

Wheels of Escape: Seeking Nature, Well-Being and Gratitude on the Road

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ABSTRACT

This study examines individuals' motivations for escaping and seeking in the context of nature-oriented sightseeing travel, with a specific focus on bus travel as the primary mode of transportation. While literature often examines these motivations through individual psychological processes or destination-related evaluations, limited attention has been given to the role of transportation, particularly bus travel, in shaping travel motivations and well-being outcomes. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who had participated in bus-based sightseeing tours. The findings reveal that participants' connection to the natural environment is not solely based on personal preferences but emerges from a complex interplay of social, economic, and environmental influences. A key outcome of nature-oriented sightseeing travel was the expression of gratitude, which played a central role in participants' well-being. Moreover, the structure of bus tours, which enable scenic observation and collective experiences, was found to support emotional and psychological engagement. These insights underscore that transportation is not merely a logistical element but an experiential component that significantly contributes to overall well-being. This study offers a novel perspective by emphasizing how the mode of travel itself can shape the depth and quality of the nature-oriented sightseeing travel experience, thereby enriching individuals' psychological outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Escape, Seeking, Nature-oriented Sightseeing, Well-Being, Bus Travel.

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1. Introduction

Travel has been widely recognized as a way for individuals to gain insights into diverse cultural, social, and environmental contexts (Curtin & Brown, 2018). Travelers can develop their minds, emotions, and cultures through life-changing experiences (Slak Valek & Fotiadis, 2018). These experiences can also bring motivations such as open-mindedness, tolerance, and positive environmental attitudes (Kuenzi & McNeely, 2008). Iso-Ahola (1983) suggests that tourism is linked to satisfaction, awareness, escape, and the pursuit of new experiences. These factors influence travel plans and behavior, contributing to 'psychological intrinsic motivation' (Iso-Ahola, 1983). Similarly, Ross and Iso-Ahola (1991) emphasize the importance of experiencing a sense of competence, coping with difficulties, learning, exploring, relaxing, and finding oneself (Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991). Research supports the notion that nature-oriented sightseeing travel enables individuals to escape their daily lives and reconnect with the natural environment (Bimonte & Faralla, 2014; Iversen et al., 2016). Research suggests that the natural environment provides a valuable escape from modern life. It can help people feel more optimistic, energetic, and positive (Guardini et al., 2023). It has also been suggested that spending time in nature can reduce stress and improve feelings of empowerment, hope, and harmony (Ryynanen, 2023). One of the most critical psychological benefits of nature-oriented sightseeing travel is the deepening of a sense of gratitude. Guardini et al. (2023) state that experiences with nature make individuals more sensitive to their environment, causing them to appreciate what they have more and recognize small moments. The literature suggests that nature-oriented sightseeing travel by tourists is associated with enhanced well-being (Balmford et al., 2009; Fredman et al., 2012; Buckley et al., 2012). Yu and colleagues (2020) emphasize that vacation and leisure travel contribute to the subjective well-being of tourists by increasing their sense of belonging and happiness (Yu et al., 2020).

Rossmann and Ulehla (1977) discuss travel in five dimensions: emotional and spiritual experiences, adventure, aesthetic contributions of the natural environment, escape from urban stress, and escape from the social environment. Travel is thought to affect well-being and quality of life beyond happiness (Friman et al., 2017). For many tourists, the natural environment and resources form the basis of travel motivation (Luo & Deng, 2008), while traveling in an unfamiliar place offers opportunities for personal development (Pearce & Lee, 2005). The findings of Ruiz-Moreno et al. (2024) indicate that individuals who travel frequently tend to have higher levels of well-being.

Tourists seek experiences such as interacting with local communities, gaining knowledge, and fulfilling the search for meaning (Balmford et al., 2009). Nature-oriented sightseeing travel is associated with motivations to escape routine and discover peaceful environments. These trips are a physical escape and fulfill psychological and emotional needs. The bus is popular for nature-oriented sightseeing travel, offering passengers relaxation, self-beneficial activities, and social interaction (Clayton et al., 2017). Therefore, in this study, the bus was preferred as the mode of nature-oriented sightseeing travel. In tourism literature, bus travel is primarily considered part of mass and standard package tours; such trips are viewed as a functional element that limits the experience, providing only point-to-point transportation. However, this study challenges the traditional approach and argues that particularly in the context of long-term, locally-oriented tours organised in Turkey's Eastern Black Sea region, the bus is not a vehicle that limits the experience; on the contrary, it can serve as a multidimensional platform that deepens, diversifies, and gives meaning to the experience. Indeed, in this context, the bus is not merely a means of transportation; it is repositioned as an experiential space where cultural narratives, nature observations, and social interactions intertwine (Farias, 2010; Ghanem & Shaaban, 2021).

