



COMMUNITY-LED HERITAGE TOURISM IN INTRAMUROS: ROLES AND PRACTICES OF LOCAL TOUR GUIDES

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ABSTRACT

Community-led heritage tourism provides opportunities for local communities to participate in tourism while preserving and communicating cultural and historical heritage. This study explored the experiences, roles, practices, and challenges of community tour guides conducting heritage tours in Intramuros, Manila. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, involving ten accredited community tour guides selected through purposive sampling. The study was conducted from August 2025 to May 2026. Data was gathered through individual semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Five areas emerged from the data: experiences of community tour guides; roles in visitor engagement and satisfaction; cultural and historical elements considered important in guiding; strengths and limitations of community-led tours; and factors influencing effectiveness, satisfaction, and challenges. The findings indicate that guides enter the profession through varied pathways, often influenced by livelihood needs, family traditions, local opportunities, and interest in history. They function not only as information providers but also as storytellers, cultural mediators, entertainers, facilitators, and safety-oriented service providers. Fort Santiago, Spanish colonial structures, World War II narratives, the *kalesa*, and Filipino cultural identity were among the heritage elements emphasized. Community-led tours were perceived as affordable, accessible, authentic, and interactive, although fixed routes, regulatory requirements, language barriers, seasonal income, and unauthorized guides presented challenges. The study highlights the importance of continuous training, effective communication, institutional support, and fair regulation in strengthening community-led heritage tourism in Intramuros.

Keywords: *community-led tourism, heritage tourism, tour guides, visitor engagement, Intramuros*

INTRODUCTION

Heritage tourism connects visitors with the historical, cultural, and social meanings of destinations. Within heritage settings, tour guides play an important role because they do more than provide information. They interpret places, communicate cultural meanings, manage visitor interactions, and shape how tourists understand and experience heritage. Cohen (1985) conceptualized the tourist guide as a professional who performs multiple roles in mediating between tourists and destinations. More recent research likewise emphasizes the guide's role in interpretation, visitor experience, cultural mediation, and service delivery.

Intramuros, Manila's historic walled city, provides a particularly relevant setting for examining community-led heritage tourism. Its historic churches, fortifications, colonial structures, streets, and traditional forms of transportation provide physical and cultural resources that can be interpreted through guided experiences. The Intramuros Administration has also supported community-based tourism initiatives involving local communities and the *kutsero* sector, demonstrating the participation of local actors in presenting the heritage of the Walled City (Intramuros Administration, 2021).

Tour guides are particularly important in heritage destinations because historical places do not communicate their meanings automatically. Guides help visitors connect physical sites with stories, historical events, cultural practices, and community experiences. Leong et al. (2024) found that historical storytelling and tour guide interaction can contribute to value co-creation and meaningful heritage experiences. Similarly, Khater et al. (2026) emphasized the importance of storytelling in facilitating cultural immersion, while Khater (2026) highlighted the role of guides in heritage interpretation and conservation.

The role of guides also requires adaptability. Visitors differ in language, cultural background, interests, expectations, and levels of historical knowledge. Effective guiding therefore involves communication, interpretation, interpersonal interaction, and adjustment to visitor needs. Research on tour guide competencies has similarly associated communication skills and professional performance with tour quality and visitor satisfaction (Arabacıoğlu & Dedeoğlu, 2025; Bafail & Hanbazazah, 2025).

At the same time, tour guiding is affected by organizational and working conditions. Tour guides may experience unstable income, seasonal demand, regulatory requirements, language difficulties, and other operational challenges. Demirdelen et al. (2022) found that perceived organizational support is associated with tour guides' quality of work life, while Bahanshal (2026) highlighted seasonality as a continuing challenge for the tour guide profession.

Although existing studies have examined tour guide competencies, heritage interpretation, and visitor experiences, there remains a need to understand the experiences and practices of community tour guides specifically operating within Intramuros. The present study addresses this gap by examining how local guides

understand their roles, communicate heritage, engage visitors, and negotiate the opportunities and constraints associated with community-led tours

Research Questions

This study explored the roles and practices of community tour guides in heritage tourism in Intramuros, Manila. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of community tour guides in conducting heritage tours in Intramuros?
2. How do community tour guides perceive their role in shaping visitor engagement and satisfaction?
3. What cultural and historical elements do tour guides consider most important in delivering community-led heritage tours?
4. How do community tour guides describe the strengths and limitations of community-led tours compared with other tour formats in Intramuros?
5. What factors influence the effectiveness, satisfaction, and challenges of community tour guides in conducting heritage tours?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of community tour guides in Intramuros. Phenomenology is appropriate when the purpose is to understand how individuals experience and make meaning of a particular phenomenon (Henriques et al., 2021). In this study, the phenomenon examined was community-led heritage tour guiding in Intramuros.

