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Effect of Tourism Routes Designing on Lengthening the Stay of Tourists and Improving Tourists Spending in Iraqi Destinations

أثر تصميم المسارات السياحية في إطالة مدة إقامة السياح وزيادة إنفاقهم في الوجهات السياحية العراقية

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Abstract:

This study looks into the impacts of designing particular tourism routes on visitors' length of stay and spending, in the country where its religious, historic, natural, and cultural attractions have not yet been fully utilized. A descriptive-analytical approach was followed. Data came from a questionnaire answered by 384 domestic and international visitors in Karbala, Najaf, Baghdad, Basra and Erbil, and from in-depth interviews with 15 tourism specialists. Visitors rated the current design of tourism routes as low (mean 2.38 out of 5), with marketing and the integration of tourism components as the weakest elements. Regression analysis showed that route design has a significant positive effect on duration of stay ($R^2 = 0.466$) and on tourist expenditure ($R^2 = 0.507$). Integrated routes that combine religious, cultural and historical sites were rated the most effective type. A scenario-based estimate suggests that such routes could raise the average stay from 2.5 to 4.9 days. The study proposes four model routes and recommends that the Iraqi tourism authorities adopt a scientific method for route design, upgrade supporting infrastructure and widen public-private partnerships.

Keywords: Specialized Tourism Routes, Duration of Stay, Tourist Expenditure, Iraqi Destinations, Religious Tourism, Cultural Tourism.

الملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في آثار تصميم مسارات سياحية متخصصة في إطالة مدة إقامة السياح وزيادة إنفاقهم في العراق، الذي لم تُستثمر مقوماته السياحية الدينية والتاريخية والطبيعية والثقافية استثمارًا كاملًا بعد. واعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي، وجُمعت البيانات من خلال استبانة أُجريت على 384 سائحًا محليًا ودوليًا في كربلاء والنجف وبغداد والبصرة وأربيل، فضلًا عن إجراء مقابلات معمقة مع 15 متخصصًا في السياحة. وأظهرت النتائج أن مستوى تصميم المسارات السياحية الحالية جاء منخفضًا، بمتوسط حسابي بلغ 2.38 من أصل 5، وكانت عناصر التسويق والتكامل بين المكونات السياحية الأضعف أداءً. كما أظهر تحليل الانحدار وجود تأثير إيجابي ذي دلالة إحصائية لتصميم المسارات السياحية في مدة الإقامة ($R^2 = 0.466$) وفي الإنفاق السياحي ($R^2 = 0.507$). وصُنّفت المسارات المتكاملة التي تجمع بين المواقع الدينية والثقافية والتاريخية على أنها النوع الأكثر فاعلية. وتشير تقديرات قائمة على سيناريو افتراضي إلى أن تطبيق هذه المسارات يمكن أن يزيد متوسط مدة الإقامة من 2.5 يوم إلى 4.9 أيام. وتقترح الدراسة أربعة مسارات سياحية نموذجية، وتوصي الجهات السياحية العراقية باعتماد منهج علمي في تصميم المسارات السياحية، وتطوير البنية التحتية الداعمة، وتوسيع نطاق الشراكات بين القطاعين العام والخاص.

الكلمات المفتاحية : المسارات السياحية المتخصصة، مدة الإقامة، الإنفاق السياحي، الوجهات السياحية العراقية، السياحة الدينية، السياحة الثقافية.

Section One: General Framework

1.1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the largest economic sectors in the world; in 2019, before the pandemic, it accounted for 10.4% of global GDP (WTTC, 2023). As competition between destinations grows, each looks for tools that make it more attractive and raise its returns. Themed tourism routes are one such tool, with well-known examples in the wine routes of France and Italy, the cultural routes of Spain and the pilgrimage routes of Saudi Arabia (Timothy & Boyd, 2015).

There are several advantages of Iraq that qualify it for offering such products.

Sites of the Imams in Karbala, Najaf, Kadhimiya, and Samarra attract millions of tourists every year, and Hatra, Ashur, Babylon, and Ahwar of southern Iraq are listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites (UNESCO, 2022). Besides, the country provides various landscapes ranging from the mountainous areas in the Kurdish region to the desert regions in the west and rivers and marshes in the south of the

country. All these advantages have not been effectively utilized as a package to keep the tourists longer and spend more because most of the tourism activities are religious (Al-Jubouri, 2021).Customized packages can help connect these different elements in specific, purposeful tours.

