

Research Paper: Thematic Tourism; A new Concept for Developing Tourism (Case Study: Rural Areas of Meyami County)



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: the purpose of the present research is to determine and identify various forms of thematic tourism and implementation strategies in rural areas of Meyami County for proper planning respecting the current market structure and the region's tourism potentials.

Methods: the present research applied a case study method using various instruments including observation, interview, as well as document references. Interviews were conducted with 30 local stakeholders and experts up to the saturation.

Results: the research led to a set of developing subthemes embodied in the main themes of cultural-historical, pilgrimage, rural life, agriculture and food, industry, health, physical activity, landscape and natural systems, and geology. Respecting each determined theme, a developable tourism form and a set of follow-up operational strategies were provided.

Conclusion: considering the region Caravanserai's capacities, enhancing tourism infrastructure, designing, developing and marketing of particular forms of tourism for the understudied city, focusing on supplementary plans along with thematic tourism forms, cooperating with influencers such as bloggers, journalists, and even famous tour leaders are critical factors in developing thematic tourism in the rural areas of Meyami County.

1. Introduction

Tourism is known as one of the largest economic industries around the world. It accounts for 10% of the global gross domestic product (GDP). Interestingly, out

of every 10 jobs in the world, one is associated with tourism (World Tourism Organization, 2018). In 2018, the number of international travelers was 1.4 billion people; a business with 1.7 trillion dollars revenue. The significance of this industry is that it alone accounts for 7% of the global total exports, and 29% of the service

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exports (World Tourism Organization, 2019). The desire to attain the aforementioned advantages leads many countries to seek larger benefits from this industry and to ensure their development through tourism expansion.

Our country (Iran) is no exception. In travelogues and historical texts, the four-season land, Iran, has always been known for its rich culture and wilderness. It has paved the way for tourism development through accessing huge natural, cultural, and historical resources. It is stated that the oil and petrochemical industries can be well substituted by tourism. In addition, as the world organizations report, tourism can play a major role as a strong economic arm and can resolve domestic difficulties such as lack of income and employment (World Tourism Organization, 2018). Moreover, it is worth notifying that tourism, as a means of promoting world peace, can be a proper tool to fix the negative image created by Western media; in other words, it introduces rich Iranian culture to the world.

Therefore, numerous political documents have highlighted the necessity of tourism development in Iran. According to the Islamic Republic of Iran's 20-Year Vision Plan, by 2025, Iran will reach 20 million visitors and an income of about 25 billion dollars through tourism (The Expediency Discernment Council, 2005). Recently, the "Sixth Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran" particularly highlighted the "sustained development of Iran tourism, whereby the number of foreign visitors and travelers increases at least five times by the end of the sixth plan" (The Supreme Leader, 2015). However, despite all potentials and multiple sources, as well as high-level documents emphasis on tourism development in Iran, our present rank is undeniably far from the desired image. Respecting tourism competitiveness ranking, Iran ranked 89 among 140 countries selected by the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2019); hence, achieving prospective objectives for tourism development, and removing barriers weakening the current economic position would require proper planning at various national, provincial and urban levels, as well as in rural areas as the least micro-levels. Of these, rural areas of Meyami County need a proper, well-established tourism planning. Rural areas of Meyami County are endowed with huge potentials of different dimensions that realize various forms of tourism. Different vegetation, wildlife, multiple geomorphological phenomena, an ancient culture, an intellectual heritage, great historical figures, and historical monuments all represent different tourism potentials of this region. In addition,

these villages and rural areas have been located on the route of the passengers travelling to Khorasan Razavi- a crowded, popular route in different seasons, especially holidays.

Therefore, on the one hand, due to its high tourism potentials and the fact that it is located on a crossroad, it appears that tourism is not yet significantly recognized by these rural areas. On the other hand, as tourism is often used for developing destinations with different tourism sources and multiple limitations (Đurašević, 2014), focusing on various parts, these rural areas can enjoy theme-based tourism to develop new tourism products in order to improve visitors' experiences. Thus, the objectives of the present study are, first, to introduce a set of developing tourism subjects (themes) based on the potentials, platforms, and capacities of the rural areas, and second, to provide operational strategies for following up with the identified thematic forms.

