



Received: 18 March 2024

Revised: 3 May 2024

Accepted: 3 May 2024

# RECREATIONAL TOURISM: RIVER FLOATING AND TUBING IN PAI, MAE HONG SON, THAILAND, TOURISM CASE

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(This article belongs to the Theme 1: Humanities and Social Sciences for Sustainable Development)

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## Abstract

Scholars and practitioners in tourism industry have extensively explored factors influence tourists' positive emotions, however a research gap exists regarding the combined effects of multiple factors. Recreational tourism has gained attention, reflecting growing creativity in placemaking for tourism through various design strategies. It can be viewed as networked tourism which relies on both producers and consumers to generating value through encounters. Case studies emphasize sensitivity to local context, adherence to basic design principles, and the importance of an unobstructed vision in creative placemaking. Shifting focus from creative development to creative tourism aligns with trends in the tourism industry. An example of recreational tourism's impact is seen in Pai, Mae Hong Son, Thailand where the foreign tourists flock for adventure activities. Safety concerns arise due to the popularity of "tipsy tubing", a river-floating activity. Despite safety issues, it is dubbed "the ultimate backpacker attraction in Pai" on travel websites. This low-impact activity has surged in popularity among backpackers since Thailand's 2022 border reopening. Tubing leverages local resources, attracting over 600,000+ visitors annually and generating 2 billion THB in tourism-related revenue.

**Keywords:** Recreational Tourism, Nomad Tourist, River Floating, Topsy Tubing

**Citation Information:** Vithayaporn, S. (2024). Recreational Tourism: River Floating and Tubing in Pai, Mae Hong Son, Thailand, Tourism Case. *Asian Interdisciplinary and Sustainability Review*, 13(1), 58-67. <https://doi.org/10.14456/aisr.2024.7>

## **Introduction**

Tourism plays a vital role in the economies of many countries, contributing significantly to employment opportunities and fostering the development of new businesses, thereby bolstering the GDP (Rattanasirivilai, 2023). Sustainable tourism is characterized by a comprehensive consideration of both present and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, aiming to fulfil the needs of visitors and hosts alike while also enhancing prospects for future generations. The concept of sustainable tourism revolves around the idea of managing resources in a manner that satisfies economic, social, and aesthetic requirements while simultaneously preserving cultural authenticity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and the integrity of environmental support systems (Suthivorapongsri, Angsukanchanakul & Maneechai, 2023). At its core, sustainability in tourism encompasses environmental, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. However, recreational tourism is often neglected in the study of sustainable tourism development, despite its potential contribution to sustainable development. This gap in the literature needs to be addressed. Hence, this study aims to identify and fill this gap.

In academic or professional contexts, "tourism cases" might refer to case studies analyzing specific tourism destinations, businesses, marketing strategies, or sustainable tourism practices. Cases could be used to refer to statistical data or instances related to tourism, such as the number of tourists visiting a particular destination, revenue generated from tourism, or trends in travel behavior. This study utilized a tourism case based on recreational tourism, specifically focusing on river floating and tubing in Pai, Mae Hong Son, Thailand. This destination stands out as one of the most popular spots for recreational activities among tourists. The objective was to further analyze the extent to which recreational tourism enhances sustainable tourism development".

They bridge the gap between theory and practice, provide a platform for critical thinking and decision-making, and offer practical insights that can inform industry practices, policy formulation, and academic research. Data Analysis used appropriate qualitative techniques and interpret the findings of the data analysis in relation to objectives. It identified patterns, trends, relationships, and insights that emerge from the data. To drawing conclusions based on the analysis and interpreted findings. Implications of the study also presented in the conclusion for theory, practice, or policy in the tourism industry.

## **Literature Review**

### **Recreational Tourism**

Recreational tourism is a form of tourism that focuses on engaging travellers in creative activities and experiences by fostering their active participation in the local culture, traditions, and artistic expressions of a destination (Richards, 2020). The aim is to provide visitors with unique and authentic experiences that go beyond passive sightseeing. The concept of creative tourism emerged as a response to the growing interest among travellers in enjoying more immersive and hands-on experiences. It seeks to promote interaction between tourists and local communities whilst encouraging cultural exchange and mutual learning. Research on recreational tourism has been conducted by a number of scholars (Duxbury & Richards, 2019). Recreational tourism allows visitors to not only observe but also actively participate in the creative processes and cultural practices of a destination. Recreational tourism experiences can encompass a wide range of activities depending on the destination's cultural and artistic heritage. Some examples include the following (Galvagno & Giaccone, 2019; Hongnuan et al., 2021).

