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## Article

# Archaeological Attractions Marketing: Some Current Thoughts on Heritage Tourism in Mexico

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**Abstract:** Tourism activity in general, with the heritage tourism sector in particular, represented the second inflow of foreign currency to Mexico in 2019 (pre-pandemic), with more than USD 24 million. According to local polls, the main purpose of travel is leisure. However, more than half of tourists (local and foreigner) who visit Mexico enjoy/visit an archaeological site, a museum, and/or a local community. The latter illustrates that the heritage tourism sector is a vital axis within the national and local economy, as well as to promote its research, conservation, and diffusion. Researchers claim that it can also be an important component for the cultural revitalization of communities. However, how well does a community benefit from the tourist activity of any particular heritage/archaeological site? Can they feel any connection with it if only a handful of community members benefit from it? Using the Cancun example, we will talk about the concept of “heritage tourism”, not only for its economic value but also for its potential for social/cultural assessments for local heritage. Secondly, we talk about how archaeology is performed and how pre-Hispanic sites play along as a tourist attraction, particularly from the Mexican perspective.



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**Keywords:** cultural patrimony; identity; heritage; local/indigenous communities; Mexico

## 1. Introduction

Tourism activity in general, with the heritage tourism sector in particular, represented the second inflow of foreign currency to Mexico in 2019 (pre-pandemic) with more than USD 24 million [1,2]. Only the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (INAH) (National Institute of Anthropology and History) registered more than 26 million tourists who experienced the *Zonas Arqueológicas* (Z.A.) (Archaeological Zones) and the museums operated by INAH for the same period. Following from the above, it is shown that the heritage tourism sector is not only a vital axis for the national and local economy, but it can also be an important element for the cultural revitalization of communities. However, is this really happening? Did the local communities really enjoy the economic benefits from tourist activities? Did the members of the local communities have a voice and vote on the decision-making on how the heritage is being used as a tourist attraction? Did they feel related to that heritage? In most countries, archaeological activity is envisioned as an academic endeavor and normally, there is not a clear legal path on how or who has a right over the cultural heritage. Just in America, in the last couple of decades, several local and/or indigenous communities have raised their voice and made important legal and administrative changes on how the cultural patrimony needs to be handled and used (including tourism activities). For example, the native American communities passing the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990 [3] or the members of the San Pedro de Atacama community in Chile who pushed the local museum to remove the human remains from the exhibition in 2006 and have some control on tourist activity [4]. However, what happens in a country where there is strong legislation on cultural heritage?

Here, we will describe the actual context of tourism vs. cultural heritage consumption in Mexico and how the local communities started to question the state's control of it. What can be done? This is especially to establish how this activity is not only important due to its economic relevance in the local economies but because researchers argue, it can be a revitalizing element for cultural identity and conservation of the heritage (tangible and intangible) of a particular community. We are aware that this practice is not always a good one. Therefore, we will try to identify the dangers that cultural property/activity runs when used as a tourist property, especially when the so-called "benefits" are not well distributed among the local community. Secondly, we will focus on how archaeology fits into that category, how archaeology is done in the country not only as an academic activity but also with the tourism collateral effect on it. In addition, how the pre-Hispanic sites play along inside the conscious and unconscious mind of the local population as an identity/cultural heritage but as a tourist attraction as well, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, and what can be done to have more responsible tourist activity.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Since humankind acquired awareness of its being, that is, when this new species became aware of its existence, a permanent desire was born to know its surroundings, its environment, the space that surrounded them, and beyond. If we pay attention to the definition of the World Tourism Organization (WTO) of what a tourist is, "... the displacement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal, professional or business reasons ..." [5] (p. 1), then the human being started to be a tourist a long time ago. Thus, despite this latest pandemic in which the current model of tourism collapsed to unseen levels, this activity will not cease to exist; on the contrary, it is predicted a speedy recovery [6–9], albeit with significant changes.

