

Improving the Competitiveness of Tourism in Moc Chau District, Son La Province, Vietnam

Trinh Thi Thu Trang, Nguyen Thi Thu Ha, and Nguyen Thi Lan Anh

ABSTRACT

Moc Chau district of Son La province which has a rich natural landscape, cool climate and unique customs and culture is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Northwest. The study has collected secondary data and used statistical, synthetic and comparative methods to analysis the current situation of tourism development in Moc Chau district. The article also assesses the competitiveness of Moc Chau through the DDCI index and uses the SWOT model to clarify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges in improving the district's tourism competitiveness of Moc Chau, Son La province. Through the analysis of the current situation, the author has proposed the following recommendations: building diversified tours with attractive prices; investing in tourism infrastructure; developing cultural tourism; raising the awareness of the role of people and effectively communicating the local brand so that Moc Chau with its potential can become an attractive tourist destination.

Keywords: Competitiveness, Moc Chau, Son La, Tourism, Vietnam.

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T. T. Trang *

Faculty of Economics, Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), Vietnam

(e-mail: trinthithutrang@tueba.edu.vn)

N. T. T. Ha

Faculty of Economics, Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), Vietnam

(e-mail: ntthuha@tueba.edu.vn)

N. T. L. Anh

Faculty of Economics, Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), Vietnam

(e-mail: ntlanh@tueba.edu.vn)

**Corresponding Author*

I. INTRODUCTION

As the gateway of Son La province, Moc Chau plateau has diverse terrain, temperate climate, beautiful landscape, is an ideal resort destination for tourists. Moc Chau is considered to be the place where tourism resources are concentrated the most in Son La in particular and the Northwest mountainous region in general. Tourism here is not only resort tourism, entertainment, sightseeing but also exploring tourism, exploiting culture and festivals of ethnic groups. Taking advantage of this, Moc Chau district has promoted tourism development, thereby contributing to protecting the landscape and environment, diversifying types of services, and at the same time increasing income for ethnic minorities in the region. Over the years, Moc Chau has gradually become an attractive destination for domestic and foreign tourists. The structure of tourists is gradually shifting in a positive direction, from mainly tourism in the form of "trip" to long-term tourism.

However, Moc Chau tourism has not fully exploited the advantages of regional tourism, the management of tourism resources is still weak, reflected in the number of tourists in 2021 was 437 thousand visitors and revenue from tourism was 484 billion, lower than some other localities such as Sapa with 1.3 million visitors, revenue from tourism more than 4,200 billion; Ha Giang with 900 thousand visitors and revenue from tourism reached 1,620 billion. This is because most of the tours in Moc Chau have not met the needs of the tourists yet. The scenic spots have hardly been invested in embellishment, the investment in tourism services was also moderate. This article focuses on analyzing the overview of the tourism status of Moc Chau district, the competitiveness of district's tourism, analyzing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges for tourism of Moc Chau, thereby proposing solutions to improve the local competitiveness in tourism development in the coming time.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism competitiveness is an issue that has received special attention in recent decades as the global tourism industry has grown rapidly.

Anh (2020) introduced Michael Porter's framework for analyzing competitiveness at the local level with elements of cultural, educational, health and social infrastructure; technical infrastructure (transport, electricity, water, telecommunications) and fiscal, investment, credit and structural policies. To assess the competitive advantages of the locality, Porter (2008) proposed a diamond model that includes four factors: (i) the conditions of production factors; (ii) demand conditions; (iii) related and supporting industries; (iv) strategic and competitive context of the enterprise.

