



# **Exploring Spiritual Tourism; Motivations and Holistic Wellbeing of Participants in Sacred Travel Experiences**

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## Abstract

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<p>The tourism industry is constantly evolving, and different forms of niche tourism are increasing their popularity. There is great potential to enhance one's wellbeing through immersive and transformational experiences. This research investigates the motivations, characteristics and holistic wellbeing outcomes of participants who have taken part in spiritual tourism. The main objective is to understand how these types of journeys influence individuals' overall wellbeing, while more specific aims include identifying the motivational factors driving individuals to these types of journeys, as well as unravelling the destinations, activities and trip durations.</p> <p>Previous research on the topic has argued that meditation retreat tourism may serve as a self-administered wellbeing intervention and that a core characteristic of spiritual tourism is its' ability to disrupt the usual pace and limitations of everyday life, with this break from routines being the key factor of its' appeal. The theoretical framework of this research integrates Pine and Gilmore's Experience Realms and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The author inspects the significance of educational, escapist and esthetic realms and the contribution of higher levels needs of Maslow's Hierarchy; love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization. A qualitative method was used, with semi-structured interviews conducted on five interviewees over a one-month period via email and Microsoft Teams. The five interviewees provided insights into their journeys as well as the impact of spiritual tourism on their lives and holistic wellbeing.</p> <p>The results of this research indicate that the interviewees were driven by a variety of different personal motives, such as desire for personal growth, desire for answers on life's big questions and curiosity to learn about cultural or religious practises. The journeys were characterized by different activities such as meditations and rituals, and they typically took place natural or other spiritually or culturally significant settings. The outcomes of the interviews revealed positive aspects on emotional wellbeing, such as clarity on life, new perspective, improved self-awareness and deeper connection with others as well as possible improvements on physical wellbeing. These findings suggest that spiritual tourism experiences positively contribute to holistic wellbeing.</p>
<b>Key words</b> Spiritual tourism, wellbeing, niche tourism, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Experience Realms

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## 1 Introduction

This research-oriented thesis explores spiritual tourism as a concept and as niche tourism, diving deeper into what motivates people to embark on sacred journeys, what their experiences are like when they do so and how it affects their overall wellbeing. In the recent years, there has been a rise in people's interest towards holistic wellbeing, and leisure activities that support it. The growing appeal of seeking inner peace and solace from everyday life leads many to travel to even far away destinations. More people are drawn to self-discovery and personal growth and finding the purpose and meaning of this life we are living as a collective. The phenomenon of self-discovery through travel has gained popularity over the past years, especially amid recent global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The uncertainty of the state of the world leaves even more individuals to prioritize their emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. As a response to this growing demand for holistic wellbeing, spiritual tourism offers a tempting opportunity to escape the stress of everyday life. Whether this includes a religious pilgrimage to a sacred place, immersing oneself in sacred rituals of ancient civilizations, going on meditation and yoga retreats or just traveling more mindfully and consciously to cultivate presence and awareness during the journey, these experiences can offer the traveller a great escape.

The author of this work first became intrigued by this topic after they found themselves delving deeper into spirituality in their personal life after a series of unfortunate events and started wondering about how a change of the environment, such as traveling to a peaceful sacred place could benefit their overall wellbeing. The author then started pondering on what generally motivates people to embark on such journeys and while each experience is unique, they could not help but wonder whether there might be a common thread connecting these motivations and the eventual outcomes. Moreover, they became increasingly interested by the potential impact on embarking on a spiritual journey to a foreign location on individuals' overall wellbeing. Additionally, they are also keen on finding out what are the places to where these sacred journeys have been made to, what has been the duration of them, and which activities have been at play there. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to generate more insight into this topic to enrich the academic discourse, but also to possibly benefit travel agencies who offer niche tourism opportunities by providing evidence-based insights which can in the future enhance the development of spiritual tourism packages.

## 1.1 Research question, sub-questions and objectives

The main research question for this thesis is to understand how these types of travel experiences influence individuals' overall wellbeing. The sub-questions are as follows:

1. What are the underlying motivational factors that drive individuals to visit sacred places?
2. What are the characteristics of spiritual travel experiences, including the destinations chosen, duration of the trips and the activities involved?

The objectives of this thesis are:

1. To identify the diverse motivational factors that drive individuals to visit sacred places, including religious causes, personal growth, seeking solace and healing or cultural exploration.
2. To analyse the characteristics of spiritual travel experiences, such as the chosen destinations, the duration of the trips and the activities involved to understand these journeys more in depth.

## 1.2 Significance of the study

The tourism industry is continuously evolving, spiritual tourism as a niche tourism has great potential to grow and develop in the future, since it is unique by nature can greatly benefit the holistic wellbeing of the individuals' going on these journeys. The significance of this research can be divided into three main categories: contribution to tourism development, enhancing destination management and the benefit to individuals keen on these types of travel experiences.

By understanding the underlying motivational factors of individuals traveling to sacred places or embarking on spiritual tourism journeys, different tourism stakeholders can better tailor their offerings to meet the diverse needs of these travellers. These insights can also aid in the development of specialized tourism packages, accommodations, and the creation of experiences in these journeys, thus enhancing the overall tourism product.

Researching the characteristics of spiritual tourism experiences, including the chosen destinations, trip durations and activities involved provides valuable insights for destination management. By understanding the preferences of these types of travellers, destination managers can optimize infrastructure development and marketing strategies in order to attract more visitors from this segment.

By investigating the impact of sacred travel experiences on an individual's overall wellbeing, this research can empower travellers to embark on these types of journeys themselves and thus potentially enhance their sense of purpose and benefit their overall wellbeing.

In summary, this research contributes to the tourism industry by providing insights into the motivational factors driving individuals to these types of travel experiences and thus tourism stakeholders can tailor their offerings more efficiently. Additionally, this study can help enhance destination management by researching the characteristics of these types of travel experiences in order to optimize infrastructure development and marketing strategies, Lastly, this study may benefit individuals interested in sacred travel experiences and shed light on the impact of these on overall wellbeing.

### **1.3 Methodology in brief**

This research will be conducted utilizing qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews. The interview consists of altogether fifteen questions, with some additional follow-up questions in between. A total of five participants will be interviewed. Two of the participants will be interviewed via Teams video call, and the rest will be interviewed through email. The interviewees will be chosen by utilizing purposive sample approach. Purposive sampling is a well-suited method for this research due to its specific focus on individuals who have experiences in spiritual tourism.

## 2 Spiritual tourism

This chapter delves into the existing literature on spiritual tourism and its' connectedness to overall wellbeing and contains definitions for key terms and concepts.

### 2.1 Spiritual tourism definition

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourism as a “social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business purposes” (UNWTO, n.a). Spiritual tourism is defined as a form of tourism which is centred around fulfilling spiritual needs and it leverages cultural resources as well as beliefs in higher powers to provide a sense of fulfilment and connection to ancestors and traditions. (Worldmatetravel, 2024). Spiritual tourism is a wide concept, which may include pilgrimages to sacred sites, visiting religious landmarks, cultural traditions, and participation in different types of retreats. One of the most fundamental attributes of spiritual tourism is the disruption of the everyday tempo and spatial constraints. This aspect of tourism experience is the likely contributor to the appeal of spiritual tourism to both newcomers to spiritual exploration as well as individuals seeking to enrich their existing spiritual practises. (Cheer et. al 2017). Spiritual tourism and religious tourism are two different terms which nevertheless share common ground and often intersect with one another. It appears plausible that spiritual tourism is not only one single entity, but rather encompasses a spectrum of different travel experiences where participants pursue a variety of desired outcomes, both religious and non-religious and the driving force behind these types of journeys often comes from a yearning for challenging, intellectual transcendent and sometimes life changing experiences (Cheer et. al 2017).

Khoshkhoo & Nadalipour (2016), presents the conceptualisation of spiritual tourism in relation to religious tourism and pilgrimage by Norman (2012).

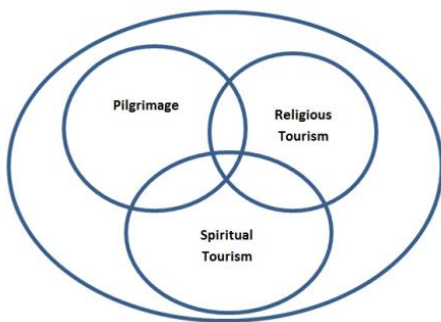


Figure 1. Spiritual tourism in relation to religious tourism and pilgrimage (Norman, 2012).

