

Article

In the Footsteps of Tradition: Reinventing the Paths of Santa Faz Within the Paradigm of Sustainability and Territorial Development in Alicante

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Abstract: The Santa Faz Pilgrimage, with over 600 years of history and as Spain's second most significant pilgrimage, is at a critical point due to urbanization and inadequate planning. This study explores revitalizing and enhancing the historical Santa Faz routes, integrating cultural tourism, environmental sustainability, and socioeconomic benefits. Recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, the pilgrimage impacts Alicante's cultural landscape yet faces pressure from modern urban development. Using a multidisciplinary approach aligned with the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the study proposes alternative routes, such as a "green route" through ancient paths and water routes, a Villafranqueza route, and one from the former Monastery of Los Ángeles. These paths would be revived through local reforestation, sustainable tourism infrastructure, and rest areas for pilgrims. The restoration of the Santa Faz paths is seen as vital for cultural heritage conservation, sustainable tourism, and job creation, with both opportunities and challenges in integrating these routes into the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes. The study advocates modifying the urban plan and promoting employment in heritage and tourism management, emphasizing the need for ongoing research and cross-disciplinary collaboration to secure the long-term preservation and development of these culturally significant spaces.



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1. Introduction

The Santa Faz Pilgrimage stands as a testament to Alicante's rich intangible cultural heritage, encapsulating not only regional devotion but also unique historical narratives integral to Spanish cultural identity. Recognized as one of Spain's oldest pilgrimages, its historical and religious roots contribute to Alicante's distinct identity, fostering a living connection to the past within the present framework of sustainable tourism practices.

The Santa Faz Pilgrimage stands as a crucial element within Alicante's intangible cultural heritage, embodying traditions that have been preserved for over six centuries. This pilgrimage not only reinforces local identity but also aligns with broader cultural tourism strategies that emphasize experiential and sustainable tourism practices. In this way, the pilgrimage can be viewed as part of a shift toward 'slow tourism' or 'sustainable pilgrimage routes' in Europe, where engagement with place, community, and nature is emphasized over traditional forms of mass tourism.

1.1. The Natural Environment

The landscape of the Campo de Alicante region is defined by a dynamic interaction between internal tectonic forces and external erosion, resulting in a varied topography. Predominantly flat, this region also features a series of smaller elevations and mountain ranges, especially to the north. This topographic variation arises from a complex structural compartmentalization of the terrain. Formations such as the crests of Calvario and Monte del Pino de Alberola, as well as the Lomas de Orgegia, shape the landscape. Additionally, prominent features like Benacantil, Molinet, Serra Grossa, and Tossal, connected by the hills of Creu de Fusta and Vistahermosa, contribute significant geomorphological diversity (López 1978) (Figure 1).

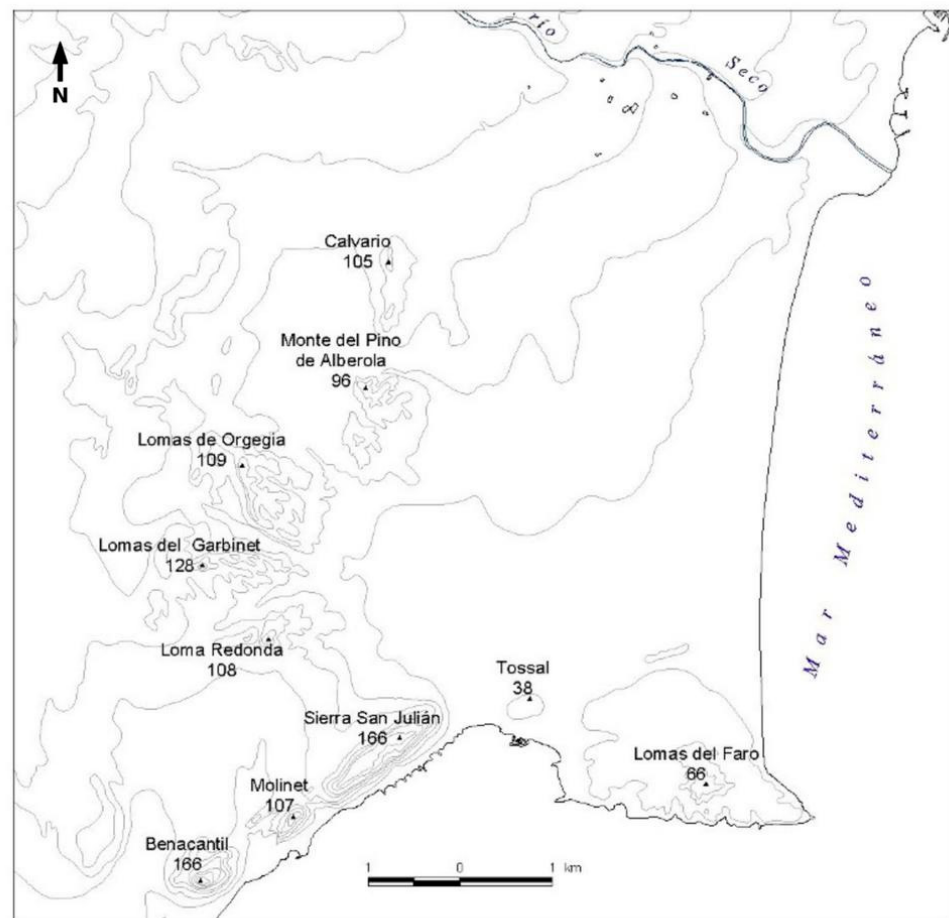


Figure 1. Physical framework through which the Santa Faz Pilgrimage (Alicante) takes place, with the monastery located near Monte del Pino de Alberola.

In the Campo de Alicante region, the geological composition of the landscape is mainly characterized by Pliocene sandstones and Upper Cretaceous marl and limestone formations. The flat areas, predominantly composed of detrital sediments, are the result of fluvial transport processes and represent the most suitable zones for agricultural practices (Gumuzzio and Matarredona 1983). Additionally, there are humid areas, such as Albufereta and Marjal, whose agricultural development required drainage processes for effective use (Madoz 1987; Cavanilles 1797).

Favorable agricultural conditions in the Campo de Alicante region include gentle slopes and the morphology of alluvial fans, which facilitate land cultivation. Furthermore, the Seco, Montnegre, or Verd River supplies water to the area, with a Mediterranean-pluvial regime characterized by peak flows in spring and autumn, low flows in summer,

and potential flooding in autumn (Gil 1983, 1972; López 1951; Madoz 1987; Cavanilles 1797).

1.2. Space and Its Organization

The Huerta de Alicante has long been inhabited and cultivated due to its ecological value and the traditional organization of its space. The plains south of the Seco River benefit from irrigation, enhancing productivity and crop diversification (Alberola 1984b; López 1951; P. Rosser 2010; Gutierrez Lloret 1990).

The modern irrigation system dates back to the period following the Christian occupation in the late Middle Ages, with the construction of the Tibi Dam in the 16th century (the first in Europe) to regulate water flow. Improvements to irrigation infrastructure included the construction of weirs, reservoirs, and storage tanks (Alberola 1984a; Gutierrez Lloret 1990) (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Ancient weir of Mutxamel, possibly of Muslim origin but significantly transformed in the 16th century. Source: Private collection.

The network of primary and secondary canals distributes water throughout the Huerta, using the Acequia Mayor as its main artery. Despite the irrigation systems in place, the Huerta has consistently faced water scarcity, often referred to as an “enhanced dryland” (López 1951; Alberola 1984a).

Settlement in the Huerta has developed hierarchically, with Alicante as the main center. Smaller population centers include San Juan, Mutxamel, Benimagrell, Santa Faz, Tángel, Villafranqueza, and Lloixa. The network of roads and canals has been fundamental in shaping the territory.

In the study area, agricultural practices have evolved significantly over the centuries. Before the 16th century, predominant crops included wheat, barley, olives, figs, carob, almonds, barilla, esparto grass, and wine, with vines becoming the primary crop in the 16th century, though they later declined. While olive cultivation was reintroduced, it remains sparse. Currently, citrus fruits are the only stable crops. Almond and fig production grew notably in the 18th century, but mulberry trees disappeared (Giménez 1981; López 1951).

In general, crops in the Huerta were limited and mainly for subsistence. Tomatoes and winter beans thrived, though today, tomato cultivation is mainly outside the traditional Huerta, which itself faces near-total abandonment (López 1978, 1951).

Analysis of Huerta de Alicante's territory reveals three categories of traces left by traditional land use: ancient routes, irrigation systems, and remnants of traditional crops.

The historical routes served as access corridors to the Huerta towers. These paths follow a hierarchical territorial structure extending from the national highway 332 to the sea. However, progressive alterations to these routes are evident as they approach the coastline (López 1978).

The road network in the study area originated from the ancestral Camino de la Santa Faz or Camino de Valencia, now converted into a national highway, and presents variously modified routes:

- Camino de la Cruz de Piedra, or Camí Vell de l'Ametler, a main axis, retains accessibility and functionality, allowing passage to adjacent properties and land. Despite being an unpaved road, it is in good condition. However, the original connection between Cruz de Piedra and San Juan is now materially unfeasible;
- Camino de Benimagrell, or Camí de Reixes, connecting Cruz de Piedra with Benimagrell, still maintains operational access, flanked by various historical towers along its route;
- Camino de la Huerta lacks continuity, especially at its eastern end, where emerging urbanization obstructs its potential link with Camino de la Playa de San Juan, with Torre Conde situated along its midpoint;
- Camino de la Playa de San Juan, or Camino del Ciprés, has been fragmented due to new infrastructure developments that disregard its original route and is increasingly absorbed by the area's urbanization. Initially, it linked several historic towers;
- The southernmost Camino de la Albufereta has been completely eliminated due to urban expansion; it formerly connected Torre Castillo with Torre Ferrer;
- Finally, Camino de la Cadena, the only transversal route in this sector, faces connectivity challenges after intersecting Camino de Benimagrell, with several towers located along its length.

Additionally, a network of secondary roads has been documented, exhibiting a transverse arrangement relative to the primary routes, reflecting historical territorial organization and providing access to homes or land interspersed among the main routes. Noteworthy features of these paths include rows of trees and remnants of dry-stone walls (Figure 3).

The irrigation system in the Huerta of Alicante is another crucial element of traditional spatial organization. It consists of a main water distribution network, along with branches and complementary components (López 1951; Gil 1972).

Regarding crops, there is a general abandonment of agricultural activity in the analyzed area, except for a few plots with citrus trees (López 1978) (Figure 4).

