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Navigating the Multifaceted Realms of Religious Tourism at Meteora in Kalabaka and Spiritual Pilgrimage

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Abstract

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This thesis aims to determine and clarify the most precise definition of Religious Tourism, explore the story of the Meteora region in Kalabaka, and investigate the motivation of the guests as well as their subsequent expectations. Religious tourism refers to traveling for religious or spiritual purposes. This thesis will offer a comprehensive analysis of the tourism industry in Greece, including a detailed discussion of its various types and their effects on the country's economy and society. Additionally, we will delve into the challenges and opportunities that this sector presents and explore potential solutions to address any negative impacts that may arise. Religious Tourism is an important contributor to the Greek economy, with destinations such as Meteora being particularly popular. The Experience Economy has positively impacted Greece's tourism industry, and there is anticipation for further growth.

Meteora is widely regarded as one of the most beautiful destinations in Greece. It is a collection of rock formations located in the region of Trikala. What makes the monument truly remarkable is the presence of Christian Orthodox monasteries perched atop these rocks. The stunning architecture of the monasteries never fails to inspire awe and admiration in visitors. Religious Tourism has emerged as a significant market in the Tourism Industry. It motivates people across the world to explore places with sacred essence. This thesis sheds light on an aspect of the Tourism Industry that is not so commonly discussed. It highlights the strong connection between religion and tourism and explores the subject in depth.

This research-oriented thesis delves into the captivating world of religious tourism, by uncovering the reasons behind the overwhelming desire to explore the awe-inspiring beauty of Meteora. Through meticulous research, the main aim is to identify the expectations of our visitors, providing valuable insights for future travellers. By exploring the experiences of previous Meteora guests, this thesis aspires to answer important questions. As part of the research methodology, interviews will be conducted. The research conducted on the topic of Religious Tourism has revealed that it is a popular and widespread form of tourism that is of interest to most travelers. The definition of Religious Tourism aligns with the general point of view of people. Guests are primarily attracted to the beauty of the monasteries and the wild landscape, but their faith also plays a significant role in their choice of destination. The author concluded that the guests' expectations were met during their visit, with only a few exceptions. The key finding of this research is that travelers are more likely to consider Meteora as a destination that provides an experience that can be enhanced further. Through this study, the author was able to gather detailed information and gain valuable insights into the preferences, needs, and motivations of tourists.

Keywords
Religious Tourism, Meteora, Experience, Tourism Industry, Tourism Market, effects, ex-pectations, pilgrimage

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1. Introduction

Greece is a country with a rich history and culture, and a popular tourist destination in Europe. One of the most famous types of tourism in Greece is Religious Tourism, which attracts plenty of visitors every year. 'Religion engages and influences our daily life, so far in every period and region of the world' (Jongmeewasin, 2016.) Religious Tourism or Spiritual Tourism includes the element of pilgrimage, and therefore could be considered as the oldest form of tourism (LaviniaȚALĂ, 2008). Greece offers a unique and unforgettable experience for those seeking spiritual enlightenment or a deeper connection with their faith, with its many ancient churches, monasteries, and holy sites.

1.1   Scope and choice of the topic

This thesis confidently searches in depth the fascinating world of Religious Tourism in Greece, with a particular emphasis on the captivating destination of Meteora. Meteora is a breathtaking and natural complex of rocky formations situated in the picturesque Trikala region. This unique geological wonder is popular for its towering rocks that stretch high into the sky, providing a stunning backdrop for the historic monasteries that perch atop them like the gates to heaven. These ancient monasteries, with their unique architecture, are an impressive feat of human engineering and a testament to the ingenuity and perseverance of the monks who constructed them. The combination of natural beauty and man-made marvels makes Meteora a must-visit destination for anyone who appreciates the wonders of the world. As a respected site of UNESCO World Heritage Site, Meteora owned 24 Greek Orthodox Monasteries built atop them. Today, only 6 of them remain operational and open to the public. The monasteries available for visitation, are the monastery of Megalou Meteorou (1340 A.C.), Agios Stephanos (1350 A.C.), Vaarlam (1542 A.C.), Agia Triada (1362 A.C.), Roussanou (1529 A.C.), Aghios Nikolaos Panausas (14th century). Visitors are permitted to explore the monasteries, but access is limited to specific days and hours. All the above information is referred to on the website National Tourism Organization of Greece (Visit Greece).

Regarding the thesis's objective, the core objective is to find out the true expectations of the visitors of Meteora, such as what people expected and what they experienced eventually. Looking through what people believed about the monument, the local community, and the service will be the main goal. Also, another important part will be the search for their

motivations to visit. Discovering the exact definition and explanation of Religious Tourism is another objective. Finally studying and sharing the history of the attraction, such as mentioning the Greek cultural heritage through tourism at Meteora, could be considered as an additional part of the objective.

1.2 Research questions

The main research question is centered on exploring the expectations of guests who visit Meteora's religious tourism site. The aim is to gather detailed information about what visitors are looking for when they arrive at the site, to gain valuable insights into their preferences, needs, and motivations. By obtaining a deeper understanding of these factors, the research reassures that they have a positive and memorable visit.

The sub-research questions consist of:

1. What do people think Religious Tourism is?

2. What is their motivation to visit?

3. What experience do tourists expect to have in Meteora?

4. What do the guests actually experience in Meteora?

While conducting research, the investigation will also concern the impact of religious tourism on the national and local economy, as well as society. This thesis will use the interview method after considering the qualitative and quantitative approaches. This study will comprehensively examine the topic by utilizing a variety of research methods including but not limited to interviews with previous guests of the attraction, surveys, and observations. Interviews will be conducted with guests who have visited the breathtaking monument of Meteora called to answer research questions. After those interviews, light will be shed on the historical and cultural significance of this natural architectural masterpiece.

2. Religious Tourism

Nowadays, there are hundreds of types of tourism worldwide. Although, Religious Tourism, could be considered one of the most prominent. Many people successfully tried to define Religious Tourism, through their studies and articles. Religion has been considered as the key motivator to travel, accentuating tourism-related activities (Heidari et al., 2016.) 'Common examples of religious travel and tourism include pilgrimages,retreats,conferences,seminars,and festivals' (Iliev and Dejan, 2020.)

Pilgrimages as a distinctive type of travel, exert their influence far beyond the confines of spiritual pursuits. Embracing multifaceted political, economic, social, and cultural ramifications, they manifest the potential to impact even global trade and public health dynamics (Goffi et al., 2019). The inherent spatial mobility intrinsic to the phenomenon of pilgrimage endows it with profound significance and engenders scholarly interest, thereby meriting a comprehensive investigation (Guriţă,2023.) Until now tourism and religion have often been seen as independent and mutually exclusive subjects (Stausberg, 2012). Religious tourism owns a strong presence in the travel market since 1990, and many travel agencies have taken advantage of its increasing popularity.

Religious tourism can be defined as the visit of sacred places, to participate or follow-up in religious ceremonies and the pilgrimage in the form of visits or activities to fulfill religious duties in the evaluation of tourism understanding. It mostly covers tourist trips to perform religious beliefs and/or to see the centers of faith attraction in the evaluation of the tourism phenomenon (Heidari et al., 2017).

One of the most important facts of Religious Tourism is that the visitors come from different social and economic classes and are mostly older people. The existence of the 5 visitor experience modes, including recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental, and existential, have been identified by Cohen in 1979 (Huang et al.,2019). Religious tourism is a global phenomenon that provides a valuable opportunity to explore diverse cultural and religious traditions, and this is the reason why so many people are opting for it.

