
Guest editorial: The study of tourism in Southeast Asia: ongoing trends and future directions

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This special issue aims to provide a critical analysis of the current state of tourism in Southeast Asia and its various facets, including its economic, social, cultural and environmental impact after COVID-19. Southeast Asia has undergone a significant transformation in its tourism sector. The rise of middle-class travellers, the proliferation of budget airlines, the changing tourists' motivation and the increasing influence of digital technology on travel behaviours have all contributed to a dynamic and evolving tourism landscape. In this context, Southeast Asia represents a diverse region with different historical, political and socioeconomic developments and a broad range of natural and cultural tourist attractions. As a result, Southeast Asia has embraced tourism as a means to generate income and create jobs (Trupp, Dolezal, & Bui, 2020). Over the past three decades, international tourist arrivals in the region have skyrocketed from 21.2 million in 1990 to around 137 million in 2019 and almost one billion domestic trips in 2019. Tourism contributed 12.1% of the region's gross domestic product (GDP) and employed 42 million workers, most of whom are women working in small and medium-sized enterprises that supply goods or services to the sector (ADB, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, posed unprecedented challenges, disrupting travel patterns and compelling stakeholders to rethink and adapt their strategies. Southeast Asia international tourist arrivals and tourism receipts fell by 82 and 78% in 2019 and 2020, respectively (Basu-Das, 2022), due to the pandemic. This led to high job losses throughout the region. In several of these countries, the tourism sector was responsible for almost a third of all job losses. The informal tourism sectors such as street vendors, souvenir sellers, freelance tour guides and drivers, which form a significant part of the local tourism value chain, suffered the greatest losses in employment and income (Basu-Das, 2022). Small businesses experienced partial or complete closure as they failed to operate during COVID-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions.

Although tourist arrivals are increasing gradually across Southeast Asia since late 2022, it is still slow due to multiple global headwinds. One of the main reasons for this is the reduction of tourists from China, as they typically make up the majority of ASEAN tourists (Tan, 2022). Moreover, rising inflation levels and likely mild recessions in the USA and Europe are dampening tourist inflows from these two regions. Travel firms can expect a recovery over the next 12 months, albeit not as fast as originally expected. The reopening of borders is also leading to a recovery in medical tourism, which is boosting the region's major hospitals. The recovery of the tourism sector amidst a global growth slowdown and rising costs will be a major tailwind for growth in ASEAN until 2023.



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As the region navigates the complexities of a rapidly changing world, it presents unique opportunities for tourism scholars to look into issues around Southeast Asia. This special issue brings together a collection of insightful articles that examine the ongoing trends and future directions in Southeast Asian tourism. It presents a forum for discussing the emerging sector and social phenomenon of tourism such as the significance of food culture and creative industry within this region. Southeast Asia is a region known for its diverse culture and food, which reflects its historical, geographical and social influences. The food culture in Southeast Asia is an integral part of its identity and the integration of food with the creative industry in tourism has become a significant trend making travel experiences more immersive and memorable (Teh, 2021). This issue also looks at the importance of digitalisation and how it has influenced decision-making and tourism. Digitalisation has fundamentally changed the tourism industry by reconstructing tourists' experiences with personalised products, using digital platforms to connect with travellers around the world, using social media platforms as powerful marketing tools or even communicating safety measures and travel advice during and after a pandemic. Travellers' experiences will be further enhanced by technology's integration into tourism as it continues to evolve. More details of the summary of articles below:

The issue comprises five articles dealing with different aspects of the tourism industry:

Using data collected through literature review, observation and in-depth interviews, the study shows that digitalisation has created a hybrid on-off approach to marketing and products. This hybrid approach strengthens the resilience of spiritual tourism by combining digital engagement with face-to-face experiences, supporting the industry in the new normal era.

The second article, "University students' perceptions of tourism impacts: a study in Vietnam" by [Nghiem-Phú, Hoàng, Kiều, and Vũ \(2024\)](#), examines how university students perceive tourism impacts. The results show that the impacts of tourism are perceived both positively and negatively and can affect both the destinations and the inhabitants. These impacts include general economic, socio-cultural and environmental elements as well as specific contextual aspects such as cross-border marriages, child labour and the loss of economic autonomy. The study provides pointers for better communication on the impacts of tourism in the future.

The third article, "Food, glorious food! The intersection of food cultures and creative tourism in Brunei," by [Tham and Chin \(2024\)](#), applies the theoretical frameworks of resource-based view and social creativity to elucidate insights related to food cultures and creative tourism in the context of Brunei. The findings revealed the entrepreneurial mindset of local food chefs and enthusiasts in showcasing Bruneian heritage and culture supported by government campaigns and technological advances. It also highlights further evidence that food cultures and creative tourism can be a lever for a national economic diversification strategy.

The fourth article, "Resurgence and transformation: the impact of COVID-19 on Myanmar's tourism industry and future trends," by [Zreik \(2024\)](#) analyses the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Myanmar's tourism industry. The study identifies challenges, innovations and future trends to promote a resilient and sustainable sector. The findings show that the pandemic has significantly disrupted tourism in Myanmar, resulting in economic losses and shifting the focus to sustainable, outdoor and cultural experiences. Effective government and private sector strategies are contributing to the recovery and point to a more diverse and resilient future.

The final article, "COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 transitions: case study on the Lao PDR" by [King and Chin \(2024\)](#), looks at the adverse effect of COVID-19 on tourism focusing specifically on Lao PDR post-pandemic, an area frequently neglected in tourism studies. The paper emphasises Lao PDR's strategic position in rebalancing the market and provides an

insight into the country's adaptation strategies as well as a nuanced perspective on the evolving landscape of Lao tourism.

The contribution of this issue will deepen the understanding of the dynamics of tourism on both global and local levels and the impact it has on residents and localities in Southeast Asia. Arguably, tourism has not only contributed to economic growth but also caused increasing socioeconomic inequality and vast disruptions to local ecosystems, societies and cultures. The expansion of an industry that often exceeds local carrying capacity limits, supported through injections of capital by external funding bodies with little room for local initiative, has often led to residents' marginalisation and the widening of socioeconomic gaps within local communities. In reconsidering the relationship between tourism and development in this issue, we highlight several dimensions of this nexus.

Overall, this special issue makes a valuable contribution to the study of tourism in Southeast Asia and provides a platform for scholars, practitioners and policymakers to engage in critical discussions on the future of tourism in the region. We hope that the articles in this issue will stimulate further research and inspire innovative approaches to the development and management of tourism in Southeast Asia. We are confident that this special issue (Volume 24, Issue 2) will be an excellent resource for students, researchers and practitioners in the fields of tourism, Southeast Asia, sociology and international relations.

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Further reading

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