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PIRATE FESTIVALS AROUND THE WORLD AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The shift of contemporary tourism toward experiential, cultural, and thematic experiences creates new opportunities for destinations seeking differentiation, an extension of the tourism season, and stronger local entrepreneurship. In this context, pirate festivals constitute a distinctive form of event tourism because they combine historical or mythological narratives, harbour landscapes, re-enactments, parades, music, and participatory entertainment. This article examines three international pirate festivals—Pirates Week in the Cayman Islands, the Gasparilla Pirate Festival in Tampa, and the Brixham Pirate Festival in Devon—and two permanent themed attractions, the St. Augustine Pirate & Treasure Museum and the Pirates of Nassau Museum. The methodology is based on a qualitative comparative analysis of secondary sources and is supplemented by available quantitative economic data. The study shows that pirate-themed events can contribute to visitor generation, expenditure on accommodation, food services and attractions, destination promotion, and cultural entrepreneurship. For Gasparilla, an academic assessment of the 2003 event estimated a direct economic impact of USD 21.83 million, while current organisers report a local economic impact exceeding USD 40 million. For Pirates Week, an earlier economic study cited by the Cayman Compass estimated approximately USD 700,000 in annual economic returns and a benefit-to-cost ratio of 1.6:1. The findings suggest that pirate theming can function as a tool for local development, provided that it is linked to local identity, community participation, historical responsibility, and sustainable management.

Keywords: Pirate Festivals; Cultural Tourism; Event Tourism; Local Development; Cultural Entrepreneurship; Place Branding; Sustainability

1 INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism has evolved into a field in which history, local identity, and the creative economy intersect with entrepreneurship. Destinations no longer compete solely on the basis of natural resources or basic infrastructure, but also on their capacity to create recognisable experiences. Cultural entrepreneurship can transform monuments, arts, gastronomy, literary routes, and local narratives into tourism products, provided that this process respects the identity of place and supports long-term development (Maniou et al., 2025a; Maniou et al., 2025b; Maniou et al., 2025c).

Festivals are a characteristic mechanism of this process. They concentrate activities in a specific place and period, create a reason to visit, and mobilise cultural organisations, businesses, residents, and visitors. The study by Pagkalos et al. (2025), although focused on literary festivals, more broadly highlights the potential of festival events to connect with cultural development and social experience. Similarly, literary parks have been examined as entrepreneurial models of cultural tourism, demonstrating that a narrative can acquire spatial, organisational, and economic dimensions (Maniou et al., 2025d).

Pirate theming is of particular interest because it has strong international recognisability. It is associated with maritime history, ports, travel, conflict, and legends, while contemporary popular culture has endowed it with powerful elements of adventure and spectacle. It can therefore be transformed into a festival or museum product in which visitors do not merely observe but participate through costumes, parades, re-enactments, music, and interactive exhibits.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the contribution of pirate festivals to local development and to compare different international models. The main research questions are: (a) through which mechanisms does a pirate festival generate economic and tourism value; (b) what is the role of cultural identity and the local community; and (c) how can periodic events be complemented by permanent themed attractions?

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP, FESTIVALS AND PLACE

Cultural entrepreneurship can be understood as the organised use of cultural resources to create social, cultural, and economic value. Maniou et al. (2025e) examine the painting heritage of Athens through the relationship between cultural entrepreneurship and cultural tourism, while other studies in the same research stream consider monuments in Kalymnos and Patmos as potential resources for sustainable cultural entrepreneurship (Maniou et al., 2025a; Maniou et al., 2025b). The common logic is that a cultural resource acquires a developmental function when it is integrated into a network of experiences, services, and local partnerships.

For island and coastal destinations, differentiation is particularly important. The study on Lesvos emphasises long-term development based on the island's competitive characteristics (Maniou et al., 2025f). Pirate theming can function in a similar way when it is connected to ports, maritime history, fortifications, or local narratives rather than introduced as a detached thematic setting.

Gastronomy is also an important mechanism for spreading festival-related expenditure. Research on South Aegean islands identifies gastronomy as a driver of cultural entrepreneurship (Maniou et al., 2025c). Within a festival, links with local foods, restaurants, and producers can channel a larger share of visitor spending toward a wider range of local businesses.

The economic value of an event is not limited to ticket revenue. It includes accommodation, food and beverage, transport, retail purchases, additional visits to attractions, and the potential extension of length of stay. At the same time, there is intangible value: publicity, recognition, community pride, and enhancement of the destination image. The assessment of pirate festivals therefore requires a combination of economic and cultural indicators.

