

Introduction: the potential of special interest tourism (SIT) to create new opportunities in Hungary

Introduction

This special issue explores the transformative potential of special interest tourism (SIT) within both urban and rural contexts in Hungary, emphasizing its capacity to promote sustainable, inclusive and diversified tourism development. Through a range of interdisciplinary contributions, the issue highlights how SIT can respond to critical challenges such as overtourism in Budapest and underdevelopment in peripheral regions, offering alternative models grounded in authenticity, cultural value and community engagement. Drawing on diverse themes – including gastronomy, dark tourism, digital innovation, religious heritage, rural traditions and accessible tourism – the articles collectively frame SIT not merely as a niche market, but as a strategic lens through which tourism can be reimagined. This includes its role in destination marketing and branding. This issue includes types of SIT that are growing rapidly in international importance such as gastronomy, which can be closely linked to local traditions and sustainable production (Stalmirska and Ali, 2023). SIT is positioned as a tool for sustainable destination management, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to well-being, inclusive cities, decent work and responsible consumption.

The issue will examine the extent to which SIT can increase the competitiveness of Hungarian tourism through the creation of new products and services, especially in the capital city Budapest, but also in other regions of the country which would benefit from economic development. The issue will investigate how best to integrate SIT products and services into destination management in line with the SDGs, e.g. SDG 11 will be addressed, which relates to Sustainable Cities and Communities, for example, local resident quality of life in Budapest. The theme of SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production will underpin the issue. The use of SIT in a tourism development strategy connects to SDG 12 because it aims to attract tourists who are more interested in local culture, heritage, traditions and resident lifestyles. This is especially true in a rural tourism context. SIT can also help to create Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8) if it can create new opportunities for local suppliers and business, especially in the countryside. The issue also focuses on the inclusion of minority and ethnic groups in Hungary (e.g. orthodox Jewish tourists, ethnic minorities, disabled travellers).

It has been suggested that SIT can help to address problems of overtourism because it tends to be more sustainable and segmented (S  raphin *et al.*, 2019). SIT can attract smaller numbers of dedicated tourists who are interested in so-called ‘localhood’ and are willing to explore areas that are off-the-beaten track (Lim and Bouchon, 2017; Matoga and Paw  owska, 2018). There have also been several studies about de-marketing or re-branding of destinations in relation to overtourism (e.g. Bouchon and Rauscher, 2019; S  raphin *et al.*, 2019; Pinke-Sziva *et al.*, 2025) and this issue will also address the role of SIT in this process. It helps to create new niches, attracts different segments and has the potential to disperse tourist flows, while changing the image of the destination.

Context

There have been relatively few academic sources that explore the full range of SIT products in depth, especially within one country. Hungary is a relatively unknown destination to an international readership, although many tourists are familiar with the capital city Budapest. The Hungarian context provides a compelling case study, characterized by stark contrasts



between high-volume urban tourism and neglected rural areas. It is also interesting to understand the development trajectories of previous socialist countries like Hungary, which have developed in a different way from many western countries (Smith and Klicek, 2020).

This issue explores how SIT can enhance the competitiveness of Hungarian tourism by developing new products and services – particularly in the capital, Budapest, but also in other regions that could benefit from economic growth. In the post-COVID era, the significance of SIT has grown notably among tourism practitioners, as many destinations are reassessing their strategic approaches. There is a discernible shift away from mass tourism models and tourism forms that generate limited economic returns while imposing considerable burdens on local communities – such as party tourism in urban centres. SIT presents an opportunity to redirect tourist flows toward less congested areas within cities and rural regions, attracting smaller groups of highly motivated travellers who seek meaningful engagement with local culture, heritage, traditions and gastronomy. SIT supports the development of a differentiated and more sustainable destination image, aligning with broader objectives of responsible tourism, sustainable development and improved quality of life for residents. Moreover, SIT can generate economic and social benefits for rural communities and ethnic minority groups, fostering inclusive participation in the tourism economy. It may also contribute to the revitalization of cultural heritage and the strengthening of cultural identity and pride among local populations.