From Porter's diamond model of factors determining destination's competitive advantages, later researchers were more interested in the sustainable competitiveness of tourism, creating a mark impression is the model of Ritchie and Crouch (2003) when studying the sustainable competitiveness of tourism from two dimensions: the first dimension was formed from available resources and the exploitation of these resources; the second dimension, determining tourism competitiveness includes 5 factors, of which 3 main factors were core resources and attractions; supporting factors and resources; destination management and the two factors that make up the sustainability of a destination were destination policy, planning, development and limiting and expansion factors. Huong and Hoan (2017) applied the tourism destination competitiveness model of Ritchie and Crouch (2003) to research Hue tourist destination and determine the order of importance of the five factors as follows: Supporting factors, Destination Management, Core Resources, Habitat and Tourism infrastructure, and Tourism Connectivity. In which, the supporting factor was one of the two factors that create the sustainable competitiveness of a destination which plays the most important role in the sustainable competitiveness of Hue tourism. However, the research only surveyed tourists, so some variables were not used, the study also did not clarify the impact of the micro and macro environment on Hue's destination competitiveness. Therefore, the research results have certain limitations.

Lang (2014) based on the criteria for assessing the competitiveness of tourist destinations of Dwyer & Kim (2003), combined with 4 methods to determine the competitiveness of tourist destinations in Da Lat. Research results show that Da Lat has not made a strong impression on tourists, except for sightseeing services, all the remaining services such as transportation, accommodation, dining, shopping, and entertainment were lower than the expectations of visitors. Although the method to determining the competitiveness of the tourist destination - Da Lat in the study is reasonable both in theory and in practice, it can only calculate the overall competitiveness. Some sub-criteria but very meaningful for enterprises in the long-term such as average growth rate, growth rate need further and more detailed calculations.

For studies on Moc Chau tourism, such as: Mui (2020) gave an overview of natural and human conditions for tourism development in Son La province and assessed development possibility of tourist attractions in the study area. However, the author has not evaluated the effectiveness of the development of tourism types in Son La in general and in Moc Chau in particular. Yen (2022) also introduced the potential to become a national tourist area on the tourism corridor "Through the Northwest". The article has assessed the current situation and proposed solutions to strengthen the state management of tourism, contributing to solving difficulties of the tourism industry in Moc Chau district after the Covid-19 pandemic and promoting potential of a national tourist area.

A review of related studies shows that studies used a number of criteria to assess local competitiveness combined with the diamond model of Porter (1990) or the model of Ritchie and Crouch (2003) to analyze and evaluate the competitiveness of tourist destinations. Due to the multidimensional and complex of destination competitiveness, most studies only stop at one or some aspects of competitiveness assessment. Therefore, the study applying the SWOT model to analyze the competitiveness has methodological significance and the research results will be a useful reference for related researchers.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Data Collection Method

The article uses the method of collecting secondary data from reports and statistics of the People's Committee of Moc Chau district; research and articles with relevant contents have been carried out and published by domestic and international organizations and individuals.

B. Data Analysis Method

The article uses descriptive statistical methods, comparative methods and SWOT model to analyze and evaluate tourism competitiveness of Moc Chau district, Son La province.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

A. Tourism Overview of Moc Chau District

1) Tourism resources

Moc Chau Plateau has a large area with cool climate, it is conveniently located 180 km from Hanoi, 120 km from Son La, close enough for tourists to come, far enough for tourists to stay; the ecosystem is diverse, especially the grasslands with beautiful landscapes (meadows, flower gardens); there are many scenic spots such as Ngu Dong, On village, Dai Yem waterfall, Pha Luong peak, Ecological lake area of Ang village pine forest, tea hill, peach garden, plum garden, dairy farms.

The diverse customs and traditions with festivals of the Mong people, the culture of the Muong and the habit of the Thai are very attractive to tourists, especially the Ethnic Culture Festival is held from August 30 to February 2 every year, the festival of Het Cha and Cau Mua in March, fruit picking festival in May every year.

There are historical and cultural relics: Vat Hong Pagoda; Epitaph of Tay Tien regiment; the historical site where Uncle Ho talked to the people of Moc Chau; the historical and cultural site where Uncle Ho talked with officials and soldiers of Moc Chau Agricultural School; the historical site Inscription of Regiment 83rd volunteer army Vietnam - Laos; the historical site of hate stele Zone 64; historical site of hate stele Km 70; the historical site of Moc Ly Fort.