3 METHODOLOGY

The research follows a qualitative multiple-case-study approach. Three festivals—Cayman Islands Pirates Week, the Gasparilla Pirate Festival, and the Brixham Pirate Festival—were selected because they represent different scales, geographical environments, and organisational models. Two permanent themed attractions, the St. Augustine Pirate & Treasure Museum and the Pirates of Nassau Museum, were added in order to examine the complementarity between periodic events and permanent cultural provision.

The main sources for the cases are official websites of organisers and public bodies, tourism sources, and research literature. For the economic dimension, the study uses the peer-reviewed research of Bonn and Dai (2004) on Gasparilla, current information from the Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla (2026), and the Cayman Compass (2006) report on an economic study conducted by the University of the West Indies for Pirates Week.

The comparison is organised around four dimensions: the form and content of the experience, its relationship with local identity, potential mechanisms of economic impact, and the capacity to extend tourism activity over time. A major limitation is the absence of homogeneous economic studies for all cases. Consequently, the available monetary figures are presented together with their year and type of measurement and are not used to produce a simplistic ranking of the festivals.

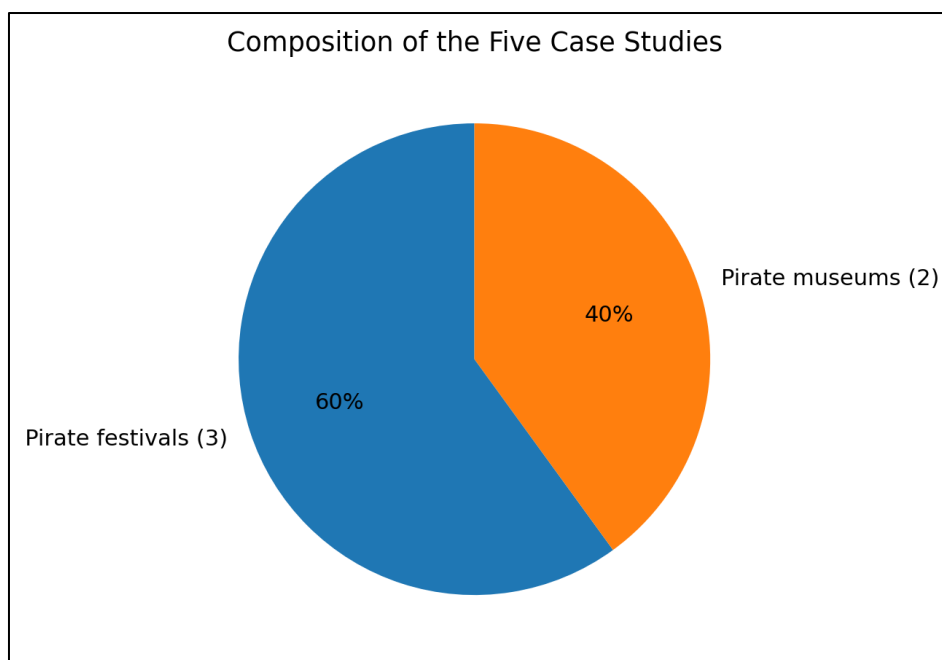


Figure 1: Composition of the Five Case Studies

Commentary: The selected sample contains three pirate festivals (60%) and two permanent pirate museums (40%). The figure describes the research design; it is not an estimate of the global distribution of pirate-tourism attractions.

4 INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDIES

4.1 Cayman Islands Pirates Week Festival

Pirates Week began in 1977 and was associated with efforts to generate tourism interest during a period of lower demand. The official history of the festival presents it as an event that developed around pirate re-enactments and cultural activities, eventually becoming a recognisable event in the Cayman Islands (Cayman Islands Government, 2025).

The developmental importance of the case lies primarily in the relationship between events and seasonality. A festival scheduled outside the main peak season can create an additional reason to travel and support services that would otherwise face lower demand. Moreover, when the programme incorporates local music, gastronomy, and resident participation, the pirate narrative functions as a framework through which broader elements of the destination can be promoted.

For the economic dimension, an older assessment is reported by the Cayman Compass (2006). According to the article, a University of the West Indies study estimated approximately USD 700,000 in annual economic returns and a benefit-to-cost ratio of 1.6:1. Because the original study is not used directly here, this finding should be treated as a secondary report rather than as a current economic assessment.

