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Conserving and promoting the spiritual cultural values in tourism activities from the perspective of tourism culture: The case of Can Tho city, Vietnam

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Abstract

The objective of the study is to preserve and promote the spiritual and cultural values in tourism activities in Can Tho City from the perspective of tourism culture. The study was carried out using a qualitative research method. Based on the theoretical basis of spiritual culture, analyzing resources and their values for spiritual tourism in Can Tho and promoting Can Tho's spiritual tourism in a contemporary context. On that basis, propose solutions such as improving the efficiency of state management of cultural and spiritual tourism; heritage preservation and development of spiritual cultural tourism products; investing in and embellishing historical and cultural relics; training and developing tourism human resources; raising awareness about cultural and spiritual tourism within the community and travel business organizations; applying digital technology in managing spiritual tourism destinations.

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1. Introduction

Today, the issue of deep application of spiritual factors that ensure the socio-sustainable development of ethnic groups is urgent [1]. Incorporating spiritual knowledge into tourism practices can enhance cultural heritage management [2]. Engaging local communities in the management and promotion of spiritual tourism ensures that cultural values are respected and preserved [3, 4]. Effective management of sacred sites involves respecting spiritual values, engaging local communities, and ensuring quality experiences. This can improve the quality of life for residents and enhance the tourism experience [5]. Spiritual culture is an aspect of cultural activities, manifested in material or spiritual aspects, carrying sacred values in life and religious beliefs. Outstanding spiritual culture taking place includes visiting and learning about religious beliefs; attending events related to festivals associated with the expression of belief in various religions; pilgrimage tourism; meditation tourism; and tourism in remembrance of national heroes. Currently, the country has more than 44,000 landmarks, scenic spots, and historical relics, of which more than half are places where the model of cultural and spiritual tourism can

be exploited [6]. The potential for spiritual and cultural tourism in Vietnam is very rich and diverse. Spiritual and cultural tourism is becoming a type of tourism that attracts tourists, both satisfying the needs for relaxation and learning about history, customs, practices, and beliefs through monuments and festivals. Stemming from the diverse needs of visitors, the outstanding cultural and spiritual tourism activities taking place are: visiting and learning about religious beliefs; attending events related to festivals associated with the expression of beliefs and religions; pilgrimage tourism; meditation tourism; and tourism in remembrance of national heroes.

Can Tho City has a lot of potential for developing spiritual and cultural tourism through the system of cultural and historical relics, unique architecture [7]. Can Tho has a lot of resources for cultural and spiritual tourism, with about 100 temples, both large and small, and 37 recognized cultural and historical relics (14 national monuments and 23 city monuments). However, at present, cultural and spiritual tourism in Can Tho has not yet developed commensurate with the available potential. Specifically, in February 2019, the monuments welcomed nearly 63,800 visitors; in February 2020, the number of visitors was only nearly 23,300, reaching 36.5% of the same period [8]. Cultural and spiritual tourism activities in zones, routes, and spots are taking place spontaneously, lacking orientation, and have not fully realized their potential. Tourism products are fragmented, and tourism services are lacking, especially ancillary services; this inability to create attraction for tourists is also the reason why tourists who come here often stay for a short time and spend little. Therefore, the research paper "Conserving and Promoting the Spiritual Cultural Values in Tourism Activities in Can Tho City from the Perspective of Cultural Tourism" aims to preserve and propose solutions to improve the spiritual culture of tourism activities based on making the best use of the city's resources and advantages.

Research Methods: The study was carried out using a qualitative research method. It focuses on the case study method, with the specific case of Can Tho City. Therefore, the main method used for implementation is descriptive statistics and interviews with cultural and tourism experts. Secondary data is collected, including legal documents from the Government, the Department of Statistics, research works, and related sources of information and documents. These data are systematized, analyzed, synthesized, evaluated, and commented on correctly as a basis for providing solutions.

