

UNDERSTANDING VISITOR TRAVEL BEHAVIOUR IN A NATURE-BASED TOURISM DESTINATION: EVIDENCE FROM GUNUNG STONG, MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *Nature-based tourism destinations are increasingly promoted as instruments for sustainable regional development; however, effective planning requires a sound understanding of visitor travel behaviour. This study examines the travel behaviour of visitors to Gunung Stong, a prominent nature-based tourism destination in Malaysia, with the aim of providing evidence to support sustainable destination management. Using a quantitative survey approach, data were collected from 360 visitors and analysed using descriptive statistics. The analysis focused on key behavioural dimensions, including visit frequency, information sources, length of stay, purpose of visit, travel arrangements, and expectation fulfilment. The findings show that Gunung Stong is predominantly visited by first-time visitors who rely heavily on social media and word of mouth for travel information. Visits are mainly leisure-oriented, characterised by short stays and independent travel arrangements. Importantly, most visitors reported that their experiences met or exceeded expectations. These findings provide valuable insights for destination managers and policymakers in designing sustainable tourism strategies, particularly in managing visitor flows, strengthening digital communication, and enhancing nature-based experiences while minimising environmental impacts.*

Keywords: *Travel behaviour, Nature-based tourism, Visitor behaviour, Gunung Stong, Malaysia*

Introduction

Gunung Stong, located in Kelantan, Malaysia, represents an emerging nature-based tourism destination known for its mountainous terrain, waterfalls, forest ecosystems, and outdoor recreational activities (Rizal, Aziz & Alwi, 2024). The destination has attracted increasing numbers of visitors in recent years, particularly domestic tourists seeking nature and adventure experiences. Despite this growth, empirical research examining visitor travel behaviour at Gunung Stong remains limited. Existing tourism studies in Malaysia have predominantly focused on constructs such as tourist satisfaction, destination image, and ecotourism potential, often employing perception-based or attitudinal models to evaluate destination competitiveness and visitor experience. While these studies provide valuable insights into tourists' evaluations and intentions, they offer limited understanding of actual behavioural patterns, such as visit frequency, trip planning behaviour, travel arrangements, and on-site movement. Such behavioural dimensions are crucial, as they directly influence resource utilisation, spatial distribution of visitors, and environmental pressure within nature-based destinations.

This limitation is particularly critical for emerging destinations like Gunung Stong, where tourism development is still evolving and management strategies are not yet fully established. In such contexts, relying solely on attitudinal measures may lead to incomplete or ineffective planning decisions. Descriptive behavioural evidence provides a more practical foundation for managing visitor flows, designing infrastructure, and implementing sustainable tourism policies. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to analyse visitor travel behaviour at Gunung Stong by examining visit frequency, information sources, length of stay, purpose of visit, travel arrangements, and expectation fulfilment. By providing an empirical profile of visitor behaviour, this study contributes to the literature on nature-based tourism and offers practical insights for sustainable destination planning and management.

Literature Review

Visitor Travel Behaviour in Tourism

Visitor travel behaviour is a foundational concept in tourism research because it explains how individuals plan, decide, and act across the travel journey from pre-trip information search and destination selection to on-site consumption patterns and post-visit evaluation. In empirical tourism studies, travel behaviour is commonly operationalised through observable indicators such as visit frequency, travel party composition, travel arrangements, length of stay, spending patterns, preferred activities, and experience evaluation (Yamada & Tanaka, 2023). In Malaysia, travel behaviour research has become increasingly important as domestic tourism continues to be a major contributor to tourism activity and expenditure. National statistics show strong domestic travel volumes and gradual changes in trip patterns, including average length of stay, which provides a useful behavioural indicator for understanding destination pressure and infrastructure needs (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2025). Such behavioural indicators are particularly relevant to sustainability-oriented destination management, as variations in length of stay, travel motivation, and mobility patterns can influence resource consumption, congestion, and waste generation which issues that are often more pronounced in nature-based settings.

