

A Journey into Cultural Marvels: Tourist Perception and Satisfaction with Cultural Heritage Sites in Muscat, Oman

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study is to examine tourists' perceptions of cultural heritage sites in Muscat and analyze their satisfaction with cultural heritage tourist sites in Muscat.

Design/methodology/approach: This study employed a quantitative approach and adopted a descriptive research design, as it describes primary relationships to increase the understanding of the questions. This study employed a multistage sampling technique and collected data using a questionnaire. The sample size in this study was 118.

Findings: The most frequently visited cultural heritage tourist site in Muscat was Mutrah Souq. The highest mean score for the perception of tourists with cultural heritage tourism in Muscat was Wonderful historical sites – architecture, forts, and mosques. The highest mean score for the satisfaction of tourists with cultural heritage tourism in Muscat was that the tourist sites were culturally and traditionally aesthetic. The highest expectation by the tourists (difference between satisfaction and perception) was that the tourists like to ensure safety and security at the tourist sites during their visit to Muscat.

Research limitations/implications: Tourists get more opportunities to become familiar with Omani customs and civilization. Therefore, the accessibility to cultural and historical sites must be easy, and various transportation options must be offered. As most tourists find it difficult to access, food, drinks, and amenities must be made available at all the tourist sites since it might be challenging for tourists to get to cultural heritage sites, the approach and accessibility must be uncomplicated.

Social Implications: Economic factors are tied to the promotion of cultural heritage tourism because they benefit the economy, initiatives by the Government, tourism development agencies, business owners, and other stakeholders, including local authorities should stimulate new and repeated market potential to sustain and maintain foreign tourist visits. Based on the findings of this study, more activities should be conducted for tourists visiting cultural heritage sites. Prioritizing the cultural heritage tourism locations, careful planning and strategic measures must be taken to improve visitor perceptions, expectations, and satisfaction.

Originality / Value: Research on the satisfaction of visitors to UNESCO World Heritage Sites, as well as research on the Nizwa and Bahla Forts, is available, and the majority of these studies center on the Sultanate of Oman's Aldhkhilyah region. However, no research has been conducted on cultural heritage tourism in Muscat to date; therefore, many stakeholders will find great value in this study.

Keywords: Cultural heritage Tourism, Tourist sites in Muscat-Oman, Perception of the Tourists, satisfaction of the Tourists, Expectations of the Tourists.

Introduction

Tourism is considered to be one of the primary drivers of global socioeconomic advancement. [Wu & Li](#) (2014) reported that tourism has accounted for 5% of global GDP in the last few decades, providing opportunities for income and livelihood to many industries and entrepreneurs around the world. Similarly, [Al Maimani & Johari](#) (2017) emphasized that the tourism and travel industry has significant involvement in global GDP, garnering about 7.4 trillion US dollars in 2016 and rising to 8.2 trillion US dollars in 2017.

Tourism has advanced significantly and become more accessible due to developments in society and technology. [Walker & Walker](#) (2011) stated that tourism has evolved progressively, with more destinations and activities to choose from. This change in tourism from leisure to adventure and exploration shows the outburst of niche marketplace designations within the travel sector. There are many types of tourism, such as adventure, gastronomy, faith, nature, sustainability, and learning tourism ([Jamal & Hill](#), 2007). However, [Baporikar](#) (2012) emphasized that cultural heritage tourism is considered one of the most promising sectors because of the noteworthiness of such a historical agenda that promotes the current cultural individuality of a cluster of individuals. Cultural heritage tourism is described as the act of entering places that are significant to the preceding and succeeding cultural identity of a country, ethnic group, or individual ([Nyaupane & Timothy](#), 2010). Cultural heritage tourism is also defined as traveling to experience sites, relics, and events that represent the true stories of the past and present generations as well as their culture and natural resources ([Nyaupane & Timothy](#), 2010).

In addition, [Alexandrakis et al.](#) (2019) state that in Europe, culture and heritage have become one of their competitive advantages in positioning the tourism market. Besides Asia, where ancient civilization started, Europe has prominently proved its potential in the cultural heritage tourism economy for many years ([Walker & Walker](#), 2011). The reigning grandeur of the Athens Stadium in Greece is a top-rated site in Europe that has marked ancient historical events from generation to generation ([Manasse](#), 2023). The connection between Middle Eastern culture and Egyptian pyramids also marked the hard work and artistic talents of ancient people ([Boussaa](#), 2014). Contemporary and modern Romanesque and Gothic architecture also envisioned the enormous potential of artists from Great Britain, Spain, France, and Italy ([Elsorady](#), 2011).

[Alexandrakis et al.](#) (2019) mentioned that cultural heritage tourism has a positive economic and social impact, instituting and strengthening socio-cultural identity, promoting the preservation of cultural heritage, assisting culture as a strategy, and facilitating harmony, peace, and consideration among people. With its significant contribution to the community and economy, cultural heritage tourism has gained popularity ([Khunou et al.](#), 2009).

