

## Unearthing Potential: An Auto-ethnographic Case Study of Tourism in Sudan amidst Turmoil

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### Abstract

This case study investigates the often-overlooked cultural and natural treasures of Sudan, framed through the lived experiences of an expatriate family from 2020 to 2023. It explores renowned sites such as the ancient Nubian pyramids, the burgeoning tourism prospects along the Red Sea near Port Sudan, and the symbolic meeting point of the Blue and White Niles in Khartoum. Highlighting Sudan's significant, yet underdeveloped, potential for archaeological, cultural, and eco-tourism, the research also delves into systemic obstacles hindering tourism growth, including inadequate infrastructure, bureaucratic hurdles, and a lack of global visibility. The abrupt onset of civil conflict in 2023 not only disrupted nascent tourism initiatives but also jeopardised invaluable cultural assets. Through the amalgamation of personal narrative with insights from academic literature, this study emphasises the urgent need for international engagement to both safeguard Sudan's rich heritage and reimagine its tourism prospects in a post-conflict landscape.

**Keywords:** civil conflict, cultural heritage, political turmoil, tourism potential

### INTRODUCTION

Sudan with a tourism potential, [Theuns \(1997\)](#) provided a timely examination of Sudan's largely untapped tourism potential, particularly its rich archaeological heritage, including the remnants of the Nubian (Kushite) civilisation. The author highlighted the Sudanese government's nascent efforts to revitalise the sector while also addressing the significant obstacles posed by the country's political and economic isolation. Reviving tourism in Sudan faces significant political and financial constraints, which must be addressed to unlock the sector's potential. Sudan boasts a rich cultural heritage (e.g., ancient pyramids of Meroe), diverse landscapes, and the Red Sea coastlines, but decades of conflict, instability, and economic crises have severely hampered tourism.

[Gerasimov and Bogdanov \(2020\)](#) traced Sudan's tourism history from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, beginning with European interest post-Napoleon's Egypt expedition. Under

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the Egyptian Turkish Rule (1821) and later Anglo-Egyptian Colonial Administration (1899), infrastructure like hotels and railroads developed, mostly owned by foreigners. Post-independence (1956) saw growth in national travel companies and foreign visitors, but political and economic instability (1980–2000) hindered sector expansion. After a millennium, tourism remains underdeveloped, with limited foreign travellers and local-Russian collaborations. Despite challenges, Sudanese experts study the sector to propose improvements. The industry shows potential but lacks significant state revenue due to persistent hurdles. Globally, Sudan is frequently depicted through lenses of conflict, political discord, and its expansive desert terrain. This narrow portrayal obscures a country replete with profound historical narratives and diverse natural landscapes.

[Mohamed et al. \(2022\)](#) highlighted Sudan's significant but underutilised tourism potential, citing its favourable geographic location, climate, natural attractions, and cultural heritage. However, despite these strengths, the country fails to capitalise on tourism due to systemic challenges. The study underscores the need for strategic tourism planning in Sudan to ensure sustainable development, overcome institutional and infrastructural barriers, and maintain a competitive edge in the global tourism market. [Belotti \(2024\)](#) highlighted Sudan's untapped tourism potential, emphasising its archaeological, natural, and cultural assets. However, it notes that these alone are insufficient for global competitiveness without strategic improvements in efficiency, stakeholder collaboration, and marketing. While writing from the perspective of an expatriate family who spent three years living in Sudan (2020-2023), this case study reveals a nation saturated with cultural and natural wealth that extends far beyond common perceptions. Hidden treasures such as the awe-inspiring Nubian pyramids and tranquil Red Sea resorts challenged the authors' initial assumptions. Yet, Sudan's fragile journey toward stability, following years of authoritarian rule and civil strife, faced a brutal setback with the resurgence of conflict in April 2023. This turmoil not only made cultural sites perilous but also displaced countless individuals and left communities in distress.

With the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) regaining control of Khartoum International Airport, marking a significant victory in the ongoing conflict ([Al Jazeera, 2025](#)), the airport is undergoing extensive renovations and repairs. The airport is planned to reopen in October 2025 ([Travel News Africa, 2025](#); [Travel and Tour World, 2025](#)). This initiative is crucial for national economic recovery, as it aims to restore essential infrastructure and re-establish international air travel connections. The airport has been non-operational since April 2023, leaving Port Sudan International Airport as the only functional international gateway in the country. The successful reopening of Khartoum International Airport has the potential to revitalise Sudan's tourism sector, facilitating access to its historical and cultural heritage sites. However, achieving sustainable peace and long-term security remains a significant challenge for fully transitioning Sudan to a post-conflict state and further developing a robust tourism industry.

