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Cultural Heritage and Urban Identity in Athens: City Break Tourism from the Perspective of Polish Visitors

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to showcase Athens as an attractive tourist destination, highlighting its cultural and historical heritage that makes it an ideal choice for short city breaks, as perceived by Polish tourists. The study was conducted using a combination of the diagnostic survey method and participant observation. A survey questionnaire was employed as a research tool in the study conducted in 2024 on a sample size of 134 individuals. The results of the survey confirmed that according to the respondents the top factors contributing to Athens' tourism potential for a city break trip were the opportunity to visit historically significant monuments (73.8%), convenient transport connections with other European cities, and the attractive cost of the trip compared to other European cities (23.8%). The respondents most frequently indicated the following improvements as necessary to make visiting heritage sites in Athens even more convenient: the implementation of an online booking system (36%), better signposting of tourist attractions (23%), extending the opening hours of historical monuments (21%), and increasing the number of guides who speak various languages (21%).

KEYWORDS: cultural heritage, urban identity, Athens, history, city break

STRESZCZENIE

Dziedzictwo kulturowe i tożsamość miasta w Atenach: turystyka city break z perspektywy polskich turystów

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie Aten jako atrakcyjnej destynacji turystycznej, w której dziedzictwo kulturowe i historyczne kształtuje potencjał miasta dla turystów wybierających krótkie wyjazdy typu city break w opinii polskich turystów. Badania zostały przeprowadzone z wykorzystaniem metody sondażu diagnostycznego oraz obserwacji uczestniczącej. Narzędziem badawczym, którym posłużono się podczas badań, był kwestionariusz ankiety, który został przeprowadzony w 2024 r. na 134 osobach. Badania wykazały, że zdaniem respondentów najważniejszym czynnikiem potencjału turystycznego

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Aten w celu odbycia wyjazdu city break jest możliwość odwiedzenia zabytków o dużym znaczeniu historycznym (73,8%), a także dobre połączenie transportowe z miastami europejskimi oraz koszt wyjazdu, który zdaniem respondentów jest atrakcyjny cenowo w stosunku do innych europejskich miast (23,8%).

Wprowadzenie systemu rezerwacji online (36%), lepsze oznakowanie atrakcji turystycznej (23%), wydłużenie godzin zwiedzania historycznych zabytków (21%), a także zwiększenie liczby przewodników mówiących w różnych językach (21%) to najczęściej wskazywane przez respondentów czynniki potrzebne do wprowadzenia w ofercie zwiedzania Aten, tak aby zwiedzanie zabytków dziedzictwa kulturowego było jeszcze bardziej dogodne.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: dziedzictwo kulturowe, tożsamość miejska, Ateny, historia, city break

Introduction

Contemporary urban sightseeing takes various forms and is driven by motivations closely connected with cultural factors. The main activities associated with urban tourism include visiting monuments and museums, strolling through historic streets, exploring places with unique legends and histories, and participating in cultural events (Buczowska, 2008). In cities—especially those with a rich historical legacy, a high concentration of historical and cultural landmarks, and a plethora of cultural events—urban tourism constitutes a significant segment of cultural tourism (Benevolo, 1995; Schwarzer, 2005; Rohrscheidt, 2010; Czarnecki, 2015; Zmysłony, 2015).

Urban tourism focused on large and historically significant centers received significant support with the launch of the program European City of Culture in 1985, where Athens became the first designated capital (Richards, 1996). The program promotes a different European city each year by organizing cultural events, which contributes to an increase in the number of tourist arrivals. Every year, the European Tour Operators Association (ETOA) organizes the City Break International Travel Fair, aimed at travel agencies, tour operators, and other institutions active in the sector of tourism and cultural sectors across Europe.

Tourism is a crucial sector of the Greek economy. In 2016, the Greek government implemented measures to modernize tourism policy, such as extending the tourist season, promoting alternative forms of tourism, and highlighting lesser-known destinations. These efforts have resulted in a steady increase in tourism revenues (Ikkos & Koutsos, 2017).

Greece consistently ranks among the three most visited European countries by Polish tourists. It remains a highly attractive destination due to its unique combination of beautiful beaches, rich history, and tourist attractions. In particular, Athens, the capital city of Greece, is an excellent choice for those seeking

short, yet intensive trips, such as city breaks (*Tourist trips of Poles in 2023 and plans for 2024*, *Centre for Public Opinion Research [CBOS]*, 2024).

A city break is a popular form of short-term travel that allows visitors to experience the attractions of a large city intensively in just a few days. Such trips are an ideal travel option for travelers wishing to combine sightseeing with relaxation, as well as for those seeking intensive experiences within a limited period of time. Cities offer a wide range of attractions—from historical monuments and museums to modern architecture and the distinctive atmosphere of local culture (Panas et al., 2017; Vitouladiti et al., 2018; Papazoglou & Bargianni, 2021). Athens, with its unique combination of ancient monuments and the vibrancy of modern metropolis, is an excellent destination for a city-break trip, particularly for enthusiasts of history and culture.

However, the city's growing popularity has also generated about negative consequences. The influx of tourists, particularly during peak seasons, has contributed to overtourism, resulting in overcrowding of public spaces and historic sites (Barac-Miftarević, 2023). This intense pressure on infrastructure can reduce the quality of the visitor experience while also affecting the daily lives of local residents (Kryczka, 2019). Moreover, processes such as gentrification and the displacement of inhabitants from central districts have emerged, altering the social and cultural fabric of the city. These challenges highlight the need for sustainable urban tourism strategies capable of balancing the benefits of attracting visitors with the preservation of Athens' cultural heritage and the well-being of its local communities.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the concepts of urban and cultural tourism, as well as on the notion of the city break as a short yet intensive form of travel. Cultural tourism enables tourists to engage with historical and cultural heritage, which shapes a city's identity and influences its perceived attractiveness. In the case of Athens, both its ancient heritage and the historical layers originating from later periods are important, as together they create a multidimensional image of the city.

The aim of this study is to present Athens as an attractive tourist destination, particularly in the context of short city break trips, from the perspective of Polish tourists. The research framework assumes that tourists' experiences are shaped by the accessibility and attractiveness of historical and cultural sites and by the functionality of tourism infrastructure and organizational facilities, such as online booking systems and signage of attractions. At the same time, the study considers the potential negative consequences of the city's growing popularity, including overtourism, overcrowding of public spaces, and social changes in central districts.

