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**ARTICLE**

# Analysis, Evaluation and Comparison of Religious Tourism with Ecotourism: Case Studies in Armenia and Tanzania

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## ABSTRACT

This contribution is the result of an experience of two recent trips—"the field study"—, to Armenia and Tanzania, carried out separately by the two authors with the aim of exploring particular aspects of sustainable tourism through the analysis, interpretation and comparison of religious tourism with ecotourism in both countries. The application of these two types of tourism in the form of sustainable tourism practices aims to enhance and protect the territories under consideration and contribute to their local and regional economic development. The methodology employed in the comparative analysis is based on the investigation of political strategies, official statistics, national and regional documentation adopted by Armenia and Tanzania in relation to the tourism practices adopted, and participant observation. Tourism practices in Armenia and Tanzania in recent times have shown a focus on sustainability, aimed at developing these countries and preserving their territories and cultural heritage, as well as increasing tourists' awareness of their positive impact on the territories they visit. Acting on religious tourism in synergy with ecotourism helps tourists reduce their ecological impact, contribute to the conservation of cultural landscapes, and broaden their spiritual experiences. Traveling responsibly, sustainably, and ecospiritually through sacred sites and natural landscapes, in line with political strategies aimed at the sustainability of a country visited, increases tourism awareness of the benefits they bring to the local community and the heritage they bring. The spread of ecospiritual practices practiced in sustainable tourist travel also leads to increased heritage sustainability.

***Keywords:*** Ecotourism; Religious Tourism; Policy; Management; Heritage

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# 1. Introduction

Geography approaches themes of religion and related topics in the 19th–20th centuries, dealing with the geographical distribution of various religious forms in the world and the influence of geographical factors on their diffusion [1]. Studies of religious geography explain the relationship between religion and society [2] and trace the history of the birth and spreading of the various cults from a geographical-territorial perspective. This includes the study of pilgrimage and the analysis of the links between religion and environment [1].

Today the religious themes that arouse the most interest in the geographical discipline are those that are located in the interstitial spaces between religion and culture or between religion and the environment. In fact, in the various studies, cultural ad/or environmental tourism penetrates the religious one or is contaminated by it, in the sense of effective thematic hybridization that can contribute to the transformation and semantic expansion of the concept of religious tourism [3,4], innovating it.

Speaking of transformations, we cannot omit the fact that Pierre Deffontaines considers religion as a factor in the transformation of the landscape [5], which in turn will above all transform its socio-cultural component. In fact, through the construction of places of worship and prayer in "green spaces" (often located outside the city walls) religion involves substantial changes to the landscape, causing, together with them, economic, social and cultural changes to the population that inhabits it.

Religious tourism is a form of tourism that is aimed at sacred places such as sanctuaries, churches, convents, hermitages, abbeys and their history, the religious experience lived in these places and the religious traditions that concern them [6]. Religious tourism is a "niche tourism", and travel for religious reasons today is not only a journey focused on the discovery of the sacred place, but also on the religious experience that contributed to its appearance and on the knowledge of this place [6], which embodies the natural, cultural and artistic heritage [7]. Today's religious tourist has the desire to live the multidimensional experience of the sacred place, which is also associated with the desire to discover himself and regain his well-being. He is also, sometimes, looking for natural spaces so much so that he can refer to the ecotourism experience.

It is also in search of the natural spaces that the religious tourist seems to be, sometimes encroaching on the dimension of the ecotourism experience. In fact, ecotourism is a green and sustainable tourism that transmits to others the message of care for the territory visited and respect for the population that inhabits it, recognizing it from a historical, cultural, identity and value point of view [8,9].

Following this premise the objective of this contribution is to offer, to the scientific community and to all people interested in the broad themes of religious tourism and ecotourism, a reflection on the valorization of these tourist forms and on the need for their continuous application to an increasingly vast number of territories, in the growing holistic multidimensional sustainability. In particular, the study aims to underline the sustainable dimension of religious tourism, observing this form of tourism from a broader perspective and in terms of the search for spirituality and synergistic connection with ecotourism.

Currently, tourist trips that have the least impact on the territories visited and respect some "ecotourism requirements" or sustainability ones are trips that combine religious reasons with cultural and/or environmental ones [10].

The religious tourist chooses to travel more and more to countries dotted with sacred places immersed in nature in order to fulfill his desire for sacredness, to be able to immerse himself in silence in nature and discover "monastic landscapes", seen as regions that contain a various number of monasteries which, in turn, impact the religious, cultic, economic, social and political structures of this region [11], as a set of monasteries surrounded by agricultural lands and/or forests with hermitages in protected areas [12].

Thinking about the human history lived in sacred places, we cannot ignore the historical roots of religious tourism which lie in pilgrimage [13–15] and spiritual retreat [15]. However, religious tourism is a broad phenomenon that includes not only travellers, but also travel organizers and managers of tourist-religious facilities that host travelers [14].

Over time, the "borders" of religious tourism that are not easily delineated [16] have also expanded thematically and have begun to correlate increasingly with the protection of heritage of religious interest with particular emphasis on its cultural and environmental dimensions [15]. In fact, religious tourism can take on very different typologies, ranging from pilgrimage, walking, religious gathering and/or retreat, to the simple visit to places of worship. In the contemporary sense,

religious tourism is also increasingly analyzed from a social, cultural, organizational, economic and environmental point of view[17] and objectives on its appropriate management are continually being set and achieved[18].

In this study, some sacred places, located in the Armenian and Tanzanian territories and fundamental to the territorial and cultural identity of Armenia and Tanzania, are analyzed. The churches and monasteries in these territories are examples of cultural heritage[19], tangible and intangible, which are visited for both religious and tourist reasons[20]. The case studies presented show themselves as laboratories in which religious tourism is intertwined with ecotourism, in order to be able to contribute to sustainable travel in these territories[21] and to be able to spread it to other countries of the world.

## 2. Materials and Methods

In the first part, the study focused on identifying and collecting the main recent and basic literature on the topics of "religious tourism", "ecotourism" and the interconnections between "sustainable tourism", "culture", "heritage" and "eco-spirituality". The "field" study was carried out through travel experiences[22]: one concerning Armenia (completed in June 2025) and the other Tanzania (completed in the summer of 2023). In order to compare the policies and strategies of both countries regarding the direction of documents and regulations on tourism, we identified those that support sustainable tourism.

The seven monasteries visited in Armenia and the three visited in Tanzania were included in the so-called "judgement sampling" rather than probabilistic sampling[23,24]. According to this type of sampling, which is ideal for exploratory research, it is the researcher who, based on their own knowledge and judgement[25,26], chooses the case studies that will be included in the non-representative sample, which will help the researcher find answers to their research questions. The researchers acted according to this logic, collecting numerous information, photographs and images during their field research and writing field notes.

However, the non-representativeness of these samples for the populations concerned reflects their diversity within the population of interest to the scientific community and illustrates the profundity and abundance of the data collected[27]. The analysis of the data collected, combined with data from the initial research phase (policies, strategies and scientific literature analysed), allowed the authors to understand that religious tourism in Armenia and Tanzania is interconnected with ecotourism, giving rise to the ecospiritual (i.e. mixed) practice of travelling.

Furthermore, in both travel experiences, the methodology of participant observation[28] of the places visited was implemented, and there were also brief dialogs with local informants. With regard to the main sources and specific bibliography relating to Armenia, reference is made to important texts[29–38]. As for Tanzania, important bibliographic sources were found at the Camaldolese Hermits General House in Camaldoli, Tuscany. In particular in the "Camaldoli Fund" of the Historical Archives[39], the official website of the monastic community of Camaldoli. Consultation of the first volume of the *Camaldolese Forestry Code. The roots of sustainability*, edited by Raul Romanowas of fundamental importance. All other basic and minor sources are found in the bibliography.

## 3. Nature as a Sacred Place

The study intends to highlight the extent to which sacred sites and monasticism in general, in this specific case Armenian (formed under the influence of Syriac and Byzantine traditions)[32], Camaldolese and Benedictine have affected the configuration of the landscape and the conservation of nature.

In the Christian Middle Ages, monks looked to the forest and other uncultivated places as building blocks of their spiritual garden[40]. The contemplated landscape therefore forged the spiritual one of the monks. The Benedictine monks looked with great respect at Creation because it was the work of God[40]. However, they were deeply convinced that nature had been brought into being by the Creator to be useful to the human being, to protect him from the demons that often inhabited the forests. The human being therefore had to employ the environmental resources given to him by God with respect. Living in harmony with the environment meant living more peacefully with oneself and making a continuous spiritual ascent.

Today, religious tourists who go to sacred places sometimes try to reunite with timeless nature[41] to experience

wild or uncontaminated nature and to enhance the ecological and environmental dimension of these places. Sometimes religious tourists can also be understood as ecotourists, because they prefer to center their experience on the natural heritage and the sustainable dimension of access to it. Others find their experiential dimension between these two tourist typologies, in the so-called interstices of these two tourist forms, going to sacred places with the same ardor with which they explore the scenic beauty and nature that surrounds them.

It seems useful to provide an in-depth analysis of the concept of "ecotourism", to look for points in common with religious tourism. As the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1992) already argued in the '80 years of the 20th century, ecotourism consists of a particular form of sustainable tourism in which the predominant motivation in choosing the destination is interest in the natural heritage. The international definition of ecotourism, promoted by organisations such as the IUCN (International Union Conservation Nature) and nowadays recognised by literature and experts, is responsible travel to natural areas that protects the environment, educates visitors, and produces socio-economic benefits for local communities. Authentic ecotourism involves small groups of travellers, minimises ecological and cultural impact, and contributes to the well-being and development of host populations.

The first forms of tourism motivated by naturalistic interests date back to the '60s, although only from the early '90s did greater environmental awareness emerge in society (more informed about environmental values).

The UNWTO has never developed a specific, universal definition of ecotourism, but it does describe the essential characteristics of sustainable tourism, which includes the principles of ecotourism: tourism that meets the needs of travellers and hosts communities while protecting the environment and ensuring future opportunities, with a particular focus on nature conservation and the well-being of local populations.

Ecotourism is therefore a tourist activity aimed at encouraging and not altering the natural, but also social, cultural and artistic environment of a place visited and not hindering or inhibiting the development of other typical social and economic activities [42–45]. Ecotourism is often practiced in protected areas [46–49] and — above all due to its value in conserving the biodiversity of the places visited — it has taken the name of conservation tourism [50].

Religious tourists, going to sacred places, sometimes cross over into geographical areas "with an ecotourism vocation" and it is our task to investigate them (together with the tourists who go there) in "ecospiritual" terms. The concept of *ecospirituality* [51] was coined by Bron Taylor, Professor of Religion and Nature at the University of Florida, linking ecology with spirituality. In fact, ecospirituality is a "manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment". Whatever faith the tourist has, he can feel ecospirituality in the sacred places he visits, that is, that feeling that connects him to the environment.