In this figure 1, it is shown that spiritual tourism, religious tourism, and pilgrimage intersect with one another. Khoshkhoo & Nadalipour (2016), explain that spiritual tourism may occur within pilgrimage traditions and may bear similarities to religious tourism. However, the factor which distinguishes spiritual tourism and religious tourism is the tourist's pursuit of spiritual development in a secularized manner (Khoshkhoo & Nadalipour, 2016).

## 2.2 Spiritual tourism as niche tourism

Niche tourism encompasses a variety of different types of tourism which differ from mass tourism. As a form of tourism, it differs from mass tourism because it targets specific interests, preferences, or motivations of travellers rather than catering to a more conventional, generalized demand. Niche tourism experiences are generally more tailored and personalized and involve smaller group sizes. Febrian (2022), presents the niche tourism classification by Novelli (2005, 9).

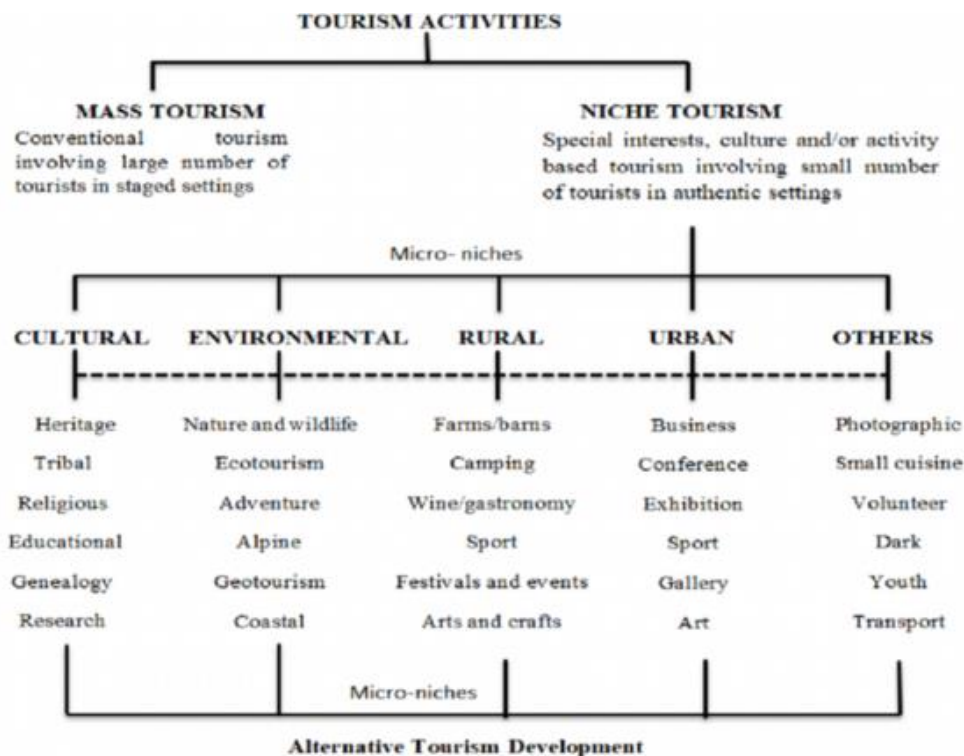


Figure 2. Novelli's niche tourism classification (2005).

In this figure 2 by Novelli (2005, 9), spiritual tourism falls under the cultural micro-niche category since it intertwines with religious tourism. The exploration of different cultures and traditions and connecting with other humans while seeking spiritual fulfilment is a prominent factor in both religious and spiritual tourism.

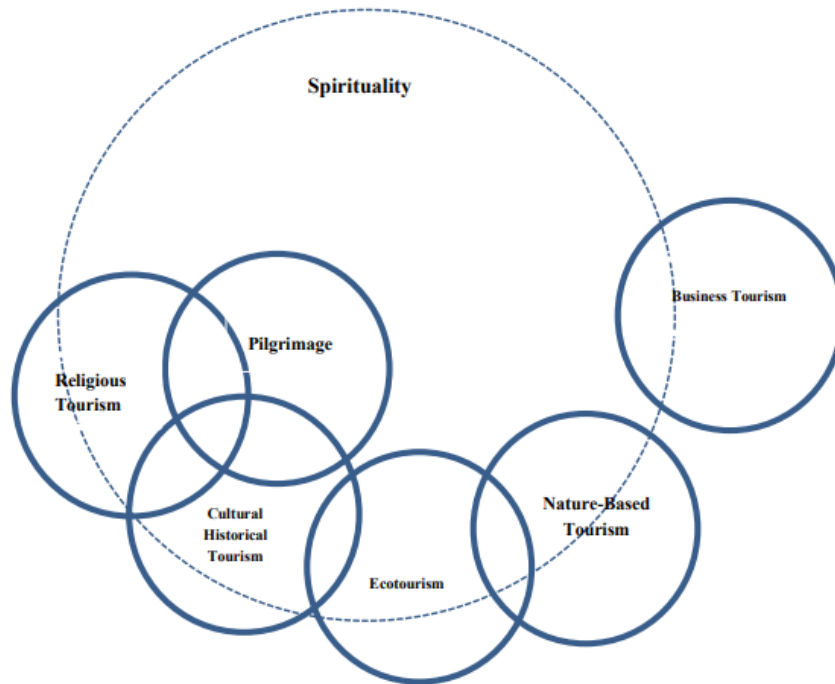


Figure 3. Different types of tourism in relation to spirituality (Khoshkhoo & Nadalipour, 2016)

The different types of tourism types presented in the above graph can be explained as follows: Business tourism encompasses attending conferences, exhibitions, contract signings, and similar events, offering a distinct set of experiences and significance beyond leisure travel. Nature-based tourism focuses on experiencing natural resources, such as landscapes, forests, mountains, and jungles. This type of tourism engages visitors not only physically but also on deeper, spiritual levels. Eco-tourism involves traveling responsibly to natural areas with the aim of learning about, appreciating, and exploring natural landscapes alongside cultural aspects, it is fundamentally committed to nature and social responsibility, often inspired by spiritual visions and capable of fostering self-fulfilment and spiritual experiences. Cultural historical tourism involves traveling to sites that are culturally attractive. This type of tourism aims to gather new information and satisfy the cultural needs of tourists. By observing the behaviors, rituals, languages, and cultures of different societies, cultural tourism enhances mutual understanding and peace among people worldwide, enhancing cultural tolerance. Pilgrimage tourism, a phenomenon historically older than tourism itself, can be considered a primitive form of travel. It involves a spiritual journey where individuals seek a deeper connection with the divine. Lastly, religious tourism is motivated by religious intentions, either solely

or in combination with other motivations, aiming to visit sacred places such as mosques, churches, temples, and religious tombs. It can also include visits to cultural, natural, and environmental sites that hold sacred significance for local people, attracting non-local visitors for various religious reasons. (Khoshkhoo & Nadalipour, 2016).

Khoshkhoo & Nadalipour suggest that tourism inherently carries a spiritual dimension (2016). They argue that all different forms of tourism include a spiritual aspect. When travellers engage in travel and tourism, they discover new places, diverse cultures and unique experience which may influence their viewpoint and understanding of life. The findings of the study conclude that every type of travel includes some aspect of spirituality and moreover the extent of spiritual influence on different tourism experiences varies depending on the type of tourism as well as the traveller's intentions towards spiritual growth.

### **2.3 Motivational factors**

There is a wide range of motivational factors driving individuals to embark on spiritual journeys to a variety of different destinations. The motivational factors are as diverse as the travellers themselves, consisting of a wide range of cultural, personal, and spiritual factors which influence the decisions to embark on these transformative journeys. Furthermore, the societal trends shifting towards wellbeing, the search for a deeper meaning in life and the pursuit of finding inner peace have also contributed to the popularity of spiritual tourism. According to Kivisola (2015), the expectations travellers have from spiritual travel journeys include peace of mind and relaxation, getting to know one's inner self, quieting down and meditating, gaining new experiences and general wellbeing and relaxation. The world is constantly changing, and the number of global crises is on the rise.

