

The Potential for Sustainable Development of Spiritual Tourism at The Tam Chuc Pagoda Complex, Ninh Binh Province, Vietnam

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Abstract: *The Tam Chuc pagoda complex (Ninh Binh, Vietnam) is one of the largest spiritual tourism destinations in the country, possessing multiple advantages such as a monumental system of architectural structures, the convergence of religious, cultural, and historical values, and a distinctive natural landscape. Among these, Buddhism exerts a profound influence, not only serving as the spiritual foundation shaping the sacred space but also guiding the development of tourism products toward deeper spiritual and cultural values, encouraging visitors to engage in meaningful religious and cultural experiences. In recent years, the Tam Chuc pagoda complex has become a key destination within the tourism development strategy of the Red River delta region. The exploitation of its spiritual and cultural values has brought significant economic benefits and generated employment opportunities for local communities. However, its rapid growth has also raised several challenges, including environmental pollution, visitor overcrowding during peak seasons, and the commercialization of sacred spaces. The objective of this study is to identify and analyze the potential for developing spiritual tourism at the Tam Chuc pagoda complex based on the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions. It also aims to assess the role of Buddhism in shaping cultural-spiritual values and enhancing visitors' experiences. On that basis, the paper proposes a set of recommendations and solutions to strengthen the management of cultural and religious resources, diversify tourism products, raise community awareness, and foster cooperation among stakeholders in order to preserve and promote cultural-religious values and advance the sustainable development of spiritual tourism.*

Keywords: *Spiritual tourism; Tam Chuc pagoda complex; Sustainable development.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, spiritual tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing forms of tourism in Vietnam. The increasing demand for spiritual experiences among Vietnamese people has become a major driving

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force behind this growth. For many visitors, spiritual tourism is not merely about traveling to sacred places, admiring unique religious architecture, or enjoying picturesque natural landscapes; it is also a journey of inner connection and tranquility, helping individuals find balance and peace in life. The rapid development of major Buddhist pilgrimage centers in recent years demonstrates the important role of Buddhism in shaping sacred spaces, preserving cultural and historical values, and promoting tourism-driven economic growth as well as international cultural exchange.

In this context, assessing the potential for sustainable development of spiritual tourism at the Tam Chuc pagoda complex is essential to identify its existing strengths, as well as the limitations and challenges in current exploitation practices. On that basis, the study proposes strategic orientations to develop Tam Chuc into a representative spiritual destination that harmonizes tourism growth with the preservation of Buddhist values, while meeting the needs of pilgrims in both the present and the future.

Theoretical foundations of spiritual tourism and sustainable development

Concept of spiritual tourism

Spiritual tourism is a distinctive type of tourism that arises from the human need to experience and explore religious and spiritual values. It is closely associated with sacred spaces such as temples, pagodas, shrines, religious festivals, and sites of spiritual significance. The primary goal of spiritual tourism goes beyond sightseeing or recreation; it seeks to foster understanding and connection with the spiritual, cultural, and humanistic values of local communities.

In Vietnam, although there is no official definition of “spiritual tourism” in Party or State documents, in essence, this activity has long been practiced across the country through traditional festivals such as the Hung Kings temple Festival (Phu Tho), the Huong pagoda Festival (Hanoi), the Saint Giong Festival (Hanoi), Yen Tu (Quang Ninh), Con Son–Kiep Bac (Hai Duong), Tran temple and Phu Day (Nam Dinh), Phat Diem Stone Cathedral (Ninh Binh), Nghinh Ong Festival (Ca Mau), and My Son Sanctuary (Quang Nam).

In the fields of cultural and tourism management, as well as in academic research on belief and religion, the concept of “spiritual tourism” has been increasingly recognized, particularly since the “*International Conference on Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development*” held in Ninh Binh in 2013. Today, the term is widely used in both academic discourse and practice to describe tourism activities associated with belief, religion, festivals, and sacred spaces. The Vietnam National Administration of Tourism and many localities also regularly collect and report statistics on the number of visitors to spiritual destinations such as Huong pagoda, Bai Dinh pagoda, Tam Chuc pagoda, and Yen Tu.

According to Nguyen Van Tuan (2013), spiritual tourism is essentially a form of cultural tourism in which spiritual and cultural elements serve as both the foundation and the ultimate objective to fulfill the spiritual needs of human beings. He stated: “*In terms of content and nature, spiritual tourism is essentially a type of cultural tourism that takes spiritual and cultural factors both as a basis and as an objective to satisfy the spiritual needs of humans in their inner life. From this perspective, spiritual tourism exploits spiritual and cultural elements during tourism activities, based on both tangible and intangible cultural values associated with human understanding of the world, faith, religion, beliefs, and other profound spiritual*

values. Accordingly, spiritual tourism brings about sacred emotions and spiritual experiences for travelers during their journeys.”²

In the book *Community-Based Tourism: From Ideas to Practice* by Vu Tuan Anh and Pham Bich Ngoc (2022), when analyzing tourism types that can be developed with community participation, the authors define spiritual tourism as follows: “*Spiritual tourism is a type of tourism that serves the spiritual and religious purposes of travelers and is considered a component of cultural tourism. Pilgrimage or spiritual tourism often involves journeys to sacred places or visits to cultural heritage sites to meet the spiritual and cultural needs of visitors*”³.

