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The Role of Takht-e Foulad Cemetery in Isfahan's Tourism Development: A Focus on Spiritual Tourism

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Abstract

Takht-e Foulad in Isfahan stands as a significant tourist destination, embodying Iran's rich spiritual, cultural, religious, and historical heritage. While primarily recognized as a cemetery, its diverse tourism aspects position it as a prominent cultural complex with the potential to serve as a "cultural tourism theme park." This study examines the complex's role in Isfahan's tourism development through a spiritual lens, based on quantitative research conducted from autumn 2021 to summer 2022. Data collection methods included documentary research, library resources, and questionnaires. Analytical findings highlight an inherent spirituality within the Takht-e Foulad Complex, necessitating a holistic approach that integrates the perspectives of tourists, the site, and the local community. The study categorizes the complex's tourism dimensions into heritage, religious, and event tourism, aiming to craft a spiritually-oriented tourism strategy that contributes to Isfahan's broader tourism development. The final model presents practical recommendations and strategies to promote spirituality while advancing tourism within the Takht-e Foulad Complex. **

**This paper is derived from a project conducted for the Isfahan Municipality in 2022

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Introduction

Isfahan is a key tourist city in Iran, renowned for its historical significance and rich cultural and religious heritage. Home to nationally and globally important sites, it is often regarded as the cultural capital of the Middle East and the Islamic world; it stands as a major center for tourism (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Within Isfahan's diverse array of tourist attractions, Takht-e Foulad Cemetery stands out as a uniquely significant site. Excavations have uncovered several brick funerary stones with Kufic and Naskh inscriptions, dating back to 567 and 686 AH. During the Safavid period, as Isfahan expanded southward, the cemetery grew in size, becoming the final resting place for numerous Islamic jurists, scholars, and esteemed citizens, including Mir Fendereski, Agha Hossein Khansari, and Mirza Rafi'a-ye Na'ini, Agha Jamal Khansari, Fazel Isfahani, and others. Over time, Takht-e Foulad became deeply interwoven with Isfahan's social, cultural, artistic, and civilizational heritage. Beyond its historical significance, Takht-e Foulad serves as a literary and artistic repository, preserving poetry and works by distinguished literary figures. These poets have composed eloquent verses in tribute to distinguished dignitaries, marking their passing with stylistically rich chronograms. The gravestones and tablets within the complex reflect a distinctive poetic tradition, imbued with profound spiritual and mystical themes (Nilforooshan, 2005).

While enhancing tourism at Takht-e Foulad Cemetery presents undeniable challenges, tourism development initiatives at historical and cultural sites play a crucial role in shaping broader tourism planning strategies (Sojasi Qeidari & Mahmoodi, 2018). Past experiences with planning efforts aimed at cultural and historical enrichment—such as promoting the cultural values of diverse nations, preserving and conserving heritage sites, fostering cultural branding, and safeguarding local and spatial identities—highlight the need for a complementary perspective. To achieve a truly integrated approach to tourism development, Isfahan's cultural and religious tourism strategies must be supplemented by additional considerations. In this context, incorporating a spiritual approach to tourism can serve as a powerful tool, offering deeper engagement with the site while enriching visitors' experiences beyond conventional historical and cultural narratives.

Since travel leads tourists to search for meaning in life, it can be seen as a form of spirituality. (Shirmohammadi et al., 2024). The concept of spirituality, as the non-physical dimension of human existence, permeates all aspects of life. As beings created with inherent uniqueness, humans are not placed on Earth without purpose; rather, they are guided by specific existential aims. The soul, or the immaterial essence of human life, possesses distinct characteristics that are explored through spiritual foundations. To fulfill these existential aims, humankind turns to movement—using travel as both a resource and a means of realization. Travel, as a journey of passage, serves as a pathway to self-discovery and personal transformation. It becomes the birthplace of human formation and development,

encompassing all experiences and guiding individuals toward completion. Within this framework, spirituality is understood as the essence of existence, shaping human connection with oneself, the surrounding world, and the Creator. It represents the core of human nature—the wholeness of being—that humankind seeks through travel in its pursuit of deeper meaning and fulfillment (Shahrabi Farahani, 2018).

The Takht-e Foulad Cemetery in Isfahan transcends its role as a historical and cultural site, embodying both material and spiritual heritage. Rooted in Iranian-Islamic architectural traditions, its intricate tilework, mirror work, sacred structures, and the sepulchers of luminaries in science, art, and philosophy make it a unique destination reflecting Iran's anthropological history. This richness demands a trans-developmental perspective that extends beyond conventional tourism models. Given its extensive cultural reach, Takht-e Foulad stands out as one of the world's rare "cultural theme parks" integrating literature, poetry, music, philosophy, mysticism, and the arts. A review of Isfahan's tourism development strategies suggests that adopting a contemporary scholarly approach to spirituality can facilitate holistic development, enriching both its material and spiritual heritage. This perspective presents opportunities to elevate Takht-e Foulad's prominence among the general public and specialized audiences alike. Thus, the critical question arises: How can a spiritual approach to tourism effectively contribute to the development of tourism in Isfahan, with Takht-e Foulad as its focal point?

Theoretical Background

Concepts of Development and Tourism

The concept of development, originally rooted in the natural sciences, has progressively replaced terms such as advancement, evolution, and growth. Over time, it has been adapted to describe the dynamic processes of change within human societies, encompassing economic, social, cultural, and technological transformations (Mousaghi, 2010). The term "development," first recorded in French and English in 1752, originally referred to the attainment of goals or ideas according to a specific design or scheme. Over time, its meaning expanded to denote distinct stages within projects and, by analogy, the biological progression of growth—from a seed or germ to a fully blossomed plant (Hass, 1992). Etymologically, "development" refers to the process of unfolding or emerging from an enclosed state, signifying the realization of inherent potential within something (Riggsfred, 2005).

