

UNEARTHING SUNKEN TREASURES: HARNESSING UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE FOR TOURISM GROWTH IN GALLE, SRI LANKA

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Abstract

The allure of delving into ancient, submerged realms has catapulted underwater cultural heritage to prominence within the marine tourism sector. Among the coastal jewels of Sri Lanka, Galle stands out as a city steeped in historical significance, having functioned as a bustling harbour for generations. Beneath its waves lies an underwater museum of artifacts that hold the potential to redefine the tourism landscape of the city. This study ventures into the depths to explore how these sunken treasures could be harnessed to invigorate tourism in Galle. The primary aim is to unravel the role that underwater cultural heritage could play in shaping and enhancing the tourism narrative of Galle City. By evaluating Galle's capacity to leverage this unique resource, the research seeks to determine how well the city is equipped to cater to this emerging niche and how it can turn its underwater assets into a vibrant tourism draw. To achieve this, the study employs a qualitative research methodology, drawing insights through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including tourism service providers, maritime archaeologists, and museum officials. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the existing perceptions and potential of underwater heritage tourism. The data collected were subjected to rigorous content analysis, revealing several critical findings: the substantial underwater cultural heritage assets of the Galle City, the growing interest among tourists in these submerged artifacts, and the current shortcomings in managing and promoting these resources effectively. The findings of the study suggest that an integrated approach—one that intertwines tourism development with the preservation and promotion of underwater heritage—could create a symbiotic relationship. Such a strategy promises to not only enhance the appeal of Galle as a tourist destination but also ensure the sustainable management of its underwater cultural treasures. By fostering this harmony, both the tourism sector and the heritage assets can thrive, enriching the historical and economic landscape of the Galle City.

Keywords: Artifacts, Cultural Heritage, Maritime, Tourism, Underwater

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In recent years, the landscape of tourism has evolved dramatically, transforming from a simple quest for leisure into a profound journey of discovery and knowledge. Unlike the tourists of the past, who primarily sought relaxation and entertainment, contemporary travelers are driven by a desire for richer, more meaningful experiences. This new breed of tourists, often referred to as "experiential travelers," are not merely content to observe; they seek to engage, understand, and immerse themselves in the local culture, history, and environment. This paradigm shift has paved the way for niche tourism to gain prominence, with an increasing number of travelers gravitating towards specialized forms of exploration that offer deeper insights into unique aspects of the world.

One particularly compelling niche is underwater cultural heritage (UCH), which intertwines the thrilling realms of maritime archaeology and tourism. This emerging field invites adventurers and history enthusiasts alike to explore submerged relics of bygone civilizations, revealing the stories of human endeavor, trade, and cultural exchange that lie beneath the waves. As the interest in the UCH rises, so too does the recognition of its potential to contribute to sustainable tourism development, particularly in regions like Galle, Sri Lanka. Galle, a coastal gem with a rich maritime history, has long been recognized for its strategic significance as a natural harbor. Established as a bustling port in the mid-13th century, Galle became a vital nexus for Chinese, Arabian, and later European maritime trade routes navigating the Indian Ocean. The harbor not only facilitated the exchange of goods but also fostered a melting pot of cultures, ideas, and traditions. This confluence has left an indelible mark on the region's heritage, encapsulated in the myriad shipwrecks and submerged artifacts that lie scattered along its shores. The waters surrounding Galle are believed to harbor invaluable relics, making the seabed akin to a vast underwater museum, rich in cultural and historical significance (UNESCO, 2017). As global tourism trends shift towards more immersive experiences, Galle has emerged as a prime destination for international travelers seeking to uncover the mysteries of its underwater cultural heritage. The region's combination of adventure and history is particularly appealing to those who yearn to delve into the past, guided by the allure of sunken treasures waiting to be discovered. For the modern tourist, Galle offers not just a picturesque locale but an invitation to participate in the unearthing of historical narratives that have long remained hidden beneath the surface.

