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NARAWADEE BUAKHWAN

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University of Illinois Research Park

60 Hazelwood Drive

Champaign, IL 61820 USA

Ph: +1-217-328-0405

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Using Domestic and International Satisfaction to Promote the Sustainability of a Heritage Site in Songkhla Old Town, Thailand

Narawadee Buakhwan,¹ Songkhla Rajabhat University, Thailand

Abstract: The objectives for this research were to study the behavior and the needs of domestic and international visitors in a cultural heritage site in Thailand; and to study activities and routes that could lead to the creation of sustainable cultural heritage programs in Thailand. A mixed-methods research technique was used in this investigation using data obtained from documents, surveys, observations, interviews, and small group discussions with representatives from all sectors involved in heritage-site marketing. This article compares the background of current visitors to cultural heritage destinations, explores their level of satisfaction with the experience, and makes suggestions for new routes that can help develop heritage cities as sustainable alternatives to more mainstream attractions.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Domestic Tourism, International Tourism, Sustainability, Visitor Satisfaction

Introduction

An increasingly pressing issue in conversations about tourism development is sustainability (Hall et al. 2016). Tourism is a service industry that creates jobs, generating income for many countries at the top level. At present, the global tourism market is highly competitive, with each country aiming to market their own attractions and services to draw tourists from all over the world. There is an ongoing battle for customers, and national governments are looking for new and innovative ways to lure both domestic and international tourists (Submitter, Chang, and Kuo 2019). Yet, it is becoming increasingly important to manage heritage sites in a sustainable manner that does not have a negative impact on the environment.

Songkhla Province is an area of Southern Thailand with great potential for sustainable development. There is a rich variety of resources, including natural attractions, cultural attractions, traditions, and interesting ways of life. There is an existing basic structure for supporting visitors, such as hotels, restaurants, airports, and the availability of basic infrastructure services. There is also a clear policy for local development with sustainability in mind (Intamano and Visuthismajarn 2019). Moreover, Songkhla province borders Malaysia, making it a recognized and popular destination for both Thai and foreign tourists, especially Malaysian and Singaporean tourists, who travel all year round.

However, the majority of visitors travel to Hat Yai District because it is the center of business and home to many hotels, shopping malls, and entertainment complexes. They seemingly ignore the beautiful cultural sites with great potential beyond Hat Yai. One such destination is Songkhla Old Town, a source of cultural learning in history, the fine arts, and architecture.

Given the untapped potential of Songkhla Old Town as an attractive international destination, the researcher felt it was necessary to examine the composition of domestic and international visitors to the town. This article therefore compares the background of current visitors to a cultural heritage site in Southern Thailand, Songkhla Old Town. The level of satisfaction with the experience in Songkhla Old Town is explored, differences and similarities are identified, and

¹ Corresponding Author: Narawadee Buakhwan, Songkhla Rajabhat University, Samrong Rd, Khao Rup Chang, Mueang Songkhla District, Songkhla, Thailand 90000. email: nbuakhwan313@gmail.com

suggestions are made for two new tourist routes to help develop sustainable tourism in the region and more general discussions about potential development pathways in Thailand.

Literature Review

Cultural tourism is not a new phenomenon, being in existence since the time of Ancient Rome and Ancient Greece (Ivanovic 2008). Cultural education has historically been viewed as a major cause of travel, especially for the middle and upper classes (Gregory 2000). Yet the tourism boom of the twentieth century and increasing technological innovations in transport have provided people with greater and more affordable opportunities to experience cultural heritage around the world (Richards 1996). Cultural heritage tourism has now become a recognized strategy for national economic development that simultaneously promotes conservation of traditional customs and architecture and stimulates the economy (Chen and Rahman 2018). Research has shown that travelers visiting cultural heritage sites stay for longer and have higher expenditure levels than other types of tourist (Advisory Council on Historic Preservation 2002).

As mass tourism has developed, questions of sustainability have emerged more frequently (Girard and Nijkamp 2009). In 1996, the United Nations World Tourism Organization defined sustainable tourism as: “tourism which leads to management of all areas, in such a way, that the economic, social and environmental needs are being fulfilled with the cultural integration, ecological processes, biodiversity and supporting the development of societies” (UNWTO 1996). Academic interest in social and environmental issues of tourism sustainability emerged in the 1980s (Allen et al. 1988; Brougham and Butler 1981; Cater 1987). However, the term “sustainable tourism” did not specifically appear in academic studies until a decade later (May 1991; Nash and Butler 1990).