Thus, the theoretical framework structures the analysis by linking the research aim—namely, assessing the attractiveness of Athens for Polish tourists choosing city-break trips—with the research concept that considers both

positive tourist experiences and the challenges associated with managing tourist flows within the city. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of tourists' perceptions and the identification of factors influencing their choices and experiences.

Heritage tourism

The importance of culture and heritage in tourism, as well as the distinctive characteristics of cultural tourism, have been extensively examined by various scholars, including M. Marczak (2000), J. Małek (2003), M. Mika (2007), A. Stasiak (2007), and A. Kowalczyk (2005; 2008), W. Daszkiewicz (2010), and A. M. Rohrscheidt (2019; 2020).

Cultural tourism constitutes one of the oldest types of tourism, with its roots dating back to Ancient Rome and Ancient Greece. During those periods, pilgrimages and individual journeys were highly popular and often possessed both cognitive and educational dimensions.

Cultural tourism is a broad concept that encompasses a variety of aspects and thematic contexts. Its diversity is a result of the varied objectives and motivations of tourists, leading to the formation of numerous subcategories. Within cultural tourism, three significant segments may be distinguished: classical cultural tourism, which includes heritage tourism and educational tourism, and general cultural tourism, which includes urban tourism. Educational tourism, historical tourism, heritage tourism, and urban tourism are all integral parts of cultural tourism in the broadest sense (Rohrscheidt, 2016). These forms of tourism are prominent in Athens, attracting large numbers of visitors eager to experience the city's rich cultural heritage.

Heritage tourism involves travelling with the primary goal of experiencing monuments, architectural ensembles, and sites officially and universally recognized as cultural heritage of the world, a country, or a region (Mikos von Rohrscheidt, 2016). This is especially relevant for historic cities that have a significant historical legacy and well-preserved landmarks (Varfolomeyev et al., 2015; Kapur, 2018).

Heritage tourism allows individuals to discover the rich history, cultural values, and traditions of a destination—both past and present—in an authentic manner. This type of tourism includes visiting historical and archaeological sites, becoming acquainted with local customs and traditions, and participating in cultural events and festivals. Greece and Italy are prime examples of countries where heritage tourism is highly developed. Cities such as Rome and Athens attract tourists from all over the world, offering not only monuments of exceptional historical significance, but also a unique atmosphere and insight into the cultural heritage deeply embedded in their identities.

Management of urban heritage resources in Athens

Athens is a city with a rich cultural heritage, making it one of the most important urban centers in Europe. It is home to a wealth of tangible and intangible cultural resources, including iconic ancient sites such as the Acropolis, the Agora, and the Temple of Olympian Zeus, as well as historic city districts, such as Plaka and Monastiraki, alongside contemporary revitalization projects. These resources are integral to the city's identity and contribute to its attractiveness as a tourist destination. In Greek literature, Athens is increasingly referred to as a "cultural heritage hub," which is reflected in international initiatives such as the establishment of the Heritage Hub by Europa Nostra. The organization's mission is to support revitalization efforts and increase community involvement in heritage preservation.

Contemporary heritage management in Athens involves not only traditional activities related to the protection of monuments (Pendlebury et al., 2018), but also their integration into the daily functioning of the city (Li et al., 2015) and urban planning (Pendlebury et al., 2018). One of the key aspects of this approach is heritage resilience, which refers to the ability of cultural resources to withstand dynamic social and environmental changes (Labadi, 2022). Research by Cheirchanteri (2025) suggests that Athens must adapt its heritage protection policies to address contemporary challenges such as climate change (Fatorić & Seekamp, 2017; Sesana et al., 2021), rapid urbanization, and increasing tourist pressure. The concept of resilience emphasizes the need for flexible management that can effectively balance the protection of monuments with their functional presence within the urban structure (Gravari-Barbas, 2018).

Digital technologies are also playing an increasingly important role in heritage management. The Athens Institute (IEA) is implementing extensive programs aimed at digitizing Greek heritage, creating digital archives, mobile applications, virtual reconstructions, and semantic databases. These activities do not only increase accessibility of heritage resources but also enable the development of the modern forms of interpretation and cultural education, fostering their stronger integration with the tourism activities of the city. Digitization is thus becoming a tool that strengthens both promotion of Athens and its multidimensional attractiveness to various groups of audiences.

Strategic planning is a crucial aspect of heritage policy in Athens. The most recent strategies of Greek cultural institutions (2025) prioritize interdisciplinarity, international cooperation, and the utilization of modern technologies as means of safeguarding and adapting heritage. These documents also emphasize the importance of creating sustainable management models that address current urban challenges (Holtorf & Högberg, 2021).

Heritage management in Athens also involves the presence of the wide range of stakeholders, reflected, among other aspects, in the development of

social participation. Examples include the initiatives of the Netherlands Institute Athens, which organizes summer universities devoted to alternative cultural routes, tourism, cultural mediation, and education in the field of heritage protection. The involvement of residents, local organizations, and businesses in management processes promotes cultural awareness and strengthens the social dimension of heritage protection (Graham et al., 2016).

One important aspect of managing urban heritage is its relationship with heritage tourism (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011). In cities such as Athens, historical heritage plays a crucial role in attracting tourists and shaping the city's image. However, research by Cao (2023) indicates that the development of heritage tourism can lead to conflicts of interest between authorities, residents, and tourists, especially in places of symbolic significance, such as the Parthenon or Plato's Academy. Consequently, heritage management policies must consider the perspectives of different social groups and strive to find sustainable and socially acceptable solutions (Balaskas & Kourkoulakos, 2024).

Both the literature and heritage management practice confirm that the ways in which heritage resources are protected, interpreted, and made accessible directly influences Athens' tourist image. Monument conservation, the development of digitization initiatives, educational activities, the introduction of innovations, and stakeholder-oriented strategies all constitute fundamental elements shaping the city's attractiveness to tourists. In the context of short city-break trips, cultural heritage becomes one of the most important factors determining the perception of Athens as an inspiring and valuable destination.

City break as a way to discover the history of the city and its cultural heritage

When discussing heritage tourism in Athens within the category of city-break travel, it is first necessary to define urban tourism. This type of tourist travel is characterized by cities being the primary or main destinations (Mikos von Rohrscheidt, 2016).

