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TOWARDS AGE-FRIENDLY DESTINATIONS: ASSESSING ELDERLY TOURIST NEEDS AND MANAGEMENT APPROACHES IN LOWER NORTHERN THAILAND

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Abstract

This study investigates effective tourism management strategies for elderly travelers in Thailand's Lower Northern Region, addressing the global demographic shift towards an aging society. It pursued a dual objective: first, to analyze the specific needs and preferences of elderly tourists regarding local attractions and services, and second, to assess the readiness of existing tourism destinations to accommodate these requirements. A descriptive approach was employed, collecting data from 400 Thai tourists aged 60 and above who had visited the region, using semi-structured questionnaires and interviews. Additionally, a Universal Design-based evaluation was conducted across 60 sites in five provinces: Phitsanulok, Phichit, Nakhon Sawan, Uttaradit, and Phetchabun. Findings reveal that elderly tourists prioritize accessible infrastructure, including barrier-free facilities, well-trained service staff, and clear information. Cultural and spiritual attractions emerged as the most preferred destinations. While Phetchabun exhibited the highest age-friendliness, notable gaps persist between elderly visitors' expectations and the current infrastructure across the region. This research underscores the urgent need for inclusive design, cross-sector collaboration, and innovative service development to create sustainable and age-friendly tourism ecosystems in Thailand, positioning the Lower Northern Region as a model for an aging society.

Keywords: Elderly Tourism, Tourism Management, Universal Design, Destination Readiness, Inclusive Tourism

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Introduction

Tourism has long been recognized as one of the most dynamic and influential drivers of global economic and social development. In Thailand, it remains a cornerstone of national economic growth and one of the country's primary income-generating industries, significantly contributing to prosperity and social welfare. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2022), the nation welcomed approximately 22.35 million international visitors in 2012, an increase of 16.29 percent from the previous year, generating nearly 983,928 million baht in revenue, a remarkable 26.76 percent rise. Beyond its economic importance, tourism stimulates employment, supports income redistribution, and encourages the preservation of cultural heritage. It also facilitates cultural exchange between residents and international visitors, fostering mutual understanding and shared responsibility for environmental and cultural conservation (Tosun & Jenkins, 1996). Given these multidimensional benefits, tourism development remains a strategic priority within Thailand's national policy framework.

As global tourism dynamics evolve, Thailand faces the dual challenge of maintaining competitiveness and adapting to shifting demographic structures. Among emerging market segments, elderly tourists represent a promising yet underdeveloped demographic. The global trend toward aging populations, driven by advances in healthcare, medical technology, and improved living standards, has resulted in a growing number of older adults who are financially stable, time-affluent, and motivated to travel. Lohmann & Danielsson (2001) observed that the post-World War II "Baby Boomer" generation and early Generation X cohorts are entering retirement with substantial financial resources and a strong inclination toward leisure and travel. This transformation highlights the potential of senior tourism as a high-value market characterized by strong purchasing power, extended stays, and distinctive travel motivations. The Thai Research Institute for Tourism Development projected that by 2020, the global population of elderly tourists would reach approximately 700 million, underscoring the urgency of developing inclusive, age-friendly tourism strategies (Mangunsong, 2020).

Elderly travelers generally prioritize comfort, safety, and quality of service in their tourism experiences (Song & Feng, 2021). They tend to favor slower-paced itineraries that allow for relaxation, cultural immersion, and authentic engagement with local communities. While many are willing to pay premium prices for convenience and comfort, age-related limitations such as reduced mobility, vision, and hearing require that tourism infrastructure be designed for accessibility and inclusion. Jaiwilai & Kunaviktikul (2022) emphasized that destinations must adopt universal design principles to ensure barrier-free facilities, safe transportation, accessible accommodations, and integrated healthcare support. These measures enhance not only physical safety but also psychological well-being, enabling elderly travelers to enjoy independent and meaningful travel experiences.

