

Pathways of Peace: Discovering Unity Through the Pilgrimage to Indonesia's Maria Caves

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Abstract: Catholics in Indonesia have a long tradition of making pilgrimages to the *Gua Maria* (Maria Caves), complementing visits to cathedrals and other religious sites. This study focuses on Marian tourism at the *Gua Maria* in Java and Bali, highlighting their inclusivity as destinations open to both Catholic and non-Catholic visitors, fostering peace and mutual respect. The research explores the spiritual and communal experiences of pilgrims, investigating the interplay between religious practices and tourist behaviour in a multicultural context. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through literature reviews, interviews, and observations. Findings reveal that pilgrimages to the *Gua Maria* provide a profound sense of brotherhood and exemplify genuine tolerance. These sites' openness contributes to national harmony, while the application of *Sapta Pesona Wisata* (the Seven Charms of Tourism) enhances visitor experiences by emphasising security, comfort, and serenity. This study contributes to religious tourism literature by demonstrating how *Sapta Pesona Wisata* can improve the quality of Marian pilgrimage tourism, fostering intercultural dialogue and religious tolerance. It underscores the *Gua Maria's* role in promoting peace, inclusivity, and social cohesion within Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Keywords: Catholic Pilgrimage; Maria Cave; Marian Tourism; Religious Tourism; Spiritual Tourism.

Abstrak: Umat Katolik di Indonesia memiliki tradisi panjang melakukan ziarah ke *Gua Maria*, yang melengkapi kunjungan mereka ke katedral dan situs-situs religius lainnya. Penelitian ini berfokus pada pariwisata Maria (*Marian tourism*) di *Gua Maria* yang terletak di Jawa dan Bali, menyoroti inklusivitasnya sebagai destinasi yang terbuka bagi pengunjung Katolik maupun non-Katolik, sehingga menciptakan suasana damai dan saling menghormati. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman spiritual dan komunal para peziarah, serta mengkaji interaksi antara praktik religius dan perilaku wisatawan dalam konteks multikultural. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui studi literatur, wawancara, dan observasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa ziarah ke *Gua Maria* memberikan rasa persaudaraan yang mendalam dan menjadi wujud nyata dari toleransi sejati. Keterbukaan tempat-tempat ziarah ini berkontribusi pada harmoni nasional, sementara penerapan *Sapta Pesona Wisata* (tujuh pesona wisata) meningkatkan pengalaman pengunjung dengan menekankan keamanan, kenyamanan, dan suasana yang tenang. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian pariwisata religius dengan menunjukkan bagaimana *Sapta Pesona Wisata* dapat meningkatkan kualitas pariwisata ziarah Maria, mendorong dialog lintas budaya dan toleransi beragama. Studi ini menegaskan peran *Gua Maria* dalam mempromosikan perdamaian, inklusivitas, dan kohesi sosial di tengah masyarakat pluralistik Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: Ziarah Katolik; Gua Maria; Wisata Maria; Wisata religi; Wisata Spiritual.

1. Introduction

The Vatican has long established itself as a destination for global tourists seeking to experience the spiritual significance of St. Peter's tomb. Similarly, the *Maria Lourdes Cave*, where the Blessed Mother appeared to Saint Bernadette in Lourdes, France, in 1858, has inspired Catholics worldwide to create Marian pilgrimage sites (Miller, 2013). These sacred locations are not only spaces of religious devotion but also cultural heritage sites, drawing pilgrims and tourists alike. The phenomenon of the Marian pilgrimage, rooted in historical and spiritual traditions, continues to thrive globally, including in Indonesia.

In Indonesia, the Catholic Church reflects the universal devotion to the Virgin Mary through pilgrimages to Maria Caves. As part of a pluralistic nation, Maria Caves play a crucial role in promoting interfaith harmony and social cohesion. Religious tourism at these sites fosters a sense of unity and mutual understanding, where tour guides act as cultural ambassadors, sharing the values of respect and tolerance with visitors. Pilgrims and tourists alike find opportunities for reflection and dialogue, making Maria Caves significant not only for Catholics but also for non-Catholic visitors seeking cultural and spiritual experiences (Thompson, 2000).