Similarly, Nguyen Trong Nhan and Cao My Khanh share a perspective closely aligned with that of Nguyen Van Tuan, emphasizing the humanistic and elevating dimensions of spiritual tourism: “*The development of spiritual and cultural tourism not only brings economic, social, and cultural benefits to destinations like other forms of tourism, but also helps travelers elevate their spiritual awareness in seeking higher purposes and values that can enhance their dignity and quality of life, provided that tourism development proceeds in the right direction*”⁴.

Spiritual tourism is a form of cultural tourism that integrates elements of belief, culture, heritage, economy, and community. Its primary objective is to meet the spiritual needs of individuals while also providing educational, humanistic, and heritage-preserving values. This type of tourism mainly draws upon tangible and intangible cultural values associated with religious and spiritual practices, offering visitors profound and sacred experiences. Such experiences serve as a journey of exploring the spiritual realm, returning to the inner self, and seeking peace and positive values. In Vietnam, spiritual and cultural elements have become a source of depth and sustainable vitality for community and national identity.

Spiritual tourism contributes to the preservation and promotion of cultural and religious values, fosters cultural exchange, and strengthens local identity. At the same time, it generates economic revenue, creates employment opportunities, and enhances community well-being. Moreover, spiritual activities guide individuals toward healthy, virtuous lifestyles, thereby supporting the development of a sustainably minded society at the spiritual level.

Concept of sustainable tourism

According to UNESCO (2006): “*Sustainable tourism is tourism that respects the local people, visitors, cultural heritage, and the environment. Sustainable tourism seeks to provide enjoyable experiences for all while also bringing benefits to the local population.*”

This definition aligns closely with that of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2021), which defines sustainable tourism as: “*Tourism that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It contributes to positive economic, social, and environmental development, ensuring cultural integrity and equitable distribution of benefits*”.

² Nguyen Van Tuan (2013), *Spiritual Tourism in Vietnam – Current Situation and Development Orientation*, Paper presented at the *International Conference on Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development* (Ninh Binh, November, 2013).

³ Vu Tuan Anh – Pham Bich Ngoc (2022), *Community-Based Tourism: From Concept to Practice*, p.44.

⁴ Nguyen Trong Nhan – Cao My Khanh (2014), *Tourists’ Evaluation of the Conditions for Developing Cultural and Spiritual Tourism in An Giang Province*, *Can Tho University Journal of Science*, p.122.

Sustainable tourism involves developing tourism activities to satisfy the current needs of both visitors and local residents while addressing the conservation and enhancement of resources necessary for the future development of tourism. It entails the careful management of resources to meet economic, social, and environmental needs while maintaining cultural integrity, biodiversity, ecosystem development, and the life-support systems of human communities.

According to the UNWTO, sustainable tourism should:

- Optimize the use of environmental resources as a key factor in tourism development, maintain essential ecological processes, and help conserve natural heritage and biodiversity.
- Respect the authenticity of local culture, environment, and people, preserve traditional values and cultural heritage, and foster understanding and acceptance among different cultures.
- Ensure long-term economic viability that provides equitable benefits for all stakeholders, including employment opportunities, stable income, social services for local communities, and contributes to poverty alleviation.

In Vietnam, the 2017 Tourism Law (Article 3) emphasizes: “*Sustainable tourism development is tourism that simultaneously meets economic, social, and environmental requirements, ensuring harmony of interests among all stakeholders involved in tourism activities and does not compromise the ability to meet future tourism needs.*”⁵

In summary, sustainable tourism is a form of tourism in which activities are based on the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions, maintaining a balance among these three elements to ensure long-term sustainability for both present and future generations. Sustainable tourism is not merely about visiting a place as an ordinary tourist; it also aims to create a positive impact on all people involved.

The Relationship between spiritual tourism and sustainable development

Spiritual tourism and sustainable development are closely interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Essentially, this type of tourism exploits religious, belief-based, cultural heritage, and sacred landscape values-resources that are highly sensitive and vulnerable to pressures of economic exploitation. Therefore, the development of spiritual tourism must be framed within sustainable principles to ensure the continuity and longevity of sacred values. When well-managed, spiritual tourism becomes a driving force for comprehensive local development, harmonizing tourism exploitation with the preservation of religious and cultural heritage. Conversely, uncontrolled tourism development can lead to the disruption of sacred spaces, increased environmental pollution, and erosion of cultural values.

Firstly, spiritual tourism contributes significantly to the economic pillar of sustainable development. Tourism activities generate employment, increase local income, and promote the development of infrastructure and service ecosystems, thereby improving the quality of life of local residents. Spiritual destinations often attract large numbers of visitors over extended periods, providing a more stable and sustainable source of revenue compared to many other types of tourism. It can be affirmed that spiritual tourism plays a crucial role in promoting sustainable development.

