Promoting sustainable tourism practices at the Mont Saint-Michel through responsible tourist experiences

Master Thesis

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1 Introduction

Just off the coast of Normandy, the picturesque island Mont Saint-Michel is situated with its medieval town built upon the rocks. At the top of the Mont is an abbey that is still being used by a monastic community. The bay of the Mont Saint-Michel floods twice a day, surrounding the island with water, as it has for the past 1300 years. The island of the Mont Saint-Michel used to be connected to the mainland by a road. This road formed a dam that caught sand in the bay surrounding the Mont Saint-Michel and caused the land to creep closer to the Mont Saint-Michel, making the site lose its maritime surroundings if nothing was done. The maritime character of the site was restored during an extensive restauration work that was finished in 2015 where the parking lot was relocated 2,5 kilometers land inwards and a bridge was built close to the foot of the Mont Saint-Michel. These works made sure the island could be surrounded by water again during high tide, conserving the maritime character of the Mont Saint-Michel.

The marvelous island used to be a pilgrimage destination for believers from all over Europe. Now it is subjected to mass tourism, with tourists coming from all over the world who want to visit the World Heritage site and take a picture, with as many as 2,5 million tourists a year on average (UNESCO, 2018). Tourists come to visit the Mont Saint-Michel throughout the year, but with the high season being in the summer months, mostly in July and August during the summer holidays, it becomes very crowded. During these months, masses of visitors arrive around 11 am and leave between 4 and 5 pm. This peak in tourist frequentation is not to be underestimated. In just one day 20.000 visitors pass through the island village of only 4 hectares, of which 1 hectare consists of a forest that is not open for visitors. At the entrance of the village is the main street which has tourist shops and restaurants selling fast food sandwiches, a fancy sit-down meal or typical French crepes and galettes on either side of the street. Surrounding the main street are little passageways and alleys with not as many shops. The main street leads to the stairs that go up to the entrance of the Abbey. On this small island, it can become crowded quickly, especially in July and August. Most tourists visit the site during the day, between the peak hours the main street becomes congested with tourist masses and it becomes difficult to move forward or stand still. Only three or four times a year, in August, the tourist flow becomes so congested that next to the main entrance of the village, the smaller second entrance must be opened in order to deviate the tourist flow and make it a one-way street. Otherwise it would take tourists half an hour to only enter the village by foot. A handful of times the site was already so crowded, new visitors would have to wait outside of the entrance until 100 visitors would have exited in order to let new visitors in.

The Mont Saint-Michel faces problems of over-touristification because of the large number of tourists that come to visit the island every day, more so during peak season. The effect that over-touristification has on the site is causing the village to be overcrowded by tourists, making a walk through the main street a difficulty for visitors and inhabitants alike. This over-touristification is causing a threat to the heritage site, where monks and nuns still practice their faith and pray three times a day (Stille, 2014). Furthermore, tourist behavior almost always has an impact on the heritage location that can be damaging to the cultural heritage site, such as climbing monuments, littering and souvenir-hunting (Alazaizeh., Jamaliah, Mgonja & Ababneh, 2019). This tourist behavior affects the heritage site and the tourist experience.

From the tourist perspective, over-touristification can become an issue because the Mont Saint-Michel will become overcrowded with tourists, which will take away from the tourist experience of the site. Experiencing busy streets, long queues for entrances to museums, tourist attractions, restaurants and congested transportation means will taint the tourist experience. Tourists will be disappointed with the loss of authenticity to the heritage site and the commercialization due to mass tourism. At the same time, over-touristification is threatening the heritage site and the tourist experience because of the overcrowding and loss of authenticity. Therefore, Mont Saint-Michel has to overcome the challenge of preserving the site while facilitating increasing numbers of visitors.

The Local (2017) accuses the Mont Saint-Michel of becoming a tourist trap because of a revolving door policy due to the quality of service and "the low quality of shops, restaurants, museums and lodgings on offer that are frequently criticized" (The Local, 2017, paragraph 5).

Although it is France's second most visited location, just after Paris, there has not been much research done on the subject of tourism and specifically sustainable tourism at the Mont Saint-Michel. This study will focus on both sustainable tourism regarding the overcrowding of the village and will also analyze the tourist experience at the heritage site of the Mont Saint-Michel, so that future visitors will benefit from a responsible tourist experience.

Thus, the research question for this thesis is; *How can sustainable tourism development be promoted for the preservation of cultural heritage destinations?* To support this research question several sub questions will be answered. These are; *What are the limitations in sustainable tourism development for the Mont Saint-Michel? What policies and implementations can encourage sustainable tourist behavior at a destination? What can people working in the tourism sector do to elicit more sustainable behavior from tourists?*

The research goal of this study is to add to the very limited research on sustainable tourism at the Mont Saint-Michel and to analyze the current state of tourism at the site so that

a responsible tourist experience may be sustained. The research aims to analyze how to preserve the heritage from over-touristification and how best to promote sustainable tourism at the Mont Saint-Michel. Safeguarding heritage is fundamental for the local feeling of association to their own cultural heritage and for future generations to understand and want to preserve heritage. Preserving cultural heritage, tourist behavior at heritage sites, and the relationship between the locals and tourists are connected. Thus, this master thesis focusses on multiple aspects of sustainable tourism at the Mont Saint-Michel. In order to sustain the tourism activity at the Mont Saint-Michel in a non-damaging way this thesis will look at heritage preservation, the economic consumption side of tourism, host-tourist relationships and the tourist experience. For this research, the tourist experience is the most important incentive to implement sustainable tourism. The tourist experience is led by the limitations it has to offer, such as overcrowding, littering, transportation and the behavior of other tourists. This research aims to define those limitations and analyze the implementations that have been made by the local tourism sector.

The relevance of this study is to demonstrate the importance of preserving heritage sites and promoting a responsible tourist experience. Over-touristification is a serious problem to many destinations, which leads to damages being made to the heritage site, to the environment surrounding the site and to locals not recognizing their city and not being able to practice their own cultural habits, thus moving to a different area with less tourists. Often, local markets are being taken over by tourists and locals have to adjust their daily routine in order to do their groceries. Regular shops and restaurants will become overpriced for the average local, and they will not be able to visit their usual places. Furthermore, big tourist masses will overcrowd a heritage site that is not built for a big amount of people, and that cannot expand for it is an ancient building that needs to be preserved. Crowds of tourists will feel overwhelmed by the small space and neglect the rules that are keeping the heritage site intact, this will manifest in littering, touching objects and disrespectful behavior towards the site. This research is going to address these issues by analyzing the tourist perspective on tourism at the Mont Saint-Michel and what the limitations to sustainable tourism development at the site might be. The opinions of local tourism workers at the Mont Saint-Michel and the policies that are being implemented to preserve the heritage site and develop sustainable tourism growth are analyzed.

Another important aspect of this study is the host and tourist relationship. The issues of overcrowding of a destination does not only affect the local life, but also causes a less enjoyable visit for tourists, leaving them with a feeling of dissatisfaction after their visit. By promoting a

responsible tourism experience, tourists will enjoy their visit more while preserving the destination.

This research will be relevant for the implementation of sustainability policies and will aim to protect heritage from over-touristification. For this master thesis the heritage village of the Mont Saint-Michel was researched. The main concern of the study is to protect the site from overtourism and improving the quality of the tourist experience, thus making the visit more enjoyable for tourists. As there has not been much previous research done on sustainable tourism to the Mont Saint-Michel, this research will add a more in-depth view from the experience of tourism workers to the existing research on sustainable tourism and will dive into the case of the Mont Saint-Michel concerning the preservation of cultural heritage facing tourist masses. Overtourism at other heritage sites and cities has been causing deterioration of cultural heritage and quality of life of locals. Research has been done on the causes and consequences of overtourism and solutions for heritage cities have been proposed (Benner, 2019). The Mont Saint-Michel is a different case entirely because it is not a city that can grow to accommodate more tourism masses, but a village on an island that needs to be preserved. The carrying capacity of the village might be at its peak, while the quality of tourism services disappoint visitors and the village seems to become more commercialized and less about the tourist experience.

This research aims to analyze the sustainability of tourism to the Mont Saint-Michel from a tourism management perspective. Qualitative research was done through the conduction of interviews. The associations that are interesting for this study to interview and that are the research population are the tourism office of the Mont Saint-Michel, local tour operators, local tourism workers, city policy planners and the abbey of the Mont Saint Michel that is a part of the *centre des monuments nationaux* (center of national monuments). With the use of the following questions an open interview was held. What is the current policy on sustainable tourism? And how is the Mont Saint-Michel implementing this policy? What more can be done to promote sustainable tourism at the Mont Saint-Michel? For the perspective from a host-tourist relations view, it is interesting for this research to interview tourism workers such as restaurant and shop owners and tour guides that are in daily contact with tourists. The participants for the interviews were people working at the tourism office of the Mont Saint-Michel, people working at the *comité regional de tourisme* (regional comity of tourism, also CRT) of Normandy, restaurant and shop owners inside the Mont Saint-Michel, a tour guide at the Mont Saint-Michel, an inhabitant of the village on the Mont and people working inside the restaurants and shops, who are in daily contact with tourists.

These workers were asked questions about their daily experience with tourists and the tourist behavior they notice. Questions were asked such as What kind of observations have you made about the tourists behavior at the site? And Do you think tourists are aware of their negative behavior and the consequences it has on the site?

For the tourist perspective to be analyzed reviews on TripAdvisor left by visitors of the Mont Saint-Michel were analyzed.

The second chapter of the research is the theoretical section and discusses different theories concerning the subject of sustainable tourism, overtourism and tourist behavior at heritage sites. Sustainable tourism consists of three pillars that should be balanced. The environmental, economic and socio-cultural pillars, these pillars go together but contradict each other, which makes for sustainable tourism development to be difficult to achieve (Lansing & De Vries, 2006). Following this chapter, a methodological chapter discusses the considerations made concerning which methods to use for the research and the analysis and explains the process of the study. Multiple methods were used for the study. In order to analyze the tourism worker perspective interviews were held with people working at the Mont Saint-Michel. For the tourist perspective and to analyze the tourist experience, reviews on TripAdvisor were analyzed. The fourth chapter will discuss and analyze the results of the research with the use of the theories discussed in the theoretical chapter. The analysis of the results is divided in three subsections, authenticity, commercialization and overcrowding. The fifth and final chapter will contain the conclusion of the research that aims to contribute to the academic debate on the subject of sustainable tourism development at cultural heritage destinations.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Defining sustainable tourism development

Following the surge of tourism of the past century, destinations have been concerned with tourism masses visiting and overtaking the local and cultural environment of their destination. The rise of interest in cultural tourism and cultural heritage has led to problems of overcrowding at popular tourist destinations. Destinations that had been welcoming tourists are facing issues of overcrowding, the littering of cities and nature and the decrease of the quality of life of locals. These problems have been causing issues for inhabitants and tourists alike, such as locals not being able to recognize their city and needing to adapt their daily routine. Tourists will be displeased with the crowds of other tourists and quality of tourism will be lost due to the rise of cheaper tourism suppliers that deliver quantity over quality (Garcia, De la Calle Vaquero & Garcia, 2011; Benner, 2019). At the same time, tourism increases prosperity, it can increase economic growth and facilitates jobs (Buckley, 2012). Tourism enhances intercultural understanding and relations and educates tourists about other cultures and history.