Tourism is a complex and multidimensional activity, requiring careful planning across social, cultural, economic, and infrastructural domains. Essential infrastructure includes highways, airports, railways, roads, parking areas, parks, lighting systems, maritime and port facilities, bus and train stations, hotels, motels, restaurants, shopping districts, leisure venues, museums, and retail spaces. Additionally, potable water treatment, fuel distribution, telecommunication networks, and sanitation systems are crucial

components supporting tourism development (Coltman, 2001). Tourism growth in any region depends on national and local conditions, including socio-cultural influences, natural and historical attractions, and the quality and availability of services. Ultimately, distinctive features of a destination's attractions and amenities play a fundamental role in its appeal, driving visitor engagement and participation in tourism activities (Sojasi Qeidari & Mahmoodi, 2018).

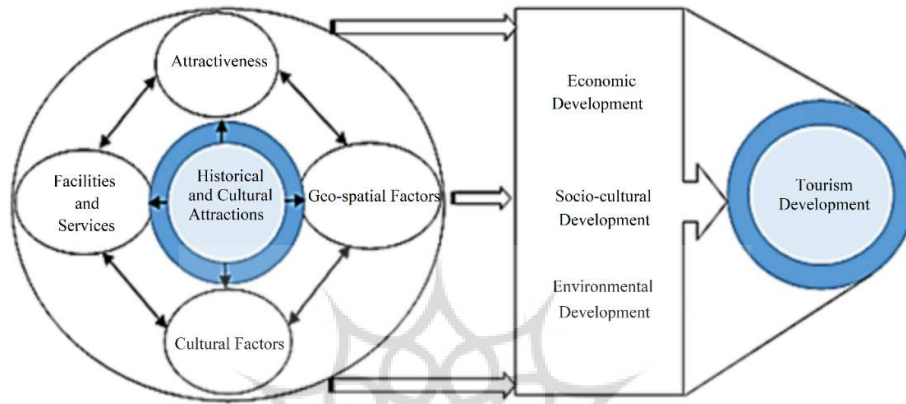


Figure 1. Tourism Development at the Destination (Sojasi Qeidari & Mahmoodi, 2018)

Numerous studies have explored tourism development in Isfahan. Among these, the tourism development model presented in Figure 2 highlights the structural components of economic, social, cultural, and infrastructural growth in the city's tourism sector.

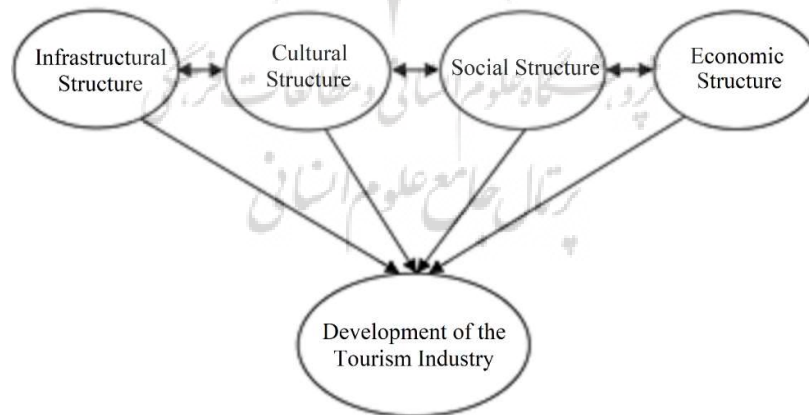


Figure 2. Development of Isfahan's Tourism Industry (Haghighi et al., 2015)

Analusis and findings

Human beings, in both their essence and survival, are constantly driven by the pursuit of fulfilling their needs. While these needs are diverse and complex, often defying complete satisfaction, they serve as the fundamental catalysts for human behavior. Psychology, as the study of human behavior, examines these driving forces through the lens of motivation. Within this framework, psychologists, drawing on anthropological principles, have developed various categorizations of human needs to better understand the underlying factors that shape human actions (Imani Khoshkhoo & Shahrabi Farahani, 2018). Frankl (1986) categorizes human spiritual needs as follows: the need for intellectual dynamism, meaning, self-transcendence, eternity and immortality, religion, and emotional and social belonging. These needs reflect the fundamental dimensions of human existence, shaping personal growth, purpose, and connection.

Culture is an integral part of human needs, positioned within the higher levels of human requirements. Today, from the most profound human interactions to the search for existential meaning, from transcending personal limitations to fostering a connection with a higher power or something beyond oneself, all fall within the domain of spirituality. The diverse interpretations of spirituality in monotheistic religions make it difficult to establish a universal definition. However, in a broad sense, spirituality is a human virtue that gives life meaning and purpose, shaping one's way of being in the world and fostering connections—with oneself, others, and existence as a whole. While the understanding of spirituality in travel manifests differently among individuals, it remains a shared human experience across religious traditions (Imani Khoshkhoo & Shahrabi Farahani, 2018). Spiritual destinations serve as profound representations of a region's civilization and culture, drawing tourists in search of deeper meaning and connection. Mystical tourism emerges from religious practices or spiritual journeys, offering travelers transformative experiences that engage both the tangible heritage and intangible essence of a place. (Shirmohammadi et al., 2024).

Literature Review

Studies examining Takht-e Foulad's role in Isfahan's tourism development, particularly its spiritual dimensions, have been analyzed. The findings from relevant research in this field are presented in Table 1.

The tourism development of Isfahan, spirituality, and the Takht-e Foulad Cemetery are key terms shaping the analysis and background research for this study, as outlined in Table 1. Content analysis of existing literature indicates that the spiritual dimension and tourism development at Takht-e Foulad have been examined separately. Consequently, the research gap is illustrated in Figure 3.

