

Traditional Guesthouse Architecture and Sustainable Tourist Engagement: A Qualitative Study of Tunisian Guesthouses

Architecture traditionnelle des maisons d'hôtes et engagement durable des touristes : une étude qualitative sur les maisons d'hôtes tunisiennes

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Abstract

This research examines how traditional guesthouses can enhance tourists' experiences while promoting sustainable engagement. Based on semi-structured interviews with 20 domestic and international visitors, our findings show that tourists seek authenticity, cultural immersion, and emotional connection while balancing comfort, modernity, and tradition. Traditional architectural elements—such as handcrafted materials, spatial organization, and aesthetic details—strongly influence accommodation choice, fostering emotional attachment, satisfaction, and loyalty. Visitors also report adopting sustainable behaviors when encouraged through clear guidance, including energy and water conservation, recycling, and support for local products. Participants emphasize the importance of comfort improvements, interactive sustainability-focused communication, and offerings involving local stakeholders, highlighting the need to integrate modern amenities with authentic style. The study contributes theoretically by showing how specific architectural features trigger emotions and promote sustainable behaviors, and methodologically by demonstrating the value of qualitative approaches in capturing tourists' nuanced motivations, perceptions, and experiences. These insights offer practical guidance for guesthouse managers seeking to combine heritage preservation, tourist satisfaction, and sustainable tourism practices.

Keywords: guesthouses; Authenticity; traditional architecture; tourist experience; sustainable engagement; sustainable practices; Place attachment; Memorable experience.

Résumé

Cette recherche analyse la manière dont les maisons d'hôtes traditionnelles peuvent enrichir l'expérience touristique tout en favorisant un engagement durable. À partir d'entretiens semi-directifs conduits auprès de 20 visiteurs nationaux et internationaux, nos résultats montrent que les touristes recherchent l'authenticité, l'immersion culturelle et la connexion émotionnelle, tout en souhaitant concilier confort, modernité et tradition. Les éléments architecturaux traditionnels — tels que les matériaux artisanaux, l'organisation spatiale et les détails esthétiques — influencent fortement le choix de l'hébergement, renforçant l'attachement émotionnel, la satisfaction et la fidélité. Les visiteurs indiquent également adopter des comportements durables lorsqu'ils sont encouragés par des indications claires, notamment en matière d'économie d'énergie et d'eau, de recyclage et de soutien aux produits locaux. Les participants soulignent l'importance d'améliorer le confort, d'instaurer une communication interactive centrée sur la durabilité et de proposer des offres impliquant les acteurs locaux, mettant ainsi en évidence la nécessité d'intégrer des équipements modernes dans un cadre authentique. Sur le plan théorique, l'étude montre comment des caractéristiques architecturales précises suscitent des émotions et encouragent des comportements responsables ; sur le plan méthodologique, elle met en valeur l'apport des approches qualitatives pour saisir les motivations, perceptions et expériences nuancées des touristes. Ces résultats offrent des pistes opérationnelles pour les gestionnaires de maisons d'hôtes souhaitant concilier préservation du patrimoine, satisfaction des visiteurs et pratiques de tourisme durable.

Mots-clés : maisons d'hôtes ; authenticité ; architecture traditionnelle ; expérience touristique ; engagement durable ; pratiques durables ; attachement au lieu ; expérience mémorable.

Introduction

Concerns about sustainable development are multiplying (Machado & Goswami, 2023), particularly in the tourism sector, signaling the advent of a new era of eco-responsible travel. Numerous terms have emerged to describe sustainable tourism, including responsible tourism, green tourism, and ecotourism (Mihalic, 2024). According to Papečkys and Jasinskas (2024), sustainable tourism is defined as the management of all tourism activities and forms of development to preserve natural, economic, and social integrity while ensuring the protection of natural and cultural resources.

In this context, traditional guesthouses, often rooted in local architecture, align naturally with this vision by offering an alternative to mass tourism and its uniformity (Vrabcova et al., 2024). Recent initiatives even advocate for a “Sustainable Tourism” label for guesthouses to promote environmentally friendly practices and raise travelers’ awareness of sustainability issues (Kaouache, 2024). Integrating ecological imperatives into strategic management (Kim et al., 2023) allows the tourism offering to meet the expectations of a sustainability-oriented clientele (Chang et al., 2024).