Despite its immense potential, the full realization of Galle's underwater cultural heritage as a catalyst for tourism growth faces several challenges. Issues such as illegal looting, inadequate access to shipwreck sites, and a lack of sustainable management practices have hindered the effective utilization of this invaluable resource. Moreover, while the demand for experiences related to underwater heritage is palpable, there remains a gap in the provision of services and facilities that can accommodate this interest. This study seeks to address these challenges by exploring innovative strategies for harnessing Galle's underwater cultural heritage to enhance tourism growth. By investigating the intersection of archaeology, conservation, and tourism, this research aims to uncover pathways for sustainable development that not only protect the region's rich cultural assets but also enrich the visitor experience. Through collaboration with local stakeholders, maritime archaeologists, and tourism operators, the study will illuminate the ways in which Galle can leverage its underwater treasures to cultivate a thriving tourism sector that resonates with the aspirations of the modern traveler.

The underwater cultural heritage of Galle holds the promise of a vibrant and enriching tourism experience that can captivate the hearts and minds of visitors. As travelers increasingly seek knowledge and adventure, Galle stands poised to unveil the hidden stories of its maritime past, inviting tourists to embark on a journey that transcends mere sightseeing, offering instead a profound connection to history, culture, and the ocean's depths.

1.2 Research Problem

Building on the previously mentioned context, it is crucial to recognize the role that underwater cultural heritage plays in shaping tourism in Galle. By highlighting its value, conservation efforts can be prioritized, while tourism operators can craft compelling travel experiences centered around this hidden treasure. However, the connection between underwater cultural heritage and tourism in Sri Lanka remains underexplored, leaving a significant gap in understanding. To unlock Galle's full potential, research is needed to bridge this divide, exploring how its underwater heritage can be carefully managed to benefit both preservation and tourism. Past studies have typically focused on either heritage or tourism in isolation, underscoring the need for a multidisciplinary approach. This study aims to fill that void by investigating the symbiotic

relationship between Galle's underwater cultural heritage and tourism from the viewpoints of both maritime archaeologists and industry professionals.

1.3 Research Objectives

The primary goal of this research was to uncover the potential of Underwater Cultural Heritage in shaping tourism in Galle. To achieve this overarching aim, several key objectives were outlined. These included identifying the role Underwater Cultural Heritage plays in Galle's tourism landscape, understanding the desires and expectations of tourists drawn to this hidden heritage, evaluating Galle's capacity to meet these demands, and exploring how tourism can, in turn, support and enhance the preservation of Underwater Cultural Heritage.

1.4 Significance of the Study

By achieving its objectives, this research will enrich the knowledge base as a multidisciplinary study, bridging the realms of tourism and underwater cultural heritage. It will illuminate the pivotal role that underwater cultural heritage plays in sustaining Galle's tourism, underscoring its significance for the region's tourism vitality. In doing so, the study paves the way for the development of initiatives that benefit both tourism and the preservation of underwater cultural treasures.

1.5 Literature Review

In 2001, the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage cast a spotlight on the mysterious world beneath the seas, defining UCH as the "traces of human existence with cultural, historical, or archaeological value that have rested below water for at least a century." These relics are not just forgotten ships lying in watery graves—they are entire submerged cities, ancient religious sanctuaries, old harbors, aircraft lost to time, and prehistoric landscapes, now hidden under the waves like whispers of the past. These underwater treasures act like time-traveling vessels, preserving both the material evidence and the cultural memory of humanity's deep and intricate relationship with the ocean. Underwater cultural heritage is a powerful key to unlocking the doors of history, blending the tangible and the intangible, from artifacts to the narratives they carry. Its relevance spans many disciplines: archaeology, marine biology, oceanography, and law, each contributing to a mosaic of understanding our past.

Preserving UCH is also aligned with today's global goals, such as the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, positioning it as an asset in addressing challenges such as climate change, sustainability, and marine conservation. By unearthing these submerged worlds, we gain insight into human adaptability and resilience, inspiring solutions to some of our modern-day challenges.

