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Developing Railway Tourism Products In Vietnam: Current Situation And Solutions

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Abstract: *Railway tourism is emerging as a promising approach to diversifying tourism products. In this form of tourism, rail journeys serve not only as a means of transportation but also offer visitors experiences associated with landscapes, culture, and heritage. This study adopts a qualitative multiple-case study approach based on secondary data to examine four representative railway tourism products in Vietnam: the Central Heritage Connection Journey, the Red Flamboyant Train, the Hanoi Five Gates Train, and the Hue Ancient Capital – Phong Nha: World Heritage Journey. Using an analytical framework comprising five components of the experience chain, the study examines how tourism elements are integrated into railway operations, ranging from the addition of services and onboard experiences to passenger trains to the operation of themed tourist trains. The findings indicate that these products have introduced innovations in itinerary design, services, and experiential content, while initial forms of cooperation have emerged among the railway sector, local authorities, and travel businesses. However, limitations remain in connecting off-train services, organizing transfer arrangements, and disclosing information on revenue, visitor expenditure, and benefits to local communities. Based on these findings, the study proposes several solutions for developing railway tourism products in Vietnam in the coming years.*
Keywords: *Railway tourism; Tourism products; Experience chain; Service integration; Sustainable tourism.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In tourism, transportation is not merely a means of bringing visitors to tourist attractions; it can also contribute to shaping the travel experience. With its ability to connect different geographical regions, pass through areas of scenic beauty, and be associated with historical and cultural values, railway transport has considerable potential to be developed as a tourism product in which the journey itself becomes part of the attraction. Mertena and Kaaristo (2024) approach train tourism as a mobility practice associated with passengers' experiences and activities at destinations. Peira et al. (2024) emphasize the role of stakeholders in the railway tourism supply chain and the potential to create additional value for local communities by utilizing cultural, historical, and landscape resources. From a review perspective, Laowirojanakul et al. (2024) demonstrate that this field encompasses various dimensions, including heritage, infrastructure, services, communities, tourist behavior, and sustainability.

In Vietnam, the railway network passes through many localities with tourism potential. In recent years, the railway sector has collaborated with several local authorities to develop products that capitalize on these advantages. Notably, on July 31, 2026, the People's Committee of Quang Tri Province, the People's Committee of Hue City, and Vietnam Railways signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in developing the Hue Ancient Capital–Phong Nha railway tourism product at a workshop held in Quang Tri (Government Information Portal, 2026c). In addition, several products have been put into operation, including the "Central Heritage Connection Journey," the "Red Flamboyant Train," the "Hanoi Five Gates Train," and the "Hue Ancient Capital–Phong Nha: World Heritage Journey." Although these products adopt different approaches, they all seek to combine rail transportation with local landscapes, culture, heritage, and destination experiences. However, incorporating tourism elements into railway operations does not necessarily mean that transportation, onboard services, stations, destinations, and service providers are fully integrated. Although international studies have addressed various aspects of railway tourism, applying these approaches to analyze and compare products currently operating in Vietnam remains an area that deserves further attention. Publicly available information on these products is mainly released separately by route or locality, making it difficult to systematically assess aspects such as itinerary design, onboard services, station–destination connectivity, distribution, and experience management.

Against this background, this study addresses two research questions: (1) How do the selected cases incorporate tourism elements into railway operations? (2) Which components have been implemented, which remain at the planning or orientation stage, and which cannot yet be assessed due to insufficient publicly available information? To answer these questions, the study develops an analytical framework comprising five components and applies it to compare four representative railway tourism products in Vietnam. The research adopts a qualitative approach based on secondary data, focusing on how these products are organized and developed. It does not aim to directly measure tourist satisfaction, economic performance, or causal relationships.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Concepts and Characteristics of Railway Tourism Products

According to Clause 5, Article 3 of the 2017 Law on Tourism, a tourism product is a combination of services developed based on the exploitation of tourism resources to meet the needs of tourists (National Assembly, 2017). In practice, tourism products often combine various services, such as transportation, sightseeing, accommodation, food and beverage services, tour guiding, and other support services.

Based on this approach, this study defines a railway tourism product as a combination of services and experiences organized around a train journey. Transportation serves as the central component, integrated with onboard experiences, station services, sightseeing activities, and destination-based services. The value of such a product lies not only in transporting visitors to their intended destinations but also in the connections between the journey and tourism activities at those destinations (Mertena & Kaaristo, 2024).

From the perspective of organization and operation, railway tourism products can be examined through four characteristics. First, train journeys serve both a transportation function and a direct role in creating experiences for visitors. Second, these products can connect multiple geographical areas and destinations, thereby making use of tourism resources along railway routes. Third, organizing such products requires the participation of multiple stakeholders, including railway enterprises, travel companies, service providers, local authorities, and communities. Fourth, railways provide opportunities to utilize heritage, cultural, and landscape resources, while also creating potential contributions to sustainable tourism development when appropriately organized and managed.