2. Literature Review

The themes of tourism-thematic tourism

World Tourism Organization and European Travel Commission (2017), in a book published on the thematic tourism, explain the "theme" of tourism as follows: private tourism operators and destination authorities apply themes for making and marketing tourism products. They highlight key characteristics, features, and unique statements, and give identity to a tourism activity of asset (World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission, 2017).

In this respect, theme in tourism may refer to any unique feature of a destination that would create a foundation for tourism product development at the destination. As explained by World Tourism Organization and European Travel Commission (2017), the most critical tourism themes or subjects can be determined by 15 main areas (Table 1).

According to the definition of tourism theme, it seems that thematic tourism is a tourism activity that occurs around a particular theme (Cervinka, Svajdova, & Tykva, 2014). Indeed, thematic tourism is a kind of journey that initially satisfies a given interest such as an entertainment, a physical activity, an interest in a particular subject, or a particular type of destination. Thematic tourism may refer to some forms of tourism concentrating on the activities or creating contexts for special markets (i.e. less number of tourists). It also refers to new places, products, and authentic experiences. Thematic tourism

not only provides the experience of visiting places and things to visitors but also brings the experience of sharing emotions and excitements to them. In fact, it must be stated that the market trend has significantly changed. Earlier, quality of the services was a key to distinguish tourism products; whereas, today, visitors look for experiences- they are more often ready to pay higher prices in return for unique experiences. In other words, current visitors are increasingly looking for authenticity, and a way to emotionally engage with the local culture and society (undoubtedly, this is one of the most fundamental and critical trends in the modern tourism around the world); in an extended change, it is rooted in the values and is known as “experience economy” (World Tourism Organization & European Travel Commission, 2017). However, it must be noted that introducing the notion of thematic tourism does not entail simultaneously creating a new type of tourism; rather, it entails implement-

ing a new concept for developing a tourist destination in line with the parties’ demands and specific needs (Đurašević, 2014). Therefore, some consider thematic tourism against mass tourism (Cervinka et al., 2014). Robinson, Heitmann, and Dieke (2011) divided tourism into two main categories: Niche Market and Mass Market, in which themes are known as Niche Market pivots.

Research background

There are a few studies that have specifically investigated thematic tourism (Table 2). The limited studies were also conducted under two areas; development of thematic tourism (Ablania Country, 2014-2020; Heyou, 2018; Lapochkina, 2015; Lee & Lee, 2018; Nagy, 2012) and identifying thematic tourism capacities for specific places (Bader, 2017; Europeancommission, 2014-2020; Lapochkina, 2015).

Table 1. Grouping common themes

Theme groupings	Nature of the aspiration
History	Experiencing and understanding the past through buildings, artefacts, reconstitutions, or other material or immaterial traces and memories.
Pilgrimage	Experiencing or sharing a sense of spirituality or sublimation through travel.
Roots	Discovering and experiencing the heritage of one’s ancestors or one’s people.
Landscape	Seeing and communing with remarkable and beautiful sites, including coastal, mountain, rural, and even man-made landscapes.
Natural systems – ecological and geological	Discovering the life and appreciating the natural forces that form exceptional places.
Cultural icons	Visiting sites and monuments, including art galleries and museums that are recognized and admired on a national or international basis.
Urban life ¹	Participating in the life of cities, through strolling, shopping, nightlife or other urban activities that capture the essence of the urban setting, including interacting with local people.
Rural life	Participating in the life of rural areas, through activities that capture the essence of the rural setting and interacting with local people.
Marine life	Participating in activities that provide insight into maritime industries, such as going oyster catching with a local oyster catcher.
Artistic excellence in visual and performance arts	Appreciating and engaging in activities relating to visual and performance arts in a destination, including related festivals and events.
Traditional crafts	Appreciating and engaging in activities relating to traditional crafts in a destination, including related events.
Food and Drink	Discovering and learning about or experiencing the food and drink of different regions and countries, in restaurants, farms, plantations, vineyards, breweries, or at markets and local festivals
Physical activity	Pursuing physical activities where the setting provides a critical backdrop for the experience, including outdoor adventure sports or endurance, journeys to extreme locations, or long-distance running, hiking, cycling or riding.
Industrial tourism – modern and traditional	Engaging in activities that demonstrate past, present and state-of-the-art work practices in industry, such as factory, mine or power station tours .
Well-being	Travelling to experience a healthy lifestyle and stimulation of well-being through activities such as spa treatments or meditation.