Travelling to cities is a phenomenon that has been known for centuries. The tradition of exploring cities and their culture through travel dates back to Ancient Rome and Ancient Greece (Firlej, 1995; Beard, 2016). The growing popularity of city travel has led to the emergence of urban tourism as a distinct branch of the tourism industry. According to Sitek (2011), urban tourism remains one of the principal forms of cultural tourism. Within this broad category, city-break trips have emerged and, although relatively young, have been gaining increasing recognition in recent years. Despite this growing interest, the literature has yet to establish a single, universally accepted definition of the phenomenon, and researchers are still working to develop a clear and unambiguous

conceptualization. According to Trew and Cockerell, British authors, city breaks are defined as “short-term, leisure trips to cities that do not include overnight stays elsewhere during the trip itself” (Trew & Cockerell, 2002).

Prylińska and Ratkowska (2009), analyzing travel offers available online, attempted to define the concept of a city-break trip as

a short-term (2–6 days) stay in a popular tourist city that offers a rich and attractive cultural and tourist offer and is well-connected to other places.

During the stay, tourists have access to a variety of services, including accommodation, food, and often guide services. They can also enjoy both permanent attractions, such as museums, theatres, and parks as well as temporary events, such as exhibitions, concerts, festivals, and sports competitions.

Awedyk, Makarewicz, and Weltrowska (2013, p. 5) broadened the definition of the term “city break,” describing it as “short-term trips, usually weekends, to popular metropolises—especially capital cities—combining leisure with cognitive and cultural tourism. These trips are usually self-organized by tourists and their features include relatively low costs.”

English-language literature distinguishes between two main types of cities break trips: the *city break weekend* and the *city break holiday*. The principal difference between them lies in the duration of the trip. A city break weekend refers to short trips limited to a weekend period (Friday to Sunday), usually undertaken to popular European cities or capital cities that are easily accessible thanks to convenient transport and low travel costs, such as inexpensive flights. In contrast, city break holidays are longer stays, typically lasting two to six days, which may extend beyond the weekend. Such trips are often taken as extended weekends, short holidays, or vacation trips. The main advantage of participating in a city-break is the opportunity to visit the city’s most significant attractions and participate in local events and activities within a short period of time.

The role of monuments and memorials in shaping the attractiveness and urban identity of Athens

For centuries, Athens has been recognized globally as the symbolic “historical capital of Europe” and its heritage—both tangible and intangible—constitute the foundation of the city’s contemporary identity (Theodora, 2020). The cultural heritage preserved in the urban space serves multiple functions: it is a testament to the development of one of the most important civilizations of the ancient world, acts as a carrier of the universal values of Western culture, and represents a key resource that influences the tourist attractiveness of the Greek

capital. Monuments, historical sites, and cultural objects therefore do not only enrich to the cityscape, but they also carry significant meanings and experiences that greatly impact visitors' perceptions of the city. These attractions draw tourists in through their unique historical value and offer the opportunity to experience authentic heritage (Prabowo et al., 2021).

The central element of this legacy is the heritage of ancient Athens, whose enduring presence in the city primarily rooted in the achievements of the 5th century BC, commonly known as the "Golden Age of Pericles." During this period, Athens flourished as the epicenter of philosophy, art, architecture, and science. According to Burkiewicz (2021), the ideas that emerged during this era became foundations of Western civilization, with concepts such as democracy, logic, harmony, and architecture laying the groundwork for European intellectual culture. Their material expression can be observed in the monumental historic sites that have survived to the present day and which contribute to the international recognition of the city. The Acropolis of Athens, together with the Parthenon, the Erechtheion, the Temple of Athena Nike, and the Propylaea constitutes one of the most recognizable archaeological complexes in the world (Willet et al., 2004). Its significance, however, extends far beyond its architectural value: it functions as a symbol of Athens, an element of Greek national identity and a central motif in the marketing narratives and cultural presentations of the city.

Ancient and Roman monuments, including the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, the Theatre of Dionysus, the Hephaesteion, the Greek Agora, and Keraikios (Kurek, 2012, p. 119), function as tourist anchors that not only attract visitors but they also enable them to immerse themselves in the city's multi-layered history. Kurek (2012) emphasizes that it is precisely these anthropogenic values that have long remained the main factor in Greece's tourist attractiveness, a phenomenon particularly evident in the case of Athens. Roman landmarks, such as arch of Hadrian, the Roman Forum with the Tower of the Winds, and the Temple of Olympian Zeus, further add to this narrative, showcasing the continuous evolution of the city. Similarly, Byzantine monuments, such as the church of Panagia Kapnikarea, church of Ayios Nikolaos Rangavas, and the buildings within the Old Metropolis have played a significant role in shaping the visual and religious landscape of Athens during the Middle Ages. As noted by Barska (2022), these structures are crucial in highlighting the city's cultural diversity.

Museums also play an integral role in presenting and interpreting cultural heritage, with the National Archaeological Museum and the Acropolis Museum being of key importance. Exhibitions of artifacts from the Mycenaean, Classical, and Cycladic periods allow tourists to gain a deeper understanding of the historical context, thereby enhancing the city's tourist attractiveness and reinforcing its image as a global center of cultural heritage (Richard, 1996). These

museums not only fulfil educational functions, but they also strengthen the symbolic status of Athens as a heritage site of global importance.

The city's cultural heritage, particularly its ancient monuments, plays a significant role in shaping its contemporary image of Athens. According to Beritatos and Gospodini (2004), Athens is often promoted through its classical and neoclassical references from the nineteenth century, while other layers of heritage—such as Ottoman or Jewish—are often overlooked. The Acropolis, a global symbol of the city's identity, is the focal point of its tourism brand. However, the emphasis on ancient narratives may result in a one-sided representation of heritage, thereby influencing tourists' expectations and limiting awareness of Athens' multiculturalism.

The 2004 Summer Olympics were a pivotal moment in the modern reinterpretation of urban heritage in Athens. As noted by Karachalis (2015), the event sparked a major modernization of urban infrastructure, the revitalization of selected areas, and the creation of new promotional opportunities. This process enabled Athens to refresh its image and incorporate elements of modernity into its identity. Although the dominant role of ancient heritage in shaping the city's brand remained unchanged, the Olympic Games allowed for the introduction of new components, such as contemporary culture and architecture, into the narrative.

Ancient monuments of Athens

Athens, widely regarded as the ancient historical capital of Europe, was one of the most important centers of civilization of the ancient world. Their peak of splendor came in the fifth century BC, a period known as the “Golden Age of Pericles.” It was during this era that Athens became the heart of Western civilization and the values that emerged there gained universal significance.