Oman is one of the Middle Eastern countries best known for its great cultural heritage ([Aulia & Almandhari](#), 2015). The various foreign occurrences have accumulated several important cultures that have contributed to its rich history. This is manifested in numerous concrete settlements, fortresses, and landmarks that are displayed in many areas of the country ([Al Hashim](#), 2015). These monument settlements are significant features of the sites. In 2012, Muscat was selected as the capital of Arab tourism. This indicates that Oman can maintain its cultural identity throughout the year ([Al Maimani & Johari](#), 2017). It also gives residents pride by knowing their community's history and encouraging them to look at their historical resources with fresh eyes to preserve and protect these irreplaceable treasures ([Zou et al.](#), 2014). Oman's culture and heritage have remained stable with modernity, and new ideas have been evident in its architecture, customs, and traditions built over hundreds of years ([Baporikar](#), 2012). According to [Al Hashim](#) (2015), Oman is emerging and provides opportunities for planners, decision-makers, entrepreneurs, and scholars to propose a tourism strategy that would effectively and sustainably promote the country's nature and culture.

UNESCO identified five world heritage sites that have a great deal of significance in Oman's culture and heritage. These are the Al Aflaj irrigation systems, Bahla Fort, the Land of Frankincense, the archaeological sites of Bat, Al-Khutm, and Al Ayn beehive tombs, and the ancient city of Qalhat. These items resembled the remnants of the historical struggle and success of Oman from generation to generation and manifested the artistry, creativity, and value of culture, faith, and humanity ([Al Maimani & Johari](#), 2017). Besides, [Baporikar](#) (2012) stated that other important cultural heritage sites in Muscat include the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Mutrah Souq, Mutrah Corniche, the Royal Opera House, the National Museum, Al Alam Palace, and various forts. The open introduction of the destination to the rest of the world builds a connection between Oman and the world, which enables them to link historical events.

[Oman Observer](#) (2019) states that Oman has a rich history and cultural sites. The City of Salalah, located in the southern region of Oman (the second-largest city in Oman), recorded 600,000 tourist arrivals during the Khareef season in 2016 ([Times News Service](#), 2016). Although the Salalah Tourism Festival takes place during the Khareef season, the area is well-known for its ancient trade of frankincense, along with other ancient cultural heritage sites such as Al Balid, Sumharam, Shisr, and Wadi Dawkah, which are listed in the World Heritage List and named the Land of Frankincense ([Oman Observer](#), 2019).

Cultural sites in Oman, as reported by [UNESCO](#) (2018), can be characterized as individual heritage sites; they imitate the sagacity of a period when individuals were more indisputable and had a less complicated way of life, reflecting the principles that have been offered in the present multifaceted society. The Sultanate of Oman has seen a vital position in the tourism segment. Thus, it has begun to build sustainability programs and strategies to uplift the industry ([Aulia & Almandhari](#), 2015). According to [Al Maimani & Johari](#) (2017), the system has developed and promoted programs and designed plans associated with the tourism segment to deliver tourism products locally and globally.

Nowadays, tourism has received very cautious attention in a bid to create Oman as a destination for tourists from around the world ([Al Kiyumi](#), 2018). One of the Sultanate of Oman's primary objectives is to save the nation's architectural legacy while simultaneously protecting its natural and cultural heritage. Culture and heritage are essential to the country and should not be allowed to disappear, not even in small amounts ([Al-Belushi & Al-Hooti](#), 2023). Oman has enormous potential to grow its historical and cultural tourism industry and is home to several historic sites spread around the country. If such important locations were preserved and met tourist demands without harming the legacy, values, and traditional aspects, visitors would be overjoyed ([Al Hashim](#), 2015). Although there are numerous tourism destinations and activities around Oman, their income-generation capacity has not been maximized to complete the infrastructure required for the tourism industry ([Al-Belushi & Al-Hooti](#), 2023). Despite many development opportunities, the growth and development of the tourism industry are still in their infancy ([Baporikar](#), 2012). There is literature on the subject of tourist satisfaction with UNESCO World Heritage Sites, as well as the Nizwa and Bahla Forts. Most of these studies focus on the Sultanate of Oman's Aldhkhiliyah region ([Mustafa](#), 2020). Even though many tourists would also visit Muscat during their trip to Oman ([Al Mahrouqi et al.](#), 2019), no research has been done on cultural heritage tourism in Muscat. So, the main aim of this study was to analyze tourists' perceptions of and satisfaction with cultural heritage sites in Muscat, Oman.

Research questions

1. What perceptions do visitors have of Muscat's cultural heritage sites?
2. How satisfied are visitors with Muscat's cultural heritage tourist sites?

Research Objectives

1. To examine tourists' perceptions of cultural heritage sites in Muscat.
2. To analyze tourists' satisfaction with cultural heritage tourist sites in Muscat.

Review of Literature

Cultural heritage tourism has been dubbed to create vibrant and complicated artifacts of cultural heritage tourism ([Timothy](#), 2011). According to [Negussie & Wondimu](#) (2012), cultural heritage can go beyond occasions or celebrations, such as festivals and events, and encompass a group of people. Similarly, [Times News Service](#) (2017) stated that cultural heritage begins with folklore and involvement that a particular group has in common over the years, which is the attraction per se for tourists and visitors to a specific destination. Moreover, [Wu & Li](#) (2014) emphasized that cultural heritage tourism provides an opportunity for individuals involved in their orientations, which are rooted in places that have historical and cultural inclinations towards being involved in their cultural undertakings.