In response to these emerging needs, the Thai government has initiated the development of service standards for elderly tourists, families with children, and pregnant women. While such initiatives mark progress toward inclusivity, their implementation remains uneven across regions. Much of the country's tourism infrastructure continues to cater primarily to general travelers rather than specifically addressing the needs of senior visitors. Strengthening policy enforcement, promoting localized adaptation, and integrating universal design principles are therefore essential steps toward improving accessibility, comfort, and service quality for aging tourists. These measures also align with the broader goals of Thailand's national strategy for sustainable development and inclusive economic growth.

The Lower Northern Region of Thailand, including the provinces of Phitsanulok, Phichit, Nakhon Sawan, Uttaradit, and Phetchabun, offers considerable potential for elderly-oriented tourism. Renowned for its cultural heritage, historical landmarks, natural landscapes, and spiritual attractions, the region aligns closely with the interests and expectations of elderly travelers. Its emphasis on wellness-oriented tourism, tranquil settings, and cultural enrichment

makes it particularly attractive to older visitors seeking relaxation and spiritual renewal. However, existing regional management strategies have yet to fully integrate the needs of elderly tourists into destination planning, service design, and infrastructure development. Addressing these gaps is therefore critical for enhancing the region's competitiveness and positioning it as a model for inclusive and sustainable tourism management.

Senior tourism strongly aligns with the principles of sustainable development. Research indicates that elderly travelers often avoid peak travel periods, extend their stays, and allocate more of their expenditures to wellness, cultural, and health-related activities (Sitepu et al., 2020). Such behavior patterns help stabilize local economies throughout the year, mitigate the effects of seasonality, and reduce environmental pressures from mass tourism. Promoting senior tourism, therefore, supports economic resilience, environmental stewardship, and community well-being, three pillars of sustainable and responsible tourism development.

Developing effective management approaches for elderly tourism requires a multidisciplinary and collaborative framework. First, destinations must adopt universal design standards to ensure accessibility across transportation systems, public facilities, and tourist attractions. This includes the creation of barrier-free environments, integration of assistive technologies, and provision of health and safety support systems. Second, workforce development programs should emphasize empathetic communication, safety awareness, and competencies in elderly care to deliver high-quality service. Third, coordination among tourism authorities, healthcare institutions, local governments, and private enterprises is necessary to create an integrated service ecosystem that supports aging travelers holistically. Finally, marketing strategies should highlight wellness, cultural authenticity, and safety factors that most strongly influence elderly tourists' destination choices.

Community participation plays a pivotal role in shaping inclusive tourism environments. Residents contribute to the authenticity and richness of visitor experiences by sharing traditions, cultural knowledge, and hospitality. Integrating traditional health practices, local cuisine, and cultural performances can enhance a destination's attractiveness while preserving intangible cultural heritage. Public-private partnerships should also be leveraged to finance age-friendly infrastructure, such as accessible transport systems, medical support facilities, and emergency response mechanisms. These investments not only increase the satisfaction of elderly travelers but also improve accessibility for all visitors, strengthening Thailand's overall tourism ecosystem.

In light of these dynamics, this study aims to propose management approaches tailored to the expectations, behaviors, and constraints of elderly tourists in the Lower Northern Region of Thailand. This research seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, tourism operators, and local communities by analyzing both the demand side (focusing on elderly travelers' needs and preferences) and the supply side (examining the readiness of tourism attractions, facilities, and services). The anticipated outcomes include enhanced accessibility, improved service standards, and enriched travel experiences for elderly tourists. Furthermore, integrating elderly-friendly tourism into Thailand's broader tourism strategy will diversify market segments, strengthen national competitiveness, and promote social inclusion amid a rapidly aging society.

Ultimately, the development of elderly tourism represents not only a strategic economic opportunity but also a moral and social commitment to building an equitable, inclusive, and sustainable tourism industry that benefits all generations. By aligning tourism management with universal design principles, participatory governance, and the Sustainable Development Goals, Thailand can position itself as a regional leader in elderly-friendly tourism. Such progress would not only enhance the quality of life for older travelers but also contribute to the broader pursuit of social cohesion, cultural preservation, and balanced regional development in the era of demographic transition.