⁵ Law on Tourism, No. 09/2017/QH14, dated June 19, 2017.

Large pagoda complexes such as Bai Dinh, Tam Chuc, and Huong Son attract millions of pilgrims annually, creating thousands of direct and indirect jobs. These include tour guides, infrastructure staff, festival coordinators, accommodation and restaurant personnel, and transport services. Local businesses also benefit by providing religious products such as incense, candles, flowers, ceremonial items, souvenirs, and handicrafts. Communities have opportunities to introduce and promote regional specialties, for example, at Huong Pagoda: Sang vegetables, Plum fruits, herbal teas, and Cu Mai cakes; at Bai Dinh pagoda: Ninh Binh Gai cakes, Hoa Luu Dau Xanh cakes, Ninh Binh fermented pork rolls, and Ninh Binh rice wine; at Tam Chuc pagoda: signature dishes from Ha Nam province such as Vu Dai braised fish, Phu Ly steamed rice rolls, freshwater fish and crab noodle soup, and Binh Luc fermented fish sauce, thus increasing local income.

The development of spiritual tourism is closely linked to infrastructure development, including roads, parking lots, accommodations, restaurants, bridges, and sightseeing areas. These improvements benefit not only tourists but also the local residents. Major festivals stimulate additional service demands such as costume rentals, guides, and event organization services, creating a value chain that benefits the community economically.

The local community directly benefits from the economic impacts of spiritual tourism. These benefits raise awareness of the long-term advantages of spiritual tourism, encouraging active participation in tourism activities, landscape preservation, maintenance of rituals, and development of local products. Strengthening community consciousness in preserving spiritual and cultural values contributes to building sustainable tourism models that enhance local income while maintaining cultural and environmental values.

Secondly, regarding the socio-cultural dimension, spiritual tourism contributes to preserving and disseminating traditional cultural values, enhancing community cohesion, and reinforcing religious faith among local populations. Through the restoration of rituals, festivals, and religious activities, this type of tourism helps maintain the continuity of intangible cultural heritage and reaffirms the role of local communities in tourism development. Community participation not only carries economic significance but is also a prerequisite for ensuring the legitimacy and sustainability of sacred spaces.

Thirdly, in terms of the environmental dimension, spiritual tourism often takes place in unique landscapes such as mountains, caves, and lakes, which are considered sacred in East Asian cultures. This necessitates strict management of visitor capacity, ecosystem preservation, and mitigation of negative impacts from waste, noise, congestion, and inappropriate urbanization that may compromise the religious landscape. Degradation of these landscapes diminishes their sacred value and directly affects the attractiveness of the destination.

From a destination management perspective, spiritual tourism can only be sustainable when a balance is achieved among the three pillars mentioned above. This requires coordinated efforts among authorities, local communities, religious organizations, and businesses to establish management mechanisms that harmonize the preservation of sacred values with tourism exploitation that delivers economic and social benefits. Lax management from any stakeholder may lead to the erosion of religious identity and degradation of resources, diminishing the true value of spiritual tourism.

In conclusion, the relationship between spiritual tourism and sustainable development is mutually reinforcing: Tourism development drives heritage preservation and improves local quality of life, while

sustainable development is a prerequisite for the long-term existence and growth of spiritual tourism. Without safeguarding sacred values, protecting landscapes, and maintaining cultural identity, spiritual tourism risks decline. Conversely, maximizing economic benefits while neglecting cultural and environmental aspects undermines the core values of spiritual tourism and negatively affects visitor experiences.

Potential for the development of spiritual tourism at the Tam Chuc pagoda complex, Ninh Binh province

Historical background, architecture, and landscape of Tam Chuc pagoda

The Tam Chuc pagoda complex is located in Ba Sao village, Kim Bang district, Ha Nam province (currently part of Tam Chuc ward, Ninh Binh province) and has been recognized as a National Tourism Site under Decision No. 201/QĐ-TTĐ dated January 22, 2013, by the Prime Minister of Vietnam. The complex was developed based on the ancient Tam Chuc pagoda, originally established during the Đinh Dynasty approximately 1,000 years ago. The restoration project, initiated in 2001, aimed to revive the 1,000-year-old pagoda and preserve, promote, and disseminate traditional cultural and religious values. During the construction of Tam Chuc lake, workers discovered numerous relics and artifacts related to the ancient pagoda, including wooden columns, stone pillars, and stone beams...After years of construction and completion, Tam Chuc pagoda now represents an impressive synthesis of monumental architectural works harmoniously integrated with the vast and majestic natural landscape, becoming an attractive spiritual tourism destination for both domestic and international visitors.