2.1   Religious Tourism in Greece

Greece has witnessed a remarkable presence in religious tourism in recent years. Visitors from all over the world are choosing Greece for their vacation, to immerse themselves in the fascinating history and rich culture of the Hellenic State. Therefore, responsible for the formations and promotion of the country is the Greek National Tourism Organization, of the Ministry of Tourism (Mylonopoulos et al.,2017). The country's picturesque churches, monasteries, and chapels also attract tourists seeking spiritual enlightenment and peaceful retreats away from their fast-paced lives. It is estimated that only domestic tourists who visit religious sites exceed 300.000 annually (Balomenou et al,2015).

The Hellenic state is a popular destination for Religious Tourism, because of the plethora of religious sites and monuments. However Greece can not only be defined as a religious destination. Picturesque islands adorned with magnificent chapels, painted in country's significant colours, white and blue (as the national flag), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) -listed monasteries, Byzantine churches located on the mainland, and even hidden churches-schools from the years of the Ottoman yoke could be some strong examples of the state's presence in the Religious Tourism Market. What is the main purpose of any visitation? History, culture, and faith.

Greece is composed of 51 regions, and each one of them holds a monument dedicated to the Christian Orthodox faith and other religions like Jewry, 12 ancient Gods of Olympus, and others. As part of my thesis research, I am compiling a comprehensive table that showcases the various regions of Greece and their corresponding religious monuments. The goal is to prove that every region in the Hellenic State, even the most unpopular ones, owns a unique monument of religious character, that endures the cultural heritage of the country. Please see the appendix, table number 1, The 51 regions of the Greek state, and one of each religious monument.

2.2   Religious Tourism at Meteora

The Meteora of Kalabaka is a renowned collection of six monasteries situated on towering rock formations in the Trikala region of Greece. This photogenic landmark has been

recognized as a protected monument by UNESCO due to its significant historical and cultural importance. The striking rocks have contributed to the rich history of Greece, making it a must-visit destination for plenty of visitors annually.

What about the monument and its history? Meteora has conquered one of the 18 places on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list. Among other breathtaking monuments, Meteora stands tall and proud. Tens of rock spires emerge from the western margin of the Plain of Thessaly creating one of the world's iconic views (Rassios et al, 2020). According to the official website of Greece for tourism (Visit Greece), many years ago the only way to enter the monasteries of Meteora was by climbing. At first, the ascites who visited the rocks during the 11th century found nothing but wild nature. After spending years building, they achieved the creation of 24 monasteries, but many of them were destroyed by strong leaders of the Ottoman Empire, and a few years later by German Forces during their occupation (Poulios,2008). Meteora experienced its acne as a monastic center, between the 13th and 14th centuries, because of the embracing of the monastic way of living by the people of the nearby areas (Visit Greece). As a spiritual place, Meteora monasteries are dedicated to Christianity of the Orthodox people. With a sacred presence since the 11th century, by several ascetics, Meteora was not always a densely populated area. During World War II and the Civil War, the monastic absence was given. After those unforgettable historical years, the monasteries were re-established and operated. 'The monastic function of the site is continually reflected in changes in the spatial arrangement of the site throughout the course of its history to the present.' (Poulios I. 2008.)

Poulios I. (2008) mentioned that the monasteries were built atop high rocks, and looked like they were 'suspended/floating in the air', and this is the meaning of Meteora, after the Greek word 'μετέ-ωρος'. This architectural miracle operates under the auspices of the Greek Orthodox Church. The author also mentioned that the internal space of the monasteries belongs exclusively to the monas-tic communities, while the external part is mostly public land. The Ministry of Culture is also playing an important role in the ownership of the monument.

There are still six operating monasteries, accessible to visitors. Every monastery has a different title and date of construction:

1. The Monastery of Megalou Meterorou is located on the highest and longest-extended rock. Established in 1340 by Aghios Athanassios Meteoritis (1302-1380), the stunning

monastery contains a Folklore Museum (1520), the ossuary, the church of Metamorfoseos tou Sotiros/ Transfiguration of Jesus (the sanctum was built in 1388 and the main church with the narthex in 1545), the Holy Altar (built-in 1557 and at present Museum of Church Heir-loom) and the Kitchener (cook-room of 1557, nowadays Folklore Museum with old copper, clay and wooden kitchen implements).

2. The Monastery of Aghios Stephanos (1350) is a single-aisled basilica, by the co-founders, Saint Antonios (first half of the 15th century) and Saint Filotheos (in the middle of 16th century). The Aghios Charalambos church (1798) inside the monastery has athonic architecture and is decorated with amazing fretworks. The Holy Altar is now a modern museum with impressive church heirlooms, like Scripts, post-Byzantine icons, canonicals and fabrics embroidered with gold, fretworks, fine silverware pieces, etc.

3. The Monastery of Varlaam (14th century) was first habituated by the monk Varlaam. The biggest part of the church was manufactured in 1542 and is dedicated to Agious Pantes. Fragko Katelano a Theban painter was the chosen one to paint the walls of the church back in 1542. At the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century, the most organized bibliographic laboratory of Meteora monasteries and a special gold thread embroidery workshop were functioning here.

4. The Monastery of Agia Triada, appears to be operating since 1362 as a monastery, thanks to the script of potentate Simeon Ouresi-Paleologou. More than 100 years later, in 1476 the church that we see today is a small crosslike double-columned church with a dome. Another Monastery Folklore Museum exists there, with a wide selection of old clothing, appliances, tools, and other folklore items.

5. The Monastery of Roussanou, built in 1529, hides the church of Metamorfoseos tou Sotiros or Transfiguration of Jesus constructed a year after the monastery. Besides the fact that the church is dedicated to Metamorfosis tou Sotiros, the church also celebrates the memory of Aghia Varvara every year on the 4th of December.

6. The Monastery of Aghios Nikolaos Panausas (14th century), is located nearby Kastraki Village among other ruined monasteries. The frescos are the oldest signed paintings created by Theofanis the Cretan and carry all the characteristic features of this great angiographer of the Cretan Art School.

All the above information for the six operating monasteries of Meteora comes from the Official website of the Greek National Tourism Organization, visitgreece.gr.

As a pole of attraction, Meteora quickly becomes the ultimate experience. The combination of cultural heritage, wild nature, breathtaking views, hermitage, and holiness are factors that lead to the deification of the monument. Today, Meteora is constituted by monasteries for both nuns and monks, in contrast to the first years of operation when the place was limited to monks (Poulios 2008). Many visitors from all over the world are traveling in the region of Trikala to admire the holiness of the monument.

