

# Religious Minorities as an Opportunity for Ghetto Niche Tourism Development (Case Study: Isfahan, Iran)

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**Abstract** | Niche tourism, whose emphasis on a specific tourism product can meet the needs of a particular audience, has developed in the tourism area over recent decades. The dynamic and competitive nature of tourism means that staying alive in a competitive world needs the emergence of niche tourism. This paper tries to introduce Isfahan city (Iran) as a new destination for ghetto niche tourism development with an emphasis on religious minorities. Moreover, this research has two major purposes: 1) to investigate the attitude of domestic tourists for ghetto tourism development and 2) to measure national tourists' awareness of this niche market. This study was conducted in Isfahan, Iran. Data was gathered through questionnaire using simple random sampling method. On the basis of the results of this study it can be concluded that domestic tourists are not familiar with the ghetto tourism concept; however, they are interested in ghetto tourism development (activities, attractions and strategies) in Isfahan city.

**Keywords** | Ghetto tourism, Isfahan, niche tourism, religious minorities

## 1. Introduction

According to Buhalis and Costa (2006) tourism is dynamic and competitive market and due to globalization and customer demand, new tourism products will emerge in the future. In addition, survival in a competitive tourism market needs the emergence of niche tourism. Robinson and Novelli (2005) noted that niche tourism is in opposition

to mass tourism and represents diversity and ways of marking difference. Moreover, niche tourism attracts tourists who spends more in the destinations (Weiler & Hall, 1992) and appears to offer tourists a more meaningful set of experiences in the knowledge that their needs and wants are being met. Therefore, it can be said that niche tourism is an opportunity to provide higher quality services to tourists who have a special interest. Niche tourism

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distinguishes between tourists and offers activities and facilities according to the study of their behaviour, needs and motivation for travel. For niche tourism development, audience and place are two key components (Robinson & Novelli, 2005).

The primary purpose of this study is to introduce Isfahan city, Iran, as a place which it is argued has a high potential for ghetto niche tourism development. Furthermore, this paper aims to investigate the attitude of audience/domestic tourists for ghetto tourism development (activities, attractions and strategies) in Isfahan.

## 2. Theoretical framework

According to the Travel Industry Dictionary (2016), ghetto tourism is a visit to rundown urban neighbourhoods but which are worth visiting to observe different culture and lifestyles (e.g. Low-income families living in poor neighbourhoods, and racial and religious minorities).

Calimani (1987) noted that the word ghetto derives from borghetto, meaning neighbourhood, and can be traced back to medieval Venice, where it referred to the area of that city to which Jews were restricted. In European history, ghetto typically referred to residential and other restrictions placed on Jews. Little Italy in the United States is one the most important ghetto tourism destinations. New York's Historic Little Italy is a place where a number of people emigrating from Italy to America settled in New York (Conforti, 1996).

It is noteworthy that the people who live in this region have the same culture and they established stores which sell Italian goods and products and opened Italian restaurants offering Italian cuisine. Therefore, there is a little Italy in the middle of a modern city of America. This lifestyle has bittersweet experiences for residents. These urban neighbourhoods show people who never lived in their ancestral lands, but have preserved their cultural components. These groups are recognized as the minority in a city. The Jews living in New York's Historic Little Italy make this region notable as a destination that shows the lifestyle of religious minorities and is also known as a ghetto of America (Conforti, 1996).

Ashworth (2002) addressed the Kazimierz district of Kraków (Poland) which was one of the largest and oldest districts of Jewish settlement as ghetto tourism destination where visitors can experience atrocity tourism and horror tourism. Warsaw (Poland) is a pioneer in Holocaust tourism and ghetto tourism development; ghetto tourism routes were identified in this city and in guide books such as the Rough Guide to Poland, the Nozyk Synagogue – 'the only one of the ghetto's three synagogues still standing' was introduced as a tourist attraction (Browning, 2012; Cole, 2015). Furthermore, Nessy (2014) argued that slum tourism, or ghetto tourism is a type of tourism that involves visiting impoverished areas. Regarding this, the city of Porto (Portugal) organizes ghetto tours to encourage tourists to take one of the worst tours of Portugal (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** | Ghetto tourism destination in Porto (Portugal) Source: <http://www.messynessychic.com/2014/10/09/ghetto-tourism-take-a-free-tour-of-run-down-portugal>

Lastly, it can be said that slum tourism involves the creation of a brand-like attraction of informal settlements as part of a city's image (Frenzel & Koens, 2012).