Artistic workshops: Travelers can engage in hands-on activities such as painting, pottery, sculpture, photography, cooking, or traditional crafts (Carvalho et al., 2023). Music and dance programmes: Tourists can learn and participate in local music and dance traditions, such as

taking part in drumming workshops, learning traditional dances, or attending music festivals (Dias et al., 2023). Cultural festivals and events: Travellers can actively participate in local festivals, parades, or cultural celebrations, where they can dress in traditional costumes, learn traditional dances, or participate in rituals (Moleiro & Ribeiro, 2023). Heritage and historical tours: Visitors can explore the historical and cultural heritage of a destination through guided tours that emphasise storytelling, theatrical performances, or interactive exhibits (Naz et al., 2022). Creative collaborations: Tourists can collaborate with local artists, designers, or writers to create artworks, murals, or literary works inspired by the destination.

Remoaldo et al. (2022) suggested that recreational tourism not only provides unique experiences for travellers but also contributes to the preservation and promotion of local cultural heritage and traditions. It can stimulate economic development by supporting local artisans, craftspeople, artists, and cultural organisations. Destinations that embrace recreational tourism often emphasise community engagement, sustainability, and the preservation of cultural authenticity (Berdenov et al., 2021; Matkabulova & Slyeva, 2023). By encouraging visitors to actively participate in these creative processes, recreational tourism creates a deeper connection and appreciation for the local culture and enhances the overall travel experience.



**Figure 1** Topsy tubing in Pai, Thailand  
Source: The Nation (2023)

### **Activity-Based Recreational Tourism**

Ross & Saxena (2019) studied creative tourism based on the activities at the destination that gain attention from tourists. These can be quite simple but still have a direct impact on the perception of various types of tourists. Tubing is a popular river activity in which participants float down a river on an inflatable tube. It can be a fun and leisurely way to enjoy the water and surrounding scenery. Whilst tubing can be done using various types of tubes, including specially designed ones for river tubing, some people use previously used rubber tubes for this activity. Although the use of previously owned rubber tubes for tubing can be a cost-effective option, as these tubes can often be obtained from old tractor or truck tires, it is important to ensure that the tube is in good condition and free from any significant damage or leaks that could compromise safety (Islamovna, 2021). Tourists must also remember that the safety and enjoyment of tubing depend on numerous factors, and therefore, 'it is always an innovative idea to research local regulations, consult with experienced tubers, or seek guidance from professionals who provide tubing services in the area that they plan to visit.

### **Tipsy Tubing in Pai, Mae Hong Son, Thailand**

The COVID-19 situation caused tourism in the village of Pai in Pai, Mae Hong Son is an enchanting tourist destination in Northern Thailand that has attracted backpackers and individuals seeking alternative experiences for a considerable time, making it arguably one of the region's finest destinations. Situated 135 km away from the popular northern Thai city of

Chiang Mai, to decrease significantly for a certain period. However, since the COVID-19 crisis passed, Pai has once again become bustling. This is mainly due to the popular activity of river rafting on the Pai River, which has become a magnet not only for international tourists but also many Thai tourists. As a result, during the most recent high season, many of the accommodations in Pai were fully booked with visitors.

Thailand's tippy tubing is a unique and unforgettable adventure where tourists can embark on a donut-shaped tube and leisurely float down the river, often while enjoying alcoholic beverages. It is important to note that drinking alcohol while tubing down the river is a significant part of the attraction for visitors to Pai. This activity is not only considered incredibly enjoyable but also offers a relaxing experience that can greatly enhance tourists' journey through northern Thailand. While tubing in Pai, tourists can meet numerous backpackers and fellow travellers, potentially forging new friendships and creating lasting memories. As they navigate the river's twists and turns, participants are likely to encounter a variety of different people amid the lively atmosphere of the interconnected tubes. It is certain that this thrilling activity provides a fantastic escape from the stresses of everyday life, which is often much needed. To embark on the tippy tubing adventure, the first step is to book a slot in advance to be certain of having a reserved spot for this activity. The entire tippy tubing experience typically lasts for approximately three hours, starting from the moment participants are picked up and driven to the river's starting point.

The participants simply sit on their tube, sip their drink of choice, and begin floating down the river. The initial floating period lasts around 30 minutes, taking them halfway along the river. This gives the travellers the chance to indulge in a delicious meal while enjoying the scenic surroundings. After the BBQ party, tourists get back into the water on their tubes and continue floating for another 20 to 30 minutes until they reach the end of the journey. Pai is a renowned tourist destination, and the province of Mae Hong Son is at the heart of its tourism offerings. Many visitors choose to explore this province due to its popularity and attractions.