The package tours examined in this study, known to the public as 'Black Sea Tours,' depart from various cities in Turkey and travel to the Eastern Black Sea region, covering multiple destinations along routes of about 1,000 kilometers, with typical durations of 5 to 7 days. These tours include highland destinations such as Pokut, Huser, and Ayder; UNESCO biosphere areas like Uzungöl and Karagöl; historical and cultural sites such as the Sumela Monastery, Atatürk Mansion, and Trabzon Hagia Sophia; and a diverse range of experiences including the coastline, forests, and river valleys. Participants are in constant visual and emotional contact with the landscape, not only at stationary travel and lodging points but also while traveling by bus. In this way, the journey can be viewed as both a physical transition and an experience that

enhances environmental awareness. Similar bus-based tours are also found on an international scale. Examples include panoramic mountain tours in the Swiss Alps, Rocky Mountain routes in Canada, the 'Golden Route' covering rural areas of Japan, and nature tours in Norwegian fjords. However, in these examples, transportation is often supported by alternatives such as trains, cable cars, or ferries, and the routes cover more accessible areas. The key factor that distinguishes Black Sea tours from others is that, due to the region's challenging topography, alternative transportation options (train, sea route, private vehicle) cannot be effectively utilised, making the bus not just an option but a necessary and integral component. Especially these rugged mountain roads can only be safely navigated by local drivers who are well-acquainted with the region, which further highlights the bus's importance as an experiential tool.

This study explores the relationship between nature-oriented sightseeing travel and well-being, particularly in the context of transportation methods, which has not been sufficiently investigated. It focuses on transportation modes, with a special emphasis on bus travel, to better understand how nature-oriented sightseeing travel influences well-being and how different modes of transportation shape this experience. In particular, it examines how bus journeys influence the quality of travel experiences and contribute to overall well-being. Rather than merely describing tourist motivations, the research analyzes how nature-oriented sightseeing bus travel reveals unique motivational patterns that differ from other travel forms. Although tourist motivations are a well-established topic in tourism research, this study shifts the focus from individual preferences to the formative role of the travel mode itself. In doing so, it positions transportation not just as a logistical element but as a transformative factor that reshapes the meaning of the travel experience, offering a theoretical and contextual contribution to tourism literature.

2. The Role of Escape and Seeking Motivation on Well-being

Understanding tourism motivations is essential in revealing the psychological reasons behind individuals' travel behavior. Iso-Ahola and Allen (1982) explained tourism motivations in two dimensions: escape and seeking. Ross and Iso-Ahola (1991) described them as personal escape/seeking motivations and interpersonal escape/seeking motivations. Iso-Ahola (1983) argues that the psychological benefits of recreational travel arise from the interaction of two fundamental motivational forces: escape from routine and stressful environments and seeking recreational opportunities for specific intrinsic rewards. This view emphasizes that individuals can achieve a more balanced and satisfying life in line with both escape and seeking motivations. Wolfe and Hsu (2004) suggest that individuals participate in leisure activities by seeking or escaping from something, and that these intrinsic factors are linked to their well-being (Wolfe & Hsu, 2004). It is well established that travel motivations influence individuals' well-being (Pearce & Lee, 2005; Yousaf et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2021). Hindley and Font (2018) concluded that well-being and escape/seeking motivations can make tourists feel complete and meaningful by experiencing the beauty of natural environment and unique experiences (Hindley & Font, 2018). The presence of self-determination, sense of competence, challenge, learning, discovery, and relaxation dimensions provided by these motivations for the individual comes to the fore (Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991).

Well-being theories constitute an important area of study in the literature (Diener, 1984; Chamberlain, 1988; Keyes, 1998; Suh et al., 1998; Bond & Hoffner, 2022; Martela, 2024). The eudaimonic dimension of well-being encompasses self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery, autonomy, positive relationships, and personal growth (Delle Fave, 2013). While psychological well-being (PWB), which is associated with the eudaimonic dimension of well-being in the literature, includes deep and meaningful elements of self-actualization, another classification called subjective well-being (SWB) defines hedonic happiness, which provides for positive emotions and general life satisfaction judgments (Kahneman et al., 1999; Ryan et al., 2006). In this study, hedonic well-being is associated with subjective well-being (SWB), focusing more on the immediate positive emotions and general life satisfaction experienced by the individual.

The role of nature-oriented sightseeing travel in enhancing individuals' well-being was emphasized by Kim et al. (2015). It was revealed that this type of tourism supports individuals' subjective well-being by connecting with natural environment (Kim et al., 2015). Diener (1994) stated that subjective well-being is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses individuals' emotional reactions, satisfaction with their living spaces, and overall life satisfaction (Diener, 1994). Iso-Ahola (1983) emphasized that tourism moti-

vations involve complex interactions between psychological and social factors, and it is essential to understand them from a social psychology perspective (Iso-Ahola, 1983). Accordingly, in this study, tourism motivations were evaluated based on Iso-Ahola's approach. Explaining the multidimensional structure of psychological well-being, Ryff and Keyes (1995) stated that elements such as self-acceptance, positive relationships, and personal growth play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of life for individuals (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