[Al Kiyumi](#) (2018) argued that cultural heritage sites could also contribute to the uplifting of economic, sociocultural, and environmental efforts in support of sustainable initiatives and the preservation of other tourism destinations in Oman.

Opportunities for Cultural Heritage Tourism

According to [García et al.](#) (2015), from a socio-cultural perspective, cultural heritage tourism is another component of tourism that takes part in opportunities due to tourists' disposition to look for new things, including traditions, cultures, and histories, as well as the lifestyles of a particular place. Thus, it enhances many facets of human societal rights and the desire to participate in community activities. [Athula & Sandaruwani](#) (2016) claimed that visiting cultural heritage sites enhances wisdom, spiritual growth, satisfaction with curiosity, relaxation, and getting out of the usual way of life. The integration of various elements, such as physical, psychological, and social, in cultural and historical settings, considering these values, is the primary motivator for tourists. Since cultural heritage belongs to inspired industries that are being utilized to enhance these places to promote business, many opportunities may come as well ([Ivanovic et al.](#), 2009).

Oman identified many active locations of tangible and intangible importance. These cultural heritage assets of Oman have ways of developing advantages in a progressively competitive tourism market, as well as developing individuality in this phase of globalization because of their uniqueness and social identity. Studies also emphasize that cultural heritage tourism focuses on identifying the properties of development as well as cultural heritage tourism management. An investigation of the demography and tourist behavioral characteristics of visiting cultural heritage destinations was also conducted. Thus, opportunities to enhance the travel market and the potential for Oman's growth are expected ([Al Hashim, 2015](#)).

The preservation and conservation of cultural heritage sites is not only about the conservation of structures built in sites that play an essential role in connecting the past, present, and future of a place or country ([Al Hashim, 2015](#)). rather the essence of heritage can also be denoted as emotional, cultural, or functional. Emotional importance consists of curiosity, continuity, identity, and spirituality. Cultural significance also consists of documentary, historical, archaeological, age, scarcity, aesthetic, symbolic, architectural, townscape, landscape, ecological, and scientific. Meanwhile, functional importance places the economic, sociocultural, political, and environmental significance of heritage tourism within the grasp of its sustainability aspects ([Gnanapala & Sandaruwani, 2016](#)). Therefore, society has concluded that heritage and cultural tourism have become one of the fastest-growing tourism segments within the tourism portfolio and can become a source of livelihood and education for local and global communities ([Donohoe, 2012](#)). This matter may prosper and become a source of development, as well as a model for developing initiatives for policy-making strategies and guidelines ([Jamal & Hill, 2007](#)).

Tourists' Perception of Cultural Heritage Sites

[Athula & Sandaruwani](#) (2016) asserts that knowledge about tourist perceptions is derived from how visitors choose, arrange, and evaluate all available data to produce or portray a comprehensive image of the event. According to [García et al.](#) (2015), tourism perceptions of cultural heritage are similar to those of other tourism products, and their perceptions can be affected by their expectations, experiences, and total satisfaction with the entire travel experience. Specifically, it is the result of the number of expectations a tourist has of a destination. [Xuan & Homsey](#) (2008) stated that perception can be positive or negative; for example, if tourists have bad experiences with their tours, their perception of the number of predetermined expectations can also be bad. Hence, they may have affected their satisfaction levels and future expectations. Additionally, [Porja et al.](#) (2004) added that perception depends on the different components of the destination, but is lower than the value of expectation and satisfaction. Moreover, [Cooper et al.](#) (2013) stated that perception is not holistic but rooted in every service quality dimension that affects the entire perception of a tourism product. For example, if the perception of responsiveness is unsatisfactory, all other areas will also be affected. However, if responsiveness is excellent, it does not follow that all the dimensions are excellent.

Similarly, the perception of a tourist site or destination is also affected by the socio-demographic profiles of tourists, such as their age, gender, civil status, and socioeconomic status. This is because every individual has their level of preferences and understanding of the things they see, thus influencing their perception, expectations, and even satisfaction levels ([Walls et al., 2011](#)). For instance, rich people have different opinions because what they experience during the tour is normal to them, which is different in the case of people from the lower-income bracket. Usually, the latter perceives small things as favorable as rich people do ([Clemes et al., 2009](#)). Moreover, sociocultural orientation, such as religion and traditions, is also considered a pull factor in tourist perception. The wants and needs of individuals also influence their understanding of what they say ([Athula & Sandaruwani, 2016](#)). On the other hand, [Mccamleya & Gilmore](#) (2018) argued that favorable perceptions and positive opinions among stakeholders result from the sustainable development of cultural heritage tourism. Besides, the experience can also be described as a visitor's perception of the quality or superiority of their encounters ([Wu & Li, 2014](#)). This encompasses the visitor's perception of the calibration of the service they receive, as well as their response to the service encounter ([Parasuraman et al., 1995](#)).