The campaign of the Greek National Tourism Organization back in 2022, cause impressions by the 1-minute promotion video with Meteora, as the main background. The title of the video was 'Greece Does Have A Winter' "The project was aimed at demonstrating the existence of winter tourism in Greece. Meteora is a year-round destination with activities for all seasons. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXfBVNKqKRM&t=25s)

In addition to that, a SWOT Analysis is going to assist the research by mentioning the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and threats (as SWOT stands for) of tourism at Meteora. This type of analysis could be considered a planning process that could help a business overcome some kind of challenges by acknowledging the elements of its existence. The main source of use is the assistance on organizational and competitive strategy. SWOT analyzes the environment of an organization and its various sub-systems. Internal factors are considered the strengths and the weaknesses, on the other hand, external factors are the opportunities and threats. In a few words we can describe this type of analysis as a simple but powerful tool, that brings up an organization's capabilities, deficiencies, and opportunities regarding the proportionate market and the external threats that might come up in the future. Another important fact about SWOT analysis is that could be rephrased as 'SWOT Matrix, TOWS Analysis, or TOWS Matrix'. During this type of tool, the creation of a framework assists in a better evaluation, planning, and projecting an organization. The two separate dimensions create the base for a well-planned project (Gurl, 2017).
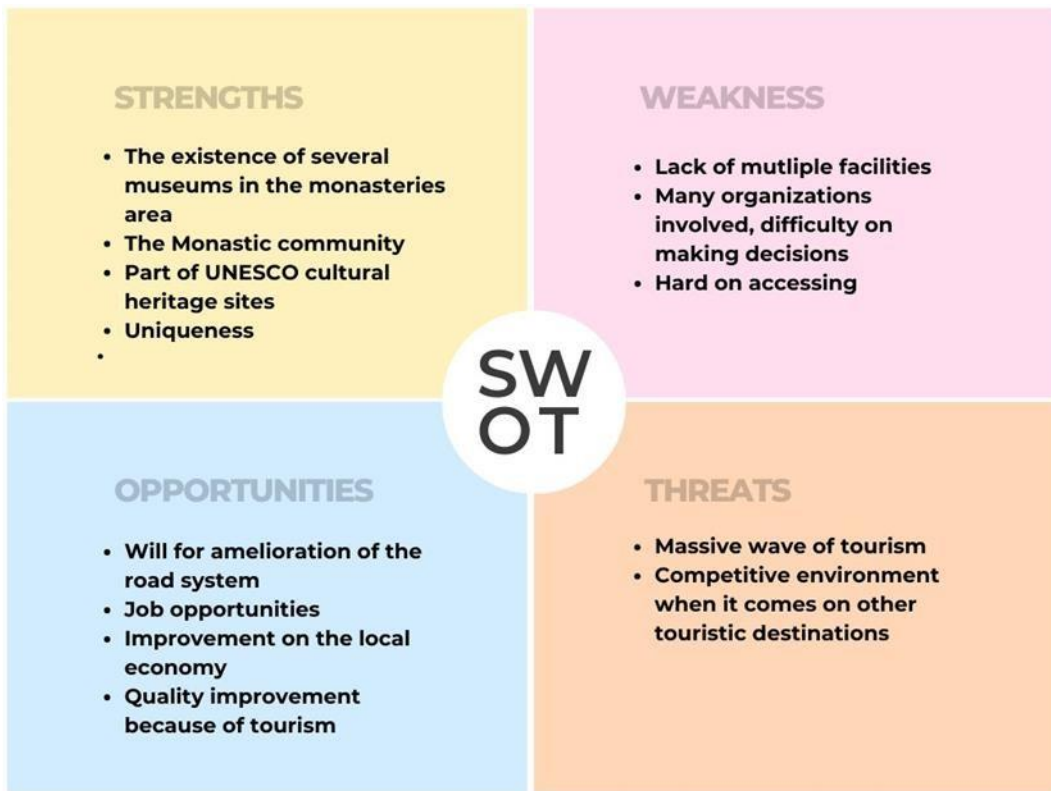
Figure 1. The SWOT Analysis of Religious Tourism at Meteora.   (Insete, 2022)

3. The Effects of Religious Tourism at Meteora

Religious Tourism at Meteora could be defined as a spectacular phenomenon in the Greek tourism context and one of the most developmentally promising forms of tourism. Because of the pole of attraction that Meteora created, the area is facing multiple changes. The impact of this type of tourism in the region of Trikala, is obvious and mostly beneficial. The types of effects that the monument is facing are going to be categorized and explained briefly. The first effect that someone is going to observe is the cultural one. Meteora has been a protected member of UNESCO since 1988. A World Heritage Site with ownership status, with a specific interest in its archaeological and arthistoric value (Poulios 2008). Furthermore, pilgrims and tourists affected the region's economy, by creating local businesses for accommodation, food and beverage, and local experiences. Effects could also be found in political terms because of the part of the government in the monument. Finally, a negative impact could be considered the environmental effects, as a result of the increased visitation (Lyratzaki, 2007).

3.1 PESTEL Analysis of the wider environment of Meteora

It is worth noting that a PESTEL analysis was conducted during this part of the research. PESTEL is a strategic analysis framework that helps organizations identify and examine the external factors that may affect their operations. The acronym PESTEL represents six key categories of external forces, including Political (government policies and regulations), Economic (market trends and financial factors), Social (demographic changes and cultural influences), Technological (innovations and advancements), Environmental (climate change and sustainability), and Legal (laws and regulations). By analyzing these factors, organizations can gain a better understanding of the opportunities and threats present in their external environment and make more informed decisions about their strategic direction. (Oxford College of Marketing).
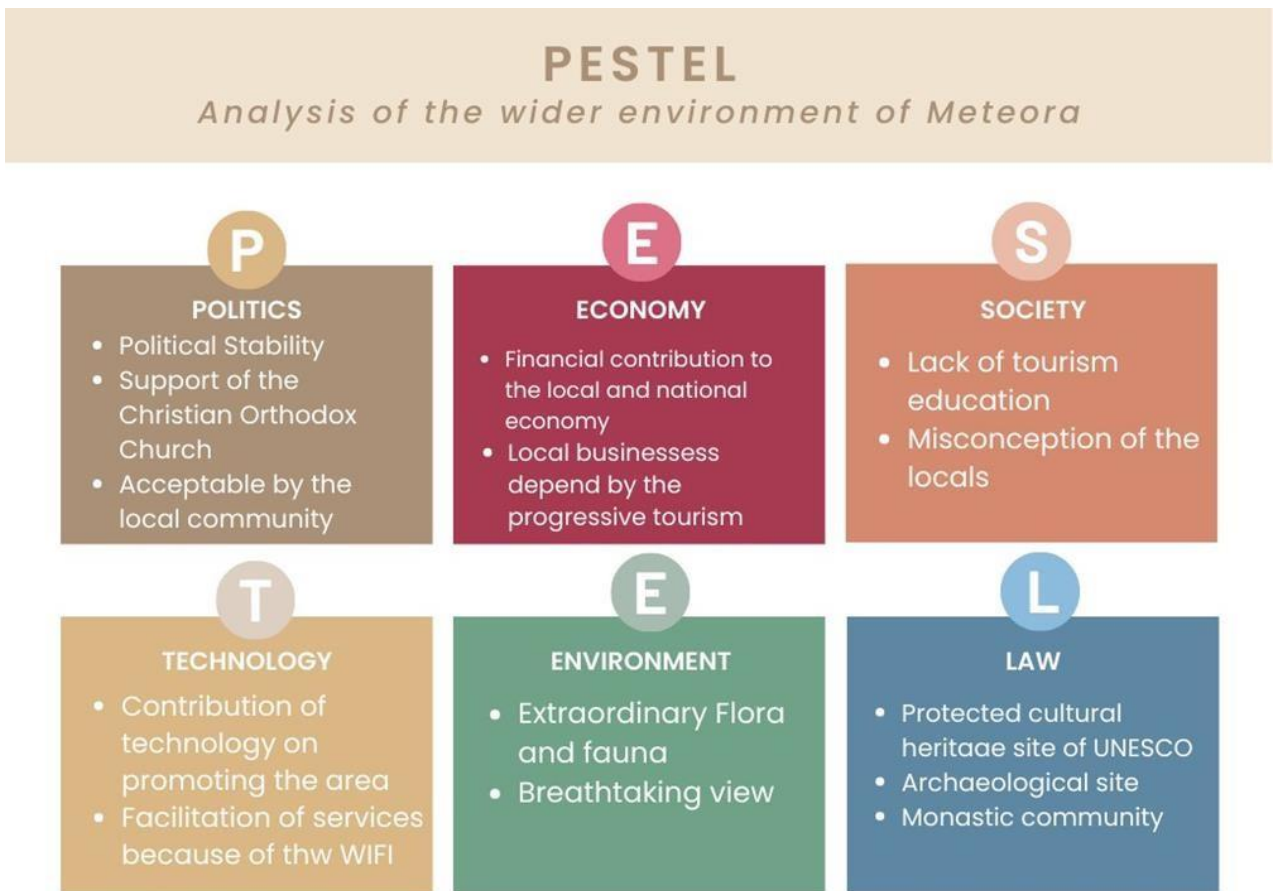
PESTEL
Analysis of the wider environment of Meteora