4.2 Gasparilla Pirate Festival – Tampa

Gasparilla is one of the most established pirate-themed events in the United States. Its history is associated with Tampa and with the legend of José Gaspar, while the event has evolved into a defining tradition of the city (EBSCO Research Starters, 2024; Tampa Bay Business & Wealth, 2026). The symbolic invasion and major parade transform the urban and waterfront environment into a stage for a themed experience.

The case is particularly important for place branding. The repetition of the event over many decades has created a strong association between Gasparilla and the image of Tampa. The festival therefore functions not merely as a temporary spectacle but as a recognisable cultural marker of the city.

Gasparilla is also the best-documented case in terms of economic impact. Bonn and Dai (2004), examining the 2003 event, estimated a direct inflow of approximately USD 21.83 million into the Tampa/Hillsborough County economy. Visitors staying in hotels or motels had an average daily expenditure of approximately USD 293 and a total contribution of approximately USD 9.79 million. Day visitors spent an average of USD 90.55 and generated approximately USD 2.77

million, while camping visitors contributed approximately USD 1.47 million. Nearly 26% of total expenditure was associated with tickets, special events, and visits to attractions undertaken because of participation in Gasparilla (Bonn and Dai, 2004).

Today, the Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla (2026) reports approximately 500,000 participants and a local economic impact exceeding USD 40 million. This figure is not methodologically identical to the estimate of Bonn and Dai and should therefore not be treated as a simple time series. It nevertheless illustrates the current scale of the event and its capacity to mobilise a large visitor market.

4.3 Brixham Pirate Festival – Devon

The Brixham Pirate Festival takes place in Brixham's historic harbour and makes use of an environment that is naturally compatible with maritime theming. The official website presents a programme featuring pirate costumes, music, re-enactments, and activities, while Tor Bay Harbour includes the festival in the wider tourism information for the area (Brixham Pirate Festival, 2026; Tor Bay Harbour, 2026).

In contrast to the large urban scale of Gasparilla, Brixham places greater emphasis on the community dimension. The historic harbour does not simply operate as scenery but as a central component of the experience. This spatial authenticity strengthens the relationship between the event and the destination, while the participation of local organisations and businesses can increase the local retention of tourism expenditure.

The sources used in this study do not provide a comparable monetary economic-impact assessment. Brixham is therefore evaluated mainly as a qualitative example of community-oriented festival development rather than through unsupported numerical estimates.

4.4 St. Augustine Pirate & Treasure Museum

The St. Augustine Pirate & Treasure Museum is a permanent themed attraction and differs from the three previous cases in terms of its temporal operation. According to Visit St. Augustine (2025), the museum organises pirate history through collections and interactive experiences. Its permanent infrastructure allows the destination to offer pirate-related content beyond the dates of a festival.

From a development perspective, this model can create a more stable flow of visits and operate as a complement to other historical attractions. The logic has similarities with cultural entrepreneurship models based on permanent places of experience, such as literary parks (Maniou et al., 2025d).

4.5 Pirates of Nassau Museum

The Pirates of Nassau Museum uses Nassau's historical association with piracy and transforms the related narrative into an organised tourism experience. Bahamas Air Tours (2024) presents it as an attraction where visitors can learn about the history of Nassau's pirates through a themed presentation.

The case is significant because it is located within a strongly tourism-oriented island destination. Such a museum can function as a complementary activity for visitors already in the destination, expanding opportunities for cultural consumption and diversifying the tourism product beyond beaches and cruise tourism.

5 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND ECONOMIC RESULTS

The five cases can be divided into two basic models. The first is the event-based model, represented by the Cayman Islands, Gasparilla, and Brixham. The second is the permanent-attraction model, represented by St. Augustine and Nassau. In the sample used in this study, therefore, 60% of the cases are festivals and 40% are permanent museum attractions. This ratio is not a statistical finding about the global distribution of pirate-tourism attractions; it simply describes the composition of the selected case studies.

The available economic evidence indicates that the scale of impact can be substantial. According to Bonn and Dai (2004), the 2003 Gasparilla event generated a direct economic inflow of USD 21.83 million. The current organiser estimate exceeds USD 40 million in local economic impact (Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla, 2026). For Pirates Week, the older reported figure is approximately USD 0.7 million in annual economic returns (Cayman Compass, 2006). These amounts are not directly comparable: they refer to different years, different economies, and different definitions of impact.

