Revealing Hidden Heritage: Assessing the Heritage Village Tourism Potential of Matang-Kuala Sepetang Perak, Malaysia for Sustainable Community Development

Norainah Abdul Rahman[1], Nadia Yusniza Mohd Yusuff[2], Salbiah Mokhtar[3], Muhamad Asri Abdullah Kamar[4] and Raja Norashekin Raja Othman[5]

[1,3&4] Program of Town and Regional Planning, Faculty of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perak Branch, Malaysia,

[5]Center of Town and Regional Planning, Faculty of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA Selangor Branch, Malaysia

[2]Department of Urban Planning and Development, Taiping Municipal Council, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author: Norainah Abdul Rahman**

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100900336

Received: 02 September 2026; Accepted: 07 September 2026; Published: 10 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Heritage village tourism plays an important role in safeguarding cultural heritage while promoting sustainable tourism and community development. The Matang–Kuala Sepetang area in Taiping, Perak, Malaysia, contains diverse tangible and intangible heritage resources reflecting its historical, cultural, economic, and environmental significance. These include historic buildings, traditional settlements, religious sites, local livelihoods, traditional food, crafts, cultural practices, and oral traditions. However, many of these resources remain undocumented, under recognised, and underutilised as potential tourism products. Currently, the Ngah Ibrahim Museum is among the main heritage attractions that has been systematically mapped and promoted, highlighting the need to identify and document other hidden heritage assets within the area. This study aims to uncover the hidden heritage of Matang–Kuala Sepetang through systematic observation and assess its potential for heritage village tourism development. A qualitative research approach was adopted using primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through field observation surveys to identify and document tangible and intangible heritage resources, while secondary data were obtained from Google Maps, official documents, planning reports, and scholarly literature. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, content analysis, mapping analysis, and systematic literature review (SLR) to examine the characteristics, significance, spatial distribution, and tourism potential of the identified resources. The study is expected to produce a comprehensive inventory of heritage village tourism products and a heritage tourism trail map highlighting the area's hidden cultural and historical assets. The findings are expected to support heritage conservation, sustainable tourism planning, destination diversification, and community empowerment. Furthermore, the study contributes to tourism education by demonstrating the integration of qualitative methods, heritage resource assessment, field observation, and tourism mapping as practical tools for fieldwork, teaching and learning also for curriculum development in tourism and heritage management program. In addition, this method can achieve the first course learning outcomes of tourism subject, namely study tourism planning and development strategies through data collection during site visit.

Keywords: Course Learning Outcomes, Community Development, Heritage Village Tourism, Hidden Heritage, Reveal, Teaching and Learning in Tourism

INTRODUCTION

Kuala Sepetang, formerly known as Port Weld, and the nearby Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve (MMFR)

provide a unique blend of live industrial heritage, long-standing resource-use patterns, and natural assets (Hashim et al., 2017). The area includes a thriving mangrove ecosystem, traditional charcoal production sites, fishing towns, and interpretive tourist activities such as boardwalks, river cruises, and birding. Because of this combination, Kuala Sepetang is positioned as a model location for studying how heritage village tourism can be developed in ways that benefit local livelihoods and conservation (Amran & Muhammad, 2019). The current literature review brings together global and Malaysian research on historical tourism, sustainable tourism principles, mangrove conservation management, community participation, and socioeconomic implications relevant to Matang-Kuala Sepetang (Hashim et al., 2017).

Heritage encompasses all types of artefacts or treasures passed down from previous generations to the present and future generations. Historic structures, traditional attire, food, and daily utensils are examples of tangible components, whereas intangible aspects include customs, language, folk songs, dances, and cultural values. According to Bonet and Ortúzar (2010), a nation's identity is shaped by its heritage, which reflects its predecessors' history, lifestyles, and values. Heritage Village Tourism focuses on the cultural experiences, heritage, and lifestyles of rural communities that have passed down traditions, customs, and practices from generation to generation (Harun, 2024; Wasela, 2023).

Tangible heritage refers to old structures, historic places, colonial remains, and local monuments (Timothy & Boyd, 2015; Bonet & Ortúzar, 2010). Natural heritage includes rivers, hills, woods, traditional farms, and conserved natural landscapes (Ahmad, 2006; Čop et al., 2024). Customs, traditional foods, performing arts, clothes, and handicrafts are examples of intangible heritage that reflect local communities' living traditions (Pascariu et al., 2022; Wasela, 2023).