Information search behaviour has also transformed tourism decision-making in Malaysia, largely due to the dominance of digital platforms. Tourism Malaysia's national travel behaviour survey highlights the increasing role of online channels in shaping destination preferences and trip planning among Malaysians (Tourism Malaysia, 2024). Consistent with this trend,

Malaysian empirical evidence suggests that social media usage which is supported by trust and perceived credibility are plays a significant role in influencing travel intention and decision-making, especially among younger travellers (Ismail et al., 2025). Complementary Malaysian scholarship further emphasises that social media influencers and digital content attributes (e.g., authenticity) shape travel decisions by affecting perceived trust and engagement (Francis, 2024). Collectively, these findings indicate that travel behaviour should be understood not only as a set of trip choices, but also as a digitally-mediated process that influences expectations, experience evaluation, and sharing behaviour, which subsequently affects future demand.

From a sustainability and destination governance perspective, visitor travel behaviour must be interpreted alongside stakeholder capacity and management readiness. This is particularly relevant in Malaysia's geopark and nature-based destinations, where sustainable development goals intersect with conservation and community well-being. Evidence from Kelantan's geopark context indicates that destination development is frequently constrained by interrelated challenges including infrastructure limitations, financial constraints, weak community engagement, environmental deterioration, and gaps in marketing and promotion (Rizal, Aziz & Alwi, 2024). Such constraints may be shaped by visitor behaviour for instance, short stays and independent travel can concentrate impacts during peak periods, while limited visitor management mechanisms may reduce the destination's ability to guide responsible behaviour. In parallel, Malaysia-based research also underscores the importance of tourism intermediaries, such as tour operators, in supporting sustainable destination outcomes through responsible practices and destination-level stewardship (Abd Hamid & Isa, 2020). Therefore, examining visitor travel behaviour provides a practical evidence base for aligning destination offerings, visitor management, and sustainability strategies particularly in nature-based destinations such as Gunung Stong, where ecological sensitivity and community outcomes are central to long-term viability.

Travel Behaviour in Nature-Based Tourism Contexts

Nature-based tourism destinations differ from urban or mass tourism settings due to their ecological sensitivity, dependence on natural assets, and limited carrying capacity. In such contexts, visitor travel behaviour has direct implications for environmental sustainability, biodiversity conservation, and community well-being (Kim & Thapa, 2023; Li, et al., 2024). Behavioural patterns such as trip duration, visitation frequency, mobility within the destination, and activity participation determine the scale and distribution of environmental pressure. In Malaysia, nature-based tourism has been promoted as a strategic pathway for sustainable regional development, particularly in forest reserves, national parks, and geoparks. However, studies indicate that increased visitation without adequate management may intensify environmental stress, including trail erosion, waste generation, and habitat disturbance (Rizal, Aziz & Alwi, 2024). Visitor behaviour therefore becomes a critical component of sustainable tourism governance. Understanding how visitors plan and execute their trips whether independently or via organised packages provides insight into potential regulatory mechanisms and visitor flow management strategies.

Length of stay is particularly relevant in nature-based destinations. Short stays may reduce prolonged ecological impact but can also concentrate visitor activities within limited timeframes, creating peak-period congestion. Conversely, extended stays may increase economic contribution to local communities but require careful resource management to avoid cumulative environmental degradation (UNWTO, 2023). Empirical tourism statistics in Malaysia suggest variability in domestic travel patterns, reinforcing the need for destination-

specific behavioural profiling (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2025). Visit frequency also carries sustainability implications. Repeat visitors are often more familiar with local regulations, conservation guidelines, and responsible behaviour practices. This familiarity may reduce negative environmental impacts and enhance stewardship attitudes. In contrast, first-time visitors may require stronger interpretive services, orientation support, and sustainability messaging to ensure compliance with conservation practices.

Furthermore, independent travel can pose both opportunities and challenges. While self-organised visitors often seek authentic and immersive experiences, limited supervision or guidance may increase the risk of non-compliant behaviour in ecologically fragile areas. In Malaysia's sustainable tourism discourse, strengthening governance, infrastructure readiness, and community involvement has been identified as crucial to balancing visitor demand with conservation priorities (Abd Hamid & Isa, 2020). Thus, examining visitor travel behaviour in nature-based contexts is not merely descriptive; it forms a foundation for designing adaptive management strategies that align tourism development with environmental sustainability objectives..