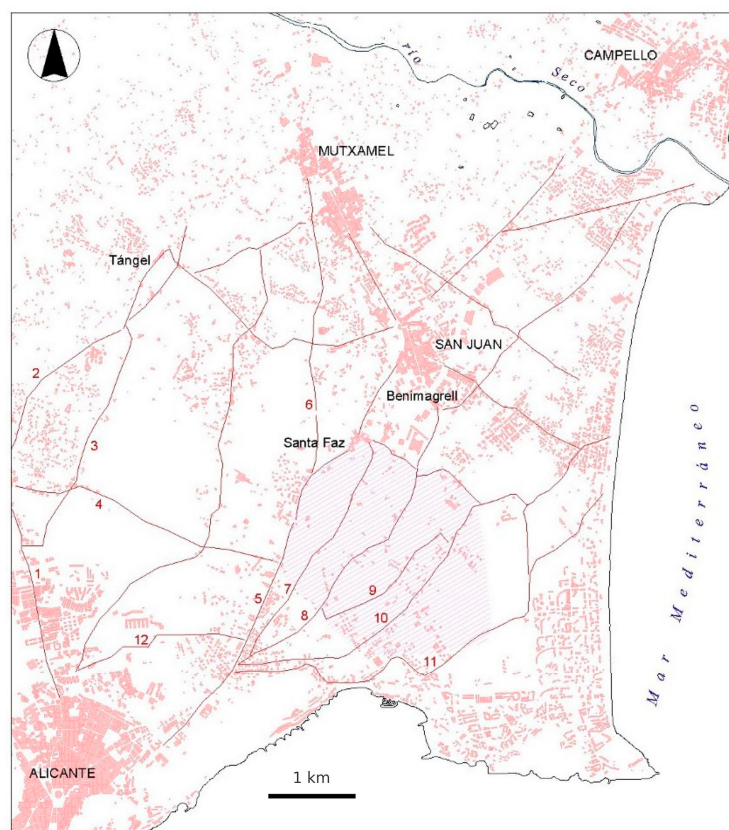


Figure 3. Santa Faz road network in the Huerta de Alicante. Road Network: 1. Villafranqueza Path. 2. Tángel Path. 3. Old Valencia Path. 4. Villafranqueza to the Sea Path. 5. Santa Faz Path. 6. Mutxamel Path. 7. Stone Cross Path. 8. Benimagrell Path. 9. Huerta Path. 10. San Juan Beach Path. 11. Albufereta Path. 12. Los Ángeles to Creu de Fusta Path. Sources: VARELA (1984). Official Cartography scale 1:10,000.

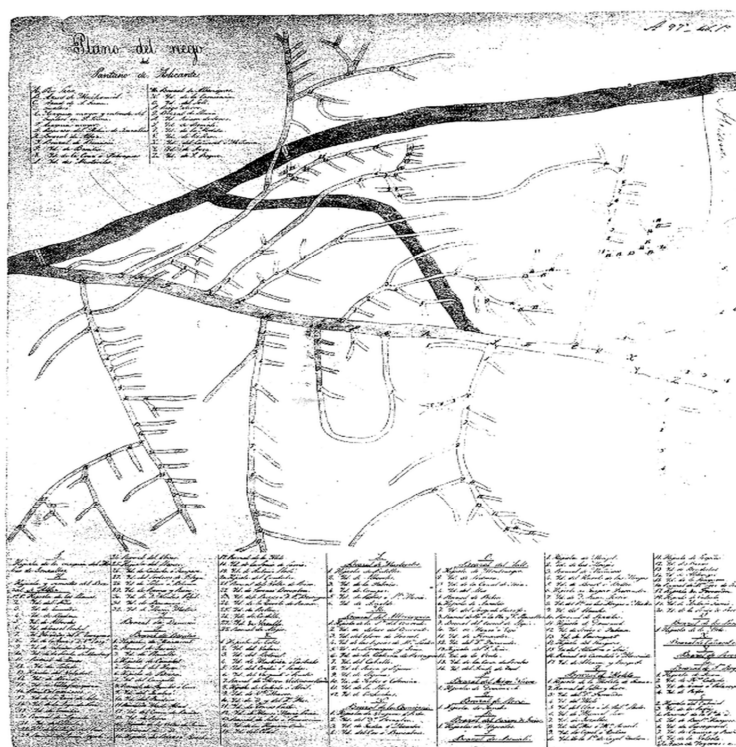


Figure 4. Irrigation map of the Alicante Reservoir (19th century). Source: Private collection.

1.3. Housing, Defense, and Water in the Huerta of Alicante

The Huerta of Alicante, due to its unique characteristics, has been an ideal location for human settlement since prehistoric times. The availability of water supported rich vegetation and abundant wildlife, both highly valued as food sources. Additionally, the extreme living conditions of marshland were balanced by the protection it offered to any settlement in the area. Lastly, its broad Mediterranean frontage facilitated the arrival of foreign cultures, as well as potential invaders, smugglers, and quick raids in the region (Rosser and Soler 2008; Rosser and Fuentes 2007; Rosser 2010).

Between the late 15th and early 17th centuries, the Mediterranean coast experienced significant instability. This was primarily due to two factors: the power of the Ottoman Turkish Empire in Europe and the rise of North African states influenced by the activities of Berber pirates. As a response, substantial fortification efforts were undertaken along the coast in the 16th century, aimed at both defending the region and monitoring the Morisco population and potential enemies (Rosser 2007, 1990; Bendicho 1991; Bevia and Camarero 1988; Bevia and Varela 1994; Cooper 1994; Maestre and Fueyo 1994).

The 16th century, as noted, saw an intensification of these incursions along the coast of the Kingdom of Valencia (Bazzana and Guichard 1978). During the Monzón Courts of 1528, presided over by Charles I, the three estates petitioned the monarch to take measures for the “protection of the current kingdom”, considering the economic damage caused by continuous corsair attacks on coastal communities (Rosser 2007; Madoz 1987; Bendicho 1991; Bevia and Camarero 1988).

The Monzón Courts of 1552 again reflected the Valencians’ concerns, establishing a “land-based guard, not by sea” to ensure “greater fulfillment of the said coast and maritime land fortification and defense”. This guard, typically made up of local knights—the only ones with horses and arms—were known as “companyies de cavalls”. These landowners were obliged not only to warn local farmers of possible raids but also to defend and shelter them in fortified houses, known as Casas-torre, built for this purpose (Rosser 1990).

In 1553, Alicante was visited by Don Jerónimo Arrufat, a judge of the Royal Audience and Royal Commissioner. From his visit, we know that the instability in the Huerta area was such that the construction of numerous Casas-torre had begun, and he urgently ordered their completion. Towers such as Bendicho, Gaspar Roig, and Joan Sena, all located in the “orta de Alacant”, were mentioned (Rosser 1990; Bendicho 1991).

Indeed, during the 16th century, the construction of towers, watchtowers, and castles along the Alicante coast was carried out under orders from Philip II to fortify the coastline. These constructions were overseen by Juan Bautista Antonelli during the term of Viceroy Vespasiano Gonzaga. The towers provided refuge and security for local workers (inland towers) and served as lookout points for detecting foreign ships, often Berber pirates, in the coastal towers (Rosser 1990, 2007; Maestre and Fueyo 1994; Fueyo and Mira 2016; Bevia and Camarero 1988) (Figure 5).

This issue, however, must have persisted well into the 17th century, as evidenced by graffiti found a few years ago in the Casa Capiscol, dated to that period and fortunately preserved by the Archaeology Services of the Alicante City Council (Rosser 2009, 1994) (Figure 6).

In the geographical area of the province of Alicante, the network of coastal and Huerta watchtowers is distinguished by unique features that make it a singular example within the Spanish Mediterranean context. The housing typology with towers is found in the highest density around the Huerta of Alicante, particularly in the area known as “La Condomina”. These homes were designed to combine residential functions with agricultural characteristics, as well as defensive and refuge aspects for their inhabitants (Maestre and Fueyo 1994; Seijo 1978).

According to Lamperez, these tower houses, inherited from the Early and Late Middle Ages, varied in form depending on the economic power of the landowner, yet all included a defensive tower as an essential element. This tower served as the final bastion where inhabitants could seek refuge in case of attack (Lamperez y Romea 1922).



Figure 5. Photograph of the Torre del Ciprés and adjacent Hermitage, built during the 16th–17th centuries. Source: Private collection.

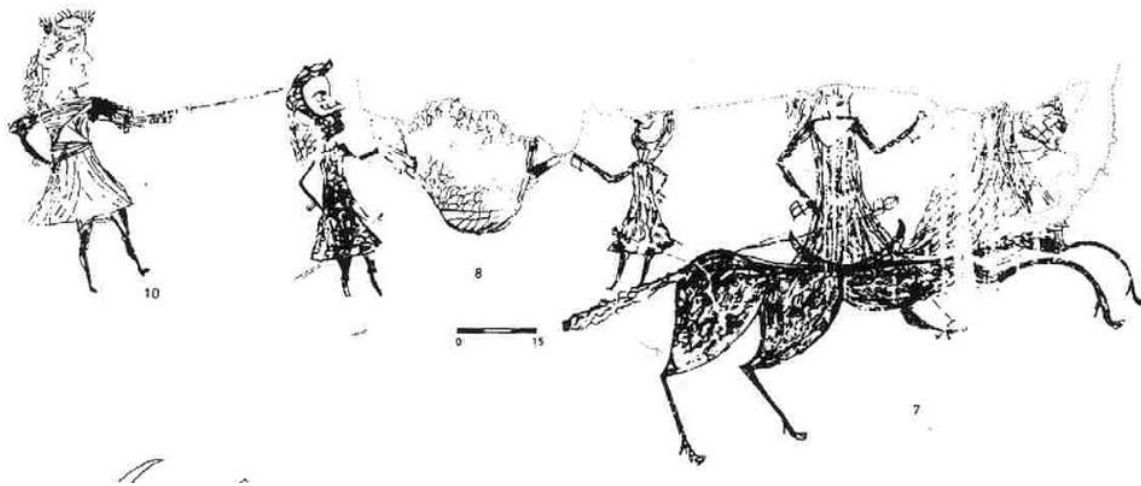


Figure 6. 17th-century graffiti preserved in the Casa Capiscol in the Huerta of Alicante, depicting members of a Company of Knights recovering loot captured by a group of Berbers.

Various authors identify similar typological roots in different types of rural residences across Spain. For instance, Alvarez Gallego notes that the quadrangular mansion of Roman architectural civilization is essentially similar to the structure of the Galician pazo and highlights that the towers attached to pazos echo their origins as feudal mansions (Álvarez Gallego 1963). Seijó Alonso suggests that the residences were attached later, during the period when Berber pirates ravaged villages, necessitating the establishment of settlers on properties due to intensive land cultivation (Seijo Alonso 1979, I y II:144; Seijo 1978). Varela mentions the reuse of Huerta houses over time, considering them as an evolution of the Roman type and emphasizing their primary agricultural use (Varela Botella 1995).

Lamperez considers the Roman agricultural house type significant due to its enduring presence over centuries, from the villa and Visigoth vicus to the Late Medieval tower, the 16th-century manor house, and the modern Andalusian cortijo (Lamperez y Romea 1922).

Thus, the casa-torre (tower house) can be specifically defined as a residence that, while adhering to the general typology mentioned, includes a refuge tower in response to the historical and social conditions prevailing from the latter half of the 16th century until the early 18th century. The form of these residences derives from the medieval interpretation of the Roman house, particularly in its agricultural use.