Spiritual tourism still has many different opinions. According to IGI Global (USA), spiritual tourism is one of the developing types of cultural tourism because nowadays people need spiritual development and discovering new things about other cultures [9]. Spiritual tourism is a form of cultural tourism that centers on spiritual and cultural aspects as both the foundation and the objective of fulfilling individuals' spiritual needs. This type of tourism emphasizes the exploration of spiritual and cultural elements during the tourism experience, drawing on both tangible and intangible cultural values. These values are closely tied to historical representations and influence people's worldviews, beliefs, religions, and other significant spiritual principles.

2. Resources and its Values for Spiritual Tourism in Can Tho

2.1. Spiritual Cultural Tourism Products

Beliefs and religious relics: Can Tho City has many relics, beliefs, and religions, containing numerous historical, architectural, artistic, and aesthetic values, ... such as Ong Pagoda (Ninh Kieu Wharf), Can Tho Grand Palace (Ninh Kieu District), Truc Lam Phuong Nam Zen Monastery (Phong Dien District), Binh Thuy Temple (Binh Thuy District), Hung King Temple (Binh Thuy District), Chau Van Liem Temple (O Mon District) ... The advantage of this tourism product is that it does not depend on the season but can be conducted all year round according to the needs of tourists.

Religious and belief festivals: Can Tho city has more than 70 traditional festivals, of which 20 traditional festivals take place every year with 3 main types: folk festivals, revolutionary festivals, and belief festivals. Belief festivals are traditionally held in the early spring and late autumn. There are several festivals of large regional character and a high religious significance, such as the Ky Yen Thuong Dien Festival, Ky Yen Ha Dien Festival, Quan Thanh De ceremony, New Year's Prayer Festival, and Chol Chonam Thomay Festival. Some localities have many traditional festivals, such as O Mon (18 festivals), Ninh Kieu, Co Do (11 festivals), and Phong Dien (8 festivals) [10]. These are considered "living museums" about the spiritual and cultural life of residents and are favourable potentials to develop cultural and spiritual tourism in Can Tho city.

Customs, beliefs, and religions: Customs are often associated with objects of worship and are held at relics, communal houses, and pagodas. Directly participating in these customs are often religious believers or people with a religious psychology that helps them satisfy their curiosity and better understand religious activities. Some typical cultural and spiritual tourist sites in Can Tho City:

Table 1.

Some typical cultural and spiritual tourist sites in Can Tho City.

Name	Year completed	Address	Cultural values
Pothi Somron Pagoda	1735	IV Area, Chau Van Liem Ward, O Mon District	City-level architectural and artistic monument in 2006
Long Quang Pagoda	1825	155/6 Binh Chanh Area, Long Hoa Ward, Binh Thuy District.	The Vietnam Cultural Heritage Association recognized the title of “Vietnamese cultural and spiritual heritage”.
Ong Pagoda	1896	32 Hai Ba Trung Street, Tan An Ward, Ninh Kieu District	National historical and cultural relic on June 21, 1993
Hoi Linh Pagoda	1907	314/36 Cach Mang Thang Tam Street, Bui Huu Nghia Ward, Binh Thuy District	The Ministry of Culture and Information has decided to rank Hoi Linh Pagoda as a national historical and cultural relic
Binh Thuy Temple	1910	Le Hong Phong Street, Binh Thuy Ward, Binh Thuy District	2 Ky Yen festivals include: Thuong Dien and Ha Dien
Munirensay Pagoda	1948	36 Hoa Binh Boulevard, Tan An Ward, Ninh Kieu District	Chol Chnam Thmay Festival from April 14 to April 17 of the solar calendar, Sen Don Ta festival
Phat Hoc Pagoda	1951	11 Hoa Binh Boulevard, Tan An Ward, Ninh Kieu District	Vesak, Vu Lan festival...
Truc Lam Phuong Nam Zen Monastery	2014	Provincial road 923, My Nhon Hamlet, My Khanh Commune, Phong Dien District	Zen Monastery has the largest area in the Mekong Delta.
Temple of Hung Kings	2022	Vo Van Kiet Street, 7 Area, Binh Thuy Ward, Binh Thuy District	Cultural and spiritual works for people in the area to remember and find their roots

2.2. The Reality of Spiritual Cultural Tourism Activities

The table illustrates the development of tourism activities in Can Tho City over the period from 2020 to 2024.