Nature plays a vital role in many spiritual traditions around the world. It is a source of inspiration, healing and wisdom. Many believe that interacting with the natural environment can lead to a deeper spiritual understanding. Ways in which nature influences human spirituality include symbolism, rituality, and reflection. The sacred places visited, referring to these elements, allow tourists to experience different ecospiritual experiences.

The ecological crisis, which we are witnessing in the world today, makes it necessary to recontextualise the conflictual and cultural relationship [52] of the human being with nature and the need to find a correct development path in sustainability, including tourism. If we recall the Camaldolese Code it seems that this correct path has already been suggested to us.

The Camaldolese Code refers to two distinct documents, both related to the Camaldolese order and their history. The first is the *Camaldoli Code* [53], a set of 77 economic statements drafted in 1943 that propose a mixed economy, overcoming corporatism among Catholics. The second is the Camaldolese Forest Code, a set of norms, precepts and prescriptions with which monks managed and protected the forests of the Tuscan-Umbrian-Marche Apennines for over eight centuries, from 1027 to 1866. Precisely in this second Code there are some interesting points for reflection. The term "Camaldolese Code" can refer either to a document of an economic nature or to one of a forestry nature, both linked to the history and activities of the Camaldolese order.

For the purposes of promoting sustainable tourist attitudes in the world towards the environment and the sustainable tourist vision of nature, particular attention must in fact be paid to the Camaldolese Forestry Code, as it establishes

the rules for the management of forests, ensuring their protection and conservation. Furthermore, it is an example of sustainable land management, based on a long-term vision. This Code appears to be an example of how much importance the monks attributed and attribute to nature, the woodland heritage and its conservation. It can also be considered as evidence of concrete care of nature by monks, a key to a harmonious and balanced relationship between man and nature in terms of sustainability.

# 4. Religious Tourism in Armenia (Christian Monasteries)

## 4.1. Tourism: National Statistics and Policies

The development of tourism in Armenia is due to Aleksandr Tamanyan (1878–1936), the architect of the Yerevan city master plan and a key figure in modern Armenian architecture. The path of sustainable tourism in Armenia has already been opened thanks to various initiatives and policies promoted especially in recent years by the government. The upgrading of sustainable tourism in Armenia, in particular in the coming years, will be accomplished by the consolidation of the "tailor-made" tourism offer for certain specific sections of the "tourist population". But first we need to look at the general statistics, in order to understand how many tourists and what type of tourist needs to develop most in Armenia.

From 2019 to 2024, a constantly growing trend in tourist presences was observed in Armenia (excluding 2020, the year of Covid-19). In those years it went from a total of 1.92 million to 2.2 million tourists (in according to data of Ministry of Economy). The country's GDP consequently grew from 12.6% in 2019 to 13.2% in 2024. In 2024, the largest tourists who visited Armenia came from Russia (43.1% of the total, corresponding to 922,200 units), Georgia (13% of the total, corresponding to 279,300 units), Iran (l'8% of the total, corresponding to 175,800 units), the United States (2.8% of the total, corresponding to 59,600 units) and India (2% compared to the total, corresponding to 43,500 units). As of 2019, male gender prevails among tourists visiting Armenia, ranging from 53–55% and up to almost 70%.

From 2019 to 2024, tourists aged 18 to 24 and those aged 35 to 44 decreased, going from '8% to 6.4% and from 32% to 23.6% respectively. The number of tourists at other ages, however, has increased. In 2024, the majority of tourists in Armenia — 61.6% — crossed the Armenian border by plane, landing at Yerevan airport, while 1.4% of tourists landed in Gyumri and 0.4% entered Armenian territory in Ayrum by train. Other tourists arrived by car: 19.9% of tourists entered from Bagrarathen, 9.8% entered from Bavra, 4.8% from Meghri and 2.3% from Gogavan. The months of June, July, August and September are high season months, when approximately 150,000 to 300,000 tourists come to the country.

Mention should now be made of the 2023 International Visitors Survey, the outcome of which is the International National Visitors Survey final report (2023), which agreed with the Armenian Tourism Committee to perceive the national strategy for tourism and its action plan, as well as to improve marketing policies and sustainable promotion of the territory. We read in the Report: «Armenia's position in the Travel and Tourism Development Index (TTDI) of the 2024 World Economic Forum fell to 72° place out of 119 countries, a decrease of 9 positions since 2021. This decline was mainly due to the decrease in the "enabling policies and conditions" and "sustainability" dimensions, which decreased by 6 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively. On the other hand, there were improvements in the "infrastructure and services" dimension, which showed an increase of 6%».

Having had 63% tourists under the age of 44 in 2023, of which 29% were tourists aged 35–44, Armenia has set itself a goal of attracting younger and middle-aged tourists to the country in the near future also through sustainable and eco-friendly tourism options. According to this Final Report, the general objective of State policy in tourism is to increase its contribution to the sustainable development of the national economy and to the equitable territorial economic growth of the country.

With this research, therefore, it is hoped that the enhancement of sustainable tourism in Armenia can take place especially in the years to come, in accordance with the political actions and strategies adopted, including by the intersection of ecotourism with religious tourism and/other forms of tourism, and the dissemination of ecospiritual tourism practices to be exercised in sacred places.

## 4.2. National Policies and Strategies for Long-Term Sustainable Tourism Development

Since recent years, the Armenian government has increasingly focused on tourism, considering it a key sector for the country's economic growth. In fact, in recent years the government has been implementing programs, projects, initiatives and strategies by extending the partnership with public and private entities, on a national and international scale, to encourage the sustainable development of tourism practices in the country and promote "tailor-made" tourism experiences for the various categories of visiting tourists.

The Armenian government is committed to developing sustainable tourism in the country through various strategic initiatives. For example, the valorization of local communities by the government takes place in close collaboration with them. In addition, numerous international events, cultural festivals and fairs are continuously promoted in the country to launch Armenia on the global tourism market as an attractive and safe new tourist destination. A number of foreign investments are being attracted to Armenia today to improve the tourist attractiveness of the country. Furthermore, several marketing campaigns continue to be launched in various Western and non-Western countries to attract more and more international tourists to Armenia, ensuring sustainable economic growth. Cultural exchange and collaboration programs with local travel agencies are also aimed at expanding the Armenian tourism sector.

The eighth edition of the Global Conference on Wine Tourism held on 13 September 2024 and hosted by UN Tourism in Armenia, brought together over 300 participants from 25 countries and highlighted the importance in integrating heritage conservation and safeguarding local traditions with innovative tourism practices, in the name of economic growth of the country through responsible and sustainable tourism.

The sustainable tourism ambition of the country is especially encouraged by the high national political attention towards the conservation of biodiversity. Armenia looks in the direction of effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability, which is also shown in the Transport and Trade Facilitation Strategy, 2020–2040. In addition, Armenia develops its tourism sector with the strategy of clustering, promoting from the North to the South of the country the cities and/or localities connected according to some tourist logics of the clusters.

Before shedding light on Armenia's tourism statistics, mostly relating to the last five years, we need to focus further on how the tourism sustainability promoted by Armenian policy for years can also be understood through the strengthening of the development of ecotourism in the country.

Ecotourism conferences in Armenia began in 2016 and are still being promoted in the country. The first conference on 2 April 2016, organized by the AUA Acopian Center for the Environment, aimed to familiarize ourselves with the principles of ecotourism and sustainable tourism and to provide visibility to activities in the country already inspired by these concepts: it thus collected experiences developed in the sectors of outdoor sports, agritourism and eco-agriculture, sustainable religious and cultural tourism. The same topics found their way into the certification program in Tourism and Hospitality Management at the American University in Armenia, where ecotourism was included for the first time.

In the years 2017–2019, action research for the development of ecotourism in Armenia entitled "Improving the quality of ecotourism services in Vayots Dzor" was carried out in the Vayots Dzor region. The AREVADZOR Project (Improving the competitiveness of SMEs through the promotion and wider use of sustainable innovative technologies) was activated by the PIN-University of Florence and the Regional Tourist Center of Vayots Dzor (Armenia). The project was co-financed by the European Union under the "Pilot Regional Development Program (PRDP-Armenia)" and the Armenian Ministry of Territorial Administration.

The main objective of the project was to improve the performance of SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) in the ecotourism and renewable energy sectors through the promotion of sustainable practices, innovative technologies and effective collaboration between local institutions and CSOs. Finally, a guide has been drawn up with eight paths for ecotourists in the region.

As a sign of maintaining trail development traditions in Armenia, PeopleinNeed has initiated a regional program in Georgia and Armenia to scale up the Transcaucasian Trail growth initiative with funding from the USAID Economic Development, Governance, and Enterprise Growth (EDGE) project. The "Transcaucasian Trail – Promoting Cross-Border Tourism" project was led by PIN Georgia and implemented in collaboration with PIN Armenia and Tran-

scaucasian Trail NGO in Georgia and Armenia.

The fact that Armenia is part of the Transcaucasian Trail opens up its project tourism ideas to new opportunities to increasingly enhance sustainable tourism in the future. The path of sustainable tourism in Armenia has already been opened by means of organic farms, eco-friendly housing such as glamping and wineries that offer authentic and sustainable experiences, but there is still much to do. Above all, it is necessary to develop the connections between ecotourism and religious tourism, in the name of the birth and diffusion of ecospiritual practices, and these intersections could be developed especially in sacred places.

## 4.3. Religious Tourism: The Example of Christian Monasteries

Armenia be called the land of secluded monasteries, which are often far from cities. The journey to Armenia — a kingdom of screaming stones and raucous mountains[38] and the country of Ararat[31] — is often a journey of encounter with one's soul[37].

Armenian churches and monasteries are of unique architectural beauty and are often UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The visit of these cultural assets of religious interest[54], also known as cultural heritage of a religious nature[17], often involve a cultural and intellectual ascent for the tourist, in addition to the spiritual, allowing the tourist to make two tours in one: the cultural and the religious, among which there is a strong bond[15].

In nature, however, through the landscape experience with which the religious tourist approaches the spiritual experience in monastic complexes, he conceals within himself the idea of Eden. For this reason, in addition to the spiritual one, the tourist also experiences the environmental dimension intensely.

In general, in addition to visits by religious tourists, the Armenian territory today records a growing tourist attention[55] and is feeling a need for continuous development of territorial branding policies with a particular focus on the development of sustainable tourism[21]. The prerequisites for this development are many: the landscape is mainly mountainous and lakeside, although the forests cover only 13% of the Armenian territory, the country boasts many mountain and lake landscapes; in fact the landscape variety attracts more and more international visitors. The Armenian cultural landscape is mostly characterized by the presence of numerous monasteries, most of which are concentrated in the regions of the central-northern regions of the country (**Figure 1**).