Moreover, with architecture embedded in local culture and handcrafted decoration reflecting heritage preservation, guesthouses offer deeper immersion for travelers (Jawabreh et al., 2024), reinforcing the importance of approaches that combine sustainability with local cultural valorization (Suryani, 2024). Beyond these distinctive features, guesthouses often exude a warm, welcoming atmosphere (Gerra & Gonçalves, 2024). Through their design, colors, and architecture—balancing authenticity and cultural preservation—guesthouses promise rich and unique tourist experiences for today’s discerning, conscientious, and volatile consumers, potentially offering exceptional value to this engaged segment.

However, the theoretical literature reveals several unresolved questions: What motivates travelers to choose eco-friendly experiences, such as staying in traditionally built guesthouses? What are the expectations of eco-conscious customers regarding these accommodations? And how do they perceive the potential for sustainable tourism practices to develop in the future? Can these guesthouses serve as a platform to raise awareness and foster long-term sustainable behaviors? These questions point to the role marketing can play in promoting tourist experiences that integrate environmental and social considerations (Dekhili et al., 2023).

Despite the topic’s significance, research on traditional guesthouses remains scarce, even though they represent a valuable and authentic alternative in today’s tourism landscape. Similarly, very few marketing studies have highlighted traditional architecture in guesthouses

as a core driver of the tourist experience (Thomas, 2024). Furthermore, research on tourist perceptions and behaviors regarding architectural heritage and how visitors value it remains incomplete (Li et al., 2024). Most studies focus on service quality or communication themes, rarely considering architecture, despite its crucial importance. Understanding consumer motivations, perceptions, and behaviors within these spaces is therefore essential. The expectations of visitors seeking culturally rooted, authentic experiences are still undefined, and it is important to explore how traditional architectural features can encourage eco-friendly behaviors and foster long-term sustainable engagement.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by proposing and testing a conceptual pathway in which the authenticity of traditional guesthouses enhances memorable tourist experiences, which in turn strengthens place attachment and ultimately promotes intentions for sustainable engagement. By articulating this sequence of authenticity, memorable experience, place attachment, and intention for sustainable engagement, the research deepens understanding of how architectural heritage can serve as a driver of both tourist satisfaction and responsible behaviors.

To guide the analysis, the study is based on the following operational questions:

1. Which architectural features of traditional guesthouses most strongly influence tourists' perceptions of authenticity and memorable experiences?
2. How do memorable experiences in these guesthouses foster place attachment and emotional connection to local culture?
3. To what extent do these experiences and place attachment encourage tourists' intentions to adopt sustainable behaviors?

To address these questions, an exploratory qualitative research design was adopted, allowing an in-depth understanding of consumers' perceptions, motivations, experiences, and expectations regarding sustainable tourism. These insights are likely to offer valuable strategic directions for managers. The central research question guiding this work is:

How can traditionally structured guesthouses enhance tourists' experiences and foster sustainable engagement in the tourism sector?

To address this question, the study is organized to first present the conceptual framework, followed by the research methodology, and finally the results and interpretation, before concluding with the main findings and implications for practice and future research.

1. Conceptual Framework

Our research aims to explore traditional guesthouse architecture as a prominent driver of the tourist experience by examining visitor motivations, evaluating their sustainable engagement with such accommodations, and assessing their future expectations regarding sustainable tourism experiences within these spaces. The study proposes a design for a memorable tourism experience while focusing on the role of traditional architecture in fostering long-term sustainable engagement among visitors.

1.1.Tradition as a Driver of a Holistic Tourism Experience

Avoiding standard tourist experiences, today's hyper-connected consumers seek innovative and unique tourism concepts (Maghraoui & Zouaoui, 2019). Guesthouses that preserve traditional architecture represent a meaningful choice compared to the standardized offerings of modern tourist accommodations (Vrabцова et al., 2024). By combining authenticity with the preservation of heritage and cultural values, these structures offer travelers unique and memorable experiences, catering to those seeking exclusivity and originality (Silva & Roque, 2024). Maghraoui and Zouaoui (2019) describe such experiences as a combination of perceptions, emotions, and interactions experienced by an individual during travel, encompassing the discovery of new cultures, activities, and landscapes.

Li et al. (2025) highlight that visual elements of architectural heritage evoke positive emotions and influence tourists' behavioral intentions. Yet, few marketing studies have examined the integration of traditional architecture into sustainable tourism offerings (Karadag, 2023). Authenticity and heritage preservation constitute a competitive advantage and a key factor for success in the eco-conscious tourism era (Aguirre et al., 2023). From a technical standpoint, features such as clay or thatched roofs enhance natural ventilation and lighting, ensuring excellent thermal comfort. Additionally, the use of natural materials such as wood or bamboo creates an exceptional traditional atmosphere, immersing visitors in history (Sebati, 2025). This deepens their connection to local culture and encourages direct interaction with the surrounding environment (Chamard & Allaux, 2018). Immersive tourism experiences like these promote the adoption of local habits and lifestyles, enriching visitors' sense of belonging and transforming these spaces into social hubs in harmony with the environment (Bogicevic et al., 2019).