### *Heritage Tourism in the Actual Situation*

We consider that mass tourism will not disappear as such but will have to adapt to the new post-COVID-19 circumstances and, in this vein, an important sector of tourists are seeking other alternatives such as nature and/or heritage tourism [10]. These changes are not new; they were getting into place before the COVID-19 pandemic, but this preference accentuated with this crisis. As we mentioned above, despite being one of the economic sectors most affected by the current situation regarding the global pandemic of COVID-19, both globally and nationally, the tourism sector is predicted to resume being one of the largest economic sectors with fast growth in the world, simply because human beings require/need/want to travel. In the specific case of Mexico, despite the alarming levels of COVID-19 infection, the government never closed its borders, and tourists, locals, and foreigners continued to arrive and travel around, providing needed economic relief to its communities. In this sense, it is predicted that local/domestic tourism will be the first to emerge and to be one of the pillars of the local economy [10,11]. A similar situation was faced with the H1N1 health crisis in 2009. Local/domestic tourism saved the day or year. Before the pandemic, in 2019, the three first inflows of foreign currency to the country were international remittances (USD 36.48 million), tourism (USD 24.5 million), and oil exportation (USD 22.4 million). Therefore, tourist activity, together with the heritage tourism sector, was the second most important revenue for Mexico with the arrival of more than 41 million tourists, twenty-seven million of whom visited the Z.A. and the INAH museums nationwide, showing that heritage tourism is one of the pillars of this activity. It is important to mention that from that amount (27 million), 80% were local/domestic tourists [11] (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Total amount of tourists who enjoy heritage tourism per year, how many visit a Z.A. or a museum, and how many were domestic and foreign tourist from 2015–2021.

Tourist	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total	23,226,973 (100%)	23,814,625 (100%)	26,473,729 (100%)	27,261,625 (100%)	27,456,582 (100%)	7,305,484 (100%)	7,065,095 (100%)
Z.A.	58.69% (13,632,403)	62.90% (14,978,290)	62.63% (16,579,343)	61.12% (16,663,408)	58.29% (16,005,589)	60.99% (4,455,517)	80.45% (5,683,782)
MUSEUMS	41.31% (9,594,570)	37.10% (8,836,335)	37.37% (9,894,386)	38.88% (10,598,217)	41.71% (11,450,993)	39.01% (2,849,967)	19.55% (1,381,313)
DOMESTIC	80.22% (18,632,503)	78.14% (18,609,111)	77.27% (20,457,279)	75.76% (20,654,431)	77.28% (21,218,706)	75.88% (5,543,747)	64.04% (4,524,470)
FOREIGN	19.78% (4,594,470)	21.86% (5,205,514)	22.73% (6,016,450)	24.24% (6,607,194)	22.72% (6,237,876)	24.12% (1,761,737)	35.96% (2,540,625)

With the above, heritage tourism shows that is not only a vital axis within the national and local economy but can also be an important component as a trigger for the cultural revitalization of communities. The concept of “heritage tourism”, which is a subsystem of tourist activity, is understood as a revitalizing element of cultural patterns in which, not only is given an economic assessment but also a social/cultural community value for the culture/heritage of a particular community. In addition, at the same time, it is important to have in mind and to identify the dangers that the cultural good runs when is used as a tourist item. As already mentioned, it is predicted that local tourism will be the spearhead of the economic recovery of this sector in the immediate future (see Table 1). Although, due to post-pandemic conditions (healthy distance, hygiene controls, and vaccination certificates), nature and cultural tourism (with its variants such as rural, community, or experience) are expected to be in great demand (Figure 1) [12]. In the same way, is important to contemplate and analyze if the value (tourism) put on the heritage contributes to the loss of it by changing the original values of the cultural pattern and with this distorted the heritage into a scenography just to satisfy the tourist activity.



**Figure 1.** Hygiene control access to the National Museum of History Castle of Chapultepec, one of the most visited venues. One of the main reasons for this is that ventilated most of its spaces [13].

However, what is “cultural or heritage tourism”? This is not a simple question to answer. For the *Secretaría de Turismo* (SECTUR) of Mexico, this concept is a

“that tourist trip motivated by knowing, understanding and enjoying the set of distinctive, spiritual and material, intellectual and affective features and elements that characterize a society or social group of a specific destination” [14] (p. 4).

That should also consolidate an element that contributes to the development and progress of the communities that hold it. On the other hand, for anthropologists, heritage is “not as something defined by material objects, but as a cultural, economic, and political resource, a discursive practice, or even as a process of various acts that engage with the past, present, and future” [15] (p. 1).

This, a more plural definition, is the result of the last decades of heritage research studies on which they envision not only the material culture as the core of the heritage but, for the most part, all activities performed by the members of a community. Due to the fact that heritage is so close to power or to the state, promoted or accepted heritage has been “sanitized”, or as some researchers call it, “whitewashing.” Therefore, researchers are moving away from understanding heritage as simple conservation and diffusion of the material past to a complex phenomenon that joins and draws together not only material objects but also sites and places which bring values, ideas, emotions, and memory, which build identity [16,17].