Literature Reviews

Tourism Management Approaches for Elderly Tourists

As Thailand transitions into a fully aged society, understanding the behaviors and needs of elderly tourists has become increasingly important for tourism planning and destination management. With a rising number of retirees enjoying better health, financial stability, and leisure time, older adults represent a growing market segment that demands age-friendly and inclusive tourism services (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2022). Developing management strategies that address this demographic offers both economic opportunities and social value consistent with sustainable development goals. Tourism management for elderly travelers must consider their distinct physical, psychological, and social characteristics. Song & Feng (2021) emphasized that senior tourists prioritize safety, comfort, and personalized service. Research also shows that accessible facilities, slower-paced itineraries, and culturally meaningful experiences significantly enhance their satisfaction (Jaiwilai & Kunaviktikul, 2022). Moreover, senior tourism supports sustainability, as older travelers often travel during off-peak seasons, stay longer, and spend more, thereby reducing pressure on overcrowded destinations (Sitepu et al., 2020).

Needs of Elderly Tourists

Existing studies identify three key dimensions of elderly tourists' needs: facilities, attractions, and service quality. Accessibility infrastructure, including ramps, elevators, handrails, and rest areas, is essential for addressing mobility limitations. Regarding attractions, older travelers generally favor cultural, natural, and spiritual sites rather than entertainment-based destinations (Lohmann & Danielsson, 2001). Service-related factors are equally critical; trained personnel, clear communication, and accessible healthcare services strongly influence visitor satisfaction and destination loyalty (Wongcharoenkul & Suntrayuth, 2023).

Management Approaches and Universal Design

Effective management of elderly tourism requires inclusivity, with the adoption of universal design principles to ensure accessibility for all travelers. Universal design ensures barrier-free, safe, and enjoyable experiences and is widely endorsed within sustainable tourism frameworks (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2023). Tailored tourism products such as wellness programs, cultural immersion activities, and nutritious local cuisine closely align with elderly tourists' preferences (Huang & Tsai, 2003). Coordination among the tourism, transportation, and healthcare sectors further improves safety and convenience, while accessible communication formats, such as large-print materials and simplified digital interfaces, promote usability.

Toward Sustainable Elderly-Friendly Tourism

Integrating these management strategies enhances the potential of regions such as Lower Northern Thailand, known for its rich cultural and natural heritage, to emerge as model destinations for elderly-friendly tourism. Aligning management practices with universal design and community participation fosters accessibility, inclusivity, and cultural preservation. Ultimately, effective management of senior tourism advances both social and economic objectives, contributing to Thailand's long-term pursuit of sustainable and equitable tourism development (Kim et al., 2015).

Research Methods

This study employs a descriptive research design to examine the needs and preferences of elderly tourists and assess the readiness of tourist attractions within the region. Rather than testing hypotheses or employing inferential analysis, the study utilizes descriptive statistical methods, such as means, percentages, and standard deviations, to interpret data and formulate policy-oriented recommendations that support inclusive and sustainable tourism management.

The research focuses on Thailand's Lower Northern Region, which comprises five provinces: Phitsanulok, Phichit, Nakhon Sawan, Uttaradit, and Phetchabun. These provinces were selected due to their variety of cultural, historical, natural, and wellness-oriented attractions that align with the preferences of elderly travelers. The region provides an ideal context for evaluating how existing destinations accommodate elderly tourists in terms of accessibility, safety, and service quality. Insights derived from this investigation are expected to inform strategies for inclusive tourism development and future policy design (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2022).

The study covers two major dimensions of inquiry. The first examines the needs and preferences of elderly tourists, categorized into three areas: (1) Facilities including accessible restrooms, ramps, elevators, and resting areas to support comfort, safety, and mobility; (2) Attraction Value covering cultural, spiritual, and natural sites that offer meaningful and relaxing experiences; and (3) Tourism Services, comprising clear information, empathetic staff, and reliable safety measures (Song & Feng, 2021). The second dimension assesses the readiness of tourist destinations. This assessment is based on universal design principles and five key management components: personnel training, route connectivity, public relations, elderly-oriented products and services, and barrier-free infrastructure (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2022).