The definition of the term sustainable tourism is still debated by academics, argues Mika (2015). In fact, one interpretation of sustainable tourism excludes the other. From the environmental approach, sustainable tourism aims to sustain the natural landscape of destinations and the value of tourism on a local, social basis. From the interpretation of the tourism business, tourism needs to experience economic growth and visitor growth, and thus sustaining the development of the tourism business (Mika, 2015, p.10). This excludes the interpretation of sustaining the natural and cultural environment in its local values. The cultural definition of sustainable tourism encompasses the preservation of cultural heritage and local, socio-cultural values, for the benefit of the local community. This research aims to sustain tourism in the cultural interpretation and improve on the case of sustainable tourism concerning the cultural environment of heritage cities.

The concept of sustainable development is accused of being contradictory (Sharpley, 2000), because of the definitions of the words sustainable and development. While sustainable indicates the preservation of the situation, in the case of this research of tourism, development indicates the ongoing changes. Sustainable tourism development would thus indicate the preservation of tourism through change. However, this research is focused on combining the different aspects of sustainable tourism and researches a holistic approach to develop sustainable tourism including economic growth and sustaining cultural heritage through tourism. While tourism as a phenomenon can harm destinations' natural and socio-cultural environment, implementing sustainable policies and developing sustainable actions can

preserve the environment and tourism growth at the same time. Experiencing tourism growth is not necessarily harmful towards a destination, when tourism is managed sustainably. This thesis will analyze the changes in implementations made to preserve tourism.

According to Buckley (2012) an unsuccessful approach to sustainability in the private sector is through self-regulation and destination marketing and demarketing. Meanwhile, tourism impact can be reduced through "environmental policies, management measures and technologies" (Buckley, 2012, p.532).

Lansing & De Vries (2006) note that an objective definition of the concept of sustainable tourism is necessary to be able to apply and manage sustainable tourism at destinations. The definition Lansing & De Vries (2006) use is the definition proposed by the World Tourism Organization. The World Tourism Organization states that sustainable tourism consists of three aspects of tourism development, environmental, economic and socio-cultural. These aspects must be in balance to achieve long term sustainability. Lansing & De Vries (2006) discuss the self-regulation of countries and corporations in sustainably characterizing tourism initiatives and conclude that the involvement of local employees would reduce economic problems, decrease environmental impacts and benefit the safeguarding of cultural heritage. Inhabitants of a destination feel the need to participate in helping to achieve sustainability in tourism at their tourist site, to preserve their natural and cultural environment as well as to promote responsible cultural tourism.

But what makes destinations over-touristified according to researchers? Destinations become over-touristified when overtourism occurs and destinations receive more tourists than can be welcomed. This occurrence can be measured by the carrying capacity of a destination (Gonzalez, Coronima & Galí, 2018). The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) has defined the tourism carrying capacity as "the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic, socio-cultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors' satisfaction (1981)." (Massiani & Santoro, 2012, p.141)

Meanwhile, an excessive number of visitors can harm a destinations heritage. Gonzalez, Coromina and Galí (2018) discuss the social carrying capacity and residents perception on tourism in a heritage town. The tourist function index, which is the ratio of tourism beds to residents, shows the number of tourists a destination can welcome compared to the number of residents. A high tourist function index indicates a high number of tourists, and residents feeling outnumbered and not feeling a sense of belonging in their city. A low ratio does not necessarily mean a destination receives a low number of tourists; in this case the destination receives many

day-trippers that stay the night in another city. The tourism economy of the destination benefits less from a low ratio because the day-trippers spend less money at the destination in terms of overnight stays and in restaurant visits, also the tourist tax is paid at another destination. Instead, the day-trip destination faces the problems overtourism brings in terms of littering, overcrowding and loss of place authenticity.

Overtourism occurs when a destination receives more tourists than it can accommodate, and negative consequences for the locals and the environment take place. Since tourism has become more affordable, tourists from all over the world come to visit European cities, who are easily reachable with the use of low-cost carriers and small distances between them. Many cities face problems of overtourism because cities do not have the resources to welcome so many tourists at once (Stanchev, 2018). Heritage towns and city centers experience overtourism at cultural heritage sites and in areas that cannot expand to receive so many tourists. The solutions for this issue recommended by Stanchev (2018) are by installing reservations and tickets for entry to protected areas such as implemented at the Cinque Terre in Italy and using technology to avoid congestion such as is the case in Amsterdam where a mobile app shows the waiting time at popular attractions and proposes alternatives to visit.

Cultural destinations that are being confronted with mass tourism have been promoting sustainable tourism in order to safeguard their heritage. But in some cases, promoting sustainability proved to be difficult even in the most obvious cases such as Venice, where the old city's cultural heritage is threatened by mass tourism and unsustainable growth of visitor numbers (Benner, 2019). Opposing sustainable tourism are big tourism corporations that earn more money through quantitative mass tourism than qualitative sustainable tourism.

2.2 The cycle of over-touristification

Lansing & De Vries (2006) discuss the theory of sustainable tourism being a marketing ploy instead of an ethical alternative of tourism, where tourists are lured towards a destination under pretext that it is a sustainable destination choice as a marketing campaign. Critics of sustainable tourism argue that the concept is so vaguely defined and interpretable that the concept of sustainability is being used to market tourism and to attract tourists on sustainable vacations, when in fact it is not clearly defined what sustainability is. Lansing & De Vries (2006) argue that feasible measurements and policies need to be implemented for sustainable tourism to be a possible form of tourism.

The business of tourism can attract social and economic growth to a destination and is often seen as a welcome source of development (Lansing & De Vries, 2006). Increasing tourism

numbers will facilitate more jobs in the tourism industry of a destination and locals working in the tourism sector will want to stimulate and increase the tourism flow. Following the surge in visitors to a destination, tourism can become more competitive and dynamic, and attractive offers will be proposed to attract tourists to a destination. And with the improvement of transportation methods, distribution of information through online media and lower cost destinations, a cultural attraction can attract more tourists to a destination. However, the popularity of a destination will lead to mass tourism, a phenomenon where tourists visit the same "must go" places and will not be informed about other less touristic places in the area. This will end up in a disappointing tourist experience for the tourists who will encounter big crowds and loss of quality of service (Rizzo & Mignosa, 2013).

Many tourism destinations receive fluctuating numbers of tourists spread over tourism seasons. Factors influencing tourism seasons are weather seasons, for example in summer with beach tourism, vacations and long weekends where tourists have more time to visit a destination, cultural or historical related events or festivals. During peak tourism seasons the quality of life of locals and their satisfaction decreases due to the arrival of more tourists and the exceeding of local resource capacities. The quality of life of tourists is measured with their social, economic and environmental perceptions. While locals welcome the benefits that come with tourism, their pro-tourism stance will change to anti-tourism due to the challenges created by an over saturated destination and services (Jeon, Kang & Desmarais, 2016).

Mansfeld (2018) addresses the host-tourist relationship when it comes to World Heritage Sites or World Heritage Properties and the local community's involvement in the process of functioning as a World Heritage Site and managing tourism. The lack of involvement in the process of planning may lead to residents demonstrating their negative sentiment towards tourism by claiming to feel disassociation from their cultural heritage. The reason for this feeling amongst residents is that the heritage and their cultural identity may seem to be confiscated from the residents after inscription as a World Heritage Site or that the cultural image spread in the media is offending to the locals who may feel the need to act differently. In order to avoid these negative sentiments, residents must be involved in the planning of tourism at World Heritage Sites. Mansfeld (2018) proposes several community sustainable goals, on the environmental, economic, socio-cultural and quality-of-life levels. An example of a sustainable tourism goal is to "Develop a forced policy assuring that some profits made by tourism at a WHS will be injected directly into environmental management and maintenance of those properties" (Mansfeld, 2018, p.33).

The vicious circle described by Russo (2002) shows the cycle of tourism at a heritage destination. Tourists become attracted to a destination for its cultural heritage sites, which are often located in near proximity of each other. The destination is overwhelmed by the number of visitors and can't seem to limit tourism growth in the area. The tourist area becomes congested and expands in an unmanageable way. This leads to the second phase of the vicious circle, day trippers come to the central tourist area but spend more time and money outside of the area, meanwhile using and putting a strain on the heritage without benefitting it through their expenses. Daytrips are also more bound by seasons because of the weather and special occasions, and day trip tourists tend to be less aware of the cultural history of the destination according to Russo (2002, p.169). They are less reachable by information and concentrate in the tourist hotspots. Day trip tourism produces more congestion during the day and leaves the destination empty in the evening and at night. The third phase of the vicious circle describes the loss of quality of tourist products and services due to the type of tourist that visits the heritage destination. The mass tourist is less informed about quality and is more sensitive to prices. Businesses tend to crowd themselves out by replacing high quality products with cheap and standardized products. In the fourth and last phase of the vicious circle, the quality of tourism is declining, and the congestion will make it costlier for tourists to choose the central cultural location instead of the surrounding areas. More tourists will choose to visit surrounding areas thus completing the vicious circle.

According to Benner (2019) in order to deviate the tourist flow that overwhelm popular tourist destinations, the destination should consider changing the promotion of the site to attract more tourists to the surrounding areas of the tourist destination and away from crowded hotspots. The policymakers and practitioners should select desirable tourist aspects to promote in order to diminish the negative impact mass tourism has on the environment and the heritage and eventually limit quantitative growth. The difficulty of steering away the tourist flow lies with political issues of tourism workers being in favor of quantitative growth, policy makers will be pressured not to change the tourism development. Benner (2019) uses the example of Venice, where hordes of tourists crowd the fragile and old city centre. The cultural heritage centre of Venice is non-expandable and tourism growth is unsustainable and threatening the heritage. In cities such as Venice policy makers need to take into account different interests of tourism entrepreneurs, sustainability advocates and the local population that is living in the overcrowded area. The example of Venice can be compared to the Mont Saint-Michel, which also has a small cultural heritage site that is non-expandable. The unsustainable tourism growth to the site causes crowds to gather in the small streets. As in many heritage cities centers,

multiple actors with different interests need to be taken into account for the management of tourism at the destination.

Research from Benner (2019) shows that economically, entrepreneurs in the tourism sector will be in favor of tourism growth, who will have influence on the politics of sustainable policy making. Opposing the unsustainable tourism growth are the inhabitants who feel as if they are losing their city to the touristic masses and are unable to use public transportations or move freely through the streets due to the tourist crowds. Residents might feel an anti-tourist sentiment due to the density of tourism in the city. Alexis (2017) analyses the association of tourism development with the sentiment of locals that develop from delight and indifference towards tourists to annoyance and irritation during the phases of the Tourist Area Life-Cycle (TALC). TALC explains the evolution and implication of tourism to a tourist area using different phases; "Exploration, Involvement, Development, Consolidation, Stagnation and Decline or Rejuvenation" (Alexis, 2017, p.288-289). From the Consolidation phase onwards is the start of mass tourism and locals are beginning to feel irritation towards tourists. According to the research, tourism development that is measured by tourism growth coincides with negative sentiments of locals towards tourists and is expressed with negative behavior due to locals feeling crowded out. Tourists will notice this negative behavior from locals and will feel less welcome at a destination. The tourist experience at the destination will become more negative due to the feeling tourists will experience of not being welcomed at the destination. This could lead to more negative behavior from tourists, such as indifference regarding littering and a lack of respect towards the cultural heritage. To prevent the cycle of negative sentiment between locals and tourists, the cycle must be altered though sustainable tourism growth and development.