The sub-focus is on historical features and values associated with local identity, such as historic sites, old buildings, and historical remains (Khairudin et al., 2024), as well as cultural features like customs, traditional practices, house architecture, and traditional foods (Harun, 2024). Furthermore, it is critical to analyse the viability of heritage-based tourist activities that do not disturb local communities' social and cultural systems (McKercher & du Cros, 2002; Su & Wall, 2014). This paper aims to identify heritage elements that can be used as tourist attractions, assess barriers to preserving and conserving heritage assets, and uncover hidden heritage village tourism in the study area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Heritage village tourism is an essential aspect of cultural and rural tourism, as it combines the preservation of physical and living cultural assets with community-based tourism development. It reflects a rising global emphasis on preserving both tangible and intangible heritage resources as critical components of sustainable tourism (UNESCO, 2003; Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

Heritage villages are living ecosystems in many parts of the world, combining traditional livelihoods, architecture, and customs to provide tourists with an authentic cultural experience. This sort of tourism not only promotes cultural awareness but also aids in historical conservation, economic revitalisation, and the preservation of rural identity.

Heritage Village Tourism

Heritage village tourism is a type of tourism that focuses on preserving, interpreting, and presenting rural cultural landscapes, architecture, and traditions. It creates unique tourism experiences by combining tangible and intangible cultural elements (Park, 2014). The concept evolved from cultural heritage tourism, encompassing rural settings, community participation, and intangible heritage expressions. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2013), heritage-based tourism promotes sustainable development by empowering communities and protecting heritage treasures while achieving visitor expectations of authenticity.

Heritage Village Tourism and Community Well-being

Heritage village tourism integrates cultural preservation with community-based tourism, thereby supporting social sustainability and local empowerment. According to UNWTO (2013), community inclusion in heritage decision-making strengthens local ownership, reduces social inequality, and promotes more equitable tourism benefits.

Globally, heritage villages serve as living cultural landscapes where local communities maintain traditional livelihoods, craft skills, and cultural expressions. When communities play an active role in tourism planning, the outcomes often include strengthened cultural pride, improved economic resilience, and enhanced community cohesion.

Tangible Heritage in Heritage Villages

Intangible cultural heritage refers to traditions, performing arts, social activities, rituals, handicrafts, and knowledge systems passed down through generations (UNESCO, 2003). It represents the living dimension of heritage, alongside physical artefacts. Heritage villages provide a unique opportunity to continue such activities through community involvement and cultural expression. Examples include traditional weaving in Bali, batik in Malaysia, ceramics in Thailand, and folk performances in Korea (Kurmanalieva et al., 2020).

Integrating Tangible and Intangible Heritage

The interaction of tangible and intangible heritage is what gives heritage village tourism its authenticity and overall appeal (Smith, 2006). Built heritage provides the setting and background, while intangible activities bring the area to life and give it significance. In Korea's UNESCO-listed Hahoe and Yangdong Villages, ancient Confucian architecture coexists with folk rituals and festivals, providing tourists with immersive cultural experiences (Kim & Ellis, 2015). Similarly, in Malaysia's Kampung Morten and Thailand's Baan Tong Luang, architectural preservation is combined with everyday living practices and crafts to create a vibrant portrayal of culture. Integrating tangible and intangible elements promotes community identity and develops sustainable tourism products based on local heritage values.

Integrating Tangible and Intangible Heritage for Community Empowerment

The connection between tangible and intangible heritage is also deeply social. Built heritage provides spaces for community gathering, learning, and intergenerational knowledge transmission, while intangible heritage reinforces shared identity and community solidarity (Smith, 2006).

Heritage villages in Korea, Thailand, and Malaysia show that when heritage is managed collaboratively with local communities, tourism can support cultural continuity, reduce rural-urban migration among youth, and create new income-generating opportunities (Kim & Ellis, 2015).

Issues and Challenges in Heritage Village Tourism

Despite its potential, heritage village tourism faces several challenges. Over-commercialisation can undermine cultural authenticity and reduce community life to staged performances (MacCannell, 1973). Physical conservation of buildings frequently conflicts with the preservation of living culture, as tourism infrastructure expansion may marginalise local traditions. Funding constraints and a lack of technical skills in heritage management further impede sustainable preservation (Poulios, 2010).

In many developing countries, uncontrolled tourism growth has led to the erosion of heritage values, the commercialisation of rituals, and the relocation of local communities. These issues underline the need for participatory management methods that prioritise local viewpoints and sustainability (Tosun, 2000).