1.5.1 A Global Perspective on Underwater Cultural Heritage

The treasures that lie beneath the world's oceans are not simply relics of the past—they are living legacies that ripple through the present. Over time, the significance of UCH has expanded, becoming a matter of geopolitical importance. The exploration of certain underwater sites, especially military wrecks, can stir up international tensions, as they often involve sensitive issues of national security. Additionally, debates over who owns the artifacts found in international waters further complicate the scene, exposing the tangled web of legal and ethical challenges associated with managing UCH, particularly in disputed maritime territories. UNESCO's 1972 Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage underscores the need to protect both cultural and natural treasures, yet the line it draws between the two can sometimes feel

arbitrary, particularly with UCH. In many cases, shipwrecks and submerged aircraft have evolved beyond their historical significance, becoming vibrant ecosystems where marine life thrives. These once-human relics now serve as artificial reefs, contributing to biodiversity and supporting conservation efforts. This symbiosis between UCH and marine ecosystems calls for a more integrated approach to management. When UCH is treated as part of the broader oceanic environment, its protection naturally aligns with efforts to conserve marine life. This perspective resonates with the philosophy of the Blue Economy, which advocates for the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth while safeguarding marine ecosystems. By viewing UCH as both a cultural and ecological asset, it becomes possible to promote heritage tourism that not only educates and entertains but also funds the preservation of both history and nature.

1.5.2 The Role of Underwater Cultural Heritage in Sustainable Tourism Development

In recent years, UCH has emerged as a beacon of potential for sustainable tourism development. The unique allure of underwater cultural heritage sites offers travelers the chance to experience the past in a way that is both thrilling and enriching. Destinations like Galle, Sri Lanka, with its deep maritime history, illustrate how UCH can be leveraged to foster tourism while advancing conservation efforts. UCH tourism attracts a niche market that includes adventurers, divers, historians, and cultural enthusiasts, creating a new avenue for economic growth in coastal regions. However, this form of tourism must be delicately managed to avoid over-exploitation and degradation of these fragile sites. Sustainable UCH tourism should be grounded in principles of conservation, education, and community involvement, aligning with the United Nations World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) vision of fostering inclusive economic development that safeguards cultural and natural resources. To transform UCH sites into tourist destinations without compromising their integrity, a balance must be struck between accessibility and preservation. Advanced technologies—such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and remotely operated vehicles (ROVs)—offer new ways for tourists to engage with these underwater wonders without physically disturbing them. For instance, virtual tours can give people a chance to explore shipwrecks hidden deep beneath the ocean's surface, making them accessible to those who can't dive.

These technologies can also be incorporated into museum exhibits or mobile apps, broadening the appeal of UCH tourism to a wider audience, including non-divers and individuals with mobility challenges. Such innovations offer immersive experiences while reducing the environmental footprint of traditional tourism.

1.5.3 Legal and Ethical Challenges in Underwater Cultural Heritage Management

The preservation and management of UCH present complex legal and ethical challenges. Unlike heritage sites on land, UCH is often located in international waters, raising difficult questions about jurisdiction, stewardship, and ownership. The UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage (2001) offers a framework for cooperation among nations to safeguard these submerged sites, yet many countries have yet to ratify the convention, leaving significant gaps in international governance. One of the most pressing ethical dilemmas in UCH management is the commercial exploitation of underwater sites. In some cases, private companies have been granted rights to salvage shipwrecks or recover artifacts for profit. While this may lead to the discovery of significant cultural treasures, it also risks turning history into a commodity, reducing priceless artifacts to mere items for sale. Some argue that this is tantamount to modern-day looting, as it prioritizes financial gain over the preservation of heritage. To counter this, many scholars advocate for a commons-based approach, where UCH is seen as belonging to all of humanity, to be preserved for the benefit of future generations. Another challenge is the illegal looting of underwater heritage sites. Advances in diving technology have made it easier for

treasure hunters to plunder these sites, damaging both their historical value and the delicate marine ecosystems that have formed around them. Despite international agreements and national laws to protect UCH, enforcement remains a significant challenge, particularly in areas with limited resources. Strengthening international collaboration and investing in marine law enforcement are crucial to preventing illegal activity and preserving UCH for posterity.