Visitor Numbers: The total number of visitors saw significant fluctuations throughout these years. After a notable decline in 2021, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visitors started to rise again in 2022 and is expected to continue growing in 2023 and 2024, with projections reaching over 6 million visitors by 2024. This represents a robust recovery and growth trajectory for the city's tourism sector.

Number of Guests Staying: A similar trend is observed in the number of guests staying, with a sharp drop in 2021 followed by a steady increase. By 2024, the number of guests staying is expected to reach 3.1 million, indicating a growing demand for accommodation and longer stays in the city.

International Visitors: The number of international visitors shows a dramatic drop in 2021, but the recovery has been notable, particularly in 2024, where a surge in international arrivals is expected, reaching nearly 3 million. This significant increase in international tourism is an encouraging sign for Can Tho's positioning as a key destination in the Mekong Delta region.

Domestic Passengers: The number of domestic passengers remains somewhat volatile. After a decline in 2021, a strong recovery is expected by 2023, but the figures for 2024 are forecasted to decrease sharply, with only 170,000 domestic passengers projected. This could indicate a shift in the source markets or a change in domestic tourism patterns.

Revenue: Tourism revenue has been steadily increasing each year, with projections of revenue reaching VND 6,226 billion by 2024. This consistent growth underscores the economic importance of the tourism sector in Can Tho's overall development.

Overall, Can Tho's tourism sector is recovering well from the impacts of the pandemic. The strong growth in both international and domestic visitors, alongside increasing revenue, suggests a promising future for tourism in the city. However, the sharp drop in domestic passengers in 2024 raises questions about changing travel preferences, and further investigation may be required to understand this trend.

Table 2.

Tourism activities in Can Tho city 2020 – 2024.

Target	Year 2020	Year 2021	Year 2022	Year 2023	Year 2024
Total number of visitors	5,605,865	2,118,205	5,134,605	5,990,000	6,300,000
Number of guests staying	2,020,145	898,205	2,508,305	2,980,000	3,100,000
International visitors	111,420	9,750	58,305	159,000	2,930,000
Domestic passenger	1,908,725	888,500	1,450,000	2,821,000	170,000
Revenue (billion VND)	3,169	1,375	4,117	5,420	6,226

Source: Can Tho Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2025 Can Tho Department of Culture [11].

The number of cultural and spiritual tourists (Table 3) is increasing, accounting for a large proportion of the tourist structure, showing that spiritual cultural tourism is increasingly holding an important position in social life. The number of

tourists is mainly in Dinh Binh Thuy, Ong Pagoda and Truc Lam Zen Monastery, Buddhist Temple, Hung King Temple, etc. A place of great cultural and religious value.

Table 3.

Number of domestic visitors at some typical spiritual tourist destinations.

Cultural and spiritual tourist destination	Year (Million Times)		
	2022	2023	2024
Binh Thuy Temple	0.70	0.60	0.60
Long Quang Pagoda	0.09	0.08	0.20
Hoi Linh Pagoda	0.07	0.06	0.08
Ong Pagoda	0.60	0.60	0.70
Phat Hoc Pagoda	0.30	0.30	0.40
Khmer Munirensay Pagoda	0.09	0.10	0.20
Khmer Pôthi Somrôn Pagoda	0.08	0.08	0.09
Truc Lam Phuong Nam Zen Monastery	0.70	0.80	0.90

Although the number of cultural and spiritual tourists increases steadily every year, the average length of stay is short (Table 4). Usually, tourists go during the day and rarely stay overnight, maybe even just a few hours a day. The longest stay in Dinh Binh Thuy is associated with other purposes such as convalescence and ecology (Table 4).

Table 4.

Length of stay of tourists at typical spiritual tourist destinations.

Cultural and spiritual tourist destination	Average number of days of stay
Binh Thuy Temple	1.30
Long Quang Pagoda	0.85
Hoi Linh Pagoda	0.88
Ong Pagoda	0.80
Phat Hoc Pagoda	1.20
Khmer Munirensay Pagoda	0.50
Truc Lam Phuong Nam Zen Monastery	0.87

The activities of exploiting the value of cultural and spiritual tourism are increasingly expressed in the scale and nature of activities at spiritual and cultural tourist sites and spots. Spiritual and cultural tourism is being approached and viewed positively by society in terms of both economic and social aspects.