2.3 Tourist behavior in heritage towns

According to Rizzo and Mignosa (2013), heritage tourism can be defined as "the explicit and voluntary contact that tourists have, away from their normal place of residence, with cultural heritage through the visit or consumption of heritage goods and services" (Rizzo & Mignosa, 2013, p.387-388). Cultural and heritage tourism has become a mass tourism phenomenon with the mass tourism operators providing tourists with the opportunity to visit a cultural destination and the tourist interest to learn about other cultures and histories.

According to Ramires, Brandao and Sousa (2018) there is a difference between the practice of visiting cultural destinations and visiting destinations for cultural and educational reasons. They define heritage tourism as being a type of cultural tourism, where the difference

lies in the motivation of the tourist. With heritage tourism the tourists are motivated to relate the heritage characteristics of a place to their perception of their own heritage. Tourists will engage in a personal heritage experience. Thus, Ramires, Brandao and Sousa (2018) conclude that heritage tourism should be observed as a social phenomenon where tourists engage with the past to motivate them to learn more about the history of a place, to participate in an experience and to be in contact to the heritage that relates them to their own heritage. Heritage tourism gives tourists a personal experience with the traditions, history and culture of a place. Cultural heritage tourists are in search of experiencing and learning about the cultures and the history of another destination and other people. With the use of education and by learning about a cultural heritage destination, tourists will behave more respectfully towards the cultural heritage. Respecting a site and its history makes visitors more aware of their behavior that could damage the site. Thus, culturally educated visitors will want to help preserve the site by small acts that could aid sustainable tourism development at the cultural heritage destination.

Jovicic (2016) suggests a difference between mass tourism and cultural tourism. Cultural tourism has become an alternative type of tourism to mass tourism. Where mass tourists visit must-see destinations, cultural tourism has as a primary goal to discover and learn about cultural heritage and historical and artistic places. However, it seems that cultural tourism is experiencing certain characteristics of mass tourism such as high number of tourists, package tourists and increased pressure on the social and environmental surroundings. To promote a positive tourism impact on a destination, tourism suppliers offer high quality tourist experiences and tourists search for an experience in which they actively participate.

Residents perceive for the most part the negative side of tourism and less so the economic growth tourism brings as they do not directly gain economically from tourism. The residents face overcrowding in the streets, having to change their daily routine in order to avoid tourists and feeling distanced from their own heritage.

Promoting sustainable visitor behavior at heritage sites is key in promoting sustainable tourism. Heritage sites are often fragile and need to be visited with caution to artefacts. Visitors awareness and behavior at heritage site can lead to more support of preservation of the heritage. Buonincontri, Marasco and Ramkissoon (2017) provide insight to results that show the tourist experience enhances their understanding and appreciation of cultural heritage and influences their attachment to the heritage. This appreciation causes tourists to behave in a way that preserves and enhances cultural heritage sites. However, the study shows visitors' lack of involvement in the sustainable management process. Visitors' sustainable behavior towards heritage sites is of importance to the preservation of those sites and sustainable tourism

development. The education of tourists on their impact on social and environmental aspects of a destination will make them aware of their behavior and entice them to participate in the actions to preserve the heritage.

The 'tourist gaze' is a term coined by Urry (1990) that explains the set of expectations that tourists have on a location while visiting. Tourists see what they expect to see in their search for authenticity. Having an authentic experience is an important aspect for tourists, who visit a destination in order to experience and to learn about another culture or history. Destinations can use this search for authenticity to promote their own history in order to attract cultural tourists and preserve their heritage. The same building style can be used in a city to be perceived as an authentic historical city or historical buildings in cities can be preserved in the name of heritage preservation to attract tourists. The tourists perceive a cultural heritage destination as authentic. From the tourist perspective, tourists are searching for an authentic experience and wish to interact with culture and learn about historical sites.

Educating tourists during their visit is a measure to make them more aware of their impact on heritage. Alazaizeh et al., (2019) examine tourist behavior at heritage sites with the use of tour guides to educate tourists about the heritage. The research determines visitor sustainable behavior is greatly influenced by the visitor experience and satisfaction. Sustainable behavior from tourists will be the result of tour guides impressing visitors with an extraordinary experience and transmitting their enthusiasm and care to preserve the heritage site. Moving forward, visitors will consider their actions and actively chose to aid in preserving the heritage.

The distribution of codes of "tourist ethics" can raise public awareness to problems caused by insensitive tourism (Drost, 1996). These tourist ethics codes are not mandatory rules for tourists to be followed, but they are reminding tourists about their environmental and sociocultural impact through their tourist actions. Understanding and respecting the guidelines at a tourism destination will ensure a more positive impact. Drost (1996) proposes the wider circulation of the guidelines through handouts to tourists at travel agencies such as airline companies. The research points out that this education about sustainable tourism development is also necessary for the host population and government, as they are often searching to attract more tourists to their destination because of the perceived economic benefits and failing to manage tourist numbers in the long term, thus damaging the site. Drost (1996) concludes the preservation of World Heritage Sites may depend on "the development of a harmonious relationship with tourism. Initiating positive changes in tourist practices and behavior will largely rely on effective education and regulations." (Drost, 1996, p.483)

According to Moscardo (1996) mindfulness causes people to absorb information and be aware and in control of their behavior. At a tourism destination, mindful visitors are more likely to enjoy their visit and to learn more and be more interested about the location. They are also more aware of the consequences of their behavior and appreciate the site more than mindless visitors. Heritage sites are endangered by tourism development, overcrowding and congestion and due to inappropriate tourist behavior, littering and vandalism. The research concludes that tourist education can relieve the pressures of negative or mindless behavior off of heritage sites and positive visitor experiences can elicit public support for the conservation of the heritage sites.

3 Methodology

Multiple methods of research were considered for this thesis, such as participant observation, interviews and case study research. The methods of participant observation and case studies were considered in order to observe the tourist-host relationship and the natural environment and behavior of tourists at the Mont-Saint-Michel and to relate and compare the case of the Mont-Saint-Michel with other destinations that are coping with the same problems caused by over-touristification. Due to the COVID-19 virus outbreak and the closing of tourist sites including the Mont Saint-Michel and the closing of country boarders, these methods could not be conducted locally in the research. Instead, the research had to be done through online means.

The methods chosen for this study are the conduction of interviews with local tourism workers and the analyzation of tourist reviews left on TripAdvisor, because the research analyzes the issue of overtourism form different points of view, from both the tourism worker as the tourist side. The method of interviewing was chosen for its detailed answers from participants and could be done though Skype interviews with local tourist workers. For this qualitative method the use of semi structured interviews was preferred. The semi structured interviews directed the interview in a certain way and led the participants to freely talk about the subject of interest with the use of a list of questions (Holstein, J., & Gubrium, J. F., 2003; Bryman, 2008). The duration of the interviews was between 45 and 90 minutes, and for the entire research 8 interviews have been conducted. Due to the travel restrictions due to COVID-19 and the closing of tourist facilities, not many people responded to conducting an interview and 8 hours of data was gathered by interviews. The data was deemed to produce sufficient information about the research subject.

The concepts mentioned in the literature review part of this research proposal were measured through the formulation of specific questions during the interviews. After reading the data multiple times and getting acquainted with the data, concepts were identified from the literature, being authenticity, the tourist experience, over-touristification and sustainable tourism development. The interview answers allowed for a clarification of the subject of sustainable tourism development at the Mont Saint-Michel and were analyzed with the use of the literature. The questions were similar in each interview in order to understand the viewpoint of each interviewee in relation to their association and to the Mont-Saint-Michel. The questions were adapted to the different associations and their work. Two different interview guidelines were made, one concerning policies at the tourism office and one concerning the daily contact of tourists with tourism workers.

During the interviews questions were asked concerning the promotion of sustainable tourism at the Mont-Saint-Michel, the issues caused by over-touristification at the site and the protection of cultural heritage. In order to gain specific information on the subject, interviews were planned with several associations connected to the Mont-Saint-Michel and interested in sustainable tourism regarding the policies for the number of tourists visiting the Mont-Saint-Michel and in the preservation of the cultural heritage of the abbey and the village on the island. The participants for the interviews were people working at the tourism office of the Mont Saint Michel, people working at the tourism office of Normandy, restaurant and shop owners inside the Mont Saint Michel, a tour guide at the Mont Saint Michel, an inhabitant of the village on the Mont, people working inside the restaurants and shops, who are in daily contact with tourists and a monk living in the abbey of the Mont Saint Michel.

The original plan for the interviews to take place, the research would have been done locally at the Mont Saint-Michel and in surrounding villages of the Bay. Because of the current circumstances with the COVID-19 virus and the closing of borders and tourist areas, the interviews could not take place locally and subjects were approached by mail for an interview through Skype and Facetime. Several tourism workers responded to this mail and interviews were planned in the first weeks of April. With the use of snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012, p.716), ending the interviews with the question whether they knew more tourism workers that would be interested to participate in the research more respondents were contacted March and April and interviewed in April and May of 2020.

The possibility to include the tourist-host relationship and the tourist perspectives in this research has been considered with the use of interviews on both sides of the relationship. As the site was closed, local interviews with tourists could not be conducted. These limitations considered, a method that appears to include the possibility of adding the tourist perspective in the research is through analyzing online reviews on the Mont-Saint-Michel from sources such as TripAdvisor. The benefits to this method would be the accessibility of the tourist perspectives on the Mont-Saint-Michel and the services received. The online reviews would be honest because of the anonymity and well thought out instead of on the spot. The limitations to this method are that questions cannot be posed towards the visitors and only the answer in the review can be analyzed, thus specific reviews must be searched that answer the research question. The criteria for these reviews were the time period of the visit, which was from the most recent visits until after the reconstruction works of the maritime character in 2015, the analyzed reviews included the discussion of certain subjects concerning authenticity, commercialization, the tourist experience and complaints about the visit and prices.

For this research, a total of 306 comments in Dutch, French and English that were left on TripAdvisor between May 2020 and November 2017 were analyzed with the use of Atlas ti and open coding. The comments were analyzed in their original language in order to not lose the meaning through an automated translation. Comments from Dutch tourists were analyzed because of the perspective from European visitors, outside of France, of the Mont Saint-Michel. This language is also the researchers first language, thus being able to analyze the European tourist perspective in an understandable way. Comments in English were chosen to receive an international tourist perspective. These comments came from several continents and demonstrates a more global view on the Mont Saint-Michel experience. Lastly, comments in French were chosen to analyze the tourist experience from within the same culture and with the tourists having grown up with knowledge of the Mont Saint-Michel.