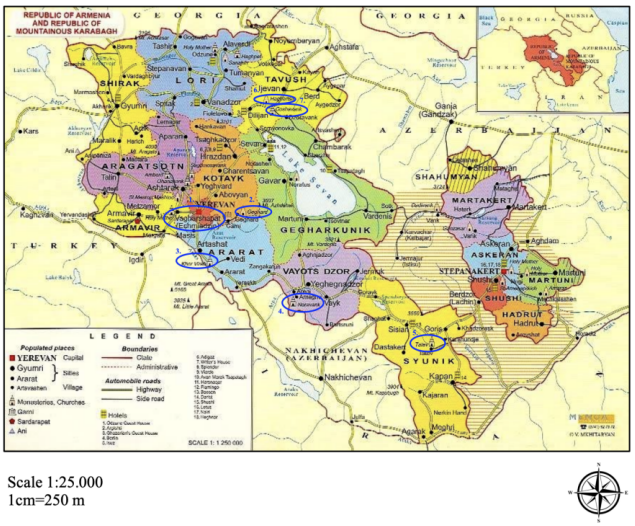


**Figure 1.** Republic of Armenia and Republic of Mountainous Karabagh and studied Sacred Places. Re-elaboration of Author.

Source: https://silkroadarmenia.am/geography-of-armenia/?lang=it.

Before describing the monasteries visited in June 2025, the subject of field research, it is useful to highlight some characteristics that Armenian monasteries have in common. While from the outside they look different from each other, from the inside they are all very simple and characterized by a dark color (given by dark-colored volcanic stones, such as black, red, etc). Furthermore, they are illuminated by the sunbeam which, penetrating the oculus and/or the small holes in the walls of the churches of the monastic complexes, built according to certain geometric rules, translates into a divine presence[56,57]. In monasteries there are no statues, paintings are very rare and there is a common predilection for the painted figure of Mary which probably has roots in the pre-Christian Armenian religion, or rather, in the main cult of the Mother Goddess, or fertility[33]. In Armenia the Mother Goddess Anhait, corresponding to the Babylonian Isthar and the Greek Artemis, was highly venerated and occupied a position at the top of the Armenian divinities[33]. Another highly venerated figure is that of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, thanks to whom the conversion of Armenia to Christianity took place in 314 AD[56]. In fact, many churches in the monasteries bear his name. The Armenian Apostolic Church was also founded with the influence of

Syria and Caesarea of Capadoccia (Kayseri) [32], as well as with the contribution of the apostles Bartholomew and Judas Thaddeus.

As regards the architectural characteristics of monasteries, it should be noted that, on the outside, the dome of churches is almost always covered by elements that transform it into a cone or pyramid. The altar is never placed under the dome but at the bottom of the arm opposite the entrance and is never at ground level but always raised, when even positioned in another room which is accessed behind a dividing wall.

As regards landscape characteristics, Armenian monasteries are often located in landscapes of rare beauty, in fact paths often wind from monastic complexes that allow religious tourists (and not only) to discover uncontaminated nature. Furthermore, today the common denominator of the landscape surrounding the monasteries are the artistic-cultural elements, such as the sale of typical and artisanal products and the presence of musicians along the road and it is mainly women who sell these products, who consider the sales space is almost their property. Another characteristic feature of monastic complexes are the small drinking water fountains called *pulpulaks*, especially in the sacred city of Armenia, Echmiadzin, the seat of the Catholicos, the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

In medieval times Armenian monasteries were often destroyed by earthquakes and/or looted, but still rose from the ashes like the Phoenix. Rebuilt, they resumed their lives which, especially in the era in which universities developed within them, was characterized by cultural, philosophical, scientific, musical, legal and educational richness. Today the Armenian monasteries represent the milestones of the national, cultural and territorial identity of Armenia to be adequately preserved and protected [58,59]; furthermore, they represent great tourist potential [58] to be enhanced through tourist trips to the country in a sustainable way.

### 4.3.1. Khachkar, the "Red Thread" for Monasteries

Field research has identified an important element that represents the "red thread" in the narrative on the numerous monastic complexes in Armenia, one of the most original manifestations of the religiosity of the Armenian people [60]: the *khachkars*, which can be found both inside and outside of monasteries. It is a sculptural element that recalls the tree of life and which turns out to be an essential element of Armenian cultural, historical, religious and territorial identity (**Figure 2**):

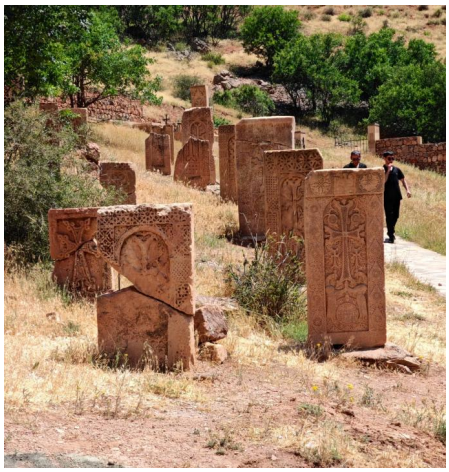

**Figure 2.** Some khachkars on the territory of the Noravank monastic complex.

Source: Photo of Author.

Sometimes khachkar is written with "t": khatchkar. It is a cross carved in stone, in the lower part of which is a small rose window representing eternity and/or seed. The background of khachkars is represented by leaves, grapes, pomegranates, pine cones, animals, national symbols and other ornaments. Biblical characters or saints can be depicted in the frame. Khachkars are erected in order to be able to save the soul of a living person or one already deceased, but also to be able to commemorate important historical events, accompany the building of a church and/or protect populations from natural disasters such as earthquakes. The khachkars placed within the walls of the monasteries represent a donation that took place. The khachkars—the "stone crosses"—are the steles or vertical rectangular slabs of red tuff or basalt with an engraved cross and which sometimes seem embroidered, recall the funerary, votive or celebratory function and are scattered in cemeteries [60] and in the territories of monasteries, some of them are even carved into rocks (Geghard monastic complex). The uniqueness of the khachkars, material evidence of religiousness [61], a true stone archive is expressed in the fact that generally there are detailed epigraphs on them that motivate their execution, making explicit the commission, date and name of the stonemason [60].

A set of these khachkars it is basically a "petrified diary" [61]. Each khachkar is one of a kind, it is a characteristic

element of Armenian medieval Christian art and a symbol of culture, history and spirituality. Since the 9th century, khachkars have symbolized the Christian faith above all and also served as a place of prayer. The archetypes of khachkar, on the other hand, are stones in the shape of a vishapakar dragon and then those with a rectangular shape (8th–7th centuries BC) with writings in the Urartian language, representing cult objects placed near water sources. There is also an opinion that the first khachkars arose in the 4th to 5th centuries CE and were made of wood to mark the places where monasteries and/or churches would arise instead of pagan altars. In the 9th century, after liberation from the Arab rule, wooden khachkars were replaced by stones. The oldest khachkar, still existing today, dates back to 879, is located in Garni and bears a dedication to Queen Katranide I, wife of King Ashot I Bagratuni.

In the cultural landscape of Armenia, where architecture and nature merge[62], there are more than 40,000 khachkars and the artisan tradition of their construction is still alive. In recent times, in addition to men, they are also carved by women. About 900 khachkars are located at the Noraduz cemetery near Lake Sevan (located at 1,900 meters above sea level). There are hundreds of khachkars in the world, some of which are in the Vatican Museums in Rome, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the British Museum in London, the Louvre Museum in Paris and the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. A 13th-century Armenian khachkar is located today on the island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni in Venice and another is at Castello Visconteo in Pavia. Today, religious tourists continue to approach the khachkars, in hope of reception of sacred energy. Since 2010, khachkars with their symbolism and mastery in sculpting them are recognized as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

### 4.3.2. Monasteries: Spirituality, Nature and Landscape

The journey underlying this research had as its starting point the city of Echmiadzin, the heart of the Armenian Apostolic Church. From Echmiadzin, the journey continued east to the monastic complex of Tatev and later north, continuing to the city of Dilijan, near which two other monasteries were visited. The spiritual journey experience was then concluded with the return to the Armenian capital (**Figure 1**).

The monastic complex of Echmiadzin, which is about 20 km west of the Armenian capital Yerevan and is located in the Armavir region, is made up of the churches of Mother Cathedral with its Treasury (301–303 AD), Santa Hripsime (618), Santa Gayane (631), Metsamor and Zvartnots Archaeological Museums, Zvartnots Cathedral (641–661), the old pagan center Bagaran, Musaler and Sardarapat memorials. Since 2000, the monastic complex of Echmiadzin has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The mother cathedral of Echmiadzin (**Figure 3**), also called the Church of the Mother of God, was erected between 301 and 303 AD by Saint Gregory the Illuminator. It is considered the first church in the world to have been built by the state of Armenia, the first nation that welcomed Christianity as the state religion.



**Figure 3.** The Echmiadzin Cathedral (301–303 AD).

Source: Photo of Author.

Several relics are kept in the Treasure Museum, including the sacred spear of Antioch, identified as the Spear of Longinus that pierced Christ on the Cross and the fragments of wood believed to be part of Noah's Ark. The spear was transferred to the Echmiadzin Treasure Museum in 1760, after having been kept in various monasteries, including the Geghard Monastery.

Throughout the green territory of the monumental complex you can breathe peace and there is silence. The territory of the complex is adorned with several khachkars, one of which comes from Noravank, created in 1308 by the medieval sculptor Momik. Today Echmiadzin is the main half

for religious tourism in Armenia.

Another monastic complex, founded by St. Gregory the Illuminator in the 4th century and located in the Kotayk region, bears the name of Geghard (the full name the monastery has borne since the 13th century is Geghardavank, "the spear monastery"). It is thought that during the crucifixion Jesus was wounded by the Roman soldier with the very spear brought to Armenia by the apostle Saint Jude Thaddeus and kept in the monastery for about five centuries starting from the 13th century, before being transferred in 1760 to the Treasure Museum of Echmiadzin. The original name of the monastery instead was Ayrivank ("the cave monastery"), due to the fact that it was cut inside a rock where there was a sacred spring. The places of worship that arose at the caves became integrated into the natural environment after being conceptually and religiously thought of as signs, or abode, of the divine[61].

The monastic complex is carved in a cliff along the Azat Valley gorge and is located in the south-east about 40 km from the capital Yerevan. Immersed in a particular landscape, the monastery, which acquired its current appearance in the 13th century, has several caves that were used by monks as early as the 6th century as homes. The entire perimeter remains protected by defensive stone walls and set in little anthropized nature. The courtyard of the monastery houses the cells, the refectory and other rooms, furthermore, numerous rock khachkars from the 12th–13th centuries are visible there.

The main church of the monastery is Surp Astvatsatsin (Holy Church of the Mother of God) and was built in 1215. In addition, there are two other rock churches in the Geghard monastic complex: Avazan (1240) and the chapel of St. Gregory the Illuminator (formerly the Chapel of the Mother of God, built before 1177). The family tomb of Princes Papak Proshyan is also present in the monastic complex.

Today the monastery, restored in the 20th century, is an active male monastery, hosts a small ecclesiastical community and also welcomes visitors and pilgrims. Religious tourists come here to admire the rock landscape, to reunite with the sacred, to become witnesses of the historical-cultural and environmental legacy of priceless beauty, and to feel ecospirituality. This monastery continues to be subjected to historical-artistic studies[63] and those concerning its state of conservation and the improvement of its tourist use[58,64].