This article juxtaposes the vast yet delicate tourism potential of Sudan against its intricate political landscape, urging immediate international focus on both preserving its cultural legacy and supporting its resilient populace.

### **Literature Review**

Alluri (2009) stated that while not the sole sector for peacebuilding, tourism in Rwanda holds significant potential due to its socio-economic benefits and role in reconciliation. Companies can integrate peacebuilding by collaborating with various actors and addressing historical cleavages through inclusive policies. Government investment and conservation efforts were vital for the sector's rapid post-conflict recovery. The promotion of peace (amahoro) is a widely endorsed goal. Rwanda's case shows tourism can rebound quickly and aid peace, suggesting further comparative studies could identify common success factors for other post-conflict nations.

Gerasimov and Bogdanov (2020) stated that Sudan's tourism industry emerged under colonial rule post-1899, developing infrastructure and attracting foreign investment. Despite growth after 1956 independence, political and economic instability from the 1980s severely hampered the sector. Today, the industry remains underdeveloped, focused on domestic tourism with minimal foreign visitors. Although local experts actively analyse the sector to spur growth, current conditions, including nascent international partnerships, provide insufficient foundation for a significant revival.

Mohamed et al. (2022) conducted a study to analyse Sudan's tourism sector, recognising the country's significant potential due to its geography, climate, and natural resources. The research aimed to identify these opportunities, assess the current state of tourism, pinpoint obstacles to development, and propose solutions. Using a semi-structured interview technique, the study concluded that a major barrier is the lack of an effective tourism planning infrastructure. This deficiency prevents Sudan from gaining its deserved share of the tourism market and threatens the sustainability of its destinations. The findings led to specific recommendations for planning a sustainable path for tourism development in Sudan.

Gabryjończyk and Kudinova (2023) stated that due to the war, Ukraine's international tourism fell by 90% and recovery will be difficult. Domestic tourism continues but faces severe restrictions. Consequently, national tourist tax revenue declined by 24% in 2022, and overall budgetary revenues from tourism fell by 31%, despite significant growth in these areas within the country's western regions.

Neelu and Kumar (2023) explored motivations for visiting war-torn Russia and Ukraine, finding that conflict can spark tourist curiosity about culture and people. Based on primary data from 207 Indian respondents and secondary data, it challenges the assumption that war deters tourism. The research offers a first-of-its-kind framework to help policymakers sustain tourism, which can significantly contribute to these nations' economies during and after conflict.

Tan and Cheng (2024) employed framing theory to analyse how the media narrates the Russia-Ukraine war's intersection with tourism. Through frame and QCA analysis, it identifies three core frames (impact, response, status) and eight issues. It reveals three narrative patterns evoking negative emotions, illustrating how media framing shapes the war-tourism nexus. The research provides a novel analytical lens for understanding this complex relationship, advancing methodological approaches in tourism studies.

Belotti (2024) investigated the potential for tourism to drive economic recovery and improve livelihoods in post-conflict Sudan, a country rich in cultural heritage but historically undeveloped in tourism. The paper was based on interviews with key informants and a situational analysis, aiming to identify the main barriers to sustainable tourism development and the potential benefits of a community-based model in Sudan.

Petrova et al. (2025) found that Ukraine's proposed digital tourism strategy is innovative but potentially overly techno optimistic. While VR/AR (Virtual Reality/Augmented Reality) can preserve memory and attract engagement, it risks becoming a virtual substitute rather than a catalyst for physical reconstruction. True recovery depends on security, massive capital, and labour market stability-factors technology alone cannot solve. The emphasis on digital consumption paradigms must not overshadow the urgent need for tangible infrastructure and socio-economic policies that ensure a resilient, human-centred recovery.

## RESEARCH METHODS

An autoethnographic framework underpins this study, drawing on the authors' immersive experiences residing and traveling through Sudan from 2020 to 2023. Data collection involved engaging in daily activities within Khartoum, exploring significant archaeological sites like Meroe and Port Sudan, conducting informal interviews with residents, tourism operators, and expatriates, and making personal observations about infrastructure and social dynamics. This narrative is further contextualised by referencing existing academic works on Nubian archaeology (Tipper & Lemos, 2021; Török, 1997), the effects of conflict on cultural heritage, and the socio-political framework of contemporary Sudan. This integrative methodology fosters a rich understanding linking individual accounts to broader societal narratives.