P — POLITICS
- Political Stability
- Support of the Christian Orthodox Church
- Acceptable by the local community

E — ECONOMY
- Financial contribution to the local and national economy
- Local businessess depend by the progressive tourism

S — SOCIETY
- Lack of tourism education
- Misconception of the locals

T — TECHNOLOGY
- Contribution of technology on promoting the area
- Facilitation of services because of thw WIFI

E — ENVIRONMENT
- Extraordinary Flora and fauna
- Breathtaking view

L — LAW
- Protected cultural heritaae site of UNESCO
- Archaeological site
- Monastic community

Figure 2. PESTEL analysis of the wider environment of Meteora (Siamourelis, 2020)

3.2   The motivations of the visitor

The significance of Meteora is that it can attract tourists from all over the world and influence religious practices. As people who have studied tourism and guest psychology know, the experience of the visitor begins when they are fantasizing about their future trip. In this case, the pyramid of Maslow's human needs (Kenrick, 2010) can answer the question of what motivates people to visit Meteora.

Physiological needs: Visitors aspire to visit a holy place like Meteora, so they can achieve spiritual well-being. Visiting sacred places for reasons such as appreciation of nature could be considered as another motive, combined with physiological and psychological needs (Terzidou et al, 2018) Also, by choosing physical activities such as hiking, they aim to

exercise and get in touch with nature. Fresh air, wild nature, and sanctity could be considered as a perfect combination and a strong motive. Next, safety and security, when it comes to people turn into attachment figures for two main provisions, a safe haven, and a secure base from which to explore, learn, and thrive, according to Ainsworth (Cherniak et al, 2021). The ultimate attachment figure for many people worldwide is God. One of the main reasons that people are choosing to visit Meteora is their need to feel safe and secure, because of the strong sensation of sacredness. Later on, love and belonging, 'God is merciful and loving according to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam', Amir Akrami quoted in his article 'The Religion of Love: A Space for All'. People aspire to feel the love that their missing these days, and religion usually could be the answer. By visiting the holly monasteries of Meteora, people tend to get in touch with their inner selves and feel loved and respected. Self-esteem, because religion tends to affect people in the optimization of their inner selves. The categories of improvement involve functional impairment, mortality, risk of cancer, and life satisfaction and happiness (Sherkat & Reed 1992). Self-esteem usually depends on happiness and satisfaction, and as previously mentioned religion affects our mood. The monasteries in the region of Kalabaka are a pole of attraction for many people because of their uniqueness. Organizing a trip to Meteora increases the possibilities of happiness. Also according to visitgreece.com, a person has the chance to enjoy plenty of activities such as rock climbing, an extreme sport, someone could feel proud and more complete. Finally, self-actualization: Admiring the beauty of the landscape of Kalabaka, being amazed by the sounds of nature, and discovering the architecture of the past, could create moments of esotericism and memories permanently photographed into the past. The main goal of an attraction is to provide an extraordinary experience that would lead to self-actualization (Heather, 2022). Meteora by being extraordinary on its own, has the chance to play an important role in a visitor's life, and this is a strong motive.

Figure 3. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. (Bridgman et al., 2019)

3.3   Push and Pull Factors Regarding Religious Tourism at Meteora

Push and Pull Factors could also demonstrate the motivations of the guest, by providing useful in-formation about the thoughts of the visitors. Regarding this concept, based on the factors concerning the worldwide tourism industry, people are pushed to choose traveling and are pulled by external motivations and other contributions. Escapism, the need for peace, a healthy lifestyle, and a prestigious way of living could be considered as push factors. Pull factors, on the other hand, are related to the results of how attractive a destination might seem. The services and the tangible monuments that are provided are influencing future visitors and creating a marketing image (Uysal & Jurowski, 1994).

PUSH FACTORS	PULL FACTORS
The will for spiritual growth, pilgrimage fulfillment, and religious experiences	Novelty and education
Rest and relaxation	Variety of organized tour packages at reasonable prices
Culture and self- Self-actualization	Wil to explore another culture, heritage, nature, entertainment
Social Interaction	Extreme sports, contact with monks and people from all over the world

Figure 4. Push and Pull factors, the motives of Religious Tourism (Terzidou et al, 2018)

3.4   The expectations of the guests

'Customer expectation means the ideas and feelings of a customer about the product or service depends on what he or she needs from the product and expects to do it' (Hamza et al., 2013).To establish the expectations of guests, it is important to take into consideration factors such as their past experiences, potential incentives, hearsay regarding the experience, and the perceptions of others within the experience market. By analyzing these factors, we can gain a better understanding of what guests are likely to anticipate and tailor our services accordingly. Expectation is a form of anticipation related to previous experiences but requires the contribution and active presence of the guest. The judgmental character of the guests comes from what they expected and what they actually experienced (Gebremichael et al., 2019). 'Customer satisfaction with services is related to both their prior expectation about the service and their perception of how well the service was provided' (Wiliam et al. 2016.) After conducting an in-depth analysis of guests' expectations, many authors have concluded, that the primary factors that significantly impact guests' expectations

are their social networks, prior experiences, and word-of-mouth recommendations. This underscores the importance of building positive relationships with guests and providing them with exceptional experiences that they will want to share with others.

One of the most fascinating parts of organizing a trip is the desire to fantasize about the place that you are going to visit. People enjoy creating scenarios of how their vacation should be. As an outcome the expectations of the guests are multiple and in the best-case scenario satisfied.

After conducting a thorough analysis of multiple reviews posted by visitors on TripAdvisor and personally visiting the breathtaking monasteries of Meteora, the author has gained a comprehensive understanding of the expectations and preferences of guests who travel to this remarkable destination. This research has revealed that visitors to Meteora are often looking to experience a unique blend of natural beauty, history, and spiritual significance. They tend to be drawn to the stunning rock formations, the fascinating history and architecture of the monasteries, and the peaceful and contemplative atmosphere of the surrounding landscape. Additionally, many visitors are seeking opportunities for adventure and active exploration, such as hiking, rock climbing, and photography. By examining these different factors in detail, I have developed a clear understanding of what guests are looking for when they visit Meteora, and how best to customize their needs. First, as anyone could see through the comments of people from all over the world, Meteora is a breathtaking destination. Visitors' expectations when it comes to the beauty of the attraction have been satisfied, because as they mentioned 'Pictures don't do it service'. The amazing landscape is not easy to capture. Admiring a photograph of the place is strictly different from living and breathing in the spectacular Meteora. The sacredness of the monasteries charmed many of the guests, as they expected. 'The tiny castles' as mentioned are a lot worthy of the visitation. Anyone can understand the satisfied expectations of the visitors from the keywords and popular mentions on Trip Advisor. 'Out of this world, Amazing place, Breathtaking views, Worth the trip' could be considered the ultimate compliment about the monument. People expected a destination that would become viral, but in the end, they experienced something called 'once in a lifetime. Many people also mentioned that they happily were surprised when they learned that part of the filming of the movie 'For Your Eyes Only' was filmed at Meteora. Guests did not forget to mention that Meteora was a highly organized place, and the fees were as much as they read online.