Table 1. Relevant studies

Number	Researcher(s)	Title	Findings
1	Esmailian (2002)	The potential of the tourism sector and its significance in Isfahan Province's economic growth	Given the province's geographical, historical, economic, and social context in one hand and with its tourism potential in the other hand, key motivations for this project include foreign exchange earnings, the preparation and preservation of cultural heritage, optimized use of provincial resources, and economic benefits derived from the industry.
2	Taghvaei and Safarabadi (2012)	Developing cultural tourism with a focus on historical sites (Case study: Isfahan's historical attractions)	Socio-cultural factors and inherent appeal are highly important for developing cultural tourism in Isfahan. Naghsh-e Jahan Square holds the top rank, followed by Hasht Behesht in second place, among Isfahan's historical sites.
3	Vahidzadegan, Irani Behbahani, and Talebian (2013)	Assessing the variables influencing the aesthetic quality of the historical-cultural landscape of Islamic cemeteries in Iran (Case study: Takht-e Foulad, Isfahan)	Beyond its religious significance, the enduring connection between local residents and the complex—despite its change in primary function—has established it as a prominent tourism hub in Isfahan, reflecting the full spectrum of Islamic Iranian culture and art. This study uniquely identifies focus and tranquility as influential factors in people's aesthetic preferences for locations.
4	Varesi and Safarabadi (2014)	The impact of social factors in tourism on urban tourism development (Case study: Isfahan)	The management of tourism spaces plays a pivotal role in Isfahan's tourism development.
5	Shafiei and Zarei Mazra'cheh (2014)	Historical cemeteries as destinations for cultural tourism	Takht-e Foulad Cemetery, as a historical, cultural, and religious complex, possesses considerable tourism potential. Effective management could enhance the attractions available to visitors in Isfahan, consequently improving both their satisfaction and time of staying.
6	Amrollahi Bolouki and Nazari Dehghi (2015)	The influence of tourists' mental image of Isfahan on its sustainable tourism development	Individual traits, through mental imagery, exert a significant positive influence on tourist behavior, tourism outcomes, and tourism development.
7	Haghighi, Roshan-Del Arbatani, and Salehi (2015)	Examining the challenges and obstacles to tourism industry growth in Isfahan from a tourist perspective	Inadequate planning and investment, infrastructure, cultural-educational frameworks, and information dissemination constitute obstacles and challenges to tourism industry growth.
8	Zahedi et al. (2015)	Tourism planning and development at the historical, cultural, and religious site of Takht-e Foulad	An analysis of the current situation led to the formulation of four scenarios during the research, and suitable strategies for tourism enhancement within the Takht-e Foulad historical, cultural, and religious complex have been proposed.
9	Kiani Salmi et al. (2017)	Developing tourism strategies for historical houses as revitalizing elements of historical urban fabric (Case study: Isfahan's historical houses)	Strategic evaluation and interpretation indicate that, within the SO strategy, enhancing the reputation and public awareness of this historical building is the optimal approach for effective promotion. Under the WO strategy, increased information dissemination and advertising, coupled with capital influx, represent the most viable strategy.

Number	Researcher(s)	Title	Findings
			Concerning the ST strategies, familiarizing the public with the distinctive architecture and mitigating traffic congestion among the area's structures emerged as the preferred solution. Finally, the WT strategy recommends increasing visitation by repurposing the building appropriately and underscores the importance of broadening public knowledge and awareness.
10	Isfahan Center for Social and Cultural Affairs (2016)	A strategic analysis report on development issues in Isfahan Province	Provincial development plans emphasizing tourism.
11	Seydaei and Hosseini (2017)	Evaluating, assessing capacity, and zoning tourism-suitable areas using Geographic Information Systems (Case study: Isfahan Province)	The primary existing potentials for anthropogenic (man-made) tourism lie within the cities of Isfahan and Mobarakeh. An evaluation of the province's historical-cultural tourism capacity revealed that the highest capacity is concentrated in the central region, with Isfahan as its hub, and in the northeast, centered on Kashan. Isfahan Province's greatest natural tourism capacity resides in its southern and western regions, which have been classified into five groups based on assigned scores. The highest scores pertain to the counties of Semirom and Fereydounshahr, rendering these areas suitable for nature-based tourism development.
12	Shahrabi Farahani (2018)	A model of spiritual perception of travel among cultural tourists in Iranian metropolitan areas: A case study of foreign tourists visiting Isfahan	A tourist's preconceptions stem from the totality of their life experiences, shaping and influencing their worldview and beliefs. Inner truth constitutes a fundamental and inseparable component of spirituality and human nature, linking to the immaterial and spiritual aspects of human existence. Outer truth encompasses the tourist's physical attributes and outward appearance. Humans, including tourists, are inherently relational beings. The travel experience acts as a crucible for the formation of diverse human connections.
13	Imani Khoshkhoo and Shahrabi Farahani (2018)	A conceptual framework for cultural tourists' perceptions of travel, emphasizing spirituality (Case study: Isfahan)	Cultural tourists' perception, across the five senses and within the context of their environment and social interactions, occurs within the framework of spirituality as a fundamental aspect of human existence. This perception, influenced by individual and environmental factors at the cultural site, encompasses a spirituality expressed through inner joy and ecstasy, connection to oneself and the broader existence, a sense of receiving transcendental forces, a feeling of peace, a return to one's inner self, and the pursuit of inner fulfillment through connection with the Creator.

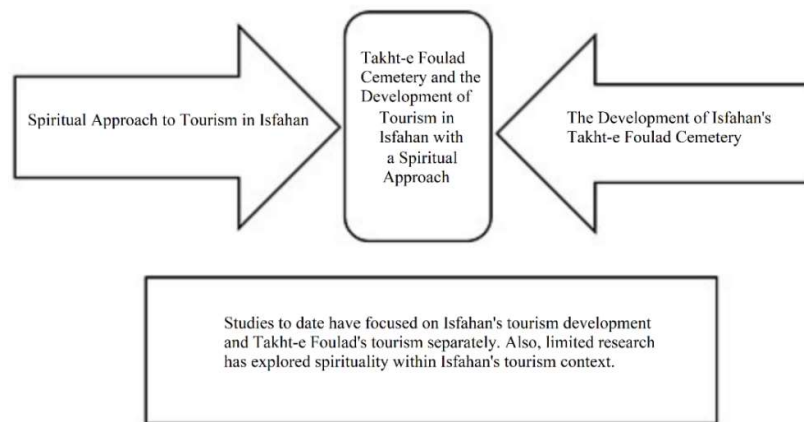


Figure 3. Deficiencies in Previous Studies

Isfahan

The foundation of Isfahan dates back to the 6th century BC, with the region historically serving as a military center, particularly under the Sasanian era. Over time, it has been referred to by various names, including Sepahan, Espahan, Espehan, Safahan, and Isfahan. Archaeological discoveries suggest that human presence in Isfahan dates back over 42,000 years. Artifacts found in the Qaleh Bozi caves (Hasanabad, Mobarakeh County) indicate that early inhabitants hunted zebras, rhinoceroses, horses, wild cattle, and other animals, providing valuable insight into prehistoric life in the region (Zendedel et al., 2009). Isfahan is a highly significant tourist city, renowned for its historical richness and its invaluable cultural and religious sites, both within Iran and on a global scale. With its exceptional attributes, the city stands as one of Iran's primary tourism hubs and a major international destination. As a result, it is often referred to as the cultural capital of the Middle East and the Islamic world (Beerli & Martin, 2004).