Credit: World Tourism Organization, 2017



1. As the present research mainly focuses on the rural areas, this theme has been excluded.

Table 2. Literature review

Title	Author (year)	Content
Integration of Creative Tourism and Theme Tourism: Driving Factors and Achieving Path—A Case Study of the Horse Culture Themed Creative Tourism in Prairie Areas	He-you (2018)	Merging two idea of creative tourism and theme tourism
A study on the Behavior response of Emotional response and Local image for the Experience value by the Theme tourism	Lee & Lee (2018)	Addressing emotional response and Local image in the field of theme tourism.
Thematic Tourism VS. Mass Tourism in the Czech Republic	Cervinka et al. (2014)	Comparing two trends of thematic tourism and mass tourism in Czech Republic
Heritage Tourism, Thematic Routes and Possibilities for Innovation	Nagy (2012)	It deals with how a thematic path develops around cultural heritage, and finally defines 6 steps of theme site selection, information search, creating a network of partners and database, interpretation of the prototype, economic evaluation, finalization and market entry for developing theme-oriented cultural heritage path.
Project of Thematic tourism development through the preservation of Polyphonic music	AblaniaCountry (2014-2020)	It focuses on using music as a subject to develop tourism in Greece.
Green paper for the promotion of thematic tourism in the Mediterranean Basin	Europeancommission (2014-2020)	In the Mediterranean Basin in cooperation with the EU within 2014-2020.
A New Concept in Promoting Tourism: Thematic Evenings	Bader (2017)	Concentrating on thematic events in Romania
Key aspects of the formation and development prospects of literary thematic tourism: national and international experience	Lapochkina (2015)	Investigates thematic tourism development in Russia, Moscow, and St. Petersburg (hometown of noble authors)
Thematic Tourism as an important segment in the business of modern tour operators	Djurasevic, Bulatovic, & Stranjancevic (2016)	Explores the role of tour operators in identifying themes according to the tourists' needs.



3. Methodology

This is an applied research as the results can be extended and employed. It is also a descriptive (non-experimental) study as it is conducted in a natural context with no intervention. Moreover, this qualitative study identifies developing forms of thematic tourism in the rural areas of Meyami County through a case study. A case study is an experimental research using multiple sources to explore an existing phenomenon in the real context, where the phenomenon and its context cannot be clearly distinguished (Yin, 2018). Case studies are conducted when the researcher (scholar) needs to understand or explain a phenomenon (Seyed Imami, 2005). This method is implemented in 6 steps (Danaeifard, 2013; Danari-fard, Alvani, & Azar, 2007; Stake, 1995) (Figure 1).

1. Statement of the problem: it states a problem (phenomenon) challenging the mind. The research focus or intention is determined following the literature review

and statement of the problem. The research focus is on what the research can rely on as a basis during the study process. The understudied research subject can be often a plan, group, team, or even a decision. Whereas, in the present research, regarding literature review and highlighting thematic tourism as a new notion in tourism, on the one hand; and features and special location of Meyami County rural areas in tourism, on the other hand, the research main question is to identify and determine various forms of thematic tourism in rural areas and follow-up strategies in the understudied area.

2. Case selection, data collection, and data analysis methods: this is a critical step for further levels. The scholar must select one or more cases reflecting the research question of the first step. Respecting the statement of the problem, a specific geographic area – rural areas of Meyami County- was selected.

In a case study, different tools are used for data collection. Thus, given the existing potentials and sources, the present research benefited from three sources to identify various developing forms of thematic tourism in the rural areas of Meyami County:

- Literature review to analyze development forms and models of the proposed tourism
- Local observations of potentials, sources, and existing attractions
- Interviews with experts and tourism activists in the industry to identify developing tourism models

3. Preparation for data collection: Being prepared to manage a large volume of data prior to data collection would save time for the researcher. Due to the nature of the case study, the researcher collects a large volume of data from several sources. The pre-research timetable lets the scholar organize, save, and manage data in such databases. In the present study, all studies were followed according to a predetermined program; and all research data were saved in individual thematic files.

4. Collecting field data: the researcher must systematically collect and store multiple data sources. Data storage is fundamental to customizing the themes and models (main contents).