Existing studies on religious tourism generally fall into three categories. First, some studies focus on religious tourism in general, discussing its role in faith-based travel and its socio-economic impact (Štefko, Kiráľová, & Mudrík, 2015; Liro, 2021). Religious tourism plays a crucial role in cultural heritage preservation, economic development, and spiritual experiences. Research highlights the importance of service quality in enhancing visitor satisfaction and encouraging repeat visits (da Cunha & Louro, 2024). Scholars have also identified different types of religious tourists, ranging from devout pilgrims to secular visitors seeking cultural enrichment (Melissa Tsai, 2021). Additionally, the authenticity of sacred sites is essential in shaping visitor perceptions and reinforcing the spiritual significance of religious destinations (Lin et al., 2024; Pande & Shi, 2023). Beyond its spiritual aspects, religious tourism contributes to local economies by generating employment and supporting businesses related to pilgrimage activities (Guriță & Scortescu, 2023). However, challenges such as over-commercialisation, sustainability concerns, and the underrepresentation of certain religious traditions in research remain pressing issues (Ohlan & Ohlan, 2024). The integration of technology, including artificial intelligence and virtual reality, has begun transforming religious tourism, offering both opportunities and challenges in balancing modern visitor engagement with traditional sacred experiences (Rohit, Bathla, Sethi, & Sharma, 2024). Future research should focus on sustainable tourism management to ensure that economic benefits do not compromise the spiritual and cultural integrity of religious sites (Millán Vázquez de la Torre, Pérez, & Martínez Cárdenas, 2016; Silva, Abrantes, Reis, & Seabra, 2023).

Second, extensive research on Marian pilgrimage in a global context highlights its deep historical and cultural roots, particularly in Europe and Latin America, where it flourished during the Counter-Reformation and remained significant through periods like the Communist era in Poland (Niedźwiedz, 2023). Major pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes in France, which attracts millions annually, reinforce the role of Marian devotion in Catholic spirituality (Notermans, 2022). These pilgrimages offer spiritual, emotional, and psychological benefits, fostering community, gratitude, and resilience among devotees (Esposito & Turco, 2024; Harris, 2013; Zika, 2017). However, modern challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have necessitated sustainable management strategies, particularly in Indonesia, where social media and strategic marketing play a crucial role in revitalising pilgrimage sites (Haryono, Satrya, Herdono, & Hoong, 2024). While the Marian pilgrimage maintains global similarities, local variations shape traditions, such as Australia's integration of Catholic motifs with local culture (Kahl, 2017) and Poland's enduring walking pilgrimages as an expression of Catholic identity (Pałkowski, 2021). These variations demonstrate the adaptability of Marian devotion, balancing historical traditions with modern developments to sustain its relevance in a changing religious landscape.

Third, a growing body of literature has examined the Marian pilgrimage in Indonesia, highlighting its historical and cultural significance, yet lacking discussions on how universal tourism principles, such as *Sapta Pesona Wisata*, shape the visitor experience and promote multicultural engagement. Post-COVID-19, Marian pilgrimage in Indonesia faces both challenges and opportunities, as the desire for

spiritual journeys among Catholics has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, posing a concern for pilgrimage site operators (Haryono et al., 2024). To address this, sustainable long-term strategies are essential, focusing on understanding pilgrims' needs, ensuring health safety, and promoting a secure environment (Haryono et al., 2024). Social media marketing has emerged as a crucial tool for sustaining interest and outreach efforts. Among Indonesia's Marian pilgrimage sites, *Sendangsono* stands out as the most renowned. Originally an indigenous worship site, it was transformed into a Christian pilgrimage centre by Jesuit missionaries in the early 20th century and has since undergone a process of *Javanisation*, integrating Javanese cultural values into its religious practices (Beck, 2018). This cultural adaptation exemplifies how pilgrimage sites can foster inclusivity and engagement among believers of various backgrounds.

Despite the extensive research on religious tourism and Marian pilgrimage, there remains a significant gap in understanding how universal tourism principles, particularly *Sapta Pesona Wisata*—which encompasses security, cleanliness, orderliness, comfort, beauty, hospitality, and memorability—are applied to Marian pilgrimage sites in Indonesia. Existing studies have primarily examined the spiritual, cultural, and socio-economic dimensions of religious tourism, yet little attention has been given to how structured tourism management principles influence visitor experiences and interfaith interactions at these sacred sites. Furthermore, while global research has explored the resilience and adaptation of Marian pilgrimage traditions, there is limited discussion on how Indonesian Marian sites, such as *Sendangsono*, balance cultural heritage preservation with modern tourism demands, particularly in the post-pandemic era. Additionally, the role of non-Catholic visitors in shaping the pilgrimage experience remains underexplored, despite Indonesia's diverse religious landscape. Understanding these aspects is essential for developing a more inclusive, sustainable, and well-managed pilgrimage environment that aligns with Indonesia's broader religious tourism objectives. This research seeks to address these gaps by analysing how *Sapta Pesona Wisata* principles contribute to visitor satisfaction, multicultural engagement, and the long-term sustainability of Marian pilgrimage tourism in Indonesia.