From the tourist activity perspective, the exploitation of heritage seems like a win situation; either resources flow for the preservation/conservation of the cultural good and/or for the diffusion of a cultural activity/ceremony, and the community gains economic resources for it and enhance its local identity.

In this sense, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1966 established that cultural/heritage tourism activity should contribute:

- (1) As an element of knowledge and understanding of the peoples, it contributes to reinforcing peace,
- (2) As a promoter of education, it allows the exchange of knowledge and contributes to the dissemination of culture,
- (3) As a factor for promoting development, it is inserted in the activity of the United Nations system, and
- (4) As a means of financing the restoration and conservation of monuments and places of historical interest [18] (p. 49).

In the same way, Millán argues that “cultural tourism incorporates practices that had become obsolete, revalues peasant customs and habits or, where appropriate, artisanal ones, recovers old processes and activities, helping to preserve collective memory and local identity” [19] (p. 8) (Figure 2). Several researchers mention that cultural tourism emerges because of the market itself. That is, of the need for its diversification and growing participation of a new urban middle class, with a high level of studies, interested in knowing and experiencing something special and different from the massive tourist offer, with cultural, symbolic, spiritual, and historical content [20–23]. This trend is not new, and it can also be said that it has always gone hand in hand with mass tourism and/or the so-called “sun, sand, and sea” tourism, where, taking advantage of the destinations, alternative sites/activities were developed in which so many areas of nature as well as cultural areas were and are exploited for tourism.

What has changed? In the last couple of decades, tourists have not only wanted to go for traditional leisure and recreational vacations but started to demand/search to know the culture/society they visit, to experience the daily life of its members, to know and participate in its festivities, and to appreciate its culture more closely. The most important thing about this change of interaction is that tourists want to see that the receiving community benefits more directly from this activity, in short, to practice responsible tourism [24–27]. In this sense, there is a very close relationship between tourism and culture (not only because tourism is a culture action by itself), since the individual visitor interacts with a society that is not their own and vice versa, and therefore, both parties are exposed to different cultures.



**Figure 2.** Local and foreign visitors getting a tour visit at the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* in Mexico City (Copyright: CONACULTA.INAH.SINAFO.FN.MEXICO) [28].

This cultural exchange acquires more importance when the tourist is conscious of this, when the tourist interacts consciously with the culture of the “other, even if is for a short period of time. In most cases, one side, a preconception or romanticized image of the “other” want to be achieved, and on the opposite side, “the other” needs to decide how much they want to meet that image. Although, when carrying out this activity, a factor of change must also be considered—that is to say, when these parts are interacting, changes or transformations (minimal if you want) occur both in the tourist and in the receiving member’s community. In general, if the receiving community is the one in control of the tourist activity, the tourist gets a more realistic image of it. Furthermore, the community not only improves its economy but also enhances its self-image, encourages the conservation and preservation of the cultural good, and appropriates the good as its own [29]. Several cases show this tendency, such as the potter’s community of Mata Ortiz, Chihuahua, or the revitalization of the traditional ceremonies among the Comcaac (Seri) communities on the Sonora Central Cost area. On the other hand, there are opposite examples as well, such as the case of Xcaret, where Mayan culture has been dramatized to satisfy the tourist [30], or *La Fiesta Grande of Chiapa de Corzo*, Chiapas, where its commercialization is getting more important than the ceremony itself, creating serious tensions among the members of the community. Tourism as a result of cultural activity is a serious cause of cultural changes (for better or for worse) that affect the culture of the ones involved [31].