5. Data evaluation and analysis: using a set of interpretations, the researcher evaluates research data to find all the relationships respecting the research questions.

6. Reporting: the purpose of reporting is to answer the research questions based on the results such that the reader can figure them out.

The research statistical population included tourism academic experts, as well as tourism activists in the region. Interviews were open and interviewees were questioned about various forms of thematic tourism, as well as follow-up strategies of the proposed forms. Research samples included 30 individuals selected through a purposive snowball sampling method regarding the frequency of thematic tourism forms and saturation (Table 3). Interview data were analyzed by a thematic analysis method.

Geography

The case study here is the rural areas of Meyami County. Meyami, with an area of 8356 km², is located on the southern hillside of Alborz Mountain Range. It is surrounded by Golestan province in the north, Shahrud city from the south and west, and the North Khorasan and Khorasan Razavi from the east. Its minimum eastern longitude is 55°, 18'; and its minimum northern latitude is 36°, 8'. It is 1081 m above sea level (Statistical Center of Iran, 2016) (Figure 2).

Meyami County has several villages surrounded by green areas on one side and enclosed by desert on the other side. In addition to natural attractions, it is situated on the Silk Road; hence, it has several historical-cultural attractions, too.

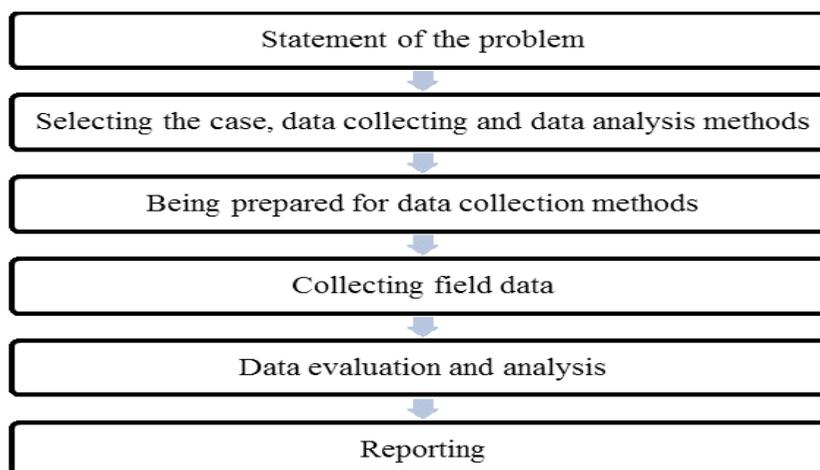


Figure 1. Case study implementation steps

Table 3. Profile of the interviewees

Interviewee number	Description
1	Member of the Islamic Council of Kalateh Asad village, organizer of an exhibition of rural products for tourists
2	Facilitator of villages in the region
3	Owner of ecology in Foromad village
4	A tourism official in Meyami county
5	Tourism expert in the field of rural tourism in Semnan province
6	professors of the tourism faculty -Semnan university
7	professors of the tourism faculty - Semnan university
8	private sector officials in the field of tourism resorts in the province
9	Local tourist guide
10	Local tourist guide
11	Expert of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
12	Expert of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
13	One of the officials of Meyami County
14	One of the official program and budget organization in Semnan province
15	Owner of ecology
16	One of the tourism officials in the Meyami county
17	One of the officials in Kommite Emdad Emam Khomeyni- one of the activities in the field of rural entrepreneurship with regard tourism
18	professors of the tourism faculty of Semnan university
19	Local tourist guide
20	Local tourist guide
21	Local tourist guide
22	Expert of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
23	One of the officials in Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
24	Expert of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
25	Expert of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
26	The organizer of the traditional food exhibition in Meyami
27	Owner of ecology in Ebrahimabad
28	Expert of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
29	One of the officials in Wildlife Office
30	professors of the art faculty - Semnan university -Archaeologist

