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### CREATIVE TOURISM POTENTIAL OF TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE ELEMENTS: THE CASE OF VAN<sup>1</sup>

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#### ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate the tangible and intangible cultural heritage elements of Van province within the framework of a creative tourism approach. The research was conducted around the four core elements of creative tourism: active participation and experience, learning and creative self-expression, authentic and participatory experience, and local community and hospitable hosts. In this study, conducted using a qualitative research method, document analysis and descriptive content analysis techniques were utilized; and Van's cultural, artistic, and gastronomic values were examined within the framework of these themes. The findings indicate that Van has high potential for creative tourism due to its traditional architecture, handicrafts, musical culture, and unique gastronomic products. Tangible heritage elements such as traditional Van houses, Akdamar Church, Şamran Canal, and carpet and filigree craftsmanship, as well as intangible heritage elements like the Van breakfast, herb cheese, Reşik shoemaking, and the Dengbêlik tradition, stand out as elements that can enable tourists to participate in the production process and experience authentic experiences. The study concluded that Van has the potential to contribute to sustainable development through creative tourism, but this potential can only be realized by increasing local participation, protecting authentic values, and supporting collaborative production-based tourism models.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In today's tourism environment, destinations are no longer just physical spaces for visitors to see and pass through; they are transforming into processes where visitors participate in the experience, are included in production processes, and interact with the local population (Richards, 2016). In this context, the understanding of cultural heritage management has also evolved from static values "to be preserved and protected" to a dynamic approach where visitors can actively participate and meaningfully experience these values (OECD, 2014). This transformation process has paved the way for the reinterpretation of cultural heritage in the context of tourism. Specifically, the concept known as "creative tourism" offers a process where visitors are not merely passive consumers, but active participants engaged in co-creation with local actors (Tan, Kung & Luh, 2013; Zhou et al., 2025). Creative tourism includes workshops, courses, and production experiences that allow for direct participation in local cultural, artistic, or craft processes (Creative Tourism Network, 2025).

This process, in which active participants collaborate with local actors in the creation not only improves destination competitiveness, but it also helps local communities maintain their cultural and economic sustainability (Richards, 2011). Visitors may "co-create with local people," "learn local cultural practices," and "engage in creative experiences," which goes beyond standard tourist experiences and provides a more meaningful engagement space (Richards & Raymond, 2000).

In this context, it is believed that Van province, located in Turkey's Eastern Anatolia region, can emerge as a destination with high creative tourism potential due to its historical heritage, multi-dimensional cultural heritage elements, and traditional handicrafts. When tangible and intangible heritage elements in the region are evaluated in terms of participation, learning, interaction, and authentic experiences, which are the fundamental criteria of creative tourism, it is expected that the province's cultural tourism elements will be better understood by potential tourists. In this study, cultural heritage elements located within the borders of Van province will be examined from a creative tourism perspective, and suggestions will be developed on how these elements can be evaluated in the context of local development and tourism.

## **CREATIVE TOURISM APPROACH**

While the concept of creativity is defined in different ways in the literature, it is generally associated with qualities such as "novelty," "originality," "appropriateness," and "usefulness" (Tan et al., 2013). This concept is also linked to the creative economy approach, which bases its foundations on the economic dimension. The creative economy refers to an understanding that aims for economic growth by utilizing elements such as knowledge, education, creativity, and intellectual development. The effects of this approach have begun to be seen in the tourism sector, as in many other industries, and the dynamics of the creative economy have been reflected in tourism activities (Singsomboon, 2014).

This close relationship between the creative economy and tourism has also led to the emergence of the concept of creative tourism. Richards and Raymond (2000) defined the concept of creative tourism, which they developed in connection with cultural tourism, as a form of tourism that aims to enhance tourists' creative capacity by offering them the opportunity to learn and experience the unique qualities of their destination through active participation (Richards, 2015; Zoğal & Emekli, 2017). This definition offers a multi-dimensional framework that supports tourists' search for experiences and responds to the increasing demand for individual participation in contemporary tourism. The study explains the four key elements of creative tourism, which are explained and evaluated progressively below.