2.2.1. Advantage

Regarding spiritual and cultural tourism resources, the whole city has 37 recognized cultural and historical relics, including 14 national-level relics and 23 city-level relics [12]. Besides, Can Tho City is considered the center of the worship of God Thanh Hoang, Thien Hau Thanh Mau, and Quan Cong. This is a favorable factor for the organization of various types of cultural and historical tourism, famous people associated with spiritual culture and beliefs, making Can Tho the center of cultural and spiritual tourism activities in the region.

In terms of culture and society, Can Tho City is also a land imbued with the spiritual culture of gardens and rivers, contributing to the formation of rich intangible tourism products such as visiting fruit gardens, listening to don ca tai tu, visiting craft villages, visiting the floating market on the river, and traditional festivals of the Kinh, Hoa, and Khmer ethnic groups. Historical and cultural works and relics associated with tourism development include the Victory of Mr. Hao, the Tomb of the Valedictorian Bui Huu Nghia, the Temple of Chau Van Liem, and the Temple of Hung Kings.

About travel business establishments: by 2023, the whole city has 66 travel businesses. Of these, there are 40 domestic travel businesses and 26 international travel businesses. Some units organize travel business activities quite well, such as Saigontourist Can Tho Travel Company, Can Tho Tourism Company, Vietravel Can Tho Travel Company, and others. However, these businesses are mostly medium-sized and small, with limited capital and a restricted ability to organize business activities.

Infrastructure system for tourism: transport infrastructure, urban landscape, information technology, and tourism technical facilities are increasingly attracting complete investment, meeting the needs of tourist' guests. Can Tho City has a smooth road traffic system with 6 national highways running through it. National Highway 1A connects Can Tho City with Ho Chi Minh City, provinces, and cities in the region and the whole country; National Highway 80; National Highway 91; National Highway 91B; National Highway 91C; National Highway 61. Regarding waterway traffic, Can Tho City has 3 important waterway transport routes. Regarding air traffic, Can Tho International Airport is invested in, upgraded, and completed with 09 domestic routes operated by Vietnam Airlines, VietJet Air, Vasco, and Bamboo Airways, and 02 international routes operated by AirAsia and Thai AirAsia. In addition, Can Tho City has 616 tourist accommodation establishments, with over 10,500 rooms (of which 1 to 5-star hotels are 133 hotels, with 5,030 rooms). Centers and supermarkets such as Copmart Supermarket, Mega Market Supermarket, Go Supermarket, Lotte Shopping Center, Vincom Plaza Hung Vuong, Xuan Khanh, etc. are operating actively, contributing to diversifying services and attracting tourists.

Regarding means of transport: the city has various and abundant means of transport for tourists, serving tourists both by road, by air, and especially by waterway with 10 passenger transport ships with accommodation, 144 non-stay tourist transport ships, and 28 tourist trams that meet standards to serve tourists.

2.2.2. Disadvantage

Firstly, although cultural and spiritual tourists in Can Tho account for nearly 30% of the total, for many reasons, the number of overnight stays is not high, and the length of stay is not long, especially for international tourists. International tourism is still small, accounting for only 1-2% of the total number of visitors to Can Tho city, so the efficiency of the spiritual tourism business is not high.

Secondly, although the infrastructure for tourism has increased in quantity, the quality has not changed significantly, and many individual businesses, especially those in the accommodation sector, are lacking in size and scale. There is also a lack of vegetarian restaurants, and accommodation facilities are invested in decoration and equipment layout to suit the target audience of cultural and spiritual tourists.