2.2. Literature Review

Studies on railway tourism have approached the subject from various perspectives. One research direction views it as a mobility practice in which passenger experiences depend not only on the means of transportation but also on the meaning of the journey and activities at destinations. Mertena and Kaaristo (2024) apply practice theory to analyze the relationships among means of transport, meanings, and competencies in the process of mobility. Also focusing on travel experiences, Bursa et al. (2024) use a discrete choice experiment at an Alpine destination in Austria to examine factors influencing transport mode choices, including both long-distance journeys and mobility services at destinations. These studies indicate that developing railway tourism products requires consideration of the entire journey rather than focusing solely on the transport mode or onboard amenities.

Another research direction focuses on stakeholder participation and coordination within the railway tourism supply chain. Through expert group discussions, the Delphi method, and the nominal group technique in Italy, Peira et al. (2024) identify relevant stakeholders and priorities for the development of this type of tourism. Their study emphasizes coordination between railway operators and tourism stakeholders in utilizing railway resources and local heritage and in developing tourism products. In addition to travel experiences and stakeholder coordination, heritage, communities, and sustainability have also received considerable attention. Bhati et al. (2014) analyze the characteristics of industrial railway heritage trains from the perspective of heritage tourism products. Based on a review of 56 studies on train tourism in Thailand, Laowirojanakul et al. (2024) identify six major themes: history and culture; infrastructure and services; communities and destinations; tourist behavior and motivation; language and communication; and sustainability and the environment. Recent studies on heritage railways have also addressed the role of communities, conservation requirements, and connections with local tourism ecosystems (Melis et al., 2026; Soldatenko et al., 2026). However, findings from the context of heritage railways should be applied selectively when examining modern trains, which may serve both ordinary travel needs and tourism activities.

Overall, previous studies have addressed three issues relevant to railway tourism development: the continuity of experiences throughout the journey; coordination among stakeholders involved in service provision; and the balanced utilization of heritage, community, and environmental values. Nevertheless, most international studies have been conducted in the contexts of heritage railways, specialized train services, or transport mode choices at destinations. These contexts differ to some extent from Vietnam, where railway tourism products take various forms, ranging from trains specifically designed for tourism purposes to passenger transport services supplemented with experiential elements. Accordingly, this study addresses a research gap from the perspective of empirical analysis and analytical methods in the Vietnamese context, rather than assuming that the field has not previously been studied. Specifically, the four cases are examined within a common analytical framework to assess the extent to which the components of railway tourism products have been established and implemented. Information on each case is classified into three status categories: implemented; identified as an orientation or plan; and insufficient publicly available information for verification. This classification helps distinguish cooperation commitments from actual implementation outcomes and avoids treating the absence of publicly available information as evidence that an activity does not exist.

2.3. An Experience Chain-Based Analytical Framework

In this study, the experience chain is used as an analytical framework to examine the connections among the stages involved in developing and delivering railway tourism products, from itinerary design to visitors' experiences at destinations. This concept should be distinguished from the supply chain. While the supply chain refers to the network of organizations and stakeholders involved in service provision, the experience chain focuses on the activities and services that passengers directly encounter throughout their journey. The framework is also not intended to measure value added in the narrower sense of value chain analysis. Drawing on the definition of tourism products in the Law on Tourism (National Assembly, 2017), Mertena and Kaaristo's (2024) approach to mobility practices, and Peira et al.'s (2024) study of stakeholders in railway tourism, this paper develops an analytical framework comprising five components:

First, tourism resources and itinerary design, which examines how tourism resources are selected and organized into specific themes, routes, and schedules.

Second, transportation and onboard services, which focuses on the means of transport, amenities, and activities that create experiences during the journey.

Third, station–destination connectivity, which examines access to tourist attractions and the availability of transfer services.

Fourth, distribution and communication, which reflects how information is provided, customers are reached, and services are made available for booking and purchase.

Fifth, experience management and sustainable development, which examines passenger support, feedback collection, resource conservation, environmental protection, and the safeguarding of benefits for local communities.

These five components are used to systematize and compare information from publicly available documents; they do not constitute a measurement scale validated through quantitative methods. Factors such as policies, infrastructure, markets, and stakeholder coordination are considered conditions that influence the entire experience chain.

2.4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative multiple-case study design combined with secondary document analysis. The units of analysis are railway products or services that have been positioned and organized by management agencies, local authorities, or operators as tourism experiences. The study does not cover the entire passenger transportation operation of the railway sector. The four selected cases are the Central Heritage Connection Journey (Hue–Da Nang), the Red Flamboyant Train (Hanoi–Hai Phong), the Hanoi Five Gates Train, and the Hue Ancient Capital–Phong Nha railway service. The cases were purposively selected to reflect differences in the degree of product specialization, the tourism resources utilized, and the forms of stakeholder coordination.

The analysis of current conditions focuses on the 2024–2026 period, with the final review and update completed as of November 18, 2026. A case was selected if it met three criteria: (1) a specific railway product or service had been operated, launched, or implemented during the research period; (2) publicly available information had been released by a state management agency, local authority, or operator; and (3) at least one component of the experience chain could be identified for analysis.

