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PIRATE HERITAGE AS A DRIVER OF TOURISM AND CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Pirate heritage is a highly recognizable cultural resource shaped by the interaction of historical evidence with literary and cinematic mythology. This article examines how that resource can attract visitors and support cultural entrepreneurship. A qualitative comparative analysis examines five international cases: Pirates Week in the Cayman Islands, the Fête des Corsaires in Saint-Malo, the St. Augustine Pirate and Treasure Museum, the Pirates exhibition at the National Maritime Museum, and the Archaeological Ensemble of Port Royal. The findings indicate that commercial viability depends on more than the popularity of pirate imagery. It requires place-based interpretation, participation by local creators, diversified revenue streams, and safeguards for heritage conservation. Festivals generate time-specific visitor flows and broad local networks; themed museums turn narrative into a permanent ticketed experience; archaeological sites demand stricter limits and long-term stewardship. A responsible development framework is proposed that connects historical accountability with entrepreneurial sustainability while avoiding the romanticization of violence, colonialism, and slavery.

Keywords: Pirate Heritage, Cultural Tourism, Cultural Entrepreneurship, Festivals, Museums, Authenticity

1 INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism has shifted from passively viewing monuments to participating in narratives, events, and creative activities. Visitors seek an intelligible connection between place, history, and lived experience. This shift broadens the scope of cultural entrepreneurship, enabling museums, event organisers, tour guides, craftspeople, artists, and hospitality businesses to develop products around a shared cultural theme. Richards (2018) describes this expansion as a transition towards more complex and participatory forms of cultural consumption.

Pirate heritage is a suitable field of study because it combines strong international recognition, a distinct maritime geography, and rich narrative material. At the same time, it presents serious interpretive challenges. The public image of the pirate has been shaped by novels, films, games, and children's characters, whereas the historical reality includes

armed violence, plunder, state-authorised privateering, colonial rivalry, and economies connected to human enslavement. Tourism development must therefore create an attractive experience without concealing its historical cost.

The central research question is how different organisations transform pirate heritage into tourism and entrepreneurial value while maintaining historical credibility and social legitimacy. Three related issues are examined: the forms of tourism product that emerge, the mechanisms through which economic value is created and distributed, and the risks generated by the commercialisation of a contested heritage.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Cultural Tourism and Experience

Heritage does not function as a tourism resource merely because it survives from the past. It acquires tourism significance when it is selected, interpreted, and connected to present-day needs. Timothy and Boyd (2003) emphasise that heritage management encompasses conservation, access, interpretation, and the negotiation of authenticity. The tourism experience is therefore the outcome of a curated narrative rather than a neutral reflection of history.

At festivals, value is generated by the concentration of activities within a limited period, collective participation, and the event's ability to strengthen the destination's image. Getz (2008) places planned events within destination development and marketing strategies. Their effects may include additional overnight stays, spending on food services and retail, publicity, and greater local pride. These outcomes are not automatic; they depend on timing, connections with local businesses, and the capacity to manage visitor flows.

In museums and exhibitions, the experience is organised within a more stable setting. Authentic objects, scenography, sound, digital applications, and participatory exhibits create a sequence of learning and entertainment. The experience may become a ticketed product and support additional income from retail, educational programmes, and special events. Its quality depends both on its appeal and on the accuracy of its interpretation.

2.2 Cultural Entrepreneurship and Pirate Heritage

Cultural entrepreneurship describes the process through which elements of tangible and intangible cultural heritage are transformed into sustainable cultural services and experiences. Economic exploitation is not its sole objective. It is also associated with preserving collective memory, strengthening local identity, encouraging community participation, and creating employment. Research concerning the Greek islands indicates that cultural entrepreneurship can draw on diverse resources, including monuments, industrial heritage, gastronomy, literature, and cultural festivals (Maniou et al., 2025a; Maniou, Mitoula and Manola, 2025b; Maniou et al., 2025c; 2025d; 2025e; 2025f).

In the case of pirate heritage, cultural entrepreneurship develops through the integration of historical research into the design of experiential tourism products. Pirate festivals, historical re-enactments, museum exhibitions, themed tours, educational programmes, and digital applications can represent different manifestations of the same cultural resource. Pirate themes enjoy widespread recognition because they are associated with the sea, adventure, ports, and tales of hidden treasure. Although this recognition facilitates audience attraction, it is insufficient to create a sustainable product. Historical documentation, a strong connection to the specific place, and the participation of local economic and cultural stakeholders are also required.