Issues and the Need for Community-centred Approaches

Heritage villages that lack community involvement often face problems such as cultural commodification, loss of authenticity, and minimal local benefit (MacCannell, 1973). Therefore, participatory heritage management, capacity-building, and fair economic distribution are crucial. Community-led heritage tourism encourages locals to become stewards of their own heritage, contributing to stronger intra-community relationships and long-term sustainability.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

While research on heritage tourism has expanded globally, there is still a lack of comparative studies that examine both tangible and intangible heritage within heritage villages. Many studies focus on physical conservation or tourist perception, ignoring the socio-cultural mechanisms that sustain living traditions (Su, 2018). There has also been minimal empirical research into how digital technologies, such as virtual reality and GIS-based mapping, might help document and promote intangible heritage (Chung et al., 2021). Future research should employ interdisciplinary approaches to discover how heritage villages might modernise while retaining authenticity and community empowerment.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach by utilising both primary and secondary data. The basic primary data were acquired using an observation survey method. This demonstration of the use of observational methods will contribute to teaching and learning in tourism-related disciplines, heritage resource assessment, and tourism mapping as practical tools for fieldwork, experiential learning, teaching and learning, and curriculum development in tourism and heritage management programs. Additionally, by gathering data during site visits, this approach can accomplish the initial course learning outcomes for the tourism subject, which are to study tourism planning and development methods. From the observation survey, the data were gathered for tangible and intangible heritage assets. In addition to identifying and documenting heritage assets, the qualitative approach enabled an understanding of community connections to heritage. Observation surveys captured not only physical characteristics but also how residents interacted with and valued these heritage spaces. Tangible assets included old buildings, historic sites, colonial remains, and local monuments. Intangible heritage assets included oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship. The tangible and intangible heritage assets were described in terms of historical, physical, and spatial aspects. While the secondary data were gathered through Google Maps, newspapers, and journal articles, all the potential tangible and intangible heritage assets were identified. All the potential tangible and intangible heritage assets were captured from Google Maps to obtain their locations. After obtaining the full list of all potential tangible and intangible heritage assets, the correct addresses were identified, and all the elements were collected during the observation survey.

Thematic and content analyses helped identify community-related themes such as cultural continuity, local participation, social values, and collective memory key elements in developing heritage tourism that genuinely support community well-being. The qualitative information from primary data was analysed using thematic analysis, while the data from secondary sources were analysed using content analysis, mapping analysis, spatial analysis, and a systematic literature review (SLR). All data collected were organised according to categories and themes of tangible and intangible heritage assets. The description of each heritage asset was explained in detail so that all data and information could be documented in an orderly manner.

RESULTS

The Study Area

Matang and Kuala Sepetang are two settlements located in the Larut Matang district, Perak Darul Ridzuan. Kuala Sepetang, also known as Port Weld in its native language, is a fishing town located approximately 16 km from Taiping Town. The town is famous for the Matang Sea Mangrove Forest, which is over 100 years old, making it one of the best-managed mangrove forests in the world. Matang also has high historical value,

with interesting historical places such as Kota Ngah Ibrahim, Captain Speedy's House, Balai Penghulu, and Tengku Menteri Mosque. These buildings reflect the heritage and history of the area.

Based on the Larut Matang District Local Plan 2035, Kuala Sepetang is located within the Larut Matang district, where the total population of Larut Matang was projected to be 312,219 in 2020. Kuala Sepetang is located within Mukim Jebong, which had a total population of 21,234 in 2020, and projections made from 2015 to 2035 show a population increase of 2.23%. Three (3) main connection systems link the Matang and Kuala Sepetang areas via the main Taiping-Kuala Sepetang Road. The second is the West Coast Expressway (WCE), a highway connecting Changkat Jering in Perak to Banting in Selangor, spanning 314.5 km.

It provides direct access from Matang and Kuala Sepetang to this main route. Thirdly is the North-South Expressway (PLUS), the main route connecting the north and south of Peninsular Malaysia. From the North Taiping Toll Plaza, the journey to Matang and Kuala Sepetang follows the main route via Jalan Matang and Jalan Kuala Sepetang, with a distance of approximately 20 to 25 kilometres. Alternatively, from the Changkat Jering Toll Plaza on the North-South Expressway (PLUS), the journey to Matang and Kuala Sepetang via the same route covers approximately 35 to 40 kilometres. Please refer Figure 1.0 below for the location of study area.