The key conclusion is not that the largest event is automatically the most successful. Effectiveness depends on how much expenditure remains within the local economy, how broad the network of beneficiary businesses is, whether

demand is generated during periods of lower activity, and whether the event strengthens local identity without creating excessive social or environmental pressures.

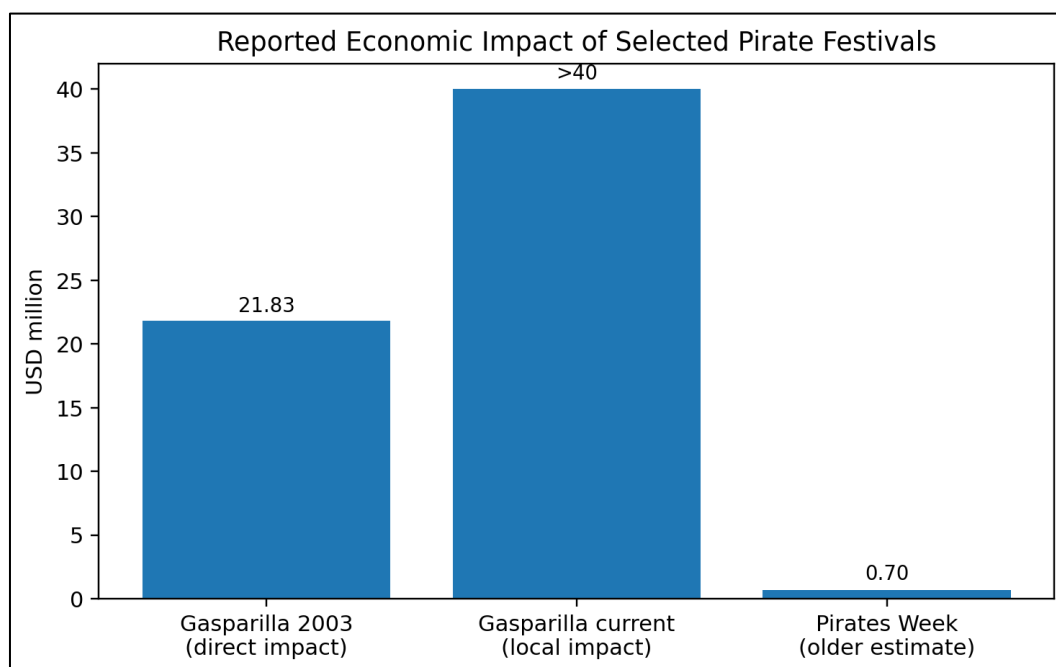


Figure 2: Reported Economic Impact of Selected Pirate Festivals

Commentary: Gasparilla shows the largest documented monetary scale in the available evidence. The 2003 figure (USD 21.83m) is a peer-reviewed estimate of direct impact, the >USD 40m figure is a current organiser-reported local impact estimate, and the Pirates Week figure (USD 0.70m) is an older estimate reported secondarily. These values are not methodologically or temporally equivalent and should not be treated as a direct ranking.

6 MECHANISMS OF CONTRIBUTION TO LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

The first mechanism is the creation of additional tourism demand. A recognisable event can become the main reason for a visit and transform a low-demand date into a period of increased activity. The historical objective of Pirates Week is characteristic of this function (Cayman Islands Government, 2025).

The second mechanism is the diffusion of expenditure. The Gasparilla study shows that visitors spend not only at the event itself but also on accommodation, attractions, and other services (Bonn and Dai, 2004). Visitors who stay overnight have particularly high daily expenditure, highlighting the importance of converting day visitors into overnight visitors.

The third mechanism is cultural entrepreneurship. Local products, gastronomy, creative professions, souvenirs, guided tours, and cultural services can be integrated into the experience. The literature on cultural entrepreneurship in island regions indicates that the use of local characteristics can be linked to long-term development and diversification (Maniou et al., 2025c; Maniou et al., 2025f).

The fourth mechanism is place branding. Gasparilla demonstrates that a festival can become part of a city's identity (Tampa Bay Business & Wealth, 2026). The recurring imagery of ships, parades, and pirate symbols generates communication material that is reproduced by visitors, the media, and digital networks.

The fifth mechanism is social participation. Particularly in smaller events, the involvement of residents, volunteers, and local associations can transform the event into a shared cultural project. Social legitimacy is critical: a festival that operates only for external visitors risks becoming disconnected from the community that hosts it.

