

Determinants of Tourist Route Choice in Scenic Destinations: Evidence from Guilin, China

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Abstract

Understanding the factors that influence tourist route choices is critical for enhancing visitor experience and sustainable destination planning. This study investigates the multidimensional drivers of travel route selection among tourists in Guilin, Guangxi, China—a region renowned for its natural landscapes and cultural heritage. Drawing on survey data (N = 464), the study analyses 32 variables grouped into thematic categories: destination attractiveness, transport and accessibility, travel costs, demographic preferences, environmental and safety concerns, information availability, psychological perceptions, and spatial behaviour patterns. Findings reveal that destination attractiveness, particularly cultural and natural features, is the most influential factor, followed closely by digital information access and transport ease. Tourists exhibit hybrid route behaviours, balancing pre-planned itineraries with real-time adaptations based on conditions and recommendations. Cost and sustainability considerations were moderately influential, while group composition and crowd avoidance had a lesser impact. These insights highlight the importance of integrating digital tools, improving connectivity, and curating culturally rich, flexible routes to enhance tourist mobility. The findings provide empirical grounding for route-based tourism planning and contribute to broader discussions on spatial decision-making in tourism.

Keywords: Tourist Route Choice, Travel Behaviour, Destination Attractiveness, Tourism Mobility, Guilin, China

Introduction

Tourist mobility patterns have become a significant focus in tourism research, particularly as destinations seek to manage visitor flows, improve experiences, and promote sustainable development (Park et al., 2023). Among the many dimensions of tourist mobility, route choice behaviour—the way tourists select, modify, and experience travel routes within a destination—is crucial for understanding spatial dynamics, service needs, and marketing strategies. As global tourism trends shift toward more personalised and flexible travel, the factors that shape these route decisions warrant closer examination (Guo et al., 2024).

Guilin, located in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southern China, offers a compelling case for such research. With its globally recognised karst landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and rapidly developing tourism infrastructure, Guilin attracts both domestic and international visitors (He et al., 2023). Key attractions such as the Li River, Longji Rice Terraces, and the vibrant town of Yangshuo represent diverse spatial and experiential elements. However, despite the region's popularity, there remains a lack of empirical understanding of how tourists choose their intra-destination travel routes, what factors influence these choices, and how this knowledge can inform destination planning.

While past studies in tourism research have extensively explored destination image, travel motivation, and satisfaction, there is a relative gap in understanding the spatial decision-making processes at the micro level—specifically, how tourists navigate between sites and how various cognitive, economic, logistical, and technological factors guide their movement within a destination (Yuan and Vui, 2023). Existing literature often treats route choice as a passive consequence of itinerary planning rather than an active, multifaceted decision-making process. Furthermore, in scenic and heritage-rich destinations like Guilin, where attractions are spatially dispersed and accessibility varies, understanding these behavioural patterns becomes even more critical.

Adding to the complexity is the role of digital navigation tools, real-time information, and changing tourist demographics, all of which have reshaped traditional models of tourist behaviour (Bashir et al., 2024). Tourists today have greater autonomy and access to mobile technology, enabling them to adjust their routes in real-time based on reviews, weather updates, or social media recommendations. These developments necessitate a more nuanced approach to studying route choice that incorporates both static factors (e.g., natural and cultural appeal, transport infrastructure) and dynamic factors (e.g., live information, travel group composition, personal interests).

Problem Statement

Despite Guilin's significance as a tourist destination, limited research has been conducted on how tourists choose their routes within the region and what multidimensional factors influence these decisions. Most existing planning efforts tend to focus on attraction development and macro-level transportation without sufficient insight into micro-level spatial behaviours and route preferences (El-Didy et al., 2024). This gap hinders efforts to optimise tourist flows, reduce congestion, and enhance the overall visitor experience.

Objective of the Study

This study aims to analyse the key factors influencing tourist route choices in Guilin, with a particular focus on integrating both physical and perceptual variables. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Identify and categorise the factors affecting travel route decisions, including destination appeal, transportation, cost, safety, information access, and tourist psychology.
2. Assess the relative influence of each factor using mean response analysis.
3. Provide insights into tourists' spatial behaviours, including their use of digital tools and real-time decision-making.