Research conducted in this regard illustrated that this enhancement of the cultural heritage of the communities does not come without a cost or danger since this action is in some way the commercialization of culture and it can fall into excess of dramatization or substitute cultural values for those demanded by tourists [32]. A good example is the city of Santa Fe, NM, in which to continue with the romantic image of “earthen architecture”, there is an ordinance that all new buildings have to have the facade of being made of adobe and with an image of the Southwest, even if they fake adobe [33,34]. A middle point must be found in which the tourist activity, the tourist, the community, and the heritage win. On the one hand, we cannot think that the commercial value of the heritage is the panacea for its revitalization, conservation, and protection only; on the other hand, if we want to preserve the cultural activity, we cannot stop giving a use/utility to those values. Culture in general, and heritage in particular, are not static; they are constantly changing, and the same applies to tourist activity. Unfortunately, sometimes with these changes, some cultural values/patterns disappear because they are not transformed/revalued to the changes (which can be social, political, and/or economic). In this way we can see that locations that were ceremonial or religious centers of pre-Hispanic cultures, today are archaeological sites; what were residential, administrative houses in the past, today are museums or culture houses (*Casas de la Cultura*), or what started as simple celebration activities in the past become major cultural celebrations today. We cannot conserve heritage just for the sake of conserving it—we need to recognize its social or community value/use. It is in this area of

opportunity that heritage, both tangible and intangible, can be preserved and/or revitalized as a cultural asset but can also be revalued as a tourist positive feature. The importance of preserving heritage, through heritage tourism, resonates with the concept that had already been brewing before the COVID-19 pandemic as conscious and responsible tourism for both recipient actors and tourists. ICOMOS rightly, in its International Charter for Cultural Tourism [35] (p. 1) emphasizes that

“... in these times of increasing globalization, the protection, conservation, interpretation, and presentation of the cultural diversity and cultural heritage of any site or region is a major challenge for many people, anywhere. However, it is normal for each specific community or group involved in conservation to take responsibility for the management of this heritage; taking into account internationally recognized standards and appropriately applied”.

Therefore, we placed special emphasis on the fact that it is the community as such which must “regulate” the interference of tourist activity in the revaluation of cultural values. This action is not only achieved/will be achieved by establishing lines of communication with them but making them participants in the organization and decision-making since we are only spectators, they are who live and make their culture. In reality, this is a challenge in a country with very strict legal regulations on heritage; for example, there is the case of the regional project in the south–southeast of Mexico identified as the Mayan Train. How do we make the communities affected by it, part of it? With the current legal structures, is this possible? Is the federal government listening to them?

### 3. The Heritage Patrimony of Mexico

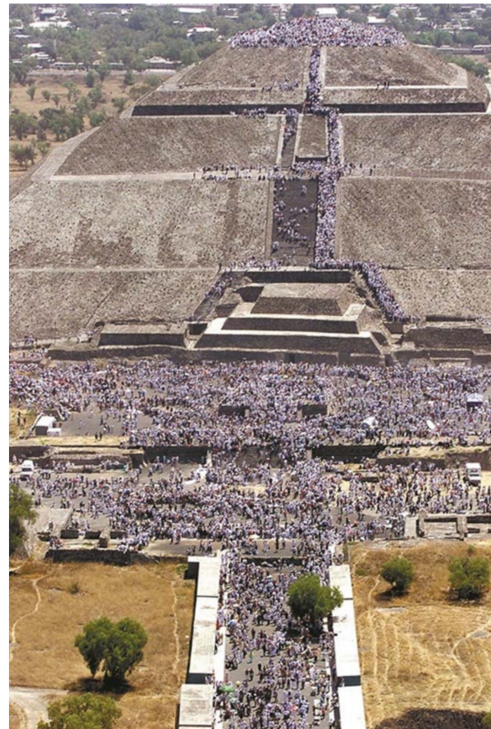
Sunbathing on a white sandy beach with crystal clear blue water, climbing an imposing Mayan pyramid in the middle of the Yucatan jungle, or just enjoying a tequila shot in a Mexican cantina, are some of the images most people have in the collective imagination about Mexico (Figure 3). This country is that and much more, and not for nothing is it among the 10 most visited places on earth. Mexico is not only known for its top places for the traditional tourism concept of the 3 big “S” (Sun, Sand, and Sea) such as Cancun, Los Cabos, or Nuevo Vallarta, where millions of tourists enjoy their vacations. They do not only stay there but travel around, enjoying the cultural and natural wonders of the country, making natural and heritage tourism the second activity of importance of this economic enterprise (see Table 1). On one hand, the great geographical diversity of the country with jungles, forests, beaches, mountains, volcanos, or deserts, make it an ideal place for nature-loving tourists. On the other hand, the most and great cultural diversity Mexico had to offer with a tangible and intangible cultural heritage make it a “must visit” country. Just to have a better idea, Mexico has until today 35 nominations for World Heritage and 10 Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity nominations by the UNESCO [36–38]. It is important to mention that this patrimony is the combination of the past and present of their culture in general and mainly those of indigenous communities in particular, who continue to preserve and maintain the local cultures alive. However, how does Mexico use, preserve, and research its cultural heritage?