Specifically, the consumer society, which is characterized by a cycle of consumption, disposal and repurchasing damaging the environment and the planet, generates an unsustainable spiritual void in many, urging them to satisfy their spiritual needs (Robledo, 2015). Additionally, many travellers are also seeking for solutions, relief, or answers to their issues in the different practises and traditions often offered at these experiences (Norman, 2011). Many also find the potential escapism and immersion of these types of travel experiences alluring. Participation in practices or traditions offer some a different state of being which they may not be able to embody at home. (Norman, 2011). This might vary from being able to concentrate more to or a sensation that time is more effective, because it has been separated from the everyday life (Norman, 2011). The motivational factors for spiritual tourism may also include the desire to learn to more effectively control or heal the mind and the body through yoga and meditation (Norman, 2011). Although as mentioned

before, spiritual and religious tourism often intersect with one another, however the motivational drivers for these two differ. In spiritual tourism, the emphasis is more on wellness, healing, personal development, socialization, going on journeys, recreation as well as leisure, whereas the motivators for religious tourism are more focused on religious observance, ritualised practise, reaffirmation of identity and cultural performance (Cheer et. al 2017). According to Reisinger (2013), in retreat tourism, the tourists who decide to embark on these types of experiences are not necessarily spiritual tourists but may simply be burnt-out executives who are hoping to improve their quality of life in many aspects or due to loss of finances or status are facing an identity crisis thus requiring a turn towards inner core values or an increased appreciation towards nature.

#### **2.4 Destination competitiveness and spirituality**

The competitiveness of a destination is constantly shaped by a variety of factors, including shifts in trends and socio-economic factors of travellers. Nadalipour (2017) suggests that just like any other phenomena, tourism attractions encompass two primary dimensions: the material and the spiritual and combined form the tourist experiences. The material aspect consists of tangible and worldly tourism products, such as physical attractions, food, transportation, accommodation as well as other material elements essential for a trip (Nadalipour, 2017). This dimension aligns with the foundational needs which are highlighted in the lowest part of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and regardless of mental attributes, perceptions or wants, all tourists require particular facilities during their travel, which links to the material dimension of the tourist experience (Nadalipour, 2017). Alternatively, the spiritual aspect consists of ambience, atmosphere and refers to transcendental human needs such as "self-actualization" and the "quest for meaning" (Nadalipour, 2017). These self-actualization needs are included in the top level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Nadalipour (2017) explains that for tourists who are not solely seeking hedonistic experiences, the spiritual dimensions may hold significant influence, possibly shaping the material aspects of the travels. Likewise, the material dimension may impact a tourist's spiritual experience and perception either positively or negatively, thus both material and spiritual dimensions determine the overall quality of the tourism experience (Nadalipour, 2017). The expectations from a tour operator in spiritual tourism journeys and the attributes which make the journey successful include the journey meeting expectations, having a skilled guide provided by the organizer, proximity to nature or water, personal time and the trip flowing smoothly (Kivisola, 2015). Other attributes deemed as significant to make the journey successful included organized programs or activities, shared group time, educational lectures and sessions, trips to nature or hikes, theme-based meals, trip diversity, the destination's location and guided exploration of the destination (Kivisola, 2015).

The extent of spiritual tourism experience differs among tourists based on tourism type and therefore the tourists' type plays an important role in the relationship between tourists' perception of destination attractiveness and their overall experiences (Nadalipour, 2017). However, there are multiple different factors which contribute to the tourist's experience and their perception of a destination's overall competitiveness since experiences are subjective and often quite complex.

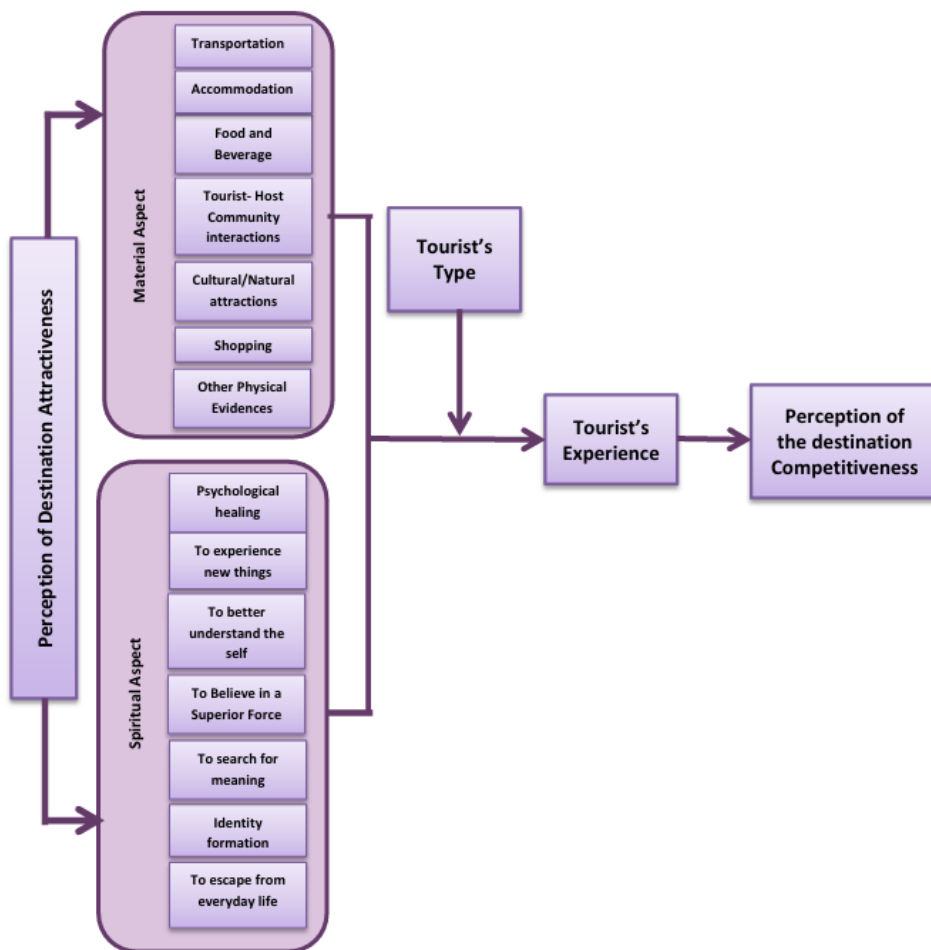


Figure 4. Tourists' perception of the destination competitiveness based on material and spiritual experiences (Nadalipour 2017).

This figure 4 portrays the process of the tourist's perception of destination attractiveness. The two primary dimensions of tourism attractions are presented, other being the material aspect and other the spiritual one. The material aspect of tourism attractions consists of matters such as transportation, accommodation and food and beverage, meanwhile the spiritual aspects consist of matters

such as psychological healing, experiencing new things and understanding oneself better. The tourist's type is the link in between, which affects the tourist's experience as well as the perception of the destination competitiveness.

## **2.5 Characteristics of spiritual tourism experiences**

Within the realm of spiritual tourism, exploring the characteristics of spiritual tourism experiences includes a rich collection of destinations, trip durations and activities and experiences included in the trip. Dileep & Nair (2021) present the five distinct categories of spiritual tourism identified by Alex Norman (2012) based on a large literature review and data gathering. Through these categories, five possible attraction types are presented:

1. The first category is "Spiritual Tourism as Healing", and it involves aspects which are associated with physical wellbeing and linked to wellness tourism. The attractions in this category may include activities such as Yoga retreats.
2. The second category is "Spiritual Tourism as Experiment", in which tourists seek alternative experiences when they feel a need for change. Examples include backpackers who immerse themselves in destinations which offer experiences such as yoga or meditation.
3. The third category is "Spiritual Tourism as Quest", which centres around the pursuit of knowledge and as well as discovery as the primary motivational factor. Examples include learning about religious practices such as Hindu rituals observed during the Kumbh Mela event in India or exploring authentic aspects of different cultures.
4. The fourth category is "Spiritual Tourism as Retreat", in which travellers seek an escape from the everyday life. The attractions for these tourists may include for example meditation retreats, health spas and eco-tourism destinations.
5. The fifth and last category is "Spiritual Tourism as Collective", in which travellers desire to participate in a shared, collective experience. The attractions often include a combination of multiple features which are known for spirituality.