Tourism has been identified as a key strategy for Isfahan in major policy documents. The Isfahan Strategic Document 2025 envisions the province as a leading tourism hub, leveraging its cultural, artistic, and natural assets. Similarly, the National Development Document in the Fourth Development Plan emphasizes strengthening and modernizing the tourism industry to meet international standards, positioning Isfahan as Iran's tourism center. However, beyond its economic, political, and social benefits, tourism development is also a response to Isfahan's environmental challenges. The Fourth Development Plan highlights water, air, and soil pollution as significant concerns. Given these pressing issues, shifting Isfahan from a manufacturing center to a tourist destination presents an opportunity to promote sustainable development while preserving its cultural and environmental heritage.

Tourism is one of the key development strategies proposed for Isfahan in high-level policy documents. For instance, the Isfahan Strategic Document 1404 envisions the province as "a leading region in the tourism industry, relying on its cultural, artistic, and natural resources." Similarly, the National Development Document of the province in the Fourth Development Plan sets the goal of "strengthening and equipping the tourism industry to meet international standards and transforming the province into the country's tourism hub." However, the push for tourism development in Isfahan extends beyond economic, political, and social benefits. According to the province's National Development Document in the Fourth Development Plan, severe environmental challenges—such as water, air, and soil pollution—are among the province's most pressing concerns. Given the city's ongoing struggle with these environmental issues, shifting Isfahan's identity from a manufacturing center to a tourism-driven destination has become a strategic priority.

The "Isfahan Metropolitan Tourism Document in the Vision of 2025" highlights significant gaps in the city's tourism infrastructure. These include a shortage of high-quality hotels and accommodations, inadequate facilities in parks and tourist attractions—particularly restrooms—the absence of a museum that meets Isfahan's cultural standards, and a lack of well-defined tourist routes. These deficiencies remain key challenges for the tourism sector (Shahzeidi et al., 2020). Additionally, the Isfahan Social and Cultural Deputy, in a report analyzing the foundations of the city's development, identifies tourism as a crucial axis of progress in the modern era. The report suggests that resolving these issues requires making tourism the central focus of the province's development strategy. Key steps include formulating policies to mitigate the negative impacts of industry and agriculture and enhancing provincial management capabilities. Addressing these priorities swiftly is essential to improving Isfahan's current tourism landscape (Isfahan Social and Cultural Deputy, 2016).

Takht-e Foulad Cemetery, Isfahan

Takht-e Foulad Cemetery, spanning approximately 75 hectares, is a historical site dating back to the pre-Buyid era. Historical texts refer to this cemetery by various names, including "Lisaan al-Arz," "Baba Rokneddin," and "Takht-e Foulad." The name "Takht-e Foulad" originates from the tombstone of Baba Foulad Halvaei, a mystic who passed away in 959 AH. Historically, numerous hills extended from Mount Soffe across southern Isfahan to this location, where the terrain was relatively flat, forming a "Takht" (flat surface). Because Baba Foulad's tomb was situated there, the area eventually became known as Takht-e Foulad (Takht-e Foulad Religious Cultural Complex, 2010, p. 29).



Picture 1. Takht-e Foulad during the reign of Mohammad Shah Qajar, by the French artist Eugène Flandin

The historical and cultural importance of Takht-e Foulad Cemetery can be highlighted through the following aspects:

1. Visiting the graves of revered figures allows visitors to reconnect with the spirits of the departed, offering solace and spiritual blessings.
2. These sacred sites serve as reminders of life's transient nature, encouraging reflection and moral contemplation.
3. Pilgrims pray for the forgiveness of the deceased while seeking divine assistance for their own needs, believing that the spirits of the departed may intercede on their behalf.
4. Research on Takht-e Foulad contributes to a deeper understanding of Isfahan's anthropology and social history.
5. As a vital component of Isfahan's cultural heritage, the cemetery's recognition, preservation, and protection strengthen the city's cultural identity and historical legacy.
6. The complex encompasses dozens of mausoleums, hundreds of artistic tombstones, several storage areas, and numerous other historical artifacts. Studying these elements enhances our understanding of historical monuments and Islamic architectural styles.
7. Investigating the artistic works, symbols, motifs, inscriptions, and structural designs at Takht-e Foulad provides valuable insights into the history and stylistic evolution of calligraphy, painting, stone carving, and tilework (Takht-e Foulad Religious Cultural Complex, 2010).



Picture 2. Takht-e Foulad

Cemeteries are integral components of the urban landscape, primarily serving as burial grounds. In historical cemeteries, this primary function has diminished over time due to urban expansion, leading them to become integrated into the city's core, transformed into quiet spaces, or, in some cases, destroyed. Preserving historical cemeteries is essential, as they represent a nation's historical and cultural identity. One effective way to safeguard and maintain these sites is through their integration into the travel and tourism sector. Takht-e Foulad, a historic cemetery, holds significant potential as a tourist attraction due to its deep historical roots, spiritual ambiance, and artistic features—including sepulchral architecture, calligraphy, painting, and stone carving. Additionally, its unique environment provides an

opportunity for the development of genealogical tourism, further enhancing its role as a cultural and historical landmark (Zahedi et al., 2015).