The Third, in human resources for tourism, there is a lack of well-trained experts and specialists in spiritual and cultural tourism, management knowledge, professionalism, cultural and spiritual expertise and especially professional qualifications. foreign languages are not fully equipped. Plan 111/KH-UBND [13] of the People's Committee of Can Tho City clearly defines that by 2020, there will be about 39,300 employees in the tourism industry, of which 13,100 are direct employees and 26,200 are indirect employees; the professionally trained workforce must reach over 80%. However, in 2020, the proportion of trained workers in the industry will only reach 68.3%. A portion of the graduates often moves to Ho Chi Minh City, Phu Quoc City, or other localities to work, while some transition to other professions. As a result, the tourism workforce in Can Tho is inconsistent in terms of numbers. In addition, regarding the quality of human resources in the tourism sector, travel agencies and hotels report that after hiring employees, they must undergo re-training, particularly in soft skills and practical operations. Only about 40% of the managers and department supervisors working in hotels possess expertise in tourism and hotel services. Among them, the limitation of foreign language skills is the most obvious problem [14].

The Fourth, the city has a dense concentration of relics, but only a few spiritual tourist attractions create an appeal for visitors such as Binh Thuy Dinh, Ong Pagoda, Buddhist Temple, Truc Lam Phuong Nam Zen Monastery, Tomb of Thu Khoa Bui Huu Nghia, Temple of King Hung ..., the rest is almost "forgotten".

The connection of Can Tho City with localities in the Mekong Delta regarding cultural and spiritual tourism activities is still low, not meeting the requirements for the general development of the region. This is one of the reasons that restrict visitors from coming to and staying in Can Tho City.

3. Promoting Can Tho's Spiritual Tourism in the Contemporary Context

3.1. Improving the Efficiency of State Management of Spiritual Cultural Tourism

Enhance the roles, responsibilities, and involvement of local authorities at all levels in the coordination and implementation of policies on spiritual tourism development. Develop regulations on the management of tourism resources and implement tourism development planning effectively. It is necessary to arrange a team of specialists in tourism to participate in the management of the monuments and the festival organizers to provide synchronous and professional orientations.

Restore traditional festivals, but the organization must ensure compliance with the law and in the spirit of safety and thrift; eliminate superstition, and ensure a civilized lifestyle in festival activities. Propaganda to raise awareness among the people about the meaning and cultural and historical value of the festival. Turning the festival into a cultural and tourist activity, promoting the image, and contributing to economic growth.

Coordinate with People's Committees of communes, wards, agencies, communal houses, and pagodas, and supervise the management and use of revenues and expenditures from festivals, etc., to ensure transparency and rationally and effectively use the above-mentioned revenue sources for the restoration and embellishment of monuments and the organization of the next festivals.

Closely coordinate with security forces to effectively implement plans to ensure security and order for cultural and spiritual tourism activities. Innovate festival organization, limiting and overcoming the situation of jostling, shoving, robbery, and pickpocketing of tourists, especially at major festivals in the city.

3.2. Heritage Conservation, Development of Spiritual Cultural Tourism Products

Organizing the implementation of projects on research, collection, statistics, and classification of cultural heritage. Conduct regular and periodic inspections and surveys on cultural heritage. Regarding the preservation of heritage, it is necessary to ensure that experts have appropriate professional knowledge about cultural heritage and possess professional ethics to be able to preserve as much as possible the "original elements" constituting that monument, ...

Focus on exploiting values and bringing economic benefits without breaking traditional cultural values. Therefore, it is necessary to have a synchronous plan linking conservation and tourism activities to promote spiritual and cultural heritage values.

Spiritual cultural tourism products with traditional festivals to attract international visitors need to pay attention to restoring and embellishing historical relics. Archaeological organizations determine the value of architectural heritage of the Kinh, Hoa, and Khmer ethnic groups. It is possible to study and build an information center to introduce in many languages the heritage values so that visitors can have a deeper understanding of this special relic complex.

3.3. Invest in and Embellish Historical and Cultural Relics

Focusing on investment from the state budget for infrastructure development in service of tourism. Develop mechanisms and policies, simplify and rationalize investment procedures to attract and create investment capital sources to develop tourism business activities, and mobilize all capital sources to solve tourism investment needs.

Implement linkages between districts and cities in developing spiritual tourism products. Links between sectors in the formulation and implementation of investment projects and programs. Linking with localities in the region in building a chain of distinctive and unique tourism products; linking with major destinations in the Mekong Delta; expansion to build attractive, highly competitive international tourism programs... On the other hand, the connection between sectors and management levels in the conservation and promotion of spiritual tourism resources.

