U Thong Ancient City : Where Heritage Lives.

U Thong Ancient City, Thailand
Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (Public Organization) (DASTA)
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story

U Thong, the ancient Dvaravati-period capital in Thailand's Suphan Buri and once a key Suvarnabhumi trading crossroads, risked seeing its traditional knowledge, ethnic customs and historical narratives fade under rapid development, threatening not just archaeological remains but community identity itself. The community founded the Khao Phra Folk Museum in 2008 through the collaboration of a local temple abbot and residents, then, with support from Thailand's Fine Arts Department, DASTA and the Suphan Buri Provincial Cultural Office, trained community scholars and young people as local interpreters leading heritage trails, festivals and museum experiences connected to the U Thong National Museum, while integrating digital media and multilingual interpretation to make Dvaravati history accessible. This created jobs (including electric shuttle services and tram tours run by the U Thong Dvaravati Community-Based Tourism Club) and drew 436,174 visitors to the ancient city in 2024, contributing to Suphan Buri Province's 4.33% visitor growth to nearly 5 million in 2025. The core lesson: heritage conservation is sustainable only when local people feel genuine ownership and pride in their history, achieved by building partnerships and community participation from the very beginning.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
To fully appreciate this story, one must visit the Ancient City of U Thong in Suphan Buri the historic cradle where Thailand's cultural and spiritual identity began. Between the 3rd and 11th Buddhist centuries, U Thong was the thriving capital of the Dvaravati Kingdom and a vital crossroads of Suvarnabhumi (the Golden Peninsula).

It was a vibrant melting pot where East met West via ancient trade routes, and where Theravada Buddhism first took root in the region.

Today, the landscape still whispers its history through ancient moats, earthen ramparts, and unearthed treasures like trade beads and terracotta amulets that connect locals directly to their ancestry. Though shifting maritime routes eventually caused the city to decline, its legacy endured.

This story truly belongs here because U Thong is now experiencing a sustainable awakening. Designated by DASTA as a " Designated Area for Sustainable Tourism," the community is actively bridging its profound archaeological past with the present. The initiative thrives here because it transforms ancient roots into mindful, community-led cultural tourism, ensuring this historical masterpiece is preserved by the very people who call it home.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
When local communities and stakeholders began to recognize that rapid development and social change were gradually overshadowing the cultural wisdom, ethnic traditions, and unique identity that had shaped the area for centuries.

While development brought new economic and tourism opportunities, it also raised concerns that traditional knowledge, local customs, and historical narratives could slowly fade away. At stake was not only the preservation of archaeological remains, but also the cultural identity and sense of pride that connect the community to its heritage.

This growing awareness inspired a shared commitment to act. Communities, government agencies, and local partners came together to pursue a more sustainable path—one that balances heritage conservation, environmental stewardship, and economic development. Their common goal was to ensure that U Thong's rich cultural legacy would continue to thrive, while creating meaningful opportunities and improving the quality of life for local residents.

The Vision: What you set out to do
The vision of U Thong was to ensure that its history, local wisdom, and traditions would remain a living part of the community and be passed on to future generations.

This vision inspired the establishment of Khao Phra Folk Museum in 2008 at Wat Khao Phra Si Sanphetchayaram through the collaboration of Phra Kru Phiphitthamakhun and local residents.

The museum preserves local history, traditional lifestyles, wisdom, and customs through collections of artifacts discovered in the area or donated by local families as treasured heirlooms.

More importantly, it serves as a space where the community tells its own story. Through cultural tourism activities, community scholars and young people work together as local interpreters, sharing the history and identity of U Thong with visitors. What motivated them was a shared belief that heritage should not remain silent in museums, but continue to live through people, creating pride, learning opportunities, and a lasting legacy for future generations.

The Journey: How change happened

The transformation of U Thong began with a simple but powerful idea to bring the stories of the ancient city back to life. The first step was to revive the identity of the place by collecting historical evidence, local legends, traditional beliefs, and the everyday wisdom of the community.

These stories were then reinterpreted in ways that people could easily experience—through heritage trails, exhibitions, festivals, and community-based learning activities. Historical narratives were also connected with the U Thong National Museum, allowing visitors to journey through the history of U Thong from the Dvaravati period to the present day.

This transformation was made possible through collaboration among many partners. The Fine Arts Department contributed archaeological conservation and research expertise, while DASTA supported cultural and community-based tourism development. The Suphan Buri Provincial Cultural Office promoted cultural preservation and creativity, and local communities, including the Thai Phuan community at Ban Khao Phra, played an essential role in preserving traditions, local cuisine, and handicrafts. Educational institutions and scholars also joined the effort by expanding knowledge of Dvaravati history and culture.

Along the way, U Thong gradually evolved from an "ancient city for study" into a more creative and engaging heritage destination. Museums were redesigned to be more accessible to younger visitors. Historical routes were linked with community life, while cultural markets, traditional food, and living heritage activities brought the past closer to everyday experiences. Digital media, multilingual interpretation, and interactive learning tools helped make history easier to understand and more attractive to visitors.

The community itself also adapted and innovated. Local wisdom was transformed into new opportunities through weaving, traditional cuisine, homestays, and experiential tourism.

Information technology was introduced to support archaeological databases, while multimedia exhibitions and interactive learning routes created new ways for visitors to explore U Thong's heritage.