However, none of the above mentioned approaches takes into consideration ghetto tourism in a case study of Iran. Furthermore, up to this time, no significant work has been undertaken in the field of ghetto niche tourism to investigate the attitude of tourists for ghetto tourism development.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Case Study

This study was conducted in the city of Isfahan. Isfahan is located on the main north–south and east–west routes crossing Iran, and it is Iran's number one tourist destination for a good reason. Isfahan has many tourist attractions, Persian gardens, and important historic Islamic buildings which give it a visual appeal unmatched by any

other Iranian city, and the many artisans working here underpin its reputation as a living museum of traditional culture. It is noteworthy that religious minorities are another tourist attraction in Isfahan.

The majority of Iranians associate themselves with the Shi'a branch of Islam and Isfahan is no exception. However, in some cities of Iran such as Isfahan, religious minorities have settled. In the city there are some special regions which are known as the settlements of three religious minorities and their communities – Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity (Catholic and Orthodox).

Zoroastrians, as the oldest religious community of Iran, have had a long history reaching back thousands of years, and it has survived to the present day. In addition, Judaism also is among the oldest religions practised in Iran and the Biblical Book of Esther contains references to the experiences of the Jews in Persia. The history of immigrant Jews in Iran goes back more than 3000 years (*The Achaemenid Empire (Cyrus the Great king)*). Moreover, the majority of Christians in Isfahan are ethnic Armenians who immigrated to Iran during the Safavid Empire (1502 – 1736).

*It is noteworthy that religious minorities have the same culture and especially Christians established stores in Isfahan which sell their goods and products and opened restaurants offering their cuisine and live music. Religious minorities have their regions – Julfa for Christian and Jubareh for Jews are excellent examples; their cemeteries (e.g.*

*Serah bat Asher Jewish cemetery in Linjan (Pir-i Bakran); Armenian Cemetery); their religious festivals; celebrities and pilgrimage sites (Table 1) are all potentials for ghetto niche tourism development in Isfahan (Figure 1).*

**Table 1 | Religious minorities pilgrimage sites in Isfahan, Iran (own construction)**

Religion	Important Pilgrimage sites
Zoroastrianism	Zoroastrian fire temple
Christianity	Vank Cathedral; Saint Jacob Church; Saint George Church; Holy Mother of God Church; Saint Stephen Church; Saint John the Baptist Church; Saint Catherine Nunnery; Holy Bethlehem Church; Saint Nicholas Church; Church of Saint Gregory the Illuminator; Saint Sarkis Church; Saint Menas; Saint Nerses Church
Judaism	Kenisa-ye Bozorg (Mirakhor's kenisa); Kenisa-ye Molla Rabbi; Kenisa-ye Sangbast; Mullah Jacob Synagogue; Mullah Neissan Synagogue; Kenisa-ye Keter David

### 3.2. Methodology

The main objective of this study is to introduce Isfahan city (Iran) as a new destination for ghetto niche tourism development with an emphasis on religious minorities. Regarding this, the research needs the audience studies. Thus, this study is an initial attempt to investigate the attitude of domestic tourists for ghetto tourism development. In addition, this paper strives to measure national tourists' awareness of this niche market in Isfahan. In order to achieve these goals two hypotheses were developed:

H1: Domestic tourists are interested in ghetto tourism development (activities, attractions and strategies) in Isfahan city.

H2: Domestic tourists are familiar with the ghetto niche tourism concept.

Data for this study was gathered through questionnaires (close-ended questions). The questionnaires were designed based on the ghetto tourism potentials (activities, attractions and strategies) which exist in Isfahan. The research methodology includes both primary and secondary research. The first phase consisted of a literature review of ghetto tourism. In the second phase, we focused on tourists and in order to study the attitude of domestic

tourists for ghetto tourism development a questionnaire (on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very low to very high) was designed and distributed in the city (around attractions, hotels, airports etc.). The empirical part of this study was conducted from April to July 2016. For determining sample size, the researchers used Veal's (2006) rules. Veal's table (2006) illustrated that the sample size for infinite population (there were no official statistics of the number of domestic tourists) should be 384 people. Thus a total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to domestic tourists in the city centre, historical heritage sites and hotels where more tourists can be found. After eliminating unusable responses from the completed questionnaires, 385 responses were coded for data analysis. Cronbach's alpha is 0.922, which presents a high level of reliability. Descriptive statistics were calculated to ascertain the characteristics of the sample and to compare means and standard deviations for each multi-item scale.