Participants and Sampling

The researchers used purposive sampling to select participants who could provide information relevant to the research questions. The participants were community tour guides in Intramuros who were at least 18 years old, had experience conducting community heritage tours, had attended relevant seminars, and were recognized or accredited within the applicable tourism and Intramuros administrative system.

The researchers initially targeted 15 participants but completed interviews with 10 community tour guides after reaching data saturation, wherein succeeding interviews no longer generated substantially new information.

Research Instrument

Data was collected using an in-depth, semi-structured interview guide developed by researchers. The questions covered the participants' backgrounds, experiences, motivations, challenges, visitor interactions, guiding practices, perceptions of community-led tours, and factors affecting tour effectiveness and visitor satisfaction.

The instrument was reviewed by five jurors, consisting of three internal and two external tourism and hospitality experts. Their comments and recommendations were considered in refining the interview guide.

Data Collection

Individual interviews were conducted in Intramuros, Manila. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were asked for consent to participate and to have their interviews recorded. Participants were informed of their right to decline or withdraw from the study. The interviews were subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researchers became familiar with the transcripts, identified significant statements, developed codes, and grouped related codes into broader themes. Thematic analysis provides a systematic approach for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Scope and Limitations

The study focused exclusively on community tour guides conducting heritage-related tours in Intramuros. It examined their experiences, perceived roles, guiding practices, perceptions of heritage elements, views of community-led tour formats, and work-related challenges. The study did not directly measure tourist satisfaction through visitor surveys or compare the guides statistically with other tour providers. Therefore, the findings represent the experiences and perceptions of the participating community tour guides and should not be generalized to all tour guides or heritage destinations.

RESULTS

Experiences of Community Tour Guides

The first area revealed five major themes: entry pathways of tour guides, motivation for becoming tour guides, experiences as community tour guides, challenges encountered, and operational dynamics of guiding.

Participants had varied backgrounds and lengths of experience, ranging from several years to more than two decades. Some entered guiding through kalesa driving, local residency, seminars, accreditation, family involvement, or tourism-related opportunities. The findings indicate that entry into community tour guiding does not follow a single professional pathway.

Economic considerations were particularly important. Many participants described guiding as a source of livelihood and a means of supporting their families. Others were influenced by family traditions or an interest in history and tourism. Thus, community tour guiding was shaped by both economic necessity and personal or cultural motivation.

Participants also described positive experiences involving tourist interaction and a sense of fulfilment from sharing the history and culture of Intramuros. At the same time, several challenges were reported, including language barriers, difficult tourist behavior, disagreements concerning rates and payment, unauthorized guides, and strict operational regulations.

Operational conditions also influenced their experiences. Larger groups required greater coordination, while smaller groups allowed more direct interaction. Tour duration varied depending on agreements and tourist interest, while payment structures required clear communication to minimize misunderstandings.

These findings demonstrate that community tour guiding involves not only interpretation but also continuous management of people, time, communication, and operational requirements. The thematic findings and participant summaries are documented in the thesis results.

Roles of Tour Guides in Visitor Engagement and Satisfaction

The second area generated five themes: historical interpretation and storytelling, strategies for visitor connection, handling questions and accessibility needs, community stories and cultural integration, and adaptation of guiding approaches.

Participants viewed themselves primarily as interpreters of Intramuros' history and culture. Storytelling was used to make historical information easier to understand and more engaging. Guides also incorporated humor, trivia, and personal interaction to create a more enjoyable atmosphere.

Communication was central to visitor engagement. Participants described adjusting their language, using basic foreign terms, simplifying explanations, or relying on translation assistance when necessary. Confidence, friendliness, and direct interaction were also considered important in establishing rapport.

The guides also perceived themselves as cultural mediators. They connected historical landmarks with community stories and broader cultural meanings rather than

presenting sites merely as physical structures. Their guiding approaches were adjusted according to visitors' nationality, interests, knowledge, and reactions.

Another important finding was the guides' recognition of the limits of their knowledge. Participants indicated that they would acknowledge when they did not know an answer rather than provide inaccurate information. This reflects the importance of credibility and responsible interpretation in heritage guiding.

These findings are consistent with research emphasizing communication quality, storytelling, and guide-tourist interaction as important dimensions of the tourism experience (Arabacıoğlu & Dedeoğlu, 2025; Leong et al., 2024; Khater et al., 2026).

Cultural and Historical Elements Considered Important in Guiding

Four major themes emerged: key historical sites and national heritage; war and colonial history; cultural heritage and identity; and tourism adaptation and guest-centered narratives.

Participants consistently identified Fort Santiago as a particularly important landmark because of its historical significance and association with José Rizal. Other frequently emphasized sites included Manila Cathedral, San Agustin Church, Casa Manila, and other structures associated with the Spanish colonial and wartime periods.