An essential consideration in evaluating tourist services is the interaction between employees and tourists, as it plays a significant role in shaping visitors' perceptions and levels of satisfaction with travel locations ([Aida et al., 2012](#)). Moreover, [Lee & Bang](#) (2017), in their studies, highlighted the perceptions of visitors regarding the quality of available services at a tourist attraction and their level of satisfaction with the visited site. Similarly, [Chhabra et al.](#) (2003) stated that tourists' desire to personally experience and consume a variety of past and current cultural landscapes, performances, food, handicrafts, and participation activities is referred to as heritage tourism. Nevertheless, [Porja et al.](#) (2004) asserted that knowledge of visitors' perceptions of heritage attractions would be beneficial for managing them in terms of public finance, sustainable

management, visitor preferences, price policy, and the purpose of heritage attractions. However, regardless of the benefits that cultural heritage tourist attractions provide, which give the destination a positive market image, the negative impacts of mass tourism activities can also be negatively perceived by tourists (Techera, 2011). Negussie & Wondimu (2012) emphasized that the abandonment and neglect of different cultural heritage tourism sites might result in a loss of connection with the past, a loss of cultural identity, and a decrease in tourist arrivals because of tourists' negative perceptions, which may lead to a loss of income opportunities for the local communities.

Tourists' Satisfaction with Cultural Heritage Tourism

The joy that travelers experience as a result of meeting their needs, wants, and expectations is known as tourist satisfaction (Hellier et al., 2003). In addition, it has been proposed that tourists' expectations may have an impact on their perceived experience, thereby influencing their level of satisfaction (Hussain & Ekiz, 2009). Visitor satisfaction is a crucial metric that can be used to assess the performance of tourism locations (Salleh et al., 2013). Valle et al. (2006) specified that satisfaction with tourists could be used as a gauge to determine how visitors evaluate their experiences at tourist attractions. Xuan & Homsey (2008) indicated that expectations and perceptions, along with tourism experiences, had to be of higher value to ensure tourist satisfaction. However, Ceylan & Ozcelik (2016) stated that tourist satisfaction should be the basis for evaluating the performance of products and services at destinations. Hussain & Ekiz (2009) noted that the needs of individuals and groups must be understood to provide the required services, and even beyond normal, to promote customer satisfaction. Satisfaction is also viewed holistically, wherein all components of service quality are assessed; customers must be satisfied with services related to all quality dimensions, both tangible and intangible, to put value on their money (Salleh et al., 2013). Like perception, tourist satisfaction can be affected by the socioeconomic status and cultural orientation of individuals because socioeconomic status determines the lifestyle and standards of an individual (Hellier et al., 2003).

Ramires et al. (2018) emphasized that among all other tourism attributes, accessibility to tourist attractions is critical to tourist satisfaction. Jusoh (2013) stated that while experiencing culture and heritage first-hand is the main reason tourists go to heritage destinations, other factors that affect their satisfaction include the attraction itself, accessibility, facilities and amenities, and interactions with locals. Additionally, it has been proposed that visitor satisfaction is positively affected by the quality of interactions with residents and staff (Hussain & Ekiz, 2009). Further, according to Omar et al. (2015), learning experience and safety are the two factors that matter most to tourists' satisfaction when they arrive at their location. Furthermore, Ramires et al. (2018) contend that certain qualities such as accessibility, convenience, cleanliness, and safety go beyond culture and legacy and that their absence might cause discontent. Similarly, Timothy (2011) stated that amenities such as restrooms and visitor centers are important to tourism, and when asked how important cleanliness, safety, and kid-friendly entertainment aspects are, the majority of visitors gave these categories the highest ratings. According to Al Mahrouqi et al. (2019), the main things that draw foreign visitors to Oman are its welcoming people, safety as a travel destination, high-quality lodging options, fascinating customs and culture, and visually appealing historical and cultural sites. Moreover, according to Aliman et al. (2014), cultural heritage attraction satisfaction among tourists is a collective result of the number of experiences, such as accommodation, food and beverages, transportation, tourism activities, events, festivals, and many more. Conversely, research by Yung & Chan (2011) contended that, because of its sustainable and conservative methods, it is not always simple to connect cultural heritage sites with public transit.

According to Gutierrez et al. (2019), the main reason tourists go to heritage destinations is to have a first-hand look at the culture, heritage, and offerings of these places and destinations. Their diverse features determine their satisfaction with their tourist sites. Mustafa (2020), the cultural heritage site's roads in Oman were in good shape, it was simple to get around, it had a traditional and cultural appeal, and the staff members there were well-groomed. Xuan & Homsey (2008) stated that visitors' desire for unique experiences, genuine locations, and outstanding tourist activities are factors that contribute to their level of satisfaction during their trips to cultural heritage sites. In addition, Crespi-Vallbona (2020) stated that the fundamental components of an unforgettable travel experience include participation with locals, a sense of entitlement to information, a sense of nostalgia for past times, distinctiveness, and local culture. Similarly, Jensen et al. (2017) point out that tourists who come to the heritage site for their surrounding tourist experiences, theatre visits, and historical explanations are just as satisfied with the experiences offered by the heritage site as those who come to see the material heritage itself. Moreover, according to Poria et al. (2004), heritage sites strive to provide cultural and recreational activities that draw on the largest number of visitors interested in learning more about the rich past of the location. Furthermore, Alazaizeh et al. (2019) concluded that visitors would be enthusiastic about magnificent architecture, historical structures such as forts and mosques, and distinctive cultural and traditional designs at the locations they visited. On the other hand, Cooper et al. (2013) stated