After three decades of research on environmental, architectural, social, and cultural aspects of sustainable tourism, the term now signifies tourism management based on the principles of authenticity, longevity, and sustainability, taking “full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts” as far as all stakeholders are concerned (UNWTO 2009). This expanded definition importantly emphasizes the impact and involvement of those with vested interest in the management of heritage sites (the stakeholders) (Koščak and O’Rourke 2019).

Local participation in heritage management is vital for creating sustainable attractions (Kim, Whitford, and Arcodia 2019). Actually, lack of sustainability in Thai heritage sites has been found to be caused by too much focus on the economic benefit of the site by local participants, and neglect of cultural value (Sangchumnon and Kozak 2018). This is one of Ashworth’s (2000) two bases for sustainable heritage site management. Consequently, the researchers were interested in exploring his other basis: management of heritage from the perspective of tourists.

Conservation of urban heritage, culturally important sites, and historical landmarks can assist in the branding, promotion, and management of heritage destinations and simultaneously generate a sense of community agency and improve visitor experiences (Haddad and Fakhoury 2016). Arts, culture, and heritage are key “destination enhancers” that play a significant role in determining the overall desirability of a particular destination (Kumar 2017). With specific reference to heritage sites, socio-cultural sustainability has been found to play a large role in tourist satisfaction, while environmental sustainability was less important (Asmelash and Kumar 2019). Although community participation increases sustainability, and increased sustainability enhances tourist satisfaction, tourist satisfaction has little bearing on community willingness to participate in heritage management (Dragouni and Fouseki 2018).

Thailand is a significant international destination, but there are also millions of domestic tourists traveling in the country each year. Despite this, there is no research about the differing perspectives of domestic and international tourist experiences at heritage sites. With this in

mind, the researcher considered it important to assess tourist satisfaction of heritage sites and using those findings to develop sustainable tourism routes in Songkhla Old Town.

Research Methodology

This investigation of sustainable management in the cultural heritage zone of Songkhla Old Town utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The objectives of the research are to study the behavior and needs of visitors within the cultural heritage site and to study activities and routes that might lead to the creation of sustainable programs within the cultural heritage zone.

The population studied during this investigation was composed of fifteen community leaders and scholars in the culture and history of Songkhla Old Town; twenty representatives of relevant government agencies (Songkhla Tourism and Sports Office, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT)–Hat Yai Office, Songkhla Provincial Cultural Office, Songkhla Provincial Administrative Organization, and Singha Nakhon Municipality); fifteen individuals from the private sector, local businesses, and tour operators; 4,400 domestic visitors; and 200 foreign visitors. Tools used in the research project consisted of 1) a survey of basic information on heritage marketing, 2) a questionnaire on behavior and needs of visitors, and 3) a small-group discussion to hear opinions of the parties concerned.

The researcher used an integrated research methodology, combining qualitative research and quantitative research. Related documents were first studied to gather preliminary information and theories on the research topic, including local government documents, books, articles and internet sources. Data was also collected from the field using survey forms, observation forms, group discussion forms, and interview forms in accordance with the research objectives. The field survey on marketing in the cultural heritage area of Songkhla Old Town was conducted in three parts: 1) a survey of basic marketing information in the area, 2) observation of marketing information in the area, and 3) using behavioral and tourist questionnaires.

Data analysis from this research is divided into two parts: 1) qualitative data obtained from document studies, observations, interviews, and small-group meetings in the field were verified, validated, and classified into categories according to the research objectives. Content analysis was then carried out for each category using an inductive analysis method; 2) quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically percentage and mean average. The questionnaires gathered opinions of visitors toward facilities in Songkhla Old Town using a 5-level Likert rating scale: 1 (Lowest), 2 (Low), 3 (Medium), 4 (High) and 5 (Highest). The method of evaluation and interpretation of the results using the mean was conducted according to the principle of class interval by using the formula $\text{Interval (I)} = \text{Range (R)} / \text{Class (C)}$. This led to an evaluation scale of: 1.00-1.80 (Lowest), 1.81-2.60 (Low), 2.61-3.40 (Medium), 3.41-4.20 (High) and 4.21-5.00 (Highest).