Moc Chau has outstanding advantages in terms of potential and resources for tourism development compared to neighboring localities in the area:

- Ideal climate conditions for resort tourism.
- The diversity and uniqueness in the culture of ethnic minorities.
- Abundant products from nature, capable of developing into tourism products.

a) Famous tourist attractions

- Bat Cave: Located in the center of Nong Truong Moc Chau town, with an area of 6,915m².
- Five caves of Ban On: Located in Ban On sub-area, Nong Truong Moc Chau town.
- Pine forest in Ang village: Located in Dong Sang commune, Moc Chau district.
- Dai Yem Waterfall: Located in Muong Sang commune, Moc Chau district.
- Pha Luong Peak: Located in Chieng Son Commune, Moc Chau District.
- Da River: From Moc Chau to Van Yen river port.
- Xuan Nha Nature Reserve: Located in Chieng Xuan, Tan Xuan, Xuan Nha communes, Van Ho district and Chieng Son commune, Moc Chau district, with an area of 18,267.5 ha.

2) The situation of tourism development in Moc Chau district

a) Scale and structure of tourists and revenue from tourism

In 3 years (2019-2021), the number of tourists to Moc Chau decreased sharply due to the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic and the policy of closing and stopping international commercial flights in most periods of the year.

TABLE I: NUMBER OF TOURISTS AND REVENUE FROM TOURISM IN THE PERIOD 2019-2021

Year	2019	2020	2021	2020/2019 (%)	2021/2020 (%)
Revenue from tourism (billion VND)	1125	750,1	484,8	-33,3	-35,4
Number of tourists (thousands)	1250	691	437	-44,7	-36,8
International	67	5,8	4,2	-91,3	-27,6
Domestic	1183	685	433	-42,1	-36,8

Source: Moc Chau District People's Committee, 2022

According to statistics of the People's Committee of Moc Chau district, in 2019 the number of tourists coming to Moc Chau reached 1,250 thousand arrivals, of which international visitors reached 67 thousand arrivals and domestic visitors reached 1,183 thousand arrivals. In 2020, the number of tourists coming to Moc Chau decreased by 44.7%, equivalent to only 691 thousand arrivals, of which international visitors decreased by 91.3%, reaching 5.8 thousand arrivals, domestic visitors reaching 586 thousand arrivals (equivalent to a decrease of 42.1%). By 2021, the total number of tourists only reached 437 thousand arrivals, decreased 36.8% compared to 2020, of which, international visitors only reached 4.2 thousand arrivals, domestic tourists reached 433 thousand arrivals. Correspondingly, revenue from tourism in Moc Chau district also dropped sharply during this period. In 2019, revenue from tourism reached VND 1,125 billion, but by 2021, it has decreased to VND 484.8 billion (respectively the rate of decrease of 33.3% and 35.4% in the two years 2020 and 2021).

b) Tourist accommodation establishments in the district

By 2021, Moc Chau district has 271 accommodations with 6,246 beds (including 92 homestays with 2,422 beds, equivalent to 1,211 rooms; the remaining 179 hotels and motels with 3,824 beds, equivalent to 1,912 rooms).

With the current accommodation establishments, Moc Chau district has 6,246 beds with an average annual occupancy capacity of 50%/year (the minimum level recommended by the World Tourism Organization). Moc Chau district is capable of meeting 1,200-1,300,000 visitors per year, far exceeding the criteria specified in Decree 168/2017/ND-CP (minimum 300,000 visitors per year).

TABLE II: ACCOMMODATION IN MOC CHAU DISTRICT IN 2021

No	Content	Quantity	Percent (%)
1	Accommodation	271	100,0
1.1	Homestays	92	33,9
1.2	Hotels, motels	179	66,1
2	Beds	6.246	100,0
2.1	At Homestays	2.422	38,8
2.2	At hotels, motels	3.824	61,2

Source: Son La Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2022

Regarding the service quality of tourist accommodation establishments, out of the total of 271 accommodation establishments in Moc Chau district, there are only 12 establishments are rated (1 4-star resort, 1 4-star hotel, 2 3-star hotels, 3 2-star hotels, 5 1-star hotels).