**Figure 3.** Photographic composition at the archaeological site of Tulum, Mexico (photo by @pepe\_soho) [39].

One of the major tourist attractions of Mexico is its pre-Hispanic and colonial heritage (Figure 4). Unlike other countries, the research, protection, and dissemination of the paleontological, archaeological, and historical heritage of Mexico only correspond by law to the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH). However, some other educational institutions such as Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán (UADY), Universidad Autónoma de Veracruz (UAV), and Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas (UAZ), to name a few, contribute to these worthy tasks. INAH, as well as other cultural and educational institutions, were made just after the turbulent years of the Mexican revolution, with the main task to help unite the country, provide a free and high standards education, have research institutions, and most importantly, build a Mexican state image. With this idea in mind, General Lazaro Cardenas, president of Mexico at the time, created INAH on February 13 1938 [40–43]. Because INAH is a national-level institution that covers all academic aspects concerning cultural heritage (state representation, research, restoration, museography, dissemination, archaeological record, storage rooms, laboratories) as well as its administration, any intervention of cultural heritage is regulated by it. In addition, in the specific case of archeology, every project, no matter how small or large it may be, has to go through an evaluation within the Archeology Council. What is the cultural patrimony in custody by INAH? From a rough estimation that establishes around 400–450 thousand archaeological sites in Mexico, nearly 40,000 of them are registered archaeologically; from the colonial time, 111,165 historical monuments are registered, from which 83,000 are civil properties. In museums and storage rooms is held more than 20,000,000 material objects and more than 3000 altarpieces exist in the churches' country. In addition, 31 INAH Centers exist throughout the Mexican Republic (one per each state of the Republic, who are in charge of the local research and protection of the cultural patrimony). However, from the total of archaeological sites registered, only 194 Archaeological Zones are open to the public nationwide, and INAH operated and maintain 162 museums (national, regional, local, site, and community) as well. It is important to mention that archaeological sites are federal areas controlled by the federal government, not by the state or the community that holds them.





**Figure 4.** Spring equinox celebration in Teotihuacán that attracts thousands of people, many dressed in white with a red scarf or another accessory. Here, tourists try to access the top section of the Sun Pyramid (photo: ARCHIVO EL UNIVERSAL).

As we can see, almost all the research, preservation, and diffusion of the pre-Hispanic heritage of Mexico is done by INAH and paid by and for by the Federal Government. Although there is a strong academic standard to it, we as Mexican archaeologists cannot deny that the work we perform has a collateral result and that it is a tourist attraction. In the collective imagination of the members of a community where a new archaeological site had been discovered and worked, members think it is meant to burst the local economy. However, first, it is very difficult to open a new archaeological site to the public. A good portion of the site had to be explored archaeologically and that area prepared for tourist visits, the land where the site has to be federal, a minimal of facilities have to be built (such as bathrooms, storage room, ticket office, walking trails, and/or explanatory displays about the site), economic resources for its operation have to be found and allocated, and finally, only the president of Mexico can sign and authorize its opening. In addition, because INAH is a federal government agency and of the way this institute has been created, all the revenues from it go directly to the federal government, not to the local community. The only resources the community enjoys are a minimal set of jobs that the site needs to operate, such as custodians, cleaning personnel and administrative positions that only benefit a small percentage of the community—a situation that has been noted to create social inequalities among the members of the community. Sometimes, the tension breaks into a violent scenario, such as the one in September of 2008, when members of the local community of Ejido Miguel Hidalgo invade the Z.A. of Chinkultik, Chiapas to take control of it under the argument that the revenues from it had to be for the community. After a violent clash with the local and federal police, INAH gained control of the site but negotiated a rotation system of the job positions at the site every six months so more members of the community could benefit from it, and not only a handful.