The reliability and content validity of the questionnaire were also assessed by three independent experts. The Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) was calculated and any questions returning IOC results less than 0.50 were removed from the questionnaire. The modified questionnaires were then tested with thirty respondents. The results from these were not included in the research results. The reliability of the questionnaire data was assessed using a Cronbach method. The validity of qualitative data was assessed using a methodological triangulation technique. Data collected in different ways (such as observation and interview) were compared to verify the consistency of the information. Additionally, data collected from different sources were also subjected to a triangulation test.

Results

From observations, surveys, interviews and discussions about marketing management, visitor behaviors, and requirements within cultural heritage zones of Songkhla Old Town are summarized below.

The Behavior and Needs of Thai Visitors within the Cultural Heritage Area

Questionnaire results revealed that most domestic Thai visitors to the cultural heritage area of Songkhla Old Town reside in Songkhla Province. This group accounted for 44.8% of visitors to Songkhla Old Town, followed by Bangkok (10%) and Satun Province (7.5%). The majority of domestic visitors were female (67%). In terms of age, it was found that 24.8% of domestic visitors were aged 20–24, 18% aged 15–19, and 16% aged 35–39. Most domestic visitors were single (70.3%) or married (27%). Seventy-nine percent of domestic Thai visitors were Buddhist and 20.5% Muslim. It was found that most visitors had a bachelor's degree (55.5%), although 40% were students. A total of 32.8% of domestic Thai visitors had a monthly income between 10,000 and 29,999 baht, 31.3% earned less than 5,000 baht per month, and 15.3% earned between 30,000 and 49,999 baht per month.

The behavioral data of Thai visitors to the cultural heritage area of Songkhla Old Town was also gathered. This showed that most visitors had traveled to the area before (73.5%). A total of 33.5% of domestic Thai visitors visited Songkhla Old Town once per year, 32.5% made more than six trips to the area per year, and 21.8% visited 2–3 times per year. Fifty-two percent of domestic Thai visitors to Songkhla Old Town learned about the cultural heritage area from friends and 26% from the internet. The vast majority of respondents (85.8%) made their own way to the cultural heritage area by private transport. Most visitors planned to stay at a hotel or guesthouse (39.3%). Those staying at a relative or friend's house accounted for 33%. A total of 50.3% of domestic Thai visitors visited on a daytrip spent a day while traveling, 36.8% stayed for 2–4 days, and 8.5% spent more than ten days. Most visitors spent less than one week planning their trip (81.8%). In terms of expenditure in Songkhla Province, it was found that expenses were less than 1,500 baht for 51% of respondents, 28.3% spent over 3,500 baht, and 11% spent between 1,501 and 2,500 baht. Most of the time, 54% of spending is on personal purchases and 46% is on souvenirs to be gifted to other people. A total of 34.4% of domestic Thai visitors chose to visit the cultural heritage area of the Songkhla Old Town because there are many beautiful attractions, 21.4% were drawn by the architecture, and 15.2% by the unique Thai food.

It was found that the visitors' prior expectations of Songkhla Old Town were highest concerning the overall beauty of the landscape and attractions ($\bar{x} = 3.87$, high). This was followed by the uniqueness of Songkhla Old Town ($\bar{x} = 3.85$, high), the beauty of arts and culture ($\bar{x} = 3.84$, high). Overall, visitors' prior expectations of the cultural heritage area of Songkhla Old Town were at a high level ($\bar{x} = 3.76$). After having visited the town, satisfaction with its uniqueness was at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.18$), as was satisfaction with the beauty of art and culture ($\bar{x} = 4.15$) and satisfaction with the overall beauty of the landscape and tourist attractions ($\bar{x} = 4.08$). Overall, the perception of visitors after visiting the cultural heritage area in Songkhla Old Town was at a high level ($\bar{x} = 3.92$).

Concerning visitor needs when visiting Songkhla Old Town, domestic Thai visitors found safety and cleanliness to be at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.17$). Travel convenience, such as clear signage, and variety of traditional cultural performances were also both at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.07$). The cleanliness quality of restaurants and the standard of services for buying goods and souvenirs were also both at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.04$).