Heritage Assets in the Study Area

Matang is an area rich in historical and heritage values, not only important at the Perak State level but also recognised at the national level. However, the results of the site inventory study indicate that the focus of tourists remains too limited, with the majority visiting only Kota Ngah Ibrahim. Other heritage assets that are no less significant remain under-represented and have not been fully utilised as high-potential tourism products. Based on the results of the field study, 17 heritage assets were identified in the Matang area, which are divided into three categories: tangible heritage assets, intangible heritage assets, and natural heritage assets.

There are three categories of tangible heritage assets, namely heritage sites, historic cities, and sacred sites. For heritage sites, there are nine places, namely Kota Ngah Ibrahim, Captain Speedy's House, First Doctor's House, First Court, Malay Heroes' Execution Site, Dato' Sagor's Tomb and Taiping Matang Shipyard, Port Weld, and the Charcoal Factory. For historic cities, there is only one, namely Kota Ngah Ibrahim. Meanwhile, for sacred sites, there are four buildings, namely Tengku Menteri Mosque, Sri Manggala Nayagi Amman Temple, Hock Chuan Keong Temple, Tan Lau Koon Temple, and So Ah Siong Temple.

Meanwhile, for intangible heritage assets, there are three categories identified, namely traditional food, performing arts, and festive events. The types of food consist of prawn mee and semilang fish. The performing arts include Chinese opera, and the festive event is the Temple God Festival Celebration. For natural heritage assets, there are two categories, namely forest reserves or mangrove swamps and rivers, lakes, canals, and seas. For forest reserves or mangrove swamps, there is only one area, namely Hutan Paya Bakau Matang, while for rivers, lakes, canals, and seas, Sungai Sepetang and Sungai Larut exhibit these characteristics. Please refer Figure 1.0 below for the heritage asset was discovered in the study area.

The Tangibles Heritage Assets

As mentioned in the above paragraph, there are three categories of tangible heritage assets, which are heritage sites, historic cities, and sacred sites.

Heritage Site

There are nine places, namely Kota Ngah Ibrahim, Captain Speedy's House, First Doctor's House, First Court, Malay Heroes' Execution Site, Dato' Sagor's Tomb and Boat Repair Yard, Port Weld, and the Charcoal Factory. The description of each heritage asset is explained below:

Kota Ngah Ibrahim

Kota Ngah Ibrahim is a historic building constructed by the wealthy Menteri Paduka Tuan Ngah Ibrahim bin Jaafar, a Perak dignitary who was well known for opposing British intrusion into the state's administrative affairs following the Pangkor Agreement in 1874. This fort served as the administrative hub for the Larut district, which was then a territory ruled by Ngah Ibrahim. Kota Ngah Ibrahim was established in Matang in 1854. This fort's stone walls are approximately 131 metres long and 110 metres wide. The site is located approximately 8 kilometres from Taiping Town.

Ngah Ibrahim built a large house within the fort, which served as his official residence, while tin ore was stored in a separate storage structure. Following Ngah Ibrahim's exile, the British took control of Kota Ngah Ibrahim. The fort later served as the official residence of Captain Tristam Speedy, Assistant Resident, as well as a courthouse for the trial of Dato' Maharajalela and Dato' Sagor for the murder of J.W.W. Birch, the first British Resident in Perak. They were found guilty and hanged in front of Kota Ngah Ibrahim on 21 January 1877.

Captain Speedy's House

Ngah Ibrahim built Captain Speedy's House in 1873 as a testament to Captain Speedy's efforts to preserve security and administer the Larut area. The structure served mainly as a dwelling. The bungalow of Tristram Charles Sawyer Speedy, also known as Captain Speedy, is located to the right of Kota Ngah Ibrahim in Matang, Perak. Captain Speedy was one of the most flamboyant Victorian figures, often compared to Indiana Jones. Nonetheless, his name remains influential in Malayan history, particularly during the Larut Wars.

First Doctor's House

The structure known as the First Doctor's House in Perak's Matang district is most certainly a historical site. While available records contain little information about the First Doctor's House, which was built in 1870, it is noteworthy for the area as it corresponds to the construction of over 150 historic structures and shophouses in the nearby Taiping area.

First Court

The First Court in the Matang district, which may be related to Ngah Ibrahim's fort, most likely housed the courthouse for the Birch murder trial and was established earlier than 1876, having been converted into a courthouse sometime after the Birch murder in 1875. As a result, the claim that it was built in 1876 is likely inaccurate. It served as an early judicial centre and was the first official court established in Malaya. It is currently used as the Matang Chief's Office.