The study by Maniou, Maniou and Mitoula (2026) on pirate festivals and local development in Paros places pirate-related themes within the broader context of using Aegean history and folk tradition. A pirate festival can operate as an organised mechanism of cultural entrepreneurship because it mobilises artists, cultural associations, tour guides, hospitality and catering businesses, local producers, and craftspeople. Its economic impact is not limited to event revenues but extends to overnight stays, transport, food services, purchases of local products, and associated cultural activities.

Evidence from literary festivals similarly demonstrates that cultural events can strengthen local development when they are organically connected to the destination's identity and are not treated as isolated occasions (Maniou, Mitoula and Manola, 2025b). The same principle applies to pirate festivals. Such events should be grounded in the history of the particular island or port, local narratives, and available historical evidence. This approach prevents the reproduction of a generic, commercialised pirate image that could be presented in an identical manner at any destination.

Studies of Lesbos, Limnos, Kalymnos, and Patmos also show that the adaptive reuse of historic buildings and monuments can support new cultural activities without compromising their historical and architectural character (Maniou et al., 2025a; 2025c; 2025d; 2025f). In the field of pirate heritage, former port buildings, fortifications, maritime museums,

and industrial heritage sites can accommodate exhibitions, workshops, archives, educational activities, and interpretation centres. Such reuse should be accompanied by conservation studies and a clear distinction between historically documented information and subsequent fictional representations.

Gastronomy can also broaden the economic base of a pirate-themed cultural product. Research on the South Aegean islands highlights the potential of local food to function both as an expression of cultural identity and as a field of entrepreneurial activity (Maniou et al., 2025e). At pirate festivals, the involvement of local producers and catering businesses can connect maritime history with local products and culinary traditions. Artificial ‘pirate’ dishes that bear no relation to local history and serve exclusively as commercial devices should, however, be avoided.

The sustainability of cultural entrepreneurship ultimately depends on how the value generated is distributed. A pirate festival or museum contributes meaningfully to local development when it employs local suppliers, creates jobs, involves residents in the planning process, and reinvests part of its revenue in heritage conservation and research. Revenue sources should also be diversified through admission fees, guided tours, educational programmes, publications, workshops, local products, and digital content.

At the same time, entrepreneurial development must critically address the historical dimensions of piracy. Violence, plunder, colonialism, and slavery cannot be omitted in favour of an idealised image of the pirate. Historically responsible interpretation enhances the credibility of the cultural product and enables the development of content for different visitor groups. Pirate heritage can therefore become a productive field of cultural entrepreneurship when it combines the appeal of storytelling with scholarly documentation, the protection of cultural resources, and the participation of the local community.

2.3 Authenticity and Difficult Heritage

Authenticity in tourism is not always synonymous with the absence of staging. Research by Chhabra, Healy and Sills (2003) showed that a re-enactment may be considered high-quality when audiences perceive consistency, credibility, and respect for the historical context. Chhabra’s later approach (2019) treats authenticity as a process of dialogue and authentication involving organisations, communities, and visitors.

In pirate heritage, entertaining narratives should distinguish pirates from privateers, explain the relationship between private violence and state authorisation, and place their activities within networks of colonialism and trade. Port Royal is a characteristic example. UNESCO presents it not merely as a pirate port but as an English colonial urban ensemble and a hub of transatlantic trade, including the trafficking of enslaved Africans. Historical completeness does not diminish appeal; it adds layers of meaning and supports programmes for different audiences.

3 METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative comparative multiple-case approach. The sample was selected to cover three different forms of development: recurring festivals, a permanent themed museum and a museum exhibition, and an archaeological destination. The cases were examined using published academic literature and official information from the responsible organisations, last reviewed on 12 September 2026.

The analysis was organised around five dimensions: spatial connection to heritage, form of experience, principal stakeholders, potential revenue streams, and primary management risk. The method enables the identification of common patterns but does not establish a causal economic impact. Available public sources do not provide consistent data on visitors, expenditure, employment, or organisational costs. The article therefore avoids unsupported numerical estimates and presents its entrepreneurial conclusions as analytical propositions.

4 CASE ANALYSIS

4.1 Pirates Week in the Cayman Islands

Pirates Week is an event with public institutional support and broad geographical distribution across the islands. Its official programme connects pirate re-enactments with parades, local gastronomy, crafts, music, sporting activities, and days dedicated to individual communities. Pirate imagery provides an easily recognisable framework, while the content is broadened to showcase residents’ culture and everyday creativity.

