, blends traditional sightseeing with spiritual learning—known as meditation tourism. This type of tourism offers participants an opportunity to exchange knowledge on religious philosophy, discover life's truths, practice self–meditation, and build a new spiritual community of like–minded individuals united by shared faith and self–awareness. It encourages individuals to view life through the lens of Buddhist values and can be seen as a form of community–based creative tourism, allowing for self–determination by the local community. Moreover, it transforms the cultural and religious heritage of Buddhism into an economic asset through the framework of a creative economy.

By integrating nature, local lifestyles, and nearby community cultures, this model fosters open–mindedness and inclusiveness, welcoming diverse participants. It also promotes an accessible approach to Buddhist practice by encouraging individuals to engage in self–experimentation with meditation, searching for life's deeper values and meanings. This approach further allows participants to develop their practice while attending to their holistic well–being, following Buddhist natural principles, free from external embellishments, and grounded in inner peace.

In this case study, religious tourism offers substantial benefits across community, religious, and business domains. For communities, it stimulates economic growth by generating revenue through local services such as accommodation and dining while simultaneously promoting and preserving local cultural heritage. This form of tourism also aids in the dissemination of Buddhist teachings, enriching both adherents and non–adherents with deeper religious understanding. Incorporating monks and Buddhist experts into the tourism experience fosters meaningful connections between tourists and the religious community. For businesses, religious tourism presents a unique opportunity to tap into a niche market that seeks both spiritual and relaxation experiences, thereby expanding market reach and differentiating brand identity. Combining luxurious accommodations with spiritual practices not only attracts a diverse clientele but also adds significant value to the business. Overall, this approach to tourism effectively supports economic development and enriches religious outreach while promoting business growth, offering a holistic and distinctive experience.

Discussion and Recommendations

Meditation retreat tourism is a growing trend, particularly in countries like Thailand, where Buddhism is deeply rooted. Meditation and mindfulness retreats have increasingly become part of wellness tourism, attracting those seeking relaxation and mental rejuvenation.

The commercialization of meditation has led to a departure from its traditional religious context, making it more accessible to tourists who focus on psychological and physical well–being. As noted by Schedneck (2012), meditation practices have been adapted to suit the tastes of modern tourists, emphasizing mental balance and stress reduction over spiritual enlightenment.

Research highlights the benefits of meditation retreats. For instance, Smith (2003) and Tseng & Shen (2014) found that meditation strengthens the mind, body, and spirit, making it a popular activity among tourists who appreciate these holistic benefits. Krygier et al. (2013) observed that meditation reduces stress and chaotic thoughts, leading to a calmer and more peaceful state of mind. This ability to rejuvenate their mental state is a major draw for meditation retreat participants. Further research by Choe et al. (2015b) highlights the growinginterest in meditation and other Eastern spiritual practices within the broader context of Buddhist–related travel.

On the other hand, the commodification of meditation raises ethical questions. Detaching it from its religious roots risks oversimplifying or misrepresenting the practice for commercial purposes. As Schedneck (2014) demonstrates how meditation in Thailand is selectively presented to international tourists as both a culturally distinctive and universal practice, reflecting its adaptation within a tourism context. While this process contributes to the commodification of meditation, Schedneck (2014) does not view such adaptation as necessarily diminishing the practice for foreign communities. The concern is that in making meditation appealing to the masses, it might lose the depth and richness of its traditional form, which emphasizes spiritual growth and enlightenment rather than solely material or mental well–being.

However, measuring the benefits of meditation retreats poses challenges due to the subjective nature and highly personal nature of the experience. Much of the evidence supporting meditation's effectiveness relies heavily on self–reported data rather than scientific studies. Furthermore, while the commercialization of meditation has made it more accessible to a secular audience, concerns have been raised about the dilution of its original spiritual and religious significance. The adaptation of meditation for tourism purposes could be seen as diminishing the essence of its practice, particularly in traditional Buddhist contexts.

The evolution of meditation from a deeply spiritual practice to a tourism commodity presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the growing accessibility of meditation retreats allows more people to benefit from their psychological and physical advantages. Meditation has become a widely accepted tool for improving well–being,

reducing stress, and enhancing mental health. This adaptation is a positive development for those seeking accessible forms of mental rejuvenation and relaxation outside religious institutions.