1.5.4 The Role of Community Engagement in UCH Conservation

At the heart of UCH conservation is the engagement of local communities, whose involvement is essential for effective preservation. Coastal communities have a direct relationship with UCH, and by engaging them in its protection, a sense of pride and ownership is cultivated. Community-based tourism models can offer locals an opportunity to benefit economically from UCH while playing an active role in safeguarding their cultural heritage. Education is a cornerstone of community engagement. By raising awareness of the significance of UCH through school programs, outreach activities, and public exhibitions, heritage professionals can inspire local populations to take a leading role in preserving these treasures. This deepened connection between communities and their submerged heritage is vital for long-term conservation efforts. Empowering local stakeholders in the development of UCH tourism also ensures that the benefits of tourism are shared equitably. Small businesses—such as dive operators, tour guides, and local artisans—can thrive in a tourism model that promotes UCH, creating jobs and sustainable income streams for the community. By involving locals in every step of the process, it is possible to foster an inclusive development model that prioritizes both economic growth and heritage conservation.

1.5.5 The Future of Underwater Cultural Heritage in Galle, Sri Lanka

With its wealth of underwater cultural heritage, Galle, Sri Lanka, is poised to become a leader in UCH tourism. However, tapping into this potential requires a coordinated effort that balances economic growth with the preservation of both cultural and natural resources. By integrating UCH into broader tourism and conservation strategies, Galle can transform its underwater legacy into a catalyst for sustainable development. The future of UCH depends on the collaboration between archaeologists, policymakers, conservationists, and local communities. By embracing new technologies, promoting sustainable tourism, and reinforcing legal protections, Galle's underwater heritage can serve as an inspiration for other coastal regions. UCH is not simply a relic of the past—it is a bridge to a more sustainable and inclusive future for communities around the world.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the relationship between underwater cultural heritage and tourism growth in Galle, Sri Lanka. A qualitative framework was particularly suitable for this investigation as it allowed for an in-depth understanding of the perspectives and experiences of various stakeholders involved in the tourism sector and maritime archaeology.

2.1 Data Collection

2.1.1 Primary Data:

To gather primary data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a targeted group of participants, including tourism service providers and maritime archaeologists. Given the challenges

posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and other logistical issues that hindered face-to-face interactions, interviews were facilitated via telephone. This method allowed for flexibility in scheduling and ensured the safety and convenience of both the researchers and participants. The interview guide was designed to elicit rich, detailed responses while allowing participants the freedom to express their thoughts and insights. Key themes addressed included the current state of underwater cultural heritage in Galle, the challenges faced in promoting it as a tourism asset, and potential strategies for enhancing its role in local economic development.

2.1.2 Secondary Data:

Secondary data were collected from various reputable sources, including academic textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, credible websites, and relevant newspaper articles.

This literature review provided a foundational understanding of the existing body of knowledge surrounding underwater cultural heritage, tourism trends, and maritime archaeology, helping to contextualize the primary findings within the broader scholarly discourse.

2.2 Sample Selection

The sample for this study consisted of ten participants, comprising five tourism service providers operating in Galle and five maritime archaeologists, including officials from the Galle Maritime Museum. Participants were selected using a convenient sampling method, which enabled the research to efficiently access knowledgeable individuals who could provide valuable insights. This approach is particularly effective in exploratory research, where the aim is to gather initial insights from stakeholders directly involved in the subject matter.

2.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were subjected to content analysis, a systematic approach for analyzing qualitative data that identifies patterns, themes, and meanings within textual information. This method allowed for a nuanced interpretation of the responses, revealing key insights into the relationship between underwater cultural heritage and tourism growth. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes related to the perception of underwater cultural heritage among tourists, the effectiveness of current promotional strategies, and the implications for sustainable tourism development. Additionally, the data were triangulated with the secondary sources to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing responses and securely storing data. This comprehensive methodology not only facilitated a rich exploration of the topic but also provided a robust framework for analyzing the intricate dynamics between underwater cultural heritage and tourism growth in Galle, Sri Lanka.