### ***Findings and Discussion***

#### *The Nile and Nubian Pyramids: Echoes of a Civilisational Legacy*

At the point where the Blue and White Niles converge, Khartoum represents a striking visual metaphor for Sudan's historical and ecological tautology. Once a stronghold of the Kushite Kingdom, the region boasts a legacy of archaeological significance. The pyramids of Meroe, recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011, stand apart from their Egyptian counterparts, embodying the achievements

of a remarkable civilisation that flourished along the Nile (Török, 1997). However, despite their archaeological value, sites like Meroe lack standardised tourism amenities, creating logistical hurdles for independent explorers. Accessing these storied sites frequently demanded local insight or the assistance of expensive tour companies.

### ***Port Sudan and the Red Sea: Untapped Treasures Awaits***

During our family trip to the Red Sea near Port Sudan, we discovered a new side of Sudan's tourism potential. Our stay at the charming eco-lodge, Red Sea Resort, highlighted the possibilities for sustainable tourism. This off-grid resort had a rustic atmosphere, featuring cozy cottages, a jetty that led to a striking female sculpture, and a non-functional windmill—the only one we encountered in Sudan. Despite the breathtaking views and access to diving experiences offered by local providers, the resort was mostly empty during what is typically the tourist season, underscoring Sudan's lack of visibility in the global tourism market.

Although we were residents of Sudan, obtaining additional permits for domestic travel from Khartoum to Port Sudan International Airport felt unnecessarily complicated. This sentiment was echoed by the resort owner's experience, which was shared by other guests as well. Nevertheless, our stay was delightful, characterised by warm hospitality, delicious seafood, and a much-needed escape from digital distractions. This experience highlighted the region's appeal as a peaceful retreat.

### ***Community Strength Amidst Barriers***

Interactions with Sudanese locals were characterised by remarkable generosity and resilience, which often contrasted sharply with external media portrayals that emphasise conflict. However, the potential for growth in the tourism sector is hampered by ongoing systemic barriers. Fundamental infrastructure inadequacies, such as inconsistent electricity supply and limited transportation options outside major urban areas, impede the development of a thriving tourism economy. While a high-end operator, the Italian-owned ITC offers quality services, which often remain inaccessible to budget travellers, neglecting wider infrastructural needs. A couple of five-star hotels in Khartoum, particularly the Corinthia Hotel, with its striking ship-like structure situated along the banks of the Nile River and overlooking Tuti Island, exemplify the potential for luxury and business tourism. However, their presence underscores the stark disparities in service and infrastructure throughout the capital, an area already burdened by power outages and civil unrest even before the conflict in 2023. The conflict that broke out in 2023 has significantly worsened the situation as the archaeological sites and the artifacts of historical importance are seriously threatened (Shaw, 2024; UNESCO, 2024; UNESCO, 2025).

## **Discussion**

Before the 2023 conflict, Sudan's emerging tourism sector exhibited signs of significant transformation. Its wealth of archaeological sites, particularly the Nubian pyramids, positioned the country as a unique alternative for cultural tourism, distinct from the overexposed Egyptian sites. Scholars have underscored the need for transnational collaboration and strategic marketing to enhance Sudan's profile in the tourism market (Davies, 2014). Concurrently, the untouched beauty of the Red Sea coast offered prospects for niche eco-tourism but would require substantial investment in sustainable practices, particularly renewable energy and connecting transport routes to isolated resorts.

The outbreak of civil war in April 2023 severely shattered this precarious equilibrium. Although my family was evacuated without incident, the ensuing conflict displaced millions and exacerbated a humanitarian crisis. The violence further endangered Sudan's rich cultural heritage, with UNESCO warning of heightened risks of looting and damage to archaeological sites (UNESCO, 2023). This study builds upon and contrasts with earlier research on Sudan's tourism sector, revealing both persistent challenges and emerging dynamics. By comparing past academic insights with current autoethnographic findings, key continuities and shifts become evident, offering a deeper understanding of Sudan's tourism trajectory.