Meditation retreat tourism continues to grow as a significant part of wellness tourism, providing both mental and physical health benefits to participants. Studies show that meditation can lead to long–term improvements in well–being if practiced consistently. However, the commercialization and secularization of meditation raise concerns about the potential loss of its spiritual essence. While this trend makes meditation more accessible, it also risks diluting the profound meaning held within its original religious context. As meditation retreats evolve, a delicate balance must be struck between accessibility and maintaining the integrity of the practice.

Meditation retreat tourism serves as a significant driver of economic and cultural enrichment, seamlessly blending spiritual practices with sustainable growth. Economically, it stimulates both local and national economies by attracting high–spending domestic and international tourists. ThaiLife Wellness & Meditation Resort generates employment opportunities and supports related sectors, including hospitality, transportation, and local crafts, benefiting from increased demand for goods and services, ranging from organic products to local handicrafts, thereby fostering local entrepreneurship and community development.

According to Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Thailand has underscored its vision to boost the economy through cultural and creative industries, highlighting the country's rich cultural heritage and its role in increasing economic value. At the Forbes Global CEO Conference Matichon Online, 2024), she emphasized the importance of leveraging Thailand's "soft power," particularly its craftsmanship and long–standing cultural traditions, to attract high–value tourism. The government aims to promote tourism as a key driver of sustainable economic growth, aligning with national goals to strengthen infrastructure and create high–skilled employment. This vision reinforces the idea that cultural tourism, including meditation retreat tourism, can play a pivotal role in boosting the national economy while preserving cultural heritage.

The integration of meditation into wellness tourism enhances the appeal of Thailand's Buddhist heritage, providing visitors with a unique and enriching experience. This dual role of meditation retreats as both cultural and economic assets promotes sustainable growth, strengthens infrastructure development, and preserves cultural heritage. By leveraging its spiritual legacy, Thailand positions itself as a leader in wellness tourism, demonstrating that religious tourism can simultaneously foster economic prosperity and preserve cultural identity.

Meditation retreat tourism reflects the integration of both religious and secular dimensions in the modern era. On the one hand, religious practices such as meditation maintain their spiritual value, emphasizing inner growth, tranquility, and mental balance. On the other hand, when these practices are commodified through tourism, the secular dimension plays a significant role. Adapting meditation to suit tourists' preferences, along with the relaxation of religious rules, may increase accessibility but also risks diluting the spiritual depth and essence of the practice. The challenge lies in balancing the preservation of religious values while catering to secular demands. This tension between upholding spiritual integrity and responding to worldly interests remains a key issue for the future of meditation retreat tourism.

This study on meditation retreat tourism at the ThaiLife Wellness & Meditation Resort presents a novel approach to developing and creating value in the context of contemporary religious tourism. A comparison can be drawn with Lehto et al. (2006), who examine yoga tourism as a niche within the wellness tourism market and highlight travel experiences associated with physical and mental well–being. Their study demonstrates how wellness–related practices can become part of specialized tourism experiences. Similarly, the present study demonstrates the development of religious tourism through the integration of Buddhist meditation practices and tourism services, catering to tourists seeking tranquility, relaxation, and meaningful experiences. This comparison highlights the opportunities and challenges involved in adapting traditional practices to contemporary tourist needs while maintaining their distinctive meanings and values.

For future development and management of religious tourism, the study recommends focusing on understanding the long–term impacts of meditation retreat tourism on participants and preserving the authenticity of religious experiences. Developing clear standards and practices is essential to maintain the integrity of religious principles and prevent the erosion of their spiritual significance of the practice. Assessing the environmental impacts of tourism activities will support sustainable management and prevent damage to natural areas. Additionally, promoting community involvement will foster mutual benefits and support sustainable development.

By implementing these recommendations, the future of religious tourism can effectively meet traveler expectations while preserving the depth and authenticity of spiritual practices. Strategic and balanced development will ensure that religious tourism continues to offer valuable and sustainable experiences.

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