The fifth century BC witnessed the development of the most important fields of thought and culture that would forever change the face of the world. This period saw the establishment of the foundations of democracy, as well as the flourishing of theatre, art, philosophy, science, architecture and other forms of intellectual creativity. Philosophical ideas that would become milestones of the Western civilization were born in Athens (Burkiewicz, 2021). Greek concepts and words, such as democracy, harmony, music, mathematics, art, gastronomy, architecture, logic, Eros, and euphoria had a tremendous impact on development, not only of Europe, yet, of the whole world, inspiring subsequent generations and civilizations.

Anthropogenic assets, understood as elements created through human activity, play a crucial role in shaping Greece's attractiveness to tourists (Kurek, 2007). The earliest evidence of settlement in Greece dates back to 5800 BC

in Nea Nikomedia, Macedonia. The region of modern-day Greece was home to one of the most advanced civilizations in the Mediterranean during antiquity, including the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures. These civilizations initially flourished on the island of Crete before expanding to other islands and the mainland, including the Peloponnese peninsula.

In the first millennium BC, several city-states emerged in ancient Greece, with Sparta in the Peloponnese and Athens being the most significant. While Sparta's influence is not as visible today, Athens was a major hub of cultural advancement and the birthplace of democracy. Numerous monuments from this era have survived, including the Acropolis Hill, which boasts buildings constructed during Athens' peak in the fifth century BC under the leadership of Pericles. The most notable structures include the Parthenon, a remarkably preserved temple dedicated to the city's patron goddess Athena; the Erechtheion, renowned for its Caryatids—sculpted female figures serving as columns; the Temple of Athena Nike; and the Propylaea, the monumental gateway to the Acropolis (Willet et al., 2004).

To the south of the Acropolis stands the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, a Roman theatre in which theatrical performances are still held, including the annual Athens Festival, as well as the Dionysus Theatre, dating back to the fifth century BC. Within Athens itself, numerous additional monuments from antiquity can also be admired beyond the Acropolis. The Theosseion, the temple of Hephaestus, the remains of the Greek Agora and the Kerameikos cemetery are particularly noteworthy. From the Roman period, the arch of the Emperor Hadrian, the choragic Monument of Lysicrates, the ruins of the forum with the Tower of Vitræ, the Cemetery of Kerameikos, and the temple of Zeus Olympios have been preserved (Kurek, 2012, p. 119).

Among the important monuments in Athens are the Panathenaic Stadium, the site of the Panathenaic Games, and the Areopagus, a hill that served as the seat of the council of elders and court in antiquity (Kanellopoulou, 2017).

Athens is also home to many museums, including the National Archaeological Museum, which houses valuable collections of ancient art, including gold wares from Mycenaean tombs as well as collections of Cycladic and Classical sculptures. The Acropolis Museum houses fragments of the Parthenon frieze and the original Caryatids from the Erechtheion, constituting some of the institution's most important exhibits (Richard, 1996).

The eleventh and twelfth centuries are widely regarded as the golden age of Byzantine art in Athens. It was during this period that many of the city's most famous and significant Byzantine churches were constructed, not only for religious purposes but also for their cultural significance. These include the Old Cathedral of Athens, the Church of Panagia Kapnikarea, and the Church of Ayios Nikolaos Rangavas in Plaka. This era was marked by a period of Christian reconstruction following the Balkan campaigns of Emperor Basil II, which

greatly influenced the development of sacred architecture in the region. Additionally, numerous monasteries were established in the outskirts of Athens during this time (Barska, 2022).

To a large extent, the image of Athens is shaped by associations with the Acropolis. Contemporary culture plays a less important role as a factor in attracting tourists, while the experience of hosting the 2004 Summer Olympics may have created the conditions for a new paradigm of tourism planning and long-term branding strategy (Beriatos & Gospodini, 2004).

Study methodology and characteristics of respondents

The aim of the study is to present Athens as an attractive tourist destination, where the rich cultural and historical heritage influences the perceived potential of the city among Polish tourists planning short city-break trips. The empirical material was collected by means of a diagnostic survey using questionnaire-based research.

The sample was selected through purposive convenience sampling, a method commonly applied in research on tourist behavior and perception. The study was conducted by the author between April and July 2024 and was addressed exclusively to individuals who had visited Athens at least once on a short city-break trip in the previous two years. This criterion ensured that the collected opinions reflected recent tourists' experiences and perceptions.

The survey questionnaire consisted of 10 questions, including five concerning the characteristics of the respondents. Individuals who travelled to Athens for academic purposes, such as conferences or training courses, or for work purposes were excluded from the study. At the beginning of the questionnaire, city break was defined as a trip to a large city lasting between two and four days, undertaken for sightseeing, relaxation, and cultural experience. The questionnaire was prepared in Polish and distributed through tourism-related online portals.

Respondents aged between 18 and 60 years. A total of 210 questionnaires were distributed, of which 172 were returned, resulting in a response rate of 81.9%. After verifying the accuracy and completeness of the collected data, 38 questionnaires were excluded due to missing responses or failure to meet the inclusion criteria. Ultimately, 134 correctly completed questionnaires were included in the analysis, representing 63.8% of all distributed questionnaires, which may be considered a sufficient sample size for exploratory research.

Several control procedures were implemented to ensure reliability and accuracy of the data. First, the survey was completely anonymous, which minimized the risk of responses conforming to social expectations. Second, closed-ended questions were arranged into logical thematic blocks, and the applied rating

scales were subjected to an internal consistency analysis. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient calculated for the main scales assessing the attractiveness of Athens and the perception of heritage reached 0.82, which indicates a high reliability of the tool. Subsequently, the data were subject to statistical analysis with the use of the basic descriptive statistics.

The selected methodological approach made it possible to gather reliable opinions from participants, providing a strong foundation for drawing conclusions about the perception of Athens as a tourist destination and the significance of cultural heritage in shaping the city's image.

The survey encompassed questions regarding the following topics:

- What factors do respondents consider to be the most significant factors contributing to Athens' potential as a city-break destination?
- Which locations in Athens were most frequently visited by tourists during their stay?
- How do respondents assess the accessibility of information on the history and culture of Athens (e.g. in museums or at historical sites)?
- How do respondents assess the quality of tourist services in Athens (e.g. guides, hotels, and public transport)?
- What improvements do respondents believe should be introduced into Athens' city-break offer to increase tourist satisfaction?

The characteristics of the survey participants are presented in Table 1.

