

From Sacred Space to Crowded Attraction: Exploring International Tourists' Perceptions of Overcrowding at the Temple of the Tooth Relic Based on Trip Advisor Reviews

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Introduction

Religious and heritage tourism play a significant role in the global tourism industry, attracting millions of visitors to destinations of cultural, historical, and spiritual significance. Religious sites serve as places of worship, pilgrimage, and tourist attractions. Many religious sites operating as tourist destinations are experiencing challenges associated with overcrowding and it provides negative impacts on residents, tourists and heritage sites (Goodwin, 2017; UNWTO, 2018). Studies have shown that congestion, long waiting times, limited access to sites and fewer opportunities for authentic cultural interaction negatively impact visitor experiences and influence tourists' destination evaluations, willingness to revisit and their overall perception of destination quality (Manning, 2007; Yin et al, 2020). Studies have largely focused on motivations for pilgrimage, visitor satisfaction, authenticity, destination image and heritage conservation (Timothy and Olson, 2006). However, little attention has been paid to how tourists perceive overcrowding in sacred heritage environments. In the Sri Lankan context, this research gap is particularly relevant to the Temple of the Tooth, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most sacred Buddhist sites in the world, as it is recognized as a prominent and popular overcrowding destination in Kandy (Dilshan, 2025). Addressing this gap, this study explores international tourists' perceptions of overcrowding at the Temple of the Tooth through an analysis of TripAdvisor reviews. The findings contribute to the growing literature on overtourism and religious tourism, while providing insights for sustainable visitor management at sacred tourist destinations.

Objectives

The study aims: (1) to identify and analyse tourists' perceptions of overcrowding at the Temple of the Tooth Relic and (2) to examine how overcrowding influences tourists' experiences at the Temple of the Tooth Relic.

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Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design following a netnographic approach using reviews from TripAdvisor. Purposive sampling was applied and reviews were selected based on criteria including being in English, displaying the reviewer's username and country, and containing references to crowds or waiting experiences. TripAdvisor reviews for the Temple of the Tooth Relic from January 2024 to May 2026 were used as the primary data source, resulting in 62 reviews retained for analysis out of 230 total within the period. The study was guided by Carrying Capacity theory and overtourism concept. The selected reviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results

1. Tourists' Perception of Overcrowding

The findings reveal that tourists perceive overcrowding as a common feature in the Temple of the Tooth.

Crowding

Many tourists have expressed frustration with the long queues and long waiting times to gain access to the viewing area and a brief glimpse of the relic. There is congestion at the entrances, particularly in the shoe storage area and at the ticket counters. The shoe store was described as "too small for the number of foreigners visiting", and it was noted that long lines for tickets were often a source of initial frustration for visitors.

Temporal Concentration During Festivals

Overcrowding is perceived to be most acute during the morning and evening puja (theva) ceremonies and described the site as "absolutely packed", "crowded", "crammed" and "very busy" during these times. Reviewers have noted that visiting the temple outside of these puja times allows for a more "tranquil" experience.

Spatial Bottlenecks

As a major source of congestion, the upper corridor, where the sacred tooth relic is displayed has been identified. One reviewer likened the density of this area to a "mosh pit at a Metallica concert", while another compared the pressure to "1960s football crowd".

Weekend and Holiday Surges

The perception of congestion increases on weekends and local holidays. Tourists have observed that these periods bring in "large numbers of locals and school children".

Deficiencies in Crowd Management

Reviews highlighted issues with visitor management such as inadequate crowd control measures, poor organization, inadequate visitor guidance and limited staff intervention. Tourists themselves have suggested solutions for the implementation of designated queues, improved visitor flow systems, additional ticket counters, and clearer instructions throughout the site. These comments indicate a view that existing population management strategies may not be adequate to accommodate the current volume of visitors.

2. The Influence of Overcrowding on Tourist Experiences

Perceived overcrowd significantly shapes the visitor experience, and indicates the physical discomfort, psychological distress, and perceived loss of spiritual authenticity.