For the part that people did not expect, the ride through Meteora, was a difficult route. Multiple hours of driving from the capital center of Greece, rocky roads, and traffic jams were

things that disturbed the guests, as they thought that a beautiful destination deserves a safe road system. An-other unexpected element was their intention to be photographed in their best outfit. Many visitors did not know from the beginning that at Meteora there is a strict law when it comes to dress code.

3.5 Experience economy as a contributor to the tourism-experience industry, based on the Four Realms

Thanks to Pine and Gilmore (1998), now there is a staged plan for creating customized experiences that people love and are willing to pay for. 'An experience is not an amorphous construct: it is a real offering as any service, good, or commodity'(Harvard Research Review 76.6.1998.) In a world where consumers have endless options, a personalized experience is becoming a game-changer. A tailored offering that caters to individual preferences and needs is more likely to capture attention and generate sales than a one-size-fits-all approach. This is where the extraordinary effects, by going above and beyond to create a unique and memorable experience, businesses can tap into the thriving experience economy and stand out from the competition.

But how is the Four Realms of Tourism Experience theory considered as a structure for the study of tourism experiences? Pine and Gilmore (1998) offered a framework that was intended to evaluate and explain experiential consumption in relevance to the tourism industry. Meanwhile, every tourist intends to create their own experience, the tourist industry plans something unique for them. Customizing, Creating, Reselling. Every brand has its stamp in the market, and they are aiming to be chosen for their service in contrast to others. 'Consumers are willing to pay for a premium quality memorable experience that transforms them' (Jurowski, 2009.)

The theory of Four Realms divides customer experiences into four different types of activity and immersion levels. Entertainment, Esthetic, Educational, and Escapist are the well-known 4es. Firstly, in the entertainment realm, customers participate without actively engaging. Secondly, the es-thetic realm provides a deeper level of immersion where customers feel fully immersed in the experience. Thirdly, the educational realm requires active participation and focuses on learning and absorbing information. Lastly, the escapist experience realm requires both immersion and influence to fully transport customers to another world. To

achieve a fulfiling experience, all four of these realms should be included (Kacprzak et al, 2015).

Figure 5. The Four Experience Realms (of Pine and Gilmore), for the Meteora Experience (Wong 2015)

Analyzing the customer path can help every hospitality maker, to optimize the journey of the guest and customize their service into the needs of the consumer. This creates an opportunity to produce the perfect package and endure the memorabilia of the guest. A Customer Journey Map is a powerful tool that helps in designing and improving services. It presents a detailed overview of the user's journey, from the initial contact with the service to the final outcome. It provides a comprehensive understanding of how the user interacts with the service, including their emotions and expectations at each step. The map enables businesses to identify pain points, gaps, and areas of improvement in their service delivery, leading to enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty. The journey map is an essential tool for service designers, marketers, and customer experience professionals who want to create a seamless and delightful experience for their customers. (Service Design Tools). The following figure describes the steps of a guest in designing a trip to Meteora.
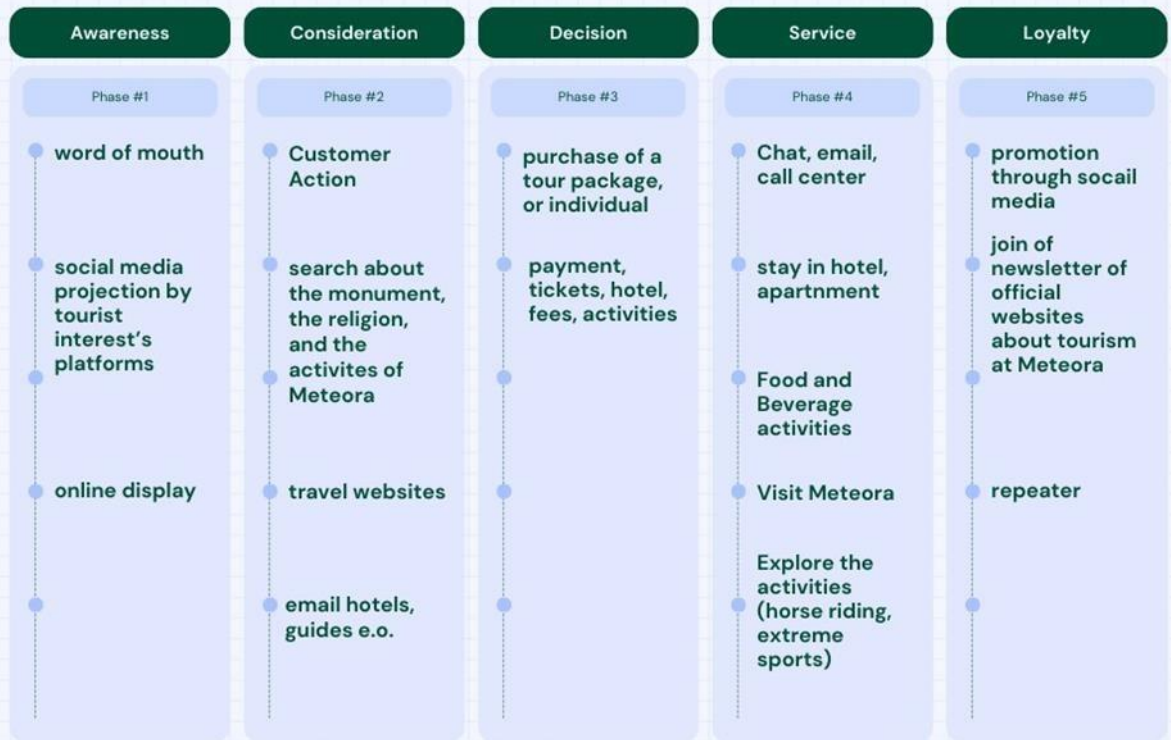
Customer Journey Map

Awareness	Consideration	Decision	Service	Loyalty
Phase #1	Phase #2	Phase #3	Phase #4	Phase #5
word of mouth	Customer Action	purchase of a tour package, or individual	Chat, email, call center	promotion through socail media
social media projection by tourist interest's platforms	search about the monument, the religion, and the activites of Meteora	payment, tickets, hotel, fees, activities	stay in hotel, apartnment	join of newsletter of official websites about tourism at Meteora
online display	travel websites		Food and Beverage activities	
			Visit Meteora	repeater
	email hotels, guides e.o.		Explore the activities (horse riding, extreme sports)	

Figure 6. Experience journey map of a visitor of Meteora   (Yachin et al.,2018)

4. Data and methods

During this phase of the study, the choice of the method is going to be presented, such as the planning of the method, the data collection, and the data analysis. This thesis is focused on the topic of religious tourism at Meteora. The study aims to explore its effects, motivations, and expectations of the guests who visit the monument and its monasteries. The research question is centered on understanding the expectations of the guests who have been to Meteora. The purpose of this study is to answer every question related to religious tourism, such as what people think it is, what motivates them to visit, and what their expectations are.