3. Nature-oriented Sightseeing Travel by Bus and Well-Being

While nature-oriented sightseeing travel offers the opportunity to experience natural environments and resources (Kim et al., 2015), it can significantly contribute to psychological well-being by allowing individuals to relax, recreate, and connect with nature (Valentine, 1992). Therefore, nature-oriented sightseeing travel is viewed as an opportunity to enhance the overall well-being of individuals (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014; Çiki & Tanrıverdi, 2023). Research on the effects of nature-oriented sightseeing travel on well-being suggests that the natural environment supports well-being by alleviating stress in the human mind, restoring cognitive abilities, and promoting feelings of renewal. This effect manifests in redefining a sense of meaning and purpose in life, as well as emotional and spiritual development, and significant changes in behavior and lifestyle (Richardson & Insch, 2021). In their study, Zelenski and Nisbet (2014) concluded that a strong connection with the natural environment increases individuals' happiness levels and promotes more sustainable attitudes towards the environment (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014). Similarly, these relationships suggest that individuals' intrinsic travel motivation strengthens their connection with nature, positively affecting ecological responsibility and subjective well-being (Çiki & Tanrıverdi, 2024). In an experimental study conducted by Guardini et al. (2023), the effects of travel experiences in nature on psychological well-being were examined. It was revealed that time spent in nature increased individuals' positive emotions, life energy, and optimism. Additionally, it was noted that such experiences have a transformational effect, strengthening feelings of gratitude in individuals (Guardini et al., 2023). This finding underscores the profound connection between nature-oriented sightseeing travel and individuals' inner worlds. In this context, Vespestad and Lindberg (2011) note that nature-oriented sightseeing travel is closely tied to the pursuit of authenticity. In their research, they stated that many tourists travel with the desire to experience nature in its authentic form. In this process, nature becomes a tool that enables individuals to discover their authentic selves (Vespestad & Lindberg, 2011). The positive effects of travel experiences on individuals' life satisfaction are not limited to nature-oriented sightseeing travel. In their study, Musa and Sim (2010) note that the travel opportunities provided by the transportation mode enhance individuals' well-being. The study also noted that older travelers often choose the bus or plane as their mode of transportation in travel planning (Musa & Sim, 2010). The link between nature-oriented sightseeing travel and well-being has rarely been explored in transportation modes. Zhang and Chan (2016) highlighted transportation infrastructure as vital for sustainable tourism development, which in turn influences destination choices (Yuo et al., 2023). For older adults, the mode of transportation has a significant impact on their travel experiences and well-being (Zhang, 2023). This study focuses on bus travel, which enables routine escape, renewal, and social interaction (Clayton et al., 2017; Yuo et al., 2023). Beyond facilitating access, transportation enhances the overall travel experience and contributes to overall well-being. This study examines nature-oriented sightseeing travel through the lens of escape and seeking motivations within the context of transportation.

4. Method

This study is structured within a qualitative research design and employs a comprehensive approach, allowing for an in-depth analysis of participants' experiences. The data collection method used was interviews. A semi-structured interview form was created to gain a detailed understanding of the escape-seeking and well-being aspects of the study. Scales from existing literature were used in developing the interview questions, with adaptations made from various sources (Iso-Ahola, 1982; Diener et al., 1984; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Uysal et al., 2015; Musselman, 2022). Interview questions were reviewed by five experts,

whose feedback was taken into consideration. After obtaining the expert opinions, permission was granted by the university's ethics commission. Between August 19, 2024, and October 19, 2024, interviews were conducted with 10 participants, totaling 8 hours and 42 minutes in duration. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals who recently participated in nature-oriented sightseeing bus tours in Türkiye's Black Sea region. The data collected were transcribed using MAXQDA 24 software, followed by content and thematic analysis. In content analysis, data were coded by grouping them into meaningful categories, and key themes. The coding process was performed independently by two researchers and then compared to ensure reliability. Recruitment was facilitated through tourism agencies, and in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who completed the voluntary participation form after being informed about the study's purpose. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in age, motivation for participation, and previous tour experience. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved after 10 interviews, recurring themes emerged, and no new significant information was obtained, indicating sufficient depth and variation in interpretation. In addition to interviews, data were supplemented by participant observation, during which the researcher joined a tour and recorded observations throughout.

5. Findings

The study examined the effects of tourists' escaping and seeking motivations on well-being through nature-oriented sightseeing bus journeys; the findings revealed how these motivations shape individuals' experiences and well-being in the context of transportation modes. Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant Code	Age	Education Level	Occupation	Marital Status
P1	63	High school	Retired tourism professional	Single
P2	52	Associate degree	Imam	Married
P3	46	Associate degree	Retired from the medical field, part-time clinic worker	Married
P4	48	Doctorate	Lecturer	Married
P5	29	High school	Production manager	Single
P6	34	Associate degree	Production worker	Married
P7	30	Master's degree	Manager at a logistics company	Single
P8	60	High school (incomplete)	Retired housewife	Single
P9	60	Bachelor's degree	Mechanical engineer	Married
P10	61	Bachelor's degree	Geography teacher	Married

Source: Own Elaboration

The study participants are diverse in age, education, and professional backgrounds, ranging from 29 to 63 years old and from high school dropouts to PhD holders. They come from various fields, including retired tourism professionals, engineers, teachers, imams, academics, production managers, and logistics managers. This variety enriches the research by allowing us to explore a range of life experiences and perspectives. The themes, categories, and codes in Table 2, created within the study's scope, address the meanings individuals derive from nature-oriented sightseeing experiences, including escaping and seeking motivations, as well as bus travel experiences.