### **Tippy Tubing and Nomad Tourists**

A nomad tourist, also known as a digital nomad or location-independent traveller, refers to an individual who embraces a lifestyle that combines travel with remote work or online entrepreneurship (Suhartanto et al., 2020). Unlike traditional tourists who take short-term vacations, nomad tourists often have the freedom to travel extensively and for longer durations while earning a living remotely. Nomad tourists typically leverage technology and digital platforms to work remotely, allowing them to maintain a source of income while exploring different destinations (Wang et al., 2020). They often rely on laptops, smartphones, and stable internet connections to carry out their work responsibilities, which can include freelancing, consulting, writing, programming, or running online businesses. One of the key characteristics of nomad tourists is their flexibility in choosing their travel destinations. They may stay in a place for a few weeks, months, or even longer, depending on personal preferences and visa regulations. This lifestyle allows them to immerse themselves in diverse cultures, experience diverse environments, and build a global network of like-minded individuals (Sharafutdinov, 2024; Tursunaliyevich et al., 2021).

Nomad tourists often seek destinations that provide a conducive environment for remote work, such as cities or towns that provide an affordable cost of living, reliable internet infrastructure, co-working spaces, and a welcoming community of digital nomads. They may also prioritise factors such as safety, quality of life, access to healthcare, and opportunities for leisure activities and exploration. The rise of nomad tourism has been facilitated by advancements in technology, remote work trends, and the increasing availability of digital platforms that enable flexible work arrangements. It offers individuals the opportunity to combine their passion for travel and exploration with their professional pursuits, allowing for a more balanced and fulfilling lifestyle.

It is important to note that the term “nomad tourist” can encompass a range of individuals with diverse backgrounds, professions, and travel preferences. While some nomad tourists may prioritise work and use travel as a means to explore, others may prioritise travel and explore work opportunities along the way. The lifestyle and motivations of nomad tourists can vary, but they all share the common characteristic of embracing a mobile and location-independent lifestyle while pursuing their personal and professional goals.

### **Tourists Flock to Explore the Pai River, Causing Excitement and a Viral Sensation on Social Media**

Based on the images appearing on various social media platforms, there is a widespread and popular trend among tourists, especially foreigners, regarding the activity of rafting in the Pai River, Pai, Mae Hong Son. The Director of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) Mae Hong Son Office stated that the aforementioned activity is not an old trend but is rather a current activity. Through field visits, interactions, and interviews with business operators, as well as continuous monitoring of the tourism situation, it has been found that tourism in Mae Hong Son in 2023 has expanded compared to the previous situation in 2019. In 2023, there have been approximately 1.55 million tourists thus far, whereas in 2019, there were around 1.42 million visitors per year. Currently, the proportion of foreign tourists is estimated to be around 15-20%, and it is expected to reach 35-40% similar to the past, assuming there are no other impacting factors.

Furthermore, from January 2023 to the present, there has been a trend of significant expansion in tourist numbers compared to the same period last year. The average occupancy rate is approximately 62.62%, which is higher than usual during the period from February to May, where tourist numbers typically decline due to rising temperatures and issues such as forest fire haze. However, in 2023, the haze situation is not severe, and there was rainfall in mid-February, resulting in good to excellent weather conditions with the temperature remaining comfortably cool throughout the day. It has also been observed that tourists are adjusting their travel plans to stay within the area, leading to a continuous flow of tourists and bustling activities in the accommodation, car rental, restaurant, souvenir sales, and pedestrian street businesses. Additionally, popular tourist destinations such as Konglan or Pai Canyon, which are natural attractions and beautiful sunset viewpoints, are consistently crowded with tourists every evening, starting from around 5:00 PM. This is part of the tourism promotion policy initiated by the Governor of Mae Hong Son, who aims to create awareness and promote Mae Hong Son as the “Westernmost Province of Thailand” or “Mae Hong Son, the last sunset.”

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) Office in Mae Hong Son has announced that during the hot season, they have engaged in discussions with entrepreneurs, the Mae Hong Son Tourism Industry Association, and the relevant public and private sector agencies to prepare and adjust tourism plans to enable tourists to travel throughout the year, following the concept of the “Travel 365 Wonderful Days in Thailand” theme. The TAT Office in Mae Hong Son, in collaboration with the network of stakeholders and relevant agencies, has set up a campaign to promote tourism during the hot season under the “Mae Hong Son Relaxation Project.” This campaign highlights the strengths of wellness tourism, combined with local food and festivals, in order to enhance the selling points.