1.2.Traditional Architecture and Sustainable Tourist Engagement

Sustainable development in tourism seeks to minimize environmental impacts while maximizing positive economic and socio-cultural benefits for local communities (Thomas,

2024). In this context, cultural heritage preservation plays a critical role, requiring an approach that balances historical value with contemporary societal needs (Li et al., 2025). Traditional guesthouses that implement eco-friendly practices while highlighting local heritage can raise tourists' awareness and encourage responsible behavior (Vrabcova et al., 2024). Traditional structures, reminiscent of "the good old days," serve as effective levers to shape visitor perceptions and promote the adoption of sustainable practices (Paulus, 2024).

By employing local materials and traditional construction techniques, these accommodations actively engage tourists in ecological practices during their stay and inspire continued sustainable behavior beyond their visit. Examples include natural insulation methods and rainwater harvesting systems, which motivate visitors to replicate these practices once they return home. Furthermore, these traditional architectures are embedded within artisanal environments that valorize local products and strengthen connections to local culture and craftsmanship (Zhang & Wen, 2020). By involving local residents in sustainable tourism offerings, the positive economic and social impacts on the community become tangible, reinforcing the adoption of practices that contribute to both exceptional tourist experiences and long-term environmental and social engagement (Thomas, 2024).

In sum, traditional guesthouse architecture not only enhances the immersive and emotional quality of the tourist experience but also serves as a catalyst for sustainable behavioral change, providing a foundation for strategic management decisions that integrate authenticity, heritage preservation, and eco-conscious engagement into the modern tourism landscape.

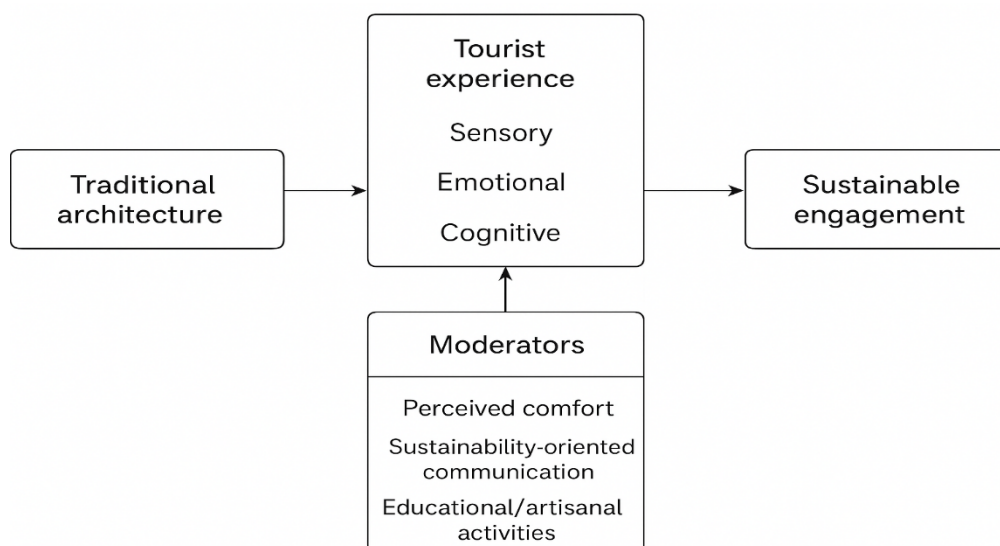
1.3. Integrative Conceptual Framework

Building on the theoretical foundations of authenticity, memorable experiences, place attachment, and pro-environmental behavior, this study proposes an integrative framework (Figure 1) that explains how traditional architectural attributes shape the sensory, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of the tourist experience. These experiential dimensions, in turn, foster perceptions of authenticity and emotional attachment to the place, which ultimately enhance sustainable engagement both during and after the visit (Zhang & Wen, 2020). Moreover, factors such as perceived comfort, sustainability-oriented communication, and participation in educational or artisanal activities may moderate these relationships.