### ***Active Participation and Experiencing***

The first element of creative tourism is the principle of active participation and experience, which involves the tourist directly interacting with the destination. In this approach, the tourist is not just a spectator; they are an active participant in the process. Creative tourism offers individuals the opportunity to develop their creativity skills through workshops and hands-on activities, while also directly experiencing the authentic cultural and local characteristics of the destination they are visiting (Richards & Raymond, 2000; Gülüm, 2015; Zoğal & Emekli, 2017).

These types of experiences create a valuable foundation for both individual development and cultural interaction by enabling visitors' active participation in the region's traditional production processes, art, and gastronomy events. Active participation, in destinations with a strong cultural heritage like Van, facilitates direct involvement in the production processes of local products (such as carpet weaving, filigree work, and pottery), making it a prominent component of creative tourism.

### ***Learning and Creative Self expression***

The second element of creative tourism is the process of learning and creative self expression. This dimension allows tourists to acquire new skills, participate in knowledge production, and express their personal creativity through experiential means. According to Richards and Raymond (2000:18), this approach refers to the individual recognizing the cultural identity of the destination through active participation and contributing to this identity with their own production.

Over time, creative tourism has evolved from being merely a field for the development of individual creativity into an integral part of sustainable development strategies, facilitated by economic, regional, and technological networks. Carvalho et al. (2024) view this transformation as an evolution from simple creative activities to complex regional networks that enhance the entrepreneurship of creative communities in tourism. In this context, creative tourism offers a model based on learning, co-creation, and the promotion of creative self expression.

### ***Authentic and Participatory Experience***

Authentic and participatory experiences, the third element of creative tourism, allow visitors to connect directly with the living culture of the destination. According to UNESCO (2006), creative tourism offers a deeper experience by enabling visitors to establish an educational, emotional, social, and participatory interaction with the place they are in, the living culture, and the local people. In this process, the tourist becomes not a traditional consumer, but a co-creator of the experience.

Additionally, creative tourism meets the need for modern travelers to participate through workshops, educational programs, and creative activities focused on the unique elements of art, heritage, nature, and the destination, allowing them to experience the true atmosphere of the region they are in (Rudan, 2012). In historically and culturally rich destinations like Van, this approach strengthens authentic engagement through local festivals, culinary experiences, and craft practices.

### ***Local Community and Hospitable Hosts***

The fourth element of creative tourism is the local community and hospitable hosts' dimension. Carvalho et al. (2024) explain this structure as a system built on the interaction between three fundamental elements: the region (geographical environment), the host (local community), and the

visitor (tourist). Within this structure, producers and consumers create value through mutual interaction, thus supporting the development of social, cultural, and relational capital in the creative tourism ecosystem.

The active involvement of the local population in this process ensures both the preservation of cultural heritage and the sharing of economic benefits. Especially in destinations that stand out for their handicrafts, gastronomy, and hospitality culture, such as Van; community based creative tourism models where producers and tourists interact are becoming the key to sustainable development.

The starting point of this study is the idea that the cultural heritage, gastronomic diversity, and authentic handicrafts of Van province, located in eastern Turkey, can be evaluated within the scope of creative tourism. Local values such as Van breakfast, herbal cheese, savat art, and carpet weaving can be transformed into creative activities that tourists can experience. In this direction, the aim of the study is to reveal the creative tourism potential of Van province and to discuss the applications that can be developed within this scope.

## **METHOD**

This study was conducted using the descriptive analysis approach from qualitative research methods. The aim of the study is to reveal how tangible and intangible cultural heritage elements located in the province of Van can be evaluated within the framework of the basic elements of creative tourism. The study is based on the theoretical foundations of creative tourism at a conceptual level and relates this theoretical framework to Van's cultural heritage potential. The research is a case study; Van province was chosen as the study area due to its rich cultural diversity, historical depth, and unique handicrafts. An interpretive approach was adopted along with descriptive analysis in the evaluation of the data, and no quantitative measurement or survey study was conducted.