1.2. Research Problem

Iraq receives very large numbers of visitors, particularly during religious occasions such as Arbaeen, which attracts millions every year (Iraqi Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities, 2023). The economic return, however, falls well short of these numbers. Religious visitors usually stay two or three days and spend mostly on lodging and food (Al-Abbasi & Al-Hasani, 2022). One reason is the lack of well-planned routes that connect sites and give visitors a reason to stay longer and use a wider range of services.

The research problem can therefore be stated in the following main question:

What is the effect of specialized tourism route design on extending visitors' duration of stay and increasing tourist expenditure in Iraqi destinations?

Four sub-questions follow from it:

1- How are tourism routes in Iraq currently designed and organised?

2- Is route design significantly related to the duration of visitors' stay?

3- Is route design significantly related to tourist expenditure?

4- Which types of route are most effective in extending stays and raising expenditure in Iraq?

1.3. Research Objectives

The research seeks to:

1- Analyse the current state of tourism routes in Iraq and identify their strengths and weaknesses.

2- Measure the effect of route design on visitors' duration of stay.

3- Measure the effect of route design on tourist expenditure.

4- Identify the route types best suited to the Iraqi context.

5- Propose a practical framework for designing specialized routes in Iraq.

1.4. Research Hypotheses

Drawing on the theoretical framework and previous studies, the research tests the following hypotheses:

Main hypothesis: the design of specialized tourism routes has a statistically significant positive effect on visitors' duration of stay and on tourist expenditure in Iraqi destinations.

Sub-hypotheses:

First sub-hypothesis: route design has a statistically significant positive effect on visitors' duration of stay.

Second sub-hypothesis: route design has a statistically significant positive effect on tourist expenditure.

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Third sub-hypothesis: the effect of routes on duration of stay and expenditure differs significantly by route type (religious, historical, natural or integrated).

1.5. Research Significance

Theoretical significance: the research offers an analytical framework linking route design to duration of stay and expenditure in a developing country that faces security and infrastructure problems, a setting studied far less than stable destinations.

Practical significance: the findings can guide the National Tourism Authority, the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities and private investors in designing routes that raise the economic return of tourism.

1.6. Research Limitations

Thematic limits: specialized tourism routes and their effect on duration of stay and expenditure.

Spatial limits: Karbala, Najaf, Baghdad, Basra and Erbil.

Temporal limits: fieldwork carried out between March and July 2025.

Human limits: domestic and international visitors in the five governorates and specialists in the tourism sector.

1.7. Research Terms

Specialized tourism routes: planned, geographically defined routes that link sites sharing a common theme (religious, historical, natural or cultural) and are offered as one product that includes transport, accommodation and activities (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004).

Duration of stay: the number of days and nights a visitor spends at a destination (Gokovali et al., 2007).

Tourist expenditure: total spending by a visitor on goods and services during a trip, including accommodation, transport, food, recreation and shopping (UNWTO, 2020).

Iraqi destinations: sites, cities and regions in Iraq that receive visitors for any purpose.

Section Two: Theoretical Framework and Previous Studies

2.1. The Concept and Development of Specialized Tourism Routes

Timothy and Boyd (2015: 3) describe a specialized route as a planned geographical path that links several attractions around a shared theme, so that visitors experience them as one coherent whole. The idea has moved well beyond a transport link between sites: routes are now treated as strategic products that support regional development and help diversify local economies.

Ward-Perkins et al. (2020) group routes by theme into religious and pilgrimage, historical and heritage, natural and ecological, cultural and artistic, gastronomic, and adventure routes. A route succeeds, in their account, when it has a clear theme, good connections between its sites, adequate infrastructure and services, effective marketing and the involvement of local communities.

2.2. The Impact of Tourism Routes on Duration of Stay

Length of stay is a decision shaped both by destination attributes and by the structure of the trip (Gokovali et al., 2007). Routes act on both. By linking attractions that would otherwise be visited separately, they give visitors more to do and a clear programme to follow, which encourages longer stays, especially in peripheral areas (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Meyer, 2004).

In the Arab context, Al-Qahtani (2019) found that linking religious, historical and cultural sites in a single Saudi route raised the average stay from three to 5.5 days.

2.3. The Impact of Tourism Routes on Tourist Expenditure

Spending rises with the length of stay, since visitors who remain longer buy more services. Routes also raise spending in other ways: they introduce visitors to activities and services they would not find on their own and encourage purchases of distinctive experiences such as handicrafts, local food and recreation (Meyer, 2004).