The fee to enter Mexican archaeological sites are among the cheapest around the globe. To enter the site of Teotihuacan, for example, the general admission is MXN 80 (less than USD 4). On top of that, there are many exceptions to enter free, such as being a student/teacher enrolled in Mexico or over 65 years old, and admission is also free to all

Mexicans on weekends. It is important to mention that for INAH, the diffusion of Mexican heritage is more important than its economic revenue. As a reminder, we mentioned that 80% of tourists who enter these sites are local (see Table 1). Therefore, there is not a lot of direct revenue from this heritage attraction. On average, from the over 190 Z.A. open in Mexico, 10–15% of them generate revenue. On top of that is the administrative cost of operation for the sites (light, services, salaries, insurance, supplies, maintenance, and research operation cost), resources that came directly from the federal government, not from the site revenues. In the end, it does not matter if the site earns revenues or not—the federal government is in charge; but once again, for INAH, the importance is the diffusion of the Mexican heritage and not its revenue. This is also not a vision shared by the local states, such as Yucatan, where they build service tourist units (*parador turistico*) in the state territory just in front of the archaeological sites and charge for passage through it, and they do not have all the exceptions INAH had [44].

#### 4. Discussion

As has been shown, Mexican heritage tourism is not only an important economic enterprise for the country but is also controlled by the federal state through INAH. According to constitutional law, not only is archaeological academic activity regulated by INAH, but INAH also administrates the archaeological and colonial Mexican heritage. Very few countries around the globe have such strict regulations on their national heritage. As we see, not even local states have control over it, much less the local communities where the heritage good is held. The strict regulation makes it almost impossible for the members of a community to have a say on their heritage because by law, it belongs to all Mexicans, not only to one community. However, this is not a position that is shared by all the archaeologists and academics who work for INAH and have been working shoulder to shoulder with local communities.

The sites that have been successful, economically speaking, are because the community realizes that the richness of the sites is not the direct revenue from it but the indirect revenue. That is to say, the tourist needs to be transported to the site, needs to eat and sleep somewhere, and wants to buy something, and the community does not have to depend only on the archaeological site as the only tourist attraction (diversification is key). When the community fulfills those needs, the distribution of tourists and its benefits is wider. However, there is also the case that some groups or local mafias take control of such tourism services like taxis or transport organizations; in this case, once again, only a handful of members of the community benefit from the tourism activity. From a legal standpoint, there is not a chance that the local community benefits directly from the archaeological site because this is directly controlled and administrated by INAH. However, there have been some examples. The only case that we know in which a community got some direct benefit from an archaeological site is Chinkultik, Chiapas, when after a violent clash with the federal government and negotiations with INAH officials, the ejido Miguel Hidalgo received some job benefits. In other, non-violent examples, local communities obtain a local community museum where they not only display their heritage in conjunction with the “experts” but also have a community space to sell local artesanias (handicrafts) (but no direct control of the site). It is important to mention that these actions are more a personal battle by the archaeologist who works at that site and deals with the local communities’ interests (such as the Z.A. of Atzompa and Monte Alban, Oaxaca) [45,46].

Alternatively, there is a particular case where there is an unwanted tolerance of INAH officials to the local vendors to sell inside the archaeological sites such as Chichen Itza or Palenque (Figure 5), just to mention a few. This specific context had two sides: the illegal vendors endanger the conservation of the archaeological site and its surroundings are one side of the coin. On the other hand, because most tourists arrive at the site by bus directly to the site, the tourist does not have contact with the outside population; therefore, if the illegal vendor does not catch the tourist inside, they do not sell. Until today, there is no real solution to the problem; vendors are still inside the sites, and INAH does not want to take

legal action (having all the laws in favor) but does not want to make a bigger community problem. Besides that, every year there are more illegal vendors inside, a good percentage of the vendors are not even from the local community, and very few sell local *artesanias* (handicrafts). Thus, the main problem prevails—is the local community benefiting from heritage tourism? Somebody does. In spite of the COVID-19 pandemic, top archaeological sites and museums continue to be on top (see Tables 2 and 3), although we can see some changes—for example, in the last two years Chichen got more visitors than Teotihuacan because of the pandemic was more severe in central Mexico and the peninsula of Yucatan never closed its borders to tourists.



Figure 5. Illegal vendors inside the archaeological site of Chichen Itza, Mexico [47].

Table 2. Top five Mexican archaeological sites of the number of visitors 2015–2021.