The significance of research methods cannot be questioned. They are the systematic techniques utilized to collect data for a particular project. The selection of a method is dependent on several factors, including the research topic, the type of data to be utilized, and the target group. The chosen method must be appropriate and efficient in gathering accurate and reliable data, which is essential for making informed conclusions and decisions. Therefore, the method a researcher chooses can have a significant impact on the outcome of their research. (Pfeiffer Library Tiffin University, 2022). Methods are split into two sections, one is the quantitative research approach, and the other one is the qualitative research approach.

'Quantitative research is a form of research that relies on the methods of natural sciences, which procedures numerical data and hard facts', and the main purpose is to establish a cause and a result by utilizing the power of statistics. It could also be defined as empirical research because of its accuracy. The data of the collection could be divided into multiple categories. Graphs and tables are usually related to quantitative research as an aid before the results (Ahmad, Sharique 2019).

'Qualitative research provides insights and understanding of the problem setting.' It is the method of exploring, since this type of research studies highly complex phenomena incompatible with the quantitative research approach. By generating ideas and hypotheses, qualitative research is a concept of in-depth understanding of human behavior, experiences, attitudes, intentions, and motivations, based on observation. Examples of this type of research are case studies, grounded theories, ethnography, history, and phenomenology (Ahmad, Sharique 2019).

4.1 Interview as a method

An interview can be defined as a conversation with a main purpose, gathering useful information for a cause. This type of method is a communication process, for two or more individuals. When it comes to research interviews, there is the person who takes the interview, the person who is in charge of the coordination of the process, by managing the questions, and an interviewee who responds and gives all the answers (Easwaramoorthy & al. 2006). The interviewer seeks to extract valuable information for a specific purpose. The questions are carefully planned and formulated, and they are aimed at accuracy.

The interview is a research technique that can provide valuable insights into people's thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and emotions. It is particularly useful in situations where there is controversy or ambiguity surrounding a particular topic. Interviews are typically conducted in person, although phone interviews are also possible. There are three types of interviews that researchers can use: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. A structured interview involves pre-determined, questions that are asked in a specific order and typically asked on surveys. In this case, the interviewer usually has to intervene for the other person to better understand the question. A semi-structured interview allows for more flexibility, with open-ended questions that can be tailored to the individual being interviewed. They are also useful for collecting in-depth information. Finally, an unstructured interview allows for a free-flowing conversation that can explore topics in-depth and reveal unexpected insights. Usually, they are the key to finding out the truth behind a person's experience (Easwaramoorthy & al. 2006).

For this research, interviews will be conducted as the primary method. These interviews aim to discover people's perspectives on Religious Tourism in Greece, their expectations, and motivations for visiting Meteora, and hear about their general experiences at this stunning monument in the Kalabaka region. The method of conducting interviews was chosen for this research due to its advantages, including immediate feedback, the ability to gather in-depth information, and the exploration of various aspects. The interviews for this thesis are going to be tailor-made to the needs of the research and they will be very useful for offering a new perspective on the objective. Assistance will be provided by individuals who have previously visited the Meteora monument to develop a collection of valuable information for the interview part of the research. Face-to-face interviews are going to be conducted for the thesis.

4.2   Planning of an interview

In advance of conducting the interviews, it is important to compose a list of all the topics that the research aspires to cover and congregate all the useful information for the composition of the data collection. 'The spoken or written word always has a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and how carefully we report or code the answers' (Fontana & al. 2005.) For that reason, the interview has 3 stages, before, during, and after.

When preparing for an interview, it's important to take a few crucial steps. The first and most important parts of interviewing involve defining the objective and choosing the type of interview, especially if the purpose is to gather information. Additionally, selecting the type of interviewees and determining your approach to them will help ensure that you are fully prepared to conduct the interview. Making a list of questions and finding the person who will conduct them are the last steps before the start of the interview (Easwaramoorthy & al. 2006). This useful information helped me create the plan for the process of interview.

During the interview process, a comprehensive questionnaire was designed to gather useful information from the guests of Meteora. The questionnaire comprises less than 10 questions, including the main research question, which seeks to understand the expectations of the guests. In addition to that, the sub-questions are also an important part of the interview process, as they further seek the guests' experiences and opinions. Concerning the research, the interviews based on the study may have been time-consuming for the interviewees. In-depth questions often require more thoughtful and detailed responses, which can take up a significant amount of time. However, it is important to note that the information gathered from these interviews will be valuable for the study. It is essential to conduct thorough research to gain a better understanding of the objective.

4.3   Data collection and analysis

Data collection is as important as crucial, since it determines how the information is used and the explanations that are generated through the research methodology and approach of the person that conducts the study. (Paradis et al.,2016).Data collection during research could be considered the primary step. Without a doubt, errors should be included, and later evaluated before the data entry, so the research is completed (Whitney & al. 1998).

The primary objective of this research is to conduct interviews with a minimum of 8-10 individuals who have visited Meteora, a UNESCO World Heritage site in Greece, to gain a

better understanding of their experiences. The interviews will be conducted with two different groups of people: primary school teachers who have visited the monument multiple times as escorts to their students, and bachelor's students of Hospitality studies who have visited the site as part of their educational curriculum. These groups of people were specifically chosen for their deep knowledge of the monument, their eloquence in expressing their experiences, and their memorabilia. By interviewing these individuals, the researchers hope to gain insights into the unique perspectives of visitors who have interacted with this remarkable site in different ways.

Data analysis is a multiscale process–a closely related operation, that can assist the purpose of summarized data (Ibrahim, 2015). Data analysis is a valuable tool that is open to interpretation. It can be used to gain insights and make informed decisions. The information that is set to the analysis has been gathered from the answers provided by the individuals who participated in the interview. This data, once evaluated, will provide valuable insights into the subject matter being studied.

5. Results

During this chapter, a comprehensive analysis of the results from the interviews conducted is going to be presented. The outcomes will be thoroughly discussed in the next part, such as highlighting the key themes and objectives of the research. Through the analysis of the results, the research aims to provide a detailed understanding of the participants' perspectives and insights and how these can be used as a part of future research regarding Meteora of Kalabaka. The results of the interview questionnaires were conducted in written form by the participants. During the research, 10 participants were interviewed through a questionnaire consisting of 10 questions. The interviews were conducted via email and completed in less than four days. Certainly, it's important to mention how the participants describe the monument. Magnificent, extraordinary, and inspiring are some of the decorative adjectives, through the eyes of the guests.

5.1   Religious Tourism & Expectations

First, the results concern the participant's points of view regarding Religious Tourism. Interviewees were asked to share their insights and expectations related to the definition of the term Religious Tourism. Specifically, they were asked to provide their initial thoughts on this type of tourism and what it means to them. Moreover, the majority answered that they considered this type of tourism as the most fascinating and captivating, because of the combination of leisure and sanity. It provides a blend of relaxation and well-being, something that tourism aims in general as an outcome. They anticipated that the term would lead to religious moments and experiences, art related to religion, enlightening historical edification, and always centered around a monument like a church or a monastery. Furthermore, the participants were asked to describe their expectations about Meteora before their actual visit. Breathtaking views, admiration of the rock formations, and an encapsulating experience were some of the answers. Precisely, participants reported that they anticipated an experience that refers to a fantasy. An unreal and unique moment engraved into their memory.