Table 2. Themes, Categories, and Codes

Theme	Category	Codes
Well-Being	Spiritual Well-Being	Gratitude
		Keeping Expectations Low
		Prayer
	Cognitive Well-Being	Emotional Balance
		Fatalism
		Letting Go
Nature-Oriented Sightseeing Well-Being	Nature-Oriented Sightseeing Well-Being	Mental Relaxation
		Proximity to Ideals
		Life Responsibility
		Desire to Share Happiness
		Freedom
		Financial Concerns
Motivations for Seeking and Escaping	Seeking	Pleasure Derived from Struggle
		Self-Discovery in Nature
		Awareness Brought by Nature
		Relaxation Through Nature
		Respect for Nature
	Escaping	Remembrance of Nature
		Physical and Mental Renewal
		Pursuit of Newness
		Longing to Touch the Future
		Seek for Slowness
Traveling by Bus	Emotional Aspects of Bus Travel	Personal Growth Seek
		Desire for Exploration
		Escape from Societal Problems
	Physical Conditions of Bus Travel	Escape from Monotony
		Escape from Life Responsibilities
		Escape from Hard Times
		Escape from Work-Related Issues
Traveling by Bus	Physical Conditions of Bus Travel	Escape from Health Problems
		Dreaming While on the Bus
		Desire for Solo Travel
		Emotions at the End of the Journey
		Opportunity for Socialization
Traveling by Bus	Physical Conditions of Bus Travel	Positive Aspects of the Bus
		Reconnecting with Nature
		Negative Aspects of the Bus
		Gaining Information from a Guide
		Music Related to the Destination

5.1 Well-Being

An analysis of participants' statements reveals insights into spiritual, cognitive, and nature-oriented sightseeing well-being, reflecting varied experiences and motivations. In this study, three thematic categories were identified through a content analysis of semi-structured interviews. These themes were interpreted not only through an inductive approach but also in conjunction with theoretical frameworks in the well-being literature (Ryff, 1989; Fisher, 1998; Keyes et al., 2002). The Spiritual and Cognitive Well-Being theme includes participants' experiences of inner awareness, seeking meaning, mental engagement, and learning during their interactions with nature, guided narratives, and group activities. Expressions such as *'I felt connected to nature,' 'my heart was filled with peace,'* and *'I felt grateful for something'* reflect individuals' intuitive and emotional bonds with nature, while statements like "I think more carefully when throwing away rubbish" or *"what I learned from the guide changed my perspective on nature"* highlight cognitive awareness. These findings align with the potential for inner transformation offered by spiritual tourism and the dimension of spiritual well-being defined by Fisher (1998). Therefore, *spiritual well-being* is linked to practices that emphasize gratitude and trust, promoting balance and resilience. *Cognitive well-being* stems from mental fulfillment through learning and cultural engagement. *Nature-oriented sightseeing well-being* emphasizes the calming and restorative effects that individuals experience in nature.

5.1.1 Spiritual well-being

Participants indicate that spiritual well-being comes from self-orientation and a connection with a higher power. For example, participant 2 shares that silent prayer and solitude in nature enhance their spiritual peace, a reflection of experiences that emerged not during the bus journey itself, but in specific moments spent in nature, such as plateau walks, quiet scenic viewpoints, or early morning solitary time. These practices help individuals achieve spiritual depth by creating distance from the external world and fostering a sense of renewal. Participant 2 stated that she *"acts with an understanding of trustworthiness in the face of adversities and prefers to be grateful for the current situation instead of complaining."* This approach enables individuals to accept challenging life conditions and achieve spiritual balance more quickly. Spiritual well-being can be achieved through great spiritual experiences and focusing on the small details of daily life. Participant 8; *"I learned to be happy with small things. Even getting up in the morning and loving the flowers in my garden, digging in their soil, is a peaceful experience. Living with gratitude helps me see the positive aspects of life. This understanding strengthens me spiritually."* This statement reflects a transformation in lifestyle and a renewed awareness toward nature that emerged following the tour experience. It is essential to note that this shift is linked to a realization that emerged during the bus-based journey itself, suggesting that the reflective and emotionally engaging nature of the tour contributed to fostering sustained spiritual awareness and gratitude. Another element that stands out in the participants' statements is the ability to interpret events positively. Participant 3 describes life's challenging situations: *"I believe everything has a reason. For example, I respond positively to being late on a journey by saying, 'There must be good in this.' Tawakkul enables me to look at life more serenely and peacefully."* This perspective provides spiritual peace by reducing the pressure of uncontrollable events on the individual.