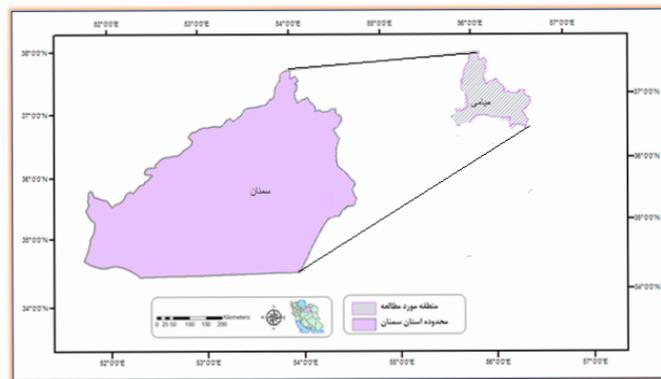


Figure 2. Location and divisions of Meyami County



Table 4. Some of the resources, attractions, and their location and characteristics

Type of Attraction/ Resources	Title	Location (Village)	Characteristics
Natural Attraction/ Resources	Poppy and sunflower plains	Hossein Abad Kalposh	Top Tourism Area (Mantaghe Nemoneh Ghardeshgari) Place of annual Poppy and sunflower plains Exhibition
	Nam Nik Jungle	Nam Nick Village	Top Tourism Area (Mantaghe Nemoneh Ghardeshgari) Good for holding jungle tours
	Kalshor	Kord Abad Village	A beautiful salt field for geological and nature tours
	Sam Nam Nik Cave	Nam Nick Village	The second deepest and most dangerous cave in Iran studied by a polish researcher
	Nam Nik fall	Nam Nick Village	Top Tourism Area (Mantaghe Nemoneh Ghardeshgari)
	Narvan Cave	Gots Village	Existence of beautiful stalagmites and stalactites on the roof, walls and even the floor of the cave
	Dasht Shad Jungle	Dasht Shad Village	Top Tourism Area (Mantaghe Nemoneh Ghardeshgari)
	Natural Landscape	Nardin Village	Targeted village
	Natural Landscape	Telowin Village	Targeted village
	Natural Landscape	Gollestan Village	Targeted village
Historical-Cultural Attraction/ Resources	Shrine of Eremiah (PBUH)	Ermian Village	It has a tree with a diameter of more than 8 meters and is 4000 years old
	Shrine of Danie (PBUH)	Rezvan Village	It is one of the three places attributed to the tomb of Daniel the Prophet (PBUH) in the country (Shush, Qazvin, Meyami i)
	Shrine of Sultan Sayyid Ahmad(PBUH)	Foromad Village	From the buildings of Shah Tahmasb (Safavid) era -A very old inscription in the place of Imamzadeh
	tomb of Ibn Yamin Forumadi	Foromad Village	Tomb of a famous Iranian poet -The tomb was reconstructed in 1974.
	tomb of Sheikh Hassan Jouri	Firoz Abad Village	Tomb of the Leader of the Sarbedaran
	Grnad Mosque of Foromad	Foromad Village	Belonging to the Khwarezmshahian-Ilkhani era- It has unique architectural decorations of plaster and brick
	Mohammad Abad polabrisham Caravanserai	Hossein Abad Polabrisham Village	Located on the Silk Road and belongs to the Safavid era
	Sepanj (JahanAbad) Caravanserai	Jahan Abad Village	Located on the Silk Road – It has unique decorations- the place for governance events in the past times
Man-Made Attraction/ Resources	Abas Abad Caravanserai	Abas Abad Village	Being on the Silk Road - Belongs to the Safavid era
	Kalposh Dam	Hossein Abad Kalposh	Top Tourism Area (Mantaghe Nemoneh Ghardeshgari) Beautiful Lake
	Lake of Sheikh Hassan Jouri Dam	Foromad Village	It has the possibility of swimming and fishing in it
	Abbas Abad Copper Mine	Abas Abad Village	Has exploitation capacity for mining tourism
	Shirt production	Mohammad Abad Village	One of the centers of shirt production in the country with several workshops in this field
Diary Products	Jodane Village	Milk production center of Semnan province	

Three main purposes of visiting rural areas in Meyami County are enjoying natural attractions, historical buildings, and traditional textures in the villages (Table 4). Meanwhile, the former is more appealing to tourists.

However, the concept of theme tourism is not well established in the villages, and the formation of themes can be a good solution for more tourism development in the region.

4. Findings

Inspired by the WTO classification and given the tourism potentials and attractions of Meyami County, 9 main themes (subjects) were determined in this study for tourism development: Historical-cultural, religious, rural life, agriculture and food, industry, health, physical ac-

tivity, landscape, natural systems, and geology. In some classifications, the main themes contain several sub-themes providing market segmentation. Executive plans for each theme development were presented (Table 5).