As for the location of these towers, authors differ. Some report a total of 24 towers within the municipalities of Alicante, San Juan, Campello, and Mutxamel, while others cite 23 in this area. According to Varela, up to 28 towers were recorded in 1979, although two of these (Rizo and Tres Olivos) have recently disappeared. This study identifies the presence of 30 towers, including those whose known remains suggest their past existence, either through their scale or documented references. The distribution of these towers is as follows: 22 in the municipality of Alicante (La Condomina), 6 in the municipality of San Juan de Alicante, and 2 in the municipality of Mutxamel (Rosser 2007; Seijo Alonso 1979; Varela Botella 1995; Maestre and Fueyo 1994; Seijo 1978) (Figure 7).

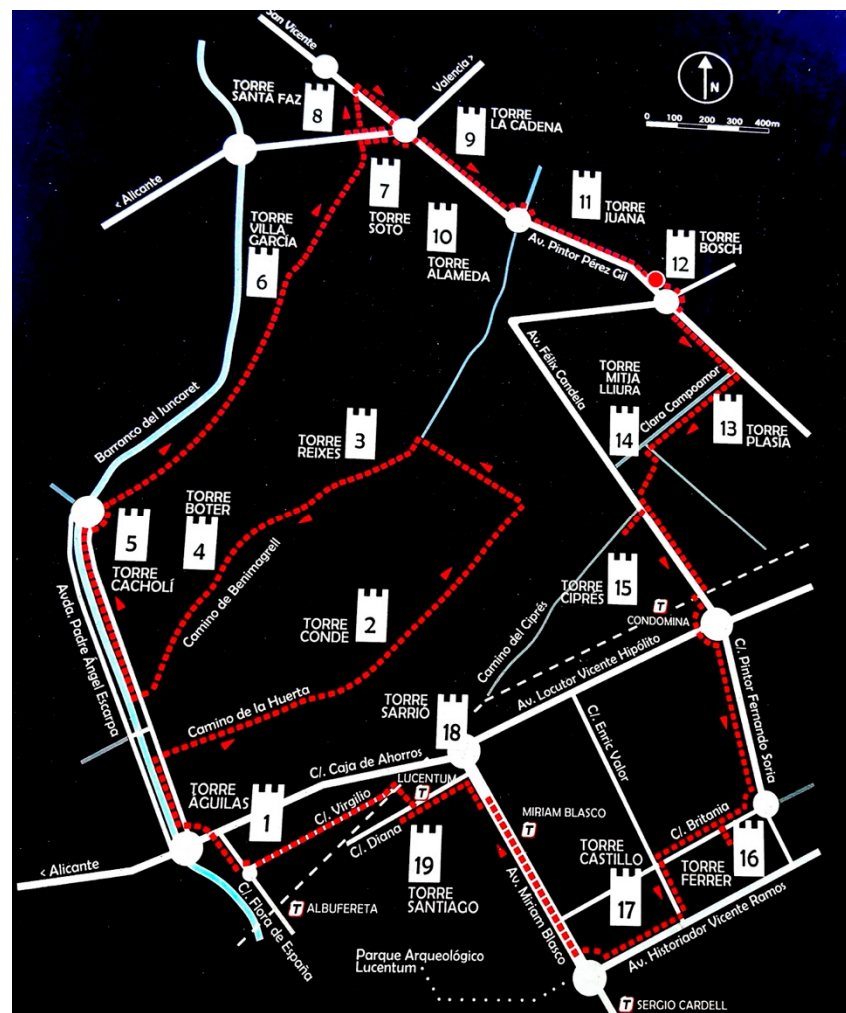


Figure 7. Map showing the location of towers in the Huerta of Alicante. Source: Private collection.

The existence of irrigation canals in the area is crucial for understanding the settlement patterns. According to Crespo Giner, the construction of the Gualeró Canal was contemporaneous with the San Juan weir in 1656, indicating a time gap between the construction

of the towers and the residences (Crespo Giner 1979). However, Sala and Sanchis suggest that the landowners in La Condomina might have restored an old canal with the intent of building a dam on the river (Crespo Giner 1979; Sala Seva and Sánchez Buades 1978; Sanchis Tortosa and Sala Seva 1989) (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Photograph of paths, dry stone walls, vegetation, etc., in the Huerta of Alicante. Source: Plinthus Collection.

Throughout the 18th century, and especially in the 19th century, these structures ceased to be directly related to agricultural use and became almost exclusively estates and recreational villas. In recent years, property owners have increasingly abandoned these structures in favor of other types of buildings and leisure sites, leading to a process of degradation and deterioration affecting the entire area. Additionally, land subdivisions and urban developments have altered the original structure and functional balance of the region, erasing certain pathways, remnants of the irrigation system, and the visual relationships that were integral to its purpose.

Completing this picture of the Huerta of Alicante is the construction of the Tibi Dam in the 16th century—the oldest in Europe, excluding Roman structures in Mérida—which addressed another of the Huerta’s persistent issues, alongside Berber raids: the lack of water for irrigation. This issue, despite the dam’s construction, led to the Huerta of Alicante being largely dedicated to dryland farming, except along riverbanks and adjacent areas. The region became renowned for its production of raisins, fresh and dried figs, and especially Fondillón wine (Alberola 1984a).

The recent transformation of this area from an urban planning perspective, with little consideration for structures, paths, livestock trails, canals, etc., threatens to turn this legacy into history unless preventive action is taken.

1.4. The Relic and Miracles of the Santa Faz

The Santa Faz Pilgrimage stands as a profound reflection of Alicante’s enduring cultural identity, blending religious devotion with local heritage. As one of the region’s most

significant intangible heritage practices, the pilgrimage reflects centuries-old community values, embodying Alicante's unique position within Spain's broader cultural and historical landscape.

Comparable to other European pilgrimage routes, the Santa Faz Pilgrimage aligns with the European tradition of religious journeys that integrate spiritual, communal, and environmental dimensions. Unlike routes such as the Camino de Santiago, the Santa Faz journey intertwines historical and socio-cultural elements specific to the Mediterranean region, drawing on centuries of localized customs, beliefs, and community participation.

The pilgrimage reflects current perspectives on sustainable cultural tourism by promoting a slow tourism approach, an increasingly recognized method in European pilgrimage sites. Studies in cultural heritage underscore the value of community-led initiatives in preserving intangible heritage, positioning the Santa Faz Pilgrimage as a vital component of Alicante's identity and as a model for sustainable tourism development.

From a material perspective, the Santa Faz relic is regarded by Christian tradition as one of the three cloths used by Veronica to wipe Jesus' face during his Passion. The relic arrived in Alicante in the 15th century, brought by Mosén Pedro Mena, a priest from San Juan, who received it from a cardinal in Rome (Cutillas Bernal 2001, 1998; Esplá Rizo 1969; Ferrándiz Lozano 1989; Vidal Tur 1942; Iborra 2016) (Figure 9).



Figure 9. The Holy Face, held by two angels and painted by Juan Sánchez Cotán (1620–1625), from the Monastery of La Cartuja in Granada.

After repeatedly appearing from the bottom of the chest where the priest safeguarded it, the relic was placed on a wooden panel and displayed in his parish, marking the beginning of its public veneration (Esplá Rizo 1969; Vidal Tur 1942).

The origin of this tradition dates back to 1489 when three miracles attributed to the Santa Faz relic were historically recorded: the miracle of the tear, the miracle of the three holy faces, and the preaching of Friar Benito of Valencia (Cutillas Bernal 2001, 1998; Esplá

Rizo 1969; Ferrándiz Lozano 1989; Vidal Tur 1942). According to Viciano, as narrated in the third part of his 16th-century chronicle, the first Santa Faz pilgrimage took place on 17 March 1489 as a prayer procession for rain (Ferrándiz Lozano 1989; Iborra 2016). The route followed the Lloixa ravine in San Juan, within the Alicante huerta area, where the Miracle of the Tear occurred. It was at this location that the Council of the city of Alicante later founded and built the Monastery of Santa Faz in commemoration of this event (Cerdán Tato 1989; Hernández Guardiola 1988; Vidal Tur 1942) (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Wooden panel from the old altarpiece of the Church of Santa Faz in the Monastery of the same name (15th century) depicting this first miracle. Source: Photograph by the authors.

Days later, on 25 March, with no rain yet, the relic was called upon once more. During its transport, the second miracle, known as the “miracle of the three faces”, occurred under the ‘Holy Pine’ near the Franciscan Convent of Los Ángeles. On this occasion, according to popular tradition, the prayers were answered, and rain finally fell (Esplá Rizo 1969; Cutillas Bernal 1998; Huerta Esteve and Melis Maynar 1989) (Figure 11).

The relic was kept in the Church of Los Ángeles until 1490 when it was moved to the newly constructed Monastery of Santa Faz that same year. The sanctuary would later be rebuilt in the 18th century (Esplá Rizo 1969; Cutillas Bernal 1998; Hernández Guardiola 1988).

Additionally, the Camarín de la Santa Faz, which houses the relic and was built in the 17th century, holds a fascinating history involving artists who played a significant role in its construction and were associated with the Alumbrados sect. The painter of the impressive interior paintings, Conchillos, was even imprisoned by the Inquisition (Hernández Guardiola 1988; Mas Galvañ 2003).



Figure 11. Detail of one of the canvases by the painter Conchillos in the Camarín de la Santa Faz (17th century), depicting the second miracle. Source: Photograph by the authors.

1.5. The Santa Faz Pilgrimage

The Santa Faz pilgrimage, popularly known as La Peregrina, is a traditional festivity in the city of Alicante that reflects its culture and popular religiosity. This festival embodies various historical, cultural, ethnological, and ritual meanings (Rodes Sala 2009). On the one hand, the pilgrimage commemorates a historical event and the popular devotion of the people of Alicante, who journeyed to the site of the Miracle of the Tear, where a sanctuary was later built to house the relic and provide a place for public worship. On the other hand, the pilgrimage is also a ritual of collective affirmation for the Alicante community, giving the celebration identity meanings as a symbol of brotherhood and belonging to the city (Cerdán Tato 1989; Herrero Casla 2015; Huerta Esteve and Melis Maynar 1989) (Figure 12).

The Santa Faz pilgrimage is celebrated annually on the second Thursday after Holy Thursday, although it was originally held on March 17. The date change was established in 1663 by the Third Diocesan Synod, which determined that the celebration should be moved to the Thursday following the 'Dominica in Albis' (the second Sunday of Easter) to avoid overlapping with Lent. However, this change was not implemented until 1752 (Cutillas Bernal 2001; Esplá Rizo 1969; Cutillas Bernal 1998).

This pilgrimage embodies the fervor and devotion of the entire Alicante community, a tradition preserved over half a millennium within local families (Herrero Casla 2015). The pilgrimage commemorates the miracles attributed to the sacred relic and has served, over the centuries, as an occasion for pilgrims and the city of Alicante to pray for health, peace, and rain (Amores 2007, 2008; Esplá Rizo 1969; Martínez Morellá 1944; Mirasierras 1988; Vidal Tur 1942) (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Photograph of the Pilgrimage passing through the current Avenida de Denia (19th century). Source: Seguí Collection. Department of Memory of Alicante, Alicante City Council.