When asked to assess provisions for foreign visitors, domestic Thai visitors judged the appeal of tourist attractions to be at a high level ($\bar{x} = 3.99$), followed by data service ($\bar{x} = 3.97$), the beauty of art and culture and the experience of local lifestyle (both $\bar{x} = 3.94$).

Domestic Thai visitors considered safety and cleanliness to be the most important factor in the overall satisfaction of their visit to Songkhla Old Town ($\bar{x} = 4.17$), followed by convenience of travel, cultural performance variety (both $\bar{x} = 4.07$), restaurant hygiene and cleanliness, standard services for buying goods and souvenirs (both $\bar{x} = 4.04$).

The Behavior and Needs of Foreign Visitors within the Cultural Heritage Area

Survey results of the behavior and needs of foreign visitors to the cultural heritage area of Songkhla Old Town revealed that 65% originate from Malaysia, 29% from Singapore and 4.5% from Vietnam. The gender split is almost half and half (male = 50.5%, female = 49.5%). A total of 35.5% of respondents were aged between 25 and 29 years, 22% were aged between 20 and 24 years and, 17% were aged between 30 and 34 years. The majority of foreign visitors were single (63%), with a further 34% married. A total of 39.5% of foreign visitors were Buddhist, 30% Christian, and 25.5% Muslim. In terms of education, most had graduated with a bachelor's degree (75.5%). A total of 37% earned an average monthly income of between 10,000 and 29,999 baht, 20% earned between 30,000 and 49,999 baht, and 16% earned less than 5,000 baht per month.

A total of 53.5% of respondents had previously visited Songkhla Old Town, with 46.5% on their first visit. 53% travelled to Songkhla once per year, 30% visited 2-3 times per year, and 9.5% travelled 3-5 times a year. 33.2% of the foreign visitors surveyed heard of Songkhla Old Town from friends, 31.4% from the Internet and 16.8% from tour companies. Most foreign visitors travelled to the cultural heritage area in Songkhla Old Town independently (70%). 87.5% of foreign visitors stayed at hotels or guest houses, 11.5% at relatives' or friends' houses and 1% stayed elsewhere. Regarding the rest period while traveling, it was found that 46% stayed for 2-4 days, 25.5% stayed for 5-7 days and 17.5% stayed for one day. When coming to travel, it was found that 48.5% took less than one week to plan, 26% took 1-2 weeks, and 18% took 3-4 weeks. A total of 57.5% traveled with friends, 13.5% traveled with relatives, and 11.5% with their spouse. A total of 72.5% had between 1 and five people in their traveling party, 12.5% traveled with 6-10 people, and 7.5% traveled alone. Regarding the budget for this trip to Songkhla Old Town, it was found that 36.5% spent more than 3,500 baht, 24.5% less than 1,500 baht, and 20.5% had expenses between 1,501 and 2,500 baht. Most of the expenditure for this trip was personal expenses (67.5%), with 32.5% being spent on others. Thirty-four percent of foreign visitors spent most on food and beverages, 21.8% on accommodation, and 21.3% for purchasing souvenirs. The reason that foreign visitors chose to visit the cultural heritage area of Songkhla Old Town was because there are beautiful and unique attractions (27.4%), the local food is delicious (24.2%), and for the diverse regional culture (21.3%). The most popular activities sought after by foreign tourists were dining on local food (28%), entertainment (25.5%), and souvenir shopping (20.8%).

As for prior expectations before traveling to the cultural heritage area of Songkhla Old Town, the visitors had high expectations for the sustainability of attractions ($\bar{x} = 3.40$), followed by the variety of cultural activities and traditional ways of life ($\bar{x} = 3.39$, medium) and information services ($\bar{x} = 3.38$, medium level). Overall expectations of foreign visitors before traveling to Songkhla Old Town were at a moderate level ($\bar{x} = 3.32$). Overall, the perception of visitors after visiting the cultural heritage area in Songkhla Old Town was at a high level ($\bar{x} = 3.90$) (Table 1).