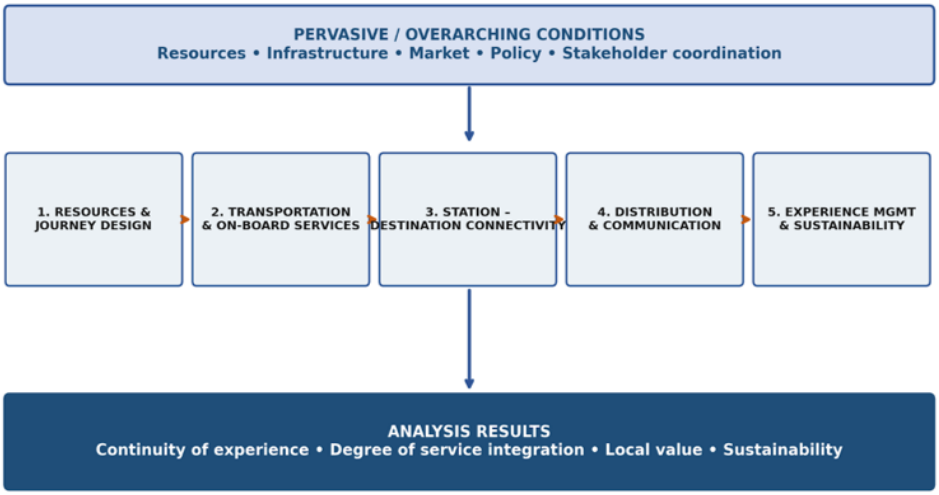
Data were collected from the information portals of the Government, tourism and statistical management agencies, local authorities, Vietnam Railways, and railway operators. Academic literature was retrieved from journal websites, publishers, and academic repositories. Vietnamese search terms included "railway tourism," "tourist train," the names of individual trains, "station–destination connectivity," and "railway tourism linkages." English search terms included "railway tourism," "train tourism," "railway tourism supply chain," "train tourism mobility," and "heritage railway tourism."

Documents were selected if they contained information directly relevant to at least one component of the analytical framework or provided a theoretical basis for the study. When duplicate documents were identified, preference was given to the original publication issued by the responsible agency or the organization directly operating the service. Academic studies were primarily used to develop the theoretical background and compare findings, while operational statistics were preferentially obtained from original sources. This was a purposive document review conducted to support the case study, rather than a systematic review; it was not intended to cover all available literature or all railway tourism products in Vietnam.

For each case, information was organized according to the five components of the analytical framework. The analysis also recorded the document title, publication date, statistical reference date, publishing organization, indicators, and scope of information. The analytical process involved two steps: classifying information according to the five components and comparing the evidence to assign it to one of three categories: (1) implemented, when a public source confirmed an activity or actual outcome; (2) orientation/planning, when the content was mentioned only in a policy, agreement, or plan; and (3) insufficient publicly available evidence, when no information confirming implementation could be identified. The cases were then compared to identify similarities, differences,

and areas where evidence remained insufficient. For data on train services, passenger volumes, and operating capacity, the study retained the terminology, reference dates, and statistical scope used by each source. These figures were not converted into numbers of tour participants, tourism revenue, or economic contributions. Assessments of service integration, experience quality, and the effectiveness of stakeholder coordination represent the authors' analysis of publicly available documents; they are not direct measurements obtained from tourists or service providers.

The study did not conduct interviews, surveys, or field observations. Therefore, the findings primarily reflect information that has been publicly disclosed and do not provide sufficient grounds for testing causal relationships or confirming activities for which public information is unavailable. This limitation should be considered when assessing and interpreting the research findings.



*Source: Proposed by the author based on Tourism Law (2017) and studies by Mertena & Kaaristo (2024), Peira et al. (2024).

Figure 1. Analytical framework for railway tourism product development along the experience chain

III. CURRENT SITUATION OF RAILWAY TOURISM PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM

3.1. Product Diversification Based on Local Resources and Identity

The four cases demonstrate the diversity of approaches to railway tourism product development in Vietnam. Some trains have been developed as themed services, with landscapes, culture, and heritage as their main attractions, while others have evolved from passenger transport services supplemented with tourism-related identity and experiential elements. Accordingly, the extent to which tourism elements are integrated varies across the products. This study does not equate all passengers using these trains with tourists; instead, it focuses on how tourism resources are utilized and experiences are organized in each case.

Introduced in March 2024, the Central Heritage Connection Journey on the Hue–Da Nang route combines passenger transportation with the exploitation of local landscapes and cultural resources. The journey passes through the Hai Van Pass and Lang Co Bay, allowing passengers to experience natural scenery during the trip. According to information released on March 26, 2026, after two years of operation, the train had served more than 440,000 passenger journeys across over 2,800 services. The transport operator also reported that it had implemented demand-stimulation programs and established partnerships with more than 140 travel agencies and tourism companies in Hue and Da Nang. In addition to transportation services, the train features 180-degree rotating seats, a VIP carriage inspired by the imperial space of Hue, and a community carriage showcasing local cuisine and culture. Thus, the product has taken initial steps toward combining scenery along the route, onboard services, and cooperation with tourism businesses. However, the reported passenger figures reflect the number of people using the transportation service and do not separately indicate the number of visitors participating in tourism programs or purchasing package tours (Government Information Portal, 2026b).

