



# Reviving a Collapsing Country's Economy Through Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of Tourism in Lebanon

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**Abstract:** As cultural and heritage tourism have proven to be effective tools for economic growth for countries, this research aims to identify whether cultural and heritage tourism have been effective for the revival of tourism in Lebanon. The country witnessed a steep decline in tourism numbers in recent years due to economic instabilities. With the devastating outbreak of COVID-19 tourism in Lebanon came to a halt. This research explores the use of cultural and heritage tourism as a means of tourism revival for Lebanon, and as a solution to the bad economic downfall. This research illustrates how regardless of all turbulence the country has witnessed over the years, tourism in Lebanon is unique as it does not bow down to the pressures of various disruptions. There is, however, a major need for Lebanon to resolve its continuous political conflicts and find a “winning formula” among all political parties in order to grow its economy through cultural tourism while dealing or managing any political turmoil which may sporadically rear its ugly head. Lebanon is also in need to strengthen its cultural connection with other ‘brother’ countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman and learn from the success stories of tourism and cultural heritage development happening there. The research demonstrates an essential necessity for Lebanon to improve and re-store heritage infrastructure in the country. The damage caused by the civil war, Beirut port blast, and poor economic downturn prevented restoration efforts to all heritage sites in Lebanon.

**Keywords:** Culture, Cultural Heritage, Heritage, Lebanon, Tourism, Tourism Economy

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## 1. Introduction

Culture and heritage have been acknowledged to be amongst some of the most central components of a country's identity. The connection to our ancestors can either be tangible or intangible. Interesting places of visit such as historical sites and monuments, cultural events and other traditions associated with such a destination, the environment and other landscape features, natural and man-made, are a central part of such identity [2]. Culture and heritage are thus broadly the definers of a nation's core that differentiate it from the next or other nations [29].

Research indicates that the tourism industry is one of the most central and vital industries for any country's economy and its growth in those terms [39]. Culture and heritage play an important role as components of this tourism industry and their ability to differentiate and magnify on such country's identity. This is when we begin to engage in cultural and heritage tourism in specific terms. It is under this tourism

banner that visitors to a destination travel to experience that destination's historical sites, attend cultural events or learn some fascinating facts about its history. These visitors are then identified as cultural and heritage tourists [24].

One factor that has been central to tourism in general has been the fact that tourism is a people's industry and as such it is volatile and susceptible to various elements whether man-made such as wars and strife or natural such as weather disasters or pandemics in essence [5]. Under any of these, the tourism market may respond in a negative manner and thus exhibit signs of shrinkage on the whole. Although these conditions may seem debilitating, the austerity strength of the tourism industry to bounce back from such shrinkage is unforetold. What is further unique about the tourism industry is its ability to adapt to any of the mentioned elements in the aftermath of their occurrence [10]. What is premised by this is that even though the tourism industry may react in a negative manner to devastating effects of either man-made strife or natural disasters, therein lies opportunities that the industry

often finds itself transforming or evolving from into something better and hence over-coming the effects of any such events.

The above holds truth when it was experienced towards the end of 2019 in the wake of the deadly and devastating COVID-19 (corona virus) pandemic which besieged and continues to besiege the globe at the time of penning down this research [41]. Being a severe virus that affects the respiratory system, the COVID-virus rapidly took its toll on individuals and spread rapidly across continents. It quickly gained the moniker of a "pandemic" due to its rapid and devastating effects and especially the deaths of millions of people within a short space of time and this by the WHO [11]. It quickly became apparent that this pandemic was not going anywhere soon and as such to limit its rapid spread, certain "hush" measures had to be taken by the world leaders in their efforts to understand what was going on such a scale and to limit the effects of the pandemic which was promising to wipe out the global population. Austerity measures such as hard lockdowns of whole countries, quarantine camps and hospitals, social distancing, wearing of masks and the closure of international borders, soon were the order of the day globally. These measures were soon to hurt the globe's economies more than was ever imagined by the leaders [43].