In the research, data were obtained from secondary sources. The archives of the Van Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, the records of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey, academic publications, local government reports, and current scientific articles in the literature were analyzed using the document review method. The data was evaluated using the content analysis technique and thematically classified.

During the analysis process, the four core elements of creative tourism – active participation and experience, learning and creative self expression, authentic and participatory experience, and local community and hospitable hosts – were adopted as the conceptual framework (Richards, 2016; OECD, 2014; Creative Tourism Network, 2025). The cultural heritage elements of Van were classified under these themes, and the dimension of each element within the scope of creative tourism was analyzed.

In this context:

- Carpet weaving, pottery, and traditional breakfast activities under the dimension of active participation and experience,
- Savat craftsmanship, stone carving, and herb cheese making within the scope of learning and creative self expression,
- Participation in life and folk celebrations in traditional Van houses within the context of authentic and participatory experiences,

- Village guesthouses, women's cooperatives, and local market interactions were examined under the category of local community and hospitable hosts.

This classification has allowed for the evaluation of Van's cultural heritage from a creative tourism perspective, and each element has been discussed in terms of its creative tourism potential in the findings section of the study.

### **Findings and Discussion: Evaluation of Van Province's Cultural Heritage Based on Creative Tourism Elements**

Van province has been a hub of interaction for many civilizations throughout history; with its natural environment, architectural heritage, and traditional way of life, it has become one of the cultural centers of Eastern Anatolia. Historical structures located around Lake Van, traditional production methods, and a unique gastronomic culture, when integrated with the core elements of creative tourism, create a strong tourism value chain. In this context, Van's tangible and intangible cultural heritage elements have been evaluated below in line with the four dimensions of creative tourism.

#### **The Creative Tourism Potential of Tangible Cultural Heritage Elements**

##### ***a. Active Participation and Experiencing***

Van has numerous cultural attractions with historical buildings and natural areas that visitors can physically engage with.

- ***Traditional Van Houses*** are noteworthy not only architecturally but also as a reflection of social life (Günel, 1993; Öztürk, 2024). Practices such as "baking bread in a tandoor," "preparing a Van breakfast," or "making pottery," which will be carried out in these residences integrated with tandoor houses, gardens, and barns, offer visitors both cultural and sensory participation opportunities. These events provide visitors with the experience of "being part of local life" while encouraging the preservation of the traditional fabric of homes.
- ***The Shamram (Menua) Canal***, built by the Urartian King Minua, is an engineering marvel (Payne, 2006). The canal's surroundings are suitable for cultural heritage walking routes, outdoor art installations, or nature photography events. This area embodies the concept of "active experience," offering visitors an immersive experience intertwined with history, nature, and culture.
- ***Van Castle*** is similarly of great importance both archeologically and culturally (Diker, 2015). Outdoor exhibitions, traditional breakfast events, or history themed festival organizations held here will transform the castle from just a historical structure into a "participatory experience space."

All of these examples enable tangible heritage to move beyond being a static exhibition space and transform into living spaces where production and participation take place.

##### ***b. Learning and Creative Self Expression***

Van's tangible heritage elements have a natural potential to support creative learning processes.

- ***Akdamar Church***, with its stone decorations and iconographic embellishments, is one of the most unique examples of Armenian art (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2015). The "stone

carving, ceramic pattern, or icon painting workshops" to be held around the church will provide visitors with the opportunity to learn art history experientially and create a creative work.

- **Van Savatlı Silverwork** represents the region's craft heritage with a unique decorative technique applied to black silver (Erginsoy, 1978; Kuşoğlu, 1999). In the workshops, participants designing their own silver rings, necklaces, or brooches encourages the process of "creative self expression."
- **The Hüseyin Pasha Mosque** and its surrounding complex are not only a place of worship but also a learning center for architecture students and art historians (Ağaoğlu, 2007; Öztürk, 2020). The "architectural drawing workshops," "stone masonry practices," or "minaret decoration studies" to be held at the complex support the academic and creative dimensions of cultural heritage.