Through this qualitative approach, the study aims to contribute valuable insights that can inform future policy and practice in the sustainable development of this unique tourism sector.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Tourism Demand for Galle and its tourism facilities

Galle is regarded as one of Sri Lanka's premier tourist destinations, renowned for its stunning beaches and the iconic Old Dutch Fort, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Even during the turbulent times of the ethnic conflict, this region continued to attract visitors, thanks to its abundant resources. Tourists flock to Galle and its surroundings to indulge in beach tourism, explore its rich heritage, and partake in water activities like diving and snorkeling. The region boasts a robust tourism infrastructure, offering a wide range of services to meet the needs of its visitors. Accommodations range from boutique hotels and five-star resorts to cozy homestays, while dining options span from upscale restaurants to more budget-friendly eateries. Additionally, efficient transportation, including public transit and various auxiliary services, further enhances the tourism experience in Galle.

3.2 Availability of Underwater Cultural Heritage around Galle

Galle harbour hides a submerged kingdom of history, where the echoes of past centuries sleep beneath the waves. It is a cradle of archaeological discovery, with its depths rich in secrets from lost worlds. Maritime explorers have revealed a graveyard of ships, a sanctuary for sunken vessels spanning different eras. Since the 1990s, nearly 26 shipwrecks have emerged from these waters, each carrying its own story. Remarkably, many of these relics lie within a mere ten-to-fifteen-minute journey from shore. Some are ancient fragments of time, while others are lavish ships that once ruled the seas with grandeur. The wrecks beyond the harbour brim with marine life, transforming into underwater paradises for those drawn to the mysteries of archaeology and the vibrancy of the ocean's life. Among the most prominent shipwrecks brought to light, with the guidance of Dutch historical records, are the 'Geinwens' (1776), the 'Dolfijn,' the 'Barbestejn' (1735), the 'Hercules' (1661), and the 'Avondster' (1659). These ships, like time machines trapped in the ocean's embrace, offer precious glimpses into lives long gone. But the story doesn't end there—beyond the harbour, the waters of Unawatuna and Hikkaduwa cradle even more wrecks, further enriching the tapestry of this maritime legacy.



Figure 1: Archaeological sites in the Galle Harbour.
Source: ICOMOS

3.3 Modes of providing underwater cultural heritage experience to tourists

El Kady (2017) suggests that the underwater cultural heritage can be unveiled to tourists through four main avenues: land-based museums, underwater museums, underwater archaeological parks, and virtual underwater exhibits. With this in mind, the methods of presenting this heritage around Galle, along with the behavior of tourists in these spaces, are explored below.

3.4 Maritime Archaeological Museum on Land and Tourist Behaviour

These museums serve as gateways to ancient times, preserving the maritime chronicles written in the treasures salvaged from shipwrecks that have rested in the ocean's depths for ages. A bounty of artifacts, particularly those from vessels that met their fate near Galle, has been recovered in remarkable quantities. Now, these priceless heirlooms adorn the Galle Maritime Archaeological Museum, beckoning visitors on an enchanting odyssey through the vibrant tapestry of maritime lore. This museum has emerged as an indispensable destination for travelers in Galle, celebrated for its role in illuminating the rich marine and cultural heritage of Sri Lanka's southern shores. Among the museum's most mesmerizing exhibits are the copper alloy nails and remnants of wooden frames from the *Geinwens*, alongside the bell from the *Hercules*, which met its watery grave off Galle Harbour on May 22, 1661. This bell carries the evocative Latin inscription "AMOR VINCIT OMNIA ANNO 1625," a poignant reminder that "Love conquers all – Year 1625" (Mandawala, 2017; Galle Maritime Archaeological Museum). The ocean floor has also surrendered stone anchors, including a striking Arabian-style anchor adorned with its wooden flukes, still intact.