With this synopsis of the pandemic and its effects firmly etched on the world's population, thoughts quickly assimilated into how whole global industries would ever make a meaningful come back from such devastation. For the tourism industry, it could then be subsumed that culture and heritage could just be the answer to the revival of the tourism industry in most global destinations. Silberberg [33] once noted the effectiveness of culture and heritage as tools for economic recovery and growth for a country's economy. This is a sentiment that seems to have been carried over by many scholars in their works and as such it is thought the effects of the COVID-pandemic may also just be weathered by the promotion of the cultural and heritage tourism sectors [34]. It is for this reason that the current focus of this research output, is to investigate and critically assess the strength and plausibility of culture and heritage as tools in the growth of both the tourism sector and economy of Lebanon.

Lebanon is a Middle Eastern country that is well known for the numerous difficulties it faces or has faced for a very long time as a country. The main issues plaguing Lebanon seems to be civil strife dating back to the 1950s, which has seen the civil situation in the country change hands, unsatisfactorily, from the different militia clans that have come into power and been deposed by others upon a failure to stabilize the country [9].

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country endured various crises of a massive magnitude from a disintegrating healthcare system, constant rising political instability and these basically compounded the country's economic situation negatively [21]. In October 2019, a meeting of the different "political parties" sat to decide in the increase of taxes even to the extent of formulating a tax on the popular social media platform, WhatsApp. These decisions

eventually led to the infamous "October Rising" protests by the Lebanese people following months of economic decline amid the additional taxes imposed on them [42]. This led to the depreciation of the Lebanese currency and further untold poverty for the people of Lebanon.

2020 added its own set of challenges for the country of Lebanon, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a further economic collapse. Corruption by the Lebanese authorities and failures in addressing these and many more crises resulted in the decline of basic civil liberties [9]. A massive blast of the Beirut port also became headline news and investigations into that have also been plagued by lack of transparency, credibility and independence. The usage of uncalled for force by security forces in dispersing protesting crowds, a failing healthcare system due to the COVID-pandemic and rolling blackouts are just some of the discomforts that have plagued the country in the past two years [42].

With the totaling of all the above crises the question then becomes what does it all mean for the tourism industry of Lebanon? Are there any safe spaces for visitors to come and enjoy what the country has to offer in terms of tourism? Are potential visitors being swayed or driven away to visit because of fears for their safety or that the turmoil currently ensuing may just not offer any enticing prospects to look forward to in terms of tourism experiences? It is for this reason this research paper is being undertaken currently. It is an analysis of the potentials that lie in utilizing what the country does not need to produce, but, harness in the form of culture and heritage in looking at the rebuild of its economic state and also the re-growth of the tourism industry. It may also just offer plausible and possible solutions for the Lebanese authorities to look into in the rebuild of their country as a safe and proper tourism destination for any potential visitors.

## 2. Case Study of Lebanon

Under this section the analysis commences with a synopsis of the current economic situation of Lebanon which will be followed by a juxtaposition of similar situations that ensued in other countries that have gone through Lebanon's current woes. This will then be followed by an in-depth critical discussion of the potentials that culture and heritage have as elements or tools for tourism growth for the country and the potential it has for economic growth and a change of its fortunes. Any potential limitations to this proposed line of thought will then be considered culminating with conclusions and recommendations for future potential application and roll out of any policies premised on cultural and heritage tourism.

### 2.1. Current Economic Situation in Lebanon

With a rapidly debilitating economic situation and financial crisis over the last two years, Lebanon has been beset by crisis upon crisis [39]. These include the effects of the COVID-19 and the Beirut explosion mentioned earlier. Of those mentioned, the economic crisis has presented by far the largest and most devastating as well as most persistent impacts of a negative nature for the country. So severe has been the

economic crisis to the extent figures show that globally, it has ranked possibly in the top three most devastating and severe crises to have occurred in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to date. These figures indicate a shrinking of Lebanon's GDP from US\$55 billion in 2018 to about US\$20 billion projections for the 2021 financial forecast [39]. The per capita GDP during the same period plummeted by 37.1%. Such a rapid contraction may be attributable to wars and conflict.

