

Exploration of the Tourist Attractions of Selo Malere Village: A Phenomenology Study of Sustainable Tourism

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism is a comprehensive strategy that aims to improve the quality of life by ensuring a balanced approach to providing, developing, and preserving natural and cultural resources for future generations. This study examines the prospects for sustainable tourism in Aileu District, Timor-Leste, specifically in Selo Malere village, comprising six hamlets rich in natural beauty and cultural heritage. The study used a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of local communities regarding the opportunities and challenges associated with tourism development, focusing on important sites such as Dili Vanili and Rai Mutin. The study findings indicate that although these locations have significant natural beauty and great economic potential, they need to be improved by adequate digital promotion, lack of infrastructure, and uncertainty regarding future land use. The study recommends strengthening marketing efforts through social media, improving infrastructure, and developing additional facilities to attract tourists and increase local income. The active involvement of local communities and strong government support are essential to maximizing these opportunities and promoting sustainable tourism in the region.

Keywords: *sustainable tourism, Aileu District, Selo Malere village, infrastructure, government support*

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism is one of the integrated efforts to develop the quality of life by balancing the provision and development, utilization, and maintenance of natural resources and culture sustainably until the future (Dewi & Ristianti, 2021). The predicate sustainable means tourism development based on tourists' needs while still showing a sustainable environment and providing benefits both now and in the future (Wearing & McDonald, 2002).

Sustainable tourism is all forms of development and management, namely the environment, economy, social and welfare of natural resources, and culture that exist for the long term (Middleton & Hawkins, 2009). Sustainable development that contains locality is the next challenge, which means that local community participation is a special focus in its realization so that it can contribute to tourism activities. Forms of local community participation include stakeholders, local ownership, sustainable use of resources, accommodating residents' goals, monitoring and evaluation, accountability, training, and promotion (Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019).

Timor Leste is a Southeast Asian country bordering Indonesia on Timor Island. After its independence in 2002, this country became one of the youngest in the world, with the capital city of Dili. With around 15,000 km², Timor Leste strives to build political and economic stability while relying on the agricultural and oil industries (Almeida, 2015). Aileu District, located in Timor Leste, has Selo Malere village as one of the areas close to the economic area, such as shops, markets, and public roads leading to Dili, Ainaro, Manufahi, and Kovalima. This village comprises six hamlets: Hularema Hamlet, Cotabauro Hamlet, Kabasfatin Hamlet, Maurusa Hamlet, Malere Hamlet, and Tartihi Hamlet (World Bank, 2004).

Each hamlet offers extraordinary natural beauty and cultural richness. Tourists can enjoy the stunning natural scenery and the rich local traditions and cultures, making it a fascinating and attractive destination to explore (Achmad et al., 2022; Petroman et al., 2016). Despite its great potential, the problem of developing tourism objects in Selo Malere Village still needs to be solved. Data shows that accessibility to tourist objects still needs to be improved, with roads often in poor condition and difficult to pass, especially during the rainy season. In addition, the lack of promotion of tourist areas makes the wider community not fully aware of the existing tourism potential. Visitors who come to Aileu often need to be made aware of the unique tourist attractions in this village.

In addition, there still needs to be more public awareness in managing tourist attractions. The awareness is exacerbated by the limited training and education about tourism for the local community, which makes them less prepared to be involved in the tourism industry. Various studies have noted that local communities are not fully involved in decision-making regarding tourism development, reducing their potential to benefit from this sector (Feyers et al., 2020; Pramanik & Rahman, 2024; Safeyah et al., 2024).

The consideration of focusing on sustainable tourism development in the Aileu District is that this sector can increase local income and contribute to preserving culture and the environment. By utilizing local potential wisely, tourism can be a tool to empower communities. Active community involvement in this process will ensure they feel the direct benefits of tourism activities, increasing their motivation to maintain and preserve existing natural and cultural resources.

On the other hand, the government also needs to actively support sustainable tourism development by providing adequate infrastructure, training for communities, and effective promotion. Previous studies have shown that strong government support and collaboration with local communities are essential to achieving sustainable tourism goals. (Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019).

However, there are still problems in developing tourist attractions in Selo Malere Village, namely the lack of promotion of tourist areas, accessibility that needs to be improved, and the lack of public awareness in managing tourist attractions. Community opportunities in tourism management still need to be improved, and there is still a need for more education about tourism in the local community (Achmad, 2022). Sustainable tourism development can be done by providing training or other supporting things to increase tourist interest and improve the community's economy in Aileu District, Selo Malere Village.