This research aims to bridge the gap in existing literature by examining how *Sapta Pesona Wisata* principles are implemented at Indonesian Marian pilgrimage sites and their impact on visitor experiences, cultural engagement, and interfaith interactions. Specifically, this study seeks to assess how elements such as security, cleanliness, comfort, and hospitality contribute to the sustainability and inclusivity of these religious destinations. By focusing on *Sendangsono* as a case study, this research will explore how the site integrates tourism management principles while maintaining its religious and cultural authenticity. Additionally, this study will analyse the perspectives of both Catholic and non-Catholic visitors, providing insights into how pilgrimage destinations can foster cross-cultural dialogue and promote religious harmony in Indonesia's pluralistic society. Through qualitative and quantitative methods, this research will offer a comprehensive evaluation of the role of structured tourism frameworks in enhancing Marian pilgrimage tourism, addressing the gaps in previous studies and contributing to broader discussions on sustainable religious tourism.

2. Methods

This research employed a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of pilgrims at the Maria Caves in depth. The unit of analysis focused on individual pilgrims and groups visiting Maria Caves in Java, specifically *Sendangsono*, and in Bali, including *Palasari* and *Air Sanih*. These locations were selected for their historical and cultural importance. *Sendangsono* Maria Cave is significant as the site of the first Catholic baptism in Java. *Palasari* Maria Cave represents the Catholic missionary efforts in Bali during the 1940s, while *Air Sanih* Maria Cave is located within a pluralistic community, making it an ideal setting to study interfaith dynamics.

A qualitative design was chosen because it provides an in-depth understanding of the motivations, behaviours, and experiences of pilgrims. This approach is best suited to capture the complexity of the spiritual and communal dynamics present at the Maria Caves, aligning with the study's aim to understand how pilgrimage tourism fosters intercultural dialogue and spiritual fulfilment.

Primary data were collected through interviews and observations. Interviews were conducted with priests, Catholic and non-Catholic pilgrims, and students of architecture who visited the Maria Caves for study purposes. Secondary data were gathered from literature reviews of existing studies on religious tourism and Marian pilgrimage. The selection of informants was purposive, ensuring a diverse representation. Priests offered perspectives on the role of Maria Caves in Catholicism and their universal significance. Family pilgrims provided insights into their perceptions and behaviours during pilgrimage visits. Travellers with specific interests, such as students, contributed a broader understanding of the Maria Caves beyond their religious function, including architectural studies.

Data collection involved organising trips to Maria Caves and providing participants with structured interview questions. These interviews were followed by unstructured discussions to capture additional insights. Testimonies from participants offered authentic reflections on their experiences. Observations were conducted during the visits, focusing on behavioural patterns, interactions, and the duration of stay. Researchers refrained from intervening or directing participants, ensuring the data reflected natural behaviours. Briefings were given beforehand to inform participants of appropriate conduct in the sacred spaces of Maria Caves.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis as described by Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas (2013). This method allowed for identifying patterns, themes, and connections within the collected data, helping to reveal the broader meanings associated with pilgrimage at the Maria Caves. The analysis paid particular attention to the symbolic and practical significance of the sites, visitor behaviours, and the integration of *Sapta Pesona Wisata* values, including security, cleanliness, and hospitality, in the management of the pilgrimage destinations.

3. Results

Pilgrim Experiences and Motivations

The results of interviews with Priest Tinus (Priest of the Hati Kudus Jesus Catholic Church, Palasari) revealed that pilgrims from outside Bali often visited Palasari during the month of Mary or the Rosary in search of blessings or miracles:

“Many pilgrims visit in the month of Mary in May and the month of the Rosary in October. The motivation for pilgrimage is generally for an externally miracle, the search for struggles over health problems and economic problems that differentiate people on pilgrimage inside and outside Indonesia. The arrival of pilgrims to Palasari is only for a short time, not for overnight stays. This is what makes no economic benefits. Pilgrims come for a maximum of 3 hours and don't shop.”

Architecture students from Yogyakarta expressed admiration for the naturalistic design of Sendangsono Maria Cave. They felt visiting the Grotto of Mary benefited from what they were looking for:

“Sendangsono has good architecture. Even though we are not Catholics, we are well received at Sendangsono. Even though it is in the open, the Sendangsono Maria Cave is clean, beautiful, beautiful and maintains its sacredness.”