The country's currency, the Lebanese Lira (LBP) seems to continue towards a downward spiral with inflation rates remaining in the triple digits. The effects of inflation are considered to be very regressive and tend to affect the poor and middle-class mainly [39]. The social impacts emanating from such an economic meltdown are dire and pose a potential for catastrophe. It was already indicated that more than half the population of Lebanon is already living under the poverty datum line. Unemployment figures are on the rise and a collapse of basic services has been witnessed across the board. The situation has further been compounded by acute shortages of fuel which has also led to severe electricity blackouts country wide. Health services have again suffered strongly with noticeable shortages of medication.

With all this negativity proliferating even internationally, the effects towards the country's tourism industry was and continues to be a cause for concern. Adding the "October Revolution" into the mix, which saw protests flare up against the government by the Lebanese people who took to the streets demanding an exit of all political parties, these actions by the citizens was a culmination of decades of misrule and a declining economy, shrinking GDP and one of the highest debt to GDP ratios globally [42].

Middle Eastern nations have been traditionally known as energy producing nations in the form of global fossil fuel producers and suppliers. Their economies have largely been dependent on the production of these [27]. Over the past two decades or so, this status quo has been the subject of change for these nations in attempts to seek a diversification of their economies by pushing non-energy sectors as factors that can have a meaningful impact and change in their economies. Tourism has largely emerged as one such non-energy sector that the region has proffered. The region is replete with a wealth of heritage, climates that are ideal to tourism and a host of leisure resources that elevate the tourism industries to levels of comparativeness and competitiveness with other regions [27].

Many areas exist within the region that exude the trademarks of tourism development efforts such as those found in Dubai dubbed the shopping city of the Middle East or Beirut the capital of Lebanon also dubbed the Paris of Middle East. Further, the Lebanese coastal areas possess a plethora of tourism potential as was experienced and enjoyed by the West as a destination and financial center in the late 1950s and 1960s [36]. This flourish was short lived, however, as this development was soon curtailed and derailed by the civil war which occurred from 1975 to 1990, wiping out much of the post-world war economic development the country had amassed. These gains were soon enjoyed by Bahrain as it

welcomed the financial centre developed earlier in Beirut. The war ended and a rebuilt of the country's infrastructure together with some stability began to return as semblance to the war-torn country. Another 2006 war with Israel soon undid the small gains to the tourism sector and the country's economy as a result [27].

Pursuant the Israel war and the recent civil unrest in October of 2020, Lebanon's economic woes became unbearable. A devaluation of its currency began against major world currencies such as the USD and the British pound at 1500 LBP to US\$1 dropping to 17000 LBP for a single US\$1 [12]. The blast mentioned earlier in this research of more than two thousand tons of ammonium nitrate, which were stored at the port, led to the death of more than 200 people, the injury of more than 6000 people, and the home deprivation of more than 300000 people, in addition to the closure of numerous businesses. Furthermore, all goods available at the port were destroyed totally, among which goods for people and businesses and aid from other countries for fighting the COVID-19 pandemic were also part of the consignments which perished in the explosion. The overall damage estimation resulting from the explosion was pegged at about US\$15 billion. It also included the temporary closure of the port for a period [12].

A round up of the economic situation will reveal a country that is beset by the worst confluence of negative elements that can lead to a debilitating state for any tourism industry faced with the same or similar issues. The biggest question currently ensuing is whether past events taken into account may be superimposed into the country's current situation? Has all the turmoil led to the tourism industry reacting in a negative manner as has been witnessed before? Also, looking further at the prospects of re-growth of the sector, what role or centrality of the cultural and heritage factors will play in achieving these results [23]?

## ***2.2. Cultural and Heritage Tourism in Lebanon***

Lebanon is endowed with a one of a kind landscape and cultural heritage. It also adorns one of the most wonderful climates throughout the year and a sizeable territory of about 10452 Km<sup>2</sup> [17]. Its four seasons have meant that tourists are able to visit its various places of interest which are recognized as world heritage sites throughout the year. This intimates at the tourism sector in Lebanon being recognized as traditionally being one of the leading economic contributors [20]. It has a huge income and employment impact for the country.