Dileep & Nair (2021) present the variety of other types of different spiritual tourism attractions identified by Cheer et al. (2017). These include destinations which evoke feelings of accomplishment (such as climbing Mt. Everest), as well as religious heritage sites such as Camino de Santiago. Other attractions offer opportunities for discovery (such as Machu Picchu), or enlightenment (such as the Pyramids of Giza). Very religious sites, such as Mecca, the Holy Land and Rome are also

quite prominent destinations for spiritual travellers. In addition, places such as Rishikesh offer opportunities for wellbeing, while sites such as Stonehenge can offer the traveller a satisfaction of wonderment. Furthermore, places like Uluru offer a chance to experience indigenous cosmological systems.

Meditation and yoga retreats to beautiful, far away destinations have emerged as a prominent trend in Western spiritual tourism. The content of the retreats usually consists of group meditation training sessions, lectures, or meditation alone in one's own room. The meals in these types of retreats tend to be vegetarian, and interaction with others during the retreat is usually limited or forbidden. (Norman & Pokorny, 2017).

The duration of spiritual tourism journeys varies significantly due to their unique nature and the diverse elements involved. Factors such as trip organization, whether it's independent or arranged by a travel agency or other organizations, play a crucial role in determining the duration. Whether the trip is made for religious purposes (such as pilgrimages) or spiritual purposes (such as going on meditation or yoga retreats) also impact the duration. For example, CC's Hideaway offer a 7-day yoga retreat holiday in Thailand, as well as other retreats lasting up to 2 weeks at a time. Tour operator Cosmos offers travellers religious tours lasting from 8 to 14 days. The most common duration for a retreat is around 6-10 days, while some may last as long as one year (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). Typically, visits to singular spiritual or religious destinations, such as architectural sites with cultural heritage like temples, tend to be relatively brief. According to UNWTO (2013), the average length of stay at popular sites in Viet Nam, such as a temple or a pagoda is around one day.

## **2.6 Impact on wellbeing**

Wellbeing is defined as “the experience of health, happiness and prosperity” and encompasses aspects such as maintaining optimal mental health, experiencing a high level of life satisfaction, feeling a sense of purpose or meaning, and effectively coping with stress (Psychology Today). Wellbeing has many different dimensions and is very subjective depending on the person.

Spiritual tourism offers many opportunities and resources for travellers to improve or maintain their overall wellbeing. Exploring sites with religious significance, actively participating in ceremonies, and deeply engaging with the cultural heritage of a destination can bring a profound sense of connection and belonging. These encounters often inspire feelings of awe, reverence, and spiritual fulfilment, contributing positively to mental and emotional wellness. Additionally, spiritual tourism

often includes activities like meditation, yoga, mindfulness, and introspection, all known to support mental health and emotional strength.

Zhang, Huang & Shen (2023) researched the effects of tourists' spiritual values on psychological wellbeing at Buddhist sites in China. The study highlighted how individuals, while traveling, could engage with diverse aspects of their surroundings including people, nature, and various life experiences to discover a positive direction for their lives. Furthermore, the research highlighted the distinct influence of the cultural ambiance, particularly present in special religious settings such as Buddhist mountains. In these environments, travellers reported feelings of awe, special religious experiences, and intentional behavioural regulation, distinguishing their experiences from conventional tourism experiences.

Norman & Pokorny (2017) argue that meditation retreat tourism can serve as a self-administered well-being intervention. This approach can enable individuals to take on a more active role in their personal development. Indeed, retreats serve as a powerful symbol of transformation, whether through intensive training or insights gained in different moments of deep reflection and through the removal from the everyday life which then followed by return (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). The process of leaving and then returning to the familiar environment embodies the transformative nature of retreats. Individuals usually go on these journeys to explore the inner beings of themselves more deeply, thus possibly returning with a fresh perspective, feeling revitalized and more able to face life's challenges.

Buzinde (2020) uses autoethnography to share their personal story about their spiritual tourism experience at a yoga/meditation retreat in Rishikesh, India and connects it to self-determination theory (SDT). Self-determination theory is a psychological framework which explains human motivation and wellbeing. The key components of SDT are competence (the need to be effective dealing with the environment), relatedness (the need to have close and affectionate relationships) and autonomy (the need to feel independent and self-governing) (Simplypsychology, 2023).

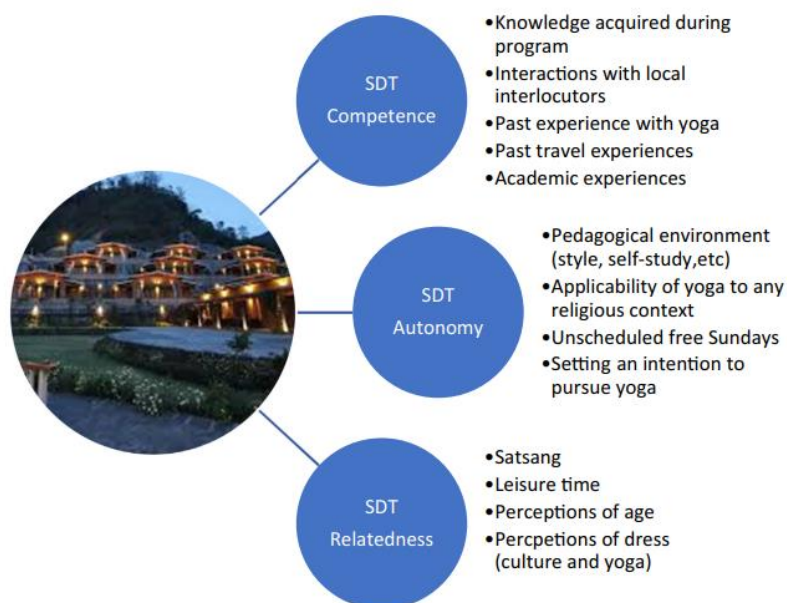


Figure 5. The connection between self-determination theory and the authors personal experiences in Rishikesh (Buzinde, 2020)

SDT was linked to the authors personal experiences through the exploration of three key elements:

**Competence:** The author felt effective as well as capable in the retreat setting due to their prior experience and knowledge on yoga, traveling abroad and academic background. The sense of mastery allowed the author to confidently navigate the spiritual tourism environment, thus contributing to their psychological wellbeing.

**Relatedness:** The author experienced a sense of connectedness and belonging through shared activities such as Satsang (Sanskrit term referring to the act of gathering with like-minded, spiritual individuals) (Yogapedia, 2023). The sense of relatedness and feeling accepted fostered a strong social bond among participants, enhancing the author's wellbeing.

**Autonomy:** The retreat enabled the author freedom to pursue yoga in a way that aligned with their personal values and interests, thus promoting their wellbeing. (Buzinde, 2020).

Travel itself can be a very transformative experience for the individual. Author Paulo Coelho describes in his novel *Aleph* (2011) the transformative potential of traveling: "After weeks on the road, listening to a language you don't understand, using a currency whose value you don't comprehend, walking down streets you've never walked down before, you discover that your old "I," along with everything you ever learned, is absolutely no use at all in the face of those new challenges, and

you begin to realize that buried deep in your unconscious mind there is someone much more interesting and adventurous and more open to the world and to new experiences". Reisinger (2013), explains that the reason why travel becomes truly transformative, is because it not solely reveals a true or authentic self, but possibly also a more courageous and adventurous self who may have never existed if the individual had never travelled. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this can be associated with the highest part of the hierarchy, which deals with self-actualization (McLeod, 2024). Adding the element of spiritualization into the travel experience and allowing space and encouraging the traveller to explore their inner being, there is great potential for long lasting wellbeing outcomes especially in spiritual tourism experiences.

### 3 Key theories underpinning spiritual tourism and wellbeing

The theoretical framework of this research will lean on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (McLeod, 2024). This will provide a lens through which the dynamics of spiritual tourism and its' impact on an individual's wellbeing can be explored. This research will also utilize Experience realms by Pine and Gilmore (Pine & Gilmore 1999) to categorize the different types of spiritual tourism experiences and how they contribute to visitor satisfaction and overall wellbeing outcomes.

#### 3.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a psychological theory developed by Abraham Maslow in 1943, which consists of a model with five tiers, all representing human needs and is usually depicted as a pyramid. According to Maslow, the lower-level needs must be satisfied before progressing to the higher-level needs. According to this theory, the higher one goes up on the hierarchy, the more difficult it is to satisfy the needs in that stage, due to the interpersonal and environmental barriers (McLeod, 2024).