These areas offer visitors not just an opportunity to observe, but also the experience of being part of cultural production.

#### **c. Authentic and Participatory Experience**

Tangible heritage elements are the strongest carriers of an authentic experience in Van.

- **Van Castle**, with its historical atmosphere, gives visitors a feeling of "traveling through time." The "World's Largest Breakfast Table" (Diker, 2015) held here is a creative example where the authentic space meets the modern tourist experience.
- "History walks" or "art camp events" organized along the **Shamram Canal** are authentic experiences guided by local people and where traditional stories are shared. These kinds of events ensure that the cultural landscape remains a living part of it.
- **Van Houses** can be transformed into spaces where tourists can spend time with local families, cook regional dishes, and share stories, enhancing their accommodation experience. Thus, architectural heritage is preserved through social interaction.

#### **d. Local Community and Hospitable Hosts**

The sustainability of creative tourism is possible with the active participation of local people.

- **When carpet** weaving and filigree work are reorganized through women's cooperatives, they contribute to both the local economy and cultural continuity.
- Shops around **the Hüseyin Pasha Mosque** can be transformed into craft shops, sales points, or workshops to increase visitor producer interaction.
- Village guesthouses on the shores of **Lake Van** bring the culture of hospitality to the heart of creative tourism. Visitors here experience "local hospitality" by participating in traditional breakfasts, herb cheese making, and fish cooking activities.

This approach transforms Van's cultural heritage into a structure that not only preserves it but also reproduces it through social interaction and economic participation.

### **The Creative Tourism Potential of Intangible Cultural Heritage Elements**

#### **a. Active Participation and Experiencing**

- *Van Otlu Peyniri* is a product directly related to the region's climate and flora. Cheese making workshops held in the highlands allow visitors to actively participate in the production process (Yenipınar, Köşker & Karacaoğlu, 2014).
- *Van Breakfast* is a culture of sharing that brings together a large number of local products (Bayhan, 2014; Kılıçhan & Köşker, 2015). In breakfast workshops, tourists participate in the process of making kavut, murtuğa, or gencirüt, transforming gastronomy into an experiential learning area.
- *Pottery* is one of the oldest crafts in Van and is concentrated in the Bardakçı neighborhood (Van Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 2025). The hands-on pottery making activities to be held here are creative experiences where participants are involved in the production process.

**b. Learning and Creative Self Expression**

- *Reşik Shoemaking* is a traditional craft made from goat hair and hemp (Arvas, 2021). By teaching the production stages of these shoes in workshops this month, cultural knowledge transfer can be ensured.
- *Van Savat Art* provides a creative learning space where participants can create their own designs (Erginsoy, 1978; Kuşoğlu, 1999). These applications allow for both the transmission of cultural knowledge and its reinterpretation through individual production.

**c. Authentic and Participatory Experience**

- *Dengbêjlik tradition* is one of the most authentic forms of expression in Kurdish oral culture (Taş, 2015). Allowing visitors to participate in these evenings as listeners or storytellers ensures that culture is experienced in a living form.
- *Van Breakfast* events are one of the strongest representations of the guest-host relationship. Breakfast is not just a meal; it's a cultural ritual that reflects community engagement and social sharing.

**d. Local Community and Hospitable Hosts**

Practices where the local community is the subject of creative tourism form the foundation of sustainable tourism. Producing cheese, carpets, jams, and savat products made by women's cooperatives with tourist participation transforms cultural production into a participatory structure. Additionally, village guesthouses, family run businesses, and local guiding services strengthen the interaction between tourists and locals by keeping the culture of hospitality alive.

**General Assessment**

When Van's cultural heritage is integrated with the fundamental elements of creative tourism, it creates a multifaceted experience. While tangible heritage elements – Van Castle, Akdamar Church, Shamram Canal, Van Houses – highlight the dimensions of "learning" and "authentic experience," intangible heritage elements – herb cheese, dengbêjlik, savat craftsmanship, reşik mastery – create areas for "active participation" and "creative self expression."