Digital Information Sources and Sustainable Tourism Promotion

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed visitor information search behaviour. Social media platforms, travel blogs, review sites, and online communities now function as primary channels through which tourists discover destinations, evaluate alternatives, and form expectations. In Malaysia, digital penetration and social media usage are among the highest in Southeast Asia, making online influence a central determinant of travel behaviour (Tourism Malaysia, 2024). Recent Malaysian studies demonstrate that social media usage significantly shapes travel intention, particularly among younger generations. Trust, perceived credibility, and peer influence mediate the relationship between digital content and travel decisions (Ismail et al., 2025). Similarly, the influence of social media influencers has been shown to affect destination perception and behavioural intention through perceived authenticity and relatability (Francis, 2024). These findings suggest that digital platforms do not merely inform travel decisions but actively construct destination narratives and visitor expectations.

For nature-based tourism destinations, digital influence presents both opportunities and risks. On the positive side, online platforms can amplify destination visibility, promote eco-friendly practices, and communicate sustainability guidelines effectively (Zhang, Li, & Liu, 2023). Digital storytelling can also enhance destination image and encourage responsible visitor conduct. However, viral exposure and user-generated content may lead to sudden surges in visitation, potentially exceeding ecological carrying capacity if not properly managed (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2023). From a sustainability science perspective, digital communication strategies must therefore be integrated into destination management planning. Proactive dissemination of environmental codes of conduct, visitor capacity information, and conservation messaging through social media can help shape responsible travel behaviour before visitors arrive at the destination. According to Saura, Palacios-Marques & Ribeiro-Soriano (2023), monitoring online discourse may provide early signals of emerging demand trends, enabling authorities to implement timely management responses. In the case of Gunung Stong, where natural landscapes constitute the core tourism asset, digital information sources likely play a decisive role in attracting visitors and shaping pre-visit expectations. Understanding the dominance of specific information channels is therefore critical for aligning marketing communication with sustainable tourism objectives..

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey approach to examine visitor travel behaviour at Gunung Stong, Malaysia. A quantitative design was deemed appropriate as the study aims to systematically profile observable behavioural patterns among visitors and generate empirical evidence to support sustainable destination management. The cross-sectional design allows for the collection of data from visitors at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of travel behaviour characteristics relevant to destination planning and sustainability considerations.

Data Collection and Sample

Data were collected through structured on-site surveys administered to visitors at Gunung Stong starting June 2025. The on-site approach ensured that respondents had recent and direct experience with the destination, thereby enhancing response accuracy and reducing recall bias. A convenience sampling technique was employed due to the absence of a comprehensive visitor sampling frame. Visitors aged 18 years and above who had completed or were in the process of completing their visit were invited to participate voluntarily in the survey. Prior to participation, respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

The questionnaire instrument was developed based on a review of prior tourism and visitor behaviour studies with selected items adapted and modified to suit the context of nature-based tourism at Gunung Stong. The instrument comprised several sections, including visit frequency, information sources, length of stay, purpose of visit, travel arrangements, and expectation fulfilment. To ensure clarity and content validity, the questionnaire was pretested with a small group of visitors ($n = 20$) prior to the actual data collection, and minor revisions were made based on their feedback. For the information source variable, respondents were allowed to select multiple options to reflect the diverse channels used in trip planning.

A total of 380 questionnaires were distributed, of which 360 usable responses were obtained after screening for completeness, resulting in a valid response rate of 94.7%. All respondents had experienced at least one visit to Gunung Stong. The sample size exceeds the minimum requirement for descriptive tourism studies and is considered adequate for profiling visitor behavioural patterns.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies and percentages, were employed to summarise visitor travel behaviour patterns. Descriptive analysis was appropriate for the study objective, which focuses on profiling and behavioural pattern identification rather than hypothesis testing. The results provide empirical evidence to support interpretation of visitor flow characteristics, digital influence patterns, and sustainability implications for Gunung Stong as a nature-based tourism destination.