Another monastery visited was Khor Virap, a key landmark of Armenia's conversion to Christianity[31]. Khor Virap is located opposite the majestic Mount Ararat (currently located in Turkey). The monastery, also linked to Saint Gregory the Illuminator, is located in the Artashat region. It is a monastery-fortress from the years 1662–1669 which is located close to the Turkish border. The monastery of Khor Virap is called "deep well monastery", because here is the place where Saint Gregory the Illuminator, the patron saint of Armenia, was imprisoned, by the pagan king Tiridates III, for fourteen years. One day the king — who killed Hripsimè, a Roman Christian virgin with whom he had fallen in love and who had rejected him[37] — fell seriously ill and Saint Gregory saved him; out of gratitude Tiridates III embraced Christianity. It is said that when Saint Gregory came out of the well and saw the light of day, he lost his sight forever. The monastery was built around the well that served as a "cell" to Saint Gregory. Today, the well is visited every day by many brave tourists and to go down it you have to lower yourself ten meters down, too bad that next to this well there is no sign that reveals the history of this incredible place to tourists.

The monastery Khor Virap, which was also an important center of education from the 13th century, consists of the St. Gregory Church, the St. Astvatsasin Church, the bell tower and fences with adjacent buildings. Religious tourists come here not only to feel ecospirituality, but also to admire the sacred Mount Ararat[31,65] which is at the heart of the Armenian imagination. The god Ararat[38] with his two peaks —the lesser one (the Little Masis, 3990 m) and the greater one (the Great Masis, 5165 m) — is one of the essential identity elements of the Armenian people, the symbol of the national landscape of Armenia[66]. The Armenians call it Masis Azath Masis, or "free" or "noble". Its highest peak was considered particularly sacred, because it was considered the place where the xaj, mythical beings who protected the Armenian kings, lived. From the sacred character of this peak also arose the prohibition on reaching it[32]. The highest peak in Ararat was first reached on 9 October 1829 by Professor F. Parrot (1791–1841)[31]. There is, however, another view that the Masis was first climbed in 1707 by Pitton de Tournefort[37]. The religious tourist tends to start again from Khor Virap having acquired «an Araratian sense»[38]: the force of attraction for this mountain that will never abandon

him.

The Noravank monastic complex (the "new monastery") is located in a picturesque gorge in the Amaghu Valley, 122 km from Yerevan and is also called Amaghu-Noravank, after the Amaghu village located above the canyon. Noravank is located near Yeghegnadzor in the Armenian region of Vayots Dzor and was built with the participation of Bishop Hovhannes in the 12th–13th centuries, although some testimonies even date it to the 10th century[32]. The oldest structure of the complex has now been destroyed, the one that can be seen today dates back to 1205. This monastery is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site (since 2002).

The monastery, nestled in the arid landscape and surrounded by reddish mountains, is sometimes called the "red monastery". The architectural style of Noravank Monastery blends traditional Armenian and Seljuk influences. The monastic complex consists of the church of Surb Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God, 1339), Surb Karapet (St. Church of John the Baptist, built between 1216 and 1223) and the church of Surb Grigor (Saint Grigory, 1275). Surb Astvatsatsin is a two-story church, a very rare thing in Armenia, and was built by an architect and sculptor Momik, author of one of the khachkars in Echmiadzin, also famous for his human depictions of religious figures.

The cultural landscape of the monastery is also composed of the remains of chapels and medieval buildings, the ruins of various civil buildings and the khachkars scattered across the territory of the monastic complex (**Figure 2**).

It was the princes of the Orbelyan dynasty who financed the construction of the monastery, and some princes of this dynasty are buried on the ground floor of the Surb Astvatsatsin church. Between the 12th and 14th centuries the monastery experienced its maximum splendor, becoming the episcopal seat of the Syunik region, attracting religious figures and artists from all over the country. In the Middle Ages, Noravank, a very important center for education and culture, was closely linked to the University of Gladzor and Tatev with their rich libraries. Thanks to its benefactors the Noravank monastery was also a focus in the political developments of the time. Noravank is a functioning monastery, an important pilgrimage destination and open-air museum. The multidisciplinary research of this monastery continues to be carried out[67,68].

Almost all religious tourists who come to Armenia (international tourists) or travel within it (national tourists), include the Tatev monastic complex in their itinerary. Built from the 9th to the 13th century, it has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995 and is located on a wide basaltic plateau in the Syunik region of southeastern Armenia, near the village of Tatev. Its name comes from Saint Eustathios (Eustathios-Statevos-Tatev), a disciple of the apostle Thaddeus who was martyred in the region. The name translates from Old Armenian as "to give wings", suitable for a monastery located so high that it seems to reach the sky. There is, however, another legend regarding the name of this monastery. It is said that the master who built the monastery, at the end of his work, asked for two wooden shavings to be brought to him. Taking them he prayed to God and said: "May the Holy Spirit send down his wings". After these words, he jumped into the abyss. In flight, wings grew on his back and he flew away, saving himself. The monastery was named in honor of this miracle. The monastery is perched on a natural fortification, on the edge of the Vorotan Gorge, the deepest gorge in the country. The location of the current monastic complex housed a pagan temple. Later, in the 4th century, the temple was replaced by a small church when Christianity began to manifest itself in the country. In the 9th century, the actual construction of the monastery began under the seat of Bishop Hovhannes and with the economic help of Princes Philip and Ashot of Syunik.

Tatev was bishop of Syunik and played a significant role in the history of the region, which became an economic, political, spiritual and cultural centre. In the 14th and 15th centuries the monastery hosted one of the most important Armenian medieval universities, the University of Tatev, which made advances in science, religion and philosophy, as well as a notable contribution to the preservation of the culture and belief of Armenia through the reproduction of books and the development of Armenian miniature. At Tatev University, which was under the rule of Orbelyan's family, astronomy, geography, philosophy and more were taught. It had three departments: music, painting and science. Old and new wills, translated religious manuscripts from Greek, Latin and other languages, were also studied in the science department.

The monastery has always been a pilgrimage destination, having been an important center of Armenian spiritual life, science and culture in the Middle Ages. The monastic

buildings are protected on two sides by ravines and on the other two sides by defensive walls. Nature here serves not only as a spiritual garden [40] for the religious tourist, but also as a defensive wall or "naturalistic barrier".

The complex consists of the Church of Saint Astvatsatsin, built on an old monastic tomb in 1087 and the Monumental Church of Saint Poghos Petros (895–906), which is the focal point of the complex which in turn includes the Church of Saint Gregory (1265). In addition, the monastic complex has its refectory, library, mausoleum, a 13th-century oil press, and many other adjacent buildings.

In the courtyard of the complex is the monument "Gavazan", a medieval Armenian architectural and engineering masterpiece. This pillar is approximately 8 meters high and was designed to swing slightly with the wind and beyond.

In the past, it was not very easy to reach the Tatev monastery, because the only road leading to it had numerous bends (**Figure 4**). Everything changed with the implementation of the non-commercial *Tatev Revival project*, a program initiated by Armenian entrepreneur Ruben Vardanyan and his wife Veronika Zonabend to bring sustainable tourism to the region.

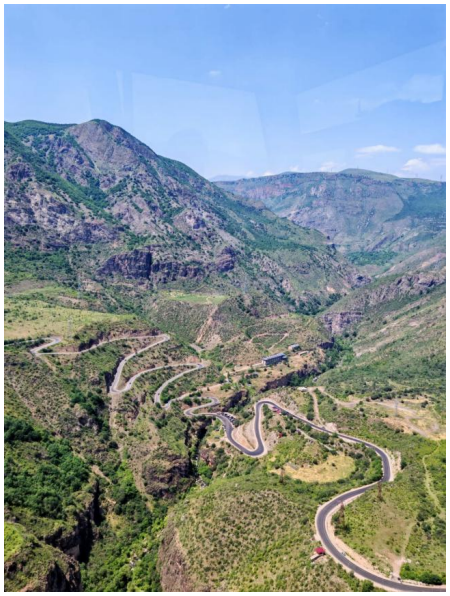

**Figure 4.** The Unique State Road that leads to the Monastery.
Source: Photo of Author.

It was decided to build the cable car to offer tourists alternative and sustainable mobility (in fact, the proceeds from ticket sales are allocated to the restoration of the monastery). With the opening of the longest cable car in the world (5752 m), called "Wings of Tatev", in October 2010, numerous tourists were able to visit the monastery while avoiding the uncomfortable road. The reversible cable car with a duration of twelve minutes and a difference in altitude of 320 m was built to enhance above all the territorial beauty of the Syunik region. The cable car, inscribed in the 2010 Guinness Book of Records as the longest non-stop double-track cable car in the world, runs between the villages of Halidzor and Tatev Monastery.

In recent times the town of Tatev has been hosting more and more tourists, but in a sustainable way as there is a diversified accommodation offer (there are various types of accommodation in the town of Tatev: hotels, B&Bs, guesthouses and apartments managed mostly by the local population). By staying overnight in these facilities, tourists contribute to the economic development of the Syunik region, helping its population.

In addition to the monastery, this geographical area is also an excellent hiking destination, with trails leading to the old Tatev hermitage (inhabited today by a single monk), the Devil's Bridge gorge or nearby medieval villages such as Old Harjis, Halidzor or Khndzoresk.

From Tatev the religious tourist arrives in the Tavush region, located in the north-east of the country, where near Lake Sevan, the largest lake in Armenia, is the city of Dilijan and about 18 km from there is the Haghartsin monastery, built between the 10th and 14th centuries by monks who at that time escaped from persecution in Western Armenia subject to Byzantium. The monastery is located within the 240 sq km Dilijan National Park, one of the most beautiful protected areas in Armenia.

The Haghartsin Monastery is formed by three churches built of local limestone of different colors — the St. Church of Gregory the Illuminator (11th century), the St. Church of Stephen (1244) and the Church of the Holy Mother of God (Surb Astvatsatsin) (1281) —, a 13th century chapel, a sepulchre, two courtyards, prayer halls and a refectory (the largest in Armenia, built in 1248 by the architect Minas). The Church of the Surb Astvatsatsin has a cone-shaped dome on an octahedral drum. According to a legend, during the consecration of this church the eagles were seen playing in the sky. Later, many people began to refer to the monastery as "hagh" "artsiv", or the "games of eagles". According to another legend, every day the priests, who lived in the monas-

tic complex, watched the eagles flying in the sky and playing with each other. Thus the name of the monastic complex "Haghartsin" was born, meaning "hagh" (game) and "artsiv" (eagle), the game of the eagle or the soaring eagle. In fact, images of the eagle are found on the walls of the monastic complex, for example on the eastern facade of the church of St. Astvatsatsin. Today in Haghartsin National Park eagles continue to fly in the sky, admired by tourists.

Outside the Church of the Surb Astvatsatsin is a khachkar, carved in the 13th century by the artist Poghos, which is placed next to a tree planted by the Zakaryan princes over eight hundred years ago. Having survived lightning, earthquakes and various conflicts, today this tree is only a stump but whoever, having made a wish, manages to pass through one of its cavities, will be pardoned and have their wish fulfilled.