The data was transcribed and then coded using Atlas ti through the process of open coding (Benaquisto, 2008, p.86). The interviews were read by the researcher and important parts were assigned a code. Concepts form the theoretical chapter such as tourist behavior, mass tourism, authenticity were connected to the coded passages. Following this axial coding was used to connect codes that fit together in overarching themes. The codes were then analyzed and formed a response to the research question.

4 Analysis

This master thesis aims to answer the research question *How can sustainable tourism development be promoted for the preservation of cultural heritage destinations?* For this research the cultural heritage destination of the Mont Saint-Michel was analyzed with the use of TripAdvisor reviews and 8 interviews with people working in the tourism sector of the Mont Saint-Michel and/or living on the site. The tourist experience was analyzed from TripAdvisor reviews in order to understand what the points of improvement at the Mont Saint-Michel are from the tourist perspective. The tourist experience of a destination is influenced by the facilities available at the site. The most frequent themes named by tourists in the reviews were authenticity of the site, the commercialization of the site and prices at the local shops and restaurants, the crowds at the Mont Saint-Michel during different seasons, including tips for other tourists when to visit and their interaction with locals. Thus, the analysis was divided in three subsections according to the main three subjects that were identified during the gathering of the data from interviews and TripAdvisor at the Mont Saint-Michel; authenticity, commercialization and overcrowding. The three pillars of sustainable tourism, environmental, economic and socio-cultural, were measured with the data within the subsections. These pillars allow for an analysis of what sustainable tourism entails at the Mont Saint-Michel and what the limitations are to develop sustainable tourism at the Mont Saint-Michel.

In order to answer the sub question "*What are the limitations in sustainable tourism development for the Mont Saint-Michel?*" we must first look at what the issues are. To start, interviewees were asked what sustainable tourism meant for them. The answers differed between ecological responsible tourism and preserving heritage for future generations. According to a participant, sustainable tourism development consisted of three pillars, the ecological, the economic and the social pillar. This answer corresponds with the theory used by Lansing & De Vries (2006). The three pillars of sustainable tourism are equally important to be able to develop sustainable tourism at a destination, the ecological, economic and socio-cultural pillars must be balanced. However, there is a constant tension between these pillars. The contradicting priorities of the pillars, preserving the natural environment, encouraging economic growth, and preserving the culture and quality of life of locals. Experiencing tourism growth will have an impact on the natural and cultural environment of a destination. How tourism is managed can encourage sustainable tourism growth and balance the three pillars of sustainable tourism.

What the interviews did have in common was the sentiment that sustainable tourism was a contradiction. Participants admitted tourism is not always sustainable, starting with the

act of travelling and the shipping and selling of products from another continent. Economic growth due to tourism brings with it the negative aspects that affect the environment and the community if nothing is done to preserve the destination through sustainable tourism development (Buckley, 2012; Mika, 2015). A participant responded during an interview:

Because the problem we face is that, there is an opposition, in my opinion, between sustainability and tourism in its economic component. I think that one cannot have job creations, one cannot have times of growth via tourism and at the same time preserve the environment. *

*translated from French by the researcher

To be able to preserve the environment and the heritage, a more sustainable form of tourism must be developed and policies that preserve the site of the Mont Saint-Michel must be developed. At this point, the Mont Saint-Michel receives mass tourism which affects the environment, the site and the tourist experience. To develop sustainable tourism is to take part in actions to preserve and protect the location.

4.1 Authenticity

Authenticity is an important aspect to the tourist experience at the Mont Saint-Michel. Many tourists referenced the marvelous history of the site and were enticed to visit it since they had heard of its beautiful setting in the midst of tides in the bay of Mont Saint-Michel and wondered at the difficulty of building a village on a rocky island in medieval times. Visitors specifically recounted the beauty of the abbey as a motive to visit the Mont Saint-Michel and perceived it as a must visit destination if you were in the region. Reviews such as the one below from November 2019, discussed the historical, medieval village and wondered how it must have been to live there during medieval times without encountering as many tourists, who at the time were pilgrims on a religious quest towards the abbey.

We spent the night at Mont Saint Michel & are so pleased we got to experience the Abbey after hours & once the crowds had departed. If only the walls could talk! It was magical wondering the streets & ramparts, imagining the life & history that these walls contained.

In contrast to reviews about the Mont Saint-Michel's authenticity and history, reviews were also posted about tourists having a theme park experience, while comparing Mont Saint-

Michel to the Disney castle, the Rapunzel castle, the castle Hogwarts as well as the shopping road from Harry Potter and Minas Tirith from Lord of the Rings.

A review from a tourist that visited in November 2019 said:

> This is a beautiful place and full of surprises. I now know where Harry Potter creator took some of her ideas. This place is magical and full of little stores and nice stoned streets. The abbey is well preserved, despite the amount of tourism.

The review above mentions the beauty of the site and the magical setting. The visitor compares the site of the Mont Saint-Michel to a Harry Potter world by saying she imagines the creator taking inspiration from the historical site.

Taken from another review from June 2019 is a segment connecting the Mont Saint-Michel to Minas Tirith from Lord of the Rings. The reviewer visited the site with a guide, who conveyed more history of the place, thus educating the tourists about the location and heritage. According to the tourist, the use of the guide added more significance to the experience. The use of tour guides when visiting a cultural heritage destination adds an educational dimension to the visit. Guides will be able to educate visitors about the culture and history of the site and make visitors more aware of the influence visitors have on the natural and socio-cultural environment.

> If you've seen The Lord of the Rings, it will remind you of Minas Tirith. Our guide was also able to share a lot of the history of the place, which undoubtedly added a lot more significance to the experience.

These comparisons show how tourists are in search of an authentic experience that they can relate to and recognize with their personal heritage, in this case of the Mont Saint-Michel it is with fictional heritage of books and films, as described by Ramires, Brandao & Sousa (2018). Tourists that are not experiencing ancient cultural heritage buildings such as the Mont Saint-Michel in their own culture are more likely to relate the site to buildings they do have experience with. Even with those being fictional places, tourists who truly submerge themselves in the fandom of those fictional places will relive the tourist experience at the Mont Saint-Michel. However, not all the comparisons of the Mont Saint-Michel to those fictional places came from positive reviews. Some reviews comparing the Mont Saint-Michel to a Disney experience did not mean the magical sense of the word but described an amusement park

experience which did not feel authentic of France and historical buildings. The review below from June 2019 describes feeling disappointed upon visiting the site he had wanted to visit for years. The visitor notes the site felt commercialized because of the trinket shops and crowds of tourists, even though he describes the site as beautiful and well preserved.

I have wanted to visit this site for years and finally I have. Maybe my expectations were too high, but I felt it was somewhat overrated. I still think this is a very interesting place to visit, but it felt much more commercialized than I had anticipated. There were crowds of tourists and many cheap trinket shops to get their money. It felt more like a Disney experience than authentic France.

That aside, it is situated beautifully and pictures cannot do it justice. The tides ebbing and flowing around the castle is special indeed. And the gothic architecture on the tour is interesting although not nearly as preserved and stunning as other notable gothic sites around Europe. Visit if you have it on your list, but if you are on the fence, consider skipping it.

These different experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity of the Mont Saint-Michel allow for tourists to perceive the cultural heritage site as a historical tourism destination that engages tourists with the past. The authentic village and since 2015 the authentic island scenery amaze tourists daily. Tourists that interact with the history of the Mont Saint-Michel experience the medieval village and reminisce about a historical time, wondering what the experience would have been like at that time and without tourists. For some tourists, the Mont Saint-Michel felt as staged authenticity, as if the village was made to look historical to a point of becoming fake, which reminded the visitors of a theme park such as Disneyland. What contributed to the tourist perception of visiting a theme park at the Mont Saint-Michel were the tourist crowds, who visit the site because it is a "must see".

According to Moscardo (1996) there are two types of visitors, mindful and mindless visitors, and more often they are mindless. The first path of mindlessness stems from routine behavior, because the situation is standardized and repetitive. The second path to mindlessness is that of visitors having decided the information offered to them is not interesting and thus not paying attention to it, or because they accept without question a situation from another location and reproduce it. Aligned with this theory from Moscardo (1996), the participants in the interviews also identified two types of tourists. The local inhabitants notice different kinds of tourists visiting their village, through conversations with the tourists and through noticing their

behavior. The cultural tourist is genuinely interested in the history and religious culture of the site. These tourists happen to arrive earlier in the morning to experience sunset or morning mass and frequently ask questions about the site to locals. The other and more frequent kind of tourist is the mass tourist that visits the must-see places. This mass tourist also asks questions to locals but noticeably more commercial ones, such as at what time the village would close and whether people really lived there.

Mindless tourists are unaware of how their behavior affects the site. These tourists will engage in their indifferent behavior and will not be aware of how they are harming the heritage site. This can result in behavior that is perceived as negative, such as littering and being disrespectful towards the cultural heritage of the destination. This negative behavior will harm the ecological and socio-cultural environment of the destination. For the case of the Mont Saint-Michel, participants were asked during the interviews whether they believed tourists were aware of their harmful or negative behavior towards the site. Negative behavior that was named during the interviews was littering or loud talking in the abbey and exhibiting disrespectful behavior towards the site. According to the participants, few tourists display negative behavior towards the site, and respondents observed that tourists are not aware of their negative behavior, they behave as they would at any other site or at home (Moscardo, 1996). The visitors that are being respectful towards the site and exhibit positive behavior are however aware of the negative behavior of other visitors. The unsustainable cycle of over-touristification occurs when negative tourists are acting negatively because they are not aware of their behavior. A participant also notes that visitors may be unaware of their negative behavior when they are stressed at the site. The participant explains the stress can arise from the visitors circumstances at the site, such as when the site is overcrowded, and visitors have to wait in line for hours, the participant names the stress that can come from being in a crowded shuttle bus in the middle of summer, or when tourists have to stand around in the rain with no cover. These circumstances will leave tourists with a bad mood and they will not be aware of their negative behavior regarding the site and other tourists. Participants clarify that there is a rise in negative behavior when the Mont Saint-Michel is more crowded, noticeably in the summer months. In order to reduce the negative behavior, this cycle of unsustainability must be altered through the management of tourism growth at certain high tourism times.

Tourists themselves are willing to change their visiting behavior, for example to come in other seasons than in summer, because it benefits their own tourist experience. When tourists learn in advance to their visit when the best time to visit is, or what to expect at the site in terms of amenities, their expectations will be met, and they will be prepared for their visit. When

tourists are educated about the sustainable tourism actions, they will be aware of their visiting behavior and adapt to preserve the site. However, it is more likely tourists will choose to change their behavior towards the site, because it is beneficial for themselves. Visiting the site with 20.000 other visitors in the same day is less attractive than visiting the site when it is quieter, and visitors can take their time to explore.

A tour guide recited a particular experience of hers when a tourist asked her during a visit in the abbey whether the monks that were preparing their service were real monks or whether they were actors. The tour guide was taken aback by the question and responded jokingly that the monks were indeed actors, upon which the tourist walked away, content with the answer. When the tour guide caught up with the tourist to in fact make sure she knew the monks were real and not to disturb them, the tourist was more confused by this realization than if the monks would have been actors. This tourist was so convinced of the conceived authenticity of the site that she experienced the site as an amusement park, and that there were actors dressed as monks to make the experience more authentic. The tourist saw what she expected to see as her form of perceived authenticity (Urry, 1990).