Further discoveries have revealed the *Bala Oruwa*, a traditional fishing vessel forged from the sturdy timbers of wild breadfruit (*Artocarpus nobilis*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), and domba (*Calophyllum inophyllum*). This 32-foot marvel, once a stalwart in the deep-sea fishing realm, is yet another jewel in the museum's diverse collection (Galle Maritime Archaeological

Museum). The museum proudly displays ancient Chinese porcelain, unearthed from various locales across Sri Lanka, bearing testament to the enduring trade routes that once linked China and Sri Lanka. Alongside these relics, visitors can marvel at maps, nautical instruments, ropes, earthenware, beer mugs, smoking pipes, barrels, artillery pieces, and sailors' shoes, all weaving a vibrant narrative of maritime existence from days gone by.

In 2017, the museum welcomed 2,942 international explorers and 45,196 local adventurers, generating approximately 1,288,265 LKR in revenue. Officials have noted that both local and foreign guests are particularly enchanted by the actual shipwreck sites, the tales of their recovery, and the rich historical sagas surrounding these underwater treasures. Foreign visitors, especially from Europe, India, and East Asia, often seek deeper insights into the artifacts on display. Many leave with souvenirs that serve as cherished mementos of their maritime journey. Proceeds from ticket sales are reinvested into the conservation of these underwater wonders, ensuring that tourism plays a crucial role in safeguarding this cultural heritage. Moreover, the knowledgeable narratives shared by the museum staff help foster a deeper appreciation among visitors, igniting a collective commitment to preserve and honor these invaluable artifacts for generations to come.

3.5 Underwater Museum and Tourist Behaviour

An underwater museum is a marvel crafted beneath the surface, nestled within the embrace of a natural body of water. These aquatic galleries invite exploration through glass-bottomed boats, snorkeling, or scuba diving, each offering a unique glimpse into their depths. Here, artifacts from nearby shipwrecks can be artfully arranged in submerged displays, securely anchored to withstand the relentless battering of waves and currents. In the context of Sri Lanka, while Galle boasts an underwater museum, the treasures showcased do not originate from local shipwrecks, casting doubt on its role as a genuine interpreter of underwater cultural heritage. According to tourism service providers, the lingering travel restrictions from COVID-19 have muddied the waters, making it challenging to gauge tourist engagement with this unique attraction. However, they emphasize that if this model could be effectively implemented—featuring artifacts and monuments salvaged from sunken vessels—it holds the promise of yielding significant benefits. This perspective is echoed by maritime archaeologists, who lend their support to the vision of a thriving underwater cultural experience.

3.6 Underwater Archaeological Trails – In Situ and Tourist Behaviour

Another avenue for immersing individuals in the realm of underwater cultural heritage is the in-situ experience. In Sri Lanka, diving centers serve as the gateway to this adventure. Despite the harbor's treasure trove of shipwrecks, access is often restricted due to security concerns surrounding the naval base, limiting tourists' ability to engage with these submerged stories. Instead, intrepid explorers can embark on diving trails in the outer harbor, Unawatuna, and Hikkaduwa. During the peak tourism season from November to April, diving centers report an influx of visitors eager to plunge into the depths. Among these, local adventurers hail from bustling Colombo and surrounding urban areas, while international guests travel from nations such as India, the UK, Russia, the Netherlands, Germany, and China. Some visitors arrive in Galle solely to

immerse themselves in the mysteries of shipwrecks, often returning for subsequent dives. These repeat tourists are typically more inclined to invest generously in their underwater escapades, dedicating two to three days to exploring the vibrant marine heritage. Feedback from tourists is overwhelmingly positive, with around 90% expressing satisfaction with their diving experiences, a testament to the allure of the underwater realm that encourages them to return. Yet, while the demand for shipwreck-related souvenirs is palpable, there remains a noticeable absence of retail outlets offering such mementos. Tourism service providers lament the scarcity of accessible wrecks, particularly in the harbor, where the treasures remain hidden from outsiders. Every rose has its thorn, and the pursuit of diving trails to shipwrecks does not come without challenges. Archaeologists warn of looting and vandalism, as some local divers illicitly retrieve artifacts to sell as antiques or break apart iron wreckage for scrap. Fortunately, these actions have diminished compared to earlier generations.