In 2018 the magnitude of this contribution was valued at US\$3.8 billion which accounted for 7% of the country's GDP and this emanated from travel and tourism only. The total sector contribution in the same year stood at US\$10.4 billion which was a 19.1% contributor to the GDP, making it the second highest ratio in the Middle East. Tourism capital investments were valued at US\$1.3 billion in 2018 and were projected to grow exponentially to US\$1.7 billion by 2028. In terms of employment, the sector accounted for 18.4% of all of Lebanon's employment statistics in 2018 making it one of the

largest employers in the country [20]. Since 2014, the tourism sector has shown massive potentials in terms of growth with annual growth rates pegged at 10% since 2014. The 2010 fiscal year saw tourist figures reach 2 million visitors for the country which was a record ever. During the 2018 season tourist arrivals reached 1.9 million with Europeans accounting for the biggest chunk of those figures at 36% closely followed by other Arabic visitors at 29% of total of those visitors. Finally, in terms of spend, a return of Gulf tourists in 2017 to the country saw Saudi nationals record the largest share of spenders with 14% spend with UAE visitors at 12% and Kuwait visitors at 7% [20].

Magnifying on the tourism sector itself, leisure tourism is likely the most popular type of tourism that tourists have been noted to come for in the country. The country's coastlines are said to be most popular with tourists. Cultural and Heritage tourism follows closely with the country offering quite a wide range of cultural tourism derivatives including 5 UNESCO World Heritage sites [13]. In the summer season, the country plays host to over 15 international music and other entertainment festivals such as one of the most popular global concerts – the Baalbeck and Byblos International Festivals – which feature a range of both local and international performers. Baalbeck is a city set by the Roman ruins, with a unique architecture with what is left. The festival held in the site usually receives numerous tourists from all over the globe and is a major source of tourism for the country [28]. Added to this cultural pot of variety was a re-introduction of the country by the Vatican as a worldwide pilgrimage destination this after a 12-year removal [20].

Additionally, the availability of the country's natural heritage resembles an essential uniqueness of Lebanon. With more than 225km of coastline, the country has some of the most enjoyable beach fronts especially during the summer months thus making it a preferred summer destination. Winter is also quite a vibrant season with a host of activities availed to tourists of varying types such as ski resorts, backcountry trails, cross-country trails, and snowshoe trails available [26]. The country further has a unique cedar forest, Chouf Reserve, valleys, as well [32].

A synopsis of the Lebanese people themselves reveals that they are a unique kind of people with a diversity of religions and cultures. One thing that is characteristic of them is the fact that religiously, alcohol is a huge no just as in most Middle Eastern nations. However, in some regions (and may be for the accommodation of foreign visitors and the expat community) alcohol has become a bit more acceptable [32]. The Lebanese are known for their hospitality, and their love of life. Getting to know the Lebanese culture is different from all others [32]. Even now, within their economic crisis, Lebanese people protest during the day, and go out partying or doing some entertaining events in the evenings – and their vibes are the main reason tourists visit the country.

Essentially, it is evident that Lebanon's tourism sector especially its cultural tourism has a significant potential for the revival of the country's fortunes. Its crises have also been noted as being major contributors to its decline and shrinkage.

The Ministry of Tourism has even opined that, "If stability remains, the tourism industry is going to grow at such a rate that it is more than capable of overcoming any recent upheaval, – Nada Sardouk, Ministry of Tourism." [18]. From this can be gathered that despite any negativity that the country may receive based on its political and civil issues, it has shown signs and resoluteness in coming back from such negativity. In April of 2008 the Ministry indicated that they had received 280 000 tourists to the country with hopes of increases in those figures to between 1.3 and 1.6 million by the end of that year. This resoluteness was then evidenced by the highest visitor figures during the 2010 season as alluded to earlier. This is indicative of the dynamism of the tourism sector in Lebanon if negativity is not a part of the recipe [18].

This then draws attention to the comparative aspect of this research work by also taking into consideration other similar situations and events that have occurred in other countries and from which such other countries have emerged by implementing cultural tourism policies in such revival strategies as may be of assistance for Lebanon's tourism sector as well.