Currently, similar projects have begun to form such as: Thao Nguyen 2 9-storey hotel area; Moc Chau Island 9-storey resort and hotel, Moc Chau - Hanoi hotel.

c) Tourism business and service establishments

Catering facilities: Moc Chau currently has 330 catering establishments, which can serve the number of 500 thousand guests per year as regulated. However, most of them are small establishments with low service quality; there is no facility with large scale, high quality, qualified for large events (thousands of guests).

Shopping facilities: currently there are 10 shopping establishments in Moc Chau, but most of them are small in scale, the products are not rich and diverse; there is only 1 shopping service area is recognized as meeting tourists service standards (Moc Chau foods).

At present Moc Chau district has amusement, entertainment and sightseeing facilities such as: Ang village pine forest tourist area, Happyland, Dai Yem Waterfall. and some points are being built such as Moc Chau Island. Among them, there are 02 tourist sites and attractions that have been recognized as provincial tourist areas: high-class resort and entertainment area with pine forest in Ang village, Dai Yem waterfall tourist and entertainment area.

In May 2022, Moc Chau District inaugurated the Bach Long glass bridge with a length of 632 m, which is a work in the "Moc Chau Island tourist area". This is an additional item for the entertainment system in Moc Chau tourist area.

The current amusement parks and entertainment areas are all small in scale, without a high-quality, general entertainment area for tourists.

d) Investment in tourism development at Moc Chau district

In recent years, Moc Chau district has synchronously implemented many solutions, focusing on improving business environment, enhancing competitiveness, creating the most favorable conditions for investors to survey, establish and implement project in the area. By the end of 2021, the district has 17 projects in the field of tourism and services with a total investment of VND 3,761 billion, and 5 investment projects in Moc Chau National Park with a total investment of VND 1,330 billion.

In Moc Chau district, more than 70 companies and enterprises have come to survey and evaluate investment opportunities; in which there are many large enterprises and corporations such as: Vingroup, Sungroup, T&T, Becamex Binh Duong, FLC Thanh Hoa. Particularly in 2021, Moc Chau district worked with 25 investors to survey and set up projects in the district; giving opinions on the policy of receiving and adjusting investment certificates for 15 projects; 2 projects were granted investment certificates, approved investment policies, total investment registration is over 95 billion VND. The district has coordinated with relevant departments and branches to complete documents and procedures for submission to competent authorities for consideration and approval the investment policy of the project "Hoa Binh - Moc Chau Expressway" project, which has been approved by the Prime Minister; coordinate with T&T Group to survey and prepare a pre-feasibility report for the project "Moc Chau Inner City Tourism Boulevard" in the form of a public-private partnership and submit it to the competent authorities for approval; continue to coordinate and create favorable conditions for investors to deploy and implement projects in the district.

e) *Advertise and promote tourism in Moc Chau district*

In the period of 2019 - 2021, Moc Chau district has actively and proactively carried out tourism promotion activities in various forms. Specifically:

Propaganda on electronic information channels. Moc Chau district propagates and promotes Moc Chau tourism on the mass media, especially on Radio – Television and the district's web portals.

In addition to promoting tourism publications, the Management Board of Moc Chau National Tourist Area introduced the virtual travel experience of Moc Chau 360. In Moc Chau 360 tour, viewers can experience traveling and sightseeing, interact almost realistically with the destinations of Moc Chau that have been digitized in 3D environment.

Events are organized every year. Organize and coordinate to successfully organize cultural - social activities, traditional festivals to attract tourists to Moc Chau.

Publications promoting tourism. Promote the publication "Moc Chau - Super Garden" to all universities, colleges, intermediate schools, high schools, junior high schools, elementary schools in Hanoi city.