The campaign includes culinary tourism, highlighting the variety of local and ethnic foods available in Pai, as well as health and beauty establishments such as spas. It also emphasises the uniqueness of cultural heritage, such as the New Year festivities of various ethnic groups that are popularly celebrated from February to March. Additionally, there are activities that have been organised in support of tourism, such as the procession and holy water pouring ceremony in Pai held on 13 April 2023, as well as newly created events like the Songkran Water Festival, which was held for the first time in Pai on 20-21 April 2023. These events feature interesting activities such as river rafting, water play zones, water park attractions, and

the sale of local food and souvenirs, which are connected to the walking street activities. These efforts aim to attract tourists to visit and stay longer in Pai, creating opportunities for spending and distributing income to various communities, reducing inequality, and addressing issues of unemployment and migration to urban areas, in line with government policies. The plan designates Pai as a tourism hub, expanding outwards to various areas due to the diversity of the local tourist attractions, including waterfalls, hot springs, mineral baths, scenic viewpoints, and numerous activities. This caters to the needs of digital nomad groups and workcation or hybrid work groups, who can travel and work in Pai for extended periods, contributing to an increase in length of stay and generating income for the local communities.

The river rafting venture in Pai is presently experiencing a surge in popularity, emerging as a prominent trend. It is perceived as an avenue capable of generating revenue for entrepreneurs while also fostering favorable job prospects and livelihoods for the local populace. The TAT's Mae Hong Son Office previously conducted a pilot test for marketing and promoting this activity from April to May 2022 by marketing it in conjunction with the "Sticky Rice with Mango Festival" on Pai Walking Street, which received positive responses throughout. Furthermore, in November 2022, the activity gained significant visibility on social media and attracted a large number of foreign tourists. This raised concerns among various parties, and as a result, the Mae Hong Son Office of the TAT invited relevant government agencies, security authorities, entrepreneurs, and stakeholders to a meeting to foster mutual understanding and establish sustainable tourism management strategies.

### **Tourism Enterprises in Pai, Mae Hong Son, Thailand**

Currently, five businesses have registered with the Mae Hong Son Tourist Police Station. These businesses are required to control the consumption of alcoholic beverages during the river rafting activity in Pai. Due to the increasing popularity of the river rafting activity among both Thai and foreign tourists, the TAT's Mae Hong Son Office, as a tourism promotion agency, and the coordinating agencies have held meetings to gather opinions from various sectors, including the government, the private sector, and civil society. The objective is to create a participatory management approach to tourism that ensures continuity and balance in terms of the economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. The focus is on creating valuable experiences for tourists that can add economic value, foster business linkages, and distribute income to communities in a fair manner without exploiting tourists. It also aims to preserve cultural identity, promote happiness within society, and emphasise the care, conservation, and restoration of natural resources for sustainable development.

The Mae Hong Son Office of the TAT, in collaboration with the Mae Hong Son Chamber of Commerce, Pai Tourism Business Association, and the relevant government and private sector organisations, has been engaging in discussions with business operators to prepare and promote year-round tourism plans under the "Mae Hong Son Relaxation" project, in alignment with the "365 Days of Marvelous Thailand" theme. The TAT, together with the network of stakeholders and related agencies, has planned a summer tourism campaign under the project. The campaign highlights the strengths of health and wellness tourism, combined with local food and festivals. It aims to attract tourists by offering diverse local and ethnic cuisines as well as the international food options available in Pai. Additionally, the project promotes businesses related to health and beauty, such as spas, while leveraging the unique cultural aspects and traditional festivals, including the popular New Year celebrations of various ethnic groups, which take place from February to March. Furthermore, the project highlights the unique Pai Sang Long Festival, which is the only one of its kind in the world.

In addition to that, there are also activities that support tourism, such as the traditional procession and sacred water pouring ceremony of Pai, which were held on 13 April 2023. There are also newly organised events, such as the Songkran Festival, which were held for the first time in Pai on 20-21 April 2023. This event offers interesting activities, including rubber rafting

on the Pai River, a water play zone, traditional local food stalls, and souvenir sales booths connected with the walking street activities. These will attract tourists to visit and stay in the area for a longer period, thereby creating opportunities for tourists to spend and distribute income to various communities, which will reduce inequality and prevent unemployment and migration to major cities, in accordance with government policies.

The plan designates Pai as a hub for tourism and expands it into various areas in order to offer a diversity of tourist attractions, including waterfalls, hot springs, mineral springs, viewpoints, and various activities. This will cater to the needs of digital nomad groups and workcation groups or those who wish to travel while working in the area of Pai. Furthermore, it encourages them to extend the duration of their stay and provides more opportunities for long-term residency.