The study's target population comprises Thai elderly tourists aged 60 years and older who have visited the Lower Northern Region at least once in the past year. A total of 400 respondents were selected using accidental sampling, a non-probability approach suitable for descriptive research when participants are engaged during travel activities. This sample size ensures sufficient reliability and representativeness for descriptive statistical analysis.

Data collection combined quantitative and qualitative methods to achieve a comprehensive understanding of elderly tourism. (1) Secondary Data Review: Existing academic studies, government policy reports, and statistical data were analyzed to construct the conceptual framework and inform questionnaire design. (2) Questionnaire: The primary instrument was a semi-structured questionnaire divided into three sections: (2.1) demographic information, (2.2) needs and preferences (rated on a 5-point Likert scale, Likert, 1932), and (2.3) open-ended questions for qualitative feedback. Content validity was confirmed by three experts, producing an Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index of 0.89. Reliability testing with 30 pilot participants yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.923, indicating excellent internal consistency (Nam et al., 2025). (3) Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected respondents to gain deeper insight into travel motivations, service expectations, and areas for improvement. Responses were analyzed using content analysis to identify key patterns and recurring themes, complementing quantitative results (Seedapeng & Tansenee, 2021).

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were applied to summarize the characteristics, behaviors, and perceptions of elderly tourists. These results were then used to identify priority development areas, design provincial management models, and propose strategic recommendations for elderly-friendly tourism planning.

By integrating quantitative precision with qualitative insight, this methodological framework provides a holistic understanding of elderly tourists' expectations and destinations' preparedness in the Lower Northern Region. The findings aim to inform evidence-based management guidelines that enhance accessibility, inclusivity, and sustainability within Thailand's evolving tourism landscape.

Research Results

The study explored the needs and preferences of elderly tourists regarding tourism destinations in the Lower Northern Region of Thailand. Data were collected via questionnaires distributed

to 400 elderly Thai tourists aged 60 and above who had previously traveled within the target area.

Demographically, the majority of respondents were male (52.75%), aged 60-65 years (40.50%), and in single marital status (41.00%). Most held a level of education below a bachelor's degree and traveled primarily for leisure (32%). They typically traveled for one day, particularly during national holidays or festival periods, mostly with family or relatives using private vehicles, and incurred travel expenses of less than 1,000 Baht per trip.

The core objective was to examine the perceived importance of three main aspects of tourism destinations from the perspective of elderly tourists: facilities for the elderly, the perceived value of the destinations, and tourism services provided at the destinations. The findings revealed that the overall level of need and preference across all three dimensions was high, with a mean score of 4.34 and a standard deviation of 0.79, based on a 5-point Likert scale, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Level of Needs and Preferences of Elderly Tourists Toward Tourism Destinations in the Lower Northern Region of Thailand, by Main Dimensions

Dimension	Mean Standard Deviation (SD)		Level of Preference
1) Facilities for the elderly	4.58	0.66	Highest
2) Tourism services	4.43	0.74	High
3) Value of the tourist destination	4.32	0.77	High
Overall	4.34	0.79	High

As Table 1 shows, 'facilities for the elderly' was rated as the most important factor (Mean = 4.58, SD = 0.66). This indicates that senior tourists prioritize accessibility and physical convenience in destination choice, including features such as ramps, senior-friendly restrooms, elevators, and rest areas. 'Tourism services' ranked second (Mean = 4.43, SD = 0.74), encompassing safety, staff friendliness, information clarity, health services, and elderly-appropriate food services. While 'perceived value of the destination' received the lowest mean score among the three, it still ranked high (Mean = 4.32, SD = 0.77). This dimension reflects seniors' appreciation for destinations rich in cultural, historical, spiritual, or peaceful environments, such as temples, ancient sites, and nature reserves. Overall, the findings suggest that effective age-friendly tourism management must emphasize inclusive infrastructure, high-quality service delivery, and value-driven experiences to meet the expectations of this growing demographic.