that certain travel experiences involve escaping from the monotony and meaninglessness of regular everyday life. As a result, these travelers are drawn to destinations that offer something fresh, such as adventure or cultural heritage tourism. These trips emphasize the pursuit of genuine and meaningful experiences beyond the boundaries of one's society.

Methodology

A quantitative approach is employed in this study. This study employed a descriptive survey design. Descriptive research describes the characteristics of a particular phenomenon, situation, or event through careful evaluation using measurable variables (Bernard, 2002). The results provide data about the sample that describes primary relationships to increase understanding of the questions being asked. According to Kurpius & Stafford (2006), descriptive research often targets a population and/or phenomenon and aims to answer the current status of the subject or topic of the study.

Around 2000 tourists visit Muscat every day (Muscat Daily, 2023). This was considered to be the population of the study. This study employed a multi-stage sampling technique. According to Kurpius & Stafford (2006), multi-stage sampling involves the collection of samples in steps using small-sized sampling parts at each level. Multistage sampling can be a sophisticated form of group sampling, as it is a type of sampling that includes splitting the population into groups (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2010). First, the study identified five cultural heritage tourism sites as subjects for evaluation: Muttrah Souq, Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Royal Opera House, the National Museum, and the Al Alam Palace. The survey questionnaire targeted tourists who visited these sites, and it was distributed using a simple random sampling technique.

This study used a questionnaire survey. The variables for the questionnaire were inspired by two studies that were conducted in Oman (Mustafa, 2020; Al Mahrouqi et al., 2019). Kurpius & Stafford (2006) stated that the most common tools for conducting primary research are tourism analysis and survey planning. The questionnaire is a commonly used survey method that can produce a large volume of data, and the respondent is required to answer the same set of questions (Babbie, 2010). Bernard (2002) claimed that using this type of method allows for obtaining additional and diverse data types, such as perception, satisfaction, and attitudes. In addition, it helps to collect data without difficulty and quickly define the characteristics of the study. This survey questionnaire has four parts: Part 1 contains the profile of the tourists, Part 2 contains the characteristics of the tourists, Part 3 determines tourist perception, and Part 4 measures tourists' satisfaction with cultural heritage sites. 129 questionnaires were distributed to Tourists. Out of which 11 were not used for the study as the questionnaires were incomplete. So, the respondents of the study were 118. The frequency distribution, percentage, ranking, mean, and standard deviation were used to determine the tourists' perception and satisfaction of cultural heritage sites in Muscat (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2010).

Findings and Analysis

Results

Table 1. Profile of Respondents

	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	85	72.03
	Female	33	27.97
Age	19-30 years old	15	12.71
	31-45 years old	31	26.27
	45 –above years	72	61.02
Civil Status	Single	76	64.41
	Married	42	35.59
Nationality	Omani	19	16.10
	Non-Omani	99	83.90
Region	Oman	19	16.10
	Europe	63	53.38
	Asia	20	16.94
	GCC	11	9.32
	Others	5	4.26

Table 2. Tourists' characteristics

Category	Frequency	%
1. The number of times you visited Muscat		
First time	68	57.62
Second time	26	22.03
Three times	15	12.71
Four and more times	9	7.64
2. Duration of your stay		
One to three days	45	38.13
Four to seven days	38	32.20
Eight to Ten days	27	22.88
More than Ten days	8	6.79
3. Where did you hear about cultural heritage sites in Muscat?		
Family and friends	30	25.42
Social Media	48	40.67
Travel agents/Tour operators	14	11.86
Ads in TV, Radio, newspapers, magazines, and emails	16	13.55
Others	10	8.50
4. Motives for travelling to Muscat		
Visiting tourist sites	46	38.98
Discover the customs, traditions, and history	51	43.22
Education and research purpose	6	5.08
Business visit	5	4.23
To meet friends and family and others	10	8.47

Of the respondents, 22.03 % visited Muscat twice, whereas 57.62 % visited Muscat for the first time. 38.13 % spent one–three days whereas 32.20 % spent four–seven days during their visits. The majority of respondents (40.67%) learned about the sites through social media, followed by friends and family (25.42%). Events, exhibits, websites, blogs, and travel websites are examples from other sources. The majority of respondents (43.22%) reported that they wanted to learn about Oman’s traditions, customs, and history followed by 39.98% of the respondents who indicated that they wanted to see tourist attractions.