Malay Heroes' Execution Site

These three Malay heroes were freedom fighters who spearheaded the Malay struggle against colonial rule. However, their significant sacrifices and contributions as heroic fighters for Malaya remain relevant today. The British hanged these three warriors for the murder of J.W.W. Birch. They were Dato' Seri Maharaja Lela, Dato' Sagor, and Pandak Indut in Pasir Salak. They were later sentenced to be hanged from a mango tree in Matang, one of the districts within the Bukit Gantang parliamentary area.

Dato Sagor's Tomb

Dato' Sagor's Tomb is a tribute to the anti-colonial struggle, as well as a pilgrimage and educational site. Dato' Sagor's Tomb is located next to that of Dato' Maharaja Lela, at a site also associated with Kota Ngah Ibrahim, and includes the ruins of a fort and Dato' Sagor's cell. The mausoleum is located near Kota Ngah Ibrahim, which also features the ruins of a fort and Dato' Sagor's cell.

Port Weld

Kuala Sepetang, formerly known as Port Weld, is a historic harbour town in Perak's Larut, Matang, and Selama districts. Its history is defined by its role as the terminus of Malaysia's first railway line, which was established in 1885 to transport tin from Taiping to the coast for export. The port declined as other transportation options emerged, and the railway line was decommissioned in the 1980s.

Taiping Matang Shipyard

The Taiping Matang Shipyard, believed to have existed since the nineteenth century, repairs damaged vessels, performs regular maintenance, and constructs boats utilising traditional carpentry skills. Taiping Matang Shipyard is well known for its tradition and craftsmanship, and it serves as a bridge between the past and the present. In this historic place, time appears to stand still, passing on traditional knowledge to the present. When visiting the Taiping Matang Shipyard, visitors can observe the carpenters' skills and experience the elegance of traditional craftsmanship.

Charcoal Factory

Malaysia's oldest charcoal industry is located in the Matang district, particularly in Kuala Sepetang, previously known as Port Weld, and has been in operation since the 1930s. The industry's legacy is closely linked to the sustainably managed Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve, which supplies the raw material. The Matang charcoal industry is a unique example of a traditional practice that has survived in the modern world because of appropriate environmental management and a strong commitment to cultural preservation.

Historic Cities

There is only Kota Ngah Ibrahim that is categorised as a historic city. The description has been explained above.

Scared Sites

There are four (4) buildings categorised as sacred sites, namely Tengku Menteri Mosque, Sri Manggala Nayagi Amman Temple, Hock Chuan Keong Temple, and Tan Lau Koon Temple.

Tengku Menteri Mosque

The Tengku Menteri Mosque in the Matang district, also known as Masjid Khairiah Matang Tengku Menteri, was built in 1867 by Ngah Ibrahim, an influential tin-mining businessman. This makes it a historic mosque with a significant role in the region's history, possibly dating back as early as 1870, according to some archives.

Sri Manggala Nayagi Amman Temple

The Sri Manggala Nayagi Amman Temple is situated in Matang, Perak. This temple was established in 1862 by Indian farm workers who came to Malaysia. The temple was originally built as a small cottage. Then, in 1915, a Hindu-style temple structure was constructed, and Goddess Amman was installed there. This temple became a site of worship for the Indian community in Matang.

Hock Chuan Keong Tokong

Hock Chuan Keong Tokong, built in 1895, is devoted to the “Three Loyal Kings of the Song Dynasty,” historical figures venerated for their undying loyalty and valour. The temple enshrines a pantheon of popular gods and deities as a token of gratitude for safety and prosperity in the local community.

Tan Lau Koon Tokong

The Tan Lau Koon Tokong in the Matang district has a history and background that dates back to the area's

growth during the 19th-century tin mining boom, which attracted numerous Chinese settlers. The region was once characterised by conflict due to feuds among several Chinese immigration groups, prompting British intervention and the establishment of colonial authority in the 1870s. As a result, the tokong (temple) most likely developed during this period of rapid expansion, representing the large Chinese population that relocated to the area for tin mining activities.

The Intangible Heritage Assets

For intangible heritage assets, there are three (3) categories identified, namely traditional food, performing arts, and festive events.

Traditional Food

The traditional foods in Matang and Kuala Sepetang are prawn mee and semilang fish. The famous prawn mee outlets in Matang and Kuala Sepetang include Kak Nor Mee Udang Kuala Sepetang Original, Mee Udang Warisan, Salleh Stall Mee Udang Port Weld, Mak Teh Mee Banjir Udang, Mee Udang Last Corner, Restoran Mee Udang Mak Jah, and Mee Udang Laut Segar Pak Hashim. Meanwhile, the popular semilang fish dishes are found at Selera Azrorasa, Warung Mak Mah Gulai Semilang, and D'port Ikan Bakar Seafood Kuala Sepetang Taiping.