Alazaizeh et al., (2019) researched the use of tour guides to educate tourists at a heritage site, so that the visitors would understand and display more respectful behavior towards the site. This theory is implemented by local tour guides at the Mont Saint-Michel, who notice educating tourists during their visit causes them to display a positive behavior. Depending on the types of visitors, differing in cultural backgrounds, age and education, visitors can be taught throughout their visit about the history, the architecture and the consequences on the environment with different approaches. At the Mont Saint-Michel different guided tours can be made, a tour around the bay of the Mont Saint-Michel, where tourists can learn about the natural environment and the tides surrounding the site, a tour of the village of the Mont Saint-Michel, and a tour of the abbey. A full-day tour can be made as well throughout every part of the Mont Saint-Michel.

A tour guide that participated in the research notes that her explanations about the history of the site are not always accepted by the tourists. She explains when she is guiding a visit in the abbey and there are monks practicing their faith, some tourists are skeptical about the rules to the visit to respect the site. She then has to explain to them that everyone is welcome to believe in their own faith but within the building of the abbey of the Mont Saint-Michel the religion needs to be respected, by talking in low voices and taking off headgear. By educating tourists about the history and the culture of the site, the Mont Saint-Michel is more likely to incite respect from tourists, which will stimulate positive tourist behavior towards the site.

In order to encourage sustainable tourist behavior at the Mont Saint-Michel and promote tourism frequentation in the surrounding area of the Mont Saint-Michel, a destination contract was assembled between the region Normandy and the region Bretagne, and the local tourism offices of the big villages, being Saint-Malo, Avranches and Mont Saint-Michel. In this destination contract the partners work together to promote tourism throughout the Bay of the Mont Saint-Michel along major cities up to Saint-Malo. At the Mont Saint-Michel a plan of actions was created every year with a communication plan, and there were some years where the informational communication plan was distributed globally. This was the case in 2015, when the restoration of the maritime character of the Mont Saint-Michel was completed. The restoration of the maritime character of the Mont Saint-Michel made sure the site returned to its authentic scenery of an island instead of being attached to the mainland. With the removal of the parking lot, the authenticity of the surroundings was restored, and the site is again preserved in its original historic state. This creates a more authentic experience for the tourists and shows the historically and culturally preserved Mont Saint-Michel. Walking up to the site, without the polluted view of the parking lot and vehicles makes the visit a more authentic experience.

A recently implemented action sponsored by region Normandy is the website and application Secrets-Normands, where locals propose off the beaten track experiences in the region. The website will focus on responsible tourism and propose experiences doable without a car and personal engagement for tourists with the Normandy territory. The experiences will be secret places that the locals of Normandy like to visit, that are less known amongst tourists and propose these to visitors on the website. This makes for a pleasant interaction between tourists and locals. Tourists often ask for destination tips that are situated at half an hour or maximum an hour away from where they are situated. This website will make sure visitors can find those hidden gems. This will also prevent tourists coming from Étretat to visit the Mont Saint-Michel for only a day, making those long distances by car and adding to the environmental pollution. Tourists will consume the destination on a more local level and have a more authentic experience when visiting the region and the villages surrounding the bay of the Mont Saint-Michel. The tourism offices in the region are working together to make the tourists more aware of their location and of their travels concerning the flow of tourism. The participant from the CRT Normandie expects that through implementing multiple smaller actions sustainability will be established throughout the tourism practices in the region.

When asked about his ideas on actions that could take place at the Mont Saint-Michel to promote sustainable tourism development, a local municipality worker at the Mont Saint-

Michel proposed the use of a yearly tourist pass to come to the Mont Saint-Michel including a free parking lot entrance or reduced train fare. He argued that visitors want to return to the Mont Saint-Michel to experience other parts of the site, but often are held back by the prices to be paid every visit. With a customer loyalty pass, it would become a cheaper visit and it would promote tourist returns, loyalty and responsible tourist behavior at the site. However, he specifies the pass would not be viable in July and August, so that cultural tourists would visit throughout the lower season thus promoting sustainable tourism development.

He was asked about the possibility of the site becoming more of a Disney attraction with the implementation of tourist passes, and he responded that the mass tourist wouldn't use such a pass because he would not be interested in revisiting and valuing the historical site multiple times. The mass tourist visits because the site is a must see and has a different experience from a cultural tourist. The pass would be of interest to cultural tourists who wish to return to explore and learn and experience more from the site.

Discover something other than the image and the brilliance that we have of the Mont, the Grande Rue, the abbey and so on. Show a lot of things, we have a church that is extraordinary. Who is steeped in history. Everyone is talking about the Archangel, who is at the top of the abbey. It is not true. The archangel has been worshiped for centuries, he is the one in the church. And nobody knows, and that's the truth. The one that is up there, well it is very recent. So, if we don't give a little history, if we don't give meaning to visitors, yes it will give a little bit of the idea of a park. But someone who would come to the Mont with a pass comes because they are in love. And the Mont is not visited in a day. I've been there for 20 years, I'm still discovering things. And we can't visit the Mont in a day. So, if we take the trouble to want to discover the Mont, at other times, in other places, with other events and other people. We can see, we can meet people, we can visit exhibitions, see something else, well I don't mind doing it. But if each time I have to pay the tax rate, parking, restaurant, abbey and so on, eh. It's going to be expensive to discover the new seagull that has arrived or the flamingo that is walking around. *

*translated from French by the researcher

The authenticity of the Mont Saint-Michel is perceived differently by different types of tourists. For some, the site resembles a theme park such as Disneyland and tourists encounter mass tourism at the site. Visiting the must-see destination during a hasty visit, perceiving what seems to be staged authenticity and experiencing stress due to the crowds, queues and prices

can be detrimental to the tourist experience. The mindless tourist will be unaware of his harmful behavior towards the site and causes unsustainable tourism behavior which leads to the cycle of over-touristification (Moscardo, 1996). In comparison, the educated tourist will be aware of the consequences his visiting behavior has on the site and will be more respectful and engage in sustainable tourism behavior. Educating tourists can be done at the site, through the use of tour guides (Alazaizeh et al., 2019). However, not all tourists partake in guided tours, thus cannot be educated by guides. Nevertheless, tourists can educate themselves beforehand of their visit to the site with the use of online communication methods and through contacting the heritage site for more information regarding sustainable tourism actions and anticipating their visit.

4.2 Commercialization

The commercialization of the site takes away from the authenticity of the site according to tourists. Visitors feel as if everything at the Mont Saint-Michel is constructed precisely so that the destination earns the most money from tourists. Starting at the new parking lot, tourists notice that there is no information to be found about parking prices and what the rates are per hour of parking. Upon paying when leaving the parking lot, the tourists only find out the prices are set whether they stayed 2 hours or 24 hours, which costs 14€ in the high season. Many reviews warned other visitors in advance about these prices and complained about the steep prices. Some reviews noted that the prices for the parking made up for the free shuttle busses between the parking and the entrance of the Mont Saint-Michel. A few reviews compared the risen prices to the prices of a decade ago, from before the return of the maritime character of the Mont Saint-Michel.

Upon entering the village, tourists encounter many touristy shops in the main street. Visitors appreciate to be able to buy some souvenirs at the site but seem to be less enthusiastic by the amount of shops that are selling the same products. The commercialization of the Mont Saint-Michel affects the tourist experience and is a result of the over-touristification of the site. Tourists come to visit the heritage destination for their interest in the history of the medieval village and for the natural environment of the tides in the bay surrounding the island. Arriving inside the village, many tourists experience a feeling of disappointment due to the amount of shops selling tourist "trinkets" and the prices of the amenities at the site.

It is amazingly beautiful when you get a first glimpse of the Mont Saint-Michel from the distance and look full expectation towards the growing Mont when you come closer. Took the shuttle bus to the island without waiting because it was early in the season (Easter weekend) and walked there through the busy streets up and then through the stairs to the top. We went down via the ramparts where it was less crowded, and we could enjoy the nice views over the surroundings and the rooftops of the village. Sadly, the shopping streets are filled with one touristy shop after the other, which we walked past quickly. *

*translated from a Dutch review by the researcher

This review above was written by a tourist that visited the Mont Saint-Michel in April 2019. The review describes a nice visit of the site while it was not too crowded due to visiting early in the season. The only point of improvement this reviewer gives is because of the amount of touristy shops in the village that take away from the experience.

The review below from July 2018 describes the experience of a tourist as soon as he enters the village of the Mont Saint-Michel. The experience is tainted by the touristic side with the shops, restaurants and hotels. The visitor describes the crowds of tourists during his summer visit as mass tourism and supposes climbing the Mont makes up for the touristic experience at the bottom.

Our enthusiasm drops as soon as we are inside of the Mont Saint-Michel, because you enter a stream of people in narrow streets with the obligated souvenir shops, restaurants and hotels. Mass tourism that was not our cup of tea. The higher you climb, the nicer and the less crowded it gets. You are rewarded with beautiful views you can take back as a picture. The church and abbey are also more than worth the climb. Mont Saint-Michel is a "must see" top location, but you'll have to accept the mass tourism. *

*translated from a Dutch review by the researcher

Because of the clear commercialization of the site, with the overwhelming amount of touristy shops and expensive restaurants, visitors feel taken advantage of during their trip. Visitors that do not take a picnic lunch with them opt for food at one of the many restaurants on the Mont Saint-Michel. When buying food there in the lower part of the main street, visitors are shocked at the prices of regular sandwiches that are, according to them, not even that good. Very few tourists realized the prices at the site are high because of the location of the Mont

Saint-Michel and the difficulty to receive products and most of them felt like they were being scammed.

No surprise, it is not one of the most beautiful world wonders without its marks. The Mont is magnificent, and time has no hold over it. However, the business surrounding it is unpleasant and pollutes the atmosphere. 15€ for parking, an omelet at 30€ or even all of the other activities offered don't add to the site. You will have to come for the essentials. Come by bike and take a sandwich with you for example. That will help you avoid this feeling of being scammed. *
*translated from French by the researcher

The review above from August 2019 shows the sentiment of many tourists visiting the Mont Saint-Michel. The site is a magnificent one that transpires through time, but the added businesses in the village will pollute the experience for many and call it a tourist trap. Many leave the site with a feeling of having been scammed because of the high prices, and vow to come back with a homemade sandwich.

European visitors more often have the opportunity to return to the Mont Saint-Michel than visitors from other continents. Reviews from returning visitors are interesting to analyze because they describe the difference time makes at the site. Having visited a decade or longer ago, a visitor can truly comprehend the impact international tourism and commercialization has had on the site. The review below from January 2020 describes the kind of experience the visitor had in his childhood at the Mont Saint-Michel. In the 1970s and 1980s the Mont attracted a lot of visitors, but it was not yet the tourism machine it is today. With the arrival of international visitors, many restaurants and shops hold a revolving door policy for tourists.