Table 3. Tourist sites visited in Muscat

Category	Percentage	Rank
Mutrah Souq	79.70	1
Mutrah Corniche	72.80	2
Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque	66.70	3
Royal Opera House	60.20	4
Al Alam Palace	55.10	5
National Museum of Oman	47.60	6
Bait Al Zubair Museum	45.80	7
Mutrah Fort	36.40	8
Omani and French Museum	33.90	9
Bait Al Maqham Castle	27.10	10
Others	24.60	11
Al Mirani Fort	20.30	12
Al Jalali Fort	14.40	13

Table 3 shows the tourist sites visited in Muscat by the respondents. Mutrah Souq (79.70%) was ranked first followed by Mutrah Corniche (72.80%) as second. It is indicated that the most popular tourist destinations for those with a passion for cultural heritage in Muscat are Mutrah Corniche and Mutrah Souq. 24.60% of respondents visited other locations in Muscat. These include the Museum of Omani Heritage, Muscat Gate Museum, Masjid Al Khor, Riyam Censer, Old Souq Watchtower, Mohammed Al Ameen Mosque, Muscart (Art Gallery), and the Photographic Society of Oman.

Table 4. Tourist perception and satisfaction of the cultural heritage sites in Muscat

Description Attributes	Perception(P)		Satisfaction(S)		Expect	Actual Experience
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	S - P	
Historical spots-architecture, forts & mosques	4.41	1.07	4.45	0.94	0.04	Satisfied
Many cultural heritage attractions are available	4.34	0.95	4.36	0.78	0.02	Satisfied
Tourist sites were culturally and traditionally aesthetic	4.27	0.71	4.49	1.12	0.22	Satisfied
Opportunities to learn customs and culture	4.27	0.87	3.81	0.83	- 0.46	Not Satisfied
Sites are accessible through all modes of transportation	4.12	0.84	3.78	0.84	- 0.34	Not Satisfied
Food, drinks & amenities are available at tourist sites	4.00	0.79	3.58	0.69	- 0.42	Not Satisfied
Handicrafts & gift shops available at tourist sites	3.97	0.93	3.68	0.86	- 0.29	Not Satisfied
The accessibility of the site is easy to reach	3.91	0.85	3.54	0.75	- 0.37	Not Satisfied
The shopping malls and Souq are easily accessible	3.86	1.01	4.13	0.89	0.27	Satisfied
The staff at the tourist sites are skilled and interact with me very well	3.82	0.96	3.80	0.81	- 0.02	Not Satisfied
People around tourist sites are easily approachable	3.77	0.88	3.93	0.93	0.16	Satisfied
Felt safe & secure at the sites visited in Muscat	3.71	0.72	4.41	1.13	0.70	Satisfied
The climate is pleasant & is easy to walk in	3.65	0.68	4.12	0.77	0.47	Satisfied
The management of cultural heritage sites is effective	3.58	0.93	3.79	0.86	0.21	Satisfied
Tourist sites are equipped with toilets, restful places, and relaxing places	3.58	0.84	3.51	0.69	- 0.07	Not Satisfied
Government ensures carrying capacity with security & quality	3.43	0.65	3.55	0.76	0.12	Satisfied
Various activities are offered at the tourist sites	3.41	1.16	2.77	0.95	-0.64	Not Satisfied
Enough accommodations near the tourist sites	3.37	0.53	3.45	0.87	0.08	Satisfied
Facilities for kids, elderly & physically challenged	3.20	1.11	3.21	0.94	0.01	Satisfied
Tourist sites are free of pollution and maintain a high cleanliness.	3.29	0.95	3.39	0.98	0.10	Satisfied
There are tour guides & operators available to assist	3.12	0.64	3.56	0.88	0.44	Satisfied
Sites are less crowded & traffic flow is smooth	3.07	0.72	3.34	0.74	0.27	Satisfied
Tourist information centers are available at most sites	3.02	0.76	2.97	0.91	- 0.05	Not Satisfied

Table 4 shows the results for tourists’ perceptions and satisfaction with cultural heritage sites in Muscat. The highest mean score recorded for historical spots – architecture, forts, and mosques (4.41). This indicates that the tourists perceive that Muscat has wonderful historical sites – architecture, forts, and mosques. The second-highest mean score for many cultural heritage attractions is available (4.34) and the third-highest mean score was for the tourist sites that were culturally and traditionally aesthetic (4.27). This indicates that the respondents believed that there were many historically significant and culturally appealing locations. Opportunities for learning customs and cultures are available. Further, the cultural heritage sites that are accessible through all modes of transportation (4.12) are listed as the fourth item. Further, it is also indicated that the travelers have reservations about the tour guides and operators to assist during the tour, the tourist sites are less crowded, and the traffic flow is smooth.

The highest mean score for the satisfaction of the tourist sites was culturally and traditionally aesthetic (4.49). This indicates that the cultural and traditional aesthetics of tourist destinations are evident. The second and third-highest mean scores were noted for wonderful historical sites – architecture, forts, and mosques (4.45). Felt safe and secure at the tourist sites during my visit to Muscat (4.41). This indicates that the tourists are quite pleased with Muscat’s historical structures, forts, and mosques, and demonstrates that tourists who came to Muscat felt safe and secure at tourist attractions. The tourists were not appreciative of the fact that the tourist sites were clean, unpolluted, had reduced crowds, and had efficient traffic flow.