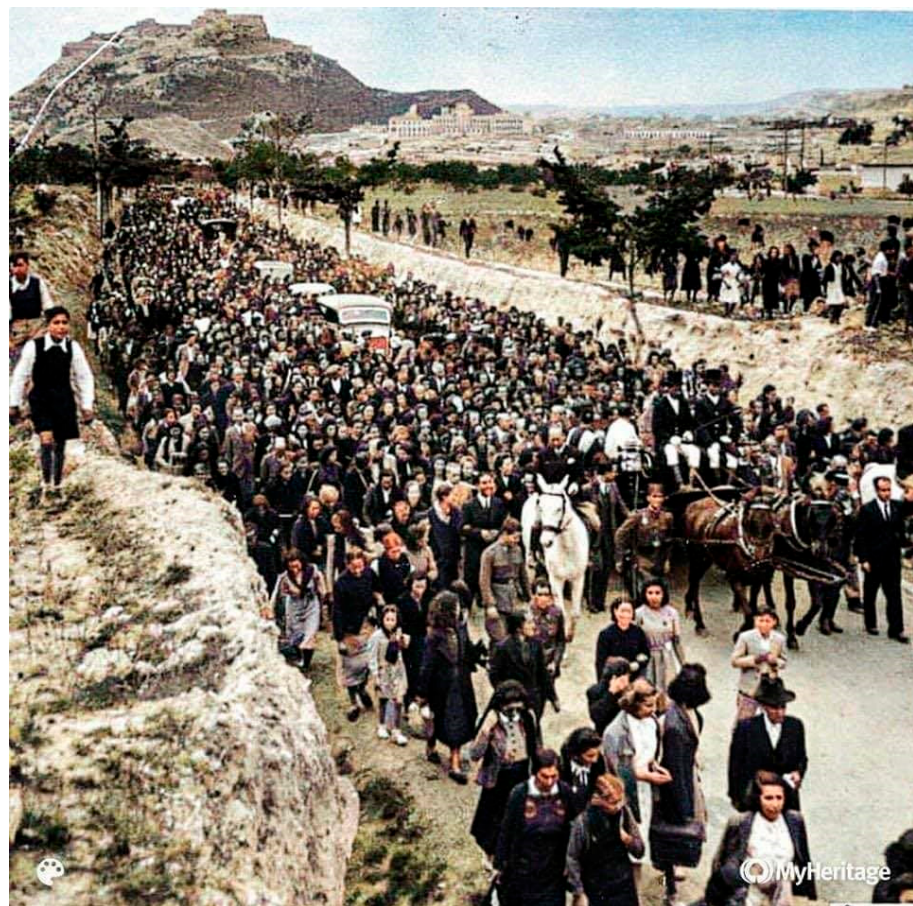


Figure 13. Photograph of the Pilgrimage passing through the current Avenida de Denia (19th century). Source: MyHeritage.

1.6. The Paths of Santa Faz

The devotion of Alicante to the relic was so profound that, according to records by Huerta and Melis, several historical routes for the transfers and prayers of Santa Faz can be traced (Huerta Esteve and Melis Maynar 1989). These routes include the following:

- The route from San Juan to Santa Faz and Los Ángeles;
- The route connecting Los Ángeles, Vista Hermosa, and Santa Faz;
- The route starting from San Vicente, passing through Villafranqueza, and ending in Santa Faz;
- The route from the city of Alicante follows the historic path to Santa Faz, leading to the sanctuary.

Given the patrimonial and historical importance of this last route, we will focus exclusively on it, as it is the path that has traditionally defined the annual pilgrimage of La Peregrina, which concerns us here. It follows the National Highway 332–340, which was once the old route to Valencia and Santa Faz. This highway is closed to traffic on the day of the pilgrimage to facilitate the movement of pilgrims (Cerdán Tato 1989). The route begins in Alicante and proceeds to the Santa Faz sanctuary, located approximately 8 km away (Ferrándiz Lozano 1989).

The pilgrims accompany the official entourage, composed of the municipal council and religious representatives of the Collegiate Chapter, who carry a replica of the relic to the Monastery (Cerdán Tato 1989; Herrero Casla 2015; Martínez Morellá 1944) (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Photograph of the Pilgrimage passing through Raval Roig (1840s). Source: Alicante Municipal Archive.

The route passes through the urban center, Lomas de Garbinet, and the Cruz de Fusta. This cross marks the location where the “enemies” encountered each other: two emissaries riding to deliver news of the Miracle of the Tear, who reconciled upon meeting on the path. The cross symbolizes fraternity and forgiveness along the pilgrimage route and served for years as a reference point between Alicante and San Juan ([Herrero Casla 2015](#); [Huerta Esteve and Melis Maynar 1989](#); [Martínez Morellá 1944](#)) (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Photograph of the Cruz de Fusta on the current Avenida de Denia (1840s). Source: Alicante Municipal Archive.

1.7. Official Participation

The pilgrimage is an event open to the public, welcoming both believers and non-believers, as well as the City Council and religious representatives. However, the latter, specifically, the municipal corporation and the religious representatives of the Collegiate Chapter, play a prominent role in the pilgrimage, as the relic is subject to a strict protocol currently overseen by the City Council’s Secretary, rooted in the 1636 Decree that governs the ceremonial procedure ([Cerdán Tato 1989](#); [Cutillas Bernal 2001](#); [Llorca O’Connor 1989](#)).

This 17th-century protocol specifies the procedure for opening the reliquary tabernacle. Four keys are required, two held by the city council and the other two by the ecclesiastical chapter. During this ritual act, the mayor and the Chapter are accompanied by the municipal syndic, the two knight custodians, and the general secretary, who reads the council’s resolution authorizing the opening of the reliquary ([Cutillas Bernal 2001, 1998](#); [Llorca O’Connor 1989](#)).

The role of civil authorities is particularly highlighted by the fact that it is the City Council that appoints the individual responsible for opening the relic’s tabernacle once

La Peregrina reaches the Monastery. Since the beginning of the festivity, this leading role in the pilgrimage has been held by a civic, not a religious, figure known as the “Syndic Councillor”. Historically, the Chief Justice and city jurors presided over the ceremony (Cerdán Tato 1989; Cutillas Bernal 2001; Llorca O’Connor 1989) (Figure 16).



Figure 16. Photograph of the Pilgrimage passing through the current Jovellanos Street (19th century). Source: Seguí Collection. Department of Memory of Alicante, Alicante City Council.

Additionally, the City Council also appoints two “Knight Custodians”, who symbolize the Huerta of Alicante and guard the relic from the time it leaves its tabernacle until it returns. This tradition dates back centuries and demonstrates the close connection between the Huerta of Alicante and the devotion to Santa Faz (Cerdán Tato 1989; Cutillas Bernal 2001; Llorca O’Connor 1989) (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Photograph of the Pilgrimage passing through the current Avenida de Denia, showing the Knight Custodians on horseback (19th century). Source: Seguí Collection. Department of Memory of Alicante, Alicante City Council.

1.8. The Pilgrimage as Intangible Heritage

It is important to note that a pilgrimage is not merely a procession; it represents a ritual journey that begins in the heart of the city and extends into the countryside. Along the route, stops are made, and religious, devotional, festive, and communal aspects, such as eating and singing, are intertwined. The physical and the spiritual merge, just as the religious and the cultural do (Cerdán Tato 1989; Herrero Casla 2015; Martínez Morellá 1944; Mirasierras 1988). Therefore, the pilgrimage connects with cultural, landscape, urban, rural, social, and community aspects (Herrero Casla 2015; Huerta Esteve and Melis Maynar 1989; Mirasierras 1988).

La Peregrina, analyzed as an intangible heritage element, combines various components and variables of significant ethnological interest in understanding and defining popular devotion and religiosity. The pilgrimage reflects the cultural representations of the city of Alicante and its people, as well as connections to ritual and festive manifestations associated with traditional society, where the rural world played a crucial role (Ferrándiz Lozano 1989; Rodes Sala 2009). Over the centuries, La Peregrina has evolved into a festivity that, in addition to its ritual and religious significance and popular devotion to the relic, has developed a sociocultural communal value where cohesion and identity take on their full meaning. (Huerta Esteve and Melis Maynar 1989) (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Photograph of the sale of water jugs, pitchers, and other ceramic items in the plaza of the Monastery of Santa Faz (1840s). Source: Alicante Municipal Archive.

During the pilgrimage, religious songs such as *gozos* and litanies are sung. The *gozos* are hymns of praise and gratitude to the Santa Faz, while litanies are prayers in the form of supplications. These songs are typically sung in Spanish, though versions in Valencian or even Latin can also be found (Cutillas Bernal 1998).

In addition to music, the ringing of bells is a prominent feature throughout the pilgrimage. Bells are rung along the route, creating a festive and religious atmosphere. The “*toc de campanes*” (bell ringing) tradition involves the ringing of church bells during the procession. Traditional music from *tabal* and *dolçaina*, typical instruments of the Valencian Community, is also heard. Additionally, *gegants i nanos* (giants and big-headed figures) parade during the festivities. Firecrackers and fireworks are also part of the pilgrimage (Cutillas Bernal 1998; Martínez Morellá 1944; Herrero Casla 2015).

The pilgrimage also includes the tradition of sharing food in groups. Pilgrims bring food with them, pausing along the way to rest and enjoy typical Easter foods from Alicante, such as rabbit with tomato, beans, *mona* (a type of cake with a hard-boiled egg), and local wine from the huerta (Cutillas Bernal 1998; Martínez Morellá 1944; Herrero Casla 2015).

On the day of the pilgrimage, a fair is held in the Santa Faz village. This fair, sustained over centuries, offers pilgrims various goods and objects. Today, it features the sale of artisanal and traditional products, such as wooden walking sticks, farming tools, pottery, and traditional regional foods. Devotional Christian items like rosaries and medallions are also available (Cutillas Bernal 1998; Herrero Casla 2015; Mirasierras 1988).

The annual La Peregrina pilgrimage is remarkable for its age and continuity, as well as for its distinctive elements and symbolic significance. The devotion of the people of Alicante over five centuries, the symbolism of the journey and ritual, the religious songs and prayers, popular music (tabal and dolçaina), food, and pilgrim attire (smock, scarf, and rosemary-crowned cane) collectively embody socio-religious and identity aspects (Rodes Sala 2009; Herrero Casla 2015; Martínez Morellá 1944) (Figure 19).



Figure 19. Recreation of the Santa Faz Pilgrimage based on photographs. Source: authors.

The La Peregrina pilgrimage is a clear example of traditional religiosity and popular devotion in Alicante and is considered one of the most emblematic cultural and religious-festive expressions of the community. Passed down through generations, its oral history and the feelings of belonging and identity it generates make it a unique and representative cultural element for the people of Alicante. This cultural expression encompasses other traditional aspects, such as music, art, gastronomy, and leisure, and has primarily been transmitted orally. The pilgrimage marks the beginning of spring and is celebrated on the second Thursday after Holy Week, considered an extension of Easter traditions, with group outings to the countryside and picnics as characteristic elements (Rodes Sala 2009).

For these reasons, the Alicante City Council and the Generalitat Valenciana have decided to declare the pilgrimage an Intangible Cultural Heritage Asset, with the approval process for this designation expected to be completed in 2024.

Within the field of cultural tourism, routes like the Santa Faz Pilgrimage serve as models for preserving heritage while enhancing local tourism. By analyzing intangible cultural

elements through tourism frameworks, Santa Faz offers valuable insights into sustainable tourism's role in reinforcing community identity and fostering cultural appreciation beyond religious devotion.