Conversely, foreign tourists exhibit a profound respect for preserving these artifacts and shipwrecks. Unlike their local counterparts, who were once encouraged by guides to collect souvenirs from the depths, modern maritime operators now advocate for the protection of these underwater treasures. This shift acknowledges that safeguarding these resources enhances the appeal of their tours and sustains their livelihoods. Many archaeologists concur that when tourism providers understand the intrinsic value of underwater heritage, they become stewards of preservation, sharing this ethos with their clients. Overall, maritime archaeologists view current tourism practices as opportunities to strengthen and safeguard underwater cultural heritage rather than as threats. However, both tourism operators and archaeologists emphasize the necessity for government attention to ensure the protection of these invaluable sites.

4. CONCLUSION

The coastal seascape of Galle, nestled along the southern shores of Sri Lanka, harbors an underwater vault of cultural wealth, filled with shipwrecks and relics from eras long gone. These submerged vessels, now resting beneath the ocean's waves, stand as silent sentinels, bearing witness to the centuries of seafaring adventures, exploration, and naval warfare that shaped this region. Far from being relics lost to time, Galle's underwater heritage is a living treasure trove—rich with potential to fuel both tourism and economic vitality. The stories woven by these shipwrecks, stretching from the harbor's depths to the less explored waters of Unawatuna and Hikkaduwa, have the power to captivate modern-day explorers—those seeking not just adventure, but also knowledge and a deep connection to the past. Travelers, especially those from foreign shores, are increasingly drawn to Galle, lured by the enigmatic charm of the secrets hidden beneath its waters. These are not passive tourists content to merely observe—they seek to engage, to immerse themselves in the rich history that lies submerged. Many journey here with a singular purpose: to explore the watery graves of ancient ships, with some investing heavily in diving excursions and related experiences. The steady flow of glowing feedback from these adventurous visitors underscores the satisfaction they derive from their encounters with Galle's underwater heritage, sparking repeat visits and cementing the region's growing reputation as a premier destination for this niche form of tourism. Currently, two main paths offer tourists the chance to connect with Galle's submerged treasures. The first is a more traditional route—a visit to the maritime museum, where curated exhibits bring maritime history to life. The second, more thrilling

option, is to dive beneath the waves and witness firsthand the majestic remnants of sunken vessels in their watery resting places. Both experiences, though captivating, merely scratch the surface of what Galle could offer. With a strategic approach, the possibilities for expanding and enriching these encounters are vast and ripe for development.

However, the journey to unlock the full potential of underwater cultural heritage tourism in Galle is not without its challenges. Chief among them is the threat posed by illegal looting and vandalism of underwater archaeological sites. Such destructive activities not only endanger the preservation of these priceless relics but also compromise the long-term viability of the underwater tourism industry itself. The problem is further exacerbated by restricted access to some shipwrecks, which limits exploration opportunities for tourists and researchers alike. Moreover, the technologies currently used to interpret and showcase Galle's underwater heritage are far from cutting-edge. While diving offers a privileged, close-up experience of these sunken artifacts, not all visitors are willing or able to take the plunge. As a result, non-divers are left with a diluted experience, missing out on the full grandeur of Galle's submerged history. Additionally, the absence of thoughtfully designed souvenirs leaves visitors without tangible mementos to commemorate their underwater adventure, preventing them from carrying a piece of Galle's heritage home—a missed opportunity for both engagement and revenue. In light of these obstacles, it becomes evident that while Galle's underwater cultural heritage possesses undeniable allure, its tourism potential remains largely untapped. However, through the insights gathered in this research, several strategies have emerged that could help turn the tide, allowing these hidden treasures to be leveraged for sustainable tourism growth.