Historical narratives concerning the Spanish colonial period and World War II were also considered essential. Participants highlighted difficult historical events, including Japanese occupation, violence, destruction, and wartime suffering. These narratives provide visitors with a deeper understanding of the historical significance of the destination.

Cultural identity extended beyond physical structures. The *kalesa*, traditional transportation, Filipino hospitality, lifestyle, and community narratives were incorporated into guiding practices. This finding supports the view that heritage includes both tangible resources and lived cultural practices (Nursanty et al., 2023).

Participants also described adapting their storytelling according to the audience while maintaining a relatively consistent historical route. This balance between adaptation and consistency enables guides to respond to visitor interests without losing the core historical narrative.

Strengths and Limitations of Community-Led Tours

Six themes emerged: institutional regulation and structure; tour experience and service delivery; economic and cost comparison; cultural and historical authenticity; operational limitations; and tour guide role and interaction.

Community-led tours were viewed as having several strengths. Participants emphasized their affordability, accessibility, cultural authenticity, and opportunities for personal interaction. Guided tours provide visitors with structured historical explanations that may not be available in self-directed experiences.

The community-based nature of the tours also supports the preservation and communication of local identity. Traditional heritage elements, particularly the *kalesa*, provide visitors with an experience connected to the historical character of Intramuros. However, the tours also have limitations. Fixed routes, safety requirements, operational restrictions, and institutional regulations can reduce flexibility. Some tour formats also require separate payments for guide services. These factors may affect visitors' ability to customize their experiences.

The role of the guide was nevertheless identified as a major strength. Guides function as storytellers, facilitators, service providers, and, in some situations, photographers and safety-oriented companions. Their direct interaction with tourists contributes to the personal character of community-led tours. The thesis findings specifically identify affordability, accessibility, authenticity, and personalized interaction as strengths, balanced against mobility and operational constraints.

Factors Influencing Effectiveness, Satisfaction, and Challenges

Four major themes emerged: professional development and competence; visitor engagement and emotional satisfaction; institutional support and regulatory environment; and work conditions and operational challenges.

Participants emphasized seminars, training, historical knowledge, communication skills, preparation, and experience as important to effective guiding. Continuous exposure to different visitors was also viewed as an opportunity to improve confidence and adaptability.

Visitor interaction influenced guides' own satisfaction. Participants described feeling fulfilled when tourists enjoyed the tour, asked questions, provided positive feedback, or expressed appreciation. These interactions served as sources of motivation.

Institutional support was another major factor. Participants discussed permits, accreditation, seminars, and renewal requirements. At the same time, some expressed concerns about administrative issues, limited support, and the presence of unauthorized guides. These issues were perceived as affecting fairness, income, and the working environment.

Completely, seasonal demand, weather, language differences, and repetitive work influenced daily working conditions. Income could fluctuate depending on tourist volume, while communication became more difficult when dealing with visitors who did not speak English.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that community tour guiding in Intramuros is a multidimensional occupation involving economic, cultural, interpretive, interpersonal, and operational responsibilities. Rather than functioning simply as providers of historical information, the guides operate as intermediaries between visitors and the heritage of the destination.

The varied entry pathways suggest that community-led heritage tourism can provide livelihood opportunities for local residents and individuals with practical knowledge of the destination. This is particularly relevant in a heritage setting where local familiarity and lived experience can complement formal training. At the same time, the participants' emphasis on seminars and accreditation indicates that experiential knowledge needs to be reinforced by professional development. Recent research similarly identifies training and qualification as important components of tour guide professionalization (Alfukaha & Ababneh, 2026).

The results regarding visitor engagement further reinforce the central role of communication and storytelling. Historical information becomes more accessible when guides translate it into narratives appropriate to the audience. Leong et al. (2024) demonstrated the importance of historical storytelling and tour guide interaction in creating value for cultural heritage tourists. Khater et al. (2026) emphasized storytelling as an important mechanism for cultural immersion. The present findings extend these observations to the community-guided setting of Intramuros, where guides continuously adjust their communication while maintaining core historical narratives.

The guides' use of humor, personal interaction, and adaptive communication also reflects the relational nature of tour guiding. Visitor engagement is not produced solely by the information presented but by how information is communicated and how the guide responds to individual visitors. Research on communication skills and tour satisfaction similarly demonstrates the relevance of information quality and guide communication to visitor experiences (Arabacıoğlu & Dedeoğlu, 2025).

The importance assigned to Fort Santiago, colonial structures, wartime narratives, and the kalesa demonstrates that community guides actively construct connections between tangible and intangible heritage. Heritage interpretation therefore extends beyond identifying historical buildings. It involves explaining why these places matter and connecting them to identity, memory, and lived culture. Nursanty et al. (2023) emphasized the connection between authenticity, community identity, and cultural preservation, while Leong et al. (2024) highlighted the role of interpretation in transforming historical knowledge into meaningful visitor experiences.