To examine the multidimensional impact of the Santa Faz pilgrimage, this study integrates qualitative and participatory methodologies particularly suited for intangible heritage analysis. Such an approach aligns with frameworks in sustainable tourism and heritage management, as these methodologies prioritize stakeholder engagement and community-based perspectives essential for preserving intangible heritage. This study applies qualitative surveys and in-depth interviews, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how the Santa Faz pilgrimage reflects both cultural values and sustainable development principles within the community.

1.9. Objectives and Significance of Study

The primary objective of this study is to propose the revitalization of the Santa Faz pilgrimage routes as an initiative to preserve Alicante's cultural heritage and foster sustainable tourism practices. By re-establishing these historical routes, the study aims to align the pilgrimage experience with principles of environmental stewardship, thus contributing to broader conversations in cultural heritage management. Moreover, this initiative proposes a sustainable development model for pilgrimage tourism by integrating reforestation, cultural landmarks, and accessible transit routes. This multidisciplinary approach promises new insights for similar heritage sites, illustrating how traditional cultural practices can coexist with contemporary urban landscapes while offering economic benefits to local communities.

Community engagement forms a cornerstone of this study, emphasizing the active role of local stakeholders in preserving the cultural and socio-economic value of the Santa Faz Pilgrimage. Aligning with sustainable cultural tourism principles, this approach not only strengthens the identity and heritage of Alicante but also recognizes the community as integral to maintaining and revitalizing the pilgrimage routes. Such involvement encourages community-led conservation and establishes the pilgrimage as both a cultural and socio-economic asset to the region. This focus on community reinforces a sustainable framework in which the local population becomes an essential participant in the preservation and promotion of their intangible heritage.

2. Revitalizing the Identity of the Traditional Santa Faz Pilgrimage Through Interventions in Alicante's Built Heritage and Natural Landscape

Intangible heritage relies on the preservation of traditions, which are orally passed down through generations. However, additional elements shape the collective imagination surrounding these traditions, with visual heritage being one of the most significant, in which landscape plays a crucial role. While today's landscape is predominantly urban, it was largely rural in the past.

The Santa Faz Pilgrimage, a centuries-old tradition, is nearing designation as an Intangible Cultural Heritage Asset, underscoring the need to strengthen its legacy by restoring its historical landscape. This landscape has suffered considerable degradation due to modernization and urbanization in the area. Despite the protection granted by its age, uncontrolled urban expansion and poor planning have restricted traditional access routes from Alicante (particularly from San Nicolás-Town hall) and from the Los Ángeles neighborhood, leading to significant landscape degradation associated with this tradition.

The recent renovation of Avenida de Denia did not adequately consider the importance of the pilgrimage, merely relocating the calvary crosses without preserving the ceremonial

context. Similarly, urban development around the Los Ángeles neighborhood and towards the Santa Faz district has disrupted traditional routes that once connected the former Monastery of Los Ángeles with the Monastery of Santa Faz, and remnants of the old Convent and Hermitage of Los Ángeles were not preserved.

With urban development progressing as per the General Urban Development Plan (PGOU), the Santa Faz district could soon become unfit for pilgrims to spend the day. Land next to the monastery, along the main road, had been zoned as open housing (EA, for bungalows) in the currently halted PGOU project, showing little regard for the 16th-century monastery and its defensive tower, a declared Cultural Heritage Asset. If these residences are built, the current makeshift park would be replaced with bungalows, limiting or even preventing pilgrims from remaining in the area.

On the other side of the road, behind car sales premises, further development was proposed (UFO-1, Torres de la Huerta Partial Plan). Although green spaces are planned, the pilgrimage tradition should take precedence over urban development rather than the reverse.

2.1. Objectives

- This study aims to propose the revitalization of the historical Santa Faz paths, integrating cultural tourism, environmental sustainability, and socioeconomic benefits for the community;
- The Santa Faz Pilgrimage is the oldest popular festival in Alicante and is in the process of being declared an Intangible Cultural Heritage Asset.

2.2. Method

An essential objective of this research is to foster meaningful community engagement throughout the project lifecycle. Participatory approaches in the study design facilitate direct community involvement in route planning and heritage conservation. This engagement ensures that the community's voice is integral to preserving the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the pilgrimage while also supporting socio-economic development. This aligns with best practices in cultural heritage management that emphasize sustainable and community-focused tourism initiatives.

To ensure meaningful community engagement, the project will adopt a participatory framework comprising three core strategies. First, it will organize a series of interactive workshops with local residents, cultural associations, and municipal authorities to gather insights, identify community needs, and co-design solutions for the pilgrimage routes. These workshops aim to facilitate an inclusive dialogue that ensures local voices guide both the restoration process and the long-term conservation efforts. Second, the project will prioritize community-driven employment opportunities by involving local artisans, small businesses, and workers in tasks such as path restoration, signage installation, and the development of eco-friendly infrastructures, including rest areas for pilgrims. Finally, it will engage the community through educational programs and events that highlight the historical, cultural, and environmental significance of the Santa Faz pilgrimage. By promoting awareness and pride in this intangible heritage, the project seeks to reinforce the community's role as custodians of the pilgrimage tradition. These efforts align with the principles of sustainable cultural tourism and underscore the project's commitment to fostering a collaborative relationship with the local population. Such participatory approaches will not only ensure the preservation of the pilgrimage's cultural legacy but also strengthen community ownership and the long-term sustainability of the initiative.

The proposed Green Route serves as a cornerstone for integrating reforestation efforts, sustainable tourism development, and heritage conservation within the Santa Faz

pilgrimage framework. By aligning the restoration of historical paths with ecological reforestation initiatives, the project enhances local biodiversity and reinforces the natural landscape, making it more resilient to environmental degradation. Native species such as carob, olive, and almond trees will be strategically planted to reflect the region's historical agricultural identity while simultaneously improving soil stability and creating habitats for local wildlife.

In terms of sustainable tourism, the revitalized Green Route aims to promote low-impact travel by offering pedestrian-friendly paths with eco-friendly infrastructure, such as rest areas and informational panels. These installations will minimize environmental disruption while providing educational opportunities for visitors to engage with the cultural and natural heritage of the area. Furthermore, the route's connection to historical landmarks and irrigation systems underscores the importance of preserving Alicante's intangible heritage, blending cultural appreciation with ecological stewardship. By integrating these components, the project fosters a holistic approach that not only protects the region's cultural and natural legacy but also positions it as a sustainable tourism model for long-term socio-economic and environmental benefits.

The initial analysis of Alicante's historical, cultural, and geographical context provides a foundational understanding of the region's unique heritage and challenges. Building on this framework, the following sections focus on revitalizing the Santa Faz pilgrimage through thoughtfully selected routes that integrate heritage conservation, environmental sustainability, and community participation. This integrated approach not only addresses the identified challenges but also ensures that the proposed interventions are rooted in a deep understanding of the region's historical and cultural significance.

2.3. Expected Outcomes and Intervention Fronts

One of the core advantages of revitalizing the Santa Faz Pilgrimage routes is the potential for sustained economic benefits for Alicante's local businesses and the job market. By positioning the pilgrimage as a cornerstone of cultural and heritage tourism, the project is projected to stimulate the local economy through increased visitor numbers and enhanced tourism services. Moreover, the project seeks to prioritize community engagement through direct employment opportunities in areas such as path restoration, maintenance of pilgrimage infrastructure, and development of eco-friendly facilities. These efforts aim to elevate Alicante's status within the cultural tourism sector while fostering economic resilience for local businesses and entrepreneurs linked to the tourism industry.

The restoration of the Santa Faz pilgrimage routes will contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, promote sustainable tourism, and create employment opportunities in the region. The challenges and opportunities associated with integrating these routes into the "Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe" have been identified.

Two main intervention fronts emerge: restoring the old paths (Cruz de Piedra, Benimagrell, Costa, Villafranqueza, Los Ángeles, and the Serra Grossa trail), which remain intact yet are currently underutilized, and creating a permanent leisure area for pilgrims around the Santa Faz district, serving as a gathering space between the Juncaret ravine channel and the Cruz de Piedra path.

The introduction of these revitalized paths not only preserves the cultural and historical significance of the pilgrimage but also serves as a catalyst for economic growth by drawing tourists year-round. The project is expected to lead to new opportunities for local artisans, gastronomic businesses, and tourism-focused enterprises, encouraging sustainable development that benefits the community.

2.4. Proposed Routes

Three alternative routes are proposed. The first, a “green route”, follows the current path behind the quarry (an old livestock and quarry cart path), recovering part of the now-unused train track after the quarry tunnel became operational. From there, the route will follow the northern edge of the Serra Grossa, continuing along the Cruz de Piedra and Benimagrell paths. The second route starts from Villafranqueza, following the Orgegia road to Santa Faz. The third route follows the traditional path from the Monastery/Hermitage of Los Ángeles to the Santa Faz Monastery (Figure 20).

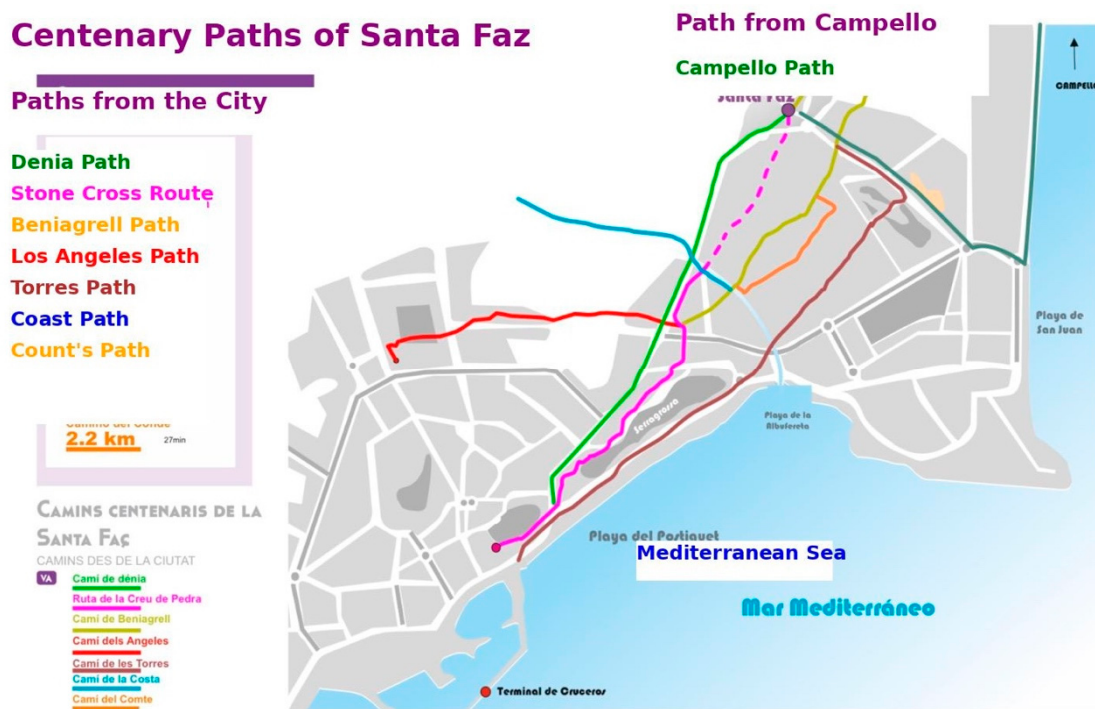


Figure 20. Centuries-Old Paths of Santa Faz. Source: Belén Alejandro, Designer.