Step by step, these efforts helped U Thong preserve its historical and cultural values while creating new opportunities for tourism and community development. More importantly, they demonstrated that heritage is not only something to be protected—it is something that can continue to live, evolve, and inspire future generations.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

There was a time when some people saw U Thong's ancient monuments as relics of the past—places to visit once and then forget. Today, they tell a different story.

As cultural and historical tourism expanded, local people began to experience tangible improvements in their quality of life. New jobs and additional income were created through tourism-related activities. Unemployed residents found opportunities to provide electric shuttle services for elderly visitors, while the U Thong Dvaravati Community-Based Tourism Club and its partners operated tram services connecting the ancient city with surrounding community attractions. These activities generated income that spread throughout the community and encouraged responsible tourism management.

The change was not only economic, but also social and cultural. Young people began to rediscover local history and wisdom, taking pride in their cultural identity. What was once seen as merely "old ruins" is now regarded as a valuable heritage worth protecting and passing on.

The results are reflected in visitor numbers. In 2024, U Thong Ancient City welcomed 436,174 visitors, while Suphan Buri Province received 4,972,275 visitors in 2025, representing a growth of 4.33 percent. Today, U Thong is an important heritage destination where history, culture, and community continue to thrive together.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

The greatest challenge for U Thong has been finding a balance between preserving its cultural roots and promoting economic development through sustainable tourism. The goal has always been clear: to ensure that its rich history, traditions, and cultural heritage continue to thrive for future generations.

Walking through the ancient moats, archaeological sites, and museums that safeguard traces of the past has reminded us that heritage is not only about preserving places, but also about preserving meaning. The strongest lesson we have learned is that conservation can only be sustainable when local people feel a sense of ownership and pride in their heritage.

Looking back, we believe that building strong partnerships and encouraging community participation from the beginning are essential. Equally important is helping younger generations understand the value of their heritage and become active custodians of their community.

For visitors, U Thong offers more than a journey through history. It provides an opportunity to experience local culture and traditions through activities and tourism routes designed and shared by the very people who call this heritage their own.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

U Thong Ancient City has become an inspiring model of how cultural heritage can be preserved alongside sustainable development. Its story shows that communities can protect their historical roots, traditions, and local wisdom while creating new value through tourism, education, and the local economy.

This journey has inspired visitors to see heritage conservation not only as preserving the past, but also as passing on knowledge, identity, and pride to future generations. Local communities continue to play an active role in safeguarding cultural heritage, maintaining traditions, and promoting responsible cultural tourism.

Today, sustainable tourism in U Thong is driven by collaboration among communities, government agencies, the private sector, educational institutions, civil society, and young people. Cultural capital has become the foundation for learning and creative tourism through community tourism routes, history-based activities, digital media, and local products that reflect U Thong's identity.

Most importantly, U Thong reminds us that sustainability is possible when people work together to preserve their shared heritage and pass it on to future generations—a story that proves development and conservation can grow side by side.

Awards or Certifications

1. Green Destinations Top 100 Stories 2024
2. Thailand Tourism Awards 2025 (15th Edition) – Kinnaree Award for Sustainability, Tourist Attraction Category

This award reflects the commitment and collaboration of local communities in preserving cultural heritage and local wisdom in a genuine and sustainable way.

3. Thailand's Intangible Cultural Heritage List 2025 – Loy Krathong Sawan Tradition

Web Articles

1. U Thong Ancient City: Exploring the History and Heritage of Suvarnabhumi
https://explorersclub.baanlaesuan.com/trip/u-thong-legacy-of-the-ancient

2. Tracing the Dvaravati Civilization: The U Thong Ancient City Community
https://www.navanurak.in.th/U_Thong_Travel/index/application/index.php?lang=th

3. U Thong National Museum | Museum Thailand
https://www.museumthailand.com/th/museum/Au-Thong-National-Museum

4. Exploring the Prehistoric Era at U Thong Ancient City, Suphan Buri Province | PPTV HD 36
https://www.pptvhd36.com/travel/thailand/237401

Other Relevant Links
1. Local Food and Traditional Wisdom
https://youtu.be/LMrTT7ihh3U?si=KeXQzxid70FU7Eo7

2. Revisiting "Old U Thong": Discovering the Roots of Ancient History and Archaeological Heritage
https://youtu.be/pmbsvQk3CTc?si=3ogAkdZg63XKb8S8

3. The Foundation of Faith in the U Thong Community: From Traces of the Past to Contemporary Life
https://youtu.be/vXEqrpcw_ic?si=72aOVJSAZv-qhiso

4. Healthy Body, Peaceful Mind in U Thong
https://youtu.be/H0bqZRYM24s?si=3Z2GNL7b1j_9YCW3

5. Experiencing Community Life in U Thong Ancient City
https://youtu.be/QXb2JsvjNCE?si=ykkuBB5MMIpnqrGv

6. Healthy Living through Organic Agriculture at Ban Dong Yen
https://youtu.be/IKN0ZjRqmIs?si=VGNvQ3iW2iSw-UN9

U Thong: Discovering the History Route
https://youtu.be/HiB8jJ6rHbY?si=wJqLF9gPCszZZ6qA

https://1drv.ms/f/c/BBC8C554B6063DA0/IgBvbQLc7B3OR4j50-WzXlq4AQkLAM-AGd1bOt9QnGH6rnQ?e=3928ut

Quotes or Testimonials
In U Thong, heritage does not belong to the past. It lives in our stories, our traditions, and the way we welcome visitors into our community. Every journey here helps keep our history alive, creates opportunities for local people, and reminds us that the best way to preserve heritage is to share it with pride.

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