Working with central and local media and newspapers. Every year, units in the district coordinate with the central and provincial press to film and record videos to propagate the cultural beauty, scenic spots, and specialty dishes of Moc Chau and broadcast on channels VTV1, VTV3, VTV4, National Assembly Television Channel, VOV channel, Son La Newspaper, Son La Television Station.

Cooperate with international organizations to promote local tourism development. Coordinate with GREAT project to select five consultants (domestic and international) for the project; Sign contracts with foreign experts; Sign a contract with the District Policy Bank to set up Great's loan support fund opened at Moc Chau Policy Bank.

B. *The Competitiveness of Moc Chau District*

The competitiveness of localities at the district level in Vietnam is now reflected in the DDCI index (Department and District Competitiveness Index). This is a set of indicators to improve competitiveness at departmental, branch and local levels, which is implemented annually by Son La province with the goal of creating competition in economic management quality among the administrations of districts, towns and cities and provincial departments, agencies and sectors. The DDCI Index is built with dual purposes, on the one hand, empowering businesses to contribute their voice and perform their role of supervising economic management activities of the province; on the other hand, put the provincial agencies and departments in the standing position to reform and improve service quality. The main objective is to improve the competitiveness and ranking of each locality and unit, thereby contributing to improving the business environment and competitiveness of the province.

According to the DDCI Assessment Report of Son La province in 2021, Moc Chau district has surpassed Mai Son to rise to the No. 1 position in the ranking, achieving the highest rank for the first time in the 2019-2021 survey period. The improvement of Moc Chau's ranking is recorded step by step over the years. In 2021, Moc Chau achieved 82.64 points. Even so, this score is still down 1.2 points from the previous year.

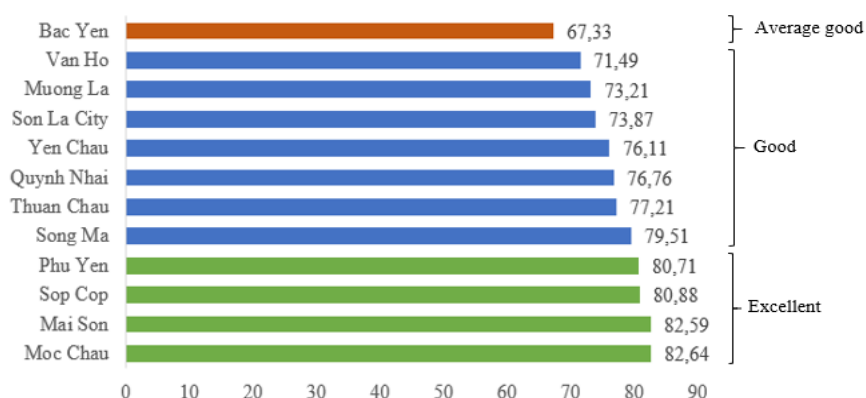


Fig 1. District level DDCI rankings and scores in 2021 – Son La province (on 100-point scale).

Source: Moc Chau District People's Committee and Australian Aid, 2022

Moc Chau continues to affirm the governance quality in component indexes such as security and order, informal costs, market entry costs, dynamism. These results are similar and continued to be maintained from 2020. On the other hand, dialogue and accountability and facilitation for business establishments in accessing land and business locations are still issues that need to be solved in Moc Chau. This result has been clearly shown from previous surveys. However, the changes received are not specific, even there is a decrease in points in the two components above. These are issues Moc Chau needs to pay special attention to in the coming years.



Fig. 2. Result of component index of DDCI Moc Chau district in 2021.
Source: Moc Chau District People's Committee and Australian Aid, 2022.

