

# Railway Travel Behavior, Preferences and Expectations of Thai Railway Passengers towards Railway Tourism Development

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## ABSTRACT

This preliminary research studied opinions and expectation of Thai travelers towards railway travel and development of railway- based tourism, using the general case of railway travel in Thailand. The study result was basically used as a guideline for demand and supply development of railway- based tourism. The study used mixed method. The quantitative study used questionnaire with 220 Thai travelers who used train as a travel mode for their travel, whereas the qualitative study used the assessment of heritage significance and analysis of tourism development potential. The study revealed female as the majority of railway travelers, aged between 21-30 years old, with the bachelor degree as the highest education level. The railway travel behavior was represented by a travel in a group of 2-3 persons, most with friends, followed by traveling alone. The activities mostly done during the journey included viewing scenery along the route, taking photographs and reading. What were preferred about traveling by train were safety, scenery, convenience, atmosphere and economy, whereas what were disliked included dirty toilet, long journey, uncleanliness on train, crowd, and unpleasant smell. The reason why the travelers used train as their travel mean involved economy reason, opportunity to see views of nature and people along the route, safety and avoidance of road traffic. The interest about railway mainly focused on railway station, services on train, train body, railway route, locomotive and history of train and railway routes of Thailand. The study also found that railway- based tourism should take into account development of railway accommodation, design of information and stories about railway routes, increase of travel schedules and tracks, development of attractions for stops en route, and

development of railway- based tourism that related with adventure tourism. The findings contributed to further recommendation regarding railway interpretation that represented different aspects of railway travel and related components of railway operation, and potential of railway- based tourism development that linked with attractions or potential resources along the routes.

**Keywords:** cultural landscape, railway-based tourism, railway heritage, tourism development

## Introduction

Transport services are an essential component of the overall product offer<sup>1</sup>. It is generally understood that transportation plays a role as the vehicle moving people from one place to another, or moving tourists from one attraction or destination to another or more. However, today transport itself has been transformed into the central focus of visitor attraction. This means that transport can offer visitors' experience through a provision of transport services that is beyond an ordinary service. Another new role of transport focuses on individual vehicle or carrying unit that has become a visitor attraction. Some vehicles become the object of excitement, unfamiliarity and wonder that are attractive under the tourist gaze, for instance a traditional *song thaew* and *tuktuk* of Thailand. To add this, some vehicles are aged and therefore can be viewed and memorized as the heritage, and thus they become the attractions displayed in museums and cultural built attractions, for example, which can call the feeling of nostalgia.

As transport moves tourists, the journey creates 'traveling' or 'movement'. It represents motion. This motion connects with various degree of emotional aesthetic of post- modern tourists, who can view or can felt their journey charming and meaningful along the way. In many cases, the journey to an attraction may be a pleasurable experience on its own right and may be a reason to visit a particular attraction. Today, there are attempts to develop tourist offers based on transport components, for example train which are beautifully decorated with fully equipped facilities, on which tourists can enjoy foods and drinks, and entertainment and even socializing, while appreciating sceneries along the rail journey. Additionally, a terminal as one of the transport system components can also be a place of attraction as well.

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<sup>1</sup>Robbins, 2003 in Michael and Geoffrey, *Railway Heritage and Tourism*, p. 118

For the case of Thailand, there are some railway- based travel routes offered by the State Railway of Thailand, yet they are not widely popular. Railway in Thailand has generally been perceived as just a mean of travel from one place to another, not quite in tourism. This study thereafter aimed to study opinions and expectation of Thai travelers towards railway travel and development of railway- based tourism, using the general case of railway travel in Thailand.

## Literature Review

There are some previous studies in regards to railway tourism development. They showcase different perspective of how a railway that is viewed as the heritage can be utilized for tourism, leisure and recreation. Some also pointed out railway tourism development could be ways for preservation of railway heritage and for inclusion of rural communities along railway routes. Railway tourism in other countries, especially in the European world has been developed mostly by utilizing their artifacts of railway heritage and related assets as tourist attractions for instance use of steam locomotives as a tourist ride, tourist railway thematic route that takes visitors to visit places, railway museum, or rail-to-trail tourism model. In the United States, for example, Amtrak worked with the National Park Service (NPS) in developing the Trail and Rails program to provide rail passengers with educational opportunities<sup>2</sup>. With 18 routes across major cities in the United States, this program aimed to promote and foster an appreciation of the natural and cultural heritage of the selected regions.

Another study was in Brazil, which studied railway tourism with the main objective of presenting the cultural tourism railway market in Brazil and discussing the experiences provided by this type of tourism, in response to the growing demand of railway tourism. The study examined an interface between trains, culture and tourism and public policies that structured this segment. The supply side of railway tourism market was studied by investigating cultural resources particularly the physical one in relation with its railway heritage, and the study of the current railway system or train operations for tourism<sup>3</sup>.

Railway tourism in Mexico has been developed with the main purpose of diversifying its tourism industry. The country integrated its existing natural, cultural and historical resources with its rail routes with different purposes. El Chepe route offers

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<sup>2</sup> Railway Heritage and Tourism, Railway Tourism: An Opportunity to Diversify Tourism in Mexico, p. 154.