It was found that the aspect visitors need the most is information provisions, which must be modern and fast. This was rated at a high level with an average value of 3.89. Similarly valued were ethical guide services and variety of cultural activities ($\bar{x} = 3.86$). Service standards of accommodation, safety of attractions and service standards (quality assurance, ethics, price and safety) were also valued highly with the same average of 3.85.

Table 1: Comparison of Prior Expectations and Post-Visit Satisfaction among Domestic and International Visitors to the Heritage Site at Songkhla Old Town

	Expectations of visitors before visiting		Perception of visitors after visiting	
Domestic	$\bar{x} = 3.76$	High	$\bar{x} = 3.92$	High
International	$\bar{x} = 3.32$	Moderate	$\bar{x} = 3.90$	High

Source: Buakhwan

Sustainable Activities and Routes Suggested within the Cultural Heritage Area

Research respondents suggested a number of specific attractions that were highlights of their visit to Songkhla Old Town that could help boost community participation and increase the level of sustainability of the town as a heritage destination. It was recommended that these form the core of any future programs. The four main attractions recommended by research informants are listed below:

1. A tram ride activity to see Songkhla Old Town is an activity that interests both Thai and foreign visitors. This enables them to see various important attractions in the Songkhla Old Town area with accompanying information about the history and architecture of the sites. Featuring this attraction on a tourism route would ensure the sustainability of traditional local transport.
2. The walking street activity “original Songkhla” is an activity that gives visitors access to the Songkhla Old Town Walking Street market. Visitors and members of the general public enjoy the atmosphere, shopping and produce from local communities, and tourist custom ensures the sustainability of local vendors’ businesses. The activities are held every Friday, Saturday and Sunday.
3. A visit to Songlae Market is an activity that promotes sustainability in the trinkets of Songkhla Old Town by presenting community created products that include local arts and culture. Also visible at the market are beautiful provincial performances, which are held every second Sunday of the month on Nakhon Nok Road. These processions run from the red mill to the old city gate of Songkhla from 17.00 to 22.00.
4. Recreational activities organized within the Red Mill include an exhibition of the history of the old town of Songkhla, musical performances, musical training for young people, dance activities, historical lectures and other activities that promote Songkhla Old Town and ensure the sustainability of cultural practices.

Routes in the Cultural Heritage Area of Songkhla Old Town

From the results of field study, the researcher was able to design routes to showcase the culture and lifestyle of the people in Songkhla Old Town. These routes were created to generate interest and sustainable experiences for visitors, teaching them about the history and outstanding culture of Songkhla Old Town. Two routes were finalized before being presented to research informants for further comment and development.

Cultural and Historical Route by Land in Songkhla Old Town

The focus of this route is the preservation and maintenance of important historical sites, such as the Songkhla City Museum, Red Mill, City Pillar Shrine, Matchimawat Temple (Wat Klang), Wat Pho Mosque, and Ban Ton, as well as recognition of the housing architecture in the main road of Songkhla Old Town.

Cultural and Historical Routes by Water in Songkhla Old Town

Since the old town of Songkhla is connected to both Songkhla Lake and the Gulf of Thailand, there is tremendous potential to develop an environmentally friendly route on the water. In addition to the proximity of the old town to the sea, there are also numerous marine tourist destinations in the vicinity, such as Ko Nuea, Cat Island and Ko Yo. Furthermore, there is a fascinating historical narrative surrounding the old town gates by the sea, the sacred Guard's Gate and the Akkaniwut Gate. Therefore, the researcher considers the natural water route of Songkhla Old Town as another valuable option for visitors looking to experience traditional lifestyle and those interested in water tourism.

Discussion

The results of the survey revealed that considerably more domestic female tourists visited Songkhla Old Town than male. For foreign visitors, the ratio was closer to 50:50. Studies have proven that gender can have a massive impact on visitors' purchasing behavior. In general, women show greater interest in souvenir shopping than men (Lehto et al. 2004). Indeed, women also tend to spend more on souvenirs than men, with women preferring textiles, perfume, and make-up, while men prefer alcohol and tobacco (Oh et al. 2004).

Despite the comparative disparity between the high price of goods sold in department stores and the low price of goods sold in traditional markets that attract local people, Hsieh and Chang (2006) found that foreign visitors often spend more money in traditional markets than their upscale counterparts. These results are corroborated by the research of Lyu and Noh (2017). Thus, it is important for the development of the local and national economy to focus infrastructural resources on the sustainable development and improvement of the quality of traditional markets to help create trust in the products and encourage international visitors to spend even more on local products. As the international visitors have both higher budgets and higher levels of disposable income than domestic Thai visitors, this seems a sensible approach.