C. SWOT Analysis for Tourism of Moc Chau District

Moc Chau has a great advantage of diverse and rich tourism resources, from beautiful natural resources to unique human resources, reflected in the cultural traditions of the local residents, which are very unique that other places do not have, helping Moc Chau district develop sustainable tourism. Along with the opening to attract tourists after the Covid-19 pandemic, in the past time, many investors have realized the potential of tourism development in Moc Chau and have come to survey to find out investment opportunities. However, tourism exploitation in the area in recent years also has certain limitations such as spontaneous exploitation, the conservation and planning of tourism resource development is overlooked, leading to the unsustainable development and unconventional tourism products. The biggest limitation for tourism activities in Moc Chau is the lack of key products, the lack of connectivity on tourist routes leading to short duration of stay and fragmentation by territory. In addition, the slow investment in infrastructure development has greatly limited the exploitation and development of tourism in the area.

TABLE III: SWOT ANALYSIS FOR TOURISM OF MOC CHAU DISTRICT

Strengths	Weaknesses
Having a strategic location of Son La province and the Northwest region of Vietnam; fertile land, suitable for the development of perennial crops, high-quality agriculture and cattle raising, which is a condition for the development of agricultural tourism.	Most of the food and shopping establishments are small, with low service quality
There are beautiful natural landscapes, many famous scenic spots; good quality of living environment (climate, air, quiet).	Small-scale amusement parks and entertainment areas, not yet of high quality
The diversity and uniqueness in the culture of ethnic minorities	Access to land and business locations is still difficult
Abundant products, capable of developing into tourism products	Tourism human resources are not professional, lacking and weak
The government has implemented many solutions to facilitate investment attraction	Types and products of tourism products are not abundant
There are many initiatives of the local community in tourism development, especially agri-tourism, community tourism.	Tourism routes lack scientific connection in both space and time
	Lack of public transportation between tourist destinations
Opportunities	Challenges
The opening of tourists after the Covid-19 epidemic has helped the locality to attract many international visitors	Risks of climate change, floods, landslides, drought.
Tourism development is concerned by the Government	Loss of local identity due to rapid and unplanned urbanization, especially linear urbanization.
Many investors have paid attention to survey and research investment opportunities in Moc Chau	Mass tourism development is harmful to the environment
The approved of project "Hoa Binh-Moc Chau Expressway" opens up opportunities to attract tourists	Tourism in general and eco-tourism in Moc Chau is still young, so it is easily affected by the domestic and foreign tourism market.
Indigenous cultural tourism is being interested by domestic and foreign tourists	The conservation and planning of tourism resource development is still overlooked
Long Sap border gate upgraded to international border gate will create opportunities to develop trade, service and tourism exchanges with Laos.	Prices and quality of tourism services in Vietnam are still limited compared to other countries in the region
There are many opportunities for socio-economic development and urban development to become a regional and provincial urban center and increasing interest in ecotourism/agriculture/community tourism	

Source: Research team, 2022

V. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Getting a high position in the tourism market always needs to go hand in hand with maintaining, promoting and enhancing competitiveness. The attractiveness of a tourist destination in the eyes of tourists not only comes from the advantages of nature, culture, and the environment but also from the process of managing, conserving and adding value from those advantages. According to the assessment, Moc Chau has special advantages in terms of nature, climate, landscape and diverse, rich cultures of ethnic minorities. However, the characteristics of transportation, specific tourism products are lacking and limited. In order to continue and enhance the tourism brand of Moc Chau in the coming time, local authorities need to find solutions to promote strengths and overcome limitations. Specifically:

- Build a variety of tours with attractive prices, suitable for domestic and foreign tourists. Besides, it is necessary to constantly improve the quality of tourism services. Attention should be paid to the diversification of services for tourists, especially night entertainment services, development of highland tourism services, and adventure sports activities.
- Focusing on investing and perfecting the infrastructure system for tourism in the area, it is necessary to have more public transport services to make it more convenient to move between attractions.
- Developing cultural tourism, promoting the introduction the stories of the local culture and history to tourists, building art routes to create impressions on the development of the tourist destination's Moc Chau image.
- Raise awareness and role of local people in building local image. Focus on conservation and sustainable tourism development.
- Develop local products combined with tourism products. Actively communicate Moc Chau tourism brand along with the Government's tourism promotion programs.

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