The Tam Chuc pagoda complex spans nearly 5,100 hectares, including almost 1,000 hectares of water bodies, 3,000 hectares of limestone mountains, pristine forests, and valleys. The site is bordered on three sides by the Seven-Star mountain range, shaped like a hand, with Tam Chuc lake and six surrounding mountains in front. The complex is home to rare species, including the white-cheeked gibbon, various fish species, pheasants, storks, and cranes. A prominent highlight of the spiritual tourism site is the 147-hectare development area on the western mountainside, including a 144-hectare footprint for Tam Chuc pagoda, which features numerous remarkable structures. The main halls are built following traditional Vietnamese pagoda architecture, with reinforced concrete columns, beams, and curved roofs painted to resemble wood. The halls range in area from 3,000 to 5,400 m², with heights of 30 - 39 meters. The statues enshrined here are cast from solid bronze, weighing between 85 and 150 tons.

The Tam Chuc pagoda complex, with its grand scale and harmonious integration of natural landscapes and majestic architecture, reflects the blending of past and present, the collaboration of Vietnamese and international artisans, and the craftsmanship of Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and Christian traditions. Its picturesque natural scenery, vast scale, and unique architectural beauty position Tam Chuc pagoda as one of the largest pagoda complexes in the world.

Key spiritual tourism sites within the complex include Tam Chuc communal hall, Tam The hall, Quan Am hall, Phap Chu hall, Ngoc pagoda, the Sutra Pillar Garden, and Ba Sao Pagoda. The bas-reliefs, Buddha statues, and other sculptural works reflect the veneration of Buddhism and respect for the spiritual and cultural values of the Vietnamese people, providing visitors with a sense of peace, tranquility, and serenity during pilgrimages and worship.



Panoramic view of Ngoc pagoda overlooking Tam Chuc lake (Source: Internet)

Tam Chuc communal hall

The Tam Chuc communal hall is situated on one of the six Luc Nhac islets in the center of Tam Chuc lake, featuring the characteristic architecture of Northern Vietnamese communal halls and temples. This structure was restored on the foundation of the ancient Tam Chuc pagoda (Ba Sao pagoda), which dates back approximately one thousand years to the Dinh Dynasty. Historically, the communal hall of Tam Chuc village enshrines Empress Duong Thi Nguyet, Emperor Dinh Tien Hoang, and the Bach Ma deity. According to legend, when Dinh Bo Linh quelled the Twelve Warlords, he arrived in what is now Kim Bang district to recruit soldiers and store provisions, and he prayed at the Linh Lang Bach Ma Temple for divine protection. Upon ascending to the throne, Emperor Dinh Tien Hoang commanded the people of Kim Bang to establish a temple in honor of the Linh Lang Bach Ma deity.

Tam The hall

Constructed at an elevation of 45 meters, Tam The hall features three tiers of curved roofs, with a total height of 39 meters and a floor area exceeding 5,000 m², including a basement of 2,200 m² capable of accommodating up to 5,000 worshippers. Passing through intricately carved wooden doors, visitors are greeted by three large bronze Buddha statues at the center of the hall, representing the past, present, and future. Surrounding the statues are 12,000 bas-reliefs carved from Indonesian volcanic stone, depicting ethereal, heavenly landscapes that symbolize the beauty of truth, goodness, and virtue sought by humankind.

The forecourt of Tam The hall features a Bodhi tree propagated from a 2,125-year-old original Bodhi tree and a black bronze cauldron approximately 4 meters tall, intricately carved with images of Vietnam's famous spiritual landmarks and inscriptions honoring Buddhist patriarchs on its surface.



Tam The hall (Source: Internet)

Phap Chu hall:

The Phap Chu hall is designed with two tiers of curved roofs, standing at a height of 31 meters with a floor area of 3,000 m², located directly below Tam The hall. A prominent feature of Phap Chu hall is four large bas-reliefs covering all walls, each depicting a pivotal stage in the life of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, from his birth, enlightenment, teaching of the Dharma, to his Parinirvana. At the center of the hall stands a solid bronze statue of Buddha Shakyamuni, weighing 150 tons, making it one of the largest Buddha statues in Southeast Asia. Additionally, there are 10,000 hand-carved panels by Indonesian artisans illustrating the Buddha's life. Every detail and scene in these bas-reliefs carries deep symbolic meaning, creating a profound spiritual space for visitors to contemplate and learn about the Buddha's life.

Quan Am hall:

Standing at 30.5 meters with a floor area of 3,000 m², Quan Am hall enshrines the thousand-hand, thousand-eye Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. The hall serves as a rich repository of narratives demonstrating the Bodhisattva's compassion and mercy in saving sentient beings, manifested through countless reincarnations. The walls are entirely adorned with unique stone bas-reliefs, depicting the legendary deeds of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. The statue's intricate details reflect the Bodhisattva's boundless wisdom and compassion, providing peace and spiritual liberation to devotees. Beyond its religious significance, the statue is an artistic masterpiece, harmoniously combining sculpture and spiritual symbolism.