To evaluate the potential of tourist attractions in the Lower Northern Region of Thailand in accordance with the needs of elderly tourists, the research team selected 12 tourist attractions per province, totaling 60, for an evaluation based on Universal Design (UD) principles. The evaluation applied a weighted scoring approach focusing on three primary dimensions:

1) **Outdoor Facilities:** This aspect assesses physical accessibility to tourism sites, including, Smooth and wide walkways with non-slip surfaces, External staircases with appropriate step dimensions and handrails, Outdoor ramps accommodating wheelchairs and mobility aids, Handrails, safety rails, and protective edges for fall prevention, Designated parking for the elderly and disabled, located near site entrances, Shaded rest areas and picnic spaces with basic amenities. The results indicated that most nature-based attractions lacked appropriate infrastructure, particularly sloped paths and accessible walkways for seniors using canes or wheelchairs.

2) **Indoor Facilities:** This component focuses on accessibility within visitor centers, museums, or indoor exhibitions, assessing, Guestroom levels and the presence of interior handrails, Restrooms with appropriate space, grab bars, and accessibility for wheelchairs, Indoor

staircases with sufficient lighting and continuous handrails, Findings revealed that sites managed by local administrative organizations or government agencies generally provided better indoor facilities compared to privately operated attractions.

3) Information and Communication: Effective communication is vital for elderly tourists. The assessment focused on Large, clear signage with readable fonts and accessible language, Information desks staffed with trained personnel, and materials friendly to the elderly, such as brochures with large print. It was found that most attractions lacked senior-specific communication tools, such as audio descriptions or tactile signs for visually impaired visitors. In conclusion, the assessment of 60 tourist attractions across the Lower Northern Region revealed that only a limited number had fully adopted Universal Design principles. Most attractions exhibited deficiencies in physical accessibility and inclusive communication. These findings underscore the urgent need for a systematic approach to developing elderly-friendly tourism. Establishing national design standards and promoting universal accessibility across all types of tourist destinations is critical for ensuring sustainable tourism in an aging society. The overall readiness scores are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Summary of Readiness Scores for Senior-Friendly Tourism by Province

Province	Outdoor Facilities (Max 5.00)	Indoor Facilities (Max 5.00)	Information & Communication (Max 5.00)	Total Score (Average)
Phetchabun	4.21	4.05	3.88	4.05
Phitsanulok	4.00	3.97	3.75	3.91
Nakhon Sawan	3.92	3.83	3.60	3.78
Uttaradit	3.65	3.55	3.45	3.55
Pichit	3.50	3.40	3.30	3.40

Table 2 presents the average scores evaluating the potential of tourism destinations in the Lower Northern Region of Thailand, with a particular focus on their alignment with Universal Design (UD) principles. The assessment was structured around three components: Outdoor Facilities, Indoor Facilities, and Information & Communication, each measured on a five-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicated greater suitability for elderly tourists. Data were drawn from respondents aged 60 and above with prior travel experience in the selected provinces.

Among the five provinces examined, Phetchabun achieved the highest overall score (Mean = 4.05), demonstrating strong performance in outdoor accessibility (including walkways, ramps, and designated parking areas), and showing relatively consistent results in indoor facilities and communication supports. Phitsanulok ranked second (Mean = 3.91), suggesting commendable progress yet highlighting the need to strengthen information accessibility and communication aids. Nakhon Sawan (Mean = 3.78) and Uttaradit (Mean = 3.55) received moderate scores, indicating partial compliance with UD standards. Both provinces revealed particular deficiencies in indoor facilities and signage, which are essential for the safety and independence of elderly travelers. Phichit, with the lowest overall score (Mean = 3.40), showed the most critical gaps across all dimensions, especially in accessible restrooms, resting areas, and clear directional signage.

These findings emphasize that while progress has been made in certain provinces, substantial disparities remain in achieving inclusive and age-friendly environments. Provincial tourism authorities are therefore encouraged to prioritize infrastructure development and communication enhancements, guided by UD principles, in alignment with national and international frameworks for sustainable, age-friendly tourism.

Beyond the quantitative assessment, interviews with elderly tourists and discussions with representatives from public and private tourism organizations revealed several appropriate tourism management approaches for elderly visitors in the Lower Northern Region of Thailand. Drawing on both survey data and qualitative analysis, the study identified strategies that enhance travel experiences for older adults by improving accessibility, safety, service quality, and communication systems. These recommendations are rooted in universal design principles and are consistent with international standards for age-friendly tourism management.