In a broader context, sustainable tourism in Aileu District can contribute to achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) adopted globally (Nguyen et al., 2019). By developing tourism that upholds the preservation of the environment and local culture, we help improve the local economy and contribute to global efforts to protect the planet Earth (D'Souza et al., 2019).

Based on the background above, this study takes the title: "Exploration of the Utilization of the Potential of Selo Malere Tourism Attractions in Aileu District, Towards Sustainable Tourism in Timor Leste." This study aims to explore the potential of tourism attractions in Selo Malere Village more deeply, as well as formulate strategies to overcome existing challenges to realize sustainable tourism that can benefit local communities and the environment. With an integrated approach, this study can significantly contribute to developing sustainable and competitive tourism in Timor Leste.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach was chosen because this study aims to understand stakeholders' subjective experiences and meanings of tourism in six hamlets, especially in the context of tourism development in Hularema Hamlet (Dili Vanili) and Kabasfatin Hamlet (Rai Mutin). As an approach, phenomenology focuses on how individuals understand and experience the reality of their social world (Cohen, 1979; Hayllar & Griffin, 2005).

According to Creswell (2015), phenomenology is suitable for researchers to explore how a group of people give meaning to the same experience, in this case, the experience of managing and developing tourist destinations in Aileu. With a tourism background involving various elements and actors, the phenomenological approach allows researchers to dig deeper into the interconnectedness between stakeholders, including tourism managers, local governments, communities, and visitors. As an approach emphasizing subjective experience, phenomenology provides space for in-depth interpretation of each actor's feelings. It assesses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges (SWOT) in developing regional tourism.

Phenomenology also allows researchers to explore the social and cultural dynamics that influence interactions between stakeholders in tourism management. *mempengaruhi interaksi antara pemangku kepentingan dalam pengelolaan pariwisata* (Astuti, 2020; Barbieri et al., 2016). Phenomenology emphasizes not only personal experiences but also the process of intersubjectivity, where meaning is formed through interactions between individuals in a broader social context. In this context, the tourism experience is not only seen from the perspective of tourists but also from tourism managers and local communities (Deery et al., 2012; Julistiyana, 2020).

This research was conducted in a natural or naturalistic setting, using the principles of qualitative research that prioritize understanding phenomena in their original context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). This approach is important because tourism is a complex and dynamic phenomenon where various social, cultural, economic, and political factors influence each other. By placing research in a natural environment, researchers can gain a more authentic understanding of the real conditions faced by stakeholders in tourism development (Erlandson et al., 1993; Muresan et al., 2019). Natural research subjects in qualitative research allow researchers to adjust data collection methods to field dynamics, making the resulting data richer and deeper (Bazeley, 2013).

This research lasted for 16 days (5 to 20 August 2024) in Selo Malere Village, Aileu District, Timor Leste; the research subjects were two tourist destinations, namely Dili Vanili and Rai Mutin. The researchers chose this location because of its high tourism potential, but it has yet to be fully utilized optimally to support local economic growth and cultural preservation. This specific research location provides a unique context for understanding how local communities and tourism managers work together to develop the tourism sector. In addition, problems faced in tourism development, such as limited infrastructure and promotion, can be studied more deeply through direct observation in the field (Paget et al., 2010).

Data is collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations are carried out to understand the physical conditions of tourist destinations, interactions between stakeholders, and management activities in the field. Qualitative research observations help researchers capture the social and cultural context directly, thus allowing for a richer understanding of the studied phenomena (Aditama et al., 2021; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009).

In-depth interviews were conducted with tourism managers, local government representatives, and local communities to explore their views on the potential and challenges faced in tourism development. Interviews are an essential technique in the phenomenological approach because they allow researchers to understand the subjective experiences of informants (Seidman, 2013). In addition, interviews allow researchers to explore information that may not be obtained through direct observation, such as perceptions of government support, community expectations, and tourism management strategies (Fatmawati & Prasetya, 2021; Hayllar & Griffin, 2005).

Documentation is used as a secondary data source to complement data obtained from observations and interviews. Documentation includes local archives, tourism data, tourism development reports, and other relevant publications. Documentary data in qualitative tourism research is essential to provide a broader and deeper perspective on the phenomenon being studied and verify information obtained through other methods (Pinariya et al., 2020).

Triangulation for qualitative research data analysis is a way to ensure that the data obtained is reliable and represents the existing reality (Denzin, 1997; Miles et al., 2014). In this study, triangulation allows researchers to test the accuracy of findings from various perspectives and sources of information, thus providing a more comprehensive picture of the potential for tourism development in Aileu.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic data of Selo Malere Village provides important information on population, age, and social structure that can provide a clearer picture of the potential and challenges. A diverse population of age and social background can be valuable in tourism development involving various societal elements. However, challenges in terms of education and skills need to be overcome so that the community can contribute optimally (Ardahaey, 2011).