#### 4. Results

Among the survey participants, 56.6% were male, and 43.4% were female (Table 2). Most respondents were between 31 and 40 years of age (53.5%) (Table 2). Furthermore, approximately 54.9% of respondents had a Master's degree (see Table 2). Based on the result of the descriptive analysis (on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very low to very high) (Table 3), 60.5% of respondents were interested (high and very high on the scale) in being familiar with various cultures and religions; 82.8% (high and very high on the scale) of domestic tourists are interested in listening to religious music. In addition, 66.7% (high and very high on the scale) of respondents would like to visit holy places of religious minorities. Moreover, analysis of the data indicates that 83.1% (high and very high on the scale) of tourists are interested in

visiting the Synagogues of Isfahan. Furthermore, 76.4% (high and very high on the scale) of tourists would like to visit churches in the city and 85.4% (high and very high on the scale) of them are interested in the Zoroastrian fire temple. Besides, 89.9% (high and very high on the scale) of tourists enjoy visiting religious minorities' cemeteries and 68.6% (high and very high on the scale) of them claim that they are interested in seeing the architectural style of historical houses and holy places of religious minorities in Isfahan. Listening to holy books of religious minorities attended by 83.3% (high and very high on the scale) of tourists. In addition, 47.8% (high and very high on the scale) of respondents noted that they would like to learn religious minorities' language and 49.3% (high and very high on the scale) of them are interested in learning about their history and their history of immigration to Isfahan. The results of descriptive analysis also illustrated that 72.2% (high and very high on the scale) of audiences paid particular attention to historical houses of religious minorities in Isfahan. Further analysis demonstrated that 84.1% (high and very high on the scale) of tourists are interested in tasting local foods of religious minorities and 71.1% (high and very high on the scale) of them like to hear folk music of religious minorities. Our results also found that 57.4% (high and very high on the scale) of persons who filled in the form mentioned that they wanted to be familiar with religious minorities' celebrities who are/were famous for the development of Isfahan city and 70.6% (high and very high on the scale) of them are interested in participating in religious minorities' festivals in Isfahan. Lastly, the clearest result of the investigation (One Sample t-test;  $\mu > 3$  and Sig < 0.05) (Table 4) is that domestic tourists are interested in ghetto tourism development in Isfahan city. However, analysis of the data with a One Sample t-test ( $\mu < 3$  and Sig < 0.05) (Table 4) illustrated that respondents are not familiar with the ghetto niche tourism concept.

**Table 2** | Tourist demographic table of respondents' questionnaires (own construction)

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Ages (years)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Educational level</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Duration of stay</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	56.6%	21-30	27.1%	High school	2.8%	2-3 days	56.4%
		31-40	53.5%	Bachelor	35.4%	3-5 days	28.3%
Female	43.4%	41-50	18.1%	Master	54.9%	1 week	9.1%
		51-60	0.7%	PhD	6.9%	> 1 week	6.2%
		> 60	0.7%				

**Table 3 |** Descriptive analysis of the attitude of domestic tourists towards ghetto tourism development (own construction)

Variables	Frequency (Scale)						Skewness
	Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very high	Missing	
Question 1: Are you familiar with ghetto tourism?	221 57.4%	160 41.6%	0 -	0 -	0 -	4 1%	0.326
Question 2: Are you interested in being familiar with various cultures and religions?	6 1.6%	8 2.1%	119 30.9%	149 38.7%	84 21.8%	19 4.9%	-0.429
Question 3: Are you interested in listening to religious music?	2 0.5%	7 1.8%	55 14.3%	133 34.5%	186 48.3%	2 0.5%	-1.014
Question 4: Are you interested in visiting holy places of religious minorities?	8 2.1%	31 8.1%	82 21.3%	101 26.2%	156 40.5%	7 1.8%	-0.754
Question 5: Are you interested in visiting Synagogues in Isfahan?	0 -	12 3.1%	51 13.2%	138 35.8%	182 47.3%	2 0.5%	-0.908
Question 6: Are you interested in visiting churches in Isfahan?	7 1.8%	16 4.2%	64 16.6%	130 33.8%	164 42.6%	4 1%	-1.042
Question 7: Are you interested in visiting the Zoroastrian fire temple?	3 0.8%	7 1.8%	42 10.9%	146 37.9%	183 47.5%	4 1%	-1.205
Question 8: Are you interested in visiting religious minorities' cemeteries?	3 0.8%	12 3.1%	19 4.9%	171 44.4%	175 45.5%	5 1.3%	-1.446
Question 9: Are you interested in seeing the architectural style of historical houses and holy places of religious minorities in Isfahan?	16 4.2%	33 8.6%	69 17.9%	138 35.8%	125 32.8%	4 1%	-0.847
Question 10: Are you interested in listening holy books of religious minorities in Isfahan?	3 0.8%	10 2.6%	49 12.7%	128 33.2%	193 50.1%	2 0.5%	-1.187
Question 11: Are you interested in learning their language?	31 8.1%	54 14%	114 29.6%	94 24.4%	90 23.4%	2 0.5%	-0.315
Question 12: Are you interested in learning about their history and their history of immigration to Isfahan?	24 6.2%	45 11.7%	124 32.2%	101 26.2%	89 23.1%	2 0.5%	-0.356
Question 13: Are you interested in visiting historical houses of religious minorities in Isfahan?	13 3.4%	14 3.6%	75 19.5%	164 42.6%	114 29.6%	5 1.3%	-0.987
Question 14: Are you interested in tasting local foods of religious minorities in Isfahan?	10 2.6%	23 6%	26 6.8%	163 42.3%	161 41.8%	2 0.5%	-1.401
Question 15: Are you interested in hearing folk music of religious minorities?	5 1.3%	24 6.2%	80 20.8%	101 26.2%	173 44.9%	2 0.5%	-0.827
Question 16: Are you interested in being familiar with religious minorities' celebrities who are/were famous for the development of Isfahan city?	18 4.7%	36 9.4%	108 28.1%	104 27%	117 30.4%	2 0.5%	-0.535
Question 17: Are you interested in participating in religious minorities' festivals in Isfahan?	10 2.6%	33 8.6%	68 17.7%	154 40%	118 30.6%	2 0.5%	-0.823