One of the most immediate solutions lies in addressing the gaps in the enforcement of Sri Lanka's Archaeology Act, which governs underwater cultural heritage. Currently, the oversight of diving activities is hampered by a shortage of personnel, leaving these precious sites vulnerable to exploitation. A proactive measure would be to increase awareness of underwater cultural heritage laws among key enforcement groups, such as the Sri Lanka Navy and coastguard personnel. By ensuring these officers are well-informed and adequately trained, illegal activities like looting and vandalism could be significantly curbed. Moreover, increasing the number of field personnel dedicated to monitoring underwater sites would further safeguard these submerged treasures. Education plays an equally crucial role—not just for enforcement officers but for the local community at large. The preservation of underwater cultural heritage is a collective responsibility, and fostering a sense of stewardship among local residents is essential for its long-term conservation. This can be achieved by incorporating underwater cultural heritage topics into school curricula, from primary to tertiary levels, thereby cultivating an early appreciation for the importance of these sites. Community outreach programs could also play a pivotal role in raising awareness and encouraging local participation in the preservation of Galle's underwater legacy. Technological advancements offer another exciting frontier for enhancing the visitor experience and protecting underwater heritage. Virtual museums represent one such innovation, providing an immersive platform for tourists to engage with Galle's maritime history. Through 3D reconstructions, augmented reality, and virtual reality, visitors can virtually dive into the past, experiencing the lives of ancient seafarers and exploring shipwrecks that are otherwise difficult to access due to their depth. These digital experiences could broaden the appeal of underwater cultural heritage tourism, particularly for those unable or unwilling to dive. Virtual tours, interactive apps,

and remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) could bring the magic of Galle's underwater world to the fingertips of a global audience.

Additionally, the development of tourism products related to underwater cultural heritage offers a promising avenue for economic growth. Crafting well-designed souvenirs—replicas of artifacts recovered from shipwrecks, for example—would allow visitors to take home a tangible piece of history, further connecting them to Galle's maritime heritage. Another compelling idea is the creation of life-sized replicas of iconic ships, such as the Avondstar, which could be anchored in shallow waters near the coast. Much like the UK's Cutty Sark, these replicas could offer an immersive experience that transports visitors back to the golden age of sailing. Comprehensive tour packages could be built around such replicas, offering a blend of education, adventure, and entertainment. The revenue generated from these endeavors could then be reinvested in archaeological research and conservation efforts, creating a sustainable cycle of preservation and growth. Storytelling is yet another powerful tool that can be harnessed to enhance the visitor experience. Every shipwreck holds a unique story, and by using vibrant, imaginative marketing techniques—such as engaging visuals, interactive displays, and multimedia presentations—the tales of these sunken vessels can be brought to life. Collaborating with maritime archaeologists, historians, and local communities could enrich these narratives, making them even more compelling for tourists. Finally, one particularly innovative idea is the establishment of an underwater museum, where artifacts recovered from nearby shipwrecks are displayed in their original submerged context.

Such a museum would offer an unparalleled experience, allowing visitors to witness history in the making while underscoring the importance of preserving these relics for future generations. Whether for divers or non-divers, this underwater museum would set Galle apart as a world leader in underwater cultural heritage tourism. At the heart of all these strategies lies the principle of sustainability. The promotion of underwater cultural heritage must be rooted in sustainable tourism practices, ensuring that these treasures are protected for future generations while benefiting local communities today. Strategic planning and a focus on conservation will be essential to achieving this balance, allowing Galle to flourish as both a cultural and economic hub. In conclusion, the waters surrounding Galle hold a vast, untapped potential for underwater cultural heritage tourism. With thoughtful planning, technological innovation, and community engagement, Galle's submerged treasures can be transformed into a beacon of sustainable tourism, bringing economic growth while preserving the rich maritime history that lies beneath its waves.

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