Ngoc pagoda (Jade pagoda):

Located atop That Tinh mountain, 468 meters above sea level, directly behind Tam The hall, Ngoc pagoda rises 15 meters and is entirely constructed from red granite slabs imported from India. The pagoda has three tiers of curved roofs covering a 36 m² footprint, following traditional Vietnamese architectural style. Remarkably, during construction, Indian artisans assembled the stone slabs without using any adhesive materials. Inside the tower resides a jade statue weighing 4.9 tons. Ngoc pagoda is the highest point in the Tam Chuc complex, accessible via 299 stone steps, offering visitors a panoramic view of the majestic landscape of Tam Chuc spiritual tourism site. This site serves not only as a place of worship and prayer but also as an ideal destination for learning about Vietnamese Buddhist history and culture.

Sutra Pillar garden:

Situated immediately behind the Tam Quan gate, the Sutra Pillar garden features stone pillars reconstructed in the style of the National Treasure Sutra Pillars at Nhat Tru pagoda in the ancient capital Hoa Lu, Ninh Binh. Along the courtyard between the Tam Quan gate and Quan Am hall, there are 32 pillars made from Thanh Hoa blue stone, each 13.5 meters tall, approximately 2 meters wide, and weighing around 200 tons. The base of each pillar is carved in the shape of lotus petals, the midsection is hexagonal, and the top supports a lotus bud. Buddha's teachings from the Prajnaparamita Sutra are inscribed on these pillars, serving as a reminder for current and future generations to cultivate virtue, creating a sacred and impressive space.

Ba Sao pagoda:

Ba Sao pagoda is an ancient pagoda dating back to the Dinh Dynasty, associated with the legend "Tien Luc Nhac – Hau That Tinh" (Front Six Harmonies – Rear Seven Stars). According to legend, the seven peaks near Tam Chuc village, part of the 99 mountains to the southwest facing Chua Huong, emitted a bright light resembling seven stars, shining day and night and illuminating a vast area. During the Dinh Dynasty, National Preceptor Khuong Viet, observing the magnificent landscape with mountains, rivers, and sparkling lights from above, established a small pagoda at the foot of the seven stars mountain range, facing the river, originally named That Tinh pagoda, later renamed Ba Sao pagoda. Ba Sao pagoda venerates Zen Master Nguyen Minh Khong, who contributed to the revival of Vietnamese Buddhism. Local legends also state that Buddha King Tran Nhan Tong visited and restored the pagoda during his journey to study Zen Buddhism.⁶

Festivals and religious practices at Tam Chuc pagoda complex

The Tam Chuc pagoda Festival is held annually at the beginning of spring, typically commencing on the 6th day of the first lunar month. The festival comprises a series of unique spiritual activities, including the opening ceremony, water procession, dragon dances on the river, incense offerings, Buddha processions, and chanting for peace, attracting tens of thousands of monks, Buddhists, and pilgrims from across the country. The festival space is organized solemnly, blending traditional rituals with modern cultural and artistic performances, creating a sacred and vibrant atmosphere imbued with the essence of Vietnamese cultural identity.

Every year, during the spring opening festival, Tam Chuc pagoda organizes numerous cultural and artistic activities aimed at preserving and promoting traditional cultural values. For example, during the "Spring

⁶ https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khu_du_l%E1%BB%8Bch_Tam_Ch%C3%BAc

Festival Tam Chuc 2025”, the program titled “Tam Chuc – Convergence of Sacredness” consisted of four segments:

1. “*Tam Chuc – The Ancient Era*”
2. “*Tam Chuc – The Journey of Rebirth in the Sacred Land*”
3. “*Tam Chuc – Radiance of Heritage*”
4. “*Spring on the Land of Buddha*”.

The ceremonial segment included rituals praying for national peace and prosperity, and the water-fetching ritual, starting from the Vesak International Conference Center pier to the center of Tam Chuc lake to collect sacred water. The water was then brought back to Tam The hall and Ngoc pagoda, symbolizing the wish for favorable weather, bountiful harvests, and national prosperity. It can be said that the water-fetching ritual constitutes the most significant part of the Spring Festival, embodying the reverence and gratitude of the people toward the Buddhas, deities, saints, and Mother Goddesses, as well as their aspirations for favorable weather and bountiful harvests.

In addition to traditional rituals, visitors can participate in special cultural events, such as the “Tet Concert: Say Hi 2025”, held on the evening of the festival opening (February 9, 2025), featuring prominent Vietnamese artists. These activities not only honor Buddhist teachings and commemorate the merits of ancestors but also promote peace, happiness, and well-being core principles of Buddhist philosophy. The Tam Chuc Festival thus reflects the spiritual values of Vietnamese Buddhism, harmonizing religious faith with traditional folk culture. Through these rituals and spiritual practices, people express their reverence for the Buddha and convey wishes for a peaceful and prosperous new year.

