



THE HERITAGE EXPERIENCE MODEL

A practical framework for understanding and enhancing the visitor experience at heritage sites

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What exactly do we mean by heritage experience? And what different experiences can a visit to a heritage site evoke? This guide explains how the Heritage Experience Model is structured and introduces its 14 dimensions. It provides heritage organisations with a practical framework for better understanding visitors' experiences, discussing them within their teams, and making informed choices when developing their visitor engagement activities.

What is the Heritage Experience Model?

A heritage visit is more than just reading information or looking at a site. Visitors can have a sense of wonder, unwind, gain new insights or feel a connection with a place and its story. The Heritage Experience Model brings these different experiences together into [14 dimensions of heritage experience](#). The model was developed by the Research Centre Public Impact as part of the [Interreg project 'Brabantse Kastelen'](#). It builds on scientific research into visitor experiences in tourism and culture.

By [visitor experience](#), we mean what someone experiences during a visit to a place, activity or event beyond their everyday routine. This experience is personal and can continue to resonate after the visit.

The dimensions were further refined through interviews with heritage experts and professionals, focus groups and *guided walks* with heritage visitors in Flanders and the Netherlands. The model was then applied and tested in several case studies. The result is a scientifically grounded, practice-oriented model that can be applied to a wide range of heritage sites.

What is a dimension?

A dimension describes one aspect of what visitors can experience during a heritage visit. Some dimensions relate to emotions, such as pleasure, relaxation or a sense of wonder. Others focus on what a visit can trigger in someone, such as curiosity, reflection and personal growth. There are also dimensions that relate to our relationship with other people, the place or the heritage itself.

The dimensions are grouped into [four domains](#): emotional (blue), cognitive (yellow), social (red) and physical (green). This broad classification is widely used in the literature and makes the model easy to understand at a glance.

- ▶ **Each dimension has measurable indicators.** You can find more information in the publication on measuring the heritage experience.
- ▶ **Several dimensions may be prominent at the same time.** A visitor may be impressed by a place, want to find out more about its history, and be keen to share that experience with others.
- ▶ **The model is not a scorecard.** Not every heritage site needs to focus on all dimensions. Which dimensions are important depends on the site, the audience and the organisation's objectives.

What can you do with the model?

The Heritage Experience Model is a practical tool for everyone working in the field of heritage and public outreach. It provides insight into the different ways in which people can experience a heritage site and offers a common language for discussing it.

There are various ways in which you can use the model. It can help to define the identity of your heritage site more clearly: what experiences in particular do you want your visitors to take away with them? It also supports the development and evaluation of public outreach, such as activities, exhibitions and events. The model is also a useful discussion tool for teams, volunteers and partners to discuss options and align expectations.

Getting started with the Heritage Experience Model

The Heritage Experience Model is more than just a theoretical framework. To support heritage professionals in their public outreach, we have developed a range of practical resources. Together, these instruments form a **practical toolbox** that allows heritage organisations to shape, discuss and evaluate the visitor experience in a targeted manner.

▶ Workshopformat

Discuss the visitor experience with your team, volunteers or partners. The format helps participants to articulate their experiences, set priorities and develop a common language around their experience.

▶ Visitor questionnaire

Measure how visitors experience your heritage site. The questionnaire is based on the 14 dimensions and contains practical guidelines for setting up a visitor survey.

▶ Inspiration guide

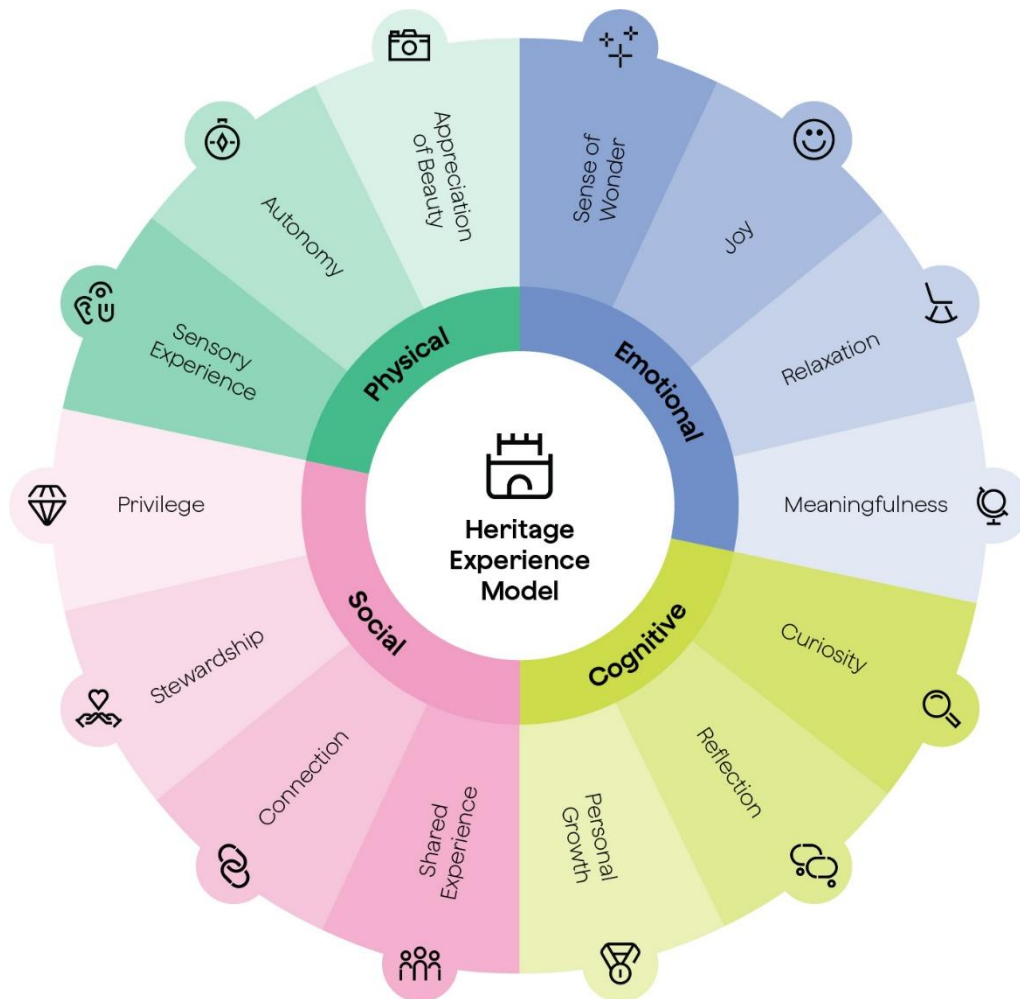
Discover inspiring examples and practices that contribute to the various dimensions of the heritage experience. The guide was developed and validated in collaboration with heritage experts from Flanders and the Netherlands.