It should be noted that this study solely focused on the ancient monuments of Athens, without addressing other historical layers of the city, such as its Ottoman, Jewish, or World War II heritage. This decision resulted from the author's research assumption that ancient heritage is the main factor in Athens' tourist attractiveness and a key element of its contemporary image. Considering the city's numerous historical layers would significantly extend the scope of the project and complicate the comparability of results, as there is not a single consistent and comparable criterion for evaluating all historical periods. For this reason, the study was deliberately limited to analyzing the perception of ancient monuments as the most important factors influencing attractiveness and perception of the city in the context of city-break tourism.

Women constituted over 70% of the surveyed group. The age distribution of the respondents was also varied, with the largest proportion belonging to the 25–29 years age range (40.3%), while the smallest group consisted of respondents aged 50–59 years (5.3%). Furthermore, the majority of the respondents reported having a university-level education (73.1%), with only two respondents reported having a basic vocational education. The author also inquired about the monthly income per family member. In this regard, 54 respondents (40.4%) indicated a gross monthly income of 4,001–5,000 PLN, while 9 respondents reported an income exceeding 5,000 PLN. It is worth mentioning that the most respondents resided in cities with a population exceeding

500,000, while 13 individuals (9.7%) lived in rural areas or in cities with a population of 150,000 to 500,000 inhabitants.

Table 1. Characteristics of the studied population

Specification	N = 134	%
Sex:		
female	94	70.1
male	40	29.9
Age:		
19–24 years old	32	23.8
25–29 years old	54	40.3
30–39 years old	21	15.7
40–49 years old	11	8.2
50–59 years old	7	5.3
60 years old and more	9	6.7
Education:		
vocational education	2	1.5
secondary education	34	25.4
higher education	98	73.1
Monthly income per family member:		
up to 2000 PLN	14	10.4
2001–3000 PLN	38	28.3
3001–4000 PLN	54	40.4
4001–5000 PLN	19	14.2
over 5000 PLN	9	6.7

Source: own study.

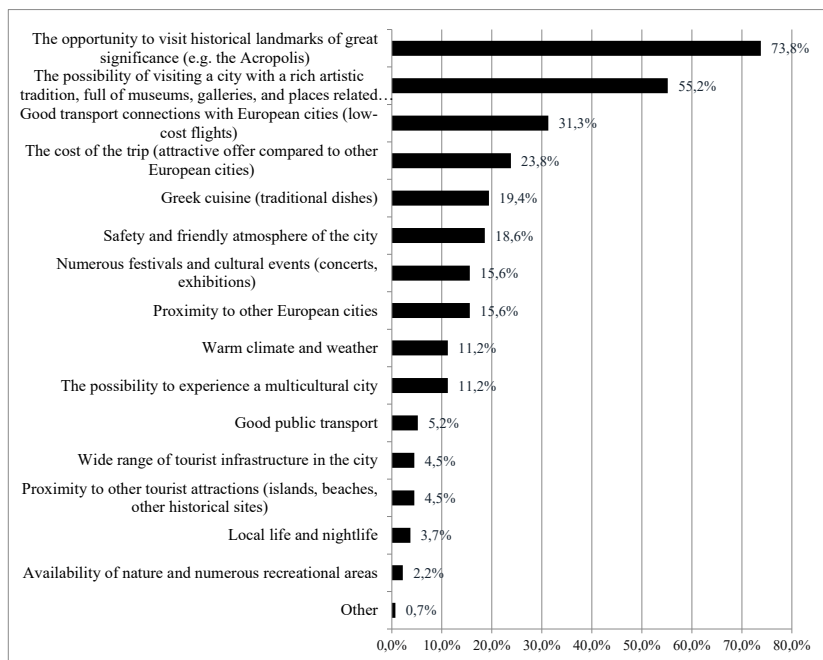
Assessment of Athens' potential as a city-break destination and its role as a city of cultural heritage

In the first question, participants were asked to identify the factors that they considered most influential in determining the tourist potential of Athens as a travel destination. They were given the option to select more than one answer, with a maximum of three choices (Figure 1). A total of 398 responses were recorded for this question.

According to the respondents, the principal factors influencing the attractiveness of Athens as a destination for city-break tourism are primarily associated with the city's rich historical and cultural heritage. A substantial majority of respondents (73.8%) identified the opportunity to visit historically significant monuments as the main draw of Athens. This is not surprising, as the city

is considered as the birthplace of Western civilization, while its monuments—including the Acropolis of Athens, the Parthenon, and numerous ancient temples—constitute priceless treasures of the world cultural heritage.

Figure 1. The most important factors contributing to Athens' tourism potential as a city-break destination in the opinion of respondents (maximum of three answers)



Source: own study.

The second major factor that draws tourists to Athens is its rich artistic tradition, encompassing numerous museums, galleries, and sites associated with ancient culture. According to 55.2% of respondents, the city offers a unique atmosphere conducive to the exploration of art and history, making it a strong magnet for art and culture enthusiasts.

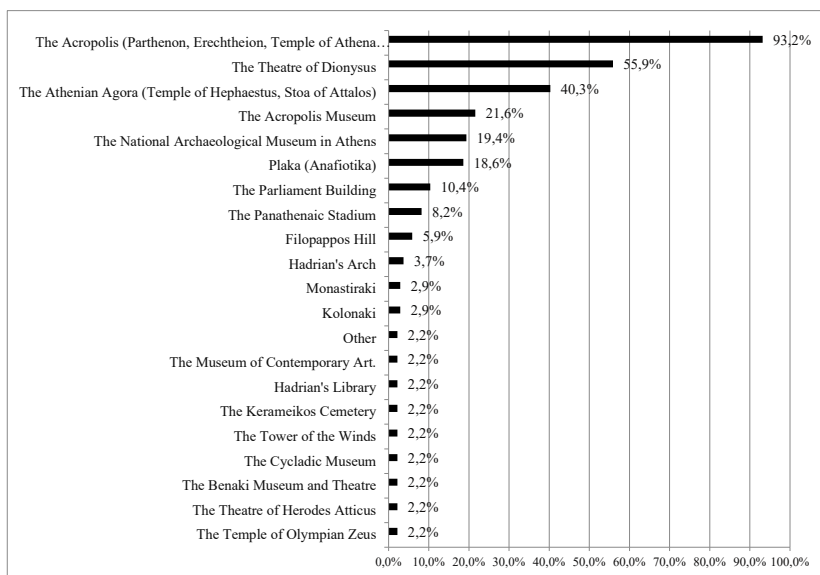
According to 23.8% of respondents, convenient transport links to other European cities constitute an additional advantage of Athens, making it an accessible and attractive destination for city-break travel. The affordable cost of travelling to Athens, especially compared to other popular European destinations, also influences tourists' decisions to choose the city for short holiday trips.