Several notable events at Tam Chuc highlight its international and cultural significance. In May 2019, Tam Chuc pagoda hosted the 16th United Nations Vesak Celebration, a major global Buddhist event with the theme: “*Buddhist Approach to Global Leadership and Shared Responsibility for a Sustainable Society*”. The event welcomed over 10,000 Buddhists from more than 100 countries and territories, including 1,500 religious leaders, heads of Buddhist organizations, and scholars.

In addition, the Tam Chuc pagoda has hosted various cultural exchange activities, notably the Vietnam–Japan Buddhist cultural exchange events held in November 2023 and November 2025. Within the framework of these festivals, a wide range of traditional artistic and spiritual activities from both countries were presented, including meditation sessions, sutra transcription, Buddhist painting at the Tam The hall, tea ceremonies, floating lantern offerings on Tam Chuc lake, Xam singing (a form of Vietnamese traditional folk music), and the ritual of flower offering and chanting. The event attracted a large number of Buddhist followers from many provinces and cities across the country. The organization of the Vietnam–Japan Buddhist cultural exchange festival not only carries profound spiritual significance, expressing prayers for national peace and prosperity but also aims to strengthen religious and cultural exchanges between Vietnam and Japan. The festival serves as an opportunity to promote the image of the Tam Chuc National Tourist Area to a wider international audience, particularly among the Japanese community living and working in Vietnam. Moreover, it helps enhance the friendship and cooperative relationship between the two nations, thereby contributing to the promotion of cultural, economic, and social exchanges toward the shared goal of sustainable development

Tam Chuc pagoda also holds the Shariradhatu (Buddha relics) of Shakyamuni Buddha, a national treasure of India, transferred from Quan Su pagoda (Hanoi) for the Vesak 2025 celebration. This marks the first

time the Buddha's relics have been enshrined in Vietnam, symbolizing strong cooperation between the Vietnamese Government, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, the Government of India, and international Buddhist organizations. This event represents a significant spiritual milestone, enhancing Tam Chuc's position in Vietnamese and international Buddhist culture, while promoting cultural exchange and global peace and sustainable development.

Compared with other notable Buddhist festivals in Vietnam, such as Chua Huong (Hanoi), Bai Dinh (Ninh Binh), and Yen Tu (Quang Ninh), the Tam Chuc festival uniquely integrates traditional and modern elements, combining folk practices with international participation. While Chua Huong emphasizes folk beliefs and the pilgrimage journey through scenic landscapes, and Bai Dinh is noted for its architectural scale and role as Southeast Asia's largest Buddhist center, Tam Chuc presents a modern, multidimensional image of Vietnamese Buddhism. This makes it a convergence point and dissemination hub of Vietnamese Buddhist culture, serving as a model for sustainable spiritual tourism based on festivals, religious practice, and community participation.

The festivals and Buddhist rituals at Tam Chuc play a pivotal role in building and promoting the spiritual tourism brand of the former Ha Nam province and the Northern region. By leveraging the values of festivals, rituals, and Buddhist philosophy, Tam Chuc has developed distinctive tourism products, differentiated from conventional ecological or cultural tourism. This forms the foundation for sustainable tourism development, centered on the values of virtue, humanity, and harmony.

The role of Tam Chuc pagoda in local spiritual tourism development - economic dimension:

The sustainable development of spiritual tourism at Tam Chuc pagoda not only brings benefits to businesses but also ensures advantages for the local community. The direct participation of the local community in tourism activities has led many households to shift their livelihoods toward tourism services, thereby increasing income and improving people's living standards. According to the management board, Tam Chuc currently provides stable employment for over 1,000 full-time staff. Activities such as pilgrimage services, vegetarian food production, guiding visitors, transportation, and organizing folk performances enable the local community to actively engage in and benefit from spiritual tourism. This contributes to forming a community-based tourism model aligned with religious practices, consistent with the orientation of sustainable tourism development.

In addition, by diversifying tourism products that align with the actual needs of local residents and keeping up with the development trends of the tourism industry such as spiritual tourism, ecotourism, and cultural tourism, Tam Chuc pagoda has successfully attracted a large number of Buddhist followers and visitors from both inside and outside the country. Furthermore, policies that connect key destinations to create year-round tourism products help reduce seasonality, prevent overcrowding and overexploitation of specific tourism types, and ultimately bring significant economic benefits to businesses, local communities, and the State.

According to statistics from the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Ha Nam Province (2025), for two consecutive years 2023 and 2024, Ha Nam was honored by the World Travel Awards as the "World's Leading Local Cultural Destination" and "Asia's Leading Emerging Tourism Destination." In 2024, the province welcomed over 4.7 million visitors, generating nearly VND 3,700 billion in revenue, and in the first five months of 2025, nearly 6 million visitors and VND 4,500 billion in revenue were

recorded.⁷ Among the province's attractions, Tam Chuc leads in festival attendance, significantly contributing to local tourism and service revenue growth. For example, during the Vesak 2025 (from May 17 to 20, 2025), the event attracted a massive number of pilgrims and visitors coming to pay homage and participate in Buddhist rituals. Each day, Tam Chuc pagoda welcomed approximately 40,000 to 70,000 Buddhist followers and tourists.