Research Methodology

This research follows a developmental-applied objective and employs a quantitative approach. Data collected through questionnaires from tourists and visitors were analyzed using statistical techniques and SPSS software, followed by model validation. The study's data collection was conducted during the winter of 2021 and the spring and summer of 2022. The statistical population for this study consists of tourists and visitors to Takht-e Foulad in Isfahan. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for infinite populations, resulting in 385 participants.

$$n = \frac{z_{\alpha}^2 p(1-p)}{\epsilon^2} = \frac{1.96^2 * 0.5(1-0.5)}{0.05^2} = 384.16 \cong 385$$

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. A total of 35 questionnaires were distributed within the target population, and their reliability was subsequently calculated. Since the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for both the research variables and the overall questionnaire exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.7, the measurement instrument demonstrated satisfactory reliability. To establish questionnaire validity within the quantitative component, face validity was applied for model verification. The questionnaire was reviewed by several expert professors, managers, and staff members associated with the Takht-e Foulad complex. After multiple revisions, the final version was approved. To evaluate the significance of themes from the tourists' perspective, a t-test was conducted. Themes were assessed using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, with the null hypothesis testing whether the mean response equaled three (indicating no effect). A significance level below 5% led to the rejection of the null hypothesis, confirming the significance of the respective theme. A t-statistic above 1.96 indicated proximity to the desired state, while a t-statistic below 1.96 signaled a deviation from the desired state. In July 2022, a survey was conducted among 388 tourists visiting the complex. Research Findings

Part 1: Theoretical Analysis

An analysis of previous studies and theoretical perspectives on tourism development and spirituality in Isfahan's Takht-e Foulad complex highlights its remarkable richness and diversity in tourism potential. Although officially designated as a "cemetery" and regarded by some—particularly those with mystical inclinations—as a sacred site, Takht-e Foulad accommodates a broad spectrum of tourism activities. Based on recent studies, its tourism potential can be categorized into five key areas.

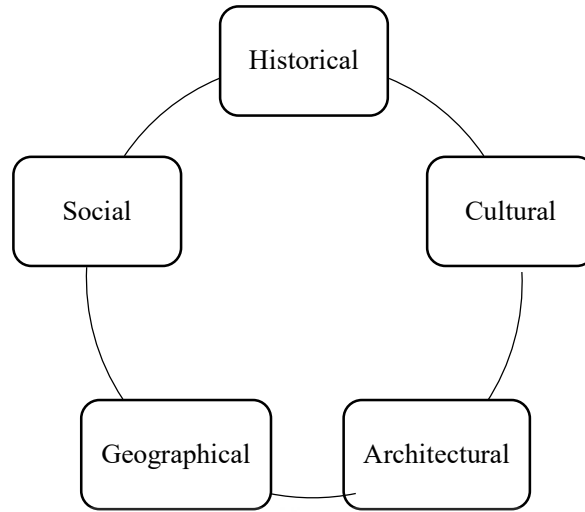


Figure 4. Dimensions of Tourism at Takht-e Foulad Cemetery, Isfahan
(Developed by the researcher based on theoretical concepts)

Dimensions of Takht-e Foulad in Isfahan

Historical Dimensions – Takht-e Foulad serves as a repository of life stories, anthropological significance, and the legacies of notable scholars and intellectuals buried within its grounds. Additionally, its buildings and structures hold immense historical value, making the complex a rich source for historical research. In essence, Takht-e Foulad can be regarded as a living historical archive.

Cultural Dimensions – The site reflects the culture and lifestyle of its time, encompassing places of activity, architectural heritage, customs, rituals, and ceremonies, as well as the ongoing cultural identity of the surrounding area. Takht-e Foulad stands as an embodiment of the evolution of culture, religion, and beliefs within the region. The presence of cultural luminaries and prominent figures further underscores its significance, making it a vital location for exploring various aspects of cultural tourism.

Architectural Dimensions – The architectural artistry of the buildings, tombstones, inscriptions, and the overall layout of Takht-e Foulad contributes to its significance from a tourism perspective. Extensive studies have been conducted in this field, providing valuable insights for researchers and scholars in architecture.

Geographical Dimensions – The cemetery's climate, location, and geographical attributes shape its historical and tourism-related evolution. Due to its vast expanse, Takht-e Foulad presents an important subject for geographical studies, offering insight into the environmental and spatial factors that have influenced its development over time.

Social Dimensions – This aspect highlights the social transformations brought about by the presence of local communities, tourists, and other visitors within the complex. Throughout history, Takht-e Foulad has welcomed diverse groups from both within and outside Isfahan, each drawn to the site for various reasons. Their interactions and engagements have shaped the social dimension of tourism within the complex, influencing its cultural and communal significance over time.

Studies on tourism development in Takht-e Foulad, Isfahan, have predominantly focused on cultural tourism. However, findings indicate that the site's potential extends far beyond this singular dimension. Given its rich heritage and diverse attractions, multiple avenues for tourism development can be explored. These potential directions can be broadly categorized into three primary types: heritage tourism, religious tourism, and event-based tourism.

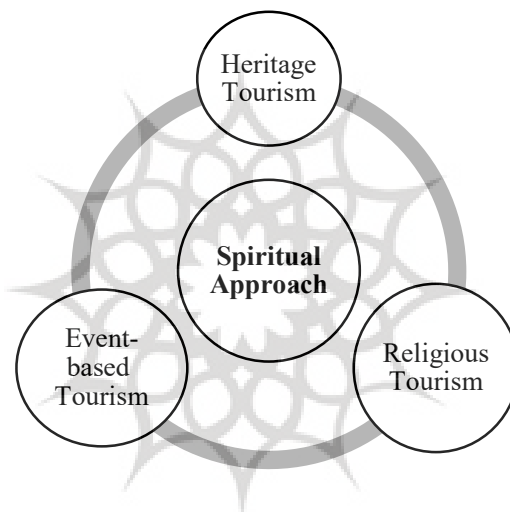


Figure 5. Axes of Tourism Development at Takht-e Foulad, Isfahan
(Developed by the researcher based on theoretical concepts)

Heritage Tourism, Religious Tourism, and Event-Based Tourism are the three primary approaches to tourism development centered on spirituality in the Takht-e Foulad complex in Isfahan. Heritage Tourism with a Spiritual Focus highlights the historical, cultural, architectural, and artistic heritage embedded within the complex, reflecting the values of Iranian society. Religious Tourism is centered on pilgrimage and the sacred sites within Takht-e Foulad, playing a crucial role in its tourism development by fostering spiritual engagement among visitors. Event-Based Tourism is a major component of tourism development in Takht-e Foulad. Given the significance of events, they are now recognized as a distinct axis of tourism growth. Cultural, religious, artistic, traditional, educational, national, and Iranian rituals and customs can become integral elements of Takht-e Foulad's tourism strategy. Another critical aspect is the emphasis on development within a spiritual framework. This

holistic approach is emerging as a fundamental pillar of tourism development, offering an integrated, cohesive, and sustainable perspective for the future of Takht-e Foulad.

