

Theme editorial: How does special interest tourism (SIT) contribute to tourism development in Hungary?

Special interest tourism (SIT) has become an increasingly important catalyst for tourism development, especially in destinations seeking to diversify their tourism portfolios beyond mass or seasonal tourism (Garanti, 2022). Hungary, with its rich cultural heritage, vibrant urban centres and underexplored rural regions, offers a unique case study for understanding how SIT can bring new economic, social and spatial dynamics in tourism. This themed issue explores how SIT not only enriches tourist experiences but also contributes to sustainable development, cultural preservation and urban-rural integration within Hungary's tourism strategy.

Over the past decade, Hungary has experienced steady growth in its tourism sector, led primarily by Budapest. However, post-pandemic recovery and increasing concerns about overtourism, socio-spatial inequality and seasonality have prompted a strategic pivot towards niche and experience-based tourism products (UNWTO, 2023). SIT responds to these challenges by appealing to travellers with specific motivations, such as heritage, gastronomy or wellness, rather than mass leisure consumption. These tailored experiences not only help differentiate Hungary in an increasingly competitive tourism market, but also distribute tourism flows more evenly across time and space.

This issue is divided into two thematic clusters. The first focuses on Budapest, Hungary's capital and its tourism epicentre. It highlights how SIT can be harnessed in urban environments to promote innovation, quality of life and resilience. The second theme addresses heritage and destination management across the country, demonstrating how SIT can support local development and cultural sustainability in less visited areas.

Theme 1: special interest tourism in Budapest

Budapest's growing status as a smart city offers a timely lens to analyse how technology and quality of life intersect with tourism development. Articles examine the tension between smart city planning and overtourism, raising important questions about the role of local governance, data and innovation in managing visitor impacts. Their findings align with broader debates in urban tourism literature suggesting that technological solutions must be complemented by community-based planning and inclusive urban policies (Gretzel *et al.*, 2015; Gursoy *et al.*, 2022).

Home exchange tourism is another underexplored phenomenon in urban SIT. Home exchange practices shape authentic and meaningful travel experiences in Budapest. This form of peer-to-peer tourism fosters cross-cultural exchange and builds trust-based travel networks, resonating with the broader sharing economy trends in tourism (Camilleri and Neuhofer, 2017). As travellers seek alternative accommodations that reflect local lifestyles, home exchange emerges as a compelling SIT modality with low environmental impact.

The adaptability of tourism enterprises in niche segments is a further concern explored through a lens of escape rooms in Budapest. These immersive attractions, grounded in storytelling and problem-solving, illustrate how experiential design can engage both domestic and international visitors. The study contributes to emerging literature on gamification and experience economy in tourism (Pradhan *et al.*, 2025).

Gastronomic tourism in Budapest, one of the fastest-growing segments of SIT, is explored not only as a reflection of national identity but also as a strategic asset in tourism branding. The work emphasizes how gastronomy serves as a gateway to place-based storytelling, sustainable food practices and value-added experiences for tourists, key elements that reinforce Hungary's unique positioning in European food tourism (Stalmirska, 2024).



Theme 2: heritage and destination management in Hungary

While Budapest attracts the major share of visitors, rural Hungary and regional cities are rich in cultural and natural assets that can support SIT-led development. The article in this theme explores how 20th-century traumas are interpreted through heritage sites and commemorative spaces. The study delves into the politics of memory and narrative in dark heritage tourism, demonstrating how such spaces can facilitate critical engagement with history while contributing to local identity and education.

Further, it explores the intersection of tradition and tourism in rural areas, emphasizing the role of local crafts, festivals and customs in attracting visitors. This perspective aligns with recent research on community-based tourism and cultural sustainability, which underscores that while tourism may be experienced collectively, residents often assess its impacts on a personal level. When local traditions are respected and integrated meaningfully, they can generate both economic and social opportunities, while also fostering authentic engagement for special interest tourists (Šegota *et al.*, 2024).

A further article presents the Jewish Cultural Route in Tokaj-Hegyalja through the lens of sustainable tourism. The research advocates for integrated approaches that blend cultural preservation with product development and inclusive governance. The issue of accessibility and inclusion is also addressed in the article investigating the travel motivations of people with disabilities in health and active tourism. Their work fills an important gap in the SIT literature by focusing on inclusive tourism design, a field that is gaining attention in global policy frameworks (Darcy and Buhalis, 2010).

Methodological innovation is brought to light in an article suggesting the combination of eye-tracking and netnography to improve dark tourism research. An article also explores how literary heritage can shape city branding in Eger through the lens of Eclipse of the Crescent Moon, a national epic. The research illustrates how literary tourism can be a powerful tool in shaping place identity and enhancing emotional engagement with destinations. This resonates with the recent findings by Moreira *et al.* (2024), who emphasize that storytelling, when framed through meaningful narratives and local actors, plays a critical role in how tourists perceive and emotionally connect with places.

Strategic implications and outlook

Collectively, the studies in this issue stress the multifaceted contribution of SIT to tourism development in Hungary. They highlight the potential of niche tourism to address critical challenges in the sector, including seasonality, overtourism, cultural commodification and regional imbalances. More importantly, SIT provides a lens through which tourism development can be more ethical, inclusive and sustainable.

As Hungary refines its national tourism strategy, SIT should not be seen merely as a niche but as a strategic pillar for sustainable growth. The insights shared in this thematic issue offer practical pathways for diversifying Hungary's tourism offering while reinforcing its cultural richness and territorial cohesion. In doing so, SIT can help Hungary transition from a destination known primarily for its capital city to one recognized for its layered, diverse and meaningful tourism experiences.

We hope you find this themed issue a valuable contribution to the ongoing conversations in tourism research and practice.

About the Theme Editors:

Dr Ágnes Pál is Associate Professor in the Department of Tourism and a member of the Future of Higher Education Research Centre of Budapest University of Economics and Business. Since 2009, she has worked with the Department of Foreign Languages for Business Communication as an accredited examiner at the Foreign Language Examination Centre. She has been actively involved in the design of project proposals and the implementation of numerous international projects. She has been serving as Faculty Head of International Affairs

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Dr Csilla Petykó has over 15 years' experience in the field of special interest tourism. Her expertise includes teaching, curriculum development, research and publishing related to creative tourism and sustainability, including camping tourism, castle tourism, special transport and accommodation and escape rooms. Furthermore, she has a particular focus on the role and opportunities of tourists with disabilities and disabled employees in the tourism sector. She is the founder and leader of a research group at the university, which is dedicated to examining the characteristics of tourism in Budapest.

Dr Melanie Kay Smith is Associate Professor and Researcher at Budapest University of Business and Economics. She has been involved in special interest tourism for more than 20 years. This includes teaching and developing degree programmes and specialisations in cultural tourism (arts, heritage, museums, creative industries) and health tourism (medical and wellness tourism and spa management). She has written numerous publications in these areas and has also been the Editor of several Special Issues of journals. She has recently written publications about cultural and gastronomic tourism in Budapest and health tourism in Hungary.

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