▶ Case studies

Discover how the model has been applied to various heritage sites and what insights this provided for practice.

The 14 dimensions of the heritage experience

The Heritage Experience Model describes 14 dimensions of the visitor experience at a heritage site.



1. Sense of wonder

A sense of wonder is about being surprised, moved or intrigued by a place. It can arise from beauty, authenticity, scale, atmosphere or unexpected elements. Visitors experience this as a moment when the site exceeds their expectations and sometimes describe it as a 'wow' feeling.

2. Joy

Joy includes the positive emotions evoked by a heritage experience, such as enthusiasm, joy or happiness. Visitors enjoy what they are doing or experiencing immensely, and can become completely absorbed in the moment.

3. Relaxation

Relaxation occurs when visitor unwind, slow down, and get away from it all and briefly have no obligations. Visitors experience this when they can step away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and feel at ease. They also associate this with a carefree feeling, safety and peace of mind.

4. Meaningfulness

Meaning is about experiencing a deeper sense of significance or connection with something bigger than yourself, such as a place, the past, nature or spirituality. Visitors may experience this as moments of silence, awe, or contemplation. It can also arise when someone feels they are contributing to preserve a site or keep it running.

5. Curiosity

Curiosity is about taking an interest and wanting to find out more about a heritage site. Visitors want to know the story behind the place, how it came to be, or what its history is. For families, curiosity may also stem from a desire of 'wanting to pass something on' to their children.

6. Reflection

Reflection includes contemplation about yourself, your life, the world or the meaning of what you experience. Visitors experience this as moments of self-reflection. A site prompts them to think, brings back memories or sparks a deeper conversation with others.

7. Personal growth

Personal growth is about developing and enriching yourself through your experiences. Visitors gain new insights, learn something new or come to see themselves, the past or the world around them in a different light.

8. Shared experience

Shared experience is about sharing a heritage experience with others. Visitors enjoy the experience together, explore together, or feel a sense of conviviality, connection, and togetherness. They describe experiencing a 'we' feeling.

9. Connection

Connection is about feeling a personal bond with a site, with nature, with the past or with the story of a heritage site. This connection arises from a sense of familiarity, memories, or a feeling of closeness to the history of a site.

10. Stewardship

Care is about respect, responsibility and looking after nature, our heritage and others. Visitors feel that a site is special or fragile and deserves to be cared for. This may also include a sense of pride or appreciation for the place.

11. Privilege

Privilege is the realisation that you can experience something exceptional or rare. Visitors experience this as special or exclusive, and feel grateful to have access to a unique place, a remarkable story or an experience that is not always available to everyone.

12. Sensory experience

Sensory experience is experiencing a place through your senses and your body. This can be by looking, listening, feeling, smelling or tasting, but also through movement, physical effort, temperature, the ground or fresh air.

13. Autonomy

Autonomy is about freedom and choice during a visit. Visitors experience this when they can choose their own route, set their own pace or decide how deeply they want to go into something. The site gives them the space to shape the experience in their own way.

14. Appreciation of beauty

Appreciation of beauty is about being moved by the beauty, design and atmosphere of a place. This may relate to nature, buildings, art, materials, details, harmony or atmosphere. Visitors perceive something as beautiful, harmonious or attractive.

Want to find out more?

Go to the [webpage for the Interreg project Brabantse Kastelen](#) or contact the Public Impact Research Centre: publiekeimpact@kdg.be

Colophon

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