(1) **Improving Tourism Facilities and Infrastructure:** Elderly respondents emphasized the need for well-designed physical environments that promote comfort and safety. Enhancing accessibility requires clear directional signage, smooth road surfaces, maintained walking paths, adequate lighting, and barrier-free landscapes. Tourist facilities should include designated parking areas, accessible restrooms, ramps, handrails, anti-slip flooring, rest areas, and first aid stations. Regular maintenance and aesthetic improvements, such as landscaping, interpretive signage, and cultural wayfinding systems, further enhance visitor satisfaction. Additionally, providing practical travel information, such as emergency contacts, nearby attractions, and real-time service updates, enables elderly travelers to make informed decisions and travel confidently.

(2) **Enhancing Accommodation Standards:** Accommodation providers play a key role in ensuring age-friendly hospitality. Elderly tourists prefer lodging that incorporates universal accessibility features and prioritizes safety and usability. Recommended features include appropriately elevated beds, bright room and bathroom lighting, ergonomic seating, reachable electrical outlets, non-slip floors, sliding bathroom doors, and secure safety handles. Providing instruction manuals or room guides in large print and in both Thai and English supports independent use. Furthermore, staff training in elderly care, empathy, and emergency procedures strengthens service quality and inclusivity.

(3) **Targeted Promotion and Incentives:** To increase engagement among elderly tourists, particularly those preferring short local trips, targeted promotional initiatives are crucial. The study suggests affordable one-day tour packages priced below 1,000 THB to appeal to budget-conscious senior travelers. Marketing efforts should leverage senior-oriented publications, community networks, and digital platforms such as LINE and Facebook, which are widely used among older Thais. Offering discounted or waived entry fees at key attractions, especially private sites, can further promote inclusivity and participation.

(4) **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Effective elderly-friendly tourism requires collaboration among government agencies, private stakeholders, and local communities. Cooperative planning, shared funding, and aligned policies can ensure sustainable implementation. Establishing community-based management systems fosters local ownership and cultural preservation. Moreover, cross-sector partnerships help integrate health and safety standards, accessible transportation, and consistent service quality across destinations. Collectively, these approaches address existing infrastructure and service gaps while preparing Thailand's tourism industry to meet the needs of an aging society. By embedding universal design principles, fostering cross-sector cooperation, and implementing inclusive policy frameworks, the Lower Northern Region can become a model for sustainable, age-friendly tourism, enhancing both national competitiveness and the quality of life for elderly travelers.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study examined the preferences, behaviors, and needs of elderly tourists in Thailand's Lower Northern Region, providing valuable insights into inclusive and sustainable tourism management. The findings underscore an urgent need to adapt tourism infrastructure, services, and communication systems to address the challenges of a rapidly aging population—an increasingly critical issue both nationally and globally (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2022;

United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2023). Elderly tourists rated accessible infrastructure (Mean = 4.58), service quality (Mean = 4.43), and destination value (Mean = 4.32) as the most influential factors shaping their travel satisfaction. These findings align with international research indicating that older travelers consistently prioritize safety, comfort, and autonomy when making travel decisions (Patterson & Balderas, 2020; Alén et al., 2012).

Accessibility and Infrastructure

Physical accessibility emerged as the strongest determinant of destination choice. Infrastructure elements such as ramps, wide walkways, accessible restrooms, sufficient seating, and proper lighting directly influence perceptions of comfort, safety, and usability. The Universal Design (UD) assessment revealed that while some provinces, notably Phetchabun, have made commendable progress in implementing accessibility improvements, many destinations across the Lower Northern Region still lack essential components, particularly in outdoor attractions and public information systems. These gaps corroborate prior studies emphasizing that the needs of elderly tourists remain inadequately incorporated into tourism planning and destination design (Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011; United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2023).