### ***2.3. Comparative Cases on Cultural Tourism as a Growth Strategy***

Lebanon is certainly not the only country globally that has been faced with economic challenges of the magnitude that they have seemed insurmountable. There are a host of other nations that have been beset by such challenges that a brief mention of these and how they eventually revived their fortunes through the implementation of cultural tourism policies, is worth mentioning.

One of the most popular examples of a similar nature is Moldova. Although not emanating from a situation of strife, Moldova sought ways of harnessing their cultural heritage potential to improve on and grow their tourism sector. Cultural heritage is considered a pivotal factor of the quality of life and also as an important source of income. Many nations derive revenue from tourism activities conjured up through cultural heritage [35]. The same was perceived and implemented by Moldovan authorities in turning around their tourism sector fortunes. They did, however, face one main challenge and was the low involvement and participation of the local community.

Next to come under focus was Thailand. An examination of its cultural and heritage potential and whether these were effective tools in the growth of the tourism sector revealed that culture and heritage were ideal attractions for both local and international visitors, however, a qualification seems to have been that these factors were more of an attraction for local tourists. Compounding the situation was the fact that most of the country's heritage attractions were under private management and not government managed hence limiting some aspect of being open to all in terms of visitation [30].

South Africa was next under focus as a nation that considered the implementation of culture and heritage as tools for strategic revival of the tourism sector. Under this study, it was unearthed that developing nations with strong rural backgrounds have the potential to offer authentic experiences

for tourists in terms of cultural consumption. The process was seen to be further bolstered by the participation of both local communities in such drive and the government involvement to a large extent in pushing such an agenda [8].

Finally, a look at Kenya was undertaken as well. In observation of the overall tourism sector, the data indicated that cultural and heritage tourism may have been under exploited and for future plans of growth policy considerations in that direction were warranted. This pointed to the success and development of the sector. The sector as a whole had to be exploited in totality together with culture and heritage in proffering up a meaningful and effective plan in achieving those aims [38].

#### **2.4. Factors Negatively Affecting the Growth of Tourism in Lebanon**

With the potential efficacies of implementing growth strategies for the Lebanese tourism sector having been explored and compared to other nations who considered and in some cases even implemented cultural tourism policies for the growth of their tourism sectors, factors do exist that have been noted to be of hindrance for Lebanese authorities to overcome before any meaningful strategies of growth may be implemented. 5 factors are worth mentioning.

##### **2.4.1. The Political Situation in the Country**

For any nation's tourism sector to have any meaningful turn around or growth prospects, the involvement of the government authority cannot be undermined. They are a pivotal partner to such growth. The current situation in Lebanon is however not conducive for the sector as the government and other political players are too busy embroiled in leadership and political squabbles to take note of and care for the people of Lebanon. This has a definite negative impact on tourism growth [1].

##### **2.4.2. The Security Situation in the Country**

With a debilitating political situation, the security of both citizens and visitors also became a threat for all inhabitants of Lebanon. The uncertainty created by these upheavals is such that domestic crimes have been noted to be on the increase with security threats of abductions for ransom being on the increase. This is a definite discouragement for any visitor to even set foot in a country with such statistics [7].

##### **2.4.3. The Fuel Problem in the Country**

As previously discussed, a weathering fuel situation in the country has meant that demand has exceeded supply thus causing acute shortages of fuel. This has seen snaking queues of motorists waiting for fuel supplies and this is noted as a recipe for negatively impacting any prospective growth aspects for tourism.

##### **2.4.4. The COVID-19 Pandemic**

Latest figures indicate that the COVID-19 virus has continued to be a negative issue for Lebanon's economy with general stats pointing to a "war" that the authorities do not seem to be winning from. While in some Middle Eastern

countries, the pandemic has been reduced or contained to some extent, in Lebanon it continues to wreak havoc with just a fraction of the population having received vaccines for the pandemic [40].

##### **2.4.5. Damages from the Beirut Explosion**

Following the Beirut explosion, not only roads, infrastructure and businesses were damaged, but also some heritage buildings, and the country does not have enough money to help rebuild all of the affected areas [1].