4. Offer practical recommendations for tourism authorities and planners to design more effective and sustainable travel routes.

By examining route choice behaviour through a structured analytical lens, this study contributes to the growing field of tourism mobility research. It provides actionable insights for enhancing visitor management strategies in Guilin and similar destinations.

Literature Review

Tourist route choice is a crucial yet underexplored area in tourism research, sitting at the intersection of spatial behaviour, decision-making, and mobility studies. Scholars have traditionally focused on macro-level factors such as destination image (Leonidou et al., 2022), motivation (Omri et al., 2024), and travel satisfaction (Dabphet, 2024). However, a more granular understanding of how tourists select and modify their travel routes within a destination—particularly in spatially dispersed areas like Guilin—is still evolving.

Destination attractiveness has long been recognised as a key factor in shaping tourist behaviour. According to Qiu et al. (2022), the appeal of a destination is rooted in both its tangible features (e.g., natural scenery, historical landmarks) and intangible elements (e.g., cultural identity, atmosphere). Tourists tend to prioritise iconic attractions, such as the Li River or Longji Rice Terraces in Guilin, which offer strong symbolic and visual appeal (Yang et al., 2024). Recent studies have emphasised the role of cultural heritage and landscape diversity in attracting tourists to specific routes (Lin et al., 2024).

Transport and accessibility are also central to route decision-making. Studies by McKercher and Lew (2004) highlight how physical distance, road quality, and connectivity between sites influence tourist movement. The concept of spatial interaction models (Amen et al., 2023) has been used to explain how both attraction strength and ease of access determine travel flows. In destinations like Guilin, where attractions are spread across rural and urban zones, transport logistics—especially first- and last-mile connectivity—can significantly affect route choices.

Tourist demographics and psychographics play an equally important role. MacInnes et al. (2022) Travel Career Ladder suggests that different life stages and motivations lead to varying travel preferences. For instance, family travellers may prefer structured routes with minimal uncertainty, while younger or solo travellers often seek flexibility and adventure. Prior travel experience (Yan et al., 2024) and group composition (Chen et al., 2024) further influence spatial behaviour and willingness to deviate from planned itineraries.

A growing body of work also examines the impact of digital technology on tourist mobility. Mobile apps, online maps, real-time weather alerts, and user-generated content have enabled more spontaneous and informed route adjustments (Asaithambi et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2024). This represents a departure from the traditional fixed itinerary model and supports a more adaptive travel behaviour, especially in dynamic environments.

Despite these advances, there remains a notable research gap in integrating these factors into a comprehensive model of route choice behaviour at the intra-destination level. Most existing studies focus on either destination selection or satisfaction, but rarely examine

how a combination of attractions, logistics, costs, safety, and personal preferences influences the sequence, flexibility, and modification of travel routes. Moreover, few studies apply this framework to Chinese tourism contexts, particularly in regional destinations like Guilin, where tourism infrastructure, cultural context, and digital adoption present unique dynamics.

This study addresses the gap by empirically analysing the multi-factorial influences on tourist route choices in Guilin. In doing so, it contributes to the expanding field of tourism mobility and spatial behaviour, offering valuable insights for both academic research and destination management.

Materials and Methods

Study Location

This study was conducted in Guilin, located in the northeastern part of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, southern China. Renowned for its breathtaking karst landscapes, winding rivers, and cultural richness, Guilin serves as one of China's most iconic tourist destinations (He et al., 2021). It encompasses a diverse range of attractions, from urban landmarks and historical sites to rural scenic areas such as Yangshuo, the Li River, and the Longji Rice Terraces. The spatial distribution of these attractions, along with the growing influence of digital tourism platforms, makes Guilin an ideal case study for examining intra-destination tourist route choices.

Research Design

A quantitative survey-based approach was employed to assess the factors influencing tourist route decisions. The study aimed to capture the perceptions, preferences, and behaviours of tourists regarding their travel routes, incorporating both pre-planned choices and real-time adaptations. The survey instrument was designed around a structured Likert-scale questionnaire comprising items across seven thematic categories:

- Destination attractiveness
- Transport and accessibility
- Travel costs
- Tourist demographics and preferences
- Environmental and safety concerns
- Information availability and service quality
- Psychological and behavioural patterns related to route choice

Each item was rated on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), allowing for descriptive and comparative analysis.

Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face surveys and online distribution via tourism-related platforms and social media. The target population included domestic and international tourists who had visited or were currently travelling within the Guilin area. A purposive sampling method was adopted to ensure diversity in travel style, age, group composition, and duration of stay. Key survey sites included Guilin City Centre, Yangshuo, the Longji Rice Terraces, and transportation hubs such as Guilin North Railway Station.

A total of 464 valid responses were collected during the high travel season, February and April 2025, ensuring representation from various types of travellers—solo, group, family, and package tourists. The minimum sample size was determined using statistical guidelines for behavioural research, ensuring reliability in mean-based comparisons.

Data Analysis

The collected data were cleaned and coded using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for quantitative analysis. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were calculated for each survey item to assess the relative influence of different factors. The mean values served as indicators of the strength of agreement across thematic categories, enabling comparison among factors such as cultural appeal, transport convenience, cost sensitivity, and digital tool usage.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Anonymity and data confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study, in compliance with academic research ethics guidelines.

Results and Discussion

This study investigated the key factors influencing tourist route choices in Guilin, Guangxi, based on survey data measuring the relative importance of various determinants. The results provide valuable insights into the multidimensional nature of route choice behaviour, highlighting the significance of destination attractiveness, transport accessibility, information access, digital tools, and personal preferences in shaping tourist mobility patterns (Table 1).

Table 1
Factors Influencing Tourist Route Choices

	Mean
Destination Attractiveness	
The natural scenery of Guilin influenced my decision to visit.	3.28
Cultural and historical sites are important in choosing my travel route.	3.44
I prefer visiting iconic destinations such as Yangshuo or the Longji Rice Terraces.	3.41
Festivals and special events influence my route choices.	3.27
Transport & Accessibility	
The ease of transportation between tourist attractions influenced my route.	3.38
I chose my travel route based on the availability of public transport.	3.28
Road conditions and connectivity affected my route selection.	3.30
First and last-mile connectivity is important to me when planning routes.	3.22
Travel Costs	
I selected my travel route based on transportation costs.	3.36
I considered the cost of entry tickets to attractions when planning my route.	3.28
Affordable accommodation options along the route influenced my decisions	3.16
Dining costs were a factor in my travel route choice.	3.22
Tourist Demographics & Preferences	
My travel decisions were influenced by my interests (e.g., adventure, culture, relaxation).	3.40
My travel route was influenced by the composition of my travel group (e.g., family, friends, solo).	3.20

	Mean
My previous travel experience in Guilin influenced my current route choice.	3.31
Environmental & Safety Factors	
I considered the weather conditions when planning my route.	3.35
I prefer routes that are environmentally friendly and sustainable.	3.25
The safety of travel routes influenced my route choices.	3.27
Concerns about health risks (e.g., pandemic-related) affected my travel route decisions.	3.25
Information Availability & Service Quality	
The availability of maps and navigation tools helped me plan my route.	3.34
Tourism information centres and brochures influenced my travel decisions.	3.30
The quality of services (e.g., rest stops, tourist facilities) along the route influenced my choices.	3.34
Online reviews and travel apps influenced my route planning.	3.38
Tourist Perceptions & Psychological Factors	
I perceive Guilin as a convenient travel destination.	3.22
I feel safe when travelling along my chosen routes in Guilin.	3.34
I am motivated to explore new routes and destinations.	3.26
Recommendations from friends or social media influenced my route choice.	3.37
Tourist Traffic Route Preferences & Patterns	
I prefer travel routes that allow me to visit multiple attractions in one day.	3.32
I tend to follow pre-planned tour routes rather than exploring spontaneously.	3.30
I modify my travel route based on real-time information or recommendations.	3.27
The sequence of destinations is important to me for an enjoyable travel experience.	3.24
Route Choice Behaviour & Spatial Movement Patterns	
I used digital maps (e.g., Baidu Maps, Google Maps) to plan or adjust my travel route in Guilin	3.27
I preferred walking or biking short distances between nearby attractions.	3.24
I visited attractions in a sequence based on geographical proximity rather than popularity.	3.35
I avoided certain areas due to crowding or traffic congestion.	3.20
I chose to stay near a central location to minimise travel between attractions.	3.30
I followed recommended scenic routes (e.g., Li River cruise, Yulong River biking trail).	3.30
I modified my travel route during the trip based on real-time conditions (e.g., weather, traffic).	3.30