Its entrepreneurial value lies in the capacity to distribute demand across numerous activities and locations. Visitors consume not one spectacle but a bundle of services that may include accommodation, transport, food, shopping, and event participation. Value for small businesses increases when the programme provides an organised presence for local

suppliers and festival promotion directs visitors towards them. The main risk is that a generic carnival image may overshadow the distinctive identity of each island.

4.2 Fête des Corsaires à Saint-Malo

Saint-Malo has a historic urban environment, fortifications, and a port identity associated with the corsaires—private seafarers who operated under state licence during wartime. The Fête des Corsaires draws on this background through costumed re-enactments, fencing, music, games, and activities in public space. The old town itself serves as the stage, narrowing the distance between narrative and place.

The case demonstrates the importance of historical specificity for place branding. Using the term corsaire rather than the generic pirate creates a distinctive identity and provides educational content. From an entrepreneurial perspective, the festival can connect guided tours, local catering, costume-making, performing arts, and retail. Clear interpretation is nevertheless required so that the state authorisation of corsaires is not reduced to a simplistic glorification of maritime violence.

4.3 St. Augustine Pirate and Treasure Museum

The St. Augustine museum represents a private, permanent, ticketed form of development. According to its official website, it presents more than 800 authentic artefacts, occupies approximately 5,000 square feet of exhibition space, and uses interactive applications to transport visitors to the age of piracy. Its location opposite the Castillo de San Marcos creates spatial synergy with an already prominent historic attraction.

The model relies on repeatable daily operation, the family market, and an immersive experience. The collection provides evidence of authenticity, while scenography improves accessibility for younger audiences. Entrepreneurial resilience may be strengthened through educational packages, themed publications, and a changing programme. The risk is that authentic objects may become mere decoration for a predetermined adventure. Curators should explain the provenance, use, and limits of historical knowledge relating to each exhibit.

4.4 The Pirates Exhibition at the National Maritime Museum

The National Maritime Museum's Pirates exhibition in Greenwich, which closed on 4 January 2026, is an example of a large-scale temporary museum production. Its narrative contrasted changing depictions of pirates in popular culture with a violent historical reality and covered regions from the South China Sea to North Africa. It thus moved beyond an exclusively Anglo-Caribbean history.

A temporary exhibition creates a reason to revisit, activates collections that are not permanently displayed, and supports related content, lectures, publications, and products. Its limited duration concentrates attention but requires substantial initial investment and careful post-closure planning. Retaining digital resources after closure, such as articles on the mythology and history of piracy, extends the investment's life cycle.

4.5 Archaeological Ensemble of Port Royal

Port Royal is the most complex case because the tourism resource is a real place with terrestrial and underwater remains. In 2025, the Archaeological Ensemble of 17th-Century Port Royal was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Recognition rests on its value as an English colonial settlement, its preserved urban and defensive structure, and its connection to transatlantic trade and the trafficking of enslaved Africans.

Inscription creates opportunities for international visibility, research, specialised guided tours, and local hospitality services. It does not, however, authorise uncontrolled tourism development. Carrying capacity, protection of underwater remains, resident access, and revenue distribution must form part of the management model. In this case, cultural entrepreneurship is sustainable only when it finances—and does not undermine—conservation, research, and historically comprehensive interpretation.

