Although there are multiple and varied definitions of cultural tourism, we will initially take into account its definition established from a broad perspective by the UNWTO in 1995 as “all movements of people to meet the human need for diversity, aimed at raising the cultural level of the individual, providing new knowledge, experiences and encounters.” The same source gives us a narrower definition that refers to the “movements of persons for essentially cultural motivations such as study tours, performing arts and other cultural tours, travel to festivals and other cultural events, visit to sites and monuments.”

We can say that cultural tourism has a number of features that make it difficult to conceptualize, since it brings together varied agents, offers very different products, and brings into play diverse motivations and behaviours. It consists of culturally-based product offerings and resources that cater to highly diverse demand and responds to the specific motivations of each tourist.

The Charter of Cultural Tourism International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) (1999) expands these definitions incorporating the concept of cultural exchange as part of a form of tourism that “provides a personal experience, not only of that which has survived from the past, but of the contemporary life and society of others”.

In this regard, it may be useful to consider tourism as an activity in which two actors take part, a “host” (the supplier) and a “guest” (the client), each with his own sense of cultural identity. The encounter between the two inevitably involves a cultural exchange, which is in and of itself an important reason for taking a trip or hosting visitors. This exchange can take many forms, as tourism is an activity that is particularly conducive to exchanges between social groups. It is therefore considered that cultural tourism is one of the most important and diverse phenomena in contemporary tourism, which has proved to be open to a continuous process of innovation and creation of new products in response to the demand for new tourism experiences and the evolution of knowledge in the field of cultural management.

Likewise, cultural institutions generate interest in general and tourism activities in particular. These may be museums, art galleries, cultural centres and performance spaces for the presentation of music or dance performances, literature or artistic functions of all kinds: contemporary, classical or traditional. The scale ranges from major national cultural centres of international renown down to the most modestly designed ones that are almost always related to the local culture. Most museums combine the presentation of its permanent collection with temporary exhibitions and special events. These can attract large audiences and generate high levels of public awareness. Tourism management is mostly related to the design of exhibitions and performances and also the configuration of public spaces so as to provide visibility as a tourist attraction, while also accommodating retail spaces such as markets featuring handicrafts and local products which enrich the cultural offering as a whole.
It has also been observed that the cultural product, as a tourism resource, can make the difference for a destination. Usually these products are those that have strong appeal capable of influencing the tourist’s travel decision and choice of destination. Therefore, the function of these products is critical to destinations. This type of attraction can benefit all members of the tourism industry, generating additional demand for accommodation, as visits to these attractions usually involve the need to stay overnight at the destination. Other tourist attractions and services also benefit from increased business and traffic. Therefore, the economic benefits of a destination with a flagship tourist attraction can be substantial.

However, congestion at sites due to excessive tourism may have a significant impact on the surroundings, creating operational deficiencies, non-constructive competition, increased business costs and loss of profits for both the destination and local residents. All this may end up negatively affecting the long-term conservation of these places, altering their biodiversity or their material structure and the very meaning and authenticity of cultural sites.

This type of so-called “flagship” products may take one of the following forms, or a combination of them:

- An iconic product, understood as something that in itself is of sufficient attractiveness for a country and usually is a historical and cultural site, like the pyramids of Egypt or the Taj Mahal in India; or an attraction built for an express purpose, like the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the London Eye in London or the Guinness Brewery in Dublin.
- A grouping of individual products.

A flagship tourism product can take the form of complementary tourist attractions with potential for development that contributes to the execution of a uniform marketing strategy.

Without going into these categories, the organization of events and festivals can also meet several objectives of the tourism destinations sector:

- Improve the perception and image of the country internationally.
- Attract visitor segments that are not interested in the other attractions of the destination: organizing outdoor popular music festivals is becoming the preferred means for capturing a large audience in low or shoulder season or for attracting segments that otherwise would not think of visiting the destination.
- Celebrating a historical anniversary by declaring a commemorative or thematic year is one of the main methods for a destination to develop new products and attract customers with an overall marketing strategy, as in the case of the 400th anniversary of Dutch painter Rembrandt in 2006, which was the framework for organizing a series of exhibitions, special events and activities around the artist, which provided significant benefits to all leisure and tourism operators in Amsterdam.
- The “European Capital of Culture” initiative consists of conferring such title on the part of the European Council and Parliament to one or two European cities, which for a year have an opportunity to showcase their cultural development and cultural life. Some European cities have used this designation to completely transform their cultural structures and be recognized internationally. When a city is named European Capital of Culture, it holds all kinds of artistic events.