The findings concerning strengths and limitations reveal a tension between accessibility and regulation. Community-led tours were viewed as affordable, accessible, and personal, yet guides also experienced restrictions related to fixed routes, safety requirements, and institutional systems. This indicates that regulation can simultaneously

protect heritage tourism quality and constrain flexibility. The challenge for destination managers is therefore to maintain standards without unnecessarily limiting the capacity of local guides to respond to visitors.

The guides' concerns about institutional support and unauthorized guiding are also significant. Perceived organizational support has been associated with improved quality of work life among tour guides (Demirdelen et al., 2022). In the Intramuros context, clearer systems, fair implementation of regulations, and stronger institutional communication may therefore contribute not only to guide welfare but also to service quality.

Seasonal demand and income fluctuation demonstrate that community-led tourism does not automatically guarantee stable livelihoods. Bahanshal (2026) similarly identified seasonality as a persistent challenge within the tour guide profession. For Intramuros, strengthening training, diversifying community tourism opportunities, and improving coordination among stakeholders may help reduce the effects of irregular tourist demand.

Conclusions

The study established that community tour guides in Intramuros perform important economic, cultural, interpretive, and service functions. Their experiences are shaped by diverse entry pathways, livelihood needs, family influence, interest in history, visitor interaction, and the operational realities of guiding.

The guides' roles extend beyond delivering historical information. They function as storytellers, cultural mediators, entertainers, facilitators, and safety-oriented service providers. Their ability to adjust communication, establish rapport, respond to questions, and tailor narratives contributes to visitor engagement and satisfaction.

The findings also show that heritage interpretation in Intramuros centers on significant historical landmarks, colonial and wartime narratives, and cultural identity. Fort Santiago emerged as a particularly important landmark, while the *kalesa* and Filipino cultural practices provide opportunities to communicate both tangible and intangible heritage.

Community-led tours offer strengths in affordability, accessibility, authenticity, and personal interaction. However, these strengths are accompanied by challenges involving fixed routes, operational restrictions, regulatory requirements, language barriers, unauthorized guides, and unstable income.

The effectiveness and sustainability of community-led heritage tourism depend on the interaction of guide competence, visitor relationships, institutional support, and working conditions. Strengthening these areas can contribute to better experiences for both guides and visitors while supporting the preservation and interpretation of Intramuros heritage.

Recommendations

For Community Tour Guides

Community tour guides should continue developing their communication, storytelling, interpersonal, and intercultural skills through seminars, training, self-directed learning, and regular exposure to diverse visitors. They should also maintain accurate historical knowledge and communicate tour rates, duration, and inclusions clearly before tours begin.

For the Intramuros Administration and Tourism Authorities

Relevant authorities should provide regular training opportunities focusing on historical interpretation, storytelling, foreign-language communication, visitor management, safety, and service quality. Clear and consistently implemented policies concerning accreditation and unauthorized guides should also be maintained to promote fair competition and protect both guides and visitors.

For Community Tourism Stakeholders

Community tourism stakeholders should strengthen coordination concerning pricing, scheduling, visitor management, and operational procedures. Mechanisms that allow guides to provide personalized experiences while maintaining safety and heritage protection should be considered.

For Tourists

Visitors should consider engaging, accredited community tour guides when exploring Intramuros, respect heritage sites and established guidelines, and communicate expectations regarding tour duration, inclusions, and payment before the tour begins.

For Future Researchers

Future studies may examine the perspectives of tourists who participate in community-led tours, compare community-led and commercial tour formats, or investigate the economic and social contributions of local heritage tourism initiatives in Intramuros and other Philippine heritage destinations.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The study adhered to ethical principles concerning voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and the participants' right to decline or withdraw from the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and how their responses would be used. Individual interviews were conducted with the participants' consent, and the researchers maintained the confidentiality and privacy of the information

provided. The findings were reported based on the participants' actual responses without alteration or fabrication.

AI Disclosure. Generative artificial intelligence was used solely to assist with language editing, organization, and formatting of the manuscript. AI tools were not used to conduct the research, collect or analyze data, interpret the findings, or generate the study's conclusions. The authors retain full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, interpretation, and final content of the manuscript.

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APA Citation:

Ablola, M. C. B., Bautista, J. R. A. P., Gabitanan, J. R., Romano, M. R., Sajines, E. S. A., & Pablo, C. G. B. (2026). COMMUNITY-LED HERITAGE TOURISM IN INTRAMUROS: ROLES AND PRACTICES OF LOCAL TOUR GUIDES. *Ignatian International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 4(9), 1539–1550. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22873688>

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