As a "central connecting point," Tam Chuc pagoda not only attracts visitors but also fosters inter-regional sustainable tourism development. Integration of spiritual tourism (Tam Chuc, Huong, Bai Dinh), ecological tourism (Trang An, Van Long, Tam Chuc lake), and cultural tourism (Hoa Lu, Ninh Binh, Phu Ly) forms a comprehensive tourism network, enabling resource sharing, extending visitor stays, and enhancing tourist experiences. This interconnectedness also contributes to preserving cultural and religious values, protecting natural landscapes, and supporting local livelihoods, thereby achieving the goal of tourism development aligned with conservation and dissemination of cultural and religious values.

Cultural-Social dimension

Tam Chuc pagoda serves as a cultural convergence point, reinforcing community cohesion and instilling pride in local traditions and national cultural identity. Cultural and festival activities, such as the Lotus Festival, Peace Prayers, Buddhist Art Performances, and local cultural experiences (vegetarian cuisine, meditation, folk arts), position Tam Chuc as a meeting place between traditional culture and contemporary religion. This unique value elevates Tam Chuc beyond a mere religious site, making it a comprehensive cultural space both sacred and approachable, educational, and aesthetically enriching. Heritage values are preserved not only as historical artifacts but also revived and adapted to contemporary spiritual and cultural needs. Interaction between religion, culture, and development has transformed Tam Chuc into a "living heritage center", where sustainable cultural and humanitarian values are transmitted to both local communities and the nation.

During festivals, the pagoda attracts large numbers of pilgrims and tourists, creating spaces for community interaction, cultural exchange, and social cohesion among local residents, monks, and visitors. The Tam Chuc festival plays a vital role in preserving and promoting cultural values, reviving traditional Buddhist rituals, and inspiring ethical awareness, compassion, and social responsibility in modern life.

Environmental dimension:

The vast space, often referred to as the "Ha Long Bay on land," makes the Tam Chuc pagoda complex a place that preserves the natural values bestowed by nature such as mountains, rivers, and lakes. When visiting Tam Chuc, tourists not only have the chance to admire a majestic cultural and spiritual heritage site but also to immerse themselves in nature watching schools of fish swimming in the clear water, flocks of white storks flying gracefully over the lake, and even spotting the rare Delacour's langur species, which is listed in the red book, living in the surrounding mountains. The pagoda's management board always places great emphasis on maintaining cleanliness and a green, beautiful environment, ensuring that tourism development goes hand in hand with local economic growth. Awareness programs such as "Green tourism – Zero waste tourism" at Tam Chuc have contributed to raising community consciousness about protecting the ecosystem and the sacred space.

⁷ <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/post/63143>

Beyond economic and social impacts, spiritual activities at Tam Chuc enhance community awareness of cultural and environmental conservation, forming a model of religion-linked community tourism, where residents are both guardians and beneficiaries of cultural values. Buddhist philosophy of harmony between humans and nature is evident in visitor guidance programs, promoting environmental care, waste reduction, and landscape protection.

Sustainable spiritual tourism serves as a key factor that generates a ripple effect in the preservation of cultural heritage. As one of the largest Buddhist complexes in Southeast Asia, Tam Chuc represents a harmonious intersection between heritage conservation and local sustainable development. Preservation and promotion of tangible and intangible Buddhist heritage here aim not only to maintain national cultural identity but also to establish a model of sustainable spiritual tourism. In the context of rapid globalization and modernization, when many traditional values face the risk of commercialization or fading away, Tam Chuc stands as compelling evidence of the possibility of harmonizing preservation and development. Here, both tangible and intangible Buddhist cultural values are not “frozen” as static relics but are revitalized and flexibly adapted to contemporary social needs. The integration of religious rituals, spiritual practices, and tourism activities is carried out selectively, ensuring both sacredness and visitor engagement. Consequently, spiritual tourism at Tam Chuc transcends mere sightseeing and pilgrimage, evolving into a process of education, experience, and spiritual transformation.

The process of constructing, restoring, and preserving cultural heritage at Tam Chuc pagoda has contributed to the formation of a sustainable model of spiritual tourism development, in which cultural heritage, community life, and religion are placed in a closely interactive, harmonious, and mutually reinforcing relationship. This serves as the foundation for Tam Chuc to further affirm its position not only as one of Vietnam’s major Buddhist centers but also as a shining example of spiritual tourism development associated with the preservation of national cultural values.

Challenges and directions for sustainable development of spiritual tourism at Tam Chuc pagoda

Despite its great potential and the significant achievements in spiritual tourism in recent years, Tam Chuc pagoda complex currently faces several challenges on the path toward sustainable development.

Challenges

First: Environmental pressure and infrastructure constraints. The rapid increase in tourist numbers, especially during festivals and peak seasons, creates significant pressure on transport infrastructure, waste management, and the preservation of lake and mountain landscapes within the complex. If not addressed promptly, these issues may seriously affect the sustainability of the natural ecosystem and the destination’s image.