5.1.2 Cognitive well-being

Participant statements highlight key aspects of spiritual and mental well-being, including managing expectations, gaining freedom, experiencing spiritual fulfillment, connecting with nature, and maintaining mental balance. Many participants express a shift from valuing material possessions to prioritizing their spiritual and mental health. Participant 10 emphasizes that she avoids unnecessary material consumption to find spiritual peace and balance with the statement, *"I lead a minimalist life. I stopped buying extra things and saying, 'I want this too.' My life goals have changed, and I make choices accordingly."* Participant 4 mentions the need for renewal to maintain her mental well-being despite pressures from work and family responsibilities: *"Going on this trip was a great benefit for my renewal. The stress of the associate professorship application process was exhausting, and this trip helped me clear my mind."* This illustrates how maintaining mental balance can impact a person's productivity and overall happiness. Participant 9 highlights the importance of setting new goals even after achieving spiritual ideals: *"I have achieved all my spiritual ideals,*

but if I do not set new projects and plans, I will face unhappiness. One should always have the desire to achieve what one hopes and dreams for." This shows that the individual views spiritual well-being as a continuous process of growth. Participant 9's statement illustrates that well-being, particularly after attaining one's spiritual ideals, is sustained not solely through emotional or transcendental fulfillment, but through active cognitive engagement. The emphasis on the need to continually set new goals and initiate projects underscores the role of higher-order cognitive processes—such as planning, future-oriented thinking, and meaning-making—in maintaining psychological well-being. This perspective aligns with the concept of proximity to ideals, suggesting that reaching an ideal is not a static endpoint but a cognitive position that necessitates ongoing goal recalibration to preserve a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Thus, well-being is revealed as a dynamic, cognitively sustained process rather than a final, achieved state. Participant 1 stresses the importance of economic and psychological freedom: *"The 4 years after my divorce were a turning point for me. Seeing that I was self-sufficient and feeling freer gave me great strength. A woman should have economic and psychological freedom and develop herself."* This highlights how personal freedom profoundly affects spiritual well-being. Participant 3 points out how mental well-being influences social relationships: *"If I am mentally well, it reflects on everyone around me. If I am happy, my spouse, child, coworkers, and even my boss are happy."* This demonstrates the positive effect of an individual's mental balance and peace of mind on their social environment.

5.1.3 Nature-oriented sightseeing well-being

Participants indicate that the natural environment plays a multifaceted role in individual well-being, contributing to psychological relaxation, aesthetic pleasure, and coping with challenges. These elements promote mental and physical balance, resulting in increased life satisfaction. For example, Participant 5 emphasizes landscape's spiritual and mental healing powers: *"Being in places such as Ayder, Uzungöl, and Karagöl, feeling the smell and atmosphere of nature provided me with a mental renewal. A nature-oriented sightseeing tour allowed me to relax both mentally and physically."* Such experiences emphasize the importance of nature in individuals' spiritual renewal and awareness processes. Participant 9 states that time spent with nature increases awareness and helps individuals to renew themselves: *"Staying in nature makes me very happy. The air, nature, everything attracts my attention, keeping me more vigorous."* This statement clearly shows nature's mental and spiritual regeneration effect on individuals. Participant 7 states that nature-oriented sightseeing activities empower individuals and help them cope with difficulties: *"I feel stronger when I cope. I feel completely renewed at the end of such activities."* This statement shows that the physical challenges provided by nature contribute to individuals' personal development and psychological resilience. Participant 3 expresses the regenerative effect of nature as follows: *"Nature transforms the negative into positive. On this trip, I hugged the trees and felt the transformative power of nature."* This approach reveals that nature provides physical and spiritual renewal for individuals. This spontaneous power of nature helps reduce stress and allows individuals to regain their energy. Participant 8 explains the effect of nature on individual well-being with the following statement: *"I relax my brain a lot during nature-oriented sightseeing travels. I love nature and the soil; I feel a psychological heaviness if I do not engage with the soil."* Such experiences contribute to individuals' mental relaxation and help them release daily stress. Nature allows individuals to both connect with the community and isolate themselves. Participant 6 reveals the impact of nature on interpersonal relationships with the statement, *"I prefer to stay a little isolated on my nature-oriented sightseeing travels. However, I also like meeting new people and changing my prejudices in this process."* This statement indicates that nature provides individuals with both social and individual spaces.

5.2 Escaping and Seeking

After analyzing the participants' statements, several key findings emerged regarding the motivations for escaping and seeking. These two motivations hold distinct meanings within the context of individuals seeking to escape the stress, monotony, or specific challenges of their daily lives while also pursuing personal growth, rejuvenation, and self-discovery. Participant statements reveal that escape motivations vary in individual, social, and emotional dimensions. Escape from monotony, life's responsibilities, social problems, health problems, and difficult times plays an important role in individuals' search for mental