The spiritual approach in tourism encompasses concepts related to spirituality, which is connected to the non-material dimensions of human existence and the universe. Although spirituality is inherently abstract, its measurable aspects can be identified through implementation and operationalization. Spirituality is a subjective phenomenon shaped by human emotions, feelings, and cognition. Studies on spirituality in tourism confirm that spiritual experiences can be felt and perceived during travel. Moreover, when tourists reflect on their memories, they often emphasize these emotional and intangible impressions. Research in this field defines spirituality as a non-material phenomenon that manifests within the essence of human nature and its connection to the Creator and the surrounding world. By drawing on tourism and spirituality studies, spirituality can be transformed from a purely subjective concept into an objective one within the tourism context, supported by theoretical frameworks.

In the study and analysis of tourism at Takht-e Foulad Cemetery in Isfahan, spirituality can be explored from multiple perspectives. Rather than focusing solely on the tourist experience or the site itself, spirituality is examined through the interaction of three key spaces:

1. **The Host Community** – Emphasizing the local community and its social fabric, spirituality is shaped by communal connections and cultural traditions.
2. **The Takht-e Foulad Tourism Site** – The site itself, with its historical and spiritual significance, fosters an environment that influences visitors' experiences.
3. **The Tourists** – Spirituality is perceived and understood through visitors' personal reflections and interactions within the complex.

Through these interconnected dimensions, spirituality manifests as an evolving experience—formed through various social ties within the local community, the historical and cultural depth of Takht-e Foulad, and the personal journeys of those who visit.

Part 2: Field Analysis

According to the sample profile, 63.9% of the respondents are women, while 36.1% are men, indicating that women constitute the majority of the surveyed population.

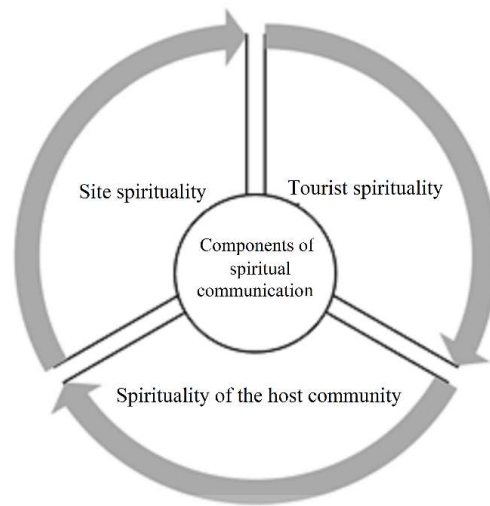


Figure 6. Spiritual Approach to Tourism at Takht-e Foulad, Isfahan
(Developed by the researcher based on theoretical concepts)

Table 2. Descriptive characteristics of tourists visiting Takht-e Foulad, Isfahan

Descriptive variables	Percentage
Gender	36% male; 64% female
Age	58% aged 36-45 17% aged 46+ 16% aged 26-35 8% aged under 25
Education	Bachelor's degree: 40% Diploma: 34% Master's degree: 14% Associate degree: 8% Doctoral degree: 1%
City of Origin	Isfahan (53%) Tehran (15%) Mashhad (9%) Ahvaz and Qom (5%) Gorgan (4%) Kashan (2%) Shiraz (0.8%) Kermanshah (0.5%) Hamedan (0.5%) Tabriz (0.3%)
Frequency of visits to Takht-e Foulad, Isfahan	First visit (13%); Repeat visit (87%)
Motivation for visiting Takht-e Foulad, Isfahan	Pilgrimage (82%) Peace (10%) Recommendations from others (3%) Familiarity with history (2%) Business trip (1.5%)
Intention to visit Takht-e Foulad, Isfahan before the trip	25% did not intend to visit. 75% intended to visit.

The analysis of responses from tourists who completed the distributed questionnaires reveals that the majority of visitors to Takht-e Foulad are women, with the highest representation falling within the 36 to 45 age group. Another notable finding is the level of education among visitors, as most respondents hold a bachelor's degree. Regarding visitors' places of origin, half of the surveyed individuals are residents of Isfahan, and most have visited Takht-e Foulad more than once. Additionally, the primary motivation for visiting is pilgrimage, followed by a desire for peace and tranquility. Among non-resident tourists traveling to Isfahan, 75% had specifically planned to visit Takht-e Foulad, incorporating it into their travel itinerary.

An examination of the results reveals several significant insights. First, the majority of visitors to the Takht-e Foulad complex in Isfahan are residents of the city itself. This reflects the strong recognition, awareness, and cultural appreciation that the people of Isfahan hold for Takht-e Foulad. Fieldwork observations further confirm this trend. Second, visitor motivations predominantly center on pilgrimage and the pursuit of peace and tranquility. Specifically, observations indicate that visiting the tombs of esteemed figures buried at Takht-e Foulad is a key priority for visitors. A particularly noteworthy finding—one that could serve as a turning point for the complex—is that many who have visited once tend to return. This underscores the unique attractions and features of the site that foster repeat visits. In other words, if awareness and information about Takht-e Foulad are effectively communicated, its profound historical and cultural appeal will naturally encourage continued engagement. Lastly, an important demographic pattern emerges: the majority of visitors are over 35 years old. This reflects a broader cultural tendency among Iranians to visit such complexes—potentially influenced by historical narratives passed down through generations, community traditions, or the specific needs of this age group that these environments fulfill. Reports from the World Tourism Organization and other scholarly studies also support this trend, indicating that cultural and religious sites often attract middle-aged and older visitors, as this demographic group tends to exhibit a stronger interest in history, culture, and religion.