Performing Art

Chinese opera performances are not held frequently in Matang and Kuala Sepetang. Typically, these performances coincide with specific festivals or religious events held at local Chinese temples. Although not a Chinese opera, the Hokkien Puppet Theatre is a traditional Chinese theatre in Kuala Sepetang.

Festive Event

The festive event identified is the Temple God Festival Celebration. The temple deity festival celebrations in Matang and Kuala Sepetang are popular local religious events. Chinese temple festivals in Malaysia are frequently celebrated in conjunction with various occasions, such as the Chinese New Year. Devotees gather at many temples, including those that are over a century old, to pray and participate in the celebrations. The Nine Emperor Gods festival is a prominent Taoist event held for nine days, usually in the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, and includes religious activities such as walking on embers. The Seng Ong Kong Gods procession is another important event that also celebrates the area's multiracial community.

The Natural Heritage Assets

There are two (2) categories of natural heritage assets, namely forest reserves or mangrove swamps, and rivers, lakes, canals, and seas.

Forest Reserves or Mangrove Swamps

Hutan Paya Bakau Matang is one of the most well-known and sustainably managed mangrove forests in the world. Since 1906, this area has been designated as a forest reserve and covers approximately 40,000 hectares. It is vital for ecology, the traditional economy, and the preservation of natural heritage. The reserve supports a diverse range of flora and fauna, including fish, prawns, crabs, migratory birds, and reptiles. The management of Hutan Paya Bakau Matang has been recognised as one of the best in the world due to its over-century-long history, unique habitats, ecosystems, and biodiversity.

Rivers, Lakes, Canals and Sea

The early colonisation and growth of tin mining in the Larut district are historically linked to Sungai Matang in Kuala Sepetang. The term Matang comes from the permatang (ridge), created by the early settlers to control the flow of water to the rice fields. Later, Ngah Ibrahim used the river as a key conduit to manage the tin mine earnings, and he constructed the Melawati port at its mouth.



Figure 1: The Study Area and Heritage Assets

DISCUSSION

The Matang-Kuala Sepetang study revealed a legacy landscape that closely aligns with the theoretical conceptions of historic village tourism discussed in the literature. Heritage village tourism focuses on the interaction of tangible and intangible cultural elements, supported by natural environments, to create unique visitor experiences and strengthen community identity (Park, 2014; Smith, 2006). Matang's 17 diverse heritage assets indicate the area's capacity to function as a vibrant heritage village destination. However, current visiting patterns and the underutilisation of many heritage resources suggest that the area's tourism potential is far from fully realised.

Matang's tangible heritage assets, which include historical structures, religious sites, and remnants of colonial-era infrastructure, serve as the foundation of the region's cultural landscape. Sites such as Kota Ngah Ibrahim, Captain Speedy's House, and the Taiping-Matang Shipyard illustrate layers of local, colonial, and economic history that are highly valuable for historical tourism. According to heritage tourism theory, physical structures provide the spatial and architectural backdrop for cultural narratives (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). However, the study found that most tourists focus on Kota Ngah Ibrahim, indicating a lack of diverse heritage interpretation and promotion. As observed in other heritage towns worldwide, when a single monument becomes the primary centre of tourism, other equally significant cultural assets are overlooked, limiting the appreciation of heritage and the dispersion of economic benefits locally (Kim & Ellis, 2015).

The intangible heritage elements identified—local cuisines such as prawn mee and semilang fish, Chinese opera performances, and the Temple God Festival showcase the living cultural manifestations that contribute to Matang's identity. These findings support UNESCO's emphasis on intangible cultural assets as a vital component of authentic cultural experiences (UNESCO, 2003). Intangible heritage promotes cultural continuity and participatory forms of tourism, resulting in deeper engagement between visitors and host communities. However, similar to issues noted elsewhere (Su, 2018), these cultural activities in Matang appear to be under-promoted, under-documented, and insufficiently integrated into the heritage tourism framework. Without deliberate interpretation, local traditions risk being overshadowed by more prominent built heritage attractions.