Destination Attractiveness as the Primary Driver

Among all categories, destination attractiveness emerged as the most influential factor in tourists' route choices, with an average mean score of 3.35. Within this category, cultural and historical significance scored the highest (3.44), underscoring the importance of Guilin's heritage resources in shaping travel decisions. Tourists also expressed strong preferences for visiting iconic sites such as Yangshuo and the Longji Rice Terraces (3.41), and were moderately influenced by the area's natural scenery (3.28) and local festivals (3.27). These findings align with existing literature that emphasises the visual and cultural appeal of destinations as core motivators of tourist behaviour (Douglas et al., 2024).

Transport and Accessibility: A Functional Necessity

Transport-related factors also scored consistently high, with ease of transportation between attractions (3.38) and road connectivity (3.30) influencing route planning. The availability of public transport (3.28) and first/last-mile connectivity (3.22) were less emphasised, but still moderately relevant. These results suggest that while tourists appreciate

functional mobility, they may tolerate limited connectivity as long as core destinations remain accessible. This underscores the need for improved transport integration, especially in rural or peripheral areas of Guilin, to enhance overall tourist satisfaction and reduce spatial inequities in visitation (Gao et al., 2024).

Cost Considerations: A Moderate Influence

Travel cost factors exhibited moderate influence on tourist decision-making, with transportation costs (3.36) and attraction ticket prices (3.28) receiving higher attention than dining (3.22) or accommodation costs (3.16). These findings reflect a practical consideration of budget constraints, especially for independent or budget-conscious travellers, but suggest that cost is not the overriding factor in route decisions compared to attraction quality or accessibility (Saputra and Jayawarsa, 2025).

Personal Preferences and Demographics

Tourist interests and travel composition played a meaningful but secondary role in route selection. Individual interests in adventure, relaxation, or culture scored relatively high (3.40), while previous experience in Guilin (3.31) and group dynamics (3.20) had less pronounced effects. This indicates that self-driven motivations, rather than external group influences, shape most route choices. Planners could use this insight to offer more customisable itineraries catering to varied lifestyles and interest segments (Chen et al., 2023).

Environmental and Safety Considerations

Environmental and health-related factors were moderately influential, with weather conditions (3.35) and safety (3.27) being the most important in this category. Interestingly, environmentally friendly route preferences (3.25) and pandemic-related concerns (3.25) were less emphasised, suggesting that while tourists are aware of such factors, they may not strongly alter their routes unless risks are immediate or severe. These results highlight the importance of contextual factors, such as time of year and public health conditions, in shaping spatial decision-making (Augustin et al., 2023).

Information Availability and Digital Tools

Information access played a significant role in route planning. Online reviews and travel apps (3.38), availability of maps and navigation tools (3.34), and quality of route-related services (3.34) all scored highly. This reflects the growing reliance on digital technologies for real-time route management, particularly among younger and tech-savvy tourists. Tourism authorities should invest in interactive digital maps, mobile applications, and updated route information to support smart travel behaviour (Sia et al., 2023).

Tourist Perceptions and Social Influence

Psychological factors and perceptions, such as recommendations from friends or social media (3.37) and perceived safety (3.34), were important. However, perceptions of convenience (3.22) and motivation to explore (3.26) were only moderately influential. These results indicate that while tourists respond to external validation, their intrinsic desire to explore is tempered by logistical and safety concerns (Matiza and Köchling, 2023).

Spatial Behaviour and Route Adaptation

Behavioural data revealed that tourists adapt their routes in real-time based on conditions (3.30) and frequently use digital maps (3.27) to guide spatial decisions. Proximity-based visitation (3.35) outpaced popularity-based sequencing, suggesting that geographical efficiency plays a greater role than attraction ranking in spatial planning. However, the low score on avoiding crowded areas (3.20) indicates a limited awareness or tolerance toward congestion, reinforcing the need for better visitor dispersal strategies (Medina-Chavarria et al., 2024).