This framework highlights how traditional architecture can serve as a catalyst for creating meaningful and immersive tourist experiences, strengthening both emotional and cultural attachment, and encouraging long-term responsible behaviors (Silva et al., 2024). By linking

architectural features to experience, attachment, and sustainability-oriented actions, the model provides a holistic perspective for both theoretical advancement and strategic management of traditional guesthouses within the eco-conscious tourism landscape.

Figure N° 1 : Integrative framework



Source : Authors

2. Research Methodology

The main objective of this study is to examine how traditional guesthouse architecture influences the tourist experience and promotes sustainable engagement among visitors. To achieve this, an exploratory qualitative research design was adopted, allowing an in-depth understanding of consumers' perceptions, motivations, experiences, and expectations regarding sustainable tourism.

2.1. Target Population and Sampling

A convenience sampling strategy was adopted, targeting tourists who had stayed in guesthouses featuring traditional architecture. Participants were recruited through social media posts, travel-related networks, and recommendations from guesthouse owners. Inclusion criteria required participants to have recently stayed in a traditional guesthouse and to be familiar with sustainability-related practices in tourism. Individuals working directly in the hospitality sector were excluded to avoid professional bias.

The final sample consisted of 20 participants displaying marked diversity in gender, age, and professional background (see Appendix 1). Although the sample was predominantly female, it encompassed a range of socio-economic and occupational profiles, providing rich and varied insights into tourists' perceptions and motivations. Data saturation was reached after the seventeenth interview, as no new themes emerged from subsequent discussions, in line with the empirical indicators suggested by Guest et al. (2006).

All participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the research objectives and procedures. Anonymity and data confidentiality were guaranteed, and data were stored securely in compliance with international ethical standards in social research.

2.2. Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, suitable for exploring emerging phenomena such as sustainable engagement in the context of the tourist experience. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, organized around three main areas:

- Screening and initial perceptions: To verify that participants had stayed in traditional guesthouses and to gather their general perceptions.
- Motivations and awareness of sustainable tourism: To explore reasons for choosing traditional guesthouses, participants' awareness of sustainable tourism, and the impact of sustainability practices on their tourist experience.
- Expectations and recommendations: To investigate participants' suggestions for optimizing the sustainable tourism experience, including cultural, architectural, and ecological aspects (Appendix 1).

Before conducting the interviews, informed consent was obtained, explaining the research objectives and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of responses in accordance with international ethical standards in social research.

2.3. Data Analysis Methods

All interviews were fully recorded and transcribed using NVivo 12 software. The data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis, aiming to identify emerging themes and sub-themes based on participants' verbatim responses. This approach allows for the identification of common patterns while preserving the richness of individual experiences. The analysis was conducted in several steps:

- Familiarization with the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data.

- Initial coding of significant statements into preliminary categories.
- Grouping into themes and sub-themes representing participants' perceptions, motivations, and behaviors.
- Illustration with direct quotes to enhance the validity and authenticity of the findings.

3. Results and Interpretation

The thematic analysis highlighted four main dimensions:

Perception of the stay: Participants consistently emphasized the authentic and harmonious atmosphere of the guesthouses, where architecture, decoration, and local gastronomy formed a coherent and emotionally rich experience. As R3 (female, 35) expressed: *"The colors and old-style materials made me feel calm, like stepping back into my grandmother's home."* Such sensory and emotional responses strengthened their affective connection to place and encouraged the adoption of local customs (Orgaz-Agüera et al., 2025). Beyond aesthetic pleasure, culinary heritage played a symbolic role in emotional regulation, particularly in uncertain times (Maghraoui & Najar, 2024).

Motivations: In line with prior research, the *quest for authenticity* and *cultural immersion* emerged as central motivations. R5 (male, 38) noted: *"I chose this guesthouse because it reflects real local life, not a tourist show."* For most participants, architecture and traditional crafts reinforced their sense of belonging and discovery. However, a minority found artisanal activities *less relevant or too staged* (R12, female, 25), suggesting segmentation between visitors seeking authenticity and those preferring comfort or novelty (Aguirre et al., 2023; Sebati, 2025).

Communication and perception of architecture: Architectural elements—such as clay walls, inner courtyards, and handcrafted furniture—were perceived as strong authenticity cues, amplifying the emotional and memorable dimensions of the experience. As R8 (female, 32) stated: *"You feel the house was built with care; it tells a story."* Moreover, transparent and personalized communication about *heritage preservation* and *eco-responsible practices* enhanced trust, perceived quality, and loyalty (Hernández-Rojas et al., 2021; Chamard & Allaux, 2018).