Second: Seasonality of tourism activities. Most visitors come to Tam Chuc during the early lunar new year and major festival periods, while other months see far fewer tourists. Such seasonality reduces the efficiency of tourism operations, affects local residents’ income, and complicates the maintenance and operation of infrastructure. Diversifying tourism products and extending visitor stays remain critical challenges.

Third: Visitor management and behavioral orientation. Some visitors lack awareness of proper conduct within sacred spaces, leading to crowding, littering, or improper ritual practices. This highlights the urgent need to educate, communicate, and manage tourists toward civilized behaviors that respect spiritual values.

Preserving the sanctity of Buddhist spaces while balancing economic objectives and spiritual integrity is a critical management task.

Proposed solutions for sustainable spiritual tourism

First: Enhancing the effectiveness of heritage management and tourism spatial planning.

It is essential to establish a unified management mechanism among the State, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, and investment enterprises to ensure a harmonious balance between religious objectives, heritage conservation, and economic development. Spatial planning should be based on principles that include limiting visitor capacity, rationally zoning functional areas, and protecting the natural landscape surrounding Tam Chuc lake as well as its distinctive ecosystem.

Second: Promoting community education and responsible tourism communication.

It is essential to strengthen sustainable tourism education programs for local residents, visitors, and students through extracurricular activities, workshops, and mass media campaigns. Communication programs promoting proper behavior in sacred spaces, ethical tourism education, and encouragement of green, economical lifestyles should be enhanced to foster respect for sacred sites and environmental awareness. At the same time, empowering the local community in tourism management and service provision plays a crucial role in maintaining sustainability and spreading a shared consciousness of heritage preservation.

Applying Buddhist philosophy in tourism development: Buddhist philosophy emphasizes the harmony between humans, nature, and society. When appropriately applied, this philosophy can serve as a guiding principle for the strategy of developing sustainable spiritual tourism in Vietnam in general, and at Tam Chuc in particular.

Third: Developing green tourism and effective environmental management. Sustainable development requires coordinated measures to minimize environmental impact, including waste sorting at source, renewable energy use, lake conservation, tree planting, and promotion of eco-friendly transport. Establishing green tourism criteria aligned with UNWTO standards and adopting sustainable tourism certifications (e.g., Green destination, ASEAN green hotel) can enhance Tam Chuc's international reputation and attract environmentally conscious visitors.

Fourth: Training and improving the quality of human resources.

The development of sustainable spiritual tourism requires a workforce equipped with comprehensive knowledge of Buddhism, religious culture, heritage management, and professional tourism skills. Therefore, it is essential to implement specialized training programs for tour guides, as well as short-term courses for service staff and management personnel focusing on cultural communication, heritage interpretation, and situational problem-solving within sacred spaces.

Moreover, cooperation with universities, research institutes, and international organizations in the fields of tourism and religious-cultural studies is necessary to facilitate professional exchange and update new trends. Such efforts will help build a high-quality human resource capable of promoting the image of Vietnamese Buddhism and conveying the true meaning of sacred values in the context of globalized tourism

Fifth: Innovating spiritual tourism products and enhancing visitor experience. For Tam Chuc to develop sustainably, it is necessary to diversify tourism products by integrating cultural and spiritual experiences such as meditation retreats, pilgrimages, Buddhist workshops, vegetarian culinary experiences, and traditional folk festivals. In addition, the application of digital technology in tourism

experiences including digital maps, multilingual automated guides, online ticketing systems, and real-time visitor flow monitoring will enhance management efficiency and help reduce overcrowding during festival seasons. Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies can also be utilized to vividly present sacred spaces, heritage sites, and Buddhist narratives, making them more engaging, especially for younger and international visitors. The integration of information technology in tour guidance, ticket booking, and visitor monitoring not only helps prevent congestion but also improves the overall quality of personalized visitor experiences.

CONCLUSION

With its current potential and influence, Tam Chuc pagoda is gradually asserting its role as a center of Buddhism and spiritual tourism, capable of connecting domestic tourism routes as well as the broader Southeast Asian and international tourism network. With proper investment and management, Tam Chuc can become a symbol of sustainable spiritual tourism, integrating religious, cultural, and ecological values within a sacred space.

The development of spiritual tourism at Tam Chuc is oriented along the three pillars of sustainable development: economy, society, and environment, with Buddhism serving as a guiding thread linking these domains. Buddhist values of compassion, wisdom, and harmony provide a philosophical foundation for tourism management, organization, and communication. This distinguishes Tam Chuc from many other religious tourism sites, where spirituality is not merely an attraction but a long-term development value. Sustainable development can only be achieved when all stakeholders from authorities, investors, and local communities to tourists share responsibility for heritage conservation, respect spiritual values, and practice harmonious lifestyles in line with Buddhist principles. This approach positions Tam Chuc as a model for sustainable spiritual tourism in the context of international integration.

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