SIT emerges as a mechanism for spatial redistribution of tourist flows, enhancing regional equity and strengthening local cultural identity. Post-COVID recovery strategies have amplified the relevance of SIT, which tends to attract smaller, more engaged visitor groups, fostering local economic resilience and social cohesion. Empirical studies within the issue address a variety of SIT forms and management approaches, including smart tourism applications, gastronomic tourism, escape rooms, peer-to-peer accommodations, Jewish religious tourism and dark heritage routes. These studies often adopt participatory and mixed-method approaches, incorporating stakeholder interviews, visitor analytics (e.g. eye-tracking) and community-based research.

Structure

This issue will consist of two sections. The first relates to special interest tourism in the capital city of Hungary, Budapest. Reflections will be made on the development of tourism in the pre- and post-COVID era. Like many cities, Budapest went from being a city suffering from overtourism (Pinke-Sziva *et al.*, 2019) to a city that attracted very few tourists during the COVID Pandemic (Pinke-Sziva *et al.*, 2025). This gave tourism experts time to re-think their strategy and consider initiatives that could attract fewer party tourists and reduce overcrowding in central areas. This includes the role of branding, as it plays an important role in the re-positioning of a city destination, especially one that wants to target different segments and create a more positive image (e.g. shifting from young party tourists to higher spending cultural tourists or gastronomic tourists). Budapest's current strengths in SIT include cultural heritage, gastronomy and spas (Smith *et al.*, 2023). The first article in this special issue examines the extent to which smart solutions could help to address overtourism and improve residents' quality of life, partly by diversifying tourism and dispersing tourist flows. The second article focuses on the development of gastronomic tourism and the potential for encouraging more tourists to enjoy local and traditional food. New niches are also emerging, for example, escape room tourism, which is the focus of one of the articles, especially the challenges of business development in the post-COVID era. Another article explores the ways in which the accommodation and hospitality sectors support SIT, for example, home exchanges, which can make a more positive contribution to local tourism development and community involvement than the now heavily criticized Airbnb. Such forms of accommodation can facilitate host-guest interactions and help to create authentic cultural experiences.

The second section focuses on the country more widely as a destination, with an emphasis on heritage, ethnic and minority groups. This includes a special emphasis on some of the darker aspects of Hungarian history. The first article deals with the potential for developing rural tourism through ethnic cultural heritage in a way that supports traditions and community values. The second article gives an example of Jewish religious tourism and the challenges of creating new services for a specific segment of visitors, while assuring sustainable approaches that benefit local residents. The third article focuses on health-related and active tourism in Hungary, especially for those tourists who have disabilities. As the majority of such tourists find domestic travel in Hungary easier than foreign travel, it is suggested that accessible tourism and more inclusive services in the country could help to improve their quality of life. Three articles then examine the phenomenon of dark tourism from different perspectives in order to understand the processes of memorialization, interpretation and experience creation. Reflections are given on the ways in which such dark heritage sites should be commemorated and presented, including in destination marketing. Their role in ethical and sensitive visitor experience creation is also considered using new technology and innovative research methods (e.g. eye tracking).

Implications

Even though this issue focuses specifically on Hungarian tourism, many of the topics are pertinent to other destinations too. For example, concerns about resident quality of life in cities, especially those (like Budapest) that suffered from overtourism pre-COVID. SIT can help to disperse visitor flows and economic benefits throughout a country or region. Destination management principles that take into consideration the SDGs are globally important and examples are given of the sustainable consumption and production of SIT, e.g. in cultural tourism and rural tourism. Marketing and branding are international issues and it is important to understand international competition as well as specific target markets in order to develop new SIT products and services. Good practice examples can be used to inspire other destinations, as well as drawing on good practice from elsewhere.

The contributions collectively underscore the importance of aligning tourism supply with evolving consumer preferences for personalized, meaningful experiences. This might include creating services for visitors from minority groups or with special needs or dealing ethically and sensitively with dark heritage. Key implications include the necessity for improved data collection, targeted policy-making and stakeholder collaboration across sectors. Ultimately, the issue demonstrates that SIT offers a viable framework for enhancing tourism competitiveness, addressing socio-spatial disparities and fostering a more equitable, sustainable tourism future in Hungary and comparable post-socialist contexts.

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