This holistic approach is transforming Van into a destination that not only preserves its cultural heritage but also recreates it in an experiential way. When Van's creative tourism potential is supported by the

principles of local participation and cultural sustainability, it can play a leading role in the cultural development of the Eastern Anatolia Region.

## **RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this study, both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage elements of Van province were evaluated within the framework of the four fundamental elements of creative tourism: (1) active participation and experience, (2) learning and creative self expression, (3) authentic and participatory experience, and (4) local community and hospitable hosts. In the literature, these four elements are frequently emphasized as the distinguishing features of creative tourism (Benhaida et al., 2024).

### **Results**

When Van's cultural heritage is examined within the context of creative tourism, the following results have been obtained: In terms of active participation and experience; tangible heritage elements such as Van houses, the Shamram Canal, and carpet weaving allow visitors to directly participate in the production or experience process. This allows creative tourists to move from being passive consumers to active participants. This situation has been defined in the literature as an important innovative aspect of creative tourism.

In terms of learning and creative self expression, workshops in Van focusing on crafts such as silver filigree work and reşik shoemaking allow visitors to acquire new skills and create their own products. In the creative tourism literature, it is an important criterion for tourists to transition from being mere observers to producers/artists.

In terms of an authentic and participatory experience, the cultural environments that can be experienced at Van Castle, canal routes, and traditional houses allow visitors to experience the feeling of "living with the local people" and "being immersed in the culture." Such interactions are central to UNESCO's understanding of creative tourism.

From the perspective of the local community and hospitable hosts, structures where the local population actively participates in the tourism process, where tourist-local interaction is achieved through women's cooperatives, handicraft production, and gastronomic activities, are of key importance for the sustainability of cultural heritage and regional development. The creative tourism literature shows that this social participation directly affects the success of the destination.

In light of these factors, Van province can be considered to have high potential in terms of creative tourism for its cultural heritage elements. Similarly in the literature, it has been emphasized that small and medium sized areas with cultural heritage are advantageous in terms of creative tourism.

### **Recommendations**

In light of these findings, the recommended strategies for Van are as follows:

- ***Experienced focused packages should be created:*** By organizing participatory workshops for tangible and intangible heritage elements such as carpet weaving, pottery, and herbal cheese making, experiences suitable for "sensory" and "creative" tourist profiles should be designed. This will contribute to the differentiation of the Van destination through the experiences created.



- **A co-production process with the local population should be developed:** Interaction between local communities, artisans, and tourists should be directly supported; collaboration with women's cooperatives, local craft groups, and gastronomy producers should be strengthened. This situation is emphasized in the creative tourism literature as "co-creation."
- **Authentic destination identity should be preserved:** Creative tourism practices should be planned in a way that reflects Van's unique architectural, gastronomic, and craft identity; in this process, the "tickling" of cultural heritage under commercialization pressure should be prevented. Because the literature states that sustainable creative tourism depends on maintaining a dynamic balance between cultural continuity and innovation.
- **Integration with global and regional networks should be ensured:** Van can join national/international creative tourism networks to support and scale creative tourism; it can make local experiences visible globally through digital platforms. This aspect is also included in the literature as an indicator of the integration of the creative economy and tourism.

#### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study's limitations should also be considered. The study is primarily based on document analysis and does not include primary field research (e.g., tourist surveys, local resident interviews). In future research, the motivations, experience perceptions, and level of participation of creative tourists visiting Van in the future can be examined using quantitative or mixed methods. Additionally, the economic impacts of creative tourism (e.g., increased income, job creation) and its environmental/social sustainability dimensions should also be researched in detail.

In conclusion, Van province is well positioned to successfully combine the four fundamental elements of creative tourism with its cultural heritage elements. If this potential is utilized with the right strategies, the region can transform from just a tourist destination into a dynamic creative tourism hub shaped by cultural production, experience sharing, and the participation of local residents.

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