Following an analysis of the descriptive statistics of tourists, the spiritual dimensions of tourism at Takht-e Foulad in Isfahan were examined from their perspective. The spiritual components were assessed across three primary dimensions: the tourist, the Takht-e Foulad site itself, and the host community. The feedback from visitors indicates that tourists generally demonstrated a strong understanding of the spiritual aspects of Takht-e Foulad, with most expressing agreement or strong agreement regarding its spiritual significance. However, the situation for residents and the local community was less favorable. Responses revealed a considerable gap between the perceived and desired state of spirituality-related aspects, with a majority of visitors expressing dissatisfaction with the current conditions.

It is essential to recognize that the reciprocal perspectives of tourists and host/local communities play a crucial role in advancing tourism development goals at any destination. This study examines the local community's perspective on Takht-e Foulad in Isfahan from the viewpoint of tourists. Following this analysis, the ranking of spirituality-related statements in tourism at Takht-e Foulad—based on tourist feedback—is presented in the following figure in order of priority.

Table 3. Prioritization of spiritual components in tourism at Takht-e Foulad, Isfahan

Tourist	Host Community	Takht-e Foulad site in Isfahan
1. Peace	1. Aware and knowledgeable about	1. Oral history
2. Interest	the history of Takht-e Foulad	2. Tourism events
3. Life Hopefulness	2. Friendship and kindness	3. Cultural dissemination
4. Positivity	3. Participation and interaction	4. Arrangement and decoration
5. Search for meaning	4. Respect	5. Continuity in heritage
6. Awareness	5. Sense of growth and development	preservation
7. Ecstasy	6. Cultural Self-esteem	6. Tourism program
8. Personal growth and Perfectionism	7. Cultural belonging	development
9. Sense of being valuable	8. Hospitality spirit	7. Greeting
10. On a journey of discovery and search		8. Cleanliness
11. Calm and respectful behavior		9. Architecture
12. Friendship		
13. Interaction		

As illustrated in the table above, the tourist component reveals that the most significant spiritual experience gained at Takht-e Foulad is peace. Following this, interest, hope for life, positive emotions, and the search for meaning emerge as key spiritual elements for visitors. Overall, tourists experience a high level of spirituality at Takht-e Foulad, with most expressing a strong connection to its spiritual aspects. The Takht-e Foulad site itself ranks second in terms of perceived spirituality. The oral history of the complex, tourism events, and cultural promotion are identified as the most significant spiritual components from the tourist's perspective. Finally, the host community component ranks the lowest, reflecting its less favorable status compared to other dimensions. Tourists perceive awareness of the site's history, friendliness, participation, and respect as key spiritual attributes within the local community. However, a noticeable gap remains between the current state and tourists' expectations regarding these aspects.

The analysis of Takht-e Foulad's role in Isfahan's tourism development through a spiritual lens highlights its profound and deeply rooted significance. Its spirituality, embedded in religion, cultural values, artistic heritage, and historical narratives, defines its identity and potential as a tourism destination. Within this framework, the tourist, the Takht-e Foulad site, and the host community represent the key components of spirituality in tourism at Takht-e Foulad. When integrated with the

site's tourism dimensions and the primary axes of tourism development, these elements collectively serve as the foundation for formulating programs and actionable strategies.

A well-structured approach, guided by this model, can drive sustainable tourism development in Takht-e Foulad. Ultimately, its advancement will contribute to the broader growth of Isfahan's tourism sector, reinforcing its cultural and historical identity while enhancing its appeal as a destination. The following figure visually represents the proposed model.

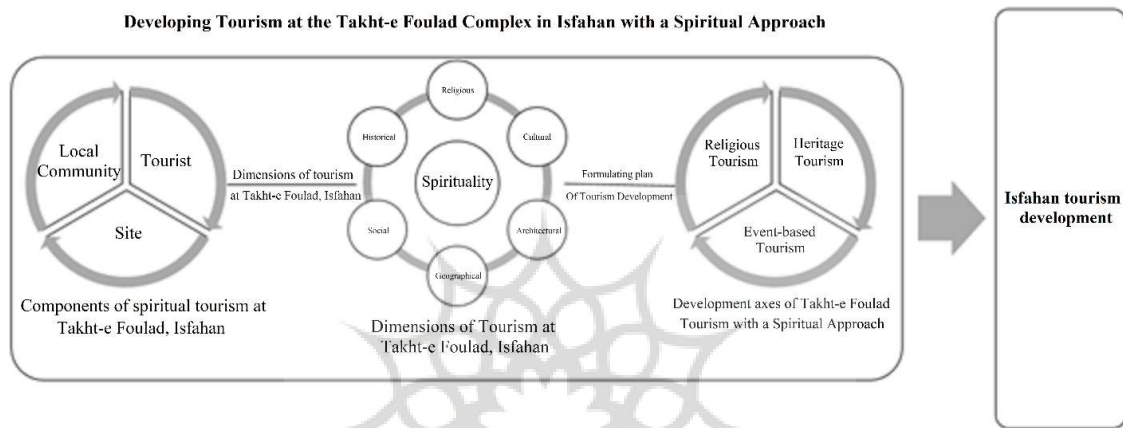


Figure 7. Role and Position of the Takht-e Foulad Complex in the Tourism Development of Isfahan, with an Emphasis on Spiritual Tourism

The presented model places spirituality at its core, reflecting its fundamental role in the Takht-e Foulad complex. Because spirituality is deeply embedded in the site, it is essential to expand and integrate it across all aspects of spiritual tourism. The Takht-e Foulad site, the tourists, and the local community are interconnected, forming a unified framework that cannot be analyzed in isolation. Beyond these core components, the tourism development strategy for Takht-e Foulad must consider various dimensions, including religious, cultural, social, architectural, geographical, and historical aspects. These dimensions align with the three primary axes of tourism development: heritage tourism, religious tourism, and event-based tourism. Each tourism dimension contributes to these axes in distinct ways. For instance, architecture plays a significant role as cultural heritage in heritage tourism, as a religious element in religious tourism, and as a subject of academic events in event-based tourism. This holistic approach ensures that all aspects of Takht-e Foulad's tourism potential are recognized and developed in an integrated manner. By considering these components collectively, rather than separately, a sustainable and well-structured tourism development strategy can be formulated. Ultimately, this approach not only enhances the site's spiritual and cultural significance but also contributes to the broader tourism

landscape of Isfahan. With the presentation of this model, all project objectives have been successfully achieved.