I came often to this site in my childhood (40 or 50 years ago), it was a bit all over the place but it had its charm.
Now it has become a tourism factory for international visitors that will only come once. So the managers of the Mont have organized themselves so that they can take a maximum euros from visitors. *
*translated from French by the researcher

The commercialization of cultural heritage destinations causes over-touristification issues at heritage sites such as the Mont Saint-Michel. This commercialization of the site relates

to the tension between the economic and socio-cultural pillars of sustainable tourism (Lansing & De Vries, 2006). Economically, the location of the Mont Saint-Michel is expensive and having products delivered to the site is expensive as well due to the difficult accessibility for vehicles to the site and business have to survive, thus making products more expensive. On the other, socio-cultural, side, high prices and consumerism detract from the authenticity of the site. These contradicting values are held by the producers and consumers of tourism and challenge the idea of sustainable tourism development.

Multiple participants note that the main complaint that they receive from visitors is about the high prices at the site. The prices of the commerce's and other regulations depend on the two companies that own 80% of the site.

At Mont Saint-Michel we have two big companies. The one who is called Mère Poulard, well it's not her name but here is who is known by the name of Mère Poulard who is very, very, very known and very, very, very rich. And another which is less known by name, but which is also almost as rich and is called Sodetour. So there, the two are two huge companies that run 80% of the businesses on Mont Saint-Michel. *
*translated from French by the researcher

These two companies that own shops and restaurants decide their prices and the way they run their business. Having these companies in charge of the majority of the amenities of the Mont Saint-Michel does not encourage sustainable tourism at the site. The site is commercialized by these companies for economical gain, at the expense of the tourist experience and development of sustainable tourism. Through the commercialization of the site, the cultural heritage experience of tourists is being harmed, while experiencing staged authenticity where the famous omelet of Mère Poulard is made to put on a show for tourists during a Disney like experience. The restaurants owned by the companies can make their lunch deals as pricy as they want because they do not have many competitors to drive their prices down, and they are aware tourists will pay high prices even if the prices go up even more. Because tourists only stay for the day trip and have come a long way to see the Mont Saint-Michel, they allow themselves to spend more on their trip and treat themselves to a pricier meal or souvenir. Commerce's make use of this and do not respect their clients to give them a fair price point. The additional employees that are hired for high tourism seasons do not experience loyalty to their jobs and respect towards the customers. A participant recounted her interactions with people working at the massive restaurant chains and said;

Speaking with their employees we ask them "but can you sell that? I could not even sell that", well they know that they scam the masses of tourists and they (the restaurant employees) respond "well you know, so eh, even if we made it another 2 or 3 euros more expensive people would come eventually to buy". But hey, I don't pay them, I'm not sure. Because at some point, by keeping on abusing the customers, eh I do not know what will happen. And what I keep hearing is, most of the customers who come here will never come back. Tourists, Japanese, South Koreans, Americans actually do not come back often. So, well, it doesn't matter. I even say if they are not stupid it does not matter, they will not come back. You see. Anyway, that is not possible. But eh I would say that it is also generated by mass tourism. That is to say that if there was a little more local tourism, fewer people, necessarily it would be different. Do you see the problem? *

*translated from French by the researcher

The participant only interacts with the employees of the businesses and not with the managers, so she can't speak for the management of the businesses. However, according to the participant, the employees do speak of the customers in a disrespectful way, claiming that if they upped the price of the products a few euros, the customers would still purchase from them. The employees expect the international mass tourists to be one-time visitors and they do not need loyal customer returns. The participant of the interview notes that the issue goes both ways. Mass tourism caused the businesses to have a revolving door policy and care less about customer satisfaction, and the quality of service causes visitors not to want to return to the Mont Saint-Michel. More local tourism and less visitors all at once would already make a difference in the quality of service and customer loyalty. The commercialization of the site is causing a vicious circle (Russo, 2002), the loss of quality in tourism products and services takes away from the destination and the tourist experience at the site. The type of visitors coming to these places and using the commercialized locations, leads to more commercialization, which again leads to more mass tourism. Tourists often dislike mass tourism, while heritage sites attract tourist masses, causing the tourists to not enjoy the site.

And the problem is that, one generates the other, that is to say that a magnificent site like this generates mass tourism and as mass tourism does not enjoy the place eh well it causes people to not enjoy the site. *

*translated from French by the researcher

The people working in the restaurants are aware most foreign visitors won't return, which causes the quality of service to lack because there is no aim for customer loyalty. Stressed visitors can also be rude to employees because of the slow service if there are many tourists to be helped, which causes employees to be under stress and deliver bad service in return. According to this review below from December 2019, which is in the low tourist season, the staff is not friendly to the customers and the food is not worth the price they ask.

The basic catering is also at exorbitant prices and the service is far from friendly. *
*translated from French by the researcher

This is not speaking for shops and restaurants run by independent owners that live of the other 20% of the businesses, where more fair prices and practices are being held. According to the participant, those smaller businesses do treat their customers well and receive positive feedback online, and from visitors that do return. However, big, fundamental changes in the policies of the businesses can only be made if the two big companies join their efforts in the development of sustainable tourism. These entrepreneurs that own and manage the businesses of the Mont Saint-Michel are in favor of tourism growth and have influence on the politics of sustainable policy making (Benner, 2019).

With the tourism policies being regulated by the government and by the government appointed EPIC (public establishment of an industrial and commercial nature) regarding the implementation of sustainable tourism development at the Mont Saint-Michel, what can locals and people working in the tourism sector do to elicit sustainable behavior from tourists? When asked whether the local tourism workers had implemented any sustainable actions of their own initiative at their establishment, many participants responded they were doing the minimum implementing sustainable actions, such as wrapping souvenirs in paper instead of handing out plastic bags and trying not to throw out too much left-over food at restaurants. The issue with initiatives from locals is that the site is regulated by the municipality regarding the waste pickup and specifically separated waste ends up in the same place. Restaurant managers note their intention to not waste food products, but when tourists do not finish their meal, the owners must throw away the food left, and believe it is more a result of tourists wasteful behavior. However, the site is controlled economically by two big companies that own 80% of the site, and participants explain that sustainable development changes can only be made once those companies incite the changes, otherwise the efforts of the smaller businesses towards sustainable tourism development will be futile. As long as these companies continue to

encourage tourism growth and unsustainable practices, they will oppose sustainable tourism development for the benefit of economic growth (Benner, 2019). This again shows the tension between the economic and socio-cultural sides of sustainable tourism. The local community and tourism workers want to participate in the decision making on sustainable tourism development, and often have useful information from personal experience with the tourism sector and interaction with tourists about the way in which tourism must be managed. Allowing for residents and tourism workers to participate in policy making leads to more satisfaction in the community regarding tourism growth and more attention to the preservation of the natural and cultural environment (Mansfeld, 2018).

4.3 Overcrowding

The high tourism season at the Mont Saint-Michel is from May to October, with the peak being in July and August. The most visitors come during the day from 11 am until 4 pm. During those two summer months, the number of visitors goes up to 20.000 visitors a day which causes congestion in the main street and overcrowding. Tourists that are visiting during the low season of November until March do no experience the same type of over-touristification as they would in summer. Many of the reviews urge other tourists to reevaluate the season in which they come to visit the Mont Saint-Michel, and if they do come in summers peak season, they urge other tourists to visit in the early morning or in the evening to avoid big crowds. Reviewers wish to share their experience of the Mont Saint-Michel.

A couple that visited the Mont Saint-Michel in August 2019 shared their experience on TripAdvisor with other visitors. A section of their review is presented below. The review notes how the crowds are so dense, visitors have to move with the crowd at a slow pace and can't take a break to look at souvenir shops or pick up the pace to escape the crowds.

Moved on by the crowd, we found ourselves at the entrance gate. Nothing but narrow, steep streets inside. teeming with people. Hard to move. Hard to stop moving once in the crowd. Gift stores on every side. Narrow walkways. Stone walls. People. People. People.

The circumstances of visiting the Mont Saint-Michel during high tourism season and the site being overcrowded causes a stressful situation for some tourists. According to the participants from the interviews, those tourists that seem less able to cope with the crowds and their surroundings, who do not experience a relaxed visit can lash out on other tourists and tourism workers. Those tourists display a negative behavior such as complaining loudly,

pushing through crowds, skipping lines and disrespecting the site. This negative tourist behavior is a result from over-touristification and unsustainable tourism growth at destinations that have become "must go" places (Rizzo & Mignosa, 2013). Tourists express their discontent with their tourist experience through unpleasantness and disrespectful behavior towards tourism workers and the heritage site.

Even though the Mont Saint-Michel is crowded during the summer months, the site can still experience more tourism growth. The Mont is described as inflexible by several participants, in the sense that it is a village constructed on top of a granite rock and cannot expand in order to make room for more visitors. It can, however, welcome more visitors during the months of November through April, and in the high tourism season it is still quiet at the site in the early morning and in the evening time. During the interviews, the local inhabitants admitted to not feeling bothered by the number of tourist masses, partly because of their affinity with tourism at their jobs, working locally at the site in tourism businesses and welcoming more tourists for business. The monks that live at the abbey do not experience issues with tourists visiting the site and find tourists to be respectful of the abbey. At the top of the Mont the tourist crowds are not audible and aren't hindering the peaceful lives at the abbey.

The congestion of tourist queues inside the village of the Mont Saint-Michel is helped to contest with the use of the local tourism office, who are available by phone or email to answer tourist questions, amongst others, about the crowds of tourists and which month would be the most pleasant to visit the site. The tourism office incites visitors to come in the afternoon because the site will be less crowded. In order to avoid a long queue to buy tickets at the entrance of the abbey, the tourism office also proposes tickets, thus spreading the congestion at the top of the Mont with a second queue. A participant notes that school trips and other organized group visits used to come during the beginning of summer, when it was already very crowded at the Mont Saint-Michel. Because the tourism office advises schools to rather come visit during the months of September or October instead of June they noticed visitor numbers were better regulated throughout the year. Furthermore, it is not up to the tourism office to put in place sustainable actions, but to the EPIC, who has been created the 1st of January 2020 and is going to put in place actions to implement sustainable tourism, however the outcome of these actions will only be measurable in 4 or 5 years. It is through international media campaigns to try to regulate tourist crowds and to encourage more tourists to come in the month of April for example. These actions are new for the Mont Saint-Michel and yet have to be implemented, the outcome of the actions will not be noticed right away.

The most recent communication plan was developed more locally to promote a different way to experience tourism to the Mont Saint-Michel. The goal is to broaden the tourism destination of the Mont Saint-Michel to include the bay and other villages surrounding the bay. Thus, the tourist flow will be diverted from only day-trip visits to the Mont Saint-Michel to longer stays in the region. Visitors would have the opportunity to also visit the Mont Saint-Michel in the early morning before the bigger crowds arrive, or in the evening when the village quiets down. The type of tourism that is promoted in the region is not only the visitation of other villages and cities with rich culture and history, but also natural tourism. The region has many bicycle routes and walking trails to explore. This promotion of the greater region behind the Mont Saint-Michel can break the vicious circle (Russo, 2002) of tourism congestion at the cultural heritage site of the Mont Saint-Michel and manage the expansion of tourism to the area surrounding the site. This promotion of the surrounding area of a touristic hotspot such as the Mont Saint-Michel by policy makers should help diminish the negative impact mass tourism has on a heritage site and on the environment (Benner, 2019).