<sup>3</sup> Railway Heritage and Tourism, Railroad Tourism in Brazil, p. 137- 150.

passengers views of dozens of bridges and tunnels, and natural landscape, with stops along the route. The Tequila Express route, with its refurbished train carriages and music and beverage related with the Mexican cultural identities on board, was developed in order to promote the country's identities through the blue Agave plantations which have been used since the 16<sup>th</sup> century to produce tequila spirit and over at least 2,000 years to make fermented drinks and cloth<sup>4</sup>. Along the Tequila Express route, the train stops at the estates<sup>5</sup> where passengers can learn the process of distilling tequila and participate in music and dance performance<sup>6</sup>. Regeneration of railway and related assets, and railway improvement and development for the sake of its original purpose (travel means) promotes a diversity of tourism and recreational products ranging from natural to cultural dimensions.

## Methodology

This study used mixed method. The quantitative study used questionnaire with 220 Thai travelers who used train as a travel mode for their travel. The qualitative study used the assessment of heritage significance and analysis of tourism development potential. The data collection was carried out with passengers who were waiting for trains at train stations and train stops. The data analysis used descriptive analysis including mean and standard deviation, and assessment of cultural heritage significance and tourism potential from the fieldwork.

## Findings

The study revealed that the majority of passengers were female, aged between 21-30 years old, with the bachelor degree as the highest education level. The railway travel behavior was represented by a travel in a group of 2-3 persons, most with friends, followed by traveling alone. The most favorite railway tourism routes offered by the State Railway of Thailand were Phetchaburi- Cha-Am Railway Route and Ampawa Floating Market Railway Route. Moreover, the activities mostly done during the journey included viewing scenery along the route, taking photographs and reading. Regarding what were preferred about traveling by train, the study found that the passengers mentioned about

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ianchadwick.com/tequila/visiting.htm>

<sup>5</sup> They are called in Spanish 'haciendas' which were plantations, mines or factories. Many haciendas combined these productive activities. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hacienda>

<sup>6</sup> Railway Heritage and Tourism, Railway Tourism: An Opportunity to Diversify Tourism in Mexico, p. 151- 158.

safety, scenery, convenience, atmosphere and economy, whereas what were disliked included dirty toilet, long journey, uncleanliness on train, crowd, and unpleasant smell. The reason why the travelers used train as their travel mean involved economy reason, opportunity to see views of nature and people along the route, safety and avoidance of road traffic. The interest about railway mainly focused on railway station, services on train, train body, railway route, locomotive and history of train and railway routes of Thailand.

Regarding the study about development for railway- based tourism in the Thai passengers' point of view, the finding reported that railway- based tourism should take into account development of railway accommodation, design of information and stories about railway routes, increase of travel schedules and tracks, development of attractions for stops en route, and development of railway- based tourism that related with adventure tourism. Contrarily, the aspects about development of local railway routes for tourism, development of railway related souvenirs, and railway museum were less notable. Additional recommendation in this regards covered improvements for the following: toilets and seats on train, safety issue, explanation of rules for train service use, cleanliness, facilitation, punctuality, and information of train uses.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings of this study suggest that there should be development of facilitation for family travel group. The result showed that family travel group shared less percent of railway passengers in this case. It is probably due to the fact that railway travel is not convenient in terms of connectivity with other transport mode, comparing to car- based travel that is more accessible and with freedom. To promote railway- based travel among family travel group especially with kids may consider designing special activities as part of interpretation to attract this group in an occasional basis. Moreover, the finding also revealed that passengers were interested in history of trains and railway routes in Thailand; this finding coincided with the finding about expectation for development of railway interpretation in the future. This suggests that State Railway of Thailand may initiate different forms of interpretation techniques serving education or entertainment purposes, by utilizing aspects of railway, and related components of railway operation such as unused equipment, old sleepers and locomotive. Information and stories about particular (historic) trains, train stations, or railway routes, can be disseminated on train by radio broadcasting or showing on TV screen, or at museums (or exhibition corner) to be

established at train stations. Annual events, festivals or activities may be programmed with railway tours, for instance. Furthermore, the findings pointed out that there was potential of railway- based tourism development that linked with attractions or potential resources along the routes. According to the opinions of Thai passengers, potential for upgrading railway travel and railway tourism of Thailand can be felt. This can be done by integrating both tangible and intangible resources along the railway routes together with existing railway schedules, as well as by creating new routes. Yet, a limitation of this development involves the fact that the existing railway routes of Thailand are not diverse, with lower connectivity with other nodes. This development will thereafter take time. Moreover, investigation of potential of resources to be integrated with railway travel is also required, and this needs high involvement of stakeholders to make it happen.

For next research, scope of study area or route may be considered in order to receive more implacable result in terms of marketing and development policy. Study of foreign tourists' point of view addressing the same issue can also be done. Lastly, data collection of similar research may incorporate interviews with related organizations including State Railway of Thailand, Tourism Authority of Thailand and tour companies, who can be part of railway- based tour program initiatives.

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