Unlike the Hue–Da Nang route, the high-quality Red Flamboyant Train on the Hanoi–Hai Phong route was developed from a passenger transport service and subsequently supplemented with identity elements associated with local characteristics. Launched on May 10, 2025, the train features a design and interior inspired by the red flamboyant flower, a familiar symbol of Hai Phong City. According to Vietnam Railways (2026), after one year of operation, the train had completed nearly 3,000 services and carried approximately 1.33 million passenger journeys. The railway sector also collaborated with the Hai Phong Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism and travel businesses to organize sightseeing and experiential activities and promote the destination. This

approach demonstrates that local identity has been incorporated into the train's design and promotional activities. However, the extent to which the product has been specialized for tourism should be assessed cautiously, as the published figures primarily reflect passenger transport performance and do not specify the number of people participating in accompanying tourism programs.

The Hanoi Five Gates Train represents a different approach, with urban culture and heritage serving as its overarching theme. Following its inaugural journey on August 19, 2025, and the commencement of regular commercial operations on September 6, 2025, the train had completed nearly 400 services and served almost 100,000 passengers by August 2026, with an average operating capacity of approximately 80%. International visitors accounted for around 40%, according to published information. The Hanoi–Tu Son–Long Bien–Hanoi itinerary features interior design, music, cuisine, and content introducing the culture of Thang Long–Kinh Bac. Notably, at Tu Son, passengers can connect with sightseeing activities at Do Temple, extending the experience beyond the train to local cultural attractions. The product is also distributed through travel businesses, agents, and online travel platforms, alongside a multilingual information and commentary system (Thang Long–Hanoi Portal, 2026). This case demonstrates a relatively clear combination of a cultural theme, onboard experiences, sightseeing activities, and service distribution.

Meanwhile, the Hue Ancient Capital–Phong Nha: World Heritage Journey is a newly launched product that began operating in 2026, aiming to connect heritage values and natural resources across different localities. The train was officially launched on August 28, 2026, with its inaugural service carrying 306 passengers. According to the Government Information Portal (2026a), the route is approximately 190 kilometers long and operates with an eight-carriage train, including five carriages with rotating seats, a VIP carriage, and community and multifunctional entertainment carriages. The route facilitates connections among heritage centers and destinations in Hue, Quang Tri, and the Phong Nha–Ke Bang area through stations along the railway line. However, access to specific attractions still depends on road transportation and the capacity to organize services in each locality. Before the train commenced operations, the People's Committee of Quang Tri Province, the People's Committee of Hue City, and Vietnam Railways signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in developing the product. This indicates that interregional cooperation was incorporated into the product development process; however, the effectiveness of connections among tourism services at destinations requires further time and empirical data for assessment (Government Information Portal, 2026c).

Table 1. Select key railway tourism products in Vietnam

Product / Train	Route and Operational Features	Differentiating Value	Linkage Aspect	Information Source
Heritage Connection Journey of Central Vietnam	Hue – Da Nang; route passing through Hai Van Pass	Hai Van Pass landscape; cultural experience and on-board services	Connecting two destinations; published cooperation with over 140 travel entities	Government Web Portal (2026b)
Red Flamboyant High-Quality Train	Hanoi – Hai Phong; passenger route combined with tourism product identity	Design linked to the port city's icons and identity	Coordination between the railway sector and local tourism promotion activities	Vietnam Railway Corporation (2026)
Hanoi 5 City Gates	Hanoi – Tu Son – Long Bien – Hanoi; sightseeing journey combined with on-board experience	Exploiting Thang Long – Kinh Bac cultural values	Connecting rail journey with cultural heritage and tourism	Thang Long – Hanoi Portal (2026)
Ancient Capital Hue – Phong Nha	Hue – Quang Tri – Dong Hoi; connecting heritage destinations via station & road	Connecting cultural, historical, and natural heritage along the Central corridor	Inter-regional cooperation between Hue, Quang Tri, and the railway sector	Government Web Portal (2026a, 2026c)

Source: Information on each case is presented in the "Information source" column. Product characteristics are synthesized from publications by management agencies and operators. The actual extent of implementation requires further verification through operational data and surveys.

3.2. Published Operational Data and Limitations of Interpretation

Publicly available sources provide several indicators of the operational scale of individual trains, including the number of services, passenger journeys, and operating capacity. However, these indicators were published at different times and cover different scopes; they have not been collected under a unified statistical system. Therefore, they cannot be used to rank the business performance of the cases. In particular, passengers on a train may include regular commuters, independent visitors, and tourists purchasing package tours. Accordingly, these figures are used only to describe operational activities and are not equated with the number of tourists using tourism packages.

Table 2. Published operational results of select railway tourism products

Product / Train	Statistical Period	Published Results	Interpretation Notes	Information Source
Heritage Connection Journey of Central Vietnam	March 2026, after 2 years of operation	Over 440,000 passenger trips; over 2,800 trips; linked with over 140 travel entities	Passenger volume on train; not synonymous with package tour guests	Government Web Portal (2026b)
Red Flamboyant	May 2026, after 1 year of operation	Nearly 3,000 trips; approx. 1.33 million passenger trips	Train operation figures; need to distinguish transport passengers from tourism guests	Vietnam Railway Corporation (2026)
Hanoi 5 City Gates	August 2026, after nearly 1 year of commercial operation	Nearly 400 trips; nearly 100,000 passenger trips; average occupancy rate approx. 80%	Indicator of product exploitation occupancy level	Thang Long – Hanoi Portal (2026)
Ancient Capital Hue – Phong Nha	From August 28, 2026	Officially launched on August 28, 2026; inaugural trip transported 306 passengers	New product; insufficient time to evaluate long-term results	Government Web Portal (2026a)

Source: The figures represent passenger journeys, number of services, or operating capacity, according to the terminology and reference dates used by each source. They do not constitute a consistent statistical dataset on tourist numbers and should therefore not be used to directly compare business performance across routes.