Table 5. Main theme, subtheme, type of tourism, and executive plans

Main theme	Subtheme	Theme-based developable tourism	Executive plans
Historical-Cultural	Historical mosque	Cultural-historical tourism	Historical events regeneration and designing narrative tour of Jameh Mosque of Forumad (the only The Süleymaniye Mosque in Iran)
	Caravanserai	Cultural-historical tourism	Developing the road to Shah Abbasi Caravanserai (Safavid) (Deh Molla Shahrud, Farash Abad, Ermiyan, Miyandasht, Abas abad, Sadrabad) Expanding the Silk Road (Mohammad Abad in the Silk Road, Sharifabad, Jahanabad, Nardin, Sharifabad Caravanserai, located 2 km away from the railroad) Restoration, use, and transferring the region top caravanserai (Meyami, Sepang, Miandasht, Abbas Abad, Alhak, Sadr Abad, Mohammad Abad, Pol Abrisham, Alhak) for tourism functions such as residence sites or traditional restaurants Historical events regeneration and designing narrative tour in Jahan Abad caravanserai
	Castle	Cultural-historical tourism	Castle restoration to be used for tourism objectives
	Cemeteries of the celebrities and popular figures	Cultural-historical tourism	Historical events regeneration and designing narrative tour in the tomb of Ibn Yamin Forumadi Historical events regeneration and designing narrative tour in the tomb of Sheykh Hassan Jouri
	Events and festivals	Cultural-historical tourism	Dairy festival at Jourane Village Festival at Jahan Abad Caravanserai Festival and handicrafts at Hossein Abad as the additional program of Poppy (flower) festival Designing Nomadic festival
Pilgrim	Religious tourism	Religious tourism	Designing and developing religious tours Ecotourism residence/ or local residence for the pilgrims in Ermian Assigning a pilgrim road between Ermian and Su Daghelan
Rural life	Targeted villages and rural areas with tourism potential	Rural tourism	Designing a pedestrian street in Ibrahim Abad Eco-tourism at the targeted tourism rural areas (Nardin, Forumad, Ibrahim Abad, Hossein Abad, Dasht Shad, Abas Abad, Talvin) Eco-tourism in Golestan Village Eco-tourism in Ermian village Need assessment and developing tourism infrastructures required in the targeted areas (Nardin, Forumad, Ibrahim Abad, Hossein Abad, Dasht Shad, Abas Abad, Talvin) Reconstruction of rural areas in old villages based on priority (like Forumad, Ermian, Ibrahim Abad)
Agricultural life and food	Agriculture	Agricultural tourism	Identifying potential areas in the county and prioritizing for agricultural tourism lands
	Food	Food Tourism	Restoring and advertising the area traditional food by annual traditional food festivals in Meyami (Forumad) Constructing a traditional restaurant delivering traditional food along the road