Dili Vanili is one of the popular tourist destinations in Hularema Hamlet, which is part of Selo Malere Village, Aileu District, and is known for its natural wealth. This place offers attractive agrotourism for visitors, with vanilla and coffee as its main commodities. Dili Vanili also has various facilities such as photo spots, cafes, libraries, fish ponds, and vanilla and coffee plantations. In addition, visitors can stay at a guest house or camp in the area provided. Dili Vanili also offers a plantation tour that includes education about the processing of commodities from planting to the final product that is typical of Dili Vanili (Source: results of observations and interviews).

In addition, various spices such as turmeric, ginger, and cinnamon are also cultivated and used as a mixture in tea products. As a result, the products produced include coffee mixed with vanilla extract and tea mixed with spices, known as chai tea. These products have been marketed both domestically and internationally.

However, several aspects need to be improved to increase the tourism potential of Dili Vanili. One is the need for more promotion through social media or digital

marketing, which causes Dili Vanili to be less well-known to internet users. To overcome this, researchers have conducted socialization with Mr. Frederico, the manager of Dili Vanili, about the importance of marketing through Instagram. Instagram is a platform focusing on visual content, user engagement, and various promotional features such as feed posts, stories, and reels. It is an important tool for optimizing social media marketing.

Instagram is the researcher's choice to help introduce products in Dili Vanili. Instagram has become one of the most effective social media platforms for product promotion. With more than one billion monthly active users, Instagram offers a variety of features that allow brands to increase visibility, reach target markets, and increase sales.



Figure 1. Instagram account @DiliVanilli (<https://www.instagram.com/dilivanilliaileu>)

Instagram account @DiliVanilli needs improved management by understanding Instagram's features, characteristics, and advantages. There is a need to provide education about the role of Instagram in marketing. Various studies have shown that Instagram is very effective for marketing because it focuses on visuals, high user engagement, and various promotional features (Ardianti & Lubis, 2020; Arviani et al., 2020; Marchand et al., 2020; Ramadhan et al., 2022; Rochmana et al., 2022).

There is a need to develop tips and tricks for building a strong Instagram account with a concise, informative Bio description and a clear CTA. Consistency in visual appearance, color theme uniformity, photo style, and filters. Arrangement of highlights stories by displaying important content such as featured products and promotions (Achmad & Melani, 2022; Prasanti et al., 2023; Retnasary et al., 2019).

Developing various content strategies for Instagram with (1) Feed posts in product photo displays with increasing lighting and detail quality. (2) Behind-the-scenes with uploads of activities behind the layers, for example, preparing food, arranging rooms, cleaning restaurants, or employee activities before and after work. (3) User-generated content allows customers to share content about tourist attractions. (4) Instagram stories, by occasionally providing Polls and Q&A to get input and criticism from visitors and

followers. (5) Countdown is used when announcing discounts, new products, or new types of services. (5) Swipe-up links are useful for directing visitors and followers to product pages (for 10,000+ followers).



Figure 2. Reels Content Creation on the Dili Vanili account.

(https://www.instagram.com/reel/C-6rCcsBE_J/?igsh=aXNlbXhlc24yaDY5)

Another feature on Instagram that can be explored for its benefits for marketing and promotion is Reels. Reels have a good impact if they contain short tutorials on using products, purchasing, and ordering tourist facilities in Dili Vanili (Figure 2). Reels can contain challenges that are useful for arousing the involvement of visitors and followers in responding to products and services. Reels can contain uploads of recorded testimonials from visitors or customers of tourist attractions (Amelia & Alamanda, 2022; Anca Jurj, 2019; Nurjannah et al., 2022; Restusari & Farida, 2019).

Another feature that is useful for supporting tourism promotion is Instagram Ads. The strategy is (1) Targeting, namely adjusting to the demographics, interests, and behavior of followers and visitors. (2) When determining the ad format, one must be able to choose when to upload photos, videos, carousels, and story ads. (3) A/B Testing, namely by testing various advertising elements to consider the effectiveness of the advertising upload (Maulana & Sandyawati, 2023; Prasanti et al., 2023; Shannon & Chantavoraluk, 2019).

If all stages have been carried out, the next step is to analyze and optimize the (1) Instagram Insights feature to track content and advertising performance (reach, impressions, engagement rate). (2) Audience feedback collects, sorts, and responds to comments and messages from followers and visitors (Mahmudah & Rahayu, 2020; Zulli, 2018).