Table 1. Motivations for Pilgrimage to Maria Caves

Pilgrimage Motivation	Category	Visitor Group
Gratitude for a miracle	Spiritual	Catholic pilgrims
Admiration for architecture	Architectural	Non-Catholic students
Seeking peace and tranquillity	Spiritual and Social	General visitors

Table 1 summarizes the motivations for visiting Maria Caves, highlighting the diversity among Catholic pilgrims, non-Catholic students, and general visitors. As shown in Table 1, the architecture of Sendangsono Maria Cave reflects a harmonious blend of art and nature, attracting visitors seeking peace and inspiration. Catholic pilgrims are primarily motivated by spiritual reasons, such as

expressing gratitude for perceived miracles. Non-Catholic students, on the other hand, are drawn to the caves for their architectural beauty, showcasing an appreciation for the blend of art and nature. Additionally, general visitors seek peace and tranquility, combining spiritual and social motivations, which highlights the inclusive and universal appeal of Maria Caves as a pilgrimage destination. In summary, the motivations for visiting Maria Caves range from spiritual gratitude for miracles to architectural admiration, illustrating the site's appeal across different demographics.

From the data that has been presented, there are identifiable patterns regarding visits to the Grotto of Mary. Catholic pilgrims show a preference to visit during the month of Mary in May and the month of the Rosary in October, which coincide with important moments in the Catholic liturgical calendar. The motivations of the pilgrims are also diverse, ranging from spiritual reasons, such as expressions of gratitude for miracles, to admiration for the architectural aspects of the Grotto, as well as social pursuits of tranquillity. The duration of visits by most pilgrims tends to be short, averaging a maximum of three hours, which results in limited economic benefits for the local community. These patterns suggest that the Gua Maria has different attractions for different groups of visitors, both based on their religious background and the purpose of their visit.

These findings affirm that Maria Cave serves not only as a space for spiritual reflection but also for cultural and architectural appreciation. This aligns with what is written in the book *"100 Years of Sendangsono"*, which states that the Sendangsono Maria Cave was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary as an expression of gratitude for her role as a mediator of grace. The beauty and sanctity of the site not only bring joy to Catholics but also serve as a meaningful "propaganda" for non-Catholics.

The implications are that challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and limited economic benefits for the local community need to be addressed in the management of religious tourism (Robledo, 2015). By leveraging digital media and involving the local community, religious tourism at Maria Cave can be developed to be more inclusive, while also serving as a model of tolerance and harmony within diversity.

Challenges and Opportunities in Marian Tourism

The main challenges for Marian tourism destinations can be mapped into two aspects, first, for non-Catholic visitors who have the desire to visit for study purposes or other positive things, they need adequate information that they can also visit. Interviews with a group of non-Catholic visitors revealed hesitations about visiting Maria Caves due to lack of information on whether access was permitted for non-Catholics. This was conveyed by a student informant who felt that he had just learned that the Cave of Mary is permitted to be visited not only by Catholics, of course with certain restrictions:

"At first, we were hesitant to visit, whether it would be permitted or not. But because I had field work to do in Sendangsono, I ventured to visit. "It turns out that the Maria Cave does not limit visitors to Catholics only."

To improve the experience for pilgrims and every visitor who comes to the Maria Cave, information and communication technology is needed that can support it. Currently, every tourist destination is competing to promote its tourist destination through posting on social media and other digital promotional means. Regarding this matter, Priest Tinus said that an institution specifically formed and assigned to handle the promotion and management of Palasari tourism already exists, namely "Orti Rahayu". It is hoped that this organization will be more optimal in promoting religious tourism in Palasari, especially the participation of "Orti Rahayu" members from among young people who find it easier to use social media. Priest Tinus highlighted the role of Orti Rahayu in promoting tourism activities, emphasizing the untapped potential of social media for wider outreach:

"The Palasari Church has long formed the Orti Rahayu organization which specifically serves Palasari spiritual tourism, both the Church and the Maria Cave. We also have a special eucharistic celebration to increase the attractiveness of the Maria Palasari Cave, namely "the Full Moon Night Mass" (*Misa Malam Bulan Purnama*) which is held every month at the Maria Palasari Cave. This is

done as is also done at Maria Cave of Puh Sarang in Kediri, East Java, which holds a special Mass, namely “Legi Friday Night Mass” (*Misa Malam Jumat Legi*) every month.”

The second challenge concerns the sense of security for young visitors who visit without being accompanied by family or parents. Feeling anxious about security while traveling, especially the quiet roads in the Maria Cave area, is a challenge for the Maria Cave management to increase the sense of security for visitors (Satrya, Haryono, Herdono, Ng, & Kaihatu, 2024). Apart from that, security is also needed to be provided by local residents around the Maria Cave itself:

“If I came back to Maria's Cave alone, I would feel afraid. But because this time I came with friends, I was brave. It would be better if there were more street lights leading to the Maria Cave, and if possible, there should be security posts at certain points that are considered vulnerable.”