Most of the complex was built under the patronage of the Bagratuni dynasty (10th–11th century AD). The monastery was the summer residence of the two princes of that dynasty—kings Smbat II and Gagik I—, who are also buried within the monastic complex. There is also the view that Smbat II is buried in Ani.

The building of the St. Gregory Church in Medieval times was the site of the first musical university in Armenia. The conservatory was founded in the 13th century by Khachatur Taronatsi, composer of the hymn "Khorund Khorin" which is still sung during the liturgy today. The tomb of the composer, who was also the abbot of the monastery, a scientist, a theologian, a teacher, a poet and a musician, is also located in Haghartsin. Between the 15th and 17th centuries, Haghartsin was a religious and cultural center with a school and a library.

Today restoration work continues to take place in this monastic complex too. The monastery is suitable for spiritual retreats, religious and cultural visits and hiking (the route from the monastery to the nearby Teghut village is part of the Transcaucasian trail, considered one of the best hiking routes in Armenia).

The last Armenian monastery, object of the field research journey, is that of Goshavank (1188–1191) known as the "Gosh monastery" which is located on a gentle hill in the village of the same name. The monastic complex is located within the Dilijan National Park, in the picturesque Tandzut Gorge, not far from the confluence of the Aghstev and Getik rivers. Mkhitar Gosh took part in the construction of this monastery: the abbot, the scientist, the writer, and Ivane Zakaryan, an outstanding spiritual teacher of that time.

The initial idea was to substitute another monastery for Getikvank, which had been destroyed by an earthquake in 1188. Even today the Goshavank is sometimes called *Nor Getik*, meaning the "New Getik". After the death of Mkhitar Gosh (in 1213) the monastery was renamed in his memory, enhancing his notable contribution to the Armenian legal system and Armenian culture in general. According to legend, Mkhitar Gosh had found refuge in a local cave while fleeing from his enemies. This hideout became his place of prayer and later the site of the monastery. Mkhitar Gosh composed a revolutionary legal treatise, later known as the *Judicial Code of Mkhitar Gosh*, the first secular document in the history of Armenian law. This Code was the first to also raise environmental issues, dedicating eleven articles to the protection of nature.

The Goshavank monastery complex, built of local pink basalt stone and set amidst a striking landscape, consists of St. Astvatsatsin Church, St. Gregory Church and St. Gregory the Illuminator Church, chapel and library. The library is said to have held about 15,000 books before it was burned by Timur's army in the 13th century. In the 13th century, Goshavank was the university where the following were taught: theology, law, philosophy, painting, the art of writing, music and natural sciences. Goshavank was one of the largest cultural, educational and religious centers in Armenia. Some manuscripts created in Goshavank, including the Code of Gosh, have been saved to the present day. Even now, Gosh's books are read and consulted in Armenia.

As in every monastery that was visited, in Goshavank the khachkars decorate the territory of the monastic complex (the most famous of them is that of 1291, executed by the master Poghos). The buildings that are part of the monastic complex are all connected to each other, with the exception of the Chapel of Saint Hripsimè, located on the opposite hill, where Mkhitar Gosh is buried, because he wanted "the eyes of his soul to watch over the monastery from him forever created".

Starting from the village of Gosh, where the monastery is located, on a picturesque hiking trail the religious tourist can arrive at the mountain lake of the same name, wrapped in the suggestive croaking of frogs. Since this lake is located

about 4 km from the center of Gosh, not all religious tourists can reach it on foot, choosing a paid ride aboard a Russian UAZ off-road vehicle (military model).

Currently Goshavank Monastery is in the process of a light restoration and attracts all those seeking to combine their spiritual and cultural explorations with the natural splendor that the Tavush region offers. Today, Goshavank Monastery is not a functioning religious complex, but a popular tourist destination. Ecotourists who engage in nature hiking, birdwatching and other outdoor activities are also noted among the visitors here, enhancing the nature and landscape of extraordinary beauty.

The seven monastic complexes which were visited and studied and fall within the Armenian case study show that, through the hybridizations of various types of travel tourism, it turns out to be possible to experience Armenia tourism in a sustainable manner. For example, tourism in Khor Virap and Noravank is very palpable, but still remains sustainable. Good sustainability tourism practices need to acquire more and more visibility and popularity on Armenian territory in order to be able to contribute to the development and consolidation of tourism in Armenia, helping to strengthen its territorial branding.

## 5. A Suggestion for Spiritual Ecotourism in Tanzania: the Camaldolese Monasteries

### 5.1. Brief Overview of Tanzania's Territory and Main Environmental Resources

Tanzania (United Republic of Tanzania) is the largest state in East Africa and home to some of the most spectacular natural and cultural heritage sites in Africa and the world. It covers an area of 945,090 square kilometres and has 1424 km of coastline on the Indian Ocean, as well as numerous archipelagos (**Figure 5**). Its location makes it one of the most prosperous regions and one of the most famous tourist destinations in sub-Saharan Africa[69–71].

The territory is geographically quite diverse, with both the highest point (Kilimanjaro) and lowest point (Olduvai Gorge in the Great Rift Valley, famous archaeological site for the discovery of fossil fragments dating back to a period prior to that of Homo sapiens, including numerous fossils and cave paintings, which attest to the presence of the earliest settlements of human civilization) on the continent located here. To the northeast is the mountainous region of Mount Meru, Kilimanjaro, and the Usambara and Pare Mountains, which separate Tanzania from Kenya. To the west is the Serengeti National Park, which, thanks to its rich fauna and annual migrations, is one of the country's main tourist attractions, as is the Ngorongoro Crater nature reserve with its park, another of the country's biodiversity hotspots and another major tourist destination (**Figure 6**).

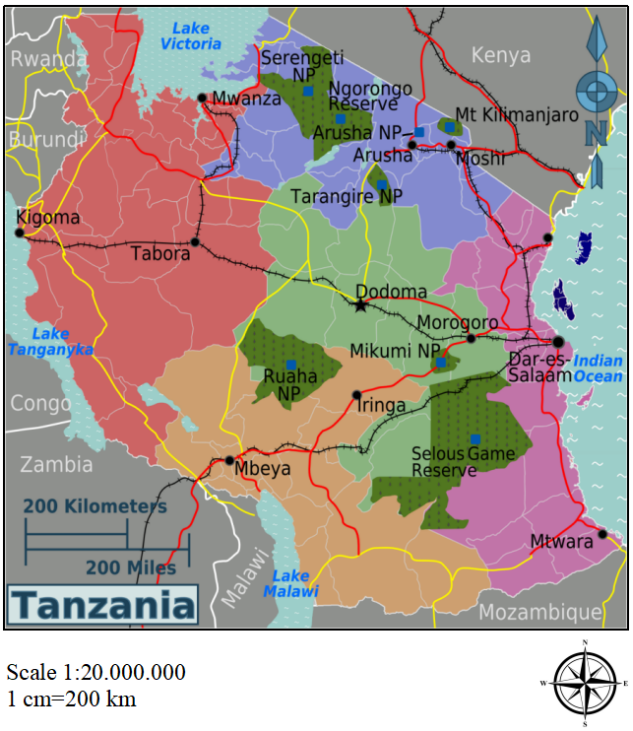


**Figure 5.** Map of Tanzania divided into regions.

Source: https://it.wikivoyage.org/wiki/File:Tanzania_regions_map.png.

The Ngorongoro Conservation Area is one of the most famous safari destinations in the world. It was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978 and an International Biosphere Reserve in 1981. It is also the place where, in the mid-1950s, the protection and conservation of African wildlife began, after long periods of poaching by white hunters. The Ngorongoro Crater was formed about 2.5 million years ago by a powerful explosion that created a depression, causing the volcano to sink and leaving a crater of 19 km in diameter, with an area of 300 km2 and a depth of 600 metres. These dimensions make Ngorongoro the largest unbroken caldera in the world and one of Africa's natural wonders, with around 30,000 large mammals residing there all year round, such

as buffalos, lions, elephants, cheetahs and rhinos, and many varieties of birds, such as flamingos, eagles, buzzards, ostriches and hawks. The centre of the crater is occupied by Lake Magadi (**Figure 6**), which has shallow waters and tends to dry up during the dry season[71,72].

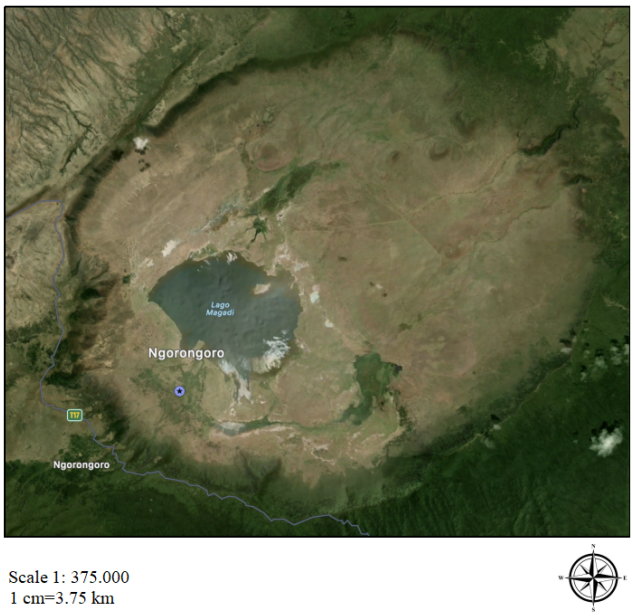


**Figure 6.** Lake Magadi. Re-elaboration of Author.
Source: Extrapolation of "Google Maps".

"The survival of our wildlife is a matter of grave concern to all of us in Africa. These creatures that inhabit the wild are not only important as a source of wonder and inspiration, but they are an integral part of our natural resources, our future livelihoods and our well-being "These words were spoken by Julius Nyerere, the first President of post-colonial Tanzania. They are found in a much longer document called the "Arusha Wildlife Manifesto, which Nyerere commissioned to promote the extraordinary habitats of his country.

When the British colonials left Tanzania (which gained independence thanks to Nyerere's foresight), they left behind only one national park, the Serengeti, created in 1951.

At present Tanzania protects about 35% of the country's natural resources: it has vast potential in terms of natural and cultural resources and tourist attractions. Tanzania's network of protected areas consists of 15 national parks, the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, 33 game reserves and 43 controlled game areas. The network of protected areas covers approximately 240,000 square kilometres[73,74].

In Tanzania, there are also a wide variety of Sacred Natural Sites (SNS) that hold great spiritual significance for the local community[75]. These sites, such as sacred forests and rock formations, are believed to be a spiritual presence and are protected by communities. They are recognised for their role in promoting biodiversity conservation and safeguarding Tanzania's cultural heritage.

The connection between spirituality and nature is deeply anchored in Tanzania's SNS. These places represent sacred spaces where people can connect with the natural world and experience a sense of peacefulness and reverence. Indigenous communities have long revered these sites as places of spiritual power and connection to their ancestral lands.