A tourist destination that has natural beauty in Selo Malere Village is "Rai Mutin," which in Indonesian means white land. Rai Mutin is precisely located in Kabasfatin Hamlet. Rai Mutin is a hidden gem that holds stunning natural beauty. One of its main attractions is the spectacular natural scenery, with a unique white hill landscape, which offers beauty that is still rarely known by tourists.

This place offers a stunning visual experience, making it an ideal tourist destination. The scenery along the road in Dusun Kabasfatin is also very charming, with seemingly endless hills and valleys, creating the perfect backdrop for taking pictures (Figure 3). This spot has great potential to attract photography enthusiasts and seekers of unique locations, especially for the younger generation active on social media.



Figure 3. Nature Tourism Destination of Rai Mutin

However, the beauty of Rai Mutin and the natural scenery in Kabasfatin have yet to be fully developed and promoted. One of the main problems is the need for more supporting infrastructure, such as limited road access and inadequate public facilities. In addition, there is uncertainty about the future of Rai Mutin because the local government is reportedly planning to turn this area into a paint industry area. However, many locals support the development of Rai Mutin as a tourist destination because they see great potential in attracting visitors and increasing income through ticket sales.



Figure 4. Sign system Kode Ba Kode Aileu

One effort that can be made is to improve and beautify the area around Rai Mutin, including updating the sign system with the words "Kode Ba Kode Rai Mutin" as a replacement for "Kode Ba Kode Aileu" to become an attractive photo spot (Figure 4). "Kode ba Kode" is a phrase in Tetum, one of Timor Leste's official languages, which means "Support each other" or "give support" in English. This phrase reflects the concept of cooperation and mutual assistance, where people help or support each other to achieve a common goal. This phrase is often used in community development or local initiatives in Timor Leste, such as tourism development or other social projects.

In addition, adding signposts and listing the location of Rai Mutin on Google Maps will make it easier for tourists to find this place. Adding facilities such as a cafe that offers typical Timor Leste cuisine can also be an additional attraction that enriches visitors' experience. The natural beauty of Rai Mutin and Dusun Kabasfatin requires more optimal exploration because it has great potential to become a natural tourist attraction that can invite tourists. With effective promotion through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, this beauty can be introduced worldwide and attract tourists from various cultural backgrounds.

Support from the government and local communities is essential to realizing this potential, making Kabasfatin a famous tourist destination and providing economic benefits to the local population. Rai Mutin offers stunning views and an in-depth experience of the peace and natural beauty of Timor Leste, which is still pristine. Despite the challenges, this beauty is worth trying and being enjoyed by many people.

SWOT Analysis of Selo Malere Village Tourism Potential

The tourist destinations of Selo Malere Village that will be analyzed are Dili Vanili in Hularema Hamlet and Rai Mutin in Kabasfatin Hamlet. These two destinations

show striking differences in terms of development and promotional potential. Dili Vanili stands out as an agrotourism destination that offers a unique experience with local commodities such as vanilla and coffee and supporting facilities. Meanwhile, Rai Mutin offers extraordinary natural beauty but needs to be constrained by inadequate infrastructure and potential conflicts with the paint industry development plan.

One of the main findings of this study is the need for a better promotional strategy, especially through social media. Promotion carried out digitally will be very helpful in increasing the visibility of destinations such as Dili Vanili and Rai Mutin. Using Instagram as a promotional platform is a relevant step, considering that Instagram has a wide user base and focuses on visual content that is very suitable for tourism promotion.

However, several challenges are faced by the managers of Dili Vanili and Rai Mutin. For Dili Vanili, the challenge lies in maximizing the potential for digital promotion. Meanwhile, Rai Mutin needs infrastructure support and protection from the threat of industrialization that can threaten the existence of the tourist area. Therefore, collaboration between the government, tourism managers, and the community is necessary to ensure that tourism development can provide maximum benefits.

Dili Vanili in Hularema Hamlet

Dili Vanili tourist destination has the following strengths: (1) Diversity of Agrotourism Products: Dili Vanili offers a unique tourism experience focusing on local commodities such as vanilla, coffee, and spices such as turmeric and ginger. These products have been marketed nationally and internationally, adding value to this destination. (2) Complete Facilities: This destination is equipped with various facilities that support tourism, such as cafes, photo spots, libraries, fish ponds, guest houses, and camping areas. These strengths: Dili Vanili is more than just a natural tourist spot; it is also a center for education and relaxation. (3) Educational Tour: Visitors can take a plantation tour that provides education about the commodity processing process from start to finish. This education can attract tourists who are interested in aspects of agribusiness and sustainability.