As far as the gap between perceptions and satisfaction is concerned, negative results demonstrated that visitor satisfaction was lower than their actual perception, whereas positive results show that visitor satisfaction exceeds their perception. Some of the positive results were that Felt safe & secure at the tourist sites visit in Muscat (0.70) followed by the climate was pleasant and it was easy to walk in (0.47) and there were tour guides & tour operators to assist (0.44), The shopping malls and Souqs are easily accessible for shopping (0.27), the tourist sites are less crowded, the traffic flow is smooth (0.27), the tourist sites are culturally and traditionally aesthetic (0.22), and the management of the cultural heritage sites is effective (0.21). This indicates that tourists’ levels of happiness with Muscat’s cultural heritage sites surpass their perceptions. However, there is a very small difference between the perceived and actual levels of satisfaction, indicating that perception and satisfaction are both at the same level. On the other hand, negative values were observed for some aspects, such as various activities offered at tourist sites (-0.64); opportunities for learning customs and cultures available (-0.46); food, drinks, and amenities available at tourist sites (-0.42); accessibility to the sites was easy to reach (-0.37); sites were accessible through all modes of transportation (-0.34); and handicrafts & gift shops were available near tourist sites (- 0.29).

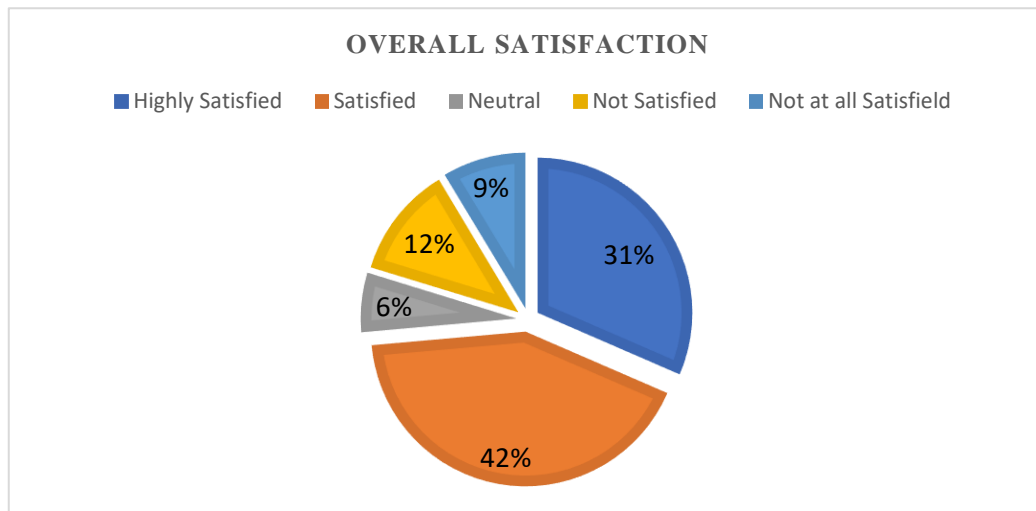


Fig.1 Satisfaction level of the Tourists during the cultural heritage sites visits in Muscat

Figure 1 illustrates the tourists’ overall satisfaction with Muscat’s cultural heritage sites. 42% are satisfied, 31% are extremely satisfied, and 6% are neutral. 12% were not happy, and the other nine percent were not content at all. Finally, six percent remain neutral. To summarise, 73% of respondents expressed satisfaction with Muscat’s cultural heritage tourist attractions.

Discussion

Objective One: Tourists' perception of the cultural heritage tourist sites in Muscat

The findings from Table 4 have been discussed in detail which is as follows:

Wonderful historical sites – architecture, forts, and mosques (4.41); many cultural heritage attractions are available (4.34); Tourist sites were culturally and traditionally aesthetic (4.27); Opportunities for learning customs and cultures were available (4.27).

According to [Times News Service](#) (2017), cultural heritage is derived from the history and experiences of people living in the area over time. Consequently, drawing tourists to these locations will aid their learning and allow them to experience the past. Besides, [Nyaupane & Timothy](#) (2010) stated that tourism focused on cultural heritage involves visiting places, artifacts, and occasions that tell authentic tales of the past and present, along with their natural resources and cultures. Moreover, [Al Maimani & Johari](#) (2017) stated that when tourists visit Muscat, they generally visit some of the important cultural heritage sites in Muscat, including Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Mutrah Souq, Mutrah Corniche, the Royal Opera House, the National Museum, Al Alam Palace, and various forts in and around Muscat. Therefore, the cultural heritage sites were accessible through all modes of transportation and the findings are supported by [Poria et al.](#) (2004), who mentioned that tourism support infrastructure, such as transportation, approachability, and ease of access, play an important role in tourist perception. Besides, [Aliman et al.](#) (2014) stated that tourists' cultural heritage experiences can be affected by accommodation, tourism activities, food and beverages, and transportation. Further, [Timothy](#) (2011) found that tourist perception is not only affected by the attractions themselves but also by a wide array of tourism products, such as approachability.