**Table 4** | The result of the one sample t-tests analysis for the variables (own construction)

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Q1	381	1.4199	.49420	.02532
Q2	366	3.8115	.86956	.04545
Q3	383	4.2898	.81676	.04173
Q4	378	3.9683	1.07247	.05516
Q5	383	4.2794	.81077	.04143
Q6	381	4.1234	.95862	.04911
Q7	381	4.3097	.80042	.04101
Q8	380	4.3237	.77763	.03989
Q9	381	3.8478	1.10164	.05644
Q10	383	4.3003	.84765	.04331
Q11	383	3.4125	1.21812	.06224
Q12	383	3.4856	1.15281	.05891
Q13	380	3.9263	.97453	.04999
Q14	383	4.1540	.97066	.04960
Q15	383	4.0783	1.01255	.05174
Q16	383	3.6945	1.13863	.05818
Q17	383	3.8799	1.02645	.05245

One-Sample Test						
Test Value = 3						
Variables	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Q1	-62.407	380	.000	-1.58005	-1.6298	-1.5303
Q2	17.853	365	.000	.81148	.7221	.9009
Q3	30.905	382	.000	1.28982	1.2078	1.3719
Q4	17.553	377	.000	.96825	.8598	1.0767
Q5	30.882	382	.000	1.27937	1.1979	1.3608
Q6	22.874	380	.000	1.12336	1.0268	1.2199
Q7	31.939	380	.000	1.30971	1.2291	1.3903
Q8	33.182	379	.000	1.32368	1.2452	1.4021
Q9	15.021	380	.000	.84777	.7368	.9587
Q10	30.020	382	.000	1.30026	1.2151	1.3854
Q11	6.628	382	.000	.41253	.2902	.5349
Q12	8.244	382	.000	.48564	.3698	.6015
Q13	18.529	379	.000	.92632	.8280	1.0246
Q14	23.268	382	.000	1.15405	1.0565	1.2516
Q15	20.842	382	.000	1.07833	.9766	1.1801
Q16	11.937	382	.000	.69452	.5801	.8089
Q17	16.776	382	.000	.87990	.7768	.9830



## 5. Conclusion

Niche tourism is a specific market segment which places emphasis on a well-defined product. It is noteworthy that niche tourism can be tailored to meet the needs, interests and motivations of the travel customer. The aim of the present paper is to identify Isfahan city as a destination that has a high potential for the development of ghetto tourism as new niche market. Isfahan can attract new customers with specific interest in the lifestyle and culture of religious minorities in Iran such as Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Judaism. In addition, this study tries to investigate the attitude of domestic tourists towards ghetto tourism development (activities, attractions and strategies) in Isfahan and is an initial attempt to measure national tourists' awareness of this niche market. On the basis of the results of this research, it can be concluded that besides Little Italy in United States (Conforti, 1996); Warsaw (Poland) (Browning, 2012; Cole, 2015) and Porto city (Portugal) Nassy (2014), Isfahan (Iran) can be introduced as a ghetto tourism destination. Ghetto tourism is a specialty form of travel tourism that has emerged during recent decades. It is obvious that the public are not familiar with the ghetto niche tourism concept and the results supported this expectation. Further analysis illustrated that domestic tourists are interested in ghetto tourism development (activities, attractions and strategies) in Isfahan city.

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