The natural heritage assets identified particularly Hutan Paya Bakau Matang and the river systems of Sungai Sepetang and Sungai Larut provide an ecological dimension that complements both tangible and intangible heritage. Consistent with global trends in heritage village tourism, natural landscapes play a crucial role in

sustaining cultural identity, supporting local livelihoods, and enhancing tourist experiences through activities such as river cruises, mangrove exploration, and ecological education (Kurmanalieva et al., 2020). However, as with other heritage resources in Matang, these natural assets are not fully integrated into a cohesive tourism narrative and remain underutilised relative to their potential.

The issues encountered in Matang are consistent with those documented in the literature. Uneven tourism distribution, insufficient heritage interpretation, a lack of community-centred management, and limited visibility of intangible heritage are all associated with concerns about cultural dilution, inadequate preservation strategies, and community marginalisation (MacCannell, 1973; Poulios, 2010; Tosun, 2000). The scarcity of promotional strategies that emphasise the interdependence of tangible, intangible, and natural heritage reinforces the need for holistic, community-driven forms of heritage management, as advocated by the UNWTO (2013).

The paper also addresses a significant research gap identified in the literature, namely the lack of comprehensive evaluations that integrate tangible, intangible, and environmental heritage within a single heritage village setting. In addition to providing a foundation for future digital documentation or GIS-based heritage mapping projects, an emerging direction for heritage conservation noted in the literature, this research contributes new empirical insights by mapping and classifying 17 heritage assets (Chung et al., 2021).

The results further emphasise Matang–Kuala Sepetang's rich heritage landscape, which holds considerable potential for fostering a more inclusive and empowered community through heritage tourism. Many intangible traditions, sacred sites, local foods, and natural environments continue to serve as social anchors for the community, reinforcing local identity and a sense of belonging.

However, the findings also indicate that many heritage assets remain underutilised, resulting in limited benefits for the local community. By mapping these sites comprehensively, this study creates opportunities for residents to diversify heritage tourism offerings and expand economic prospects more equitably.The study found that Matang–Kuala Sepetang possesses all the essential components of a successful heritage village tourism destination tangible heritage, intangible culture, and natural heritage. Yet, the uneven promotion of heritage prevents many residents from fully benefiting from tourism.

A community-centred heritage tourism framework is required to ensure that all segments of society fishermen, food vendors, artisans, cultural performers, youth, and elder gain meaningful social and economic benefits. This approach aligns with global best practices, where heritage tourism strengthens community identity, reduces poverty, enhances cultural pride, and builds social resilience (UNWTO, 2013).

To achieve a more inclusive and empowered community through heritage tourism, the following principles should guide future actions:

- Community Participation: Engage residents in decision-making, heritage interpretation, and tourism planning.
- Cultural Empowerment: Support local artisans, food entrepreneurs, and cultural performers through training and promotion.
- Intergenerational Engagement: Encourage youth participation in cultural mapping, digital storytelling, and heritage-related entrepreneurship.
- Inclusive Economic Benefits: Ensure that tourism-generated income is equitably circulated within the community.
- Social Cohesion and Identity: Promote heritage as a shared symbol of unity among the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities in Matang.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Matang - Kuala Sepetang possesses a rich and diverse array of heritage assets, collectively positioning it as a high-potential heritage village tourism destination. The region holds

considerable cultural, historical, and ecological significance, as evidenced by the identification of 17 heritage treasures across tangible, intangible, and natural categories. However, the findings indicate that tourism activities remain predominantly focused on Kota Ngah Ibrahim, resulting in the under-promotion and underutilisation of many other heritage sites that could further enhance the area's tourism profile.

Drawing on heritage tourism literature, it is evident that the strength of heritage village tourism lies in the confluence of physical history, living customs, and natural environments. While these components are present in Matang, they have not yet been effectively integrated into a cohesive and sustainable tourism framework. The lack of balanced heritage interpretation, limited community engagement, and insufficient visibility of intangible assets currently hinder the development of a comprehensive heritage experience.