Archaeological Site	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Z.A. Teotihuacan	21.32% (2,906,200)	25.72% (3,852,129)	25.24% (4,185,017)	24.41% (4,067,198)	21.61% (3,459,528)	15.76% (702,013)	16.18% (919,514)
Z.A. Chichén	15.02% (2,047,922)	14.07% (2,107,410)	16.15% (2,677,858)	16.46% (2,743,554)	14.78% (2,365,554)	18.49% (823,795)	30.67% (1,743,388)
Z.A. Tulum	11.07% (1,508,847)	11.84% (1,773,929)	13.31% (2,207,446)	13.14% (2,189,536)	12.47% (1,996,544)	14.01% (624,431)	17.91% (1,017,870)
Z.A. Palenque	6.83% (930,867)	4.38% (655,417)	5.55% (920,470)	4.54% (755,801)	5.15% (824,311)	6.42% (286,089)	5.05% (286,920)
Z.A. Cobá	3.18% (434,043)	3.93% (588,857)	4.24% (702,749)	4.49% (747,605)	4.69% (750,113)	5.30% (235,925)	5.23% (297,067)

We think Cancun, Mexico, is a good example of how heritage tourism work in Mexico. Polls conducted at the airport of Cancun, one of the most famous tourist attractions for the three big “S” of the country, illustrated that the main purpose of their visit is leisure by far (around 70%), with culture only representing between 1% and 3%. However, when we see activities tourists partake in Cancun, the polls illustrate that cultural activity (in this particular case, visiting archaeological sites such as Chichen Itza, Tulum, and Coba) represents more than 40% and activities done in nature more than 30% (Tables 4 and 5). Similar tendencies with other Mexican destinations had been registered as well. The data illustrated that culture and heritage tourism maybe not be in the mind of the tourist when they choose a destination, but once they are, they ensure to visit such areas. There is not only one main reason when it comes to deciding where to go, but the diversity of activities that can be done in one particular attraction seems to make a difference. The question is,

who is the beneficiary from such diversification? Is it the community, the private investors, or/and the federal/local government? We know from one end that those polls consulted for Cancun illustrated that the main tendencies and the main attractions were done mostly by private investors in the case of mass tourism and the federal government (INAH) for archaeological sites and museums. At the other end, we know that lately, there are several activities that do not show on the mainstream but nevertheless are more authentic, done by the locals, and most importantly, with direct benefit to it (such as gastronomic tours to local *mercados* (markets), who enjoy diving into community-owned/operated cenotes, or participating in local Maya ceremonies). It could be interesting to add a question about those activities on tourist polls conducted at the airport to see how much attention local communities receive.

**Table 3.** Top five Mexican INAH museums of the number of visitors 2015–2021.

Museum	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
M. Nacional de Antropología	20.46% (1,963,021)	19.38% (1,712,645)	23.61% (2,336,115)	24.50% (2,596,725)	26.95% (3,086,555)	32.95% (938,937)	34.54% (477,147)
M. Nacional de Historia	20.91% (2,006,072)	19.28% (1,703,992)	21.58% (2,135,465)	25.11% (2,661,615)	24.55% (2,811,646)	21.66% (617,365)	24.03% (331,985)
M. Nacional de Templo Mayor	7.41% (711,290)	7.40% (653,513)	8.11% (801,942)	9.22% (977,275)	7.97% (912,673)	8.41% (239,574)	4.14% (57,164)
M. Nacional de las Culturas	2.74% (262,741)	4.15% (366,735)	3.74% (369,865)	4.14% (438,913)	4.96% (567,997)	4.07% (116,031)	7.32% (101,105)
M. Nacional del Virreinato	2.65% (254,214)	3.19% (281,808)	2.64% (261,457)	2.41% (255,134)	2.42% (276,665)	2.25% (64,101)	1.28% (17,653)

**Table 4.** Top reasons to visit the tourist area of Cancun, Mexico, from the years prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The poll is based on questionnaires for 1000 people x month. For the years with N/A on them, that particular question was added later [48].

Motive	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	%
Leisure	84%	77.5%	70.7%	73.6%	69.3%	69.3%	72.1%	69.5%	66.3%	73.4%	66.5%
Diving activities	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	4.8%	10.2%	6.6%	7.6%
Honeymoon	11.2%	12%	14.1%	11.6%	13.5%	10%	7.6%	6.7%	7.0%	5.8%	9.9%
Visit friends/family	N/A	N/A	2.3%	2%	2.7%	3.1%	3.1%	3.9%	2.8%	3.4%	2.64%
Attend a wedding	1.2%	3%	5.1%	5.3%	5.9%	3.9%	5%	3.3%	2.8%	3.1%	3.86
Health and wellness	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.5%	1.3%	1.6%	1.1
Culture	0.5%	2%	4.5%	2.7%	3.7%	4.7%	6.2%	3.7%	2.0%	1.1%	3.1%

**Table 5.** Top reasons to visit the tourist place of Cancun Mexico from the years prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The poll is based on questionnaires to 1000 people x month.