### **3. Conclusion**

This research output has managed to put the Lebanon perspective into focus and has made cut-throat revelations of the underlying challenges that the tourism sector in Lebanon faces. A severe economic melt-down, previous and possible civil strife going into the future, a runaway unemployment situation, rising inflationary pressures, a devastating explosion and an incurable COVID-19 pandemic, are just some of the ingredients that have created and continue to threaten what may be considered a very vibrant tourism sector. Solutions are needed and fast.

This research output aimed at intimating that culture and heritage as forms of tourism could be one of the strongholds for the Lebanese authorities to turn around their economic fortunes. This was derived and premised from the fact that the country is replete with many cultural and heritage cites and offerings which have been noted to be magnets for tourists coming to the country in the past and may yet still enjoy popularity from older and newer visitors to Lebanon going into the future. These can, however, not work in isolation and therefore need the assistance of both the local authority and the Lebanese people in working together to make policies and strategies work for their good. This was also evidenced from the comparative section with other nations who have taken the same route.

From the literature, it is evident that the country has so much to offer, with huge international festivals being the draw card of international artists and visitors throughout the year and this means there is already a foundation from which plausible policies for implementation as turnaround strategies may be derived. However, the country is facing major drawbacks to its pleasant offerings. Politics in the country, coupled with COVID-19, lead to several other issues such as security instability and financial drawbacks. Peace and stability are the cornerstones of a successful endeavor based on cultural and heritage tourism. Without these, the country's success prospects may remain dim. This may just further frustrate the people of Lebanon thus leading to more and more strife and a never unending dire situation for all inhabitants.

Lebanon has a lot to offer in terms of turning around the fortunes of its tourism industry. The 5 UNESCO World Heritage sites that exist in the country are not appropriately utilized and do not financially benefit the county as they should. The re-introduction of the country by the Vatican as a worldwide pilgrimage destination is a treasure that Lebanon

could enormously benefit from. It is recommended therefore that stakeholders being the government and other tourism stakeholders, come together in the formulation of rules and regulations that will be of assistance to both public and private sector sprucing up of Lebanon's overall tourism image as a world class destination. The country's main woes have been attributed mainly to politics and the government is the chief protagonist in these. With this in mind therefore, it is further recommended that, through its Tourism ministry, active promotional campaigns about the country's cultural and heritage offerings should be adopted and implemented. These should include activating Lebanese embassies abroad to advance and promote these to the tourism global community. The Beirut blast did have its negative financial and infrastructural impacts on the country, however, this is a minor burden in the greater gains the country could benefit from when utilizing an appropriate re-development strategy.

The Financial Times [15], once reported that Lebanon's Mediterranean beaches and permissive lifestyle used to attract hordes of Arabic visitors especially from its neighboring countries, this despite sporadic outbreaks of violence, faster than the country could develop infrastructure to accommodate them. The country already has world class cultural heritage sites. It is recommended based on this then that an improvement to heritage infrastructure be implemented by the authorities which may see capacity increase for any future influx of visitors to the country to be accommodated more. A further recommendation for Lebanon is based on the fact that Middle Eastern nations are recognized for their "brotherhood" relations hence the similarities in most of how their "way of life" is respectively similar. As such, there have been some success stories in nations such as the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman, and how they have grown and improved their respective tourism industries over the years. The recommendation is therefore in encouraging engagement of Lebanese authorities with the authorities of these earlier mentioned nations in them sharing how their strategies have assisted to bolster and strengthen their tourism industries to date.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that Lebanon seems to present a unique case study. This is informed by the fact that from this research, it can be noted that strife has had a profound negative effect on the country's tourism industry, however, despite how dire the situation may seem, a whole lot of more positives may be drawn for it as well. Big events continue to be held as has been shown which increase the nation's cultural and heritage stamp. It however seems there is a dearth of literature on the nexus of how this uniqueness in having an industry that refuses to out rightly bow down to the pressures of upheaval and such upheaval may be understood. It is thus recommended that more research be undertaken in understanding this and may be better and more recommendations may be proposed for Lebanon to eventually find a "winning formula" to growing its economy through sectors such as cultural tourism while dealing or managing any political turmoil which may sporadically rear its ugly head.

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