Table 2. Challenges and Opportunities to Maria Caves

Comparison	Challenge	Opportunity
Facility vs frequency of visits	Security support facilities and road infrastructure to the location	High frequency of visits
Information vs publication	Limited information	Increasing use of social media for tourism campaign

As illustrated in Table 2, the main challenges identified include inadequate road infrastructure and limited promotion, while opportunities lie in the increasing use of social media for tourism campaigns.



Figure 1. Entrance Road to Sendangsono
Source: Maria Levina (2024)

Figure 1 depicts the serene but remote location of the Sendangsono Maria Cave, which underlines the need for better accessibility, safety to the location with adequate street lighting, accompanied by adequate traffic signs and signage. Thus, the pilgrim's journey to the location of the Maria Cave feels safe and comfortable. Related to cleanliness and beauty in Sendangsono, this is inseparable from the implementation of *Sapta Pesona Wisata*. When this research was conducted, it was still in the atmosphere of the Covid-19 Pandemic. This has prompted systematic changes in our lives. Old habits that have been established, collapsed with new habits that emerged after the epidemic that hit Indonesia and the world. Social/physical distancing and the use of the internet in communication to fulfill life's needs, are driving the emergence of these new habits. Standards for maintaining personal and environmental

hygiene and health are the center of the new normal. The implementation of CHSE (clean, health, safety and environment) for the Indonesian tourism sector is like rediscovering a long-kept identity, namely *Sapta Pesona Wisata*. Maybe all this time the noble value of *Sapta Pesona Wisata* has been doubted and underestimated. Or conversely, it has become a routine inherent in everyday life.

Sapta Pesona Wisata usually echoes or becomes a normative theme when welcoming the high season, during school holidays, national holidays, religious holidays. In those days, authority tourism delivered a letter of appeal addressed to regional heads throughout the archipelago in response to an increase in tourism activities during the high season (Malodia & Singla, 2017). The Ministry of Tourism requests that regional heads create security, comfort and order in all tourism activity centers in each region, in the form of activities including checking the feasibility of tourist facilities and infrastructure such as access roads to tourist attractions, transportation, accommodation and restaurants and recreational facilities (Handriana, Yulianti, & Kurniawati, 2020). *Sapta Pesona Wisata*, a concept of values created and popularized by the former Minister of Tourism, Soesilo Soedarman, has become the core of tourism development in the realm of human factors. *Sapta Pesona Wisata* which consist of security, cleanliness, order, coolness, beauty, hospitality, and giving impressive memories to tourists are the basic elements of tourism that place the community as an important factor in its implementation.

Broadly speaking, the main challenges faced by Marian spiritual tourism destinations include limited accessibility and the lack of information available to visitors, particularly non-Catholics. On the other hand, significant opportunities arise from the high interest of visitors in spiritual tourism and the potential for utilising social media to promote these destinations (Hvizdová, 2018). Enhancing infrastructure and improving communication strategies can strengthen the appeal of Maria Cave to various groups of visitors.

From the collected data, it appears that Catholic visitors frequently visit Maria Cave during special occasions such as the Full Moon Night Mass at Maria Palasari Cave or the Legi Friday Night Mass at Puh Sarang, Kediri. This pattern indicates that special events have the ability to attract visitors with spiritual motivations. However, another pattern emerges in the hesitation of non-Catholic visitors due to the lack of information regarding accessibility for them. This hesitation can be addressed through clearer communication and effective promotional strategies (Frisk, 2000). Additionally, the involvement of local organisations such as Orti Rahayu presents a significant opportunity to optimise the management and promotion of tourism through social media.

These findings suggest that by addressing challenges related to infrastructure and safety, and by leveraging digital media for promotion, the appeal of Marian spiritual tourism at Maria Cave can be significantly enhanced. Such strategies not only support more inclusive management but also create a safer and more comfortable tourism experience for visitors. The implementation of *Sapta Pesona Wisata* values, such as security, cleanliness, beauty, and hospitality, also plays a crucial role in supporting tourism development (Chalik, 1991). This aligns with previous literature emphasising the importance of human factors in sustainable tourism. With a systematic approach, Maria Cave can become a successful example of spiritual tourism management that integrates spiritual, cultural, and diversity values within the framework of sustainable tourism development (Aulet & Duda, 2020).