One such SNS is the Uluguru Forest Reserve. Located in the Morogoro region, this forest reserve is considered sacred by the Luguru people. It is believed to be home to ancestral spirits and plays a crucial role in maintaining the ecological balance of the area.

The protection and conservation of SNC in Tanzania presents numerous benefits for biodiversity conservation. These sites serve as sanctuaries for rare and endemic species, helping to maintain the sensitive balance of ecosystems. The specific ecological characteristics of these sites, including microclimates and undisturbed habitats, provide beneficial conditions for a large variety of plant and animal life. **Table 1** below shows evidence of the importance of SNSs for biodiversity conservation.

**Table 1.** Highlighting some key species and ecosystems found in some important SNSs in Tanzania.

| Biodiversity | Sacred Natural Sites in Tanzania |
|---|---|
| Endemic species | Sacred forests of Mount Kilimanjaro |
| Threatened species | Magamba Nature Reserve |
| Rare species | Udzungwa Mountains National Park |
| Forest ecosystems | Ngorongoro Conservation Area |
| Wetland ecosystems | Wetlands of Maswa Game Reserve |

Source: Elaborated by the Author.

Also, sacred natural sites often have strict rules and taboos associated with them, which limit activities that could damage the natural environment. Local communities, guided by their spiritual beliefs, act as guardians and custodians of these sites, preventing activities such as illegal logging and poaching[76]. This collective responsibility and management has a positive impact and partly influences policies for the conservation and protection of ecosystems in Tanzania (see paragraph 7).

## 5.2. Brief History of Tourism in Tanzania

Tourism in Tanzania and, more generally, in Africa is an activity that dates back to the period before colonisation, when European countries organised exploratory trips to discover the continent, during which they discovered its numerous natural and mineral resources, including Lake Tanganyika and Mount Kilimanjaro[77]. It is important to recall that the Europeans were not the first foreigners to explore East Africa, but between the 13th and 19th centuries, those who travelled to Tanzania (Arabs, Indians) saw this land more as a trading opportunity than a tourist destination. As early as the first millennium AD, Tanzania was already engaged in lively commercial activity, with South-West Asia, India and China among its main trading partners. In the 18th century, under Omani domination, it became one of the main trade routes in the Middle East, with Zanzibar becoming the main centre for the ivory and slave trade.

When Tanzania (then Tanganyika) became a colony, first of Germany and then of Britain, tourism activities were formally managed by local governments, the first Game Reserves were established, and the country became a tourist destination for many members of the European bourgeoisie visiting the "dark continent"[78].

Tourism really developed at the end of the 1920s; the Arusha area, in the north of the country on the border with Kenya (**Figure 7**), was the main tourist and multicultural centre; a westernised city with a higher level of infrastructure development than other areas of the country. Its growth was not only a direct result of colonialism but was also partly due to the opening of Wilson Airport in Kenya in the 1930s, which led to an increase in the number of arrivals in that state, which had more developed infrastructure and transport links. Travellers arriving in Kenya tended to move to the Tanganyika region only at a later time; this mode of travel contributed, for a long time, to the growth of tourism in northern Tanzania[78,79].




**Figure 7.** Iringa Region, Administrative Boundaries.
Source: The United Republic of Tanzania, The 2022 Population and Housing Census: Iringa Region Basic Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile Report, Tanzania, July 2024, p. 3.

With independence from British rule (1961), Tanzania (including the island of Zanzibar, which gained independence in 1963, but it was not until 1964 that the two joined together to form the United Republic of Tanzania) adopted a socialist policy, which involved the nationalisation of land, means of production and, therefore, also the tourism sector. The country's development programme (between 1969 and 1974) contributed to its growth in tourism; tourism promotion was managed by the government, which not only established the Ministry of Information and Tourism, but also planned to open a representative office in England to promote tourism in the country[80]. This was followed by the opening of the country's first airport in 1971, Kilimanjaro Airport, in order to meet tourist demand and facilitate travel. However, due to a change in demand, which was more focused on beach tourism, the number of arrivals in the country decreased considerably[81]. During that period, the number of tourists dropped from 235,000 in previous years to around 80,000 af-

ter 1973; the country was unable to compete with the beaches of Kenya, which were offered higher quality standards and greater opportunities for beach tourism[80,81].

It was only in the second half of the 1980s that tourism in the country experienced a new trend, as economic liberalisation policies attracted numerous foreign investments to promote the country's infrastructure growth. The redrawing of the border with Kenya encouraged the emergence of new companies operating in the neighbouring country, which set up branches in Tanzania. In addition, foreign investors promoted the construction of numerous accommodation facilities and the emergence of tour operators[79].

In synthesis, between the 1980s and 1990s, tourism developed with the opening of villages and tented camps linked to eco-safaris (northern area) and historical sites linked to Swahili culture. As Magnani (2014) asserts, tourism and culture should be considered a combination with great potential for local development, especially in developing countries, when combined with traditional activities[82].

Over the last twenty years, tourism has diversified further, including mountain tourism (Kilimanjaro), beach tourism (Zanzibar) and sustainable tourism in the most developed and visited areas, which are beginning to "suffer" the impact of unsustainable tourist flows during the high season.

Tanzania, like other developing countries, has identified tourism as a concrete tool for economic growth and development. After all, as Balfet and Lozato-Giotart (2009) have long argue, "economic flows directly or indirectly linked to tourism constitute the leading international activity in terms of turnover"[83].

However, there are limited empirical studies that have investigated the relationship between tourism and economic growth in Tanzania. The study by Valensi Corbinian, Rahman and Khanam (2021) partially filled this gap by empirically investigating the actual nature of economic and tourism growth in Tanzania, applying Granger causality methods and the Wald test, using annual time series data on international tourism receipts, real Gross Domestic Product and the real effective exchange rate over the period 1989–2018. The results confirm a unidirectional causality between tourism development and economic growth. The study highlights that Tanzania should focus on economic strategies that encourage sustainable tourism development as a viable source of economic growth[84].

On the basis of the "The 2024 International Visitors' Exit Survey Report" prepared by TANZANIA TOURISM SECTOR SURVEY, tourism revenues in the URT increased by 15.7%, from $3373.8 million in 2023 to $3903.1 million in 2024. Tourism revenues in Zanzibar (the area that attracts most of the country's beach tourism) amounted to $997.8 million, an increase of 10.1% compared to $906.6 million in 2023[85]. Moreover, based on statistics compiled by Tanzania's Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism in 2024, Tanzania welcomed a record 5.36 million tourists, exceeding its target of 5 million tourists by 2025.

Tanzania, like other developing countries, has identified tourism as a concrete tool for economic growth and development. After all "economic flows directly or indirectly linked to tourism constitute the leading international activity in terms of turnover"[83]. According to the 2024 Economic Impact Review (EIR) by the World Travel&Tourism Council[86], the travel and tourism sector in Tanzania grew in 2023, with a further positive trend in 2024. The Travel and Tourism sector[84] contributed NT$18.6 trillion to the national economy, surpassing the previous peak in 2019 by 4% and accounting for 9.5% of the economy, demonstrating the sector's importance to economic performance. The sector is also expected to continue contributing to job creation, with total employment set to reach 2.25 million, creating 710,000 new jobs and employing nearly one in 15 workers in the country.

## 5.3. Other Areas in Tanzania Less Known to Tourists

In terms of tourism, Tanzania is mainly known for the exotic beach tourism of Zanzibar and its parks in the northern area, the so-called Serengeti circuit, Kilimanjaro and the surrounding area, but the country's central-southern region offers tourists, or rather travellers/explorers, untouched nature that is still unknown to mass tourism but of extraordinary eco-naturalistic interest. This area offers the opportunity to discover wilder and more intimate parks and nature reserves that give one the feeling of being on an exploratory journey and offer the possibility of coming into contact with local populations.

In the eastern part of the southern highlands between Morogoro and Iringa, where Mikumi National Park and the

Udzungwa Mountains are located, the latter being the most recently established park in Tanzania and a sanctuary of biodiversity, ideal for hiking and birdwatching, the forests are veritable treasure troves of biodiversity and constitute the most intact forest ecosystems in the entire Eastern Arc mountain system. The park was created in 1992 with the support of the WWF. Covering an area of 1,990 square kilometres, it protects one of the largest and most diverse forest complexes in East Africa. It is a protected reserve because it is home to 30–40% of endemic, rare and endangered species: mammals, birds and plants that are found nowhere else, including various species of monkeys and trees over 60 metres tall, true "giants" that tower over the rainforests, often covered with numerous epiphytes and climbing plants, mosses, ferns, orchids and impressive lianas. Also interesting is the presence of numerous plants with medicinal properties, used in traditional local medicine [87].

The different phyto-climatic zones, from the slopes of the mountains up to an altitude of 2,400 m, create a rich and fascinating mosaic of different ecological situations, offering visitors unique opportunities to "live" experiences of true "full immersion" in nature in one of the corners of Tanzania least known to international tourism. Thus, far from the "motorised" mass tourism (jeeps of all sizes and types) that now pervades many protected areas in East Africa.

In this very large but rather unknown area, there are two Camaldolese monasteries that were visited during a study trip in the summer of 2023: the monastery of Santa Maria Madre della Chiesa Mafinga, in the Iringa region, run by nuns, and the monastery of St. Romuald, also in the Iringa region, run by monks. There are also three other monasteries, which will be discussed later.

The monastery of Santa Maria Madre della Chiesa Mafinga was commissioned by the local archbishop with a specific purpose: to support the diocesan seminary through contemplative prayer. Initially, three nuns settled there and their presence dates back to 1969 [88]. The nuns came from the Roman monastery of Santo Antonio Abate and were initially welcomed by the Consolata missionary nuns to learn the local language, culture, and customs. From this small group of religious women, a monastic experience began that transformed not only religious life in Tanzania but also the area surrounding the monastery.

The nuns began their material work by cultivating the land and raising animals (goats and cows), teaching seminarians and village inhabitants basic agricultural techniques for food self-sufficiency. A stable community gradually developed around the monastery, then a small urban centre, until it became a real town. Today, Mafinga is one of the five districts of the Iringa region (**Figure 7**).

The guesthouse at Mafinga Monastery, which has been open to visitors since its inception, has hosted training weeks for missionaries, spiritual exercises and retreats for groups or individuals, and more recently, conferences of all kinds and travelers who love wilderness hiking.

The Monastery of St. Romuald in the Iringa region of Mafinga was founded in 2010, when the church was also consecrated (**Figure 8**). The approximately 3,800 square meter structure is located on a hill, and the monastery also includes a guesthouse designed to blend in with the existing complex. Currently, two monks reside in the monastery along with several young men who are experiencing a period of vocational discernment and formation.



**Figure 8.** View of the complex of the Monastery of St. Romuald.
Source: Photo of Author.

The young Community lives off its own work and the aid it receives mainly from the Mother House Community in Camaldoli, as it is not yet able to support itself independently as it should be in respect of the Benedictine tradition.