The published figures indicate that trains developed around specific themes or upgraded services have achieved a certain scale of operation. However, these figures alone do not establish that all passengers were tourists, nor do they reveal the revenue or economic contribution of each product. A more comprehensive assessment of tourism performance would require additional information on the proportion of passengers purchasing service packages, revenue from supplementary services, length of stay, visitor expenditure at destinations, satisfaction levels, and repeat visitation rates. At present, these indicators have not been consistently published for all four cases.

3.3. Linkages Between the Railway Sector and Tourism Stakeholders

At the interregional level, a specific basis for cooperation is the Memorandum of Understanding between the People's Committee of Quang Tri Province, the People's Committee of Hue City, and Vietnam Railways on the development of the Hue Ancient Capital–Phong Nha railway tourism product, announced on July 31, 2026. This cooperation orientation took a concrete step toward implementation when the tourist train connecting Hue and Phong Nha officially commenced operations on August 28, 2026. This marked a transition from a cooperation commitment to the actual implementation of a product. However, currently available public information is insufficient to fully assess the extent of coordination among the railway sector, travel businesses, and service providers at destinations, as well as the effectiveness of connectivity throughout the entire journey (Government Information Portal, 2026c, 2026a).

On the Hue–Da Nang route, the transport operator reported partnerships with more than 140 travel agencies and tourism companies in the two localities. In Hai Phong, Vietnam Railways reported cooperation with the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism and travel businesses in organizing sightseeing and experiential programs associated with the Red Flamboyant Train. These reports indicate the participation of tourism stakeholders in product promotion and operation. For the Hue–Phong Nha route, cooperation between the authorities of Hue City, Quang Tri Province, and the railway sector initially reflects an orientation toward interregional collaboration in developing tourism products (Government Information Portal, 2026b, 2026c; Vietnam Railways, 2026).

Overall, the participation of the railway sector, local authorities, and tourism businesses has taken various forms, ranging from promotion and distribution to cooperation in developing interregional itineraries. However, publicly available documents do not provide sufficient information to determine the extent of regular coordination, the proportion of transactions integrated into service packages, revenue-sharing mechanisms, or the specific outcomes of individual partnerships. It is therefore necessary to distinguish the existence of agreements or cooperative activities from the actual level of integration and operation of a unified service chain.

3.4. Experience Quality Onboard and at Railway Stations

Some trains have focused on upgrading carriages, seating, VIP spaces, food and beverage services, and cultural and entertainment activities to provide passengers with additional experiences. On the Hue–Da Nang route, 180-degree rotating seats allow passengers to enjoy the scenery more conveniently; the VIP carriage is designed with inspiration from the imperial architecture of Hue; and the community carriage incorporates local cultural and culinary experiences. The Hue–Phong Nha train is also presented as featuring carriages with rotating seats, a VIP carriage, a community carriage, and service and entertainment carriages (Government Information Portal, 2026a, 2026b).

These descriptions indicate that some operators have sought to expand onboard amenities and experiential content rather than focusing exclusively on transportation. However, published descriptions of facilities and

activities are insufficient to reflect service quality from the passengers' perspective. Regarding experiences at railway stations, the reviewed sources also provide limited specific information on tourist facilities, accessibility, and connections with services at destinations. As this study did not conduct surveys or interviews, it does not draw conclusions about satisfaction levels, actual service quality, or service consistency across routes. These aspects require further assessment through direct research involving passengers.

3.5. Limitations and Issues Identified from Publicly Available Evidence

First, evidence on station–destination connectivity varies across the cases. The Hanoi Five Gates Train provides specific information about its stop at Tu Son and sightseeing activities at Do Temple, while the Hue–Phong Nha route is presented as an initiative to connect multiple heritage destinations through stations along the railway line. However, publicly available documents do not fully describe transfer arrangements, waiting times, sightseeing schedules, or contingency mechanisms in the event of train delays for these destinations. This represents an information gap that needs to be clarified, rather than evidence that the corresponding transfer services do not exist.

Second, the extent to which rail transportation is integrated with supplementary tourism services has not been fully documented. Some cases have reported cooperation with travel businesses or ticket distribution through online platforms, but no data are available on the number of service packages sold or the proportion of passengers using additional transfer, sightseeing, food and beverage, or accommodation services. Consequently, it is not yet possible to fully assess the convenience and continuity of the process of searching for, booking, and using services throughout the journey.

Third, information on impacts on local communities and the environment remains limited. Some products have incorporated local culture, cuisine, and heritage into onboard experiences. However, the reviewed documents do not provide specific indicators on the proportion of local products used, the income of participating households and service establishments, the level of community participation, or emissions and waste generated per passenger. Therefore, sustainable development objectives need to be translated into specific monitoring and evaluation criteria rather than remaining solely as promotional messages.

Overall, these limitations primarily reflect gaps in publicly available evidence and information systems for evaluation. They do not mean that the corresponding activities or services have not been implemented in practice. This distinction is also important when interpreting research findings based on secondary documents.