3.4. Training and Developing Tourism Human Resources

Create conditions for tourism staff and the management board of relics to attend spiritual tourism conferences and tourism seminars held domestically and internationally to raise awareness about cultural tourism and spiritual culture, ensuring the correct implementation of the development viewpoints of spiritual cultural tourism, bringing progressive spiritual values to society and actively contributing to sustainable socio-economic development.

Implement a program to raise awareness about cultural and spiritual tourism for the target audience, providing experiences for residents in developing community tourism associated with cultural and spiritual tourist spots; creating conditions and orientations for activities for religious dignitaries, believers, monks and nuns, and Buddhists in organizing cultural and spiritual tourism activities at belief and religious establishments.

Standardize the team of guides at the site: Improve professional skills, knowledge of culture, religion, and beliefs related to spiritual sites; improve foreign language ability; enhance cultural fostering behavior; communication skills; and improve the ability to grasp tourists' psychology, cultural, and spiritual values for guides through training classes and short-term training courses. At the same time, strengthen the management, inspection, and ensuring a team of guides and narrators with full capacity, improving the quality of products and images of Can Tho cultural and spiritual tourism on the market.

3.5. Raise Awareness of Cultural and Spiritual Tourism of the Community, Travel Business Organizations

For the residential community: it is necessary to promote the propaganda and education of the people's sense of self-awareness in preserving and promoting the value of traditional cultural heritage as an indispensable requirement. Education to raise people's sense of self-awareness and arouse in them pride in the community's cultural heritage is important work. Directing people to actively explore, collect, and preserve types of cultural heritage, especially intangible cultural heritage.

For travel business organizations: protect and preserve artifacts at cultural tourist sites and spots when bringing tourists to visit, study, and maintain the general hygienic environment. Exploiting the value of cultural and spiritual tourist attractions within the framework permitted by law.

3.6. Applying Digital Technology in Spiritual Tourism Destination Management

Promoting religious sites effectively requires modern digital strategies. Research on Facebook promotions by various National Tourism Organizations highlights the importance of engaging content and interactivity to attract tourists [15]. Link development with other types of tourism associated with destination management to become prominent tourism brands such as the Temple of Hung Kings, Dinh Binh Thuy, Ong Pagoda, and Zen Monastery. Continue to implement the smart tourism project, applying a digital transformation model in tourism promotion according to the target market. Using internet advertising is the number one priority in the choices, uploading promotional clips about the spiritual-cultural tourism festival of Can Tho city on websites with larger traffic such as YouTube, Bamboo, or creating accounts on major social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Upgrade the spiritual and cultural tourism segment on the website and link the website of the tourism industry in Can Tho city with major websites on domestic and foreign tourism.

At spiritual and cultural tourism destinations, use QR Codes in convenient locations to automatically provide introductory information about the destination to visitors. Building 3D images (VR 360) in the city's major tourist attractions such as the Temple of Hung Kings, the Memorial of the valedictorian Bùi Hữu Nghĩa, etc. Application of real space digitization of all attractions tourism in Cần Thơ city.

4. Conclusion

Based on the perspective of exploiting cultural and spiritual tourism resources to form tourism products to serve the needs of domestic and international tourists, Can Tho City has certain advantages. However, the problem is to exploit and promote the value of that resource, creating momentum for tourism development. The improvement of the professional qualifications of the narrators at the relic site also needs to be trained methodically and professionally. On the other hand, to achieve the goal of developing tourism in the space of the Mekong Delta, it is necessary to promote the connection of cultural and spiritual tourism products in Can Tho with the provinces of Soc Trang, An Giang, and Tien Giang. ... to develop a program to develop tourist zones and routes. Exploiting, preserving, and promoting the value of spiritual tourism resources has both contributed to preserving unique cultural values and creating momentum to promote tourism activities of Can Tho City for sustainable development. Based on the research results, propose groups of related solutions such as improving the efficiency of state management of spiritual cultural tourism; heritage preservation and development of spiritual cultural tourism products; investing in and embellishing historical and cultural relics; training and developing tourism human resources; raising awareness about cultural and spiritual tourism of the community and travel business organizations; applying digital technology in managing spiritual tourism destinations.

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