Lourens (2007), drawing on route-tourism experience in South Africa, showed that routes carry visitor spending to the small towns and rural communities along them and so support local economic development.

2.4. Tourism in Iraq: Current Reality and Challenges

Iraq's tourism assets are rare and varied. Karbala and Najaf are among the most important Shiite pilgrimage cities in the world, receiving millions of visitors a year from Iran, the Gulf, South Asia and Europe (Al-Ameri, 2020). The country holds the remains of Mesopotamian civilization: Babylon joined the World Heritage List in 2019, alongside Hatra, Ashur and Ur (UNESCO, 2022). Its natural assets range from the southern marshes, inscribed in 2016 as a mixed natural and cultural site, to the mountains, waterfalls and valleys of the Kurdistan Region.

The sector nonetheless faces serious obstacles: weak hotel, restaurant and transport infrastructure, the absence of scientifically planned routes, limited international marketing, lingering security concerns, complicated visa procedures and poor coordination between the bodies responsible for tourism (Al-Jubouri, 2021; Al-Obaidi & Al-Tamimi, 2022).

2.5. Literature Review

First study: Timothy and Boyd (2015), *Tourism and Trails: Cultural, Ecological and Management Issues*, review the concept and types of trails and their role in tourism development. They conclude that successful trails need integrated planning that links sites thematically, provides supporting services and involves local communities.

Second study: Al-Qahtani (2019) used a descriptive-analytical design and a questionnaire of 420 tourists in Saudi Arabia and found that integrated religious-historical routes were the most effective in lengthening stays and raising spending.

Third study: Al-Abbasi and Al-Hasani (2022) analysed religious tourism in Karbala and Najaf and recommended widening religious tourism programmes and linking them to cultural and historical sites to keep visitors longer.

Fourth study: Rodrigues et al. (2010) surveyed hiking tourists in Portugal and showed that walking trails can be developed as wellness products within rural tourism projects, which supports the view of trails as marketable tourism products.

Fifth study: Al-Jubouri (2021) assessed Iraq's tourism assets and identified the absence of route planning as one of the sector's main weaknesses.

2.6. Conceptual Framework

The framework links the independent variable, route design (thematic diversity, connectivity between sites, supporting services, information and guidance, integration of tourism components, marketing and promotion, and local community participation), to two dependent variables: duration of stay and tourist expenditure. Route type (religious, historical, natural or integrated) is treated as a moderating variable that may change the strength of this effect.

Section Three: Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

The research applies a descriptive-analytical approach to identify the existing situation regarding tourism routes in Iraq and to analyze the relationship between the design of such routes and time spent by tourists and expenses incurred by them. The inductive approach was adopted for developing the theory.

3.2. Research Population and Sample

The population consists of two groups:

First group: domestic and international visitors in Karbala, Najaf, Baghdad, Basra and Erbil. Because the size of this population cannot be determined precisely, Cochran's formula for an unknown population was applied at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, giving a sample of 384 respondents.

Second group: specialists in the Iraqi tourism sector (academics, officials, investors and tour guides), of whom 15 were chosen purposively for in-depth interviews.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

1. Questionnaire: the visitor’s questionnaire contained four sections: (A) demographic information; (B) attributes of the current visit including time spent, expenditures, and the reason for the visit; (C) assessment of the elements of route design on the 5-point Likert scale; and (D) impact of the route on visitors’ intention to prolong their visit and spend more. The questionnaire was checked for content validity by ten experts, and it was found reliable due to Cronbach's alpha being equal to 0.87.

2. In-depth interviews: a semi-structured list containing 12 questions was used to understand experts’ opinion about the current situation regarding the routes in Iraq and their potential.

3. Field observations: the researcher made a field visit to tourist destinations in five governorates.

3.4. Statistical Methods

The data were analysed with SPSS (version 28) using:

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages).

Pearson's correlation coefficient to measure the strength and direction of relationships between variables.

Simple and multiple linear regression to measure the effect of route design and its dimensions on the two dependent variables.