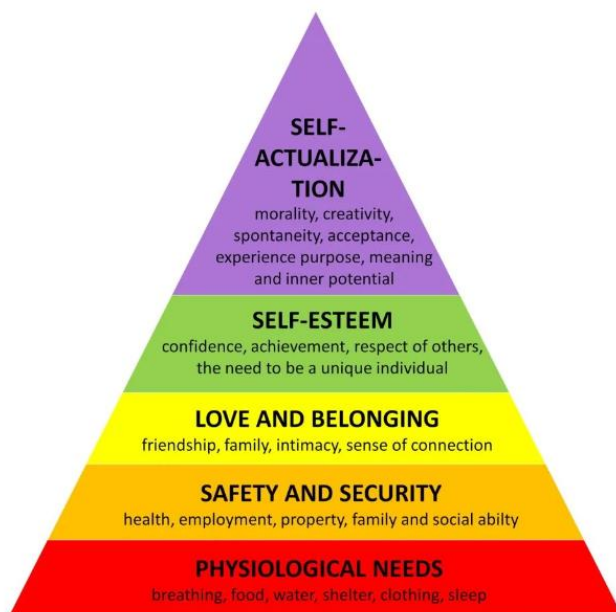


Figure 6. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod, 2024).

The five levels of the pyramid can be broken down as follows:

1. **Physiological needs:** The most essential needs for human survival, such as air, food, water, shelter, clothing, and sleep. Without these, it is impossible to survive.
2. **Safety and security:** Once the basic most essential psychological needs are satisfied, people seek safety and security, this means that there is protection from danger and harm, as well as emotional, financial and health security as well social stability.
3. **Love and belonging:** After physiological and safety needs are met, people seek social belonging and intimate relationships. This includes friendship, acceptance, trust, intimacy, sense of connection as well as giving and receiving love.
4. **Self-esteem:** This level presents the essential human need to be accepted and valued by other individuals. This includes both external factors such as success, status and recognition from others and internal factors such as confidence and self-respect.
5. At the top of the hierarchy is self-actualization, and it refers to the actualization of an individual's potential, self-fulfilment, and personal growth.

By integrating Maslow's hierarchy of needs into this research, there is potential to analyse how spiritual tourism addresses basic human needs across the different levels of the hierarchy and the contribution of them into the travellers' overall wellbeing and personal development. The emphasis of this research will be on the three higher levels of the hierarchy: love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization.

### **3.2 Experience realms by Pine and Gilmore**

Experience realms by Pine and Gilmore (1999) is a framework which offers a comprehensive understanding of the different types of experiences that businesses can create for their customers. It consists of four different realms, each with its own characteristics and objectives:

**The educational:** The experiences in this realm are mainly focused on enhancing the customers' knowledge, skills and providing insights. Examples include attending a workshop, participating in a guided tour or taking part in a class where you are able to learn or enhance a skill. The emphasis is on learning and personal development.

**The entertainment:** The experiences in this realm focus more on providing passive experiences, which are entertaining and offer an escape from the everyday life. Examples include watching a movie, attending a concert, or visiting an amusement park.

The aesthetic: The experiences in this realm focus on providing visual pleasure. Examples include visiting an art gallery, staying at a luxury hotel, or enjoying beautiful landscapes.

The escapist: The experiences in this realm focus on providing an escape from the everyday life, transferring participants to imaginary, fantasy worlds. Examples include virtual reality experiences, immersive theatre experiences and themed entertainment parks.

#### Experience realms

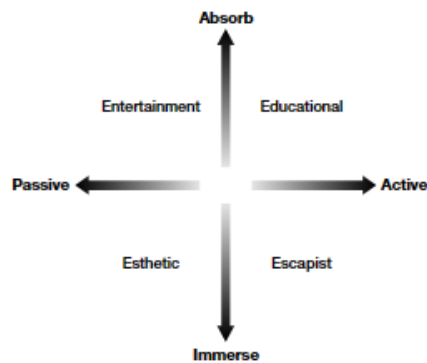


Figure 7. Experience realms by Pine & Gilmore (1999)

By utilizing Experience realms by Pine & Gilmore (1999), there is potential to analyse how different types of experiences in spiritual tourism contribute to the various different dimensions of wellbeing.

Figure 8. A summary of the theories and the elements used in this study

Author	Theory	Element	Usage
Pine & Gilmore (1998)	Experience Realms	Educational Escapist Esthetic	Author will inspect these three elements and see if there is significance in having them present in the journeys
Abraham Maslow (1943)	Hierarchy of Needs	Love and belonging Self-esteem Self-actualization	Author will inspect these three elements and the contribution of them into the travellers' overall wellbeing and personal development during the journey

## 4 Methodology

This chapter delves into the research method chosen for this thesis, the justification for it as well as explaining how it is applied to this research.

The subject of this research is spiritual tourism, the motivations behind it, the characteristics of it and its' overall impact on holistic wellbeing. The study aims to understand the underlying motivations that drive individuals to engage in sacred travel, and how such experiences contribute to their overall holistic wellbeing.

The main research question for this thesis is to understand how these types of travel experiences influence individuals' overall wellbeing.

The sub-questions are as follows:

1. What are the underlying motivational factors that drive individuals to visit sacred places?
2. What are the characteristics of spiritual travel experiences, including the destinations chosen, duration of the trips and the activities involved?

### 4.1 Qualitative approach

Qualitative research is an approach that delves into real-world issues by offering a deeper understanding of underlying phenomena. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data, qualitative research generates hypotheses and provides context that can further explain quantitative findings. This method involves collecting and analysing the participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours, addressing questions of "how" and "why" rather than "how many" or "how much" (Tenny, Brannan & Brannan, 2022). Capturing phenomena like experiences, attitudes, and behaviours can be challenging with quantitative methods. Further, a qualitative approach allows participants to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, offering insight into the how, why, and what of their actions during a specific time or event (Tenny, Brannan & Brannan, 2022). This research has been conducted using a qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences and personal stories of individuals who participate in spiritual tourism. By focusing on participants' narratives, this research aims to uncover the different motivations that drive people to embark on sacred journeys and to explore how these experiences contribute to their holistic wellbeing.

## **4.2 Semi-structured interview**

Semi-structured interviews combine elements of both structured and unstructured interview types. Unlike unstructured interviews, where the conversation is more free flowing, the interviewer in a semi-structured interview has a clear plan in regard to the questions they plan to ask. However, unlike structured interviews, the exact wording and sequence of the questions are not fixed. Semi-structured interviews are usually open-ended thus allowing flexibility in the discussion (George, 2022). This research will use semi-structured interviews because they offer a balanced approach that is suitable to exploring complex and personal topics such as spiritual tourism and its impact on holistic well-being. Meanwhile, the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allows participants to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words, offering rich, more detailed insights into their unique experiences. The interviewer can adjust the phrasing of the questions, ask follow-up questions, and explore new areas of interest that may come up during the conversation.

## **4.3 Interview questions**

The interview consists of a total of fifteen questions. These questions aim to explore key themes and concepts relevant to the research, such as the participants' motivations, expectations and general wellbeing outcomes of the journeys to provide qualitative data to support the overall objectives of the thesis. The follow-up questions were voluntary and were asked to give the interviewees more chances to elaborate. Questions 2 and 10 relate to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The follow-up question for question number 5 relates to Experience Realms by Pine and Gilmore. The questions are available in both English and Finnish, depending on the interviewee's preference.