The European Capitals of Culture for 2016 are: Wroclaw (Poland) and San Sebastian (Spain); in 2017, Aarhus (Denmark) and Pafos (Cyprus); in 2018, Leeuwarden (Netherlands) and Valletta (Malta) and in 2019, Matera (Italy) and Plovdiv (Bulgaria).
The range of attractions and activities included in the generic term “tourism products” encompasses such diverse components as natural sites, history and cultural heritage, the architectural environment and the destination’s inhabitants themselves.

It is quite common to find natural and cultural heritage assets spread across a region without sufficient individual potential to attract visitors. Nevertheless, by combining them and creating routes, their attractiveness can be increased. Similarly, establishing themes and links between several products can increase their appeal, allowing the more “modest” products to leverage the potential of the most attractive ones.

The development of circuits or routes as tourist attractions does not simply consist of setting up a route based on the location of different attractions. There has to be a theme or interest that unites them and the route should offer distinctive attractions and activities, with a range of facilities in key places along it. The attractiveness of the route comes from integrated development based on a specific theme.

Routes can be long-distance, covering multiple countries or, on the other end of the scale, a circuit that allows tourists to visit a small segment or follow a relatively short itinerary within a single country. An example of the former is the Silk Road, an interconnected network of trade routes of 6,500 km in length on the Asian continent connecting East, South and West Asia with the Mediterranean, North Africa and Europe. The UNWTO is working with national governments to increase the product offerings along routes and to intensify the marketing of the concept.

Another of the latest initiatives of the UNWTO is the “Phoenicians’ Route”. It consists of a network of major water routes that were used by the Phoenicians from the twelfth century BC as trade and cultural communications channels in the Mediterranean Sea, thus becoming an integral and basic part of Mediterranean culture. The Phoenicians’ Route was incorporated in the “The Council of Europe Cultural Routes” programme in 2003 as an international route across three continents, 18 Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Morocco, Palestine, Portugal, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and the UK) and more than 80 towns where Punic and Phoenician culture originated.

This initiative corresponds to the decision of the 98th Session of the Executive Council of the UNWTO (2014) on the promotion of the development of thematic routes as a means to stimulate regional development and integration.

Among the objectives is the creation of an internationally recognized product as well as the generation of direct and indirect socioeconomic benefits and strengthening regional cooperation by developing and promoting tourism among the 18 countries along the route.

In the Americas we have several regional routes running through several countries such as the Maya Route in Central America, the Route of the Jesuit missions spanning five countries and the Inca Trail.

On another note, we have to mention the intangible cultural heritage manifested in the following areas:

- Handicrafts and visual arts based on traditional craftsmanship
- Gastronomy and culinary arts
- Social practices, rituals and festivals
- Music and performing arts
• Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage
• Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe

Tourists can be particularly active in a specific category or merely wish to experience it only in the context of their overall experience of the living culture of a destination, although the literature on the subject notes that many cases involve more than one category.

Lastly, the concept of urban regeneration through culture presents different aspects. In urban areas, tourism can promote the development of activities, infrastructure and equipment to accommodate and attract domestic and international visitors. With regard to activities, many cities invest in organizing festivals and other major events (sporting, cultural, musical, etc.) that generate a positive spillover effect on shops, restaurants and hotels. As for the larger cities, often they require investments in transport and hotel infrastructure and other forms of accommodation to cater for increasing tourist flows and thus ensure a positive legacy for the local community.

The Guggenheim Museum is an example of urban regeneration project in which a product is created from scratch. It has not only served to provide a major flagship attraction in Bilbao, but it has also created a tourist hub in the city for the surrounding area and the rest of the region. Nevertheless, it should be recalled that the museum was part of a much wider plan (the plan to revitalize Bilbao) which contributed to its transformation from an industrial city into a cultural and service-based city. Without all other urban improvements included in the plan, the Guggenheim Museum could not have achieved such success as a flagship offering of the city.

In the face of all these situations, several questions immediately arise:

• Through good planning and management, can more people enjoy cultural and natural sites around the world while at the same time ensuring their long-term preservation?
• What examples of best practices can be cited in relation to the management of a cultural attraction?

We must remember then that the sustainability of the tourism sector depends on the effective management of tourist flows in and through destinations and sites, giving the visitor the time and the opportunity to appreciate and enjoy the local culture and values of the places they are visiting and to purchase their products and services.
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