Sustainable engagement and future expectations: While several guesthouses adopted visible sustainable measures—such as solar panels or recycling bins—their effect on engagement was contingent on visitor awareness. As R10 (female, 44) explained: *"I didn't realize it was an eco-guesthouse until the owner mentioned the materials."* Most participants expressed readiness to

adopt simple eco-behaviors (e.g., saving water, reducing waste) and valued opportunities for educational or artisanal workshops. These expectations illustrate a desire for integrated sustainability, combining tradition, comfort, and learning (Mihalic, 2024).

In summary, the qualitative methodology enabled a comprehensive understanding of how traditional architecture shapes tourist experiences and promotes sustainable engagement, offering actionable insights for guesthouse managers and sustainable tourism practitioners.

TABLE N° 1: Thematic Analysis of Respondents' Interview Corpus

Categories	Sub-categories	Potential Verbatims
Motivations for staying in traditional guesthouses	Connection with local culture	"I love staying in places where I can truly feel the local culture." "Being surrounded by local traditions makes my stay unforgettable."
	Emotional value	"The traditional architecture makes me feel like I'm traveling back in time... It's exciting and nostalgic." "The atmosphere of these houses evokes a sense of warmth and belonging."
	Search for authenticity	"I prefer these guesthouses for their originality, eco-friendliness, and authenticity." "I feel like I'm experiencing something genuine, not commercialized."
Perception of traditional architecture	Appreciated specific elements	"I love the stone walls, wooden beams, and woven mats – they create a cozy and welcoming ambiance." "The use of natural materials like bamboo and clay gives a unique character to the house."
	Influence on tourist experience	"Seeing local materials used in construction impressed me; it's an experience I will never forget." "The décor inspired me to explore more about the region and its traditions." "The

Categories	Sub-categories	Potential Verbatims
		architecture encouraged me to slow down and enjoy every moment of my stay."
Sustainable tourism engagement	Awareness of sustainable practices	"The guesthouse had a well-organized recycling system and smart ventilation designs – it was really impressive." "Using local materials and solar energy made me more conscious about sustainability."
	Impact of practices on perception	"Solar energy usage changed the way I see these accommodations." "Knowing they support local crafts and eco-friendly practices made my stay feel meaningful."
	Encouragement to adopt responsible practices	"After this stay, I plan to adopt simple actions like reducing waste." "I realized small actions like conserving water and electricity can make a difference."
Expectations for a better sustainable tourist experience	Communication improvements	"They could offer educational activities about the history of the house." "I would have liked more explanation about their sustainable practices." "Better signage or information about eco-practices would enhance the experience."
	Comfort improvements	"The rooms could be more comfortable without losing their traditional charm." "A mix of modern comfort and traditional aesthetics would be ideal."
	Cultural activities	"Include cultural workshops like cooking classes or guided tours by locals to fully experience their lifestyle." "Hands-on activities that teach traditional crafts would enrich the stay."

Conclusion

Traditional guesthouses today represent a valuable and authentic alternative in the contemporary tourism landscape by combining architectural heritage preservation, cultural immersion, and opportunities to promote sustainable practices. This study highlights several key dynamics that influence the tourist experience and sustainable engagement of visitors through an exploration of their motivations, perceptions, and expectations regarding traditionally designed guesthouses.

Our findings indicate that tourists' motivations reflect a strong quest for authenticity, cultural immersion, emotional connection, and attachment to the local territory. Traditional architecture, as a tangible expression of history and traditions, plays a central role in their choice of accommodation. A positive perception of these handcrafted architectural features not only enhances the emotional dimension of the experience but also strengthens visitor satisfaction and loyalty toward these establishments. Moreover, visitors express clear expectations regarding improvements in comfort, interactivity through sustainability-focused communication, and diversification of the offerings anchored in a specific territorial context involving local stakeholders. Overall, there is a need to balance modernity, comfort, and respect for traditions and authentic style.

While our results suggest that the culture of sustainability is still nascent among respondents, they are not resistant to sustainable practices. Visitors are generally receptive to initiatives such as using local products, adopting traditional structures, supporting local artisans, and minimizing ecological impact.

This research offers several interesting implications. From a theoretical perspective, it is among the few studies exploring tourist experiences in guesthouses in relation to traditional architecture, authenticity, and sustainable engagement. It emphasizes traditional and artisanal aspects as catalysts for sustainable engagement within an immersive and eco-conscious tourism experience. In particular, it deepens the understanding of how specific architectural features trigger emotions and attachment, enhancing short-term satisfaction while promoting long-term sustainability behaviors.