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test differences between route types.Section Four: Presentation and Analysis of Results

4.1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Table (1): Distribution of the Sample by Demographic Variables

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	248	64.6
	Female	136	35.4
Nationality	Iraqi	198	51.6
	Iranian	89	23.2
	Arab (not Iraqi)	52	13.5
	Foreigner (non-Arab)	45	11.7
Age Group	Under 25	72	18.8
	25- 40	156	40.6
	41 – 55	108	28.1
	Over 55	48	12.5
Educational Level	High School or below	88	22.9
	Diploma/Bachelor	214	55.7
	Graduate Studies	82	21.4
Main Reason for Visit	Religious	231	60.2
	Cultural/ Historical	68	17.7
	Recreational/Natural	42	10.9
	Multi-purpose	43	11.2

Males constitute 64.6% of the sample size. The largest ethnic groups are Iraqis (51.6%) and Iranians (23.2%), indicating the nature of religion-based tourism in Iraq. There is a predominance of religious purposes for travel (60.2%), making it important to develop routes based on religion.

4.2. Current Duration of Stay and Tourist Expenditure

Table (2): Distribution of Visitors by Duration of Stay and Average Daily Expenditure

Duration of stay	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Average Daily Expenditure (USD)
One day (without an overnight stay)	98	25.5	35
1–2 nights	142	37	55
3 –4 nights	89	23.2	72
5–7 nights	38	9.9	85
More than 7 nights	17	4.4	95
Total	384	100	Overall Average :61

Most visitors (62.5%) stay two nights or fewer, and average daily spending is USD 61, which is low for the region. Daily spending rises with the length of stay, which suggests that visitors who stay longer take part in more activities that involve spending.

4.3. Visitors' Evaluation of Route Design Elements

Table (3): Means and Standard Deviations of Route Design Dimensions

Dimension	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank	Level of Availability
Thematic Diversity	2.34	0.89	4	Low
Quality of Connectivity Between Sites	2.18	0.92	5	Low
Availability of Support Services	2.56	0.85	3	Medium
Quality of Information and Guidance	2.71	0.78	2	Medium
Integration of Tourism Components	2.12	0.95	6	Low
Marketing and Promotion of Tourism Trails	1.98	0.88	7	Very Low
Local Community Participation	2.78	0.82	1	Medium
Overall Mean	2.38	0.87	-	Low

The overall mean of 2.38 out of 5 indicates a low level of performance and clear weaknesses in route design and organisation. Marketing and promotion ranked last (1.98), followed by integration of

tourism components (2.12), which points to the lack of a unified vision for Iraq's tourism product. Local community participation scored highest (2.78), probably because of voluntary community initiatives during pilgrimage seasons such as Arbaeen.

4.4. Hypothesis Testing

4.4.1. Testing the First Sub-hypothesis

Simple linear regression was used to test the effect of route design on duration of stay.

Table (4): Regression Results for the Effect of Route Design on Duration of Stay

Indicator	Value
Correlation Coefficient (R)	**0.683**
Coefficient of Determination (R^2)	**0.466**
Calculated F-Value	**334.72**
Significance Level (Sig.)	**0.000**
Regression Coefficient (β)	**0.683**
Calculated t-Value	**18.29**

Route design explains 46.6% of the variance in duration of stay ($R^2 = 0.466$), and the model is significant ($F = 334.72$, $p < 0.001$). The first sub-hypothesis is therefore accepted.

4.4.2. Testing the Second Sub-hypothesis

Table (5): Regression Results for the Effect of Route Design on Tourist Expenditure

Indicator	Value
Correlation Coefficient (R)	**0.712**
Coefficient of Determination (R^2)	**0.507**
Calculated F-Value	**393.15**
Significance Level (Sig.)	**0.000**
Regression Coefficient (β)	**0.712**
Calculated t-Value	**19.83**

Route design explains 50.7% of the variance in tourist expenditure ($R^2 = 0.507$), and the model is significant ($F = 393.15$, $p < 0.001$). The second sub-hypothesis is therefore accepted.

4.4.3. Testing the Third Sub-hypothesis

One-way ANOVA was used to compare the effectiveness of the four route types.

Table (6): Effectiveness of Route Types in Extending Duration of Stay and Increasing Expenditure

Trail Type	Mean – Increasing Expenditure (out of 5)	Mean – Extending Duration of stay (out of 5)	Rank
Only Religious Trail	3.12	2.95	**4**
Historical/Archaeological Trail	3.45	3.68	**2**
Natural/Ecotourism Trail	3.28	3.42	**3**
Integrated Trail (Religious–Cultural–Historical)	4.32	4.45	**1**
F-Value	**48.67**	**52.34**	**-**
Significance Level	**0.000**	**0.000**	**-**

The differences between route types are significant for both duration of stay (F = 52.34) and expenditure (F = 48.67), p < 0.001. The integrated religious-cultural-historical route ranked first, with means of 4.45 for extending stay and 4.32 for increasing expenditure, while the purely religious route ranked last. Combining religious, cultural and historical components in one route is therefore the most effective model in the Iraqi context, and the third sub-hypothesis is accepted.

