

DESTINATION IMAGE FORMATION FOR THE DEVA FORTRESS

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Abstract: This paper analyzes how historical heritage and tourism product characteristics shape the destination image of Deva Fortress and, in turn, visitor satisfaction. We profile key image dimensions such as site presentation, accessibility, satisfaction for touristic services and for festivals. Results underscore the role of site upkeep alongside unique views and destination management in consolidating a favorable image.

Key words: *heritage tourism, destination image, visitor satisfaction*

INTRODUCTION

Destination image is widely recognised as a central construct in tourism research, shaping how visitors select destinations, evaluate their experiences, and form intentions to return or recommend. Conceptual models typically distinguish between a cognitive image, reflecting beliefs and knowledge about destination attributes, and an affective image, capturing emotional responses to place; together, these dimensions underpin overall evaluations and conative outcomes such as revisit and recommendation intentions [1, 4, 7, 14].

Empirical studies consistently show that more favourable destination images are associated with higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty, in both urban and niche tourism contexts [3, 8-10].

In heritage tourism, destination image formation is shaped not only by physical attributes and service quality, but also by historical narratives and the symbolic value of sites [15]. Historic fortresses, citadels and monumental ensembles must balance the conservation of authenticity with the provision of visitor infrastructure, interpretation and events, all of which feed into how tourists cognitively and affectively perceive the destination. Recent work on cultural and artistic heritage attractions in Central and Eastern Europe shows that the perceived quality of heritage presentation, maintenance, and supporting facilities contributes directly to both destination image and tourist satisfaction, reinforcing the role of heritage assets in local and regional development [11].

At the same time, studies of destination image emphasise that events and small-scale cultural or leisure programmes—such as festivals, performances, or municipal activities—can modify the image of a place by enriching visitors' experiences and emotional connections [2, 5, 6].

Deva Fortress is a prominent example of such a heritage attraction in western Romania. The medieval fortress stands on a volcanic hill above the city of Deva, in Hunedoara County, and is documented from at least the mid-13th century as an important defensive and administrative stronghold [12, 13].

Today it functions as a historical and architectural monument and one of the county's most visited tourism sites, known for its panoramic views over the Mureș Valley and its combination of ruined fortifications and modern access infrastructure, including an inclined lift connecting the hilltop with the town below.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A brief questionnaire administered during October 2025 captured visitation, awareness source, favorite attribute, accommodation use/satisfaction, festival participation/satisfaction, and agreement with statements on access, infrastructure, signage/interpretation, conservation, and cleanliness/safety (Likert 1–5 scales). Based on those, a descriptive analysis of the results was formulated.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results indicate a clearly favourable image of Deva Fortress among respondents. Most participants (82.8%) report having visited the site, suggesting a sample dominated by direct experience rather than second-hand impressions. Information about the fortress is obtained mainly through interpersonal channels: 62.5% learned about it from friends or family and 25.0% through school or work, while social media plays only a minor role (4.2%). This points to destination image formation driven largely by word-of-mouth and local familiarity.

Visitor loyalty intentions are high. The likelihood of recommending Deva Fortress is particularly strong, with 83.3% selecting the two highest ratings, while 72.9% express a high likelihood of revisiting. This gap suggests that the site is widely perceived as highly recommendable even when repeat visitation is not immediate or frequent.

The affective core of the destination image is clearly anchored in the site’s visual appeal. When asked what they appreciated most, 87.5% of visitors identify the landscape and views, far exceeding atmosphere (8.3%) or accessibility (4.2%). Cognitive evaluations of key attributes are also predominantly positive. Agreement reaches 77.1% for the clarity of information panels, conservation status, and cleanliness and safety, while ease of access records 75.0% agreement. Infrastructure adequacy and maintenance show the weakest performance, with 70.8% agreement and the highest share of neutral responses, indicating the main area for improvement (Figure 1).

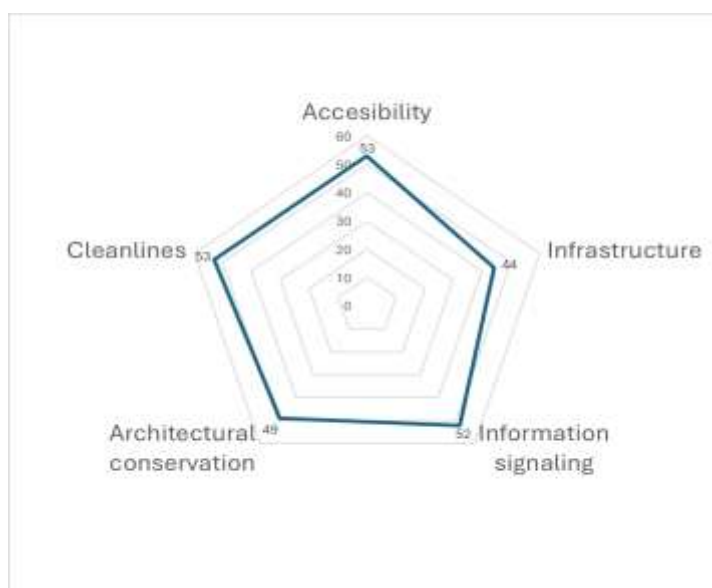


Figure 1. Composite score for functional touristic characteristics

Source: own work, 2025

The fortress also integrates well with the wider tourism offer. 62.5% of visitors report using accommodation services in the area, and satisfaction with these services is high, with 86.7% rating them in the top two categories. Nearly half of visitors (48.9%)

visited during a festival period, and festival satisfaction is very strong (95.7% rating festivals in the top two categories). Most festival-period visitors (73.9%) indicate a combined motivation, visiting both the fortress and the event.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings confirm that Deva Fortress enjoys a strong and coherent destination image, primarily anchored in its scenic setting and panoramic views. This affective core is consistently reinforced by positive cognitive evaluations related to accessibility, site conservation, safety, and the clarity of interpretive information. High levels of recommendation and revisit intention further indicate that visitors perceive the fortress as a high-quality and rewarding heritage attraction.

At the same time, the results highlight a limited number of areas where targeted improvements could enhance the overall experience. Infrastructure adequacy and maintenance emerge as the weakest evaluated attributes, suggesting that relatively modest investments in visitor facilities and upkeep could yield noticeable gains in satisfaction. Festivals and events appear to function as effective complements to the heritage offer, strengthening visitor experiences without overshadowing the core attraction.

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