Result

This section presents the descriptive analysis of visitor travel behaviour at Gunung Stong based on 360 valid responses. The findings are organised according to key behavioural dimensions, including visit frequency, main source of information, length of stay, purpose of visit, type of travel arrangement, and expectation fulfilment as shown in table 1.

Visit Frequency

The results indicate that Gunung Stong primarily attracts first-time visitors. As shown in Table 1, 57.5% (n = 207) of respondents reported visiting the destination for the first time. Meanwhile, 27.8% (n = 100) had visited twice, and 14.7% (n = 53) had visited three times or more. The dominance of first-time visitors suggests strong destination appeal and effective promotional reach. However, the relatively lower proportion of repeat visitors indicates potential opportunities for strengthening visitor loyalty strategies and enhancing long-term destination sustainability through repeat engagement.

Main Source of Information

With regard to information search behaviour, social media emerged as the most influential information source, reported by 71.9% (n = 259) of respondents. Word of mouth was the second most significant source (54.7%, n = 197), followed by travel blogs (36.4%, n = 131) and official websites (31.7%, n = 114). Traditional media sources such as television, magazines, and newspapers played a comparatively minor role (18.6%, n = 67). These findings demonstrate the dominance of digital and interpersonal communication channels in shaping visitor travel decisions. The strong reliance on social media highlights the importance of digital visibility and online engagement in promoting nature-based destinations. From a sustainability perspective, this suggests that digital platforms can serve as effective channels for disseminating responsible tourism messaging and environmental awareness initiatives.

Length of Stay

In terms of trip duration, most visitors stayed for two to three days (46.9%, n = 169). A substantial proportion visited for only one day (32.8%, n = 118), while 20.3% (n = 73) stayed for four days or more. The predominance of short to moderate stays indicates that Gunung Stong functions primarily as a short-break nature-based destination. Short stays may reduce prolonged environmental pressure; however, concentrated visitor flows during peak periods could intensify pressure on facilities and natural resources. This behavioural pattern underscores the need for effective visitor flow management and infrastructure planning.

Purpose of Visit

Leisure and recreation constituted the primary purpose of visit, accounting for 63.3% (n = 228) of respondents. Education and training represented 14.4% (n = 52), while visiting friends or relatives (10.8%, n = 39), business (6.4%, n = 23), and other purposes (5.0%, n = 18) accounted for smaller proportions. The dominance of leisure-oriented visitation confirms Gunung Stong's positioning as a recreational and nature-experience destination. The presence of education-related visits also indicates potential for expanding environmental education and eco-learning initiatives aligned with sustainable tourism development goals.

Types of Travel Arrangement

The majority of visitors (74.2%, n = 267) organised their trips independently (non-package travel), while only 25.8% (n = 93) utilised package tour services. This preference for independent travel suggests a desire for flexibility and self-directed experiences in natural

settings. However, limited reliance on structured packages may reduce opportunities for guided interpretation and structured sustainability education. Strengthening eco-guided programmes could enhance responsible visitor behaviour while maintaining experiential authenticity.

Trip Expectation Fulfilment

Regarding experience evaluation, 68.1% (n = 245) of visitors reported that their trip completely met their expectations. A further 27.5% (n = 99) indicated that their expectations were partly met, while only 4.4% (n = 16) reported dissatisfaction. The high level of expectation fulfilment reflects positive visitor perceptions and suggests that Gunung Stong delivers experiences consistent with pre-visit expectations shaped largely through digital platforms. Maintaining this satisfaction level is critical for sustaining positive word-of-mouth promotion and long-term destination competitiveness.