The selection of the proposed routes was guided by several carefully considered criteria to ensure their alignment with the study’s goals. Historical relevance was prioritized, focusing on paths with documented connections to significant landmarks such as the Monastery of Santa Faz and historical towers. The ecological restoration potential of each route was another decisive factor, emphasizing paths suitable for reforestation and conservation efforts using native species to enhance biodiversity. Accessibility and integration into existing urban and rural infrastructure were also critical considerations, ensuring the routes could accommodate modern pilgrimage needs while retaining their traditional essence. Lastly, cultural and experiential values played a role in selecting routes that provide meaningful interactions with Alicante’s historical and natural heritage.

This integrated approach not only ensures the preservation of heritage value but also contributes to the development of sustainable landscapes through ecological restoration efforts along the routes.

The Santa Faz Pilgrimage Project aligns closely with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). To ensure coherence, the methodological approach integrates a participatory framework involving local communities, cultural associations, and municipal authorities in planning and implementation, aligning with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). This multidisciplinary strategy ensures that the scientific

foundation of the project is robust, linking cultural heritage conservation with broader environmental and socio-economic objectives.

Future reforestation efforts along the pilgrimage paths are anticipated to positively impact local biodiversity and habitat quality. By introducing native flora such as carob, olive, and almond trees, the project aims to improve soil stability and create enhanced habitats for local fauna. These restoration activities are expected to support ecological resilience while enriching the sensory experience for pilgrims, fostering an environment that reflects the region's historical landscape.

Each restoration route will involve three essential elements:

- Intensive landscape recovery through reforestation with traditional and native species (carob, olive, almond, etc.);
- Provision of supply points at strategic locations, utilizing temporary architecture installations that can be dismantled as needed;
- A large arrival and gathering space near Santa Faz for pilgrims.

The paths would be established as year-round routes, offering a journey that evokes the traditional landscape of the Alicante huerta. The goal is to encourage pilgrims to travel on foot rather than by vehicle, immersing themselves in an environment that preserves remnants of the historical pilgrimage landscape. This route aims to revive and enhance the huerta paths, providing an alternative to the modern urban landscape.

To achieve this, it will be necessary to restore these paths and ensure they are passable along their entire length (for example, the Cruz de Piedra path is currently interrupted by the Orgegia ravine channel). Informational panels or QR codes would be installed to minimize invasive physical elements, offering information about the Pilgrimage, Santa Faz, huerta watchtowers, and historical irrigation systems. Recreational and rest areas will also be created to enhance the visitor experience.

2.5. Creating a Pilgrimage Leisure Zone Around the Santa Faz District

The creation of a permanent, year-round leisure area for pilgrims around the Santa Faz district (a gathering space) between the Juncaret ravine channel and the Cruz de Piedra path is essential. The gathering space would be an open, expansive area appropriate for a human gathering on the scale of the pilgrimage. It would be accompanied by a restructuring of the Santa Faz urban layout, integrating both the areas behind the Monastery (toward National Highway 332) and the space on the opposite side, connected by a large elevated passageway with landscape-integrated design.

In general, the project seeks to enhance the tributary spaces of the pilgrimage through a recovery of the landscape's memory. The project's fundamental aim is the restoration of ancient paths and the development of alternative routes for the annual Santa Faz pilgrimage, allowing for year-round use and gradually reducing reliance on National Highway 332 as the sole event route.

Moreover, this project should aim to revalue Alicante's culture and heritage (including huerta watchtowers, irrigation systems, etc.), promoting tourism, economic growth, and, consequently, local employment.

There should be a focus on promoting local culture and architecture, regional gastronomy, the "water routes", and more. This would logically require changes to the urban planning of affected areas to ensure leisure spaces and transit routes. Similarly, a public Employment Promotion Project would be necessary to refurbish all old paths, landscaping, outdoor furniture, signage, and more.

The ultimate goal is to include the "paths of the Santa Faz" within the "Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe" program (Figure 21).



Figure 21. Project: The Paths of the Holy Face.

A revitalized Santa Faz Pilgrimage pathway would significantly benefit the local economy by fostering opportunities for local businesses, artisans, and service providers connected to the pilgrimage. Small businesses, including regional food vendors, artisans, and accommodations, would see increased demand, aligning with sustainable tourism models. Additionally, the route's enhancement promotes job creation in heritage preservation, sustainable tourism management, and event logistics, contributing to regional employment and economic stability.

2.6. The Santa Faz Pilgrimage Project and the SDGs

As we have briefly mentioned earlier, the proposed project for the Santa Faz Pilgrimage aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Table 1 lists the relevant SDGs and the specific measures within those goals that the project addresses.

The proposed study to revitalize and enhance the historical paths of the Santa Faz pilgrimage aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing specific measures related to sustainable cities, responsible production and consumption, climate action, life on land, peace, justice, and strong institutions, as well as partnerships for the goals.

Table 1. SDGs related to the proposal and proposed measures.

SDG	Proposed Measure
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	The study examines the impact of urban development on traditional pilgrimage routes and proposes modifications to the current urban plan to revitalize the historical paths of the Santa Faz.
SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production	The study proposes the creation of sustainable tourism infrastructure along alternative pilgrimage routes, as well as reforestation with local species to promote more sustainable tourism.
SDG 13: Climate Action	The study recommends reforesting the pilgrimage routes with native species as part of a strategy for climate change adaptation and mitigation.
SDG 15: Life on Land	The study proposes reforesting the pilgrimage routes with local species to contribute to the conservation of terrestrial ecosystems and biodiversity.
SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	The study emphasizes the importance of ongoing research and interdisciplinary collaboration to ensure the long-term preservation and enhancement of pilgrimage spaces and sacred sites.
SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals	The study highlights the need for collaboration and cooperation among different stakeholders, including local institutions, the community, and experts, to promote cultural heritage conservation and sustainable development in Alicante.

Own elaboration.

2.7. Perceptions of Tour Guides and Adult Citizens on the Santa Faz Pilgrimage: A Qualitative Analysis of Its Cultural, Educational, and Sustainable Value

To explore the role of the Santa Faz Pilgrimage in promoting cultural heritage and its potential as a sustainable tourism resource, a qualitative survey was conducted.

The survey conducted for this study targeted two distinct groups: local tour guides and adults participating in cultural seminars related to the Santa Faz Pilgrimage. The group of tour guides ($n = 12$) ranged in age from 25 to 55 years, with an average of 10 years of professional experience in the field of cultural and historical tourism. These individuals were selected for their in-depth knowledge of the region's heritage and their direct engagement with tourists, providing valuable insights into the practical challenges and opportunities related to the pilgrimage.

The second group, referred to as 'adults' ($n = 25$), consisted of participants attending cultural and educational seminars organized at the University of Alicante Headquarters. This group was diverse, including university students (aged 20–30) and local activists involved in heritage preservation (aged 30–60). Their perspectives reflected a range of personal and professional connections to the Santa Faz Pilgrimage, offering a comprehensive view of its cultural, social, and economic implications. The diversity of this group allowed the study to capture a wide array of opinions, from those focused on cultural heritage to those considering its potential for sustainable tourism.

The surveys were structured around key themes: the cultural and historical significance of the pilgrimage, its connection to community identity, the role of historical figures such as the Franciscans and the Borgias, and the potential for establishing permanent pilgrimage routes. Questions were designed to elicit both qualitative insights and quantitative trends, providing a nuanced understanding of participant perspectives.

The data collection process followed ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent and participant anonymity. Responses were analyzed using thematic coding for qualitative data and descriptive statistics for multiple-choice questions. Thematic coding identified recurring patterns and unique insights, while quantitative analysis highlighted trends in stakeholder perceptions.

The survey results inform the study's recommendations for integrating cultural heritage conservation with sustainable tourism practices. By grounding the proposed revitalization of the Santa Faz Pilgrimage in community perceptions, the research ensures that the project aligns with local priorities and fosters stakeholder engagement (Table 2).

Table 2. Questionnaire Questions for the Qualitative Analysis of Santa Faz and Its Pilgrimage.

Survey Questions	
1	How do you believe the history and cultural significance of the Santa Faz relic influence the visitor experience at the Santa Faz Monastery in Alicante?
2	From your perspective as a tour guide, how would you approach narrating the “miracles” associated with Santa Faz to engage a diverse audience while respecting everyone’s beliefs?
3	Considering the role of the Franciscans and their connection to the Borgias, how do you think these historical elements add value to the narrative of the Santa Faz Monastery for visitors?
4	When explaining the history of the Santa Faz Camarín, how would you use the mystery and controversy surrounding the “new Da Vinci Code” (the affiliation of several 17th-century artists with the Alumbrados sect) to capture tourists’ attention without deviating from historical facts?
5	Given doubts about the authenticity of the Santa Faz and historical crises, how would you handle tourist inquiries about these controversies to provide an informative and balanced experience?
6	To what extent has your knowledge of Santa Faz deepened your appreciation for Alicante’s history?
7	Would you support the idea of permanently establishing the Santa Faz Paths throughout the year, with routes, information points, and rest areas as an educational, cultural, and tourist resource?

Own elaboration.

The analysis of responses reveals several key themes, highlighting the guides’ appreciation of Santa Faz as a cultural and tourism resource. First, most respondents emphasize the relic’s importance in distinguishing Alicante from other tourist destinations, underscoring its value beyond religion as a symbol of local identity. For many guides, Santa Faz’s history and symbolism enhance visitors’ interest, adding an emotional connection that enriches the tourist experience.

Another recurring theme is the neutral and respectful approach guides adopt in narrating the miracles associated with Santa Faz. Respondents indicated that they maintain an impartial stance, presenting the miracles as part of Alicante’s culture and allowing visitors to interpret the events from their own beliefs. This inclusive approach is seen as an effective strategy to engage a diverse audience and to strengthen the relationship between cultural tourism and respect for diverse beliefs.

Guides also highlight the influence of historical figures like the Franciscans and the Borgias, noting that these characters add a “historical mystique” that piques tourists’ interest. Respondents suggest that connections with renowned figures, especially the Borgias, add value to tours and contextualize Santa Faz’s local historical significance.

The mystery of the Santa Faz Camarín, as well as theories comparable to the Da Vinci Code, are viewed by guides as tools to captivate visitors. Respondents note that Camarín’s associated mystery adds special appeal for those seeking unique cultural experiences, allowing guides to enrich their narratives without straying from historical facts.

Finally, and of particular interest in this study, the guides express support for creating permanent Santa Faz routes as a resource to foster Alicante’s sustainable development. Most respondents believe that a well-organized route with information points and rest areas would enable Alicante to diversify its tourism offerings beyond the summer months, contributing to the conservation and appreciation of its cultural heritage and educating both local and visiting populations (Table 3).

Table 3. Highlights from Tour Guide Responses.