4.6 Comparative Findings

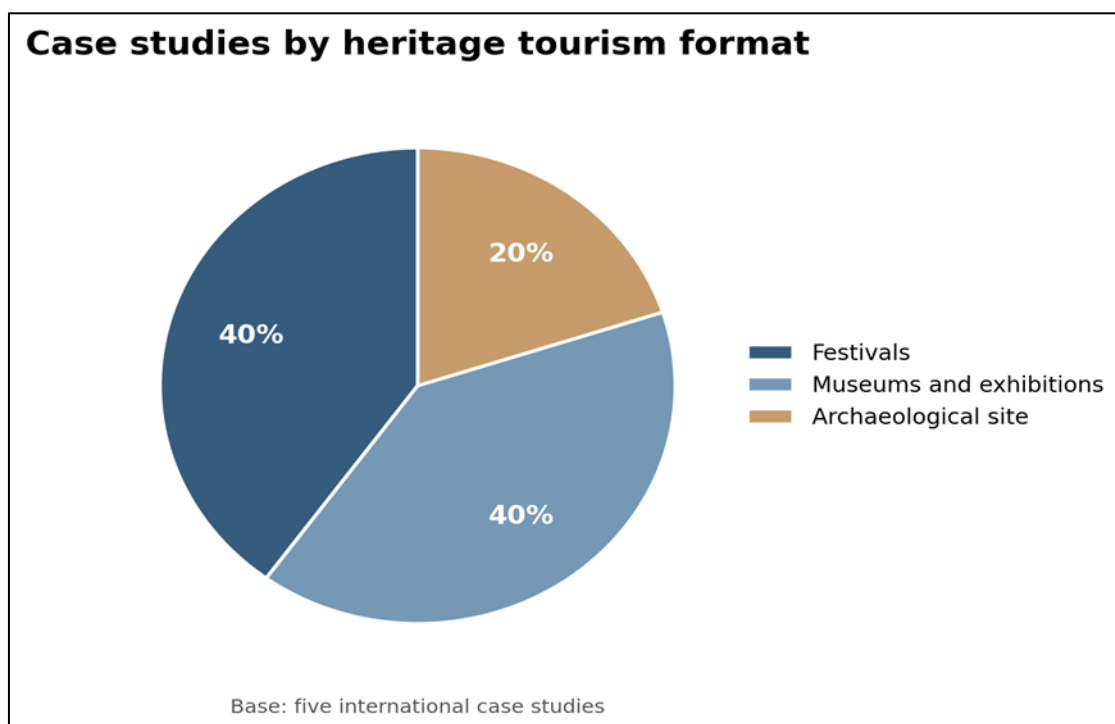


Figure 1: Distribution of the case studies by form of development

Table 1: Pirate Heritage Activities

Case	Format	Primary value creation	Critical risk
Pirates Week	Festival	Time-limited concentration of demand and a network of local suppliers	Generic carnival imagery without local differentiation
Fête des Corsaires	Festival in a historic setting	Place identity and connection of public space with performing arts	Glorification of state-authorised violence
St. Augustine	Private themed museum	Permanent ticketed experience and family market	Scenography displacing historical documentation
National Maritime Museum	Temporary exhibition	Repeat visits and renewed use of collections	High cost and limited life cycle
Port Royal	Archaeological destination	International recognition and specialised experiences	Conservation pressure and unequal distribution of benefits

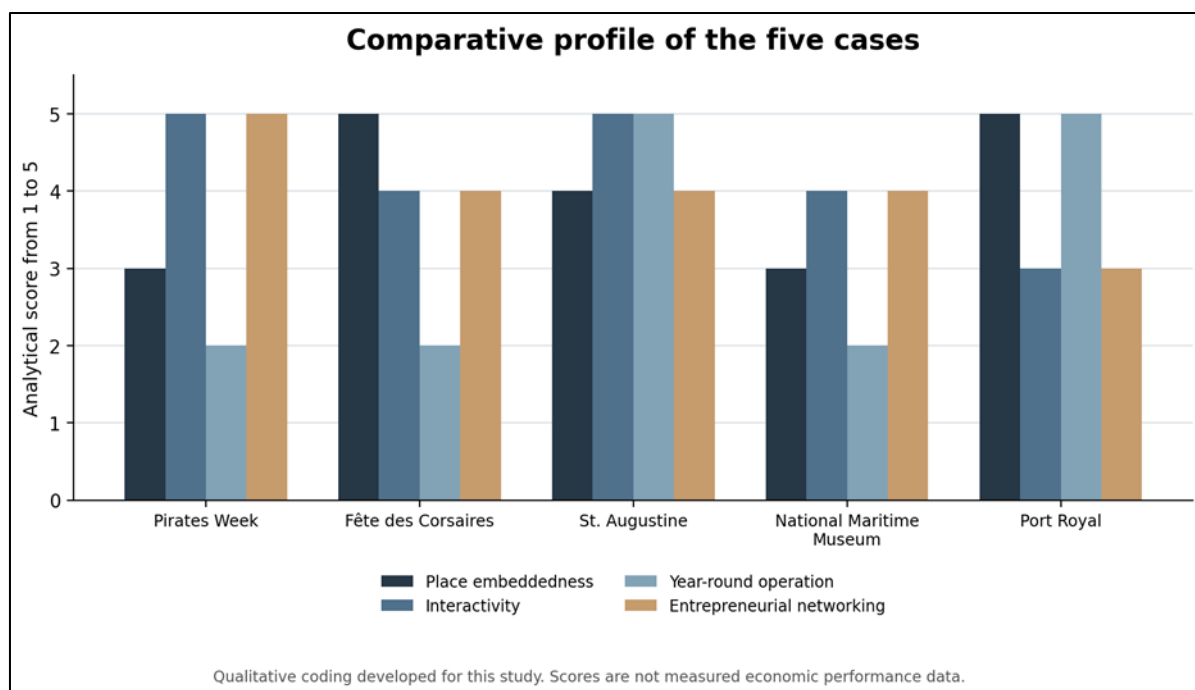


Figure 2: Qualitative comparison of the cases across four dimensions

The comparison identifies three different temporal patterns of entrepreneurial development. A festival creates a peak in demand, a museum offers stable operations, and an archaeological site requires long-term management. No form is inherently superior. The choice should reflect the scale of the destination, the available documentation and infrastructure, and stakeholders' capacity for cooperation.