Table 1: Travel Behaviour

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Visit Frequency	1 time	207	57.5
	2 times	100	27.8
	3 times or more	53	14.7
Main source of Information	Social media	259	71.9
	Word of Mouth	197	54.7
	Travel Blog	131	36.4
	Website	114	31.7
	Television / Magazine / Newspaper	67	18.6
Length of Stay	1 day	118	32.8
	2-3 days	169	46.9
	4 days or more	73	20.3
Purpose of Visit	Leisure / Recreation	228	63.3
	Education / Training	52	14.4
	Visiting Friends / Relatives	39	10.8
	Business	23	6.4
	Others	18	5.0
Types of Travel Arrangement	Package tour	93	25.8
	Non-package	267	74.2
Trip met expectations	Completely	245	68.1
	Partly	99	27.5
	Not Really	16	4.4

Discussion

This study examined visitor travel behaviour in Gunung Stong, a nature-based tourism destination in Malaysia, with the objective of generating empirical insights to support sustainable destination management. The findings reveal several important behavioural patterns with direct sustainability implications. First, the dominance of first-time visitors (57.5%) suggests that Gunung Stong continues to attract new markets, likely driven by digital visibility and peer influence. While this indicates strong destination appeal, the relatively lower proportion of repeat visitors raises questions about long-term visitor loyalty. From a sustainability perspective, repeat visitation can be beneficial as returning visitors are often more familiar with environmental guidelines, site regulations, and conservation practices. Strengthening destination attachment and loyalty through enhanced interpretive services and post-visit engagement may contribute to long-term sustainable demand.

Second, the overwhelming reliance on social media (71.9%) and word of mouth (54.7%) confirms the central role of digital ecosystems in shaping travel decisions. This aligns with broader Malaysian travel behaviour trends, where digital trust and online engagement significantly influence travel intention. For nature-based destinations such as Gunung Stong, digital communication presents both opportunity and risk. On one hand, online platforms amplify destination visibility and economic potential. On the other hand, viral exposure may lead to sudden visitor surges, potentially exceeding ecological carrying capacity. Therefore, digital marketing strategies should be integrated with sustainability messaging, including environmental codes of conduct, responsible tourism practices, and visitor flow information. Third, the prevalence of short stays (one to three days) indicates that Gunung Stong functions primarily as a short-break recreational destination. While shorter visits may limit prolonged environmental pressure, they may also intensify peak-period congestion and concentrated use of key attractions such as waterfalls and hiking trails. Effective visitor flow management, including zoning strategies, timed entry systems, and infrastructure planning, may be necessary to mitigate concentrated environmental impacts.

Fourth, the strong preference for independent (non-package) travel reflects visitors' desire for autonomy and flexibility in nature-based settings. However, limited participation in organised tours may reduce opportunities for guided environmental interpretation and structured sustainability education. Enhancing eco-guided programmes, local ranger services, and community-based tour offerings could simultaneously enrich visitor experience and strengthen conservation awareness. Finally, the high level of expectation fulfilment (68.1% completely met) indicates that Gunung Stong successfully delivers experiences consistent with visitor expectations. Positive experience evaluation is critical for maintaining destination competitiveness and generating positive word of mouth. However, sustaining satisfaction in the long term requires balancing visitor growth with environmental integrity. Failure to manage increasing visitation may undermine the very natural attributes that attract visitors.

Overall, the findings underscore that visitor travel behaviour is closely intertwined with sustainability outcomes. Behavioural profiling is therefore not merely descriptive but constitutes an essential evidence base for adaptive destination governance in ecologically sensitive environments.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical insights into visitor travel behaviour in a nature-based tourism destination, using Gunung Stong, Malaysia, as a case study. By examining visit frequency, information sources, length of stay, purpose of visit, travel arrangements, and expectation fulfilment, the study contributes to the growing body of sustainability-oriented tourism research. The findings indicate that Gunung Stong is characterised by first-time, leisure-oriented visitors who rely heavily on digital platforms for information, prefer independent travel arrangements, and undertake short to moderate stays. Importantly, the majority of visitors reported that their expectations were met, reflecting positive destination performance.

From a sustainability science perspective, understanding these behavioural patterns enables more informed destination planning. Digital dominance necessitates proactive sustainability communication strategies. Short stays require efficient visitor flow management. Independent travel behaviour highlights the need for structured yet flexible conservation-oriented services. Collectively, these insights support the integration of behavioural evidence into sustainable tourism policy and management frameworks. This study offers practical implications for destination managers, policymakers, and local stakeholders seeking to balance tourism

development with environmental protection. By aligning visitor behaviour management with conservation priorities, Gunung Stong can strengthen its position as a sustainable nature-based tourism destination.

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