Another policy to make tourism to the Mont Saint-Michel more sustainable and engage visitors in a responsible tourist experience is the spreading of the high tourism season throughout the year. This is done with the organization of events at the Mont Saint-Michel such as art shows and music and light festivals. At the abbey, which is a national monument regulated by the center for national monuments, the abbey organizes since a few years nightly visits in the summer months of July and August. There are musicians playing the harp and illuminations in the abbey. A visitor describes his experience in a review on TripAdvisor from his visit in July 2019;

We went to the abbey in the evening, after almost all the visitors had left the island, and were lucky enough to be there when the sound and light show was on (don't know if this is available all year). It was fantastic, highlight of our trip to France, loved the lights, sound effects, music, holy images projected onto the walls and ceilings, wandering around in dimly lit rooms, up and down stone staircases. It was incredible. The absolute highlight was the church at the top and wandering out onto the adjacent terrace, looking up at St. Michael on his perch atop the steeple. It was magical. The cost was minimal, and we had the place almost to ourselves, there were only a handful of other people wandering around. It was worth the exorbitant amount we paid for our hotel room on the island for the opportunity to visit the abbey at night (it's open until 11 pm in summer) and soak in the ambiance.

These kinds of actions will make tourists stay until later in the evening or plan their visit in the evening altogether thus avoiding the crowds during the day. Tourists will be able to visit the surrounding area of the bay during the day and visit the abbey of the Mont Saint-Michel in the evening, while other tourists leave the village at 4 or 5 pm. Other actions that are organized by the abbey are a religious festival Via Aeterna in September and concerts throughout the year. They are organizing more expositions, nocturnal visits, festivals and concerts in order to bring more tourism to the abbey and to the site throughout the year. The spreading of high tourism season with actions to take the pressure off of the locals, the crowds of tourists and the environment is beneficial for the pro-tourism sentiment in the region and at the site (Jeon, Kang & Desmarais, 2016).

With this year's more local plan of communication for tourists, the tourism offices have created an application called TimeTravel, which shows different ways of visiting the Mont Saint-Michel and its bay. The application is created to irrigate the tourism flux throughout the bay and not only focus the tourist visits on the Mont Saint-Michel. The tourism office not only proposes to tourists to visit the area outside of the crowded summer months, but also to take another route than the commercial main street inside the village of the Mont Saint-Michel. Even when visiting the Mont Saint-Michel during a busy day, taking another route that avoids the crowds on the main street, tourists can experience a very pleasant visit. According to the participant it does not cause issues in terms of sustainability to the Mont that it can get very crowded. The application also proposes a route through the abbey at the Mont Saint-Michel, along with 6 other routes in the bay region. It can be used as a game on the territory and it guides users to places that are normally not visited and where are less people. The application invites visitors of the Mont to also discover other villages in the bay region, so that the tourism flow is managed throughout the bay. It is a recently published game that has been constructed with the resources of the regions of Normandy and Bretagne and tourism partners of the bay, and there are no results of the use of the application yet to be seen.

Due to the high number of tourists visiting the site, oftentimes the trash cans will fill up before they are able to be emptied, and tourists will throw their trash near the trash can or on the streets. A participant that lives on the Mont Saint-Michel and works in the municipality office noted that mass tourists are less respectful than cultural tourists, and at times a mass tourist would see a trash can 3 meters away, which would be too far, and he would put his waste where it suited him best.

There are these two types of tourists, and of course the behavior is completely different. The tourist who comes in search of something, not necessarily cultural or architectural, but of discovery will be much more respectful of the place, of the people than the mass tourism which comes because it is necessary to come. The ones that have to have the photo with the Mont, and then this tourist is a little less respectful of the style well, the trash cans are there but I have to walk three meters to go and put the trash in the trashcan, I'll place it next to it. And I saw some tourists and some municipal employees say to me, the municipal employee said to the tourist "well wait, you have an ashtray to put the cigarettes", and tourists answered "no no but you are paid for that, you are paid to sweep so sweep". So that's not the same type of tourists. *

*translated from French by the researcher

The thought of the tourist behind this comment and his reasoning for not throwing the trash in the trashcan would be that cleaners are paid to clean litter from the floor and they would get it. These mass tourists are not only disrespectful towards the site by littering but are also disrespectful to the people working at the site. This type of behavior that follows from over-touristification harms the natural environment due to littering and the socio-cultural environment due to the negative sentiment that will be created amongst residents and tourism workers at the site. Because of the island nature of the village that is subject to the tides, and the crowds that block the streets for cleaning crews, trash cans can only be emptied once a day which is not enough during overly busy days at the site.

A participant from the tourism office notes the locals need to set the right example for tourists on how to treat the heritage site. The participant names the example of when smokers that work or live at the Mont Saint-Michel finish their cigarette, they should put the cigarette butt in the destined trash cans instead of throwing them on the floor. If the locals set the right example and there are no cigarette butts to be found littering the site, tourists will be apprehensive to throw their waste on the floor and will look for a trash can for their cigarette. Promoting sustainable tourism behavior is an important factor in promoting sustainable tourism development (Buonincontri, Marasco, and Ramkissoon, 2017). By educating tourists on their impact on the natural environment and socio-cultural environment of a destination, and through setting the right example for tourists, tourists can be involved in the process to develop sustainable tourism.

A creative potential action to remove litter altogether from the Mont Saint-Michel, is the removing of the trash cans from the site and bringing them to the parking lot on the mainland.

The reasoning behind this idea is that the village of the Mont Saint-Michel welcomes 20.000 visitors a day on a very restricted area with only one road and only one entrance. This obligates to implement actions that would not be possible in a larger touristic city. The goal of the policy is to make is island a 0% waste destination and to remove all the trash cans and to make it a clean location. Tourists would still be able to bring their picnic to the village but would have to bring their litter back with them in their bag to the mainland. The logistics of the action must still be planned but the participant from the municipality office believes visitors will get used quickly to the implementation and it will benefit the site greatly. The implementation of this action will benefit the natural environment of the site when less waste will be littered, and it will not end up in the nature surrounding the Mont Saint-Michel. The action will also benefit the socio-cultural environment of the site, with the removal of the trash cans, the site will display a more authentic and historical appearance. This will add to the authentic and cultural tourist experience.

An important consequence of over-touristification at heritage sites is the awareness of threats to security. The French security plan VigiPirate is alert since terrorist attacks happened in France and everyone is more alert to possible attacks at crowded locations. Security cameras are put in place in order to monitor the movement at the site. The plan VigiPirate leads to the action of sensitizing visitors to littering and inciting visitors to bring their waste back with them. This action is expected to be a collaboration with the tourism office of the Mont Saint-Michel. The security measures are also an action to preserve the heritage, however the heritage will be conserved but not reconstructed. A participant that manages a restaurant on the Mont Saint-Michel notes that the big media campaigns and actions that are being taken to promote tourism in the low season to the Mont Saint-Michel are good to have, but that tourists will come to visit the Mont Saint-Michel at their own convenience and the tourist flow will never be completely managed. Even with less visitors coming during the high tourism season, heritage sites will always attract tourists, and soon even more at the Mont Saint-Michel with the presumed nomination to the new list of the seven world wonders, the participant says. He believes what is more important than managing the tourist flow through events, is the level of security that needs to be managed, the evacuation system is going to be important for sustainable tourism development at the Mont Saint-Michel. He argues that, because there will be more days that are saturated with tourists, there will be a new system needed that is more efficient than three police officers counting visitors at the entrance.

Tourism growth at the Mont Saint-Michel must be managed through sustainable tourism policies in order to protect the site from the effects of over-touristification. Occasionally, the

site experiences so much overcrowding during the high season, that visitors must be counted and have to wait to be let in at the entrance of the village for security reasons. Interview participants and tourists alike have proposed the instalment of reservations and a ticket office to prevent the site from overcrowding, if the actions that have been put in place to spread out the tourist flux over the day and months does not improve the situation of over-touristification at the site. The solution of implementing a ticket entry policy to protected heritage areas to solve the issue of over-touristification is discussed by Stanchev (2018). This would benefit the preservation of the site, and the security of tourists while visiting an overcrowded destination.

What participants and tourists identified as the biggest issue of the Mont Saint-Michel was the shuttle bus service that provides for transport to the site from the parking lot. The shuttle bus is described as an airport bus that can contain about 80 people maximum. According to a participant, instead of letting 80 people in the bus, the busses are filled with largely over a 100 people during busy hours. Multiple participants compared the shuttle buses to sardine cans during summer, meaning the busses are congested and people are packed tightly together. The queues of tourists waiting for the bus can become very long and waiting times in high tourism season can take 45 minutes to an hour. The weather in the region of the Mont Saint-Michel can vary from rainy and very windy in all seasons, to hot and sunny in summer and there are no covered spaces for tourists to wait on the bus near the entrance of the site. Within the shuttle buses, there is no air-conditioning and in summer, when the buses are filled to the brim, it gets very hot on the inside and at times people feel unwell and faint.

The waiting time is far too long. And the other is that the shuttles are so crowded, that the transport is very uncomfortable and when you have periods of very hot weather, and we have them more and more, it should not be too surprising that some people feel unwell and faint.*
*translated from French by the researcher

Many locals wonder why the shuttle buses are not electrically driven, as the inhabitants were promised green, tram-like shuttles on rails. Instead, they were disappointed with the kind of airport buses that are driving on diesel. They are mostly disappointed for the tourist and believe this transportation will ruin the tourist experience after being stuck in an overheating bus and pushing themselves through a crowded entrance. The new shuttle bus system is not only an issue for the tourists that have to take them to visit the site according to the participants. Locals, tourism workers, employees of shops and restaurants and owners of businesses also have to take a bus to and from the site, where they used to be able to park their vehicle at the

parking lot at the foot of the Mont. In return of losing their accessible parking lot, a public service delegation was put in place, so that people who work, who live at the Mont Saint-Michel could have access to a shuttle at any time of the day and also at night, to be able to access their vehicle on the mainland.

Nevertheless, what tourists have to say about the busses in the reviews is only partly negative. About half of the reviews concerning the shuttle buses describe them as being well regulated, drive frequently and point out that they are free. Other reviews note the long queues for the buses, the buses being filled to the brim by tourists who feel like sardines in a can and tourists question why the shuttle buses drive on gasoline and not electrically. They notice the stinking smell of the buses in the middle of nature while they are walking the 2,5 kilometers to the entrance of the village. The visitor that wrote the review below from January 2020 wonders why there are no electric buses instead of the loud engines that drive the tourists. Could it be that electric buses earn less money for the company he questions?

Of course, with a super noisy heat engine; a single model could at least be electric, electric pays less?? *

*translated from French by the researcher

What a pity that you can smell during the journey the diesel of the busses which commute and why is there not an ecological electric shuttle on rail in the form of glass bubbles more adapted to the site in an eco-responsible spirit. *

*translated from French by the researcher

This reviewer from December 2019 notes the smell of diesel during his walk to the Mont Saint-Michel and suggests the use of electrical tram like shuttles which would be more ecological and would fit better to the site.