Impact of Marian Tourism on Local Communities

Table 3. Annual Pilgrim Visits to Maria Cave Sendangsono (2022–2024)

Month	2022	2023	2024
January	6,550	5,884	5,558
February	3,704	4,132	5,402
March	3,864	6,068	5,870
April	5,491	9,031	8,677
May	22,483	15,370	19,431
June	8,040	13,563	13,994
July	8,103	9,162	9,039
August	4,704	5,885	5,932
September	4,398	7,236	8,342
October	9,192	11,422	15,983
November	4,110	4,313	5,275
December	8,294	13,153	13,867

Source: Management Sendangsono Maria Cave

Pilgrimage tourism at Maria Cave has significant social and economic impacts on the local community (Hole, Khedkar, & Pawar, 2019). Based on annual visitation data for Maria Cave Sendangsono (Table 3), there is a trend of increasing visitor numbers between 2022 and 2024, particularly in May and October. May is celebrated as the *Month of the Rosary* (a Catholic devotional practice dedicated to the Virgin Mary), while October is observed as the *Month of Mary*. Additionally, there is a notable increase in visitor numbers during the school holidays in June.

In addition to the impact of visitation, the local community benefits economically from the sale of souvenirs and tourism-related services. A local vendor explained:

"The influx of pilgrims has enabled us to open small shops, providing steady income for our families."

The trend of increasing visitation to Maria Cave is illustrated in the following bar chart, which displays annual visitor numbers from 2022 to 2024:

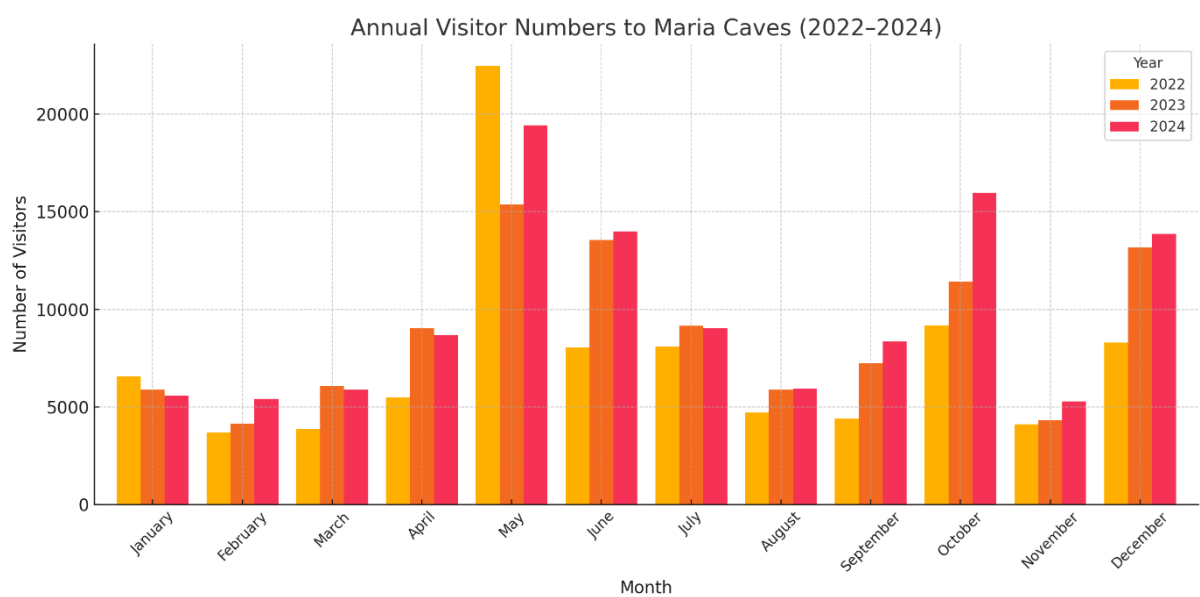


Figure 2. The trend of increasing visitation to Maria Cave

The interaction between visitors of different faiths at Maria Caves fosters mutual respect and understanding, exemplifying the role of religious tourism in promoting social harmony in a pluralistic society. Such encounters reinforce the values of tolerance and inclusivity, contributing to peaceful coexistence in diverse communities.



Figure 3. Annual Visitor Numbers to Maria Caves and Economic Impact on Local Communities
Source: Management Sendangsono Maria Cave (2025)

The active participation of local residents in managing religious tourism has not only increased the attractiveness of the destination but also fostered a sense of ownership and pride within the community. This involvement strengthens cultural preservation while providing economic benefits.



Figure 4. Local Residents Selling Handmade Souvenirs Near Sendangsono Maria Cave
Source: Maria Levina (2024)

The community at the location of the Maria Caves has an open opportunity to participate economically by selling or offering services that support tourism activities, participating in cultural activities related to the pilgrimage site, which ultimately becomes an inseparable part of the existence of the Maria Cave itself. This makes the sustainability of pilgrimage tourism in the future, because it is mainly felt to benefit local residents and provides welfare from pilgrim visits. Pilgrimage tourism has a positive impact on local economies through increased sales of souvenirs and the growth of community-based tourism activities.