Physical Discomfort and Safety Concerns

High visitor density, heat, and humidity in Sri Lanka led to a physically stressful experience for tourists. Reviewers reported "pushing and shoving", and some expressed safety concerns for the "elderly or infirm". It has also been noted that the site is not suitable for children due to these spatial constraints. The "very hot ground to walk on" adds to the physical stress of crowded, slow queues.

Diminished Spiritual Atmosphere

Many tourists report that "crowded" conditions and "deafening noise" diminish the sacredness of the site. The difference between free entry for locals and "pricy" tickets for foreigners was noted by several, leading to a perception that the site is being "exploited by tourists". Due to the commercialized feel, some visitors have felt like "intruders" to local pilgrims, while others viewed the site as a "cynical money-maker" or "more of a souvenir stand than a holy jewel".

Conflict of Interest

There is a perceived conflict between the spiritual needs of locals and the photographic/curiosity-driven needs of tourists. One reviewer noted that tourists "clog up the aisles... to get selfies" while worshippers wait patiently. Conversely, another reviewer argued that tourists are merely "observers" and should "get out of the way" for those people to worship.

Visual Disruption

The main negative impact of crowding is that tourists are unable to see the relic or the beautiful casket. Tourists have complained about "blocking the space" and "tourists blocking the aisles to take selfies", which has left others unable to get even a "5-second view" of the inner sanctum.

Negative Impact on Service Quality

The overcrowding hinders interactions between staff and visitors. Reviewers noted "pushing officials" and a "hostile attitude" from staff dealing with visitors, suggesting that "sensitive training in hospitality management" is needed for the staff. The lack of proper guidance for visitors also highlighted disorganization within the temple, where "no one knows where to go".

Dissatisfaction

High visitor density creates pressure and visual obstruction on the "horrible" crowd, which leaves many "disappointed" because tourists cannot see the tooth relic. This kind of experience leaves visitors feeling "desperate to leave". As a result of that, many tourists conclude that the experience is "not worth it" due to the "unbearable" and "insane" nature of the crowds.

Value Despite Crowds

Despite the negative impacts, a subset of travellers still viewed the experience at this sacred site positively. They noted that the "charming" atmosphere and "enchanted" religious music outweighed the "struggle". For these visitors, the "cultural significance" and "impressive architecture" made the trip worthwhile despite the unbearable crowds.

The findings demonstrate that overcrowding is a significant aspect of the visitor experience at the Temple of the Tooth Relic. While tourists generally recognised the site's religious, cultural, and historical significance, excessive visitor numbers often resulted in congestion, long waiting times, reduced satisfaction, and challenges to spiritual engagement.

Conclusion

This study explored international tourists' perceptions of overtourism at the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Sri Lanka, using a netnographic approach of TripAdvisor reviews. The findings reveal that overcrowding has become a notable challenge affecting the quality of visitor experiences at Temple of the Tooth. The study demonstrates that overtourism is not a continuous condition but occurs

during specific periods. During these times, visitor numbers frequently exceed the site's effective carrying capacity, creating conditions that negatively impact both physical comfort and emotional well-being. The findings highlight the need for active visitor management strategies that balance heritage conservation, religious significance, and tourism development. Such measures include enhanced crowd management systems, visitor flow planning, better information provision, and special training for staff could help reduce the negative impacts of overtourism while preserving the sacred character of the site. Such interventions are vital to maintaining visitor satisfaction and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the destination. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on overtourism and religious tourism by providing empirical evidence obtained from a UNESCO World Heritage religious site in Sri Lanka. These findings support the carrying capacity theory by demonstrating how high tourist density negatively impacts destination evaluations and overall tourist experiences. In a systematic way, the study demonstrates the value of netnography as a practical and cost-effective approach to capturing authentic tourist perceptions. The insights generated can inform future research and management practices in religious heritage destinations facing similar overtourism challenges around the world.

Keywords - Overtourism, Carrying Capacity, Buddhist Heritage Tourism, Tourist Perceptions, User Generated Content

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