One of the highest mean scores noted for tourist perception of the cultural and heritage tourist sites in Muscat was for food, drinks, and amenities available at tourist sites. These results are supported by the views of [Timothy](#) (2011), who mentioned that tourist perception is not only affected by the attractions themselves but also by the wide array of tourism products, such as food and beverages, and the residents' interaction with tourists and approachability. Further, [Chhabra et al.](#) (2003) defined heritage tourism as travelers' desire to engage in a range of historical and contemporary cultural landscapes, performances, cuisine, handicrafts, and participation activities.

Objective 2: Tourist satisfaction with the cultural heritage tourist sites in Muscat

Based on the results in Table 4, tourist satisfaction with the cultural heritage sites in Muscat includes: the tourist sites were culturally and traditionally aesthetic; wonderful historical sites – architecture, forts, and mosques; and many cultural heritage attractions. Therefore, visitors desire to view magnificent examples of ancient building architecture, forts, and mosques. They also want to witness that tourist destinations are aesthetically pleasing in terms of culture and tradition and that Muscat offers a wide range of cultural heritage attractions. These outcomes match the earlier finding by [Al Mahrouqi et al.](#) (2019); Jusoh (2013), [Aliman et al.](#) (2014), [Ceylan & Ozcelik](#) (2016), [Gutierrez et al.](#) (2019), [Xuan & Homsey](#) (2008), [Crespi-Vallbona](#) (2020), [Jensen et al.](#) (2017), [Valle et al.](#) (2006), [Poria et al.](#) (2004), and [Alazaizeh et al.](#) (2019). They all claimed that experiencing, learning from, making connections with the past, and discovering new facts were some of the key motivations behind tourists visiting cultural heritage sites. Findings by [Timothy & Boyd](#) (2003), [Ramires et al.](#) (2016), and [Omar et al.](#) (2015) confirmed that safety and security were the two attributes that most consistently lead to traveler satisfaction. Based on the results from Table 4, another significant aspect of tourist satisfaction was that the people around tourist sites are nice and easily approachable. A positive result (difference between satisfaction and perception) of 0.16 indicated that the locals in the vicinity of tourist attractions are friendly and approachable. These findings match those of finding by [Jusoh et al.](#) (2013), [Hussain & Ekiz](#) (2009), and [Crespi-Vallbona](#) (2020), who pointed out that cultural heritage tourists typically want to engage with locals and obtain first-hand knowledge about local customs, culture, and way of life.

Conclusion

Based on the above results, the following conclusions were construed:

The majority of the tourists were reported to travel abroad whose primary purpose of travel to Oman was to visit cultural heritage tourism sites in Muscat, Oman. Most foreign tourists come to Muscat, as Oman's cultural heritage tourism has already established its niche in the world of tourism and can potentially compete with other attractions in the world.

Tourists' perceptions of cultural heritage tourism in Oman were strongly agreeable in areas related to the wonderful historical sites – architecture, forts, mosques, and many other cultural heritage attractions. The tourist sites were culturally and traditionally aesthetic, and opportunities for learning about customs and

culture were available. Cultural heritage sites were accessible through all modes of transportation. As tourists' perceptions affect their travel intentions, many tourists have positive perceptions of Muscat's cultural and heritage tourism. In Muscat, Oman, visitors' satisfaction with the components of cultural heritage tourism attractions is very high in areas such as magnificent architectural building design and access to historical forts and mosques. During their visit to Muscat, they felt comfortable and safe visiting tourist attractions; they were attractive from a cultural and traditional standpoint, and there were many opportunities to explore the city's rich cultural legacy. In addition, shopping malls and souqs were also easily accessible.

The following aspects of cultural heritage sites exceeded tourist perceptions and resulted in their satisfaction and is what is expected by the tourists (as Satisfaction – Perception = Expectation):

Felt safe and secure at the tourist sites during visit to Muscat; the climate was pleasant and was easy to walk into various places. There were tour guides and tour operators to assist during the tour; the tourist sites were less crowded and the traffic flow was smooth; shopping malls and Souq's were accessible for shopping; the management of cultural heritage sites was effective; and the people around tourist sites were easily accessible.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations were derived:

1. Tourists must be provided with a variety of events and activities at cultural heritage locations. Given that most tourists will be eager to learn about Omani customs and traditions they must be given opportunities to immerse themselves in Omani culture and customs.
2. As most tourists find it difficult to access, food, drinks, and amenities must be made available at all the tourist sites since it might be challenging for tourists to get to cultural heritage sites, the approach and accessibility must be uncomplicated.
3. As most cultural heritage sites can now be reached by taxis, transportation authorities should ensure that a variety of transit options must be made available to access these locations.
4. Authorities should ensure that souvenirs, art, pottery, and other handicrafts are also made available close to such tourist attractions because visitors would like to purchase them as a remembrance of their trips or as a present for their loved ones.
5. Initiatives that stimulate new and repeated market potential must be developed to sustain and maintain foreign tourist visits.
6. Prioritizing the cultural heritage tourism locations, careful planning and strategic measures must be taken to improve visitor perceptions, experiences, and satisfaction. The business community, tourism, transportation, government, and locals are involved in these initiatives.

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