Pilgrimage tourism at Maria Cave has a positive economic impact through increased souvenir sales and the growth of community-based tourism activities (Kusuma & Suryasih, 2016). Moreover, the

interfaith interactions occurring during pilgrimages foster social harmony and tolerance in a pluralistic society (Kreiner, 2020).

The active participation of local residents is a key pattern in the management of religious tourism at Maria Cave. They contribute in various ways, such as providing services for pilgrims, selling souvenirs, and participating in cultural events associated with the pilgrimage (Kartal, Tepeci, & Atlı, 2015). This engagement offers direct economic benefits while fostering a sense of ownership over the tourist destination. This involvement enhances the preservation of local culture, instils pride within the community, and supports the sustainability of pilgrimage tourism in the future.

Interactions between pilgrims of different religious backgrounds at Maria Cave create a deep sense of mutual respect and understanding. This fosters the values of tolerance and inclusivity and exemplifies how religious tourism can promote social harmony within a pluralistic society.

In this context, pilgrimage tourism serves not only as a spiritual medium but also as a platform for fostering peace through interfaith interactions. These values align with the aspirations of Indonesian tourism as reflected in the national branding *Wonderful Indonesia*, which positions diversity as a core strength in attracting global visitors. With an integrated approach, pilgrimage tourism at the Gua Maria can be a model of success in managing social and economic harmony in a sustainable manner.

4. Discussion

This study conducted a thematic analysis based on findings from interviews and observations, grouped according to the *Sapta Pesona Wisata* values (*seven charms of tourism*—an Indonesian tourism framework promoting security, cleanliness, orderliness, coolness, beauty, warmth, and lasting impressions). The findings illustrate how each value—such as security, beauty, and cleanliness—enhances tourist satisfaction and creates lasting memories in a multicultural context at the Maria Caves. Key motivations for pilgrims include gratitude for miracles (Higgins & Hamilton, 2016), the search for spiritual fulfilment, and admiration of the architectural beauty of the Maria Caves, particularly the works of *Romo Mangunwijaya* (*Father Mangunwijaya*, an Indonesian Catholic priest and architect) at Sendangsono. These findings align with the theoretical framework of religious tourism, which emphasises the need for professional management to maintain the comfort and sustainability of pilgrimage sites (Alvarado-Sizzo et al., 2017; Nicolaides, 2016; Nkwanyana & Xulu, 2020).

The application of *Sapta Pesona Wisata* values is essential for providing an optimal experience for pilgrims. For example, elements such as coolness and order contribute to a serene atmosphere conducive to prayer and reflection. The architectural design of the Sendangsono Maria Cave, blending with natural landscapes, reflects the integration of cultural and spiritual values, which strengthens pilgrims' emotional and spiritual connections. Challenges such as limited infrastructure and insufficient information for non-Catholic visitors highlight the necessity for improved communication strategies and infrastructure development to accommodate diverse visitors. These findings resonate with prior studies that emphasise the importance of tranquillity, cleanliness, and security in pilgrimage destinations (Nicolaides, 2016; Sison et al., 2019).

This study supports earlier research on religious tourism, affirming that Marian pilgrimage sites serve as significant spaces for spiritual growth and cultural preservation (Nicolaides, 2016; Triantafillidou & Koritos, 2010). The findings reveal that *Sapta Pesona Wisata* values—such as tranquillity, cleanliness, and hospitality—enhance the spiritual and cultural experiences of pilgrims. These values align with global trends in pilgrimage tourism, where professional management ensures sustainability and comfort for visitors (Alvarado-Sizzo et al., 2017; Nicolaides, 2016; Nkwanyana & Xulu, 2020).

Moreover, this study integrates the broader context of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is a universal religious practice often undertaken to seek blessings, fulfil religious obligations, or achieve spiritual growth (Nenzi, 2015). In Indonesia, pilgrimage sites, including the Maria Caves, represent a unique fusion of natural beauty and spiritual significance. This mirrors global examples such as caves in Northeastern Brazil, where the sacredness of natural features supports both religious practices and cultural identity (Barrbosa & Travassos, 2008). Similarly, in Indonesia, pilgrimages to sites such as the

tombs of saints in Tasikmalaya and the spiritual paths in Cirebon contribute to social cohesion and cultural preservation (Hindersah, Agustina, & Chofyan, 2021; Rahman & Anwar, 2022).

The Maria Caves serve not only as sacred spiritual spaces but also as architectural masterpieces that attract pilgrims with both religious and secular motivations. For example, the design of the Sendangsono Maria Cave reflects local cultural integration, blending nature with human artistry—a theme echoed in research on sacred cave sites worldwide (Nicolaidis, 2016). Marian pilgrimage sites differ from older relic-based shrines by offering modernised pilgrim experiences focused on apparitions rather than relics (Brockman, 2000). These sites emphasise the spiritual journey, with rituals such as prayer, hymn-singing, and veneration providing a deeper spiritual encounter (Liutikas, 2015).