A common mechanism of success is the transformation of a central narrative into a network of complementary products. The narrative directs visitors from an event or museum towards the town, gastronomy, crafts, and other cultural services. When this interconnection is explicitly designed, more expenditure remains in the local economy, and incentives for cooperation are created. When it is absent, pirate themes are reduced to an isolated spectacle or imported souvenirs.

A second shared finding is that historical complexity can become an entrepreneurial advantage. The distinction between pirates and corsaires, women's presence in the history of piracy, global maritime routes, and links to colonialism create multiple layers of content. The same cultural resource can thus support family activities, school programmes, specialised tours, and academic events without repeating a simplified story.

4.7 Responsible Development Framework

Based on the cases, the development of a pirate-heritage product can be organised into six successive areas. First, historical sources must be critically assessed, with a clear distinction between evidence, plausible interpretation, and myth. Second, the narrative should be connected to a specific place and explain why the product is developed there. Third, the local value chain must be mapped so that creators and small businesses are involved from the design stage.

Fourth, the revenue mix should be diversified and consistent with the organisation's mission. Admission fees may be combined with educational services, themed tours, publications, workshops, and controlled commercial activity. Fifth, access and carrying capacity should be determined before promotion, particularly at archaeological and coastal sites. Sixth, evaluation should measure not only visitor numbers but also local procurement, length of stay, resident satisfaction, learning quality, and state of conservation.

Governance links these areas together. A committee or partnership involving cultural organisations, local government, businesses, researchers, and communities can oversee both the narrative and the use of revenue. Participation should not be restricted to consultation after decisions have been made. Access to procurement opportunities, training, data, and clear accountability procedures is required.

5 DISCUSSION

Pirate heritage presents a productive tension between familiarity and difficulty. Familiar imagery attracts audiences and lowers barriers to entry, while difficult history requires interpretation. Successful cases do not eliminate this tension; they use it to guide visitors from myth towards historical understanding.

From an entrepreneurial perspective, theming works best as a shared platform rather than a single product. A festival can activate the market temporarily, a museum can maintain interest throughout the year, and a historic site can provide spatial and evidential authenticity. Connecting them through shared routes, tickets, programmes, and digital storytelling can extend stays and reduce dependence on a single revenue source.

The analysis has limitations. It lacks a common system of economic data for the five cases and does not include interviews with residents, organisers, or businesses. It therefore cannot estimate net economic impact or compare social acceptance using a single indicator. Future research could combine visitor surveys, analysis of local procurement, accommodation data, and qualitative interviews before and after an event or investment.

Finally, we stress the significance of all digital technologies in the field of cultural entrepreneurship education, which is highly effective and productive, facilitating and improving assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [20], various ICT applications that are the main supporters of education [21-24], and AI, STEM, and ROBOTICS that elevate educational procedures to new performance levers [25-29]. Additionally, the development and blending of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and emotional intelligence [30-32] accelerates and further improves educational practices and results, particularly in cultural and entrepreneurial education and practice.

6 CONCLUSION

Pirate heritage can operate as a tourism attraction and a foundation for cultural entrepreneurship because it combines a recognisable narrative, maritime space, material evidence, and opportunities for participatory experience. Its value, however, does not arise from simply adding pirate decoration to a destination. It emerges from connecting the theme to local history, ensuring high-quality interpretation, and involving the local economy.

The five cases illustrate different development pathways. Festivals strengthen periodic demand and networking; museums create stable experiences and commercial flows; temporary exhibitions renew the cultural offer; and archaeological sites ground narratives in authentic remains. Across all forms, sustainability requires historical responsibility, diversified revenue, local partnerships, and measurement of cultural and social outcomes.

The central policy and entrepreneurial proposition is clear: pirate mythology may open the door, but historical knowledge and local participation create long-term value. A product that acknowledges violence, colonialism, and slavery does not lose its narrative power. On the contrary, it gains credibility, expands its educational content, and strengthens its legitimacy as a cultural investment.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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