Table 3. Situation analysis according to the five components of the experience chain

Chain Link / Componen	Recorded Manifestations	Issues Requiring Further Resolution
Resources and Journey Design	Exploiting landscapes, heritage, culture, and loca symbols	Supplementing research on demand, custome segments, and willingness to pay
Transportation and On board Services	Upgrading select trains; arranging VIP carriages, 180 rotating seats, and cultural activities	Needing indicators to evaluate service quality an satisfaction levels by route
Station – Destinatio Connectivity	Specific connected attraction points on certain routes forming inter-regional corridors	Publicizing transfer options, waiting times, an schedule synchronization
Distribution an Communication	Recorded cooperation with travel companies, ticke distribution channels, and promotional activities i select cases	Lacking unified data on service packages integrated transactions, and conversion rates
Experience Managemen and Sustainability	Recorded integration of local culture, cuisine, an products; select activities aimed at promoting heritag values	Supplementing indicators on community benefits heritage preservation, and environmental impacts

Source: Compiled and analyzed by the author based on the case studies in Vietnam (Government News, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c; Thang Long – Hanoi Portal, 2026; Vietnam Railways, 2026).

IV. DISCUSSION AND COMPARISON WITH INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Peira et al. (2024) argue that railway tourism development requires the participation of multiple stakeholders and clear coordination mechanisms in service provision. Compared with the Vietnamese context, all four cases involve stakeholders beyond the railway sector, although the forms of cooperation differ. Hue–Da Nang has reported a network of partnerships with travel businesses; the Red Flamboyant Train involves cooperation in organizing sightseeing activities and promotion; the Hanoi Five Gates Train uses multiple customer access and ticket distribution channels; while Hue–Phong Nha has moved from an interregional cooperation agreement to product implementation, with the train commencing operations on August 28, 2026. These developments indicate that stakeholder linkages have begun to take shape through various forms of practical implementation. However, publicly available documents are insufficient to assess coordination mechanisms, revenue sharing, or the actual effectiveness of individual partnerships.

The review by Laowirojanakul et al. (2024) shows that railway tourism research covers a wide range of aspects, from history and culture, infrastructure, and services to communities, tourist behavior, communication, and the environment. This multidimensional approach is consistent with the five-component analytical framework

used in this study and indicates that railway tourism product development should not focus solely on upgrading trains and onboard services. However, as the study was conducted in Thailand, its thematic categories are used here primarily as a reference for analysis rather than as direct evidence for assessing the situation in Vietnam.

Mertena and Kaaristo (2024) emphasize the relationship between train travel and other tourism practices at destinations. Meanwhile, Bursa et al. (2024) demonstrate that destination-level mobility service attributes should be considered alongside long-distance journeys when analyzing rail travel choices. These studies reinforce the argument that station–destination connectivity is an integral part of the tourism experience rather than a separate ancillary activity. Compared with the Vietnamese cases, the publication of train routes and tourist attractions reflects only part of the product development process. Ensuring continuity of the experience requires attention to transfer arrangements, waiting times, information and guidance systems, and the ability to manage disruptions during the journey.

The comparison shows that the four cases differ in their degree of product specialization. Hue–Da Nang combines scenic advantages, onboard services, and cooperation with travel businesses; the Red Flamboyant Train strengthens local identity and organizes experiential activities; the Hanoi Five Gates Train focuses on cultural content onboard and connections with tourist attractions; while Hue–Phong Nha aims to develop an interregional heritage journey. Given the differences in operational objectives, operating periods, and service structures, these products should not be evaluated solely on the basis of passenger numbers or the number of train services.

Studies on heritage railways by Bhati et al. (2014), Melis et al. (2026), and Soldatenko et al. (2026) highlight the roles of authenticity, heritage value, community participation, and sustainable management. However, these studies focus on specialized heritage railway lines or infrastructure, whereas some cases in Vietnam continue to serve ordinary travel needs alongside tourism activities. Therefore, the success criteria applied to heritage railways cannot be directly transferred to commercially operated trains. Instead, these studies provide a useful reference for identifying issues that require attention, particularly the conservation of cultural values, community benefits, and environmental impacts.

Overall, comparison with international studies indicates that railway tourism product development should be examined from two perspectives: the continuity of the experience chain and the capacity for coordination among participating stakeholders. These are also two key issues that need attention in developing railway tourism products in Vietnam, particularly given the current limitations in publicly available information and evaluation data.

V. SOLUTIONS FOR DEVELOPING RAILWAY TOURISM PRODUCTS IN VIETNAM

5.1. Strengthening Coordination Between the Railway Sector and Tourism Stakeholders

Tourism management authorities and the railway sector should translate cooperation programs into action plans suited to the characteristics of individual routes and localities. Vietnam Railways should coordinate with tourism management authorities, tourism associations, travel businesses, and service providers to clearly define responsibilities for itinerary design, service provision, product distribution, communication, and the receipt and handling of feedback from passengers and visitors.

For routes passing through multiple localities, interregional coordination mechanisms should be established to align schedules, service information, promotional activities, and benefit-sharing arrangements among stakeholders. Cooperation programs should be linked to specific objectives, the responsibilities of each stakeholder, and performance indicators. This would help transform cooperation from broadly stated commitments into regular coordination mechanisms throughout product organization and operation.