## **Methods and Fields Observations**

The information for this tourism case study was predominantly gathered through a combination of virtual and in-person discuss with representatives from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), as well as tourists who had taken part in the tippy tubing river floating activity. The author also conducted on-site observation the tourism activity for a duration between 17 to 25 October 2023. Secondary data and information collecting were obtained from the Office of the Tourism Authority of Thailand in Mae Hong Son, as well as scholarly research from websites and articles. The value and significance of tourism case studies lie in their ability to provide practical and insights into real-world tourism situations and scenarios (Yapanto et al., 2023). Tourism case studies thus serve as a valuable tool for learning, analysis, and knowledge transfer in the field of tourism. Interpretive data analysis is used to extract conclusions based on tourism cases that have been studied extensively by scholars and implemented by practitioners. Furthermore, fields observation can draw the conclusion.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Recreational tourism, it can be concluded that it is a dynamic and innovative approach to tourism that promotes the engagement of travellers with the local culture, heritage, and artistic expressions of a destination confirmed to the study of Senakhan & Pavapanunkul (2022). It recognises the value of creativity and seeks to provide immersive and participatory experiences for tourists, allowing them to interact with local artists, artisans, and cultural practitioners. Recreational tourism encourages tourists to actively participate in creative activities, such as painting, sculpture, pottery, cooking, music, dance, and other forms of artistic expression. To engaging in these activities, tourists can develop new skills, gain insights into local traditions and customs, and forge meaningful connections with the local community. The benefits of recreational tourism are multi-fold. For tourists, it offers a unique and authentic travel experience, allowing them to go beyond the traditional sightseeing and immerse themselves in the local culture aligned with the study of Machado & de Andrés (2023). It fosters personal growth, creativity, and self-expression, enabling individuals to discover their talents and passions. For local communities, creative tourism can stimulate economic development and cultural preservation. The highlighting their cultural heritage and artistic traditions, communities can generate income, create job opportunities, and revitalize their cultural practices. It also enhances community pride and self-esteem, as locals could share their knowledge and skills with visitors, fostering intercultural understanding and appreciation (Mirzaev, 2020; Perkumienė et al., 2023).

Regarding Pai as area of the study, for visitors to Pai, apart from the popular river rafting activity on the Pai River, there are many other interesting tourist attractions in Pai. These include the Walking Street, Mo Hin Khao (Misty Sea Viewpoint), Ban Santichon (Santichon Chinese Village), Choui Fong Tea Plantation, Wat Sri Don Chai, and the historic Tha Pai

Suspension Bridge. These are the enchantments of Pai, one of Thailand's famous tourist destinations, which has experienced waves of tourists throughout different eras, from the backpacker era to the booming era of Thai tourists and hipsters, and now entering the era of Chinese tourists. Currently, Pai is moving forward into the post-COVID era; thus, the tourism industry requires overall transformation (Cheer, 2020; Lew et al., 2020). With the river rafting activity gaining momentum, it has become a new attraction that allows tourists to have fun, enjoy themselves, and be impressed by the charms of Pai.

Business owners are satisfied with the positive response from tourists, and they will be able to sustain their businesses by generating income through tourism-related activities. This is made possible with the support of the Thai government's tourism initiatives, which have the potential to generate substantial income from global tourists. Recreational tourism approach utilising existing resources allows us to highlight our unique attractions without requiring significant investment. For doing so, soft power can be established and create another avenue for economic growth without relying heavily on large budgets.

In conclusion, recreational tourism is a transformative form of travel that combines cultural immersion, artistic engagement, and community participation (Wisansing & Vongvisitsin, 2019). It has the potential to enrich the travel experience, empower local communities, and promote sustainable tourism practices. Embracing creativity and supporting local artists and cultural practitioners, destinations can offer totally unique and memorable experiences to travellers while preserving and promoting their cultural heritage.

To achieve the study objectives is recreational tourism has the potential to enhance sustainable tourism development by promoting economic prosperity, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, community empowerment, and destination diversification. However, achieving sustainable tourism requires careful planning, collaboration among stakeholders, and a commitment to balancing economic, environmental, and social considerations. Recreational tourism activities, such as river floating and tubing, can generate revenue for local communities through tourist expenditures on accommodations, food, transportation, and souvenirs. This economic boost can contribute to the long-term viability of the tourism industry and support local businesses, thereby promoting sustainable economic development. This study can contribute to community empowerment to enhance sustainable recreational tourism development can empower local communities by involving them in decision-making processes, providing opportunities for entrepreneurship and skill development, and fostering pride in local resources and traditions. This community involvement and empowerment are essential for ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of tourism initiatives.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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