The daily rhythm, following the Camaldolese Benedictine tradition, includes time dedicated to work, prayer, and hospitality. Every day, the community gathers for the Liturgy, and on Sundays, the Eucharistic liturgy is also attended by people from the surrounding area and children cared for in an institution located near the monastery. Community work consists of growing vegetables and caring for fruit trees (bananas, avocados, mangoes, apples, pineapples, etc.). Other

simple activities are being considered in order to provide for the community's sustenance. A significant activity, in keeping with the Camaldolese tradition, is the cultivation of trees for timber, with a cutting and reforestation project.
The Community is open to welcome anyone who wishes to spend a few days in prayer, learning about monastic life and sharing in the work. There are not many places available, but individuals or small groups can be accommodated. For tourists, staying at the monastery is a way to help and support the Community, as well as gaining an insight into the social and environmental context in which the monastery is set.

Besides these two monasteries, there are a few others, and three in particular, one of which, following the Benedictine rule, was directly mentioned during the travel/research while talking with the local population and privileged witnesses.

The third important monastery offers hospitality to travelers who venture into an inaccessible and marginal area of Tanzania: the region of Sumbawanga and Mvimwa is located in a valley just behind Lake Tanganyika (one of the great African lakes and one of the deepest on the planet: −1,340 m), which divides Tanzania from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Zambia[89].

The Mvimwa monastery is an abbey dedicated to the Holy Spirit of the Ottilian Congregation (Benedictine religious order) located in Sumbawanga, in the Rukwa region (**Figure 9**), among the poorest in Tanzania.



**Figure 9.** View of the Mvimwa Monastery.
Source: https://www.collegiosantanselmo.com/2023/01/19/abbazia-dello-spirito-santo-mvimwa-sumbawanga-tanzania/.

Sumbawanga is the last town you encounter as you travel away from the coast from the towns of Kilwa or Lindi in the east towards Lake Tanganyika (**Figure 7**). In the inland areas, the villages are increasingly "wild", with rare electricity and even rarer drinking water, except for the wells disseminated between one village and another. From here, the landscape becomes more varied, with the savannah giving way to hills and then rocky mountains, among which is nestled the Mvimwa monastery, at an altitude of about 1800 m, which can be reached after about two hours on a rough road.

Founded in 1979, it now houses nearly 100 monks and runs numerous social and educational activities, including schools, a health clinic, a farm, and development projects for the local community.

The Mvimwa monastery also provides work for local people and families in a number of internal services and in the fields (the monastery is surrounded by an area populated by around 20,000 inhabitants, spread across 10 villages). In this way, the monastery carries out its missionary work, strengthening its educational and social role for the benefit of the poor and disadvantaged populations of the neighboring villages.

Thanks to several non-profit organizations, and one in particular, the Monastery provides the population with a dispensary (which consists of two buildings. One houses a small laboratory where rapid tests are carried out to identify malaria, for pregnant women and for AIDS; an office, a clinic to monitor the growth of newborns and another room for consultations for pregnant women. The other building comprises a dozen small hospital rooms) where women mainly stay during labor. There is a medical clinic and two small operating rooms or delivery rooms, as the nearest hospitals are very far away for the locals and can only be reached via dirt roads that are impassable during the rainy season. About a hundred people (pregnant women, new mothers, AIDS patients, and people with general illnesses) visit the dispensary every day.

Undoubtedly, thanks to the voluntary work of non-profit organizations, the Monastery provides educational opportunities and has become a driving force for social and economic transformation in the area where it is located. The hospitality provided by the Monastery and its impact also contribute to improving the socio-economic aspects of the area.

Travelers/guests are under no obligation to participate in events which are strictly linked to the religious aspect of the place, but they are required to respect the timetable (mass sung by the monks at 6.30 a.m. as the sun rises). Sunday mass, although in Swahili, is an important event where songs, musical instruments, and dances accompany the liturgy.

During the day, there is no electricity, which is turned on at dusk, turned off at 10 p.m., and restored around 5 a.m.

for about 1–2 hours. The telephone connection is usually active thanks to an antenna powered by a solar panel, and occasionally, by requesting activation and staying near the novitiate classroom, it is possible to have a Wi-Fi connection Running water is available in the monastery but is not drinkable; only bottled water is used for drinking. There is a large communal laundry room where you can wash and hang your laundry, as well as a tailor's shop, a car mechanic, and a school for electricians who can fix minor electrical or electronic problems. In addition, a few meters from the lodgings, there is a small building that functions as a pub, where you can sit and enjoy a drink in the evening. These are the basic facilities for guests' stays.

From the brief descriptions of the three monasteries, it is clear that the architecture is not sacred. The materials are often bricks made from local materials and local wood (often Tanganyika walnut), with concrete floors and sheet metal roofs. These are recent and basic constructions, but just as abbeys in Europe and monasteries in Armenia were once centers of culture and development for local populations, so today in Tanzania monasteries bring together local populations, who benefit from the cultural vitality and initiative of the Camaldolese Benedictines in their humanitarian initiatives and in promoting social and economic development.

In addition, the Benedictines take care of transportation for guests throughout their trip and act as cultural mediators with the local populations.

One more observation on the actions of the Tanzanian government, which, in order to ease the tourist pressure on the abovementioned Northern Parks, has begun to invest more and more in the creation of protected areas in the South as well, affecting precisely the unspoiled areas just described. Among these is Ruaha National Park, whose development since 2017 has been the focus of a project financed by the World Bank. The initiative (For a value of $150 million and a duration of eight years [88]. aims to create a protected area where, as is happening in Ngorongoro, human settlements and economic activities are prohibited, leaving room for tourism. In this case too, the policies that the Tanzanian government is pursuing to achieve its goal are underhanded and violent. Through expropriations, extrajudicial killings, and livestock looting, Ruaha rangers are putting pressure on local populations (in particular Maasai), making their living conditions unsustainable and forcing them to abandon their lands [90].

This is an extreme example (referring to a contested developing country) of the difficulty of applying a standardized approach to sustainability in tourism, which is also determined by the paradoxes of tourism [91]: on the one hand, the development of tourism allows local communities to obtain the resources that are essential for maintaining the community over time and achieving high standards of living; on the other hand, the tourism product, during its life cycle, can evolve under exogenous pressures (foreign investors, multinationals, etc.) to the point of completely changing its appearance, transforming itself into something totally different from the original.

The Survival International Report (2020) provides food for reflection. According to the data presented to the world, there are 120,000 protected areas covering 13% of the land surface. The problem is that several million indigenous people, who used to obtain food from this area, have been evicted and have become "environmental refugees".

In the tourism context, in order to develop proposals for different types of sustainable tourism that support some common goals and objectives, it is important to highlight how, for example, protected areas can sometimes be linked to UNESCO World Heritage sites, in particular Natural and Mixed Heritage sites. For example, in Tanzania, since 1979, seven sites have been recognized and established by UNESCO, three of which are natural sites: Kilimanjaro National Park (1987), Selous Game Reserve (1982), and Serengeti National Park (1981), and one mixed site: Ngorongoro Conservation Area (1979, 2010). The first date refers to when the site was recognized for its natural values, the second date for the cultural value, in 2010.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning the research coordinated by Stephen Garnett in Nature Sustainability in early 2023 on the role of indigenous peoples in forest conservation. This research highlights that indigenous peoples manage or have rights to a large portion of the planet's land, including about one-third of the world's intact forests, making them crucial actors in climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation [92].

In light of the brief focus presented, monasteries can be seen from many angles, but above all, in light of both the negative dynamics of impact tourism and the above-mentioned local government policies, they can play a decisive role in

protecting the territory and, at the same time, safeguarding local communities. The communities show a respect for nature that goes far beyond our best environmentalist rhetoric.

The communities demonstrate a respect for nature that goes far beyond our best environmentalist rhetoric because they have always had deep ties with nature, as already highlighted when discussing Sacred Natural Sites (SNS).

### 5.4. Religious Tourism and the Special Role of Monasteries as Guardians of the Territory and Supporters of Local Populations

Geographical location makes Tanzania one of the most prosperous regions and one of the most popular tourist destinations in sub-Saharan Africa[93]. Religious tourism in Tanzania offers a unique experience, given the diversity of religions present in the country. You can find places of worship of different religions, such as Muslim mosques, Christian churches and Hindu temples, often related and connected to local culture and history.

In Tanzania, there are no specific religious tourism itineraries, but there are many places of worship along cultural itineraries. The most interesting place to visit religious sites in a limited area is the island of Zanzibar, best known for its seaside tourism, where religious tourism focuses mainly on Islamic culture and architecture, with particular emphasis on the city of Stone Town (the old town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and its numerous mosques, including the Malindi Mosque and the Kiponda Mosque[94]. Zanzibar has numerous other mosques, often small in size, scattered throughout the island, both in villages and along the main roads. In Stone Town, you can visit Christian places of worship such as Christ Cathedral, an important example of early Christian architecture, built on the site of a former slave market, or St Joseph's Cathedral, a Catholic church with an important history. In addition to the cathedrals, there are other churches, mainly Catholic, scattered around the island, often small in size[95].

The location of the three monasteries in southwestern Tanzania described above shows how difficult it is for them to be accessed by the tourist flows that characterize the North of the country. But they are not even a destination for the religious cultural tourism that focuses on Zanzibar.

Yet these religious structures, which are open to guests according to their 'rules', offer food for thought on how they all have the potential to form the basis of eco-sustainable spiritual itineraries. In fact, pilgrimages today have changed: they are no longer just an experience of faith, but also a journey in search of well-being, spirituality, culture, and contact with nature, with one's most authentic self, and with the community[96]. Therefore, the paths themselves become opportunities to explore the history, culture, and identity of the places and people (especially the local populations) encountered along the route. In fact, the contemporary experience of pilgrimage necessarily changes with the changing social experience of the present day.

It is important to suggest that monasteries be approached from a more extensive perspective that takes into account both the continuity (or development) of tourism and the conservation of the resources necessary for its development, considering and respecting the needs of other economic activities and local populations with a view to true sustainability.

In conclusion, it should be noted that despite its successes, sustainable tourism in Tanzania is confronted with several challenges. These include the need for adequate infrastructure, managing growing tourist demand, and balancing economic development with environmental conservation. However, these challenges also represent opportunities to innovate and improve sustainable practices.

## 6. National Policies and Strategies for Long-Term Sustainable Tourism Development

The **Table 2** shows that all the "tourism efforts" that Armenia seeks to make, especially in recent years, in promoting sustainable tourism within itself are also supported by actions, strategies, laws, regulations and substantial documentation in force in the country since the 1990s. The laws passed and ratified by the Armenian government (or Armenian legislative accessions to international conventions on the conservation of biodiversity) show how attentive this country is to the conservation of flora and fauna, how much it protects its environment and the health of its citizens. In the sustainable tourism practices to be continued to spread in the country, Armenia recognizes its "sustainable vocation" that rests on policies, strategies and documentation, national and international, promoted by the Ministry of Economy (and

the Tourism Committee), the Ministry of the Environment and minor actors to contribute to the long-lasting sustainable tourism promotion in the country and, consequently, achieve the condition of lasting economic prosperity of the country.