5.2. Designing Products Based on Resource Characteristics and the Needs of Different Visitor Segments

Product development should be based on the resource advantages and characteristics of each railway route. Routes with outstanding natural scenery may prioritize sightseeing and nature-based experiences. Routes passing through areas with heritage sites, historical monuments, and craft villages may develop cultural and historical products that explore local life. Meanwhile, routes connecting urban areas may focus on day trips, culinary experiences, and urban culture. In addition to available resources, businesses need to research the needs of different visitor groups to determine appropriate journey durations, prices, and services. For example, families often value convenience and activities for children; international visitors need multilingual information; while older visitors tend to place greater emphasis on comfort, safety, and accessibility.

5.3. Improving Service Quality Onboard and at Railway Stations

Service quality should be improved consistently throughout the entire product-use process, from passengers' arrival at the station and their onboard experience to the end of the journey. Onboard, operators should pay attention to basic factors such as seating comfort, cleanliness, air conditioning, food and beverage quality, staff attitudes, and the provision of information. For routes with longer travel times or those passing through areas of significant scenic and cultural value, operators may introduce commentary, heritage interpretation, artistic performances, and cultural experiences suited to the characteristics of the journey. At railway stations, improvements are needed in

signage, waiting areas, restrooms, passenger assistance services, and accessibility for older people, children, and people with disabilities. Stations with tourism potential may also be developed as part of the product through spaces introducing railway history, local culture, and visitor services. Upgrading should be based on the actual conditions of each station, avoiding scattered investment or alterations to spaces with historical and architectural value.

5.4. Developing Connectivity Between Railway Stations and Destinations

Local authorities and tourism businesses should jointly survey stations with potential to receive visitors, identify their distances from tourist attractions, and develop appropriate connectivity arrangements. Depending on local conditions, these may include tourist buses, electric vehicles, shuttle services, or vehicle rental services at railway stations. In areas where several attractions are located close to one another, short sightseeing routes should be designed with durations that fit train schedules.

In addition to transport connectivity, integrated service packages should be developed by combining train tickets with shuttle transfers, attraction tickets, tour guides, and food and beverage services. Such integration should be accompanied by specific commitments regarding waiting times, contingency arrangements in the event of train delays, customer support contacts, and service cancellation and modification conditions. These factors are essential to ensuring continuity of the experience, rather than merely combining multiple services into a single package.

5.5. Promoting Digital Technology in Distribution and Experience Management

Businesses should integrate information on schedules, fares, stops, onboard services, and sightseeing activities at destinations into user-friendly online platforms. In addition to existing ticketing systems, stronger connections should be established with tour-booking, accommodation-booking, and destination-service platforms to help customers search for, select, and book services within a single process. For international visitors, information should be provided in multiple languages to improve product accessibility.

Transaction data, feedback, and search behavior, when appropriately collected and processed, can help businesses identify demand, adjust itineraries, design service packages, and improve communication activities. As an initial step, organizations should standardize basic data fields such as journey codes, booking sources, types of supplementary services purchased, ticket cancellation or modification rates, and post-trip feedback. The collection, sharing, and use of data must comply with personal data protection regulations, ensuring that data are used for appropriate purposes and that such use is transparent to customers.

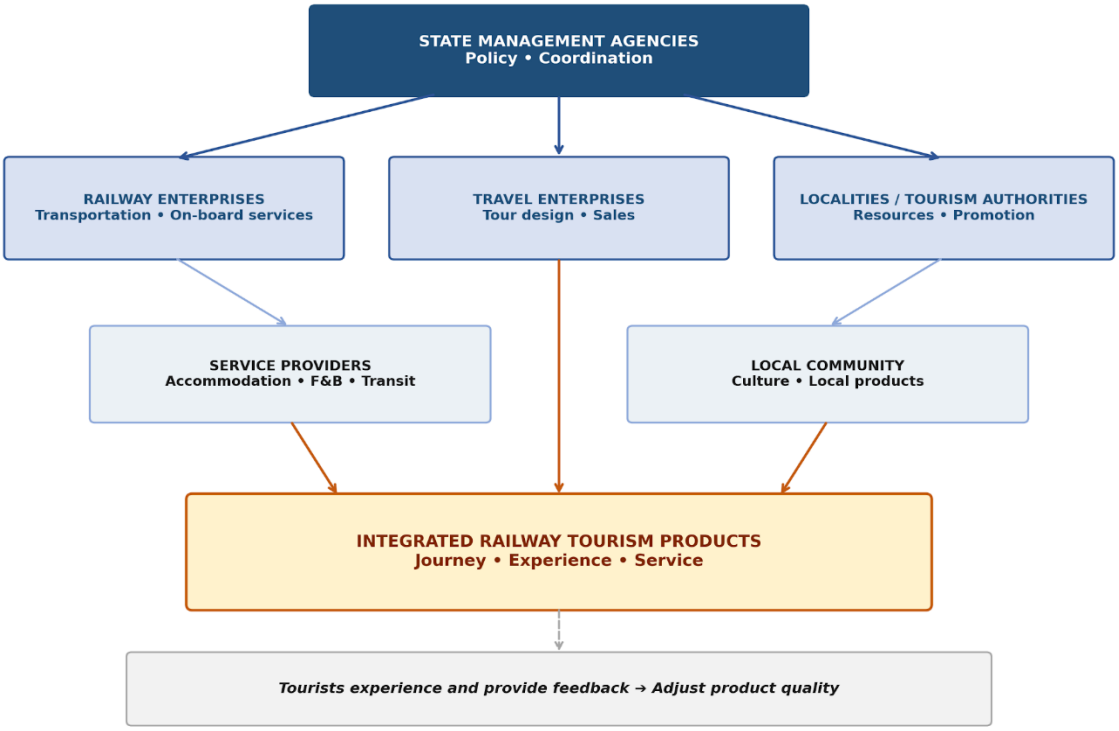
5.6. Innovating Communication Activities and Building Railway Tourism Brands