Interestingly, the smallest proportion of respondents—only 2.7%—identified local life and nightlife entertainment as important factors attracting tourists. This may suggest that Athens is mainly seen as a cultural rather than

entertainment-oriented tourist destination. Similarly, only 2.2% of respondents considered the availability of natural and recreational areas as an important element of the city’s tourism potential. This result may stem from the fact that Athens is primarily associated with its rich history and cultural heritage rather than its outdoor or environmental attractions.

In the following question, participants were asked to identify up to three places in Athens that they would be most inclined to visit during their city-break stay (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Places in Athens most frequently visited by tourists during their stay (possibility to indicate a maximum of 3 answers)



Source: own study.

A total of 401 responses were recorded for this question. The survey results clearly indicate that tourists show a strong preference for visiting monuments of major historical importance, such as the Acropolis and the Theatre of Dionysus. The vast majority of respondents (93.2%) identified the Acropolis as the most important destination visited during their stay. This result is not surprising given the exceptional cultural and historical significance of this monument. As a symbol of ancient Greece and one of the world’s most important archaeological sites, the Acropolis offers tourists an unforgettable experience and an opportunity to immerse themselves in the rich history of Athens.

Second place was occupied by the Theatre of Dionysus, which received 55.9% of the respondents’ votes. This theatre holds a significant place in history

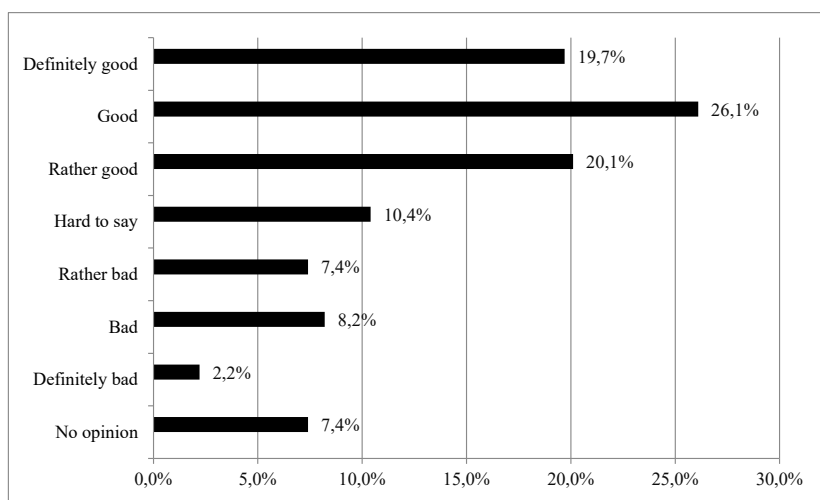
as one of the oldest theatres in the world, and is closely intertwined with the origins of Western theatre and dramatic culture. A visit to this theatre offers not only an aesthetic experience but also an educational one, especially in terms of its historical and cultural significance. This is likely the reason for its popularity among visitors.

The Athenian Agora was indicated by 40.3% of respondents. This site, associated with in antiquity with political activities and daily life of Athenians, functioned as a place of public gatherings of citizens, trade, and the development of democracy. Its historical significance makes it an important element in understanding the history of Athens, which helps explain the strong interest of tourists in visiting the site.

Other attractions, although also culturally and historically valuable, such as the Museum of Cycladic Art, the Tower of the Winds, the Kerameikos cemetery, Hadrian's Library and the Museum of Contemporary Art, proved to be the least popular. Each of these sites was visited by only 2.2% of respondents, which suggests that despite their cultural and historical value, they do not attract as many tourists compared to the icons of Athens as the Acropolis.

In the following two questions, a Likert scale was used for the responses, with the following options: definitely good, good, rather good, hard to say, rather bad, bad, definitely bad, no opinion. The survey addressed the question related to the evaluation of the availability of information on the history and culture of Athenian monuments at tourist sites (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Evaluation of availability of the information on the history and culture of Athenian monuments (e.g. in museums, while visiting monuments)?

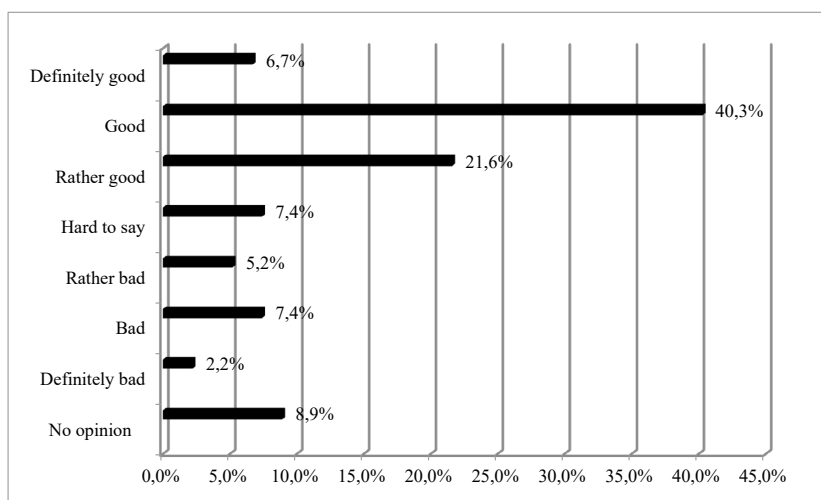


Source: own study.

Respondents rated availability of the information on the history and culture of Athens—for example in museums and at historical monuments—as good (26.1%), rather good (20.1%), and as many as almost one in five respondents rated this infrastructure as definitely good. Only 2.2% of respondents rated the availability of information as definitely bad, which represents a marginal result. Interestingly, only three individuals from the entire survey group, representing 8.2%, expressed dissatisfaction with this aspect. This may indicate that problems related to the availability of the information may relate to individual, less developed information points or specific situations, rather than a general trend.

Respondents were also asked to provide an overall assessment of the quality of tourism services and infrastructure in Athens (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Overall assessment of the quality of tourist services and infrastructure in Athens (e.g. availability of local guides, hotels, public transport)



Source: own study.