From a methodological standpoint, the study highlights the value of qualitative approaches in tourism research, as they capture tourists' motivations, perceptions, and emotions—nuances often missed by quantitative models used to validate existing theoretical frameworks.

Practically, this research provides actionable insights for managers in the guesthouse sector. Focusing on traditional architectural features allows for improved management of the tourism offering. Highlighting specific elements in communication as selling points proves particularly

effective. Practically, this can involve using attractive visuals, sharing satisfied customer testimonials, launching nostalgic campaigns on social media, or telling compelling stories about the history of the place. Creating an immersive atmosphere around these guesthouses—through historically faithful dining, showcasing cultural heritage, or involving local communities—also enhances the tourist experience. Furthermore, visibility can be strengthened through the acquisition of sustainability labels or certifications (e.g., “Ecolabel,” “Sustainable Tourism”) to attract eco-conscious tourists and transform them into brand ambassadors.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Given that traditional architecture and tourist expectations vary widely across regions, countries, and cultures, the geographical scope of this study and the generalization of our findings to other socio-cultural contexts remain limited, particularly due to the specific Tunisian context in which the research was conducted. Moreover, the use of convenience sampling may have introduced selection bias, and the reliance on self-reported data raises the possibility of social desirability bias. As an exploratory study primarily based on a theoretical synthesis enriched by qualitative insights from respondents’ statements, it is challenging to measure concretely the impact of sustainable practices implemented in traditionally designed guesthouses on visitors’ sustainability motivations and long-term engagement. These factors together limit the external validity of the findings.

Despite these limitations, several avenues for future research appear particularly promising. First, conducting studies in guesthouses across diverse regions and cultural contexts could enable comparative analyses, helping to identify similarities and differences in how traditional architecture shapes the tourist experience. Second, examining specific cultural and contextual factors that influence visitors’ perceptions, motivations, and expectations would provide deeper insight into context-dependent dynamics. Third, complementing qualitative approaches with quantitative methods using validated scales (e.g., measures of sustainability motivation, place attachment, and perceived authenticity) and structural equation modeling techniques such as PLS-SEM could enhance the robustness and generalizability of findings.

Furthermore, exploring the integration of technology into traditional guesthouses without compromising their authenticity represents a promising research direction, particularly in the increasingly digitalized tourism landscape. This avenue could significantly contribute to the development of new tourism concepts, such as sustainable and immersive experiences in traditionally designed hospitality spaces.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

- Do you usually stay in guesthouses, or do you prefer other types of accommodation? Why?
- Have you noticed specific elements related to the traditional architecture of guesthouses (materials, décor, layout)?
- Which of these elements did you enjoy the most during your stay?
- How did these elements influence your tourist experience? (Describe your emotions, thoughts, and specific impressions)
- Why did you choose to stay in traditional guesthouses?
- How important is the architecture or history of these guesthouses to you?
- Regarding these traditional guesthouses, what are your selection criteria? (Authenticity? Proximity to local culture? Ecological aspects?) Please explain.
- Does the guesthouse promote sustainable practices or values? If so, which ones? (Recycling, use of local materials, energy management, etc.)
- Have these practices influenced your perception of the establishment?
- How would you describe the perceived value of your experience?
- Do you think your stay in this guesthouse might encourage you to adopt more responsible tourism practices in the future? Please explain.
- In your opinion, which aspects of this guesthouse could be improved to enhance the tourist experience? (Comfort, design, offered activities, communication of sustainable practices, etc.)
- What is your age, profession, and origin?

Appendix 2: Respondents' Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Respondent	Gender	Profession	Age	Monthly Income Range (Tunisian Dinar)
1	Male	Merchant	67	3000–4000
2	Male	Student	25	-
3	Female	Homemaker	35	-
4	Male	Engineer	32	10000
5	Male	Engineer	38	2500
6	Female	Retired	65	1500–3000
7	Female	Homemaker	28	-
8	Female	Engineer	32	1500–2000
9	Female	Retired	78	1500–2000
10	Female	Doctor	44	3000–5000
11	Female	Student	22	-
12	Female	Student	25	-
13	Female	Judge	53	-
14	Female	Teacher	45	-
15	Female	Teacher	43	-
16	Female	Engineer	35	10000
17	Female	Marketing Executive	28	7000
18	Male	Ministry Officer (Finance)	43	1500–2000
19	Female	Liberal Profession	40	3000–5000
20	Male	Retired	70	1500–2000

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