

CULTURAL TOURISM IN THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE 21ST CENTURY: EVOLUTION, CHALLENGES, AND TRANSFORMATIVE PATHWAYS

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ABSTRACT

This paper systematically reviews the evolution, challenges, and transformative pathways of cultural tourism in the first quarter of the 21st century (2001-2025), a sector integral to global tourism and cultural exchange as recognized by the UNWTO. Addressing critical research gaps in interdisciplinary analysis and comprehensive pre- and post-pandemic assessments, this study provides a holistic understanding of its multifaceted dynamics. Utilizing a documentary research methodology, it synthesizes insights from international reports and peer-reviewed literature across economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and technological dimensions from 2001-2025. Key findings illustrate a broadening of cultural tourism concepts, now encompassing creative, gastronomy, and pop culture tourism, alongside tangible and intangible heritage. The pre-COVID-19 era saw remarkable growth and economic contributions, but also rising issues of overtourism, cultural commodification, and environmental impact. The pandemic brought unprecedented disruption, accelerating digital transformation and virtual tourism. The ongoing post-pandemic period (2022-2025) shows uneven recovery, a critical pivot towards sustainability, resilience, and community-based tourism, with continued technological integration and new ethical dilemmas. The paper concludes by emphasizing that future success requires balancing economic value, socio-cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, inclusive community engagement, and responsible technological leverage.

Keywords: Cultural Tourism, 21st Century Tourism, COVID-19 Impact, Sustainable Tourism, Digital Transformation

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