**Table 2.** Comparison of policy actions, strategies, laws, documentation and regulations relating to tourism, environmental protection, heritage and local population in Armenia and Tanzania.

| Typology/Area of Documentation | Armenia—Documentation | Tanzania—Documentation |
|---|---|---|
| NATIONAL LAWS ON TOURISM | International visitor Survey on National Level. Final Report (2023).<br>The project "Transcaucasian Trail – Promoting Cross-Border Tourism" was led led by PIN Georgia and implemented in collaboration with PIN Armenia and Transcaucasian Trail NGO in Georgia and Armenia, Programme "Tourism and Regional Infrastructure Project" (2025). | Ministry of natural Resources and Tourism National Tourism Policy(September 1999)<br>THE UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA THE TOURISM ACT [PRINCIPAL LEGISLATION] 2021 |
| AGREEMENTS, ACTIONS, REGULATIONS FOR THE PROTECTION OF BIODIVERSITY | The Armenian Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (1999).<br>Emerald Network in Armenia would support the national biodiversity action plan and align with international agreements such as the strategic plan for the Berne Convention for the period up to 2030 and the post-2020 workplan for the network (corresponding to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework for 2030).<br>Enviromental and social Impact assessment (ESIA) Sisian-Kajaran (North-South Corridor) Road Project, Armenia. Biodiversity Action Plan (2024) | THE UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA/VICE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE. National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) 2015–2020<br>THE UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA Supporting the implementation of an integrated ecosystem management approach for landscape restoration and biodiversity conservation in the United Republic of Tanzania (2023) |
| LAWS/REGULATIONS National/Regional protection of flora and fauna | Law of the Republic of Armenia "About flora" (1999).<br>Law of the Republic of Armenia "About fauna" (2000) updated in 2022,<br>The RA Government Decrees No.71-N (29/01/2010) and No.72-N (29/01/2010) on approval of the RA Red Book of Animals and RA Red Book of Plants,<br>The RA Government Decree No. 781-N on the order of Protection of flora objects of the Republic of Armenia and their use for the purpose of reproduction in natural conditions (2014) | Wildlife Conservation Act No. 5 of 2009<br>THE UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA-CHAPTER 283 THE WILDLIFE CONSERVATION ACT [PRINCIPAL LEGISLATION] REVISED EDITION 2022 |
| LAWS/REGULATIONS Protection of local populations | Law of the Republic of Armenia on Population protection in Emergency Situations (1998).<br>Law on Environmental Impact Assessment and Expert Examination (2014).<br>Strategic Programme of Prospective Development (SPPD) 2014–2025,<br>Law of the Republic of Armenia of May 13, 2025 No. ZR-89 "About risk management of natural disasters and protection of the population" | THE UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA VICE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE- GUIDELINES FOR INTEGRATING CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION INTO NATIONAL SECTORAL POLICIES, PLANS AND PROGRAMMES OFTANZANIA (2012)<br>THE UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA -PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE NATIONAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT STRATEGY (2022 – 2027) |
| UNESCO CONVENTIONS | UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (September 5, 1993). | UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage ( August 2, 1977). |
| LAWS/REGULATIONS on environmental protection | The Water Code (2002)<br>The Forest Code (2005)<br>Law on Environmental Impact Assessment and Expert Examination (2014) | Implementation Strategy for the National Environmental Policy 2022–2032<br>USAID, 'Tanzania: USAID Tuhifadhi Maliasili Project (Preserving Natural Resources),' April 2024. |
| LAWS/REGULATIONS on protected areas | Law on Special Protected Areas of Nature (2006) | Marine Parks and Reserves Act No. 29 of 1994<br>Tanzania Protected Places and Areas Act Chapter 74 Published in Tanzania Government Gazett (31 July 2022) |
| LAWS/REGULATIONS/PLANS supporting Agenda 2030 | The Council of Europe Action Plan for Armenia (2023–2026) | Implementing the 2030 Agenda in Tanzania: towards a participatory, inclusive and knowledge-driven agenda (2017)<br>United Republic of Tanzania country strategic plan (2022–2027)<br>ROADMAP TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs) IN ZANZIBAR 2020–2030 |

Source: Elaborated by Authors.

Tanzania's national policies also aim to transform tourism towards sustainability, focusing on environmental conservation and the involvement of local communities. Although there are challenges such as infrastructure quality and sanitary conditions, the country seeks to promote a model of tourism that guarantees economic benefits and the protection of natural resources. Tanzania is also adopting various measures and strategies to safeguard the environment, focused on climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity conservation and pollution reduction, in line with international cooperation policies.

Armenia and Tanzania promote an approach to tourism that aims to strike a balance between the needs of tourists, local communities, the environment and stable economic growth.

# 7. Discussion

In this work, through "field" work visiting some monasteries in Armenia and Tanzania after a careful textual analysis of local literature and documentation, an attempt was made to highlight a synergy that can exist between religious tourism and ecotourism also through comparison between these two types of sustainable tourism. With the awareness of the national policies, strategies and documentation in place relating to the tourism sector and its sustainable development in both

countries, it is possible to affirm that the ecospiritual practices that derive from the synergy of both tourisms —the religious and the spiritual — can contribute, among other things, to the development and consolidation of sustainable tourism in these territories.

We have studied in detail the ecospiritual potential that monastic complexes in Armenia and Tanzania can offer tourists.

Indeed, religious tourism may also have ecotourism aspects within it, given a broad conceptual interpretation to which the concept of religious tourism has been subjected in the 21st century[16].

Religious geography, explaining the relationship between religion and society[1] with its own analysis tools and applying itself to the territories of two case studies — Armenia and Tanzania — was indeed able to state that the hybridization of different types of tourism that takes place today in the monastic complexes of these countries has contributed considerably and continues to attribute to the sustainable development of tourism practiced in these countries.

Furthermore, the link between religion and the current use of the monastic environment and that adjacent to it, by religious tourists and beyond, was examined: this link seems to be built by tourists in the least impactful way possible, respecting the faith, nature and landscape of the territory they visit[1].

Religious tourism is a type of tourism that increases not only the tourists' spiritual knowledge, but also their historical, architectural, cultural, landscape and socio-territorial knowledge of the sacred places they visit, also making them aware of the fact that the nature that surrounds tham is a factor of transformation towards tham[16,17] and towards ecotourism experiences, liable to be offered to tourists as practices alongside and/or mixed with religious ones.

The historical roots of religious tourism, such as pilgrimage[13–15] and spiritual retreat[15], are still being fed by tourists, who are increasingly opening up to "mixed", — ecospiritual — tourist practices that arise from the adherence, conscious or not, of the tourists themselves to ecotourism practices.

Finally, the importance was emphasized, for the monastic complexes studied, of the nature and landscape that "contain" the sacred place such as gorges, mountains, rivers, lakes, woods, National Parks, of their naturalistic influence on that place (and vice versa), and of the conservation of nature by monasticism, in harmony, and, especially in the Armenian case, with national government laws that protect the environment and focus on the conservation of biodiversity. Indeed, sacred places immersed in naturalistic sites are directly linked to the local history and culture of the community living in their vicinity, and the potential of ecospiritual tourism practices in these places and their surroundings is to continue to be encouraged with foreign investments, collaborations and multi-scale cooperation.

In conclusion, in addition to the ecospiritual tourism potential of the monasteries studied and visited, the positive impact of it on the local community was also highlighted: sacred places are places that instill in the religious tourist and ecotourist the values of responsible and sustainable travel, of maintaining the link with the culture and with the host community, without making him forget his contribution to improving the economic conditions of the people who manage the small, mostly family-run businesses that live near these places.

Through the ever-spreading ecospiritual practices, the constant attempts at improvement in the political-territorial management of tourism, the calls for foreign investment and partnership, Armenia and Tanzania invite tourists, attentive to the values of sustainability, from all over the world to interpret and promote sustainable tourism in an increasingly frequent way on their territories.

# 8. Conclusions

Based on analysis, interpretation and comparison of tourism and/or environmental policies, strategies and documentation in place in Armenia and Tanzania, this research observed how religious tourism can have points of contact with ecotourism, generating ecospiritual practices in sacred places, and how much it can contribute, with its modalities, to the sustainability of tourist travel with positive repercussions of cultural, social, spiritual, economic and even infrastructural indeed, especially on the native population and the territory visited.

The spiritual motivations, the socio-territorial deepening of a territory, the intercultural encounter with its population, the contribution to the conservation of its landscapes, the growth of its cultural knowledge: these are the prerequi-

sites for embracing sustainable tourism not only in Armenia and Tanzania, but also in other countries around the world.

The studies carried out lead to the need to strengthen sustainable and ecospiritual practices among the tourist population for the valorisation and diffusion of religious tourism hybridized with ecotourism. With the gradual maturation of ecological consciousness and with the daily acquisition of climate consciousness, more and more tourists should move into the future causing the territories visited the least possible impact and instead contributing to the growth of the well-being of local communities.

Indeed, it is hoped that the proportion of responsible tourists, eager to travel sustainably and to show respect to the local population, increasing interest in its history, traditions and local development, will grow over time [97] and that more and more ecotourists and religious tourists will visit the territories under consideration and beyond, spreading sustainable and ecospiritual tourism practices throughout the world.

Being informed about the irreversibility of certain tourist behaviors leads more and more people to travel in the low season and make sustainable travel choices [98]. The transition of tourism towards sustainable conditions is already underway in Armenia and Tanzania, and it is sufficient that tourists are offered alternative itineraries that are little used by the "usual circuits" or have never been used before and therefore created ad hoc, capable of offering them tourist typologies "hybrid" in the name of interest in the conservation of nature and biodiversity.

Today we should talk about the creation of real eco-sustainable itineraries, both in Armenia and Tanzania, which see monasteries at the centre, but open up new possibilities for hybrid tourism both in terms of new tourist experiences (with the valorisation of heritage) and with regard to the creation of new ecospiritual paths.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, N.V. and K.M.; Introduction, N.V. and K.M.; Materials and Methods, N.V. and K.M.; Nature as a sacred place, N.V.; Religious tourism in Armenia (Christian monasteries), K.M.; A suggestion for spiritual ecotourism in Tanzania: the Camaldolese monasteries, N.V.; National policies and strategies for long-term sustainable tourism development N.V. and K.M.; Discussion, N.V. and K.M.; Conclusions, N.V. and K.M.; software, K.M.; formal analysis, N.V. and K.M.; investigation, N.V. and K.M.; resources, N.V. and K.M.; data curation, N.V. and K.M.; writing — original draft preparation, N.V. and K.M.; writing — review and editing, N.V. and K.M.; supervision, N.V. and K.M.; project administration, N.V. and K.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the fact that the sample was composed of places and not of people.

## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was not used for the research, as short informal and occasional dialogues with members of the local population do not contain direct data. The information was useful in strengthening our general idea on sustainable tourism through the synergy of religious tourism with ecotourism.

## Data Availability Statement

Research material cannot be published for privacy reasons. However, all the materials that could make this research interesting were included in this article.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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