Theuns (1997) and Gerasimov and Bogdanov (2020) have long noted that Sudan's archaeological and natural assets—including the Nubian pyramids and Red Sea coast—remain underdeveloped due to political and economic instability. Current findings confirm that heritage sites like Meroe still suffer from insufficient tourism infrastructure, reinforcing Marsh (2018) concerns over accessibility and logistical challenges. Despite UNESCO recognition, Sudan's pyramids continue to be overshadowed by Egypt's more effectively marketed sites, underscoring persistent deficiencies in branding and investment (UNESCO, 2011).

Similarly, Mohamed et al. (2022) highlighted Sudan's geographic and climatic advantages for tourism yet noted systemic underdevelopment. The present study's observations of deserted eco-lodges and bureaucratic travel restrictions align with these earlier conclusions, suggesting that little progress has been made in transforming potential into a viable industry.

While past studies (e.g., Gerasimov & Bogdanov, 2020) framed Sudan's tourism struggles in terms of economic stagnation and weak governance, the current research underscores a more dire reality: the April 2023 conflict has exacerbated pre-existing issues, pushing the sector from neglect into active crisis. Where earlier scholars discussed "potential hindered by instability," this study documents tangible regression—heritage sites at risk of damage, tourism facilities abandoned, and international visitors nearly absent due to safety concerns.

Belotti's (2024) emphasis on stakeholder collaboration and marketing now seems even more urgent but also more difficult to implement amid war. The Corinthia Hotel's role as an isolated luxury hub in Khartoum mirrors past disparities in tourism development but now exists within a landscape of heightened fragility.

A key divergence from earlier research is the current study's deeper ethnographic engagement with Sudanese communities. While previous works (e.g., Mohamed et al., 2022; Theuns, 1997) acknowledged local hospitality as an asset, this study provides firsthand accounts of how residents sustain informal tourism efforts despite collapsing infrastructure. The eco-lodge near Port Sudan, though struggling, exemplifies grassroots resilience—a theme less emphasised in earlier literature, which tended to focus on macro-level constraints.

However, this resilience has limits. Where Gerasimov & Bogdanov (2020) noted gradual growth in local travel agencies, the current findings suggest regression, with even basic tourism services becoming more cumbersome post-2023.

Earlier studies lamented Sudan's global image as a conflict zone, overshadowing its cultural wealth. Unfortunately, this perception has worsened. Where Belotti (2024) and Mohamed et al. (2022) called for rebranding, the current conflict has made such efforts nearly impossible without prior stabilisation. The eco-lodge's emptiness during peak season starkly illustrates how geopolitical crises directly suppress tourism demand, reinforcing Sudan's invisibility on the global stage.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Sudan's story embodies a profound duality: a land rich in cultural and natural legacies juxtaposed with continuous vulnerability and the current scourge of war. Before the 2023 conflict, the components necessary for a sustainable heritage-centred tourism sector were visible, albeit hindered by systemic shortcomings and a lack of global attention. The ongoing conflict has extinguished immediate prospects while placing the assets—cultural sites and welcoming communities—critical to future tourism in jeopardy. The current focus must transition from development to emergency conservation and humanitarian efforts. As we look ahead, reimagining Sudan's tourism landscape must be interwoven with post-conflict recovery, prioritising the safety and empowerment of its people alongside the safeguarding of its historical riches. Only then can Sudan's extraordinary warmth and heritage be celebrated on the world stage, rather than obscured by the shadows of conflict.

Implications Based on the opportunities observed and the current crisis, the following implications for immediate action and long-term planning are identified:



1. *Emergency Heritage Protection*: Engage international organisations, especially UNESCO, to assess damages to cultural sites, establish emergency preservation protocols, and prevent looting during and after the conflict.
2. *Humanitarian Support and Community Engagement*: Prioritise aid for displaced individuals and integrate tourism development with community-based initiatives that enhance local livelihoods and empower residents in rich heritage regions.
3. *Future Infrastructure Development*: Following the conflict, strategically invest in critical infrastructure, particularly renewable energy solutions and dependable transportation networks vital for future tourism recovery.
4. *Global Advocacy and Tourism Rebranding*: Initiate comprehensive international campaigns—featuring documentaries and cultural exchanges—to promote Sudan’s historical richness and cultural diversity, countering the prevalent conflict-centric narratives.
5. *Documentation and Knowledge Preservation*: Support initiatives for the documentation of vulnerable sites and traditional knowledge, ensuring the continuity of information despite physical damages to sites.

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