Another part of the questions that could be considered significant is the motivation of the guests to visit. Profoundly the guests aspired to admire the breathtaking view and learn more about the historical value of the monument influenced usually by word of mouth, social media, and probably marketing. On the other hand, visitors also mentioned that they were

motivated because of their faith (more specifically by Christian Orthodoxy Religion) and their need to experience heavenly and spiritual moments.

5.2   Experiences

As part of the research, the participants were asked to share their thoughts on their actual experiences. The responses gathered indicated that the majority of the participants felt that their initial expectations were met by their final experience. 'I experienced everything that I expected', 'I felt that I was cut off from modern civilization although a few kilometers from Kalabaka', 'I was an actual piece of this virgin nature'. This suggests that the study was successful in measuring the participants' expectations and the corresponding outcomes. However, a minority of interviewees mentioned that they experienced the triptych of the negligence of the Greek state regarding popular destinations. Bad route system, a non-existent system designed for people with special needs, and fees which imply the profiteering at the expense of the religion.

Upon reviewing the feedback provided by the participants, it became evident that they were interested in the topic of the research and thoroughly enjoyed being a part of it. Their expectations were met, and they were more than happy to share their positive experiences, as well as the areas where they would like to see some improvements. The journey to the monument was a highlight of the trip, specifically the visually breathtaking and immersive graphic ride. The visit to the Museum of Meteora was a favorite, with all participants appreciating the opportunity to learn more about the historical value and culture of the monument. Some of the participants found the rock-climbing experience adventurous, while others preferred the horse-riding courses. Despite the positive feedback, there were a few areas where the visitors would like to see some changes because they insist that there is a space for improvement. They felt that the route system could be better managed by the state and that there was a lack of accessibility for people with special needs. Additionally, they suggested that the monument fee should be abolished to make the experience more accessible to everyone.

6. Discussion

This chapter will delve into an in-depth analysis of the research findings, presenting a comprehensive discussion on the key takeaways that emerged from the study. Additionally, the research is providing detailed answers to the research questions based on the insights gained from the findings.

Upon analyzing the findings of the research, it is unequivocally clear that a fresh point of view has emerged concerning Religious Tourism at Meteora. The results shed light on a novel viewpoint that was previously unexplored, providing valuable insights into this domain. In this chapter, there is going to be a comprehensive discussion based on the outcomes of the study.

First, as an outcome, this thesis provides a persuasive aspect of what Religious Tourism is. By conducting a thorough analysis of various studies, a comprehensive theoretical framework was formulated with the primary objective of defining Religious Tourism based on academic research. Religious tourism can be defined as the visit to sacred places, to participate or follow-up in religious ceremonies and the pilgrimage in the form of visits or activities to fulfill religious duties in the evaluation of tourism understanding. It mostly covers tourist trips to perform religious beliefs and/or to see the centers of faith attraction in the evaluation of the tourism phenomenon, referred to in Chapter 2 (Heidari et al., 2017). This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration and examination of the various faces of Religious Tourism worldwide and nationally, ultimately leading to a clear and concise definition of this unique form of tourism. There is a correlation between the academic and social point of view regarding this type of tourism. Participants reported that Religious Tourism is a fascinating and timeless form of tourism, that combines leisure and sanity, by motivating a person to choose a getaway through their faith culture. When it comes to this form of traveling in Greece, based on the theoretical background the Hellenic state seems to be a golden source because of its rich cultural heritage related to the Christian Orthodox culture that still flourishes. Besides the fact of the existence of multiple religious destinations, interviewees mentioned their dissatisfaction with the negligence of the state in providing a better experience and access to the visitors of these breathtaking and historically worthy monuments.

After conducting the research, it is clear that the motivations of the guests are a significant factor, and it is considered as a key outcome of the study. Maslow's pyramid of needs exposes that visitors are motivated by their requirement for spiritual well-being, touch with nature, and the feeling of safety and sanity. According to Chapter 3.2., people turn into

attachment figures for two main provisions, a safe haven, and a secure base from which to explore, learn, and thrive, according to Ainsworth (Cherniak et al,2021). After an in-depth search of the motivations of previous visitors to Meteora, people were inspired by the history and architecture of the monument but also, they were pushed by their faith in Christianity.

Over and above, the main point of the research is the expectations of the people who visited Meteora in the past. People's expectations were influenced by previous experiences in the field of tourism according to the theoretical framework. The judgmental character of the guests comes from what they expected and what they actually experienced was discussed in Chapter 3.4. (Gebremichael et al., 2019). On the one hand, their social network, word of mouth, and social media are playing an important part in the expectations part. On the other hand, the questionnaires revealed that tourists expected an organized experience that would lead them to spiritual completion, and self-realization in combination with a breathtaking view and connection with the wild but pure nature. Except for the fact that people indeed experienced a once-in-a-lifetime moment, participants of the study did not forget to mention their satisfaction with the hospitality of the region. The infrastructure of the Trikala region, the graphic hotels and traditional taverns, and the recreational character of the activities (horse-riding, mountain climbing, etc.) were elements that contributed to an unforgettable experience. The judgmental character of the guests assists the research because of their straightness and honesty.

This thesis consisted of one main research question and four sub-questions. The primary research question is about the expectations of guests who have visited Meteora and whether those expectations were fulfilled. The sub-questions are the following ones:

1. What do people think Religious Tourism is?

2. What is their motivation to visit?

3. What experience do tourists expect to have in Meteora?

4. What do the guests actually experience in Meteora?

The first sub-question was discussed in Chapter 2, where the author delves into the definition of Religious Tourism and all related aspects. However, based on the qualitative research results, people's opinions regarding this type of tourism seem to be affected by their interaction prompts. The definition of Religious Tourism, based on the theoretical framework refers to the visit of sacred places in order to participate in religious ceremonies or activities to fulfill religious duties in the evaluation of tourism understanding (referenced in Chapter 2). During

the interviews, participants expressed their support for Religious Tourism, stating that it is an intriguing form of tourism that combines leisure, spirituality, and sanity by visiting religious destinations that hold historical and cultural significance. This section adds an additional layer of information to the primary definition.

Pertained to the second sub-question, what is their motivation to visit, was discussed in chapter 3.2., and was analyzed through the tool of Maslow's pyramid (Figure 3). According to the theoretical part, the motivations of the guests are combined with their needs. These include physiological needs such as spiritual well-being. They also need to feel safe and secure and have close relationships with their attachment figures. Love and a sense of belonging are crucial for filling the gap in their lives, and for some people, this comes from a connection with God. Self-esteem is also important for individuals to feel good about themselves and their accomplishments. Finally, self-actualization comes from achieving their goals, such as acquiring a once-in-a-lifetime experience (Figure 3). After conducting those interviews the author concluded that guests who visited Meteora were motivated by the breathtaking monument and history of the place in combination with the value of their religion and faith, and the uniqueness of the landscape. Maslow's pyramid enlightens the internal motives of the guests while the interview answers focus on superficial reasons.

In addition, sub-questions number three and four relate to the actual experience of the guest based on their expectations. First, regarding the part of the expectations of the Meteora experience, chapter 3.4., refers to the customer's expectations reflecting on the tourism industry. Past experiences of the guest adjust their future attitude regarding new stimuli. During this chapter, the readers will observe the expectations of the guest, directly from TripAdvisor rates regarding the monument of Meteora. Concerning the results of the interviews, the author concludes that people's expectations met the experience (check chapter 5).