Motive	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	%
Culture (archaeology)	33.3%	38.9%	46.9%	49.5%	45.5%	43.6%	58.9%	30.8%	35.8%	28.7%	41.1%
Nature	26.4%	34.5%	52.2%	30.2%	30.5%	29.1%	45.2%	27%	32.1%	29.8%	33.7%

From what we see from the pool, Cancun is a very appealing tourist destination mostly due to its diversification of activities. It is not only a “Sun, Sand, and Sea” place but has activities for all ages, tastes, and preferences and is not only the big private investors but locals as well, who are getting a share of the tourist “cake”, especially from the heritage angle. A similar situation had been seen in other Mexican destinations as well such as Los

Cabos, Baja California, or San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas. How is this destination so diversified? Was it planned from the beginning? Not really. From what we know, the main goal for Cancun was a mass tourist destination from the beginning and, for good or bad, has become what it is today. However, since its development, the region in general (private investors, local and federal government, and local communities) have been working to provide more diverse activities to tourists. From what we see and know, local communities started to participate more and more in how to use the heritage to their advantage and to provide economic relief to the area. It is not perfect and has its problems, but we can learn from it.

## 5. Conclusions

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism activity was one of the most profitable activities. However, this growth did not come with deep concerns and an important percentage of tourists started to demand some changes toward a more responsible, diverse, inclusive, and beneficial to the host community form of tourism. As one of many actions in response to this situation, the Sustainable Development of Tourism has become an important and interesting response. This allows us to minimize the impact on the environment and cultural goods as well as to maximize socio-economic revenues for all, not only for private investors and government agencies but also for host communities as well [49,50]. In the particular case of heritage tourism, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a necessary break, where, in some cases, the break was used to do some necessary restoration process to archaeological sites and/or to rest from some many tourists and vendors at local community festivities. Such is the case of the *Fiesta Grande of Chiapa de Corzo*, Mexico, where vendors (nonlocal products and alcohol) and tourists started to become a problem with the local celebration. From 2020 until today, the community performed its celebration with closed doors (2020) and no tourists/vendors allowed. Some old-timers mentioned that that is the way the celebration has to be. In any case, the pandemic halt had provided an important opportunity to analyze the tourist activity in general and particular sites/areas in particular to perform research, such as the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to have a better idea where we wanted the tourism activity to go from here.

Tourism in general, as a cultural activity, will not go away, will change, will transform, and will adapt to new trends, to new conditions, to new needs. What we are experiencing right now is its rearrangement. Some characteristics are not new; some were already in place before the COVID-19 pandemic (such as a more responsible tourism activity and a shift from mass/impersonal tourism to a more cultural/personal tourism), others are a result of it (such as hygiene measurements, safe distance/open spaces, less tourist per area, etc.). What the COVID-19 pandemic did was allow us to stop and think about the meaning of our actions (and not only in the tourism sector), to appreciate the personal contact, the minimal things, the person behind. Researchers and specialists of tourism have predicted that this activity will be one of the fastest recovering economic sectors worldwide simply because we, humans, want to get out—however, rather than just out, we want to be safe, be in the open, enjoy and know about the place and the people we visit. In this regard, local tourism and heritage/natural tourism activities are already in high demand an important element in this recovery. In Table 1, we can see that tourism does not stop completely and more than 7 million of them did heritage tourism. On the other hand, domestic tourist made up between 60–70% of it, illustrating that heritage tourist is well-positioned in the local/national population. Nevertheless, the most important issue, we think, is that the pandemic gives us the opportunity to perform in the near future a much needed Sustainable Development of Tourism research, where we can identify opportunities as well as threats on tourist destinations, especially archaeological sites, and community celebrations.

As we show above, cultural tourism can not only be an economic balsam for a most need hurt local economy but also an opportunity to enhance local identity and preserve and/or revitalize a cultural asset. Tourist activity can be as bad or good as we decide it to be. However, this cannot be done unilaterally and/or just from the institutions, but from

and with the community. It is the community that needs to decide how they want to be seen, how the cultural good have to be preserved, and how much tourism the cultural good and the community can handle. However, to do that we need that the institutions and the legal structures listen as well.

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