Dili Vanili's weaknesses include: (1) Lack of Digital Promotion: One of the main areas for improvement is the need for more promotion through social media and other digital platforms. So far, it has only relied on websites and Facebook. Although Dili Vanili already has superior products and adequate facilities, the need for more visibility on the internet makes it less well-known to the wider community. (2) Limited Target Market: Currently, the main focus of the product is certain domestic and international markets, but with a strong promotional strategy, especially on social media, the potential market reach could be expanded.

Opportunities that can be developed include: (1) Market Expansion Through Social Media; by utilizing Instagram as a promotional platform, Dili Vanili can reach a wider audience, including millennials active on social media. Instagram features can be used to show the beauty and uniqueness of Dili Vanili. (2) Support from the Government and Local Community can be more support for infrastructure development

and promotion. Dili Vanili is close to Timor Leste President Jose Ramos Horta's family. The local government should be able to work with the local community to increase tourism potential. (3) Tourism Product Diversification: The potential to develop more tourism experiences, such as more in-depth educational tours, accommodation packages, and workshops on vanilla and coffee processing, can attract more tourists.

Threats for the Dili Vanili tourist destination are: (1) Competition with other agrotourism destinations in Timor Leste, which offer similar products, can be a threat, especially if Dili Vanili needs to improve the quality of promotion and tourism experiences. (2) Infrastructure Limitations: If road access and public facilities are not improved, this can limit the number of visitors coming to Dili Vanili.

Rai Mutin in Kabasfatin Hamlet

Strengths of the Rai Mutin destination include: (1) Unique Natural Beauty because Rai Mutin offers a unique and spectacular white hill landscape, which is very attractive to tourists who like nature photography and exotic locations. (2) Potential for Eco-tourism: The location is still natural and has yet to be touched by excessive modernization, making Rai Mutin very suitable for developing an attractive eco-tourism for international tourists.

The prominent areas for improvement of the Rai Mutin destination are (1) Lack of supporting infrastructure, especially limited road access, and inadequate public facilities are the main obstacles in developing this destination. (2) Lack of Promotion and Introduction: Rai Mutin has yet to be widely known due to the lack of promotion and access to information on social media and online tourism platforms.

There are at least several Opportunities, namely: (1) Infrastructure Development: If there is sufficient investment from the government or private sector, supporting infrastructure such as roads, accommodation, and other public facilities can be improved. (2) Eco-tourism and Photography Potential: The natural beauty of Rai Mutin, if well promoted, can attract tourists, especially those interested in eco-tourism and photography. (3) Local Community Participation: By involving local communities in the management and promotion of the destination, Rai Mutin can become a sustainably managed tourist destination with a positive economic impact on the local population.

Rai Mutin will face threats: (1) The local government's plan to make this area a paint industry area. This industrialization will threaten the sustainability of nature in Rai Mutin and hamper tourism development. (2) Lack of Government Support: If there is more support from the government in terms of regulation and funding, the potential for Rai Mutin tourism development could be improved.

Cross-Section Analysis

In the context of the six hamlets that are the focus of the study, the tourism potential in each hamlet is different, depending on the local advantages and geographical conditions. Dili Vanili in Hularema Hamlet and Rai Mutin in Kabasfatin

Hamlet have their uniqueness, but they also face the same challenges, especially regarding promotion and infrastructure.

Dili Vanili can be an example of other destinations developing agrotourism integrated with education and local production. However, the digital marketing aspect is a factor that needs to be improved to increase tourist appeal. The socialization that has been carried out by the researcher with Mr. Rico, the manager of Dili Vanili, about the importance of Instagram in product marketing is a good first step to optimizing marketing strategies in the digital era.

On the other hand, Rai Mutin has great potential as a natural tourism destination that offers stunning natural beauty. However, limited infrastructure is a major challenge that must be overcome immediately so that this tourism potential can be fully realized. Investment in infrastructure and effective digital promotion is needed to introduce Rai Mutin as a potential natural tourism destination.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable tourism development in Aileu District, Timor Leste, especially This study shows that both Dili Vanili and Rai Mutin have great potential as tourist destinations that can attract visitors from various backgrounds, both local and international. However, several challenges must be overcome, including the need for digital promotion and inadequate infrastructure. Social media, especially Instagram, can be an effective tool to promote these two destinations more widely. In addition, improving infrastructure and increasing collaboration between managers, communities, and the government are very important to optimize tourism development in the six hamlets that are the focus of the study.

This collaboration is expected to encourage sustainable tourism development while providing economic benefits to local communities. With consistent and strategic efforts, Dili Vanili and Rai Mutin can become leading tourist destinations offering natural beauty and an in-depth experience.

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