Proposed Solutions

Proposed solutions are presented in two sections: practical and research-based.

Practical Proposed Solutions

Takht-e Foulad in Isfahan is far more than a cemetery; it is a profound embodiment of spirituality and a testament to the rich historical and cultural legacy of the city. As a cornerstone of Isfahan's artistic and civilizational heritage, it serves as a living museum, encapsulating centuries of tradition, architecture, and religious significance. The true value of this complex does not lie in the creation of new artifacts but in the thoughtful utilization of its existing treasures. Unlocking the tourism potential of Takht-e Foulad requires a strategic approach rooted in established tourism principles. By developing tourism within a spiritual framework, the site can be integrated into sustainable and meaningful development efforts. The proposed solutions focus on four essential domains: Geographical, Cultural, Marketing, and Infrastructure. Each of these areas plays a critical role in shaping a well-rounded tourism strategy, ensuring that Takht-e Foulad's significance is preserved while fostering engagement and accessibility for visitors.

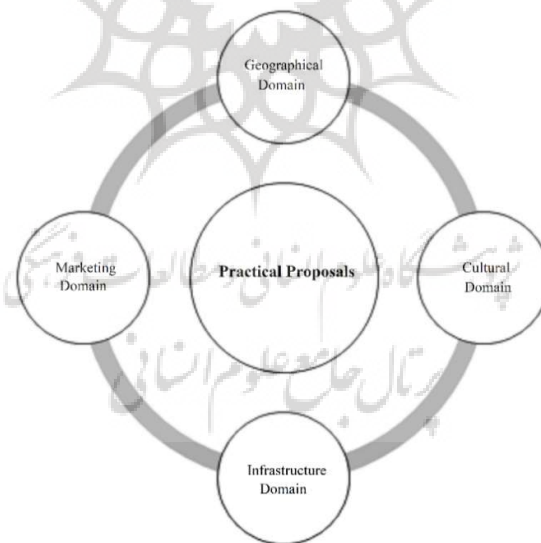


Figure 8. Practical Proposals

Geographical Domain

The geographical positioning of Takht-e Foulad within Isfahan gives it a unique character among the city's tourist sites. Situated within the urban fabric and directly intertwined with the daily lives of

residents, its extensive size presents both advantages and challenges. On one hand, its accessibility and integration into the cityscape create opportunities for strategic tourism development, offering diverse options for enhancing visitor experiences. On the other hand, its environmental and spatial diversity requires careful consideration in planning. The site features varied landscapes, including open, tree-filled spaces that contrast with areas consisting solely of tombs and courtyards. These distinct spaces allow for different tourism applications—green areas can be leveraged for cultural events, recreational activities, and family gatherings, while tomb-centered sections maintain their role in pilgrimage and reflection. Recognizing and accommodating these geographical differences in tourism planning ensures that development strategies align with both the site's intrinsic characteristics and visitor expectations. A nuanced approach to tourism management at Takht-e Foulad will allow for a balance between cultural engagement, spiritual preservation, and sustainable tourism growth.

Cultural Domain

Takht-e Foulad's potential extends beyond its identity as a cemetery. Rebranding it as the Takht-e Foulad Cultural Complex of Isfahan could reshape public perception, enhancing its appeal and tourism prospects. A cultural campaign promoting this transformation would reinforce its historical, artistic, and spiritual significance. Viewing Takht-e Foulad as a cultural tourism theme park further supports its multidimensional role. Unlike conventional theme parks, this site can integrate heritage, religious, and event-based tourism, ensuring year-round engagement. Through structured programs, visitors can experience its history, spiritual atmosphere, and cultural events in a cohesive manner. To achieve this vision, a strategic development plan is necessary. Thoughtfully designed initiatives should preserve its identity while offering immersive experiences, positioning Takht-e Foulad as a model for tourism innovation in Isfahan.

Marketing Domain

Takht-e Foulad is well-known in Isfahan, but it requires targeted promotional campaigns to attract tourists from other cities. Rebranding it as a cultural-tourism complex rather than a cemetery would enhance its appeal. Holding specialized tourism training courses within the complex is recommended, with collaboration from universities, vocational training centers, the Isfahan Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, and the Academic Jihad Center. Additionally, scientific conferences on heritage, religious, and event-based tourism would strengthen its academic and professional standing. Encouraging event-based tourism through commemorative ceremonies for prominent figures, involving their students, could foster deeper engagement. Moreover, inviting the provincial broadcasting network to produce programs featuring the site would further boost its visibility.

Infrastructure Domain

Building a hotel near Takht-e Foulad could strengthen its tourism infrastructure, but it necessitates a thorough professional evaluation. A nearby conference center would support academic and cultural engagement. Establishing an incubator and innovation hub within the complex could drive new tourism initiatives. Additionally, developing commercial centers and traditional bazaars in the surrounding area would boost local economic growth while enriching visitor experiences.

Limitations and recommendations for future studies

It is essential to clearly articulate the contribution, ensuring a comprehensive explanation at the conclusion of the introduction. Takht-e Foulad, as an extensive historical complex, presents challenges for study due to its deep integration into the urban fabric. Given this complexity, periodic planning and specialized events should be incorporated into future strategies to enhance engagement and accessibility. Additionally, understanding the perspectives of younger generations toward historical sites is crucial, as their evolving views will shape future heritage preservation and tourism initiatives.

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