Respondents rated the quality of tourism services and infrastructure offered in Athens as good (40.3%) or rather good (21.6%). Altogether, this gives 61.9% of respondents who are satisfied with the quality of tourism services, which indicates a positive picture of the tourism sector in Athens. Furthermore, 6.7% rated the quality of services as definitely good, suggesting that not only the overall accessibility, but also the level of services provided met tourists' expectations. This assessment may relate to a wide range of services, such as transport, accommodation, gastronomy, and tourist services at museums and monuments. Only 3.2% of respondents—three individuals—rated the quality of tourism services as definitely bad. Interestingly, this figure is identical to the number of respondents who

expressed a negative opinion on the availability of information about Athens' history and culture, which may suggest that dissatisfaction with these aspects was related to similar factors, e.g. the limited availability or quality of services in specific places, which may affect tourists' overall experience.

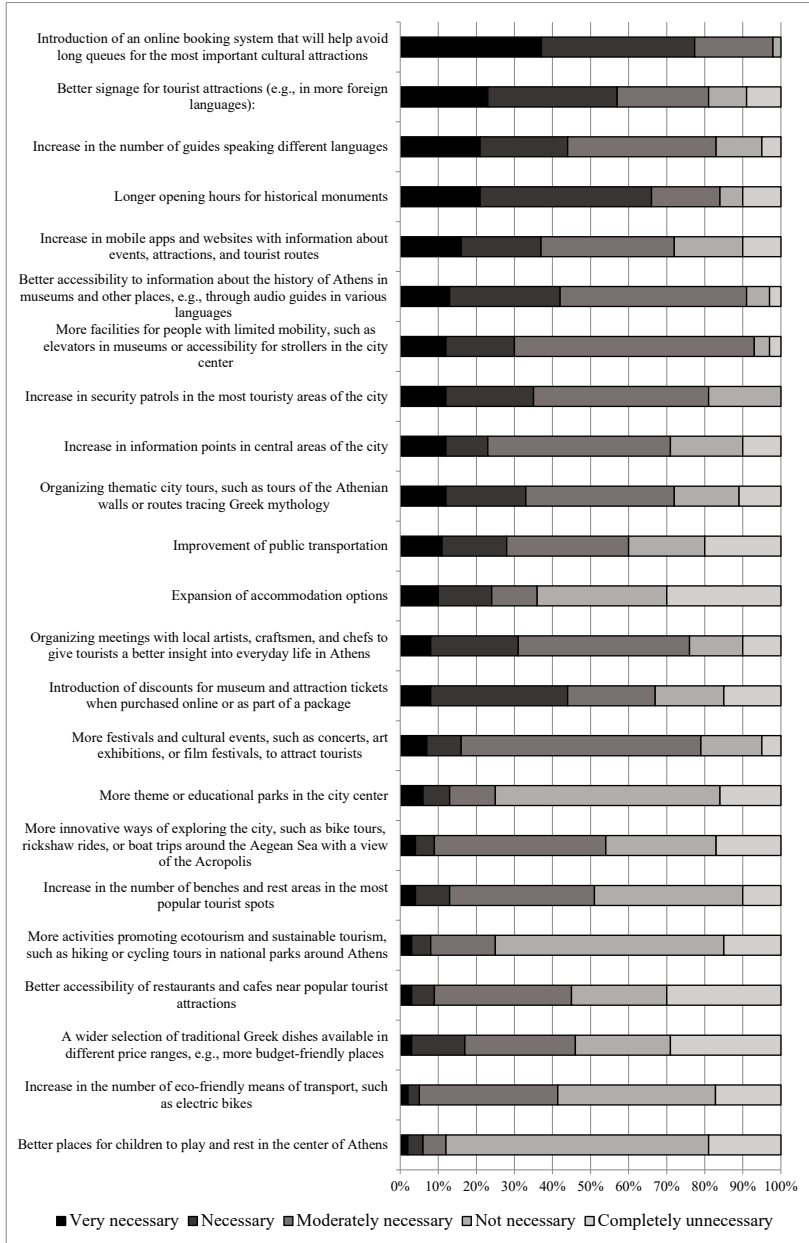
The most time-consuming and extensive question for respondents was the one assessing suggested activities that could contribute to tourist satisfaction during a city-break visit to Athens (Figure 5). Respondents rated each factor on a scale of 1–5, assuming that 5 was a value indicating very necessary actions to be implemented, value 4 – necessary to be implemented, value 3 – possible to be implemented, value 2 – unnecessary to be implemented, value 1 – completely unnecessary to be implemented.

The analysis of the survey results indicates that respondents believe the implementation of specific measures in Athens is necessary in order to improve sightseeing conditions and increase the city's tourist attractiveness. Particularly, factors related to visiting cultural heritage sites were deemed the most important. These include introducing online booking systems to avoid long queues at popular cultural attractions (36%), improving signposting in multiple foreign languages (23%), extending visiting hours for historical monuments (21%), and increasing the number of multilingual tourist guides (21%). These were the most commonly mentioned factors that respondents believe should be introduced and offered to visitors in Athens.

Respondents also identified several activities that could enhance the tourism offer of Athens, although they were not considered as top priorities. These included organizing meetings with local artists, craftsmen, and chefs to provide tourists with insight into everyday life in Athens (45%); offering thematic city walks, such as tours of the Athenian walls or routes inspired by Greek mythology (39%); introducing innovative ways of exploring the city, such as bicycle tours, rickshaw rides, or cruises on the Aegean Sea with views of the Acropolis (45%); and expanding the availability of mobile applications and websites with information about events, attractions, and tourist routes (35%). While respondents believed these measures were worth implementing, they did not consider them as priority elements for the city's promotional activities to enhance its attractiveness.

In response to the growing environmental awareness, many travelers are now seeking more sustainable forms of tourism. This includes choosing environmentally friendly hotels and restaurants, as well as using public transport or bicycles instead of taxis or private cars. However, according to the survey of Polish respondents, specific measures were deemed less important for improving sightseeing experiences in Athens. These included promoting ecotourism and sustainable tourism activities, such as hiking or cycling in national parks around Athens (3%), improving play areas for children in the city center (2%), and increasing the availability of environmentally friendly means of transport, such as electric bicycles (2%).

Figure 5. Rating of individual actions that could be improved in the city break offer in Athens to increase tourist satisfaction



Source: own study.