and emotional relief. Participants expressed the need to escape from daily monotony and repetitive routines. Participant 1 said, *"The environment I am in, the place I live in, turns into a routine after a while and becomes monotonous. One wants to escape that monotony and reset one's thoughts."* With these statements, he emphasizes that he prefers to travel to be renewed and mentally relaxed. This shows that the desire to escape routine is essential to individuals' escape motivations. The obligations of life are another critical factor that increases individuals' motivation to escape. Participant 2 said, *"I am a mother, a wife, I have many obligations at home. Sometimes I feel the need to get away from these responsibilities,"* expressing the desire of the individual to spare time for herself and get away from her responsibilities. Participants stated that they travel to escape the pressure created by political and economic conditions. Participant 4 said, *"The economic crisis and political uncertainty in the country affect me a lot. I joined the tour to get away from these."* This emphasizes the role of the socio-political atmosphere in motivating individuals to escape. Similarly, Participant 9 said, *"The political atmosphere in the country stressed me out. I joined a tour to get away from this pressure,"* expressing the individual's search for emotional relief. Such escapes play a crucial role in individuals' processes of coping with stress and achieving mental balance. Health problems also have a necessary place among escape motivations. Participant 7 said, *"I was diagnosed with lymphoma, and I am undergoing chemotherapy. I am physically exhausted, but I turned to travel to feel good in this process."* Her statements show that the individual seeks nature-oriented sightseeing relaxation to cope with health-related difficulties.

Participant expressions indicate that the motivations for seeking are multi-dimensional. Factors such as exploring new locations, fostering social connections, engaging with natural environment, and achieving physical rejuvenation contribute to individuals enhancing their mental and emotional well-being. Traveling allows individuals to escape daily life routines, rediscover themselves, strengthen their physical health, and establish meaningful connections with their social environment. Participant 7 states that traveling is an essential tool that increases the happiness of individuals, as evidenced by the statement, *"Traveling, discovering new places, being social, and making new friends make me happy."* New experiences allow individuals to gain emotional enrichment and strengthen their social ties. Participant 3 said, *"I felt like I had a mold on my back and let it go. Mentally, I have incredible comfort. My positive emotions are at the forefront."* She reveals the relaxing and renewing effects of travel on individuals through her statements. Participant 10 said, *"As I age, I face life more comfortably. When my phone rings, I am no longer stressed; I think it must be a friend calling."* Participant 10 expresses that travel reduces daily stress and provides emotional serenity. Individuals also see travel as an opportunity to improve themselves and structure their plans for the future. Participant 8 emphasizes the importance of individual development in the search and renewal processes: *"I wish I had planned better in the past. Now I try to discover things that make me happy; I read books and go to courses."* Individuals often prefer to be in touch with nature and occasionally isolate themselves during their travels. Participant 5 emphasizes the role of nature in the mental and emotional renewal processes of individuals by saying, *"I have traveled in Europe, but I generally preferred to be isolated and in touch with nature rather than the texture of cities."* Travel allows individuals to interact with local people and develop a sense of trust. Participant 5 reveals the importance of social interactions on individuals' happiness and fulfillment by stating, *"I like talking to local people. Their spontaneity gives me confidence, and this makes me happy."*

5.3 Traveling by Bus

Upon analyzing the participants' statements, it becomes clear that traveling by bus plays a significant role in individual physical and emotional experiences. Beyond being just a means of transportation, the bus offers a multifaceted experience that strengthens individuals' social bonds, increases their environmental awareness, and provides personal satisfaction.

5.3.1 Emotional Aspects of Bus Travel

Participant statements suggest that bus travel provides a multifaceted experience that addresses individuals' diverse social, cultural, emotional, and mental needs. Elements such as building social bonds, exploring new places, experiencing nostalgia, and mental renewal create a meaningful experience for individuals traveling by bus. Traveling by bus allows individuals to dream and be alone with themselves.

Participant 10 stated that the journey enriches the inner worlds of individuals by saying, *"I can dream while traveling by bus; I think about what happened in the house I see. Such experiences give me peace."* This situation suggests that travel enhances individuals' creativity and mental awareness. Participant 4 said, *"Seeing the sea and trees while traveling on the bus relaxes me. Watching nature makes traveling more enjoyable."* This expresses the relaxing effect of nature on the journey. Interaction with nature provides emotional satisfaction beyond physical conditions. Individuals traveling by bus state that they find opportunities for renewal and relaxation during breaks. Participant 3 said, *"When we get tired, we stop somewhere, have tea, and refresh ourselves. That is why I like traveling by bus so much."* She states that traveling provides individuals with physical and mental renewal. For some participants, traveling by bus has a nostalgic meaning and provides psychological relief. Participant 2 emphasizes the individual and emotional sense of bus travel by saying, *"I define traveling by bus as a feeling like 'the soul reuniting with the Divine.' I have loved traveling by bus since I was a child. It is almost a therapy for me."* For the participants, traveling by bus offers the opportunity to meet new people and establish social bonds. Participant 9 said, *"On long journeys, there can be cohesion in the bus. You can meet people close to your values."* This emphasizes the positive impact of travel on social ties. Bus trips and tours enable participants to explore new places and gain a deeper understanding of them through guided services. Participant 5 said, *"Guides tell us where to stop and give us historical and geographical information. At the end of the tour, I return with new information and experiences in my pocket."* She states that guiding services enrich individuals' travel experience. Similarly, Participant 4 expressed the emotional depth she felt during the guide's narration with the words: *"When the guide is narrating, I feel like I am in the moment; the narrative draws me in"*. This statement highlights how storytelling can create a meaningful emotional connection even within the physical space of the bus. Through narration, the journey transforms from a simple act of transportation to an emotionally engaging experience. This emotional connection is also reflected in Participant 7's statement: *"When I focus on the stories, I do not even realise where the road is going; it feels like time has stopped"*. The participant's experience illustrates how the guide's narration on the bus can temporarily detach individuals from their surroundings and draw them into a narrative-driven emotional space, proving that intense emotional experiences are not limited to reaching a destination but are actively shaped along the way. All these experiences occur within the shared physical and social environment of the bus, demonstrating that transportation becomes part of the emotional journey. The guide's storytelling, enriched with cultural references and evocative language, transforms the bus interior from a mundane setting into a lively emotional space where imagination is sparked, inner reflection is encouraged, and emotional bonds to place and story are formed.