Table 5. Main theme, subtheme, type of tourism, and executive plans

Main theme	Subtheme	Theme-based developable tourism	Executive plans
Industry	Mine	Scientific tourism	mine tourism development and identifying the required facilities in Abas Abad and Miandasht
	Manufacturing rooms	Scientific tourism Industrial tourism	Holding, designing, and marketing training courses for dressmaking in Mohammad Abad Holding, designing, and marketing of potstone tours in Ibrahim Abad
Health	Halotherapy	Medical tourism	Identifying the area salt domes to be utilized for Halotherapy tourism and establishing relevant facilities
Physical activity	Bicycling	Sport tourism	Designing bicycle lane, development and marketing for bicycle touring at Kalpush
	Caving	Sport tourism	Design, development, and marketing of caving tours (Such as Sam Nam Nik, Khartout, Namakzar, Ghaem O din
	Skiing	Sport tourism	Feasibility study of winter sport facilities like ski at Kalpush
	Riding	Sport tourism	Constructing a racecourse at Kalpush
	Motorbike Rally	Sport tourism	Feasibility study of a good place for motorbike rally
	Desert touring	Sport tourism	Design, development, and marketing for desert touring (north Abas Abad)
	Climbing	Sport tourism	Design, development, and marketing of climbers (at the southern areas)
	Fishing	Sport tourism	Design, development, and marketing of fishing tours at Shykh Hassan Jouri Dam lake
Landscape	Poppy and sunflower plain	Leisure and recreational tourism	Need assessment, prioritization, as well as developing the necessary tourism infrastructures in the top areas of Poppy and sunflower plains National and international designing and marketing for photographic tours in of Poppy and sunflower plains Constructing a recreational site Designing and constructing of camping area Designing and constructing of gazebo
	Dam	Leisure and recreational tourism	Conducting bird watching tours at Kalpush Dam
Natural systems and geology	Jungle	Eco- Tourism	Designing and developing camping in Nam Nik Jungle Designing and developing camping in Dasht Shad Jungle Designing and developing combined tours Golestan- Kalpush District Eco-camping at Kalpush District Jungle (Kalpush Dam) Need assessment, prioritization, as well as developing the necessary tourism infrastructures in the top areas of Nam Nik Jungle and Fall, Dasht Shad Jungle, and Abas Abad
	Haloxylon	Eco- Tourism	Designing of a so-called “green path” containing Haloxylon plains of Firuz Abad, Mashih Abad, and Khane Geli.
	Cave	Geotourism	Designing and developing Cave-introductory tours with expert tour guides
	Salt dome	Geotourism	Constructing eco-camps at the area of salt domes



One of the tourism themes that can be developed in the villages of Meyami is the historical-cultural theme due to the historical richness of the region and the benefit of various historical attractions. In this regard, 5 sub-themes can be considered, of which 4 sub-themes refer to historical buildings such as mosques, caravanserais,

castles, and cemeteries of the celebrities and popular figures.

“Two-porch mosques are mosques that existed only in the states of Qoms and Khorasan during the Islamic era. The Foroumad Grand Mosque (which belongs to the

state of Qoms in ancient times) is an example of prominent two-porch mosques in Meyami. Caravanserais of this region are also noteworthy. The most important caravanserai in Iran and the Islamic world, after Robat Ashraf Caravanserai, is the Sepange Caravanserai, which is very important because of its unique decorations” (Interviewee No. 30)

Besides, one of the sub-themes identified below the historical-cultural theme is the events and festivals theme:

“Jahanabad Caravanserai used to be a place for government events, and now it is possible to do the same and start holding a series of ceremonies and celebrations in this caravanserai” (Interviewee No. 4)

Enjoying visits to the tombs of celebrities and shrines within the villages of the Meyami County are also among the capacities that can be used to develop tourism:

“Currently, traveling to gain spiritual experiences has become one of the tourists’ motivators. In Meyami County, a number of these capacities are available; such as Sheikh Hassan Jori or Ibn Yamin Foroumadi. It can be attractive “(Interviewee No. 25)

The experience of rural life is another thing that has met with success in recent years and Meyami villages also have this tourism potential.

“We have 7 target villages in Meyami; each of which has unique capacities for tourism. If we provide the necessary infrastructure for these villages, we can achieve the goal of tourism development in the county” (Interviewee No. 7)

The main focus of rural development in Miami is on the agricultural industry due to the availability of numerous agricultural lands. This capacity can lead to expandable forms of tourism on this basis, such as agricultural tourism.

“It may be a good idea to use numerous agricultural farms in the county villages and build tourism farms” (Interviewee number 18)

Also, given the presence of traditional dishes in the area, the definition of food theme for tourism development will not be far from the mind. To the extent that it is even possible to use the mentioned capacity to create traditional restaurants in the road:

“The people of Forumad village have various kinds of local food. Qarooti (it’s a traditional food) had been forgotten. But now, thanks to the food festivals, these foods can be well introduced to tourists and local people may earn more money” (Interviewee number 10)

The utilization of existing special industrial capacities is one of the tools of the modern world for tourism development.

“Mohammadabad was shown on television some time ago. A significant number of men’s shirt manufacturing units in the village have the capacity for holding industrial tours.” (Interviewee number 26)

Variety of natural forms in the area that allow the implementation of various sports activities

“There is a cave called Nam Nick Cave. A Polish researcher has even studied the cave. It is a good attraction for caving” (Interviewee number 1)

In the northern villages of Meyami, the poppy and sunflower plains create unique landscapes that have a high capacity for the development of the landscape theme.

