Sustainable tourism issues in the San Antonio Mission Historic District

Excerpted from a 2015 article in *Tourism and Hospitality Research*. Original article written by UTSA’s Dr. Sedef Doganer.
**About the CCS**

**Our Mission:** The Center for Cultural Sustainability explores the continuity of the cultural systems of human existence and the common identities of heritage that bind people to places.

**Our Purpose:** The CCS provides academic research and services to benefit communities, completes large-scale research projects, provides research and educational opportunities for graduate students, and convenes leaders in the field for dialogue on global practices concerning sustainable development and construction.

**About this report**

The audience for this document includes the stakeholders affected by UNESCO’s recent designation of the San Antonio Missions as a World Heritage site.

**Tourism factoids**

- The average length of stay for a visitor to San Antonio is 4.5 days.
- San Antonio's economy could gain an extra $1 billion if the average visitor stay grows by half a day.
- One way to increase visitor length of stay is to protect and leverage San Antonio's unique cultural and heritage assets.
What is sustainable tourism?

Since its beginning in the 1970s, the sustainable tourism movement has worked toward improving the tourism phenomenon in such a way as to contribute to the regional economy and local community without harming the environment, society and historical, natural and cultural entities. The idea of sustainable tourism is now a popular concept and refers to allowing tourism growth while at the same time preventing degradation of the environment, as this may have important consequences for future quality of life.

Sustainable tourism fosters community pride and includes direct involvement of the local community. It includes three categories.

1. **Culinary tourism:** Defined by author ML Long as “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of another—participation including the consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered to belong to a culinary system not one’s own” (Culinary Tourism:
Exploring the Other Through Food). Examples include eating meals prepared with local ingredients or the purchase of local food products that are then taken home to give as gifts. The locally sourced produce ensures *tourist dollars are invested back into the community*, allowing other businesses to thrive.

2. **Cultural heritage tourism:** Cultural heritage tourism is “traveling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present” (National Trust for Historic Preservation, n.d.). It is an economic development tool designed to attract visitors to an area based on the unique aspects of the locality’s history, landscape and culture. This not only boosts regional and local pride but is also a good source of revenue for a community and creates jobs. Amid increasing globalization, cultural heritage tourism *focuses on what makes San Antonio unique*.

3. **Rural tourism:** Involves an escape from everyday urban and suburban life. It is typically characterized by a small-scale, well-managed, educational and frequently high-end market. Examples include spending a day at a working farm; going horseback riding, hunting, or fishing; walking/hiking, etc.
Tourism in San Antonio

Numerous investment and policy initiatives have been implemented to support and enhance the visitor industry in San Antonio. These include: Witte South Texas Heritage Center, McNay Art Museum, HemisFair Park, River Improvements Project, San Antonio International Airport Expansion, Pearl Brewery Development and the new hotel, San Antonio Bike Programs, Convention Center Improvements and the planned New Expansion, Tobin Center for the Performing Arts, Confluence Park River South Coordinated Management Plan, Mission Reach Recreation Concessions Study, Downtown Transportation Plan, Alamo Plaza Study, Placemaking Campaign, New Children’s Museum, San Pedro Creek, and Big Tex project.

The San Antonio Mission Historic District

The Mission Historic District, located along the San Antonio River in the south section of the city, includes the lower four missions (Listed from north to south: Concepcion, San Jose, San Juan Capistrano, and Espada), their acequias and fields.

Local government has completed a multiyear project to restore and enhance 13 miles of the San Antonio River both north and south of downtown. The project also aims to reinforce the connection to the San Antonio Missions and encourage tourists to circulate along the river beyond the downtown area.

Tourism factoid

In 2009, 26 million people visited downtown San Antonio, but only 1.7 million visited the lower four missions.
Characteristics of cultural heritage tourists

Today, San Antonio’s tourism economy depends mostly on leisure travelers and convention planners. However, a different type of traveler—the cultural heritage traveler—exists. And with the cultural heritage visitor comes opportunity for significant economic impact.

- 64% are visiting the site for the first time
- 84% will return to visit the site again to bring others or will take more time
- 55% spend nights away from home
- 58% are employed full time
- 90% come with their families
- Spend an average of $62 more per day than other travelers
- 90% come with their families