This study highlights the dual role of pilgrimage in fostering both spiritual growth and economic development. For instance, local communities benefit economically through the sale of souvenirs and the provision of services, as evidenced at the Maria Caves. This aligns with findings that pilgrimage tourism supports local economies while preserving cultural heritage (Rahman & Anwar, 2022). Additionally, interfaith interactions at pilgrimage sites, such as those at Maria Air Sanih, exemplify how religious tourism promotes tolerance and inclusivity, strengthening social cohesion in a pluralistic society (Quinn, 2009).

The findings underscore the dual role of religious tourism: fostering spiritual encounters and enhancing cultural integration. The experiences of pilgrims, both Catholic and non-Catholic, demonstrate how inter-religious encounters at the Maria Caves promote mutual respect and understanding, contributing to social harmony. For example, non-Catholic visitors at Maria Air Sanih expressed a sense of brotherhood when accompanying Catholic family members, showcasing how pilgrimage tourism can transcend religious boundaries. These outcomes align with Indonesia's tourism branding, *Wonderful Indonesia*, which leverages cultural and religious diversity as its core strength.

From a broader perspective, the implementation of *Sapta Pesona Wisata* values at Marian tourism sites serves as a model for developing sustainable religious tourism. Elements such as cleanliness and friendliness not only improve visitor experiences but also reinforce local pride and community engagement. This aligns with Pope Francis' vision of pilgrimage sites as spaces of mercy and grace, fostering reconciliation and spiritual fulfilment (Nkwanyana & Xulu, 2020).

Reflections and actionable recommendations highlight the importance of addressing challenges such as infrastructure limitations and safety concerns through targeted policies. Expanding road access and improving lighting are essential measures to ensure safer journeys for pilgrims. Empowering local residents by providing training in hospitality and tourism management can further enhance their active participation in tourism-related activities, fostering a sense of ownership and pride within the community.

In addition, implementing digital communication strategies, such as utilising social media and online platforms, is vital to disseminate clear information about the accessibility and inclusive nature of Marian pilgrimage sites. These actions collectively aim to improve the overall quality of Marian tourism destinations while also supporting local economic development.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the experience of visiting the Maria Caves as Catholic pilgrimage tourism is marked by a profound sense of brotherhood and serves as a true practice of tolerance. The presence of the Maria Caves as pilgrimage destinations provides a platform where diverse communities can gather, fostering mutual respect and understanding. For Catholics, pilgrimages to the Maria Caves involve expressing intentions, gratitude, and prayers through the intercession of Our Lady. This spiritual journey seamlessly integrates religious practices with travel, creating a unique blend of devotion and exploration. To enhance the comfort and spiritual experience of pilgrims, prioritising the implementation of *Sapta Pesona Wisata* (*seven charms of tourism*) at the Maria Caves is essential. By ensuring security, comfort, and a serene atmosphere, these values leave a lasting impression on visitors, enriching their pilgrimage experience. The central element defining the pilgrimage to the Maria Caves is the personal encounter with silence and reflection, which facilitates the internalisation of values such

as tolerance, gratitude, and reverence for humanity and nature. Realising every value within *Sapta Pesona Wisata* allows pilgrims to fully immerse themselves in the spiritual essence of the pilgrimage, transforming the experience into a moment of personal and communal growth.

This research contributes significantly to the academic field of pilgrimage tourism by examining the spiritual and communal dimensions of pilgrim experiences at the Maria Caves in Indonesia. It explores the relationship between religious practices and tourist behaviour in a multicultural setting, offering insights into how universal values like *Sapta Pesona Wisata* can guide destination management and improve visitor experiences. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the potential of *Sapta Pesona Wisata* as both a framework for destination development and an analytical tool for understanding its implementation within pilgrimage tourism.

Despite its contributions, this research is limited to the study areas of Java and Bali. Java hosts numerous Maria Caves with rich histories and traditions, including the Sendangsono Maria Cave, which pioneered the tradition of pilgrimage to Maria Caves in the region. Bali also features unique Maria Caves, albeit fewer in number compared to Java. Each Maria Cave possesses distinctive characteristics and historical significance, which could not be fully explored within the scope of this study. Future research could delve deeper into the unique attributes and histories of individual Maria Caves, analyse the experiences of non-Catholic visitors, or investigate the long-term socioeconomic impacts of pilgrimage tourism on local communities. Expanding the geographical scope and exploring additional variables could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of Maria Caves as pilgrimage destinations and their role in fostering interfaith harmony and cultural preservation.

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