<p style="text-align: center;">+</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Motivation to visit</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Goals and expectations</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Characteristics of the journey</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">+</p>
<p>1. Can you describe what motivated you to visit a sacred place or embark on a spiritual tourism journey?</p> <p>o Follow-up: Was your motivation more religious, personal, or cultural? Can you elaborate?</p> <p>2. Would you say your motivation was driven by basic needs (like seeking comfort or safety) or higher-level needs (like self-actualization or transcendence) (Basic needs might include seeking comfort, security, or a sense of belonging. Higher-level needs could involve personal growth, self-actualization, or a desire for transcendence) Which of these do you feel applies more to your experience, and why?</p>	<p>3. What specific goals or expectations did you have before embarking on this spiritual journey? For example, were you seeking answers to personal questions, hoping for a spiritual awakening, or looking to connect with a particular culture or community? How did these goals shape your experience?</p>	<p>4. Can you describe where you visited and the duration of your trip?</p> <p>5. What activities did you engage in during your visit (e.g., meditation, prayer, rituals, cultural exploration)?</p> <p>o Follow-up: Would you describe your experience as more passive (observing) or active (participating)?</p> <p>6. Did you interact with other travelers or locals during your visit? If so, how did these interactions contribute to your experience?</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Impact on wellbeing and personal growth</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Broader reflections</b></p>	
<p>7. How has your visit influenced your overall well-being and personal growth? o Follow-up: Can you describe any specific moments during your travels that had a profound impact on your mental, emotional, or spiritual health? +</p> <p>8. Did any aspect of the journey contribute positively to your physical health?</p> <p>9. Have these experiences led to any long-term changes in your outlook on life, lifestyle, attitudes, or relationships?</p>	<p>10. Which personal needs do you believe your spiritual tourism journey fulfilled (e.g., self-actualization, sense of belonging)?</p> <p>11. How do you think visiting sacred places contributes to your sense of happiness and fulfillment?</p> <p>12. Do these spiritual journeys provide a sense of escape from daily life, or are they more about transforming your perspective? +</p> <p>13. In your opinion, what makes visiting a sacred place or embarking on a spiritual tourism journey particularly powerful or transformative?</p> <p>14. How do you think spiritual travel experiences contribute to people's general well-being? For example, do these experiences help reduce stress, enhance self-awareness, or foster a sense of inner peace?</p> <p>15. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience that we haven't covered?</p>	

Figure 9. Interview questions for the participants (Hämeenoja, 2024)

#### 4.4 Reaching target population and purposive sampling approach

Although not all individuals in the target population may be readily available, efforts have been made to reach a relatively diverse population of interviewees through social media platforms. Additionally, individuals within the author's social circle who meet the criteria have been contacted for participation. Five participants who have previously embarked on spiritual tourism journeys were selected for in-depth interviews, because their experiences align with the research's focus on spiritual tourism and its' impact on holistic wellbeing. The usage of email and Microsoft Teams for conducting the interviews also enhances the accessibility. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental or selective sampling, is a non-probability sampling technique used in research to select individuals or groups which align with specific criteria that is relevant to the research question or objective (Hassan, 2024). Purposive sampling is used in this research because of the specialized nature of the research topic, which is focusing on the experiences of individuals who have taken part in some form of spiritual

tourism. The target population related to the topic is not only specific but also more likely to be found across various locations and communities.

#### **4.5 Data collection**

The data collection process took approximately a month to complete, after all the interviewees had been chosen. Five participants were contacted and chosen for this research. Throughout the month, the author scheduled and conducted interviews with the participants individually, allowing time for more detailed discussions about their unique spiritual tourism journeys.

#### **4.6 Data analysis**

The data is analysed by reading and sorting out the transcriptions from the interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams and familiarizing with them. Additionally, carefully reading through the interview results gained via email. Identifying the themes of the interviews is another step, as well as identifying common patterns and similarities within the interview results. Thematic analysis involved several times of reading the interview results through to spot key details and connections between the participants' responses. The process highlighted both the common factors as well as the uniqueness of each spiritual tourism journey and thus provided a holistic perspective on the role of spiritual tourism in enhancing well-being.

#### **4.7 Data management**

The data was collected through one-on one interviews conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams as well as the author's school's Outlook account in Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. Participants were informed about the recording process during the Teams meetings and consent was obtained from them prior to the recordings taking place. The video recordings were processed into qualitative data by downloading transcriptions and removing the interviewee's names and stored to the author's school's OneDrive. The transcripts were reviewed and organized for thematic analysis. All the data will be disposed of by the end of the research process.

#### **4.8 Ethical considerations**

The author of this research has taken into account the ethical considerations necessary to ensure the integrity of the study. All of the interviewees have been informed about the purpose of this research and the data has been anonymised to ensure their privacy. The author has also reflected upon their own possible biases to ensure that the experiences are portrayed in the most authentic way without misinterpreting. The author has also made efforts to ensure that the interviewee's have been able to share their experiences in their own words and give sufficient space for that.

## 5 Findings

Altogether five individuals were interviewed for this thesis. The individuals will be referred to as interviewee A, B, C, D and E to sustain their anonymity. All of these individuals had participated in some form of spiritual tourism and are residents of Finland. The participants were also all female and between ages of 18 to 65.

### 5.1 Characteristics of the journeys and activities

The interviewees each experienced five distinct forms of spiritual tourism. Interviewee A participated in an inner evolution retreat that lasted for one extended weekend. The retreat involved drinking ayahuasca during night sessions, and other South American plant medicines were also optionally available. The retreat took place in a rural Finnish setting. During the visit, Interviewee A took part in night ceremonies where ayahuasca was consumed, after which the participants would calm down together on mattresses while soothing music played in the background. In the morning, they participated in integration sessions, where the events of the previous night were discussed together. After that, they ate and spent time together. The facilitators also led various guided activities, such as meditation, dancing, and walking barefoot in the forest while being guided by another participant.

Interviewee B attended a retreat organized by a church community in a Finnish natural setting that lasted for five days. The daily schedule included silent retreats as well as informal group sessions. In these group sessions, participants had the option to join discussions or simply listen to others. Over time, interviewee B's experience evolved from passive participation to more active involvement, as they slowly contributed more of their own thoughts to the group's reflections. Since this was a church event, the program also included some prayer sessions, and even though interviewee B was present for them, they were not personally significant for them.

Interviewee C participated in a yoga teacher training in India, which lasted for 1,5 months. Interviewee C participated in activities such as meditation, mantra reciting, cleansing rituals for example in Ganges River, visiting holy temples and participating in other rituals there.

Interviewee D traveled to Morocco for a one-day ceremony. The ceremony was guided step-by-step by a shaman. The first half of the ceremony was only meant for concentration and self-inspection, and during the other half of the ceremony the point was to share the experiences with other participants.

Interviewee E visited a Buddhist center in Gomde, Austria to do volunteer work for two months. The activities involved were meditation practices such as Samatha, which is a form of meditation, where Buddhists work to deepen their concentration by focusing their minds on their breathing (BBC, n.d.), mantra recitation and light offerings, which is a symbolic practice of offering light and can be done in forms of candles or lamps. Light offerings are a way to pray for safety, wellbeing and a bright future for the year ahead (Dharma Drum Mountain, n.d.). Other activities involved were seminars, conversations, and reading.

## 5.2 Motivations for the visits

All of the interviewees had very different motivations for embarking on these spiritual tourism journeys. Interviewee A was initially motivated by her boyfriend, who wanted to go on a retreat. They were afraid that they would miss out, if they didn't participate as well, and thus discussed with the retreat facilitator to gain more knowledge of the retreat in question. Additionally, interviewee A realized that they had personal motives as well to participate in the retreat, such as the desire to let go of resentment tied to a difficult family relationship and free themselves from the emotional pain, which was affecting their relationship with their partner. Thus, their motivation for embarking on the retreat was quite personal. Interviewee A's motivation was driven by higher needs in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, such as personal growth and self-transcendence.

Interviewee B's motivation for embarking on their spiritual tourism journey was also personal. Interviewee B was at a turning point in their life and felt the need to pause and reflect on their values and the direction of their future. Interviewee B's motivation was also driven by the higher needs in Maslow's Hierarchy, such as personal growth and breaking away from their old habits and approaches.

Interviewee C was motivated by the desire to deepen their knowledge on yoga, they wanted to find out the origins of yoga and familiarize themselves with yoga asanas, which refer to different yoga postures. They also wanted to get to know their inner spiritual world better. Interviewee C's motivation was also driven by the higher needs in Maslow's Hierarchy.

Interviewee D's motivation for the spiritual tourism experience was mainly driven by curiosity, it was something they had wanted to do for a long time. They were looking for something which would be guided, instead of navigating it alone. The experience was recommended to them by their partner at the time and was also given to them as a gift. Interviewee D's motivations were likewise driven by the higher needs in Maslow's Hierarchy, they were looking for an experience which would be transformational and wanted to learn more about themselves and the universe.