Communication activities should focus on highlighting the values and experiences visitors can gain from a journey, rather than merely providing departure times and ticket prices. Each route should develop its own story and visual identity associated with its landscapes, history, culture, and local characteristics. Websites, social media, and short-form videos can be used to introduce actual onboard experiences, attractions along the route, and accompanying services.

For interregional routes, local authorities and operators should cooperate in developing shared messages and joint communication programs. Rather than promoting each destination separately, promotional activities should introduce journeys connecting different localities and the experiences that can be combined within a single trip. This approach can broaden visitors' travel choices while creating opportunities to extend their stays and increase their use of services at destinations.

5.7. Linking Railway Tourism Development with Heritage Conservation and Community Benefits

Businesses should work with local authorities and communities to select and organize experiential activities that are appropriate to local customs, traditions, and cultural spaces. Products may incorporate visits to craft villages, local cuisine, historical exploration, and the purchase of distinctive local products, thereby creating more opportunities for communities to participate in tourism service provision. In addition, the use of local products in onboard food and beverage services, gifts, and cultural introduction activities should be encouraged. Criteria for energy conservation, waste reduction, the use of environmentally friendly materials, and landscape protection should be incorporated into product design and operation. This orientation is consistent with studies emphasizing the role of communities and value co-creation in railway tourism ecosystems (Melis et al., 2026; Soldatenko et al., 2026).



*Source: Compiled by the author from Peira et al. (2024) and Laowirojanakul et al. (2024).

Figure 2. Stakeholder linkage model in railway tourism product development

Table 4. Solutions, implementing entities, and suggested evaluation indicators

Solution Group	Lead / Co-ordinating Entities	Suggested Evaluation Indicators
Strengthening linkages among entities in the supply chain	Railway sector; tourism management agencies; travel enterprises	Number of bundled packages sold; proportion of customer purchasing add-on services; number of regularly active partners
Product design by segment	Railway enterprises; travel enterprises	Number of themed products; segment utilization rate; degree o alignment with demand and price levels
Enhancing service quality	Railway transport enterprises	Post-trip satisfaction score; complaint rate; feedback handlin time; customer return/repeat rate
Station – Destination connectivity	Local governments; transport entities; tourism enterprises	Transit/transfer time; on-time connection rate; number o destinations with published access plans
Applying digital technology	Railway enterprises; tourism platforms	Online booking rate; successful integrated transaction rate cancellation/modification rate; convenience of booking process
Communication and branding	Promotion agencies; enterprises; localities	Reach volume; engagement rate; conversion rate fron content/communication to service bookings
Preservation and community development	Local governments; enterprises; local communities	Proportion of expenditure spent on local suppliers; number o participating local households/facilities; average waste and energy consumption per passenger

Source: Proposed by the authors based on the analysis in Section 3 and with reference to Peira et al. (2024) and Laowirojanakul et al. (2024). The indicators are proposed for future evaluation and do not represent empirical measurement results from this study.

VI. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the four cases shows that railway tourism products in Vietnam are being developed in various forms, ranging from transport services supplemented with experiential elements to trains featuring cultural and heritage themes. Several innovations have been observed in carriage design, onboard experiences, and cooperation with tourism businesses and local authorities. However, publicly available information mainly reflects operational scale and does not provide sufficient grounds for a comprehensive assessment of revenue, the number of customers purchasing tour packages, or the economic contribution of each product. The findings indicate that differences among these products lie not only in their routes or onboard experiences but also in the degree of integration among the components of the experience chain, particularly station–destination connectivity, service integration, and experience management.

The contribution of this study is the development and application of an analytical framework comprising five components of the experience chain to examine different forms of railway tourism product organization in Vietnam. Based on the findings, the study proposes groups of solutions aimed at strengthening linkages, improving service quality and continuity of the experience, promoting digital technology and brand development, and linking product operation with heritage conservation and community benefits. The implementation of these solutions should be accompanied by a system of monitoring and evaluation indicators suited to the characteristics of each route.

This study has several limitations due to its reliance on secondary data and its dependence on the scope and extent of information disclosed by government agencies, local authorities, and operators. The four cases were purposively selected to reflect different forms of product organization and are not statistically representative of the entire Vietnamese railway network. The study also did not directly survey passengers, businesses, or local communities. Therefore, future research could combine operational data, passenger surveys, interviews with relevant stakeholders, and visitor expenditure data at destinations to provide a more comprehensive assessment of experience-chain performance and product development over time.

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