The conducted research unequivocally confirms that tourists visiting Athens for short stays place the greatest importance on efficient and innovative tours of historical monuments. Modern technological solutions, such as mobile apps, interactive audio guides, and virtual tours, are highly valued as they allow for a more efficient and engaging sightseeing experience, also enabling better understanding of the history and context of the monuments. Tourists also pay considerable attention to the availability of information in multiple languages and to the possibility to make reservations through online booking systems.

Discussion

The results of the study suggest that the cultural heritage of Athens plays a significant role in shaping the city's attractiveness as a city-break destination. This finding indicates consistency between perceptions of the respondents and current trends in research on urban heritage tourism. The respondents' answers emphasized the importance of ancient monuments, particularly the Acropolis, the Agora, and the Temple of Olympian Zeus, as key elements of the city's tourist image. Additionally, the respondents indicated that their primary motivation for visiting Athens was the desire to experience an authentic connection with history, which corresponds with previous studies suggesting that tangible heritage functions as a "tourist anchor" (Timothy, 2018; Poria, Reichel, & Biran, 2019).

At the same time, the author's research confirms that the manner heritage resources are managed, presented, and interpreted has a significant impact on the quality of the visitors' experience and their overall assessment of the destination. This finding points to the need to treat heritage not only as a resource, but also as an element of the city management system, which is currently the dominant trend in urban research and heritage studies.

Compared with previous studies on the heritage of Athens, this study introduces a new perspective by focusing on the perceptions of Polish tourists visiting the city as part of a short city-break trips. This particular segment of travelers has thus far remained underrepresented in the literature. While works by Cheirchanteri (2025), Kalli and Metaxas (2024), and Cao (2023) primarily focus on heritage management strategies, stakeholder conflicts, and sustainability issues, they often neglect the perspective of tourists visiting for relatively short periods. Therefore, this study fills an important gap in understanding the role of city-break tourism in shaping the image of cultural heritage destinations.

The survey results confirm that cultural heritage is the most significant component of Athens' tourism offer. This finding corresponds with the observations of Ashworth and Tunbridge (2020), who argue that heritage cities primarily rely on their unique anthropogenic resources to enhance their

competitiveness. At the same time, the results highlight the need to further strengthen the role of interpretation and cultural education in urban spaces. Respondents indicated that access to information about the city's history and culture is not always sufficient. In light of contemporary heritage management practices (Bandarin & Van Oers, 2015; Giaccardi, 2012), the development of digital tools, such as mobile applications and multimedia forms of interpretation, may play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of the tourist experience.

The literature emphasizes the growing need for adaptive and integrated heritage management that considers issues such as resilience to environmental changes, urban pressure, and the intensification of tourist traffic. Cheirchanteri (2025) points out that Athens should pursue a policy grounded in the concept of heritage resilience—a flexible and long-term model of protection that allows for the preservation of cultural values to be combined with the dynamic development of the city. In turn, Esichaikul, (2022) draws attention to the existence of conflicts between stakeholders, including public institutions, residents, and tourists, that may influence decision-making processes regarding the protection and accessibility of monuments.

In light of the collected empirical data, it may be concluded that the respondents overwhelmingly confirmed the existence of contemporary problems affecting Athens, specifically citing overcrowding at popular sites, challenges with sightseeing during peak tourist season, and the limited availability of information in urban areas. Consequently, the findings of this study suggest the necessity for the development of innovative methods for managing tourist flow and promoting alternative cultural routes. This aligns with the current strategies of Greek cultural institutions (TEE 2025) and the initiatives of the Netherlands Institute at Athens.

The survey respondents also emphasized the need to enrich the educational and interpretive dimensions of tourist offer in Athens. The digitization of heritage resources, carried out among others by the Athena Research Center, represents an important direction that can contribute to increasing the accessibility and attractiveness of sightseeing experiences. Contemporary projects, including 3D reconstructions, digital archives, and virtual tours, respond to the needs of tourists seeking more interactive forms of cultural engagement. This is in line with global research trends (Champion, 2021; Kalay et al., 2008), which highlight the growing importance of heritage tech in urban tourism.

It is noteworthy that respondents emphasized the importance of improving the organization of tourist traffic, increasing the availability of services, and better management of the urban space surrounding key monuments. This highlights the necessity of implementing sustainable strategies that can alleviate the strain on heavily congested sites (García-Hernández et al., 2017), promote public involvement in heritage management (Waterton & Smith, 2010), develop alternative routes and cultural narratives (Kaul, 2023), and stress the

significance of intangible heritage and creative industries as a complement to traditional tourism offerings (Consoli et al., 2024).

The findings of the study contribute to the broader discussion concerning the need of expanding the interpretation of urban heritage in order to enhance its attractiveness while also safeguarding it from overexploitation.

Summary

Athens is a highly sought-after destination for cultural heritage tourism, and its unique tangible and intangible resources make it particularly well suited for short city-break trips. This is especially true for Polish tourists, who have shown a particular interest in visiting the city. The findings of the study confirm that the city's abundant historical heritage—ranging from ancient monuments to museums and archaeological sites—constitutes the main draw of Athens. These attractions offer a profound and immersive experience, allowing visitors to connect with the city's past and reinforcing its image as the “cradle of Western civilization.”

Monuments and historical sites play a crucial role in enhancing both the city's tourism sector and its modern cultural identity. They serve as the primary attraction for tourists, shaping the symbolic image of Athens and promoting specialized forms of cultural tourism. At the same time, the city's growing popularity has also brought about negative consequences, such as overtourism, overcrowding of public spaces, gentrification, and displacement of local residents from central districts. These challenges highlight the significance of heritage resilience, which involves the sustainable and adaptive management of cultural resources while considering the needs of both tourists and local communities.

Despite its contemporary challenges, Athens retains a very high tourism potential and remains one of Europe's most important cultural destinations. A properly implemented heritage management policy and balancing of social interests can ensure the city's lasting attractiveness and resilience in the face of contemporary challenges, strengthening its role as a global cultural tourism destination.

Based on the study results, specific policy and managerial recommendations may be formulated. City authorities should implement measures to reduce overcrowding at the most popular sites through the introduction of online booking systems and scheduled visiting hours, while simultaneously developing alternative tourist routes and promoting lesser-known monuments. From the perspective of tourism management, it is advisable to increase the availability of multilingual information, expand the use of digital educational tools, and organize cultural activities and thematic tours, which can enhance the tourist experience, support sustainable development, and protect Athens' cultural heritage.

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