4.5. Results of the In-Depth Interviews

The interviews with the 15 specialists produced four main themes:

First: Absence of Systematic Route Planning

Thirteen of the fifteen specialists said that Iraq has no routes designed on scientific principles. An official at the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities described existing routes as "merely transportation routes between religious cities", with no planned content or experience (Interview No. 3).

Second: Large Untapped Potential

All specialists agreed that Iraq's assets could support world-class routes. One academic suggested that linking Karbala and Najaf with Babylon, Ur and the marshes would create a route that combines "spirituality, history, and nature" (Interview No. 7).

Third: Structural Challenges

Specialists cited weak hotel and restaurant provision outside the main cities, a shortage of qualified guides, poor coordination between governorates and the lack of integrated online booking.

Fourth: Priority for Integrated Religious Routes

Twelve specialists recommended starting with integrated religious routes that add cultural and historical stops, since these suit the Iraqi context best and can be launched quickly on the back of the existing flow of pilgrims.

Section Five: Proposed Applied Framework

5.1. A Proposed Model for Designing Specialized Tourism Routes in Iraq

Based on the findings, the researcher proposes four model routes:

Trail One: "Light of Civilizations" (Integrated Religious–Historical Trail)

- **Proposed duration: 7–10 days**
- **Route:** Baghdad (Iraq Museum, Baghdad Museum, Al-Mutanabbi Street) → Babylon (archaeological site) → Karbala (Shrine of Imam Hussein, Shrine of Al-Abbas, Old City) → Najaf (Shrine of Imam Ali, Wadi Al-Salam Cemetery, Old City) → Kufa (Great Mosque) → Ur (Ziggurat) → Basra (Shatt Al-Arab Corniche, old markets).
- **Proposed activities:** Guided tours of archaeological sites, handicraft workshops, local food experiences, and cultural performances.
- **Expected expenditure:** USD 800 – 1200 per visitor.

Trail Two: "Marshes of Paradise" (Natural–Cultural Trail)

- **Proposed duration: 4–5 days**
- **Route:** Basra → Al-Chibayish Marshes → Al-Hawizeh Marshes → floating villages → Nasiriyah (Nasiriya Museum) → Ur.
- **Activities:** Boat trips, accommodation in floating guesthouses, birdwatching, and exploration of marshland culture.
- **Expected expenditure:** USD 400–600 per visitor.

Trail Three: "Mountains of Kurdistan" (Nature–Adventure Trail)

- **Proposed duration: 5–7 days**
- **Route:** Erbil (Citadel, Old Bazaar) → Shaqlawa → Mount Safeen → Duhok → Zakho → Amadiya → Dukan Lake.
- **Activities:** Mountain climbing, camping, visits to heritage villages, and tasting Kurdish cuisine.
- **Expected expenditure:** USD 500 – 800 per visitor.

Trail Four: "Integrated Arbaeen" (Seasonal Religious Trail)

- **Proposed duration: 5–7 days**
- **Route:** Najaf → Kufa → Karbala (including cultural and historical stops along the way) → visit to archaeological sites in Babylon on the return journey → Baghdad.
- **Activities:** Participation in pilgrimage rituals, cultural tours, art exhibitions, and traditional markets.
- **Expected expenditure:** USD 500 – 900 per visitor.

5.2. Implementation Requirements for the Proposed Routes

Table (7): Implementation Requirements for Specialized Tourism Routes in Iraq

Dimension	Proposed Responsible Entity	Requirements	Proposed Timeframe
Infrastructure	Ministry of Construction and Housing, Local Governments	Develop hotels and restaurants along the trails, improve roads, and establish tourist reception centers.	**2–3 years**
Human Resources	Ministry of Higher Education, National Tourism Authority	Train specialized tour guides and develop academic programs in tour guiding.	**1–2 years**
Marketing and Promotion	National Tourism Authority, Private Sector	Establish an integrated electronic platform, participate in international tourism fairs, and produce digital content.	**6 months–1 year**
Institutional Framework	Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities	Establish a specialized unit for designing and managing tourism trails and develop electronic booking systems.	**6 months–1 year**
Legislation	Council of Ministers, Ministry of Interior	Simplify visa procedures and issue regulations governing tourism trails.	**6 months–1 year**
Partnerships	National Tourism Authority, Civil Society Organizations	Activate public–private partnerships and engage local communities.	**Ongoing**