To move forward, the study emphasises the importance of integrated heritage management strategies that recognise the interrelationship of tangible, intangible, and natural assets. Strengthening interpretative programmes, increasing promotional efforts, adopting digital heritage tools, and empowering local communities through participatory management practices can all support Matang in becoming a sustainable heritage village tourism destination. By taking a more inclusive and holistic approach to heritage utilisation, Matang-Kuala Sepetang may diversify its tourism offerings, preserve its cultural legacy, and contribute to long-term socioeconomic growth. This study underscores that heritage village tourism can serve as a powerful instrument for building a stronger community in Matang-Kuala Sepetang, one that is culturally proud, socially cohesive, and economically empowered. By implementing integrated and participatory heritage management practices, the region can diversify its tourism opportunities, safeguard its cultural identity, and promote long-term community well-being. This study contributes to the teaching and learning of tourism-related disciplines by demonstrating the use of observational methods, heritage resource assessment, and tourism mapping as practical tools for fieldwork, teaching, and curriculum development in tourism and heritage management programs. Moreover, this strategy can achieve the first course learning outcomes for the tourism subject, which are to study tourism planning and development methodologies, by collecting data during site visits.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Taiping Municipal Council for collaborative research and students of Studio Rancangan Kawasan Khas Matang-Kuala Sepetang 2035 and the collaborative efforts from UiTM Selangor Branch, Puncak Alam Campus.

Ethical Considerations

There is no need for a research ethics application because it does not involve humans as it only involves physical observation surveys.

REFERENCES

1. Ahmad, Y. (2006). The scope and definitions of heritage: From tangible to intangible. International Journal of Heritage Studies, 12(3), 292–300. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250600727063
2. Amran, H., & Muhammad, N. (2019). Heritage tourism development and community participation: A Malaysian perspective. Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Environment Management, 4(13), 12–25.
3. Bonet, L. E., & Ortúzar, J. de D. (2010). A definition of cultural heritage: From the tangible to the intangible. Journal of Cultural Heritage, 11(3), 321–324. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.culher.2010.01.006
4. Chung, N., Lee, H., & Han, H. (2021). Understanding the role of digital technologies in heritage tourism: A systematic review. Tourism Management Perspectives, 37, 100713. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2020.100713
5. Čop, T., Kovačić, M., & Šuligoj, M. (2024). Natural heritage and sustainable rural tourism: A European perspective. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 32(1), 85–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2023.2181234

6. Harun, S. N. (2018). Promoting rural tourism in Perak Tengah district through the expanding of heritage interpretation and presentation. Planning Malaysia: Journal of the Malaysian Institute of Planners, 16(3), 182–196. https://doi.org/10.21837/pm.v16i7.510
7. Khairudin, N., Rahman, S., & Abdullah, M. (2024). Cultural identity and historical landscape preservation in rural Malaysia. Journal of Heritage & Society, 11(2), 101–115.
8. Kim, S., & Ellis, A. (2015). Nurturing the culture of authenticity: The case of Korean heritage villages. Journal of Heritage Tourism, 10(3), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2014.977818
9. Kurmanalieva, E., Kim, Y., & Song, H. (2020). Community-based handicraft heritage and tourism development in Asia. Asian Journal of Tourism Research, 5(2), 112–130.
10. MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings. American Journal of Sociology, 79(3), 589–603. https://doi.org/10.1086/225585
11. McKercher, B., & du Cros, H. (2002). Cultural tourism: The partnership between tourism and cultural heritage management. Routledge.
12. Park, E. (2014). Heritage tourism: Emotional and experiential dimensions. Annals of Tourism Research, 45, 116–131. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2013.12.001
13. Pascariu, G., Petrescu, R., & Tiganasu, R. (2022). Intangible cultural heritage and community identity in tourism development. Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development, 12(4), 357–373. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCHMSD-06-2021-0120
14. Poulios, I. (2010). Moving beyond a values-based approach to heritage conservation. International Journal of Heritage Studies, 16(1–2), 161–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250903441711
15. Smith, L. (2006). Uses of heritage. Routledge.
16. Su, M. (2018). Heritage tourism and the sustainability of living traditions. Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, 16(4), 345–362. https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2017.1361429
17. Su, M. M., & Wall, G. (2014). Community participation in tourism development: A case study of China. Tourism Management, 40, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2013.05.014
18. Taiping Municipal Council. (2025). Technical report of Special Area Plan Larut Matang–Kuala Sepetang 2035. Taiping Municipal Council.
19. Timothy, D. J., & Boyd, S. W. (2003). Heritage tourism. Pearson Education.
20. Timothy, D. J., & Boyd, S. W. (2015). Tourism and heritage management. Channel View Publications.
21. Tosun, C. (2000). Limits to community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries. Tourism Management, 21(6), 613–633. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(00)00009-1
22. UNESCO. (2003). Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO Publishing.
23. United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2013). Sustainable tourism for development guidebook. UNWTO.
24. Wasela, K. (2023). The role of intangible cultural heritage in the development of cultural tourism. International Journal of Eco-Cultural Tourism, Hospitality Planning and Development, 6(2), 15–28.