Moreover, the author projects the answer to the sub-question through the experiential part. In chapter 3.5., the experience economy has been discussed as a key contributor to the tourism industry. Four Realms and Customer Journey Map are tools that assisted the research throughout the experience of the guest and the economy that it supports. Factors such as education, entertainment, esthetic, and escapism have been analyzed based on the nature of attraction of Meteora (Figure 5). Customer Journey Mapping also assisted this thesis in following and understanding the experience of the guests from the moment that they heard about this specific destination (Figure 6). This chapter of the theoretical framework mentions every important factor of consideration related to experiential tourism, more specifically about Meteora as a destination and what it provides. First, the Meteora experience possibly starts

through word of mouth and social media projection. When the guests actually arrive at the destination they get in touch with the wild and virgin nature of the monument. Later on, the educational and entertainment part adds another perspective to the experience by providing several activities for each guest. The escapist part could be considered the primary element in creating an authentic and extraordinary experience. After the conduction of the interviews, the results showed that the guests experienced a once-in-a-lifetime experience because of the breathtaking view of the Meteora monument, its special architecture, and the intense sanity of the monasteries. Although interviewers did not forget to mention their dissatisfaction in specific departments (refers in chapter 5).

6.1 Reliability and validity

In the world of research, reliability and validity are paramount. Without these two key components, the results of any study could be unworthy and incomplete. Both factors are critical in ensuring that research is accurate, trustworthy, and ultimately valuable to the scientific community. Reliability refers to the value of the information and results over time, and in the acceptance of the public opinion of the society members that assisted the research. If the results could be conducted more than once, under the same methodology, we can consider it as trustworthy (Golafhsani, 2003). Furthermore, validity stands for a statement that will be well-justified and based on logic guided by principles and quality (Cypress, 2017). Either way reliability and validity play a vital mode in the field of research and study. The concepts of reliability and validity are critical components in the field of research and study. Objectivity is the main goal, and it's obtained in two ways. Firstly, information should be widely accessible for in-depth research and secondly, results should be presented in a theoretically sound, relevant, and variable manner (Kirk et al.,1986).

The study took great care and attention to detail when documenting the methods used in the research, ensuring that every step was recorded accurately and precisely. Nevertheless 'The error can be obvious to any external reader or it can be hidden away from everyone' (Morse, 1990.) Reliability and validity are factors that could be considered as questioned in every research or study. While conducting this thesis the author concluded that is going to be questioned regarding the reliability part, because of the number of participants in the questionnaires. Unlike the typical research studies that involve a vast number of interviewees, this particular research had a significantly smaller sample size. The final outcome was based on data gathered from only 10 participants who took part in the study. The results of this thesis

based on the theoretical framework and the interviews are valid, but not absolute because of the low percentage of participation.

The study might not be completely representative of the reasons that I am going to present. First, every individual being interviewed was a Greek citizen who was traveling within their own country for tourism purposes, instead of solely relying on local perspectives, it's important to consider the viewpoints of foreign visitors to truly understand their experience. Additionally, it should be noted that only a small number of guests completed the questionnaires that were utilized for research purposes on the outcome.

6.2 Self-evaluation

Despite the difficulties encountered while working on this thesis, the author found the experience to be both engaging and rewarding. The process of conducting research, analyzing data, and formulating conclusions could be considered as challenging, but it also provided the author with a valuable opportunity to expand knowledge and skills in the field of tourism in general. There are three reasons why this research can be characterized as challenging. First, the timeline for completing the thesis can be considered highly challenging. The task requires a significant amount of effort and dedication, and meeting the deadline would require a combination of focus and discipline. Besides the anxiety related to the deadline, the author learned to work effectively under great pressure. The second reason was the lack of detailed information regarding Meteora, and Religious Tourism in the Hellenic State. Although it was a fascinating topic that helped the author to get to know more about its cultural heritage and religion. The third and last reason is the lack of experience of the author regarding those types of studies. The author had practical experience in tourism but lacked academic qualifications in the same field.

Overall, the author is proud of the work that has accomplished and grateful for the lessons learned throughout the process. This thesis was an enlightening opportunity to expand the topic of Religious Tourism, a type of tourism that is becoming very popular, such as the breathtaking monument of Meteora.

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1. xxx, **. The 51 regions of the Greek state, and one of each religious monument.**
(Visit Greece)

REGION	MONUMENTS	REGION	MONUMENTS
Attiki	Metropolis Athens	Cyclades	Panagia Ekantotapyliani
(East) Attiki	Agios Efreem	Chania	Monh Gwnias
(Athens) Pireus	Agios Nektarios Aigina	Chios	Nea Monh
(West) Attiki	Agia Aikaterini Mandra	Drama	Agios Nikolaos
Achaia	Ekklhsia Agiou Andrea	Dwdekanisa	Monastery of Agio Iwannis of Apocalypse Cave
Aitoloakarnania	Agia Paraskevi	Evoia	Agios Iwannis Rwsos
Arcadia	Panagia Elwna	Evros	Panagia Kosmosotira
Argolida	Panagia Berbaka	Evrytania	Monh Proussou
Arta	Panagia Parigoritissa		
REGION	MONUMENTS	REGION	MONUMENTS
Biotia	Monh of Osios Loukas	Heraclion	Iera Monh Arkadiou
Fthiotida	Monh Dadiou	Hleias	Monh Skafidias
Halkidiki	Agio Oros	Hmathia	Panagia Soumela
Fokida	Monastery of Profitis Hlias	Grevenwn	Profitis Hlias

Florina	Iera Monh Agiou Augoustinou	Ioannina	Iera Monh Paliouri
Kavala	Agiou Dhmhtriou	Lefkada	Monastery Agioi Pateres
Karditsa	Panagia Pelekiti	Lesvos	Panagia Glykofilousa
Kastoria	Naos Agiwn Anar-gyrwn	Magnisia	Naos Agias Marinas
Kefallonia	Panagia Sisiwtissa	Messinia	Eleistria Korwnhs
Kerkyra	Ekklhsia Pantokratora	Pella	Iera Monh Arxagellou Mixahl
Kilkis	Monh Agiou Rafael	Preveza	Agios Andreas
Kozani	Agia Paraskevi	Pieria	Ekklisia Xristou
Korinthias	Agios Nikolaos	Rethymno	Monh Profiti Hlia
Laconia	Panagia Chrysafitissa Monemvasias	Rodophs	Panagia Koimisis Theotokou
Larisa	Etz Hagiim Synagogue	Samos	Monh Megalhs Panagias
Lasithi	Ieros Naos Agios Panteleimonas Spinaloga	Serres	Monh Timiou Prodromou
Thessalonikis	Monh Vlatadwn	Xanthi	Monastery of Panagia Kalamou
Thesprotia	Iera Monh Ghromeriou	Zakynthos	Agios Dionysios
Trikala	Meteora		

Appendix 2. **Interview Questions.**

1. What do you think Religious Tourism is, in a few words?

2. Since you have visited Meteora, please describe it in 3 words.

3. What was your motivation for visiting?

4. What did you expect to experience?

5. What did you experience eventually?

6. Which sense of this place awakes you (touch, smell, hearing,vision,taste)?

7. Did you enjoy any activity or facility?

8. What would you consider changing or adding if you had the chance to?