The constructive role of digital technologies in entrepreneurship and local development education must be emphasized. To strengthen this field, we must encourage digital integration across all educational areas. We should adopt paradigms from several education domains, such as mobile devices [18], diverse ICTs [19-22], and AI & STEM Robotics [23-27] to enhance core educational processes like evaluation, intervention, and instruction. Furthermore, connecting these ICT tools with models of metacognition, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence development [28-31] accelerates and

optimizes educational and economic development practices. This holistic approach yields significant results, particularly for cultural entrepreneurship, where psychological resilience and empathy are essential for success.

7 CHALLENGES, AUTHENTICITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Pirate theming contains an inherent contradiction. The popular image of the pirate is playful and romanticised, whereas the historical phenomenon is associated with violence, plunder, and illegal activity. Tourism development therefore requires a balance between entertainment and historical responsibility. Museums can play an important role in achieving this balance by adding interpretation and educational content to the festival image.

A second challenge concerns the sustainability of large visitor flows. Increased attendance can place pressure on transport, public spaces, waste management, and residents. Success should therefore not be measured only by participant numbers. Indicators such as expenditure per visitor, overnight stays, the proportion of local suppliers, resident satisfaction, and environmental management are also needed.

A third challenge is economic leakage. If a large share of procurement and revenue flows outside the destination, the local developmental impact is reduced. Cooperation with small businesses, producers, and cultural organisations can increase local value added. This approach is consistent with the literature on sustainable cultural entrepreneurship, which emphasises the competitive characteristics and endogenous resources of place (Maniou et al., 2025a; Maniou et al., 2025f).

8 DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis shows that there is no single successful model of pirate tourism. Gasparilla is an example of a large urban event with strong economic and communication scale. Pirates Week demonstrates how an event can be used to stimulate demand in an island destination. Brixham emphasises the relationship between harbour, community, and themed experience. St. Augustine and Nassau show how the same narrative can acquire a permanent tourism presence.

Table 1: Summary Comparison of the Cases

Case	Format	Main development function	Available economic evidence
Cayman Islands Pirates Week	Festival	Seasonality and island promotion	≈ USD 0.70m (older reported estimate)
Gasparilla, Tampa	Festival	Place branding and large-scale visitation	USD 21.83m direct impact (2003); >USD 40m current organiser estimate
Brixham Pirate Festival	Festival	Community and harbour identity	No comparable assessment in the sources used
St. Augustine	Museum	Permanent cultural provision	No economic assessment used
Pirates of Nassau	Museum	Complementary island experience	No economic assessment used

The most promising strategy for a destination appears to be the connection of the two models. An annual festival can function as a flagship promotional event, while a museum, route, or network of historic sites can maintain interest throughout the year. In this way, the intense but short-lived publicity of an event can be converted into a more enduring cultural product.

The economic data from Gasparilla confirm that festival-related consumption can be substantial. At the same time, the absence of equivalent studies for Brixham, Nassau, and St. Augustine points to a research gap. Future studies should apply common methodologies to estimate direct, indirect, and induced effects, distinguish local residents from genuine tourists, and avoid double counting.

Cultural entrepreneurship provides an appropriate broader framework: the objective is not simply the commercialisation of a myth, but the creation of a value network connecting culture, businesses, and community. When the theme is adapted to the specific characteristics of place, it can strengthen differentiation and recognition. When it is detached from place, however, it risks becoming an easily replicated spectacle without long-term developmental value.

9 CONCLUSIONS

Pirate festivals constitute a distinctive but meaningful form of cultural and thematic tourism. The cases examined show that they can generate visitation, increase spending on local services, diversify the tourism product, and contribute to destination image. Economic evidence is strongest in the case of Gasparilla, where the peer-reviewed 2003 study recorded a direct impact of USD 21.83 million and current organisers report a local impact exceeding USD 40 million (Bonn and Dai, 2004; Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla, 2026).

The Cayman Islands case suggests that a themed festival can be used as a tool for addressing seasonality and that, even on a smaller scale, it may display a positive benefit-to-cost relationship, according to the earlier study reported by the Cayman Compass (2006). Brixham highlights the importance of spatial and community embeddedness, while the St. Augustine and Nassau museums demonstrate the possibility of extending the pirate experience beyond the dates of an event.

Four main directions emerge for local policy: linking the theme to the actual history and characteristics of the destination; strengthening the participation of local businesses and producers; combining festivals with permanent cultural infrastructure; and systematically measuring economic, social, and environmental outcomes. Under these conditions, a pirate festival can function not as an isolated spectacle but as an instrument of sustainable cultural entrepreneurship and local development.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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