

# Heritage railways as tourist attractions: a systematic review

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## ABSTRACT

Heritage railways represent a unique form of cultural tourism, offering immersive travel experiences that combine heritage value, historical authenticity, scenic appeal, and community engagement. Operating heritage railways also contribute to regional economic development, cultural preservation, and the strengthening of community connections. This systematic literature review aims to critically analyse studies on heritage railways operating as tourist attractions, with a specific focus on the factors contributing to their success and sustainability, as well as the common challenges they encounter. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines, a systematic search was conducted in March 2025 across five electronic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Ultimate, and Inspec). The Critical Appraisal Skills program (CASP) was used to assess the study quality. A total of 23 peer-reviewed studies were included, and the evidence was narratively synthesised. Insights from various global heritage railway case studies regarding success factors and challenges were used to inform future recommendations for heritage railway operators, tourism stakeholders, policymakers, and government authorities.

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## KEYWORDS

Heritage railways; cultural tourism; attractions; success factors; challenges; sustainability; systematic review; PRISMA

## Introduction

Heritage railways represent unique tourist attractions, drawing visitors from around the world by offering a combination of historical authenticity, cultural value and immersive travel experiences. Heritage railways comprise preserved and restored railway lines, rolling stock, stations, and infrastructure (Halsall, 2001). Every heritage railway has its own history, often serving as an important transportation line or supporting industries such as mining. These histories deserve to be preserved and passed on to future generations. Following widespread railway closures in the middle of the twentieth century, many of the disused routes were revitalised and are currently operated by volunteers or non-profit organisations (Bhati et al., 2014; Rhoden et al., 2009). In many countries,

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