“The views we have of the poppy and sunflower plains in the village of Hosseinabad Kalposh are unique. Many international professional photographers like to go somewhere and photograph flowers” (Interviewee No. 9)

5. Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to initially identify and determine the main developable tourism themes and subthemes in the rural areas of Meyami County, and to present follow-up executive plans for each theme. Thus, a case study was carried out using literature review, observations, and expert interviews. In other words, it was an attempt, like some previous studies (Bader, 2017; European Commission, 2014-2020; Lapochkina, 2015) to identify a set of tourism themes that can be developed in a particular area. The research led to a set of developing subthemes entailed in the main themes of cultural-historical, religion, rural life, agriculture and food, industry, health, physical activity, landscape, and natural systems and geology. Cultural-historical theme includes historical mosques, caravanserais, castles, cemeteries of the celebrities and popular figures, and events and festivals sub-themes. The pilgrimage theme is related to religious tourism. Rural life can be defined as a theme in targeted villages and rural areas with tourism potential. Agricultural life and food theme

contain agriculture and food sub-themes separately. Halotherapy in Meyami is related to health main theme. Meanwhile, the Physical activity theme includes different sub-themes like bicycling, caving, skiing, riding, motorbike rally, desert touring, climbing, and fishing. Landscape as another main them is cited to poppy and sunflower plain as well as the dam. Natural systems and geology as the last main theme have four sub-themes; jungle, haloxylon, cave, and salt dome (Figure 3).

A developing tourism form and a set of follow-up operational strategies were also provided respecting each identified theme. Beyond the noted discussions, the authors found that to develop tourism in the rural areas of Meyami County, it is necessary to consider the following:

- The capacity of Caravanserai: as mentioned in “An Introduction to the Development of Meyami County” document, it is known as the city of Caravanserais. Therefore, this valuable potential can be utilized in various forms as traditional residence and restaurant, recreating historical events at the heart of the aforementioned Caravanserais, using for recreational activities such as festivals, events, and star observations.

- Enhancing tourism infrastructure: rural areas of Meyami County suffer from poor tourism infrastructure. Thus, it is necessary to develop infrastructure focusing on the targeted rural areas and tourism regions with high potentials.

- Designing, developing, and marketing of specific forms of tourism in the understudied rural areas: regarding the extended variety of attractions in the understudied areas, different forms of tourism such as geo-tourism, medical tourism, sports tourism, industrial tourism, and agricultural tourism can be developed as well. Undoubtedly, such variety can be followed by successful tourism.

- Complementary plans along with thematic tourism: paying attention to other critical plans and proposals such as educational programs for local executives, local people, preparing an interactive tourism map of the area, local festivals, and establishing NGOs along with developing the proposed product may ensure the success of understudied areas in tourism.

- Cooperating with influencers such as bloggers, journalists, and even popular tour leaders is another solution to facilitate theme-based tourism development as the influencers are followed by many followers in social media such as Instagram; thus, any promotion and advertising of thematic tourism in the rural areas of Meyami County will be visited by many people around the world.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

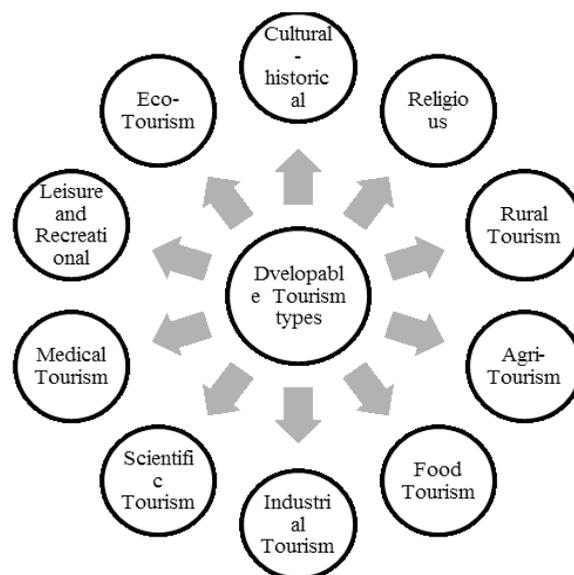


Figure 3. Developable tourism types in the understudied area based on the identified themes

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