5.3. Expected Economic Impact

Table (8): Scenario-Based Estimate of the Economic Impact of Specialized Tourism Routes

Indicator	Projected (After Implementation)	Current Situation	Percentage Increase
Average Duration of stay (days)	4.9	2.5	**%96**
Average Daily Expenditure (USD)	95	61	**%55.7**
Average Total Expenditure per Visitor (USD)	465.5	152.5	**%205**
Annual Number of Visitors (millions)	12	8	**%50**
Total Annual Tourism Revenue (USD billions)	5.59	1.22	**%358**
Expected Direct Employment Opportunities (thousand jobs)	120	45	**%167**

Under the assumptions in Table (8), namely an average stay of 4.9 days, daily spending of USD 95 and 12 million visitors a year, annual tourism revenue would rise by about 358%. These figures are

projections built on the study's assumptions, not observed outcomes, and indicate potential rather than a forecast.

Section Six: Discussion of Results

The validity of the first sub-hypothesis confirms the conclusions of the international literature about the positive connection between route-based products and longer stays (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Meyer, 2004) and the results obtained by Al-Qahtani (2019) in Saudi Arabia. Thus, it seems that the effect holds in other geographies and cultures.

The confirmation of the second sub-hypothesis is in line with the perspective that routes lead to the distribution of spending on more services and locations (Meyer, 2004; Lourens, 2007). The contribution to the understanding of how routes function includes new data on the situation in a country where there are security and infrastructural problems.

The most crucial result is the obvious superiority of the integrated religious-cultural-historical route compared to one-theme routes, which confirms the recommendations of Al-Abbasi and Al-Hasani (2022) empirically. The visitors with a religious orientation, who constitute the majority of tourists coming to Iraq, seem ready to spend more time and money in places where religious experience is combined with cultural and historical visits rather than is separate from them.

The low rating of current route designing (2.38 out of 5) evidences that there is much room for improvement, as is mentioned by Al-Jubouri (2021) and Al-Obaidi and Al-Tamimi (2022). It means that even a little improvement would provide high gains compared to the expenses.

Section Seven: Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1. Conclusions

1. Iraq has rich and varied tourism assets (religious, historical, natural and cultural) that could support world-class routes, but they remain under-developed.
2. Current route design is weak (overall mean 2.38 out of 5), especially in marketing and promotion (1.98) and integration of tourism components (2.12).
3. Route design has a significant positive effect on duration of stay, explaining 46.6% of its variance.
4. Route design has a significant positive effect on tourist expenditure, explaining 50.7% of its variance.
5. The integrated religious-cultural-historical route is the most effective model in Iraq, ahead of purely religious, historical and natural routes.
6. Under the study's assumptions, specialized routes could raise annual tourism revenue by about 358% through longer stays, higher daily spending and more visitors.

7.2. Recommendations

1- **Scientific route design:** the National Tourism Authority should adopt an integrated method covering market research, theme and site selection, experience design, supporting services and marketing.

2- **Priority for integrated routes:** begin with integrated religious-cultural-historical routes, particularly the proposed "Light of Civilizations" route linking Baghdad, Babylon, Karbala, Najaf and Basra.

3- **Infrastructure:** invest in hotels, restaurants, visitor centres and rest areas along the proposed routes.

4- **Human resources:** train specialized guides able to combine religious, historical and cultural content.

5- **Digital transformation:** build a multilingual online platform with promotional content, booking services and route information.

6- **Visa procedures:** simplify tourist visas, especially for nationalities that visit Iraq regularly.

7- **Public-private partnerships:** encourage private investment in route services through tax incentives and administrative support.

8- **Local communities:** create mechanisms that let communities along the routes provide services and share in the returns.

9- **International marketing:** promote Iraqi routes in international campaigns and tourism fairs.

10- **Research and development:** set up a research unit in the National Tourism Authority to monitor route performance and improve routes using visitor data.

7.3. Suggestions for Future Research

1- The effect of specialized routes on visitor satisfaction and loyalty to Iraqi destinations.

2- Detailed economic feasibility studies for each proposed route.

3- The role of smart technologies, such as augmented reality and mobile applications, in the route experience.

4- A comparison of route design in Iraq with neighbouring countries such as Iran and Jordan.

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