5.3.2 Physical Conditions of Bus Travel

Participant statements reveal the multifaceted effects of the physical conditions of traveling by bus on the travel experience. The physical condition of the bus has a significant impact on the travel experience. Participant 7 said, *"It is essential for me that the bus is clean. The fact that the bus driver drives carefully and obeys traffic rules also makes the journey more enjoyable."* This emphasizes the importance of physical conditions on individual satisfaction. Stopping at rest stops is one of the unique features of traveling by bus. Participant 1 states that stopping enriches the travel experience by saying, *"Stopping at facilities while traveling by bus has a unique taste and pleasure."* Such stops allow individuals to relax and meet their needs during the journey. The equipment and comfort level of the buses are also factors that affect the travel experience. Participant 4 stated that the physical conditions inside the bus vary according to individual perception, saying, *"Although problems such as narrow seats and inability to stretch the legs are physically uncomfortable, watching the surrounding scenery makes you forget these discomforts."* Some participants expressed discomfort while traveling by bus. Participant 10 emphasizes the negative aspects of traveling by saying, *"I am very uncomfortable with the smell and excessive noise. The fact that people do not use deodorant or unnecessary conversations demotivates me a lot."* The music played during bus travel and the availability of food and beverage facilities were also observed as factors that positively affected the experience. For example, Participant 6 said, *"The information provided by the guide and the music playing on the bus made me very happy. I also like to have something to eat and drink during the journey."*, indicating that in-bus activities added meaning to the journey.

6. Conclusion

In this study, the experiences and motivations of individuals traveling by bus were examined multidimensionally, and the effects of travel on physical, psychological, and social well-being were investigated. The findings indicate that travel promotes life satisfaction, mental rejuvenation, and socio-cultural engagement. Filep and Deery (2010) highlight that travel enhances emotional well-being and social connections. Their research indicates that travel provides psychological renewal and social interaction, extending beyond physical mobility. Motivations such as escaping daily stress (Crompton, 1979; Iso-Ahola, 1983) and pursuing novelty and personal growth (Iso-Ahola, 1983; Pearce & Lee, 2005) underscore travel's role in promoting mental relaxation and development. Initially intended to examine only subjective well-being dimensions, the study revealed, through in-depth analysis, that the participants' experiences also included eudaimonic elements, such as meaningfulness, personal growth, and life purpose, and that these aspects had a transformative quality. Participants noted that their travels had a significant impact on their personal and cultural development, providing valuable insights into diverse cultures and offering opportunities for meaningful interactions. Additionally, this experience encouraged a greater sense of inner awareness. A key finding of the study is that the concepts of escaping and seeking motivations differ from approaches in the literature regarding transportation modes and nature-oriented sightseeing travel. While these motivations are generally addressed through psychological and sociocultural factors, this study contributes to the literature by focusing on how transportation modes and nature-oriented sightseeing travel shape motivations. By strengthening the motivations of escape and search, nature-oriented sightseeing travel by bus transforms travel from a mere transportation process into an experience that contributes to psychological and spiritual well-being. The ever-changing landscapes and the journey intertwined with nature increase mental renewal by supporting escape motivation while strengthening seek motivation, allowing individuals to explore both the outer and inner worlds. Participant testimonies demonstrate that an orientation towards nature is not limited to individual escape or exploration, but is a multi-layered process shaped by social, economic, and environmental contexts. Nature-oriented sightseeing travel combines dynamics such as getting away from the stress of urban life (escape) and integration with nature and the search for meaning (seek). These motivations are not limited to individual preferences but are also shaped by social and environmental factors. Since the personal and collective transformation offered by travel diversifies the experiences of escape and seeking, addressing these processes with a more flexible and inclusive approach is necessary.