The religious mixture of foreign visitors was almost exactly a third Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim. It is important therefore to ensure that adequate provisions are made for visitors of each of these three faiths. This will most obviously entail provisions of suitable prayer facilities for followers of Islam and promoting Songkhla Old Town as a Halal-friendly destination. This is particularly important given the reservations many Muslim holidaymakers have before booking their trips (Battour and Ismail 2016). Moreover, 65 percent of foreign visitors to Songkhla Old Town were found to be Malaysian nationals. This, coupled with the proximity of Malaysia to Songkhla Province, makes it especially important for Songkhla to be branded as a tolerant and convenient location for devout Muslims to travel (Hariani, Rahmanita, and Ingkadijaya 2017).

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the considerable majority of visitors to Songkhla Old Town are Thai domestic visitors practicing Buddhism. This group forms the largest share of interest in the destination. Even though most foreign visitors spend between two and four days on average visiting Songkhla, day trippers make up the biggest group of travelers. As a result, the two routes designed during this investigation were created with those individuals particularly in mind. The land and water routes are best followed on different days, which make them highly suitable for foreign visitors staying longer. However, they also provide domestic returnees a way of adding variety to repeat visits to Songkhla Old Town. This variety is a major factor for people when considering the merits of returning to a tourist destination (Wongleedee 2016; Zhang, Wu, and Buhalis 2018). Before these routes are implemented, further research should be undertaken to assess their environmental sustainability (Asmelash and Kumar 2019). Although this was not a significant factor in tourist satisfaction, it remains important for the ecosystem of Songkhla Province.

Somewhat unexpectedly, results indicate that although domestic visitors had higher prior expectations of Songkhla Old Town than their foreign counterparts, the post-visit perceptions were almost identical. This indicates that the foreign marketing is not as effective as the domestic marketing of Songkhla Old Town. Incidentally, the specific reaction of foreign visitors toward Thai cuisine in Songkhla Old Town was high, which may help explain the surge in satisfaction when compared to prior results. Studies have shown that “culinary attraction mediates the relationship between brand equity and tourist satisfaction” (Liu 2016).

Aside from attraction, accommodation, and dietary requirements, it was found that the aspect visitors need the most is information provisions, which must be modern and fast. This was rated at a high level with an average value of 3.89. Similarly valued were ethical guide services and variety of cultural activities ($\bar{x} = 3.86$). Service standards were also valued highly with the same average of 3.85. It is crucially important to integrate “tourism service management capacity within a wider set of competences” using digital technology (Opute, Irene, and Iwu 2020). This will not only provide higher satisfaction among visitors, but will also empower the community to become more involved in the day-to-day sustainable management of the local tourism industry (Bouchon and Rawat 2016).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This investigation into the cultural heritage tourism in Songkhla Old Town revealed a number of important findings about the demographics of tourists to the region. The results show differing backgrounds between domestic and international visitors, yet similar satisfaction results. All tourists specifically identified an immediate need for authorities to provide accessible information to tourists. This is the next step for local tourism development. They also identified a number of potentially successful tourist routes through the city. With this in mind, the researcher would like to recommend the use of these findings to develop the tourism industry in Songkhla Old Town by creating two specific routes for the city. The first is an overland route that takes in important historical sites, such as the Songkhla City Museum, Red Mill, City Pillar Shrine, Matchimawat Temple (Wat Klang), Wat Pho Mosque, and Ban Ton, as well as the housing architecture in the main road of Songkhla Old Town. The second is a water route that combines attractions on Songkhla Lake and in the Gulf of Thailand. These routes can be marketed as either isolated day-trips for the domestic visitor or as part of a longer experience for foreign visitors. Furthermore, the researcher wishes to recommend the integration of digital technology into the Songkhla tourism sector to boost visitor satisfaction among locals and foreigners.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Narawadee Buakhwan: Vice President for Research Strategy and Academic Services, College of Innovation and Management, Songkhla Rajabhat University, Songkhla, Thailand

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