Concept or Key Idea	Description
Cultural and historical importance of the relic	Guides view the relic as adding distinctive value to Alicante, both religiously and culturally, promoting local identity.
Neutrality and respect in interpreting miracles	A respectful approach is emphasized, maintaining a neutral stance on the miracles and allowing tourists a personal interpretation.
Impact of the Franciscans and the Borgias in the narrative	The Franciscans and Borgias add a “historical mystique” that heightens visitor interest and enriches the Santa Faz story.
Leveraging the Camarín mystery	The Camarín mystery is strategically used to capture tourists’ attention without deviating from historical facts.
Professional handling of authenticity controversies	Guides prefer addressing questions about Santa Faz’s authenticity from an objective, informative perspective, avoiding conflict.
Support for permanent routes for sustainable tourism	There is consensus on the need for permanent routes that, beyond education, contribute to Alicante’s sustainable tourism.

Own elaboration.

In conclusion, the perceptions of tour guides indicate a strong recognition of the Santa Faz Pilgrimage’s educational and cultural value, which, when properly managed, could play a crucial role in promoting sustainable tourism in the region.

In this regard and relevant to this publication, this analysis provides a comprehensive view of how local actors perceive and value this festivity, reinforcing the proposal to incorporate the Santa Faz as a key tool for preserving Alicante’s heritage and identity.

The same seminar was held for adults at the University of Alicante’s University Headquarters a few months later. Twenty-five attendees completed the online survey, answering the same questions as those presented to the tour guides (Figure 22).

The qualitative analysis of responses from adult seminar participants on Santa Faz reveals several themes that highlight perceptions of the relic’s cultural and historical value. First, participants emphasize the importance of the relic as an emblem of Alicante’s cultural identity, noting that its journey to the city represents the role of faith and culture in local history. Many feel this distinctive element allows a deep connection with the region’s tradition and historical heritage.

Another significant theme is the neutral and respectful approach to interpreting the miracles associated with Santa Faz. Some participants appreciate how these stories contribute to community cohesion, while others reflect a skepticism that allows them to interpret the miracles as part of a historical context without compromising their own beliefs.

This diverse approach strengthens the relationship between cultural tourism and respect for diverse beliefs.



Figure 22. Audience attending our seminar on Santa Faz. Source: authors.

Furthermore, historical figures such as the Franciscans and the Borgias are perceived as elements that add context and depth to the Santa Faz narrative. Participants observe that these historical characters contribute a “historical mystique” that enriches the appreciation of the site and offers a unique perspective on the Santa Faz Monastery.

Stories of mystery surrounding the Camarín also captivate participants, encouraging them to explore and uncover the secrets of this space. This inclination toward mystery underscores Camarín’s ability to spark curiosity and interest in unique cultural experiences.

Finally, regarding controversies surrounding the authenticity of Santa Faz, responses reflect an appreciation for its cultural symbolism beyond historical accuracy. For some, the controversy heightens their interest in learning more about this symbol, emphasizing its role as a significant resource in the education and preservation of Alicante’s cultural heritage (Table 4).

Both qualitative analyses of the tour guides and the adult seminar participants on Santa Faz underscore the relic’s importance as a key cultural symbol for Alicante. Both groups view Santa Faz as an element that goes beyond religion, contributing to local identity and connecting visitors with the region’s historical heritage. However, while the tour guides emphasize its potential as a distinctive resource that sets Alicante apart from other destinations, the seminar participants focus on its role in local faith and tradition, attributing a spiritual dimension that enriches understanding of the city’s history.

Both groups also agree on the importance of maintaining a neutral and respectful approach in interpreting the miracles associated with the Santa Faz. This inclusive approach allows listeners to interpret the stories from their own beliefs, fostering respect for diverse

perspectives. Although there is this agreement, the tour guides adopt a strictly impartial stance to appeal to a diverse audience, while the seminar participants show divided opinions; some value these stories as community cohesion elements, while others take a skeptical view, seeing the miracles primarily as historical elements.

Table 4. Key Questions and Representative Responses from the Santa Faz Seminar.

Key Question	Representative Response
How does the story of the Santa Faz relic make you feel, and how do you think its journey to Alicante reflects the importance of faith and culture in the city’s history?	The relic represents a fundamental component of Alicante’s cultural identity, reflecting the importance of faith and culture in local history.
When learning about the “miracles” associated with Santa Faz, what thoughts or emotions arise regarding how these ancient stories continue to influence modern communities?	The miracles and legends contribute to community cohesion; some participants believe these beliefs remain significant in today’s society.
How do you think the influence of the Franciscans and the connection with the Borgias have shaped the history and perception of the Santa Faz Monastery among visitors and locals?	The influence of the Franciscans and the Borgias adds context and depth, enhancing the historical and cultural value of the Santa Faz.
With the mystery surrounding the Camarín of the Santa Faz, do you feel more intrigued to visit and discover the secrets it might hold?	The mysteries surrounding the Camarín spark curiosity, encouraging participants to explore and discover its secrets.
Knowing that Santa Faz has been the subject of controversy and scrutiny, how does this affect your interest in learning more about this religious and cultural symbol?	The controversy around Santa Faz’s authenticity doesn’t diminish interest; instead, for some, it increases their desire to learn more about this cultural symbol.

Own elaboration.

The influence of historical figures such as the Franciscans and the Borgia family is another prominent theme in both analyses. For both groups, these figures add a “mysticism” that enriches the Santa Faz narrative and provides cultural depth. However, while the guides see these figures as a tool to draw tourists’ attention through renowned historical references, the participants appreciate their contribution in terms of historical context, valuing the uniqueness these figures bring to the Santa Faz Monastery.

Regarding the mystery surrounding the Camarín of the Santa Faz, both guides and participants consider this aspect to add a unique appeal to the site. The guides use it as a narrative tool to maintain visitors’ interest, while the participants experience a personal curiosity, expressing a desire to explore this space and uncover its secrets.

Concerning the authenticity controversy, both groups acknowledge that its value as a cultural symbol does not depend on its historical accuracy. The guides approach authenticity from an objective perspective, allowing visitors to form their own opinions, while participants see the controversy as a feature that increases their interest in learning more about this symbol, considering it a characteristic that enhances its value as an educational and heritage resource.

In summary, both the tour guides and seminar participants share a deep appreciation of Santa Faz as a cultural resource. Due to their professional and formative involvement, the guides highlight their role in tourism promotion and their ability to capture visitors’ interest, while the adult participants show a more personal connection oriented towards its educational and cultural preservation value. This comparison highlights the multifunctional nature of the Santa Faz, which can be used for both tourism and the promotion of heritage education and conservation in Alicante.

In the following heatmap, the strengths of the relationship between key ideas about Santa Faz and the two groups—Tour Guides and Seminar Participants—are represented. The intensity of each cell's color indicates the level of connection, with both groups showing a strong alignment on most topics, though there is slight variation in the interpretation of miracles and the handling of authenticity (Figure 23).

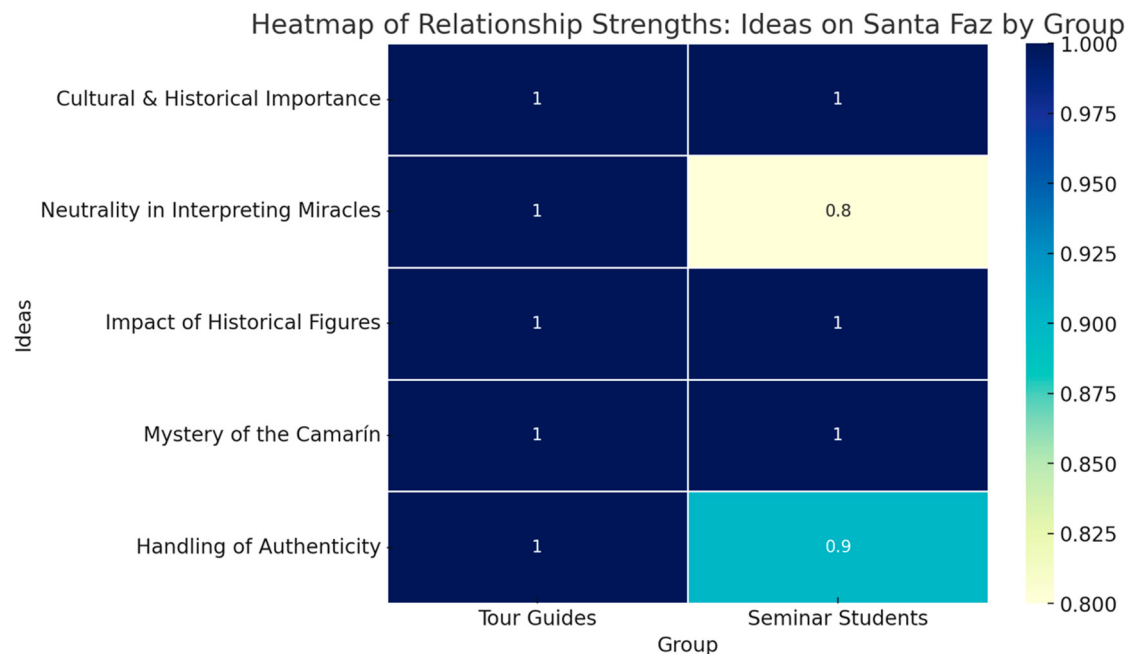


Figure 23. Heatmap showing the strengths of the relationship between key ideas about Santa Faz and the two surveyed groups. Own elaboration.

3. Discussion

Tourism plays a critical role in Alicante's economy, with the province welcoming approximately 5.4 million foreign visitors in the first three quarters of 2023 alone, representing a 25% increase from the previous year and a 7% rise from pre-pandemic levels in 2019. These tourists contributed EUR 6.8 billion to the local economy, with an average expenditure of EUR 1254 per person and an average stay of ten days. Tourism is a key driver of employment and business growth in Alicante, significantly benefiting local enterprises such as hotels, restaurants, and cultural attractions. This strong economic contribution underscores the importance of aligning cultural heritage projects, such as the revitalization of the Santa Faz Pilgrimage, with broader tourism strategies to maximize socio-economic benefits for the region.

To complement this study's qualitative insights, future research could integrate quantitative methods to assess the perceptions of potential tourists. Surveys could explore their awareness of the Santa Faz Pilgrimage, motivations for visiting, and perceived barriers to tourism development in the area. These data would provide valuable insights into how the pilgrimage can be positioned as a cultural tourism destination within Alicante's competitive tourism landscape. Additionally, examining factors such as accessibility, infrastructure, and environmental considerations through quantitative analyses would further strengthen the methodological framework and provide actionable recommendations for enhancing the pilgrimage's appeal.

The Santa Faz Pilgrimage is one of the most significant cultural and religious events in Alicante, drawing thousands of participants annually. Although this study primarily focuses on the qualitative analysis of local stakeholders' perceptions, the importance of the pilgrimage in fostering cultural and economic benefits for the region is evident. As

highlighted in the article, the pilgrimage not only reinforces local identity but also serves as a driver of cultural tourism. Its potential to contribute to sustainable tourism development aligns with the study's objectives, supporting local businesses, creating employment opportunities, and encouraging year-round visitor engagement. The revitalization of traditional routes and the enhancement of infrastructure are expected to strengthen the pilgrimage's role as a socio-economic asset, fostering sustainable practices and community participation. Future research could expand on this foundation by quantitatively examining visitor demographics, annual tourism statistics, and economic contributions, further solidifying the pilgrimage's impact on Alicante's development.