Interviewee E's motivation came from a strong interest in Buddhist philosophy, a desire to learn more about its concepts, and a wish to experience the culture and daily life of Buddhist practitioners through meditation and spiritual practices. Their motivation included religious, personal as well as cultural motives, and was driven by the higher needs in Maslow's Hierarchy, such as understanding, personal growth and spiritual connection.

### **5.3 Goals and expectations for the journeys**

The goals and expectations individuals have when embarking on spiritual journeys are vast and different. Some may have a lot of different goals or expectations, while other may have only little or none. Interviewee A's main goal was to experience a spiritual awakening and improve conscious presence. Interviewee A explained that their goal was the force which kept them going on the retreat, because at the beginning, during the first night they had felt like they wanted to go back home. Interviewee B's motivations and expectations for the journey were mainly tied to their personal needs and unanswered questions. While joining a specific community was not their goal, the experience turned positive because they felt safe with the group and connected with others on the same wavelength. Interviewee C's motivation stemmed from the desire to learn more about yoga and The Vedas, which are considered to be the most valued and sacred texts in India, which contain hymns and prayers and have influenced the development of yoga traditions (Burgin, 2011). Additionally, interviewee C wanted to share experiences with like-minded individuals and attain balance and peace of mind. Interviewee D's main goal for the experience was to experience some level of personal transformation. Interviewee E's goals for the journey were to learn about Buddhist philosophy, advance on the Buddhist path, gain a deeper understanding of the concepts of "enlightenment" and "consciousness," and seek new, interesting encounters and inspiration. These goals kept them motivated to read, ask questions, engage in conversations, participate in seminars, and practice meditation.

### **5.4 Impact on holistic wellbeing**

The main purpose of this research was to find out how spiritual tourism can impact holistic wellbeing. Interviewee A felt that their visit only had positive effects on their well-being and personal growth. They now feel a greater sense of love toward others than they did before and a deeper peace with the present moment, whatever it may bring. On the other hand, they have also noticed that this love and presence sometimes fade, and they need to remind themselves of the experiences from the retreat. They remember one moment from the night session or ceremony when they felt an

indescribable sense of connection with a person with an intellectual disability. That person smiled and laughed, and they found themselves smiling and laughing along with them. In that experience, it felt as though they were both on a shared path in search of truth. Another moment that vividly stayed with them was also from the night session, when they found themselves reflecting on all the people closest to them and feeling the love they have for them. Interviewee A found no particular impact that the experience would have had on their physical health. However, their attitude toward life has changed significantly. In the past, when unexpected negative events arose, they struggled to accept it. Now, they aim to approach whatever life brings with as much neutrality as possible, though it still takes practice. They also notice a shift in their closest relationship and in how they approach it. In moments of conflict, for example, they try to manage their own defensive reactions. They feel that their journey addressed the need to understand people and the universe on a deeper level and the journey provided more of a starting point for them to explore this matter more.

Interviewee B felt that their visit had a positive impact on their wellbeing. They arrived there with significant personal questions, and during the visit the solutions began to arise. The break from everyday life and the change of environment made things in their home setting appear different, helping them to see things from a more accurate perspective. Regarding their physical health, they did not notice any significant changes. The experience had a lasting effect on their relationships as well as their attitude towards themselves. In a way, the experience made their thoughts about what they do and do not want from life clearer. The visit reinforced their self-image, encouraging them to listen to themselves and hold on to their dreams and goals. During that point in their life, the journey positively supported their happiness and perhaps equipped them for future life challenges.

Interviewee C felt that the experience also impacted positively on their holistic wellbeing. The trip to India and the yoga training experience broadened their world view and expanded their perspective. The experience itself was quite scheduled, with waking up at 6am to do morning yoga, and sort of forced the participant to be present with themselves. Interviewee C noticed quite a lot of different emotional blockages opening during the trip, when participating in yoga asanas. Asana is a Sanskrit term that translates to "posture," "seat," or "place." In the context of hatha yoga, asanas refer to the physical positions we take during practice (YogaBasics, n.d.). Interviewee C experienced positive physical effects of the intensity of participating in yoga two times a day as well as eating only a plant-based diet. The experience of the friendliness and helpfulness of locals in India also positively contributed to the trip.

Interviewee D felt that their ceremony experience completely took away their anxiety for one year post experience. They explained that after the experience they felt a different type of trust in life and that everything would eventually be okay. The experience also allowed them to connect with other

participants in the ceremony on a completely different level and be vulnerable. The experience contributed positively on their holistic wellbeing and outlook on life, however they pointed out that the aspects learned in these experiences are a consistent practice which should be executed post experience in daily life.

Interviewee E explained that their experience in the Buddhist center enabled them to learn to be more aware and gain enjoyment from simple everyday things, for example walking up the stairs or having breakfast at the table. They also gained a lot of insights and perspective from the teachings at the center, and became more aware of how everything is constantly changing and how all events stem from past events. They felt that in moments of calmness, they felt a greater sense of acceptance toward certain things. This sense of calm also allowed them to observe their thoughts more clearly. One insight they gained was recognizing the importance of planning, knowing when a task is scheduled reduces the mental space it occupies and prevents it from causing unnecessary stress. Interviewee E felt that several aspects of the journey positively contributed to their physical health, including being surrounded by nature, experiencing mental peace, having access to healthy food, enjoying good sleep, and having opportunities for exercise. Additionally, the excitement of new experiences played a role in boosting their overall well-being.

## **5.5 Broader reflections on spiritual tourism experiences and holistic wellbeing**

Participants were also interviewed about the overall impact of spiritual tourism experiences on people's general well-being, the transformative aspects of these experiences, and the connection between fulfilling personal needs on spiritual journeys and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The similar factor between all the interviews was that self-actualization, which is on top of Maslow's hierarchy (McLeod, 2024), especially experiencing a sense of purpose was a prominent factor in these spiritual tourism journeys. Love and belonging, which is the third highest level of the hierarchy, (McLeod, 2024) was also evident in the interviews. Participants expressed a sense of deeper connection to other individuals through these experiences and a sense of belongingness was present as well.

The transformational nature of these types of journeys depends greatly on the individual's own openness to self-reflection and readiness to engage with the practises encountered. Spiritual tourism journeys may be a catalyst for individual's personal growth and challenge their existing values and beliefs about the world and themselves. A few of the interviewees felt that spiritual tourism journeys offer an opportunity to transform their perspective, reconnect with one's inner child and in the best-case scenario offer a lasting impact or improvement to their lives. Two interviewees pointed out that personal change is something which needs to be maintained after these journeys

and experiences through consistent practise. One interviewee pointed out that often embarking on spiritual tourism journeys is a privilege and may require a certain amount of money. A retreat may cost hundreds of euros, and thus may not be accessible for all to participate in.

Figure 10. Summary of the spiritual tourism experiences

Interviewee	Characteristics of the Journeys and Activities	Motivations for the Visits	Goals and Expectations for the Journeys	Impact on Holistic Wellbeing
Interviewee A	Inner evolution retreat, rural Finnish setting, ayahuasca night ceremonies	Encouraged by partner, fear of missing out, desire for emotional healing, letting go of resentment	Spiritual awakening, improve conscious presence	Greater sense of love for others, peace with present moment, attitude shift towards life
Interviewee B	Retreat organized by church, Finnish natural setting, silent retreats, group sessions	Personal growth, life turning point, need for reflection	Desire for answers to unanswered questions about life	Clarity on personal questions, new perspective, clarified life goals, supported happiness for future
Interviewee C	Yoga teacher training in India, meditations, mantra reciting, visiting holy temples	Desire to deepen yoga knowledge, curiosity about yoga origins	Learn more about yoga and the Vedas, share experiences with like-minded, peace of mind	Emotional blockages, better physical health, plant-based diet, broadening perspective, supportive community
Interviewee D	One day ceremony in Morocco, guided by shaman	Curiosity, long-held interest, desire for transformational experience	Personal transformation	Anxiety relief, trust in life, connection with participants, vulnerability, positive impact on holistic wellbeing
Interviewee E	Buddhist center in Austria, volunteer work, meditations & other rituals	Interest in Buddhist philosophy, desire to learn key Buddhist concepts	Advance on Buddhist path, seek new encounters and inspiration	enjoyment of simple things, acceptance, clarity, positive impact on physical health

(Hämeenoja, 2024)

## 5.6 Spiritual tourism, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Experience Realms

This chapter delves into how these spiritual tourism experiences are interconnected with Maslow's Hierarchy of needs (McLeod, 2024) as well as Experience Realms (Pine & Gilmore 1999). The focus will be on the higher-level needs in Maslow's Hierarchy of needs; love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization. The focus on Experience Realms will be on the educational, escapist and esthetic realms.

### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Love and belonging (McLeod, 2024) can be seen in how the interviewees engage in group activities during the journeys and seek communities who share similar interests. Interviewee C emphasized wanting to share experiences with like-minded people during the yoga teacher training and said to have found a supportive community. Interviewee D mentioned that the connectedness with other participants during the guided ceremony positively influenced their wellbeing. Interviewee E was seeking to find new encounters with others during the time spent at the Buddhist centre. Belongingness is a very important aspect of happiness for humans, and often spiritual tourism experiences have a community aspect to them.

Self-esteem (McLeod, 2024) is interconnected to the personal accomplishments and challenges a person may face during spiritual tourism journeys. Interviewee A experienced a shift in attitude and a greater sense of love for others during the retreat, which can essentially reflect greater love for self. Interviewee B described a clarity gained on personal goals during the retreat, reflecting an increase in purpose as well as self-confidence. Interviewee C experienced opening of emotional blockages, which is likely to boost self-esteem as well.

Every interviewee's journey includes elements of self-discovery as well as personal transformation, aligning with self-actualization needs, which is on top of Maslow's Hierarchy (McLeod, 2024). Interviewee A was seeking for spiritual awakening and eventually after the journey found peace in the present moment and an attitude change towards life, indicating personal transformation. Interviewee B was seeking for answers to life's questions and gained clarity post journey to personal questions, life goals as well as gained a new perspective. One of Interviewee C's goals was to find peace of mind, after the journey, they felt a release of emotional blockages as well as a broadening of their perspective. One of interviewee D's main goal for their journey was personal transformation and they were able to eliminate their anxiety for an entire year after the experience. One of interviewee E's main goals was to advance on the Buddhist path, and post journey they felt enjoyment from the simple things, were able to experience a greater sense of acceptance for things as well as clarity.

### **Experience Realms by Pine and Gilmore**

The educational realm (Pine & Gilmore 1999) is present in each one of the interviews, the emphasis is mainly on spirituality and self-improvement and learning something about oneself. Some of the experiences include other type of learning as well. For example, Interviewee C learns about yoga and Vedic origins and interviewee E learns about Buddhist concepts. The activities present in these experiences are intentionally designed for knowledge gain. The learning about oneself usually happens in more spontaneous ways and can either happen during the experience or post experience.

The escapist realm (Pine & Gilmore 1999) is present in several of the experiences, where the interviewees step out of their usual daily life environments. For example, interviewee A participated in ayahuasca ceremonies in a rural Finnish setting, aiming to disconnect from daily life and dive into inner healing. Interviewee C stepped into a new cultural setting with their yoga teacher training in India, blending educational and escapist elements. Additionally, interviewee D travelled to Morocco for a shaman-led ceremony to seek a transformational experience.

The esthetic realm (Pine & Gilmore 1999) is present in multiple aspects of these spiritual tourism journeys, from natural settings to buildings. Both interviewees A and B participated in retreats organized in Finnish natural settings. The beauty and tranquillity of the nature provide a peaceful setting for enhancing a spiritual experience. Furthermore, interviewee C visited holy temples in India, which offers an esthetic element to the experience.

## 6 Conclusions, discussion and future recommendations

The main purpose and goal of this research was to find out the motivations and characteristics of spiritual tourism journeys as well as spiritual tourism's effect on an individual's holistic well-being. Additionally, Experience Realms (Pine & Gilmore 1999) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod, 2024) were used as a theoretical framework. The author inspected the existence of educational, escapist and esthetic realms (Pine & Gilmore 1999) in spiritual tourism journeys as well as love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization needs (McLeod, 2024). The educational realm was present in most of the experiences, whether it was learning about oneself or the world on a deeper level or learning about yoga or Buddhist concepts. The escapist realm was also present in most of the journeys, when participants travelled and immersed themselves in new environments far from home. All of the journeys carried some form of esthetic dimension, with beautiful nature surrounding them or visiting temples.

Love and belongingness (McLeod, 2024) were also an important aspect shaping the journeys, connecting with others and finding community was mentioned by multiple interviewees. The fulfilment of the self-esteem need was more abstract to evaluate; however, it was reflected through gaining clarity and confidence in one's sense of self and life direction, as well as through generating greater self-love and compassion for others. Lastly, self-actualization was present in every experience through personal transformation and self-discovery.

Previous research has argued that meditation retreat tourism may serve as a self-administered well-being intervention (Norman & Pokorny 2017). Retreats are a symbol of transformation, offering both intensive training and insights through moments of deep reflection and stepping away from daily life (Norman & Pokorny 2017). One of the core characteristics of spiritual tourism is its ability to disrupt the usual pace as well as limitations of everyday life and this break of a routine is likely the key factor in the appeal of spiritual tourism (Cheer et al., 2017).

Through the interviews conducted in this research it is evident that often one of the key factors for embarking on a spiritual tourism journey is indeed the need for a break from everyday life to gain some distance to issues and a new perspective. The journeys also offered the interviewees moments of personal transformation, which in some cases has even been a lasting effect. The interviewee's trips had a variety of different durations, varying from one day for up to few months. The length of the trip itself is not the necessary factor for determining the outcome and effects of the experience itself, it is rather the participants' own mindset, personal perspective as well as engagement that shape the experience.

Reisinger (2013) mentions that the reason why travel becomes truly transformative not solely because it uncovers a person's authentic self, but because it can also bring out a more courageous and adventurous version of the self- one that may have never emerged without the travel experience. All of the interviews conducted in this research reveal a transformed version of the travellers post journey, where they have gained new insights. These experiences seem to have fostered personal growth, with the participants adopting new values, perspectives and behaviours which contribute to their overall holistic wellbeing.

This research thus proves that spiritual tourism experiences positively impact a person's holistic wellbeing through multiple dimensions, emotional mental as well as in some cases physical. The interviewees report emotional healing, enhanced self-awareness, and a deeper sense of purpose and peace as a result of their journeys. By engaging in different reflective and meditative practises, connecting with like-minded individuals and immersing themselves in peaceful or sacred environments, travellers can gain tools which may contribute to lasting transformation. It is notable however that these types of niche travel experiences may not readily be available to everyone for example due to financial limitations or geographical constraints. As the demand for holistic wellbeing is growing, it is important to explore ways to make such transformational experiences more inclusive and accessible to all.

## **6.1 Recommendations for future research**

Future research on spiritual tourism should investigate how to make spiritual tourism experiences more accessible and inclusive. The accessibility could be either inspected from a financial perspective, given the financial and logistical barriers which may limit access to spiritual tourism experiences, or from the accessibility aspect of people with physical limitations and how they are or are not taken into consideration when designing these types of experiences or travel packages. Additionally, with the rapid advancements in technology, virtual and digital forms of tourism are increasing in popularity. Thus, future research could analyze how technology could be utilized in spiritual tourism experiences and analyze the effectiveness of these digital spiritual tourism experiences in promoting holistic wellbeing. Another possible future research topic could be exploring the ethical dimensions of spiritual tourism, due to the possibility of cultural appropriation, commercialization of sacred practices, places and indigenous traditions.

## 6.2 Learning outcomes

Through conducting this research, the author learnt more about spiritual tourism as a concept and the various characteristics of spiritual tourism experiences. The author gained a deeper understanding of the diverse motivational factors driving individuals to embark on spiritual tourism journeys. The author also gained more insight into the characteristics of spiritual tourism experiences, such as the activities taking place and setting in which these travel experiences can take place in. One of the key learning outcomes for the author was to understand the holistic impact these experiences can have on an individual's wellbeing. Additionally, the author learned that these types of travel experiences are not solely for enhancing wellbeing, but also for personal transformation which may be lasting. The findings highlighted how spiritual tourism is a large concept and these types of journeys are very personal, yet they share common threads which tie back to fundamental human needs, such as feeling belongingness and connectedness to other human beings. Spiritual tourism journeys may also be the key to getting to know oneself on a deeper level by allowing space to step away from daily routines and environments.

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