In summary, the findings demonstrate that tourist route choice behaviour in Guilin is influenced by a complex interaction of cultural appeal, transport logistics, information access, and digital engagement, with moderate attention to cost and environmental concerns. These insights can inform destination planning, service optimisation, and the design of sustainable and flexible travel routes to enhance tourist experiences in Guilin and similar scenic destinations.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the multifaceted factors influencing tourist route choices within Guilin, Guangxi, China, a destination known for its exceptional natural landscapes and cultural heritage. Through an empirical survey of tourist perceptions across 32 variables grouped into key thematic categories, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of the spatial decision-making behaviours of visitors navigating Guilin's diverse attractions.

The results reveal that destination attractiveness remains the most significant driver of route choice. Tourists are particularly drawn to the natural scenery and iconic cultural destinations such as Yangshuo and the Longji Rice Terraces. These findings reaffirm the long-held notion that strong place identity, visual appeal, and artistic depth are foundational to tourism success. However, what differentiates modern tourist behaviour is the integration of these preferences with digital tools and logistical considerations. The study shows that while scenic and cultural appeal motivate initial interest, factors like transportation ease, accessibility, and digital navigation tools are crucial in shaping actual route selection on the ground.

Transport and accessibility emerged as the second most influential factor, reflecting the functional reality that movement between sites must be convenient for multi-stop itineraries to succeed. The emphasis on road quality, public transportation availability, and proximity sequencing suggests that tourists value efficiency and comfort in spatial planning. Interestingly, first- and last-mile connectivity—though less emphasised—still impacts route feasibility, especially in rural or peri-urban zones.

Digital technologies play a critical enabling role. Tourists increasingly rely on online reviews, mobile maps, travel apps, and real-time recommendations to guide and modify their routes during their journey. This indicates a shift away from rigid itinerary planning toward adaptive and responsive travel behaviour. Such behaviour not only reflects technological adoption but also highlights changing tourist expectations in an era of smart tourism. Destinations like Guilin must therefore prioritise investment in digital infrastructure and

information services, such as interactive navigation tools, location-aware content, and responsive signage systems.

Cost and environmental considerations, while not the most dominant factors, were still relevant in influencing travel decisions. Tourists expressed moderate sensitivity to transportation costs and entry fees, and showed a growing—though not overwhelming—awareness of sustainability and safety issues. This suggests that affordability and responsibility matter, but are often balanced against other factors such as convenience and experiential richness. Similarly, health concerns and pandemic-related risks, while noted, were not major deterrents during the time of study, perhaps indicating a degree of normalised risk tolerance in post-pandemic travel behaviour.

The study also highlights that tourist route behaviour is not strictly linear. Visitors blend pre-planned structures with spontaneous deviations based on weather, traffic, or interest. Proximity-based decision-making was more common than popularity-based sequencing, suggesting tourists prefer spatial efficiency over attraction fame. This reinforces the importance of smart route planning and regional connectivity, particularly in managing flow across popular and lesser-known sites.

In conclusion, tourist route choice in Guilin is shaped by an interplay of cultural motivation, spatial logic, digital empowerment, and personal preference. For destination managers and urban planners, these insights can guide the development of flexible, integrated, and sustainable route systems that enhance visitor experience while reducing spatial congestion. Future research could expand on these findings through GIS-based mapping, segmentation by tourist type, or longitudinal studies tracking seasonal or behavioural shifts.

Theoretical and Contextual Contribution

Theoretically, this research contributes to the advancement of tourism mobility and spatial behaviour studies by integrating static and dynamic determinants of intra-destination route choices into a cohesive analytical framework. By moving beyond traditional macro-level variables such as destination image and motivation, the study operationalises the role of real-time adaptability, digital tool usage, and spatial efficiency in understanding tourist mobility. This broadens the conceptualisation of route choice as a fluid, decision-oriented process shaped by layered contextual realities. In the context of China—where tourism is rapidly evolving under the influence of domestic mobility, smart technologies, and diversified tourist demands—this research offers a much-needed empirical foundation to localise global tourism theories. Practically, the insights are directly applicable to Guilin and similar scenic destinations, enabling better route-based tourism planning, digital infrastructure investments, and targeted policy design for spatial dispersion and congestion mitigation.

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