Additionally, promoting the Santa Faz Pilgrimage as part of the broader European network of cultural routes could enhance its visibility among international tourists. Initiatives such as digital marketing campaigns, collaborations with travel agencies, and partnerships with cultural tourism organizations may serve to attract a wider audience while emphasizing the site's historical, cultural, and environmental significance. These efforts would align with the broader objectives of cultural heritage conservation and sustainable tourism development.

In the field of cultural tourism, slow routes, particularly pedestrian and cycling paths, are considered valuable resources for the sustainable, social, and economic development of territories (Scandiffio 2019). Cultural routes, as defined by the Council of Europe, broaden the concept of cultural heritage conservation and enhancement to a more extensive territorial perspective that integrates tangible and intangible heritage, as well as natural and built heritage, into a cohesive whole. Within this framework, cultural routes, primarily used to rediscover the territory through the slow travel experience, require documentation and classification as a system of dispersed cultural heritage across the territory, utilizing innovative and effective tools.

In this regard, the SQISR method (Spatial Quality Index of Slow Routes) has been proposed as an approach that, at a territorial level, enables the analysis of spatial characteristics of slow routes through GIS-based mapping techniques while also allowing for the comparison of alternative routes based on a set of heterogeneous indicators (Scandiffio 2019). This tool would be fundamental to the implementation of the proposed project.

Regarding significant examples exploring different aspects of pilgrimage routes and sacred sites, their sustainable management, and local community involvement, we can consider ethno-visual tourism, which utilizes visual media to explore the cultural heritage of a destination, generating economic benefits and promoting investment in cultural heritage conservation projects and infrastructure (Loria et al. 2023), as exemplified in a case study in Adjara, Georgia. This approach emphasizes the importance of community involvement and responsible tourism practices for environmental sustainability. Another notable example is the Inanda Heritage Route in Durban, South Africa, developed for the 2010 FIFA World Cup (Marschall 2012). It examines tourist experiences, predominantly from international football fans, and assesses tourism sustainability with a focus on community participation and cultural heritage management, arguing that sustainable success in alternative tourism requires greater community involvement.

From another perspective, the interdependence between sustainable urban tourism and energy-efficient architecture is examined (Štahan 2018), highlighting the importance of stakeholder engagement, regional cooperation, sustainable urban mobility, and social and environmental innovation for successful sustainable urban tourism, including environmentally acceptable waste management and natural habitat preservation.

Focusing on the management and conservation of pilgrimage routes and sacred sites, heritage management and conservation activities, local communities, and tourism development have been examined in the Kii World Heritage Site (WHS) following its

designation (Jimura 2016). Findings indicate that WHS designation has strengthened local identity, increased local pride in culture and place of residence, and triggered a revitalization of local culture. Additionally, despite increased visitor numbers since the UNESCO inscription, negative tourism impacts appear minimal.

Furthermore, the concept of stakeholder participation has been explored in the management and conservation of Ireland's sacred Croagh Patrick mountain (Enongene and Griffin 2018), examining the factors that facilitate and hinder the effectiveness of this new partnership in promoting sustainable management of this natural sacred site, which simultaneously serves as a pilgrimage and tourism location.

Studies have also examined the development of pilgrimage paths and faith-based tourism practitioners in more than ten countries (Olsen et al. 2023), analyzing circular pilgrimages in the Netherlands, "anti-pilgrimages" in the United Kingdom, and the revitalization of ancient trails like the Old Way to Canterbury, the Kumano Kodo in Japan, and new routes such as the Sufi Trail in Turkey.

As cultural heritage sites face increasing threats from urban expansion and modernization, sustainable approaches to tourism provide a pathway for preserving not only physical heritage but also the intangible elements that imbue spaces with significance. This study positions the Santa Faz Pilgrimage within this global conversation, proposing a model of heritage tourism that both conserves Alicante's cultural identity and aligns with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

This project draws upon frameworks within intangible cultural heritage preservation and sustainable tourism, particularly those that integrate environmental stewardship with the cultural enrichment of participants. In light of this, slow tourism models have proven especially relevant for pilgrimage paths, given their focus on low-impact travel and deeper cultural engagement. The Council of Europe's Cultural Routes initiative exemplifies this approach by promoting routes that blend cultural appreciation with environmental sustainability and local economic support.

Recent literature highlights a number of successful sustainable pilgrimage models across Europe, such as the Kumano Kodo in Japan and the Inanda Heritage Route in South Africa, where sustainable tourism frameworks are employed to balance cultural preservation with visitor management. These models emphasize environmental sustainability, community involvement, and heritage conservation, which are essential components of the Santa Faz project. Integrating similar practices can not only protect but also enhance the pilgrimage's cultural and educational value, ensuring its relevance and accessibility for future generations.

Comparative studies on European pilgrimage routes, such as Spain's Camino de Santiago, the Kumano Kodo in Japan, and Ireland's Croagh Patrick, highlight the diverse approaches to managing culturally significant paths. Each route presents unique practices and challenges in integrating sustainable tourism models with traditional pilgrimage experiences. Similar to these, the Santa Faz pilgrimage pathway exemplifies Alicante's heritage through a sustainable, community-centered framework, fostering both ecological and socio-cultural resilience. Unlike the Camino de Santiago's expansive infrastructure, which accommodates international pilgrims year-round, the Santa Faz pilgrimage remains more localized, preserving an intimate community connection. This project's comparative approach could contribute valuable insights into how smaller-scale pilgrimages like Santa Faz could be promoted within the European network of cultural routes while retaining their local identity and traditions. Aligning these practices with sustainable tourism, as well as European cultural heritage frameworks, reinforces the pilgrimage's role not just as a religious journey but as a catalyst for economic growth and cultural preservation within Alicante's community.

Given the findings, this study presents essential implications for regional tourism policies aimed at integrating sustainable practices within heritage tourism. By prioritizing environmental resilience and community involvement, local and regional authorities can draw from the Santa Faz Pilgrimage framework to enhance not only the conservation of culturally significant paths but also the socioeconomic welfare of host communities. Such policies might include zoning modifications for historical routes, incentives for heritage-friendly businesses, and broader adoption of sustainable infrastructure within tourism development zones. In doing so, Alicante can serve as a model for other municipalities seeking to balance cultural preservation with sustainable growth.

To deepen the understanding of the Santa Faz Pilgrimage's influence, future research could focus on longitudinal studies examining the socio-economic impact of the pilgrimage on Alicante's local economy, assessing how job creation, community pride, and small business support evolve over time. Additionally, it would be beneficial to conduct environmental impact assessments on the reforestation and sustainability efforts associated with the pilgrimage paths, documenting changes in biodiversity, habitat quality, and visitor satisfaction. Expanding this work to include comparisons with other European pilgrimages, like those managed under sustainable tourism frameworks, would provide insights into best practices for balancing visitor engagement with ecological preservation.

The Santa Faz pilgrimage operates at the intersection of religious tradition and contemporary societal dynamics, reflecting the broader context of secularization in modern Spain. Despite the increasingly secular nature of society, the pilgrimage continues to be a deeply rooted cultural and spiritual event. While the religious dimension remains central, its significance as a symbol of regional identity has fostered cooperation between secular authorities and the Church.

Local authorities and the Church have historically collaborated in the organization and execution of the pilgrimage, with municipal support evident in logistical planning, security measures, and infrastructure maintenance. These collaborations underscore the recognition of the pilgrimage's dual role as both a religious ritual and a cultural heritage event.

Nonetheless, the custodial role of local authorities in the pilgrimage highlights a pragmatic approach that transcends potential conflicts. By framing the event as a cultural and historical asset, both the Church and municipal entities emphasize its broader societal value. This cooperative dynamic ensures that the pilgrimage remains inclusive and relevant, accommodating both its religious participants and those who engage with it as a cultural tradition.

Currently, the Santa Faz pilgrimage is actively promoted as a key cultural and religious event in Alicante's tourism portfolio. Platforms such as the official Alicante Turismo website (<https://alicanteturismo.com/es/romeria-santa-faz/>, accessed on 1 December 2024) provide detailed information about the pilgrimage's historical significance, itinerary and associated events. The website emphasizes its role as one of the most deeply rooted traditions in the region, attracting thousands of participants annually. Promotion is further supported by digital campaigns, brochures, and collaborations with local tourism offices and cultural organizations.

However, while these promotional efforts raise awareness of the pilgrimage, there remains an opportunity to enhance its visibility, particularly among international audiences. Aligning the promotion of Santa Faz with broader sustainable tourism campaigns could strengthen its appeal. For instance, highlighting its connections to the region's natural landscapes, reforestation initiatives, and eco-friendly infrastructure could position the pilgrimage as a unique experience that blends cultural, spiritual, and environmental di-

mensions. Expanding digital outreach through targeted campaigns on social media and partnerships with travel platforms could also attract younger and more diverse audiences.

Integrating these enhanced promotional strategies with the proposed revitalization efforts, such as the development of sustainable infrastructure and community involvement, would not only preserve the pilgrimage's cultural and spiritual essence but also elevate its profile as a key element of Alicante's tourism offer.

4. Conclusions

This study offers a multidimensional approach to cultural heritage management by focusing on the revitalization of intangible heritage in Alicante through the preservation and enhancement of the Santa Faz pilgrimage routes. By proposing a sustainable model that integrates reforestation, community involvement, and socio-economic benefits, the study demonstrates how traditional pilgrimage practices can align with modern principles of sustainable tourism and environmental stewardship. These initiatives not only contribute to local cultural identity but also support Alicante's broader socio-economic goals, fostering economic growth through tourism, creating employment opportunities, and strengthening community pride and cohesion.

The analysis highlights the significant contribution of tourism to Alicante's local economy, as evidenced by recent data: 5.4 million foreign tourists visited the region in the first three quarters of 2023, contributing EUR 6.8 billion to the economy. This underscores the strategic importance of integrating the Santa Faz Pilgrimage into Alicante's broader tourism framework, aligning heritage conservation with sustainable development. By restoring pilgrimage paths, reforesting historical routes, and creating environmentally sustainable infrastructures, the project illustrates a balanced model for preserving intangible cultural heritage while addressing local socio-economic and environmental needs.

Community involvement emerges as a central element in the development of such initiatives, especially given the spiritual and religious dimensions that characterize the pilgrimage. Qualitative studies, like the one conducted in this research, offer valuable insights to guide participatory processes, ensuring that local voices remain at the core of implementation efforts. These community-centered strategies align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), providing a framework for the long-term conservation and enhancement of Alicante's intangible cultural heritage.

Future research should aim to build on this foundation by incorporating quantitative methods to explore the perceptions of potential tourists, as well as examining the barriers and motivations for visiting the pilgrimage. Surveys targeting potential visitors would provide actionable data to refine promotional strategies and infrastructure development. Furthermore, integrating comprehensive economic assessments into future studies would enhance the evidence base, ensuring that heritage revitalization aligns with both community and tourism objectives.

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