Travel Behavior and Experience Preferences

Participants expressed a preference for short, affordable trips requiring minimal physical exertion, often undertaken with family members. These travel patterns highlight the potential of localized models such as community-based tourism (CBT) and one-day packages that accommodate physical limitations while promoting community interaction and supporting local economies (Otoo & Kim, 2023). Moreover, elderly tourists favored experiences that combined cultural enrichment, relaxation, and social connection. Effective communication strategies should therefore employ age-appropriate, accessible media formats, including large-print brochures, clear visual signage, and simplified digital tools such as LINE and Facebook, to facilitate trip planning and enhance engagement.

Policy and Governance Implications. From a policy perspective, the findings emphasize the importance of multi-level collaboration among local governments, national tourism authorities, and private enterprises to ensure inclusive planning and effective implementation. Key priorities include establishing formal elderly-friendly tourism standards, offering financial incentives for infrastructure improvements, and strengthening public-private partnerships to enhance coordination. Measures such as reducing or waiving entry fees at cultural and natural sites have proven successful in increasing participation among older visitors while reinforcing social inclusion (Jamin et al., 2024; Kajornatthapol et al., 2024). Institutional mechanisms should further incorporate elderly tourism indicators into national tourism evaluation frameworks to ensure consistent monitoring and improvement.

Management Framework and Universal Design

This study advances understanding of elderly tourism management by proposing a practical, evidence-based framework centered on universal design, service quality, and inclusivity. It highlights the necessity of systemic reform to ensure that elderly travelers experience tourism in dignified, accessible, and fulfilling ways. As Thailand moves toward a “super-aged” society, developing age-friendly tourism infrastructure is both an ethical obligation and a strategic measure for economic resilience. The findings demonstrate that accessibility, safety, and comfort are the dimensions most valued by elderly tourists and must therefore serve as the foundation of future tourism management and policy design. Provincial authorities should prioritize the adoption of universal design standards across public spaces, attractions, and accommodations. Features such as ramps, elevators, handrails, safe pedestrian pathways, and adequate resting areas should be systematically integrated into both new and existing destinations. Enhancing outdoor and nature-based facilities, such as national parks, temples, and heritage sites, will enable elderly visitors to explore independently and comfortably.

Furthermore, developing senior-friendly information systems, such as large-print materials, multilingual audio guides, digital kiosks, and well-trained staff, can significantly improve accessibility and satisfaction for elderly tourists with diverse physical and cognitive needs.

Cross-Sector Collaboration and Capacity Building

Collaboration across sectors, government agencies, private tourism operators, healthcare institutions, and local communities is essential to achieve sustainable outcomes. Such partnerships can facilitate integrated transportation systems, accessible route planning, and community-based tourism initiatives that generate authentic, inclusive experiences. Capacity-building programs should emphasize empathetic communication, safety management, and training in elderly care for tourism personnel to ensure that service providers meet both the physical and emotional needs of older travelers. Public-private partnerships can also play a pivotal role in financing age-friendly infrastructure and technological innovations, including mobile applications for navigation, travel assistance, and health monitoring to promote safety and independence.

Toward a Model of Inclusive Tourism in the Lower Northern Region

The Lower Northern Region, comprising Phitsanulok, Phichit, Nakhon Sawan, Uttaradit, and Phetchabun, possesses unique potential to become a model for inclusive and sustainable senior tourism development. Its rich cultural heritage, spiritual traditions, and serene natural landscapes align with the preferences of elderly travelers seeking wellness, reflection, and cultural immersion. By implementing the proposed framework, this region can serve as a pilot area for the nationwide rollout of elderly-friendly tourism standards. Such initiatives would not only enhance regional competitiveness but also position Thailand as a leader in sustainable, inclusive tourism across Southeast Asia.

Advancing elderly-friendly tourism in Thailand requires coordinated policy actions, infrastructure innovation, and meaningful community participation. Investing in accessibility and inclusivity strengthens not only the travel experience of elderly visitors but also the broader tourism ecosystem, contributing to social equity and national competitiveness. As the population continues to age, embracing universal design, cross-sector collaboration, and community engagement will be central to achieving Thailand's vision of sustainable tourism development for all generations.

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