What is also remarkable is noted in the review below from July 2018 of tourists that wanted to go to the entrance of the Mont Saint-Michel by bike. They were stopped by police and asked to walk to the site or take the bus. As cycling is fairly common in the region and it is a healthy activity, more visitors would want to make the trip by bike, but it is not allowed because officials consider having bikes parked on the bridge to be visual pollution similar to the old parking lot that used to be at the foot of the Mont Saint-Michel.

It is very crowded and touristic. We biked to the site, but the policemen stopped us halfway and we we're only allowed to go by foot or take the shuttle buses… To stay 1 day here is more than enough. *

*translated from Dutch by the researcher

As the transportation system is a common problem for all groups involved at the Mont Saint-Michel, it is an important subject to be discussed. The restoration works of the maritime character made sure to preserve the natural environment and cultural authenticity of the site. However, the addition of the shuttle buses disturbs the authentic and sustainable experience of the site. There are contradicting priorities from different aims in the development of sustainability at the site. The parking lot was moved to preserve the natural landscape of the bay surrounding the Mont Saint-Michel, but the transportation system put in place has been detrimental for the natural environment and environmental experience of visitors. Another contradiction in the priorities regarding sustainable tourism development is the aim to avoid long queues on the road towards the Mont Saint-Michel, thus creating a regulated transportation service. However, the transportation system is not adapted to the tourism masses that visit in summer and cause congestion and long queues of visitors for the buses, before entering the site. Instead of preserving the natural landscape, the buses are overcrowded and decrease the enjoyment of the cultural side of the Mont Saint-Michel.

The Mont Saint-Michel was analyzed in the context of the three pillars of sustainable tourism regarding the three issues that were identified from the data, authenticity, commercialization and overcrowding. The Mont Saint-Michel attracts many tourists due to its recognition as a cultural heritage site and its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. At times, the site is seen as inauthentic by visitors who perceive staged authenticity due to the Disney-like theme park experience and the commercialization from the site. While the heritage site is magnificent and attracts millions of cultural tourists, many mass tourists are less respectful and unaware of the consequences of their behavior towards the site. As the site has become a mass tourism destination with a revolving door policy and high prices it has become a day trip and a once-in-a-lifetime visit for many tourists. The overcrowding of the site during the high tourism season causes the streets and shuttle buses to be packed and makes the tourist experience less enjoyable. Visitors are disappointed by this because they are more interested in the history and cultural heritage of the site. Many of them feel discouraged by the crowds and commerce's at the beginning of the main street and leave the Mont before visiting the abbey and other parts of the village where a more authentic experience can be lived. Visitors, residents

and tourism workers alike have even wondered whether there can be put a limit to the number of visitors in summer to control the overcrowding. Tourism officials are aware of the need to incite sustainable tourism development at the site. In order to promote sustainable tourism development, an approach of spreading the tourism flux throughout the bay of the Mont Saint-Michel and throughout the year has been realized. However, the effects of this newly implemented approach will be seen immediately but over the course of the following years. This sustainable approach to tourism will benefit the natural and cultural environment of the Mont Saint-Michel and ensure the visitors can have a responsible tourist experience.

5 Conclusion

This master thesis aimed to identify the challenges of sustainable tourism development at cultural heritage destinations, and to analyze the sustainable policies proposed at the heritage site of the Mont Saint-Michel. Sustainable tourism development is necessary for the management of tourism at mass tourism and cultural tourism destinations. To preserve the historical heritage, the social and natural environment and economic tourism sector for the long-term use of a tourism destination, actions must be put in place (Buckley, 2012). Tourists can be an important factor in sustainable tourism development policies of tourism organizations. The habits of tourists at a destination and their willingness to participate in actions regarding the preservation of a heritage destination are underestimated by policy makers and tourists alike. When tourists are educated about their impact on the destination, they will be aware of their behavior and participate in the actions implemented to preserve the destination (Buonincontri, Marasco, and Ramkissoon, 2017). A responsible tourist experience will engage tourists in a pleasant, sustainable visit, thus preserving the heritage site. This can be managed through spreading visitor numbers throughout the day and over the seasons, making the heritage destination less crowded and able to be managed better.

In order to answer the main research question, *how can sustainable tourism development be promoted for the preservation of cultural heritage destinations?* This master thesis analyzed the case of the Mont Saint-Michel. At the site, actions to develop sustainable tourism have been implemented in recent years. However, it is too soon to notice the results of the actions on the development of tourism at the Mont Saint-Michel. To analyze the case, interviews were held with local inhabitants of the Mont Saint-Michel, tourism workers of shops and restaurants and workers of the tourism office to discuss the limitations to sustainable tourism at the site. To complement the data with the tourist perspective an analysis was made from reviews on TripAdvisor.

The results of this research show the Mont Saint-Michel is a location worth visiting according to many tourists for different motivations. However, visitors believe the commercialization of the site takes away from the authenticity of the medieval village. This causes the tourists to relate to the Mont Saint-Michel as to a theme park such as Disneyland, which takes away from the cultural heritage of the site and disrupts the socio-cultural pillar of sustainable tourism. The endurance of crowds in the main street, long queues for the entrance to the village, the abbey and shops and restaurants, congested shuttle busses and high prices at the site lead to tourists behaving negatively during their visit. Tourists at times wondered at what time the village would close and whether local people were living inside the village. The

perception of the village as a theme park causes visitors to not respect the religious site, and to display a negative behavior towards fellow tourists and towards the site. Tourists become inconsiderate of the authentic village, talk loudly in the abbey, become pushy in the crowded street and are littering. The over-touristification of the site that results in overcrowding and littering harms the natural environment surrounding the Mont Saint-Michel. Mindless mass tourists that are perceiving the Mont Saint-Michel as a theme park are oftentimes unaware that there are residents living at the Mont Saint-Michel. The disrespectful behavior of these tourists towards the site and towards the tourism workers and locals could come from the tourist experience of inauthenticity of the site. Experiencing the theme park would lead to tourists behaving as if the village would not be someone's home, thus behaving less respectful than if the tourist would be aware of the authentic village that the Mont Saint-Michel is.

To combat this behavior, tour guides are educating visitors about the history of the Mont Saint-Michel and the environment in the surrounding bay. This education will make tourists more aware of the location they are visiting and incite respect towards the site (Alazaizeh et al., 2019). Another action that may be implemented soon at the Mont Saint-Michel is the removal of all trash cans from the site, so that visitors may take their waste with them to the parking place where trash cans will be placed. This action will incite tourists to not litter in the village and leave the streets clean. It will also take some pressure off of the small municipality that has to remove waste from 20.000 people a day in high tourism season. It will be necessary to inform tourists beforehand to their visit about these actions and regarding the communication to encourage tourists to visit the site during other seasons and outside of peak hours. These actions and more are needed to manage the mass tourism crowds that frequent the Mont Saint-Michel. Favoring economic growth through promoting unsustainable tourism growth at tourism destinations, without regard to the consequences towards the natural and socio-cultural environment is causing imbalances in sustainable tourism.

Overall, results show that the environmental, the economic and the socio-cultural pillars of sustainable tourism must be balanced in order to experience sustainable tourism development (Lansing & De Vries, 2006). The pillars complement yet contradict each other, which makes a balance a challenge to achieve. To achieve this balance, visitors must be included in sustainable tourism development to preserve cultural heritage destinations. A responsible tourist experience, consisting of smaller crowds, a well-managed tourist flow and implementing actions to set the right example regarding sustainable behavior from tourists and locals will preserve the heritage site and promote sustainable tourism growth.

This research was limited by the inability to travel to the Mont Saint-Michel and observe and conduct the research locally due to the travel restrictions from the COVID-19 virus. For the researcher, being unable to experience the visit of the site with other tourists is limiting the insight of the responsible tourist experience at the Mont Saint-Michel. Due to the research being done through online means, the local inhabitants were apprehensive to respond to the online participation request. Participants of the study discussed this situation as a result of the average age of locals at the site being higher, thus causing potential respondents not to participate with the research being through online means.

This case was chosen for its historic site and reputation for being overcrowded in summer. It is important to preserve the heritage for future generations and develop a responsible tourism growth. A research concerning the influence of a responsible tourist experience on sustainable tourism development at the heritage site of the Mont Saint-Michel had not yet been made. This research positions itself in the academic debate on sustainable tourism from a holistic point of view. Sustainable tourism can be challenging to achieve, however by taking into account the different priorities of environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects sustainable tourism development can be attained. The challenges of sustainable tourism development are especially distinctive at the Mont Saint-Michel because of the size of the site. The challenges are closely linked to one another and understandably tied together in the research. Thus, this research has opened the dialogue for further examination of the management of sustainable tourism at the Mont Saint-Michel and the results of recent sustainable policies.

Recommendations for further research and the use of this research for other cultural heritage destinations are limited by the specificity of the Mont Saint-Michel. The Mont Saint-Michel is unlike another cultural heritage site, because of its location in the bay and its inability to expand. The destination attracts mass tourism and cultural tourism, with mostly day-trip visitors and is highly commercialized, thus reminding visitors of a theme park and taking away from its authenticity. Further research can be done regarding the security aspects of the site considering the preservation of the Mont Saint-Michel and the inability to administer changes to the architecture. What is left to wonder is how the site will manage more tourist crowds within a small space, while ensuring the safety of the visitors and an enjoyable tourist experience.

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7 Appendix

Interview questions translated to English from French

Interview guide 1. Tourism office workers

1. How long have you been working at the Mont Saint Michel?
2. How did you get involved in the tourism business?
3. What are your job activities and are you in contact with tourists?
4. What does sustainable tourism mean to you?
5. According to you, what are the issues the Mont Saint Michel is having?
6. Can you name some points of improvement at the Mont Saint Michel?
7. What do you think the biggest problem for sustainability for Mont Saint Michel is?
8. What has the approach of the tourism office been to solve the issues?
9. Do you feel the implementations at Mont Saint Michel have been working to solve the issues, and how so?
10. What has the response been from tourism workers at the site about the implementations?
11. What has the response been from tourists at the site about the implementations?
12. What other strategies does the tourism office have to solve the issues at Mont Saint Michel?

Interview guide 2. Restaurant and shop workers/ daily tourist interaction

1. How long have you been working at the Mont Saint Michel?
2. How did you get involved in the tourism business?
3. What are your day to day interactions with tourists like?
4. How do you experience tourist behavior?
5. How do you respond to tourist behavior?
6. What does sustainable tourism mean to you?
7. According to you, what are the issues the Mont Saint Michel is having?
8. Is sustainable tourism being implemented at the Mont Saint Michel and is the tourism office giving you guidelines on sustainability?

9. If yes, do you feel the implementations promoting sustainable tourism are affecting tourism at the Mont Saint Michel in any way?

10. Have you implemented a more sustainable policy/solution at your shop/restaurant of your own initiative?

11. If yes, are the tourists aware of the sustainable policy? How do the tourists respond?

12. What kind of observations have you made about the tourists behavior at the site?

13. Do you notice any type of tourist behavior that you would deem negative towards the site?

14. Do you think tourists are aware of their negative behavior and the consequences it has on the site?