One of the findings of this study is that bus trips contribute to the spiritual experience by increasing individuals' interaction with the natural environment. Spiritual well-being is a multidimensional process that enriches inner journeys and awareness (Kujawa, 2017). Srivastava (2023) emphasises that spiritual tourism is an attractive and developing topic in tourism research. Although the literature discusses its effects on spiritual and mental health, the connection between bus journeys and spiritual well-being remains largely unexplored. This study demonstrates that bus trips facilitate mental and spiritual renewal, transforming into a spiritual experience that transcends the physical transportation process. Cohen's (1972) concept of the 'environmental bubble' suggests that tourists surround themselves with familiar and safe spaces to protect themselves from foreign environments. In contrast, Jennings and Weiler (2006) point out that vehicles can serve not only a physical function but also an experiential one. This study presents a finding that repositioning the bus as a multi-layered experiential space bridges these two approaches. In Black Sea tours, the bus is not merely a means of transportation; it functions as a social space where attention, emotional interaction, and a sense of community are intensified, transforming into a unique experiential platform that deepens participants' relationship with the natural environment and culture. The narratives provided by guides, such as local life practices, traditions, symbolic meanings, and folk culture, enable tourists to engage with the travel experience not just as passive observers but as emotionally and cognitively involved participants (Crespi-Vallbona, 2021). These narratives, delivered within the moving space of the bus, help frame the surrounding environment and foster a deeper connection with the journey. Instead of being limited to informational content, the guide's narration stimulates the imagination and emotional responses of the participants, turning the passing scenery into something personally meaningful. One of the key findings of the study is that the guide's role as a narrator greatly contributes

to emotional and cognitive engagement. The cultural and geographical stories shared during the bus ride help participants interpret the visual landscape in real-time, strengthening their attachment to the places they pass. Despite being confined to and moving within the mobile setting of the bus, participants reported feeling integrated with their surroundings, as if they were not just moving through space but also emotionally and mentally anchoring themselves in it. In this way, the bus becomes a “moving stage,” a space where stories, memories, and emotions are activated. The narrative does more than describe the landscape; it fosters a form of emotional settlement, where travelers begin to relate to the environment and internalize the journey. As a result, the bus becomes a meaningful experiential space far beyond a simple means of transport, where emotional resonance, cultural understanding, and inner reflection come together through the power of storytelling. In this context, the study makes a unique contribution to the literature on the experiential potential of transportation, demonstrating that the bus has evolved from a passive carrier to an active experiential component. The multi-day, guided, and thematic nature tours, conducted by bus and discussed in this study, go beyond being merely a passive form of travel, offering participants a multi-layered experience that continuously provides visual, cultural, and cognitive stimuli. Enriched with activities such as walking, nature observation, guided narrations, and group interactions, these tours transform participants into active agents within the process. According to qualitative data, participants experienced sensations similar to some of the fundamental components of the flow experience, such as mental engagement, increased concentration, and spontaneous focus, particularly during moments of direct contact with nature and during meaning-focused activities guided by the tour leader.

Participants reported that observing nature during the journey increased their awareness and provided them with spiritual serenity. It was concluded that bus journeys create a meditative effect, supporting inner awareness and spiritual satisfaction, which are key components of spiritual well-being. Changing landscapes strengthen the spiritual awareness of individuals by providing continuous contact with nature. Furthermore, bus journeys offer opportunities for socialization and personal growth, suggesting that spiritual tourism is shaped by a sense of inner return and a desire for community. These findings reveal that transportation choices significantly impact physical mobility and psychological and spiritual well-being, underscoring the role of transportation in spiritual tourism. A key insight is the importance of gratitude in spiritual well-being, as participants noted its role in enhancing happiness and life satisfaction by reducing negative thoughts and promoting positivity. This aligns with studies linking gratitude to lower stress and higher life satisfaction (Wood et al., 2007). Participants also viewed gratitude as an ongoing awareness practice, focusing on significant events and everyday joys (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005; Elosúa, 2015; Watkins et al., 2022). Participants expressed that gratitude is vital for coping with challenges and facilitates the acceptance of negativity. Notably, these participants are Muslims, and their perspectives on gratitude and fate align with Islamic teachings on resilience. The Islamic faith teaches that everything happens according to God’s will, and believers should trust only in Him. This understanding aligns with the notion that humans can only experience what is predetermined, and that trust and surrender are crucial in this process. This perspective supports individuals in accepting their experiences and developing a strong sense of solidarity in their inner journey. This study highlights that nature-oriented sightseeing travel enhances gratitude. In this context, the connection to nature from an Islamic perspective can enhance individuals’ spiritual awareness and foster a more profound sense of gratitude. Consequently, the spiritual dimension offered by nature-oriented sightseeing travel can hold significant meaning for individuals from diverse cultural and faith backgrounds. It would be beneficial to investigate such experiences within an interreligious and intercultural framework and analyze them through the lens of other belief systems.

While the continuity of natural elements fosters inner peace, it also supports connecting with the natural environment and cultivating gratitude. Changing landscapes increases individuals’ spiritual awareness, helping them to relax their minds and develop a more sensitive perspective on their surroundings. These powerful emotional experiences increase individuals’ desire to revisit, enabling the sustainability of nature-oriented sightseeing travel. The connection with nature increases individuals’ tendency to seek similar experiences, creating a sustainable cycle that supports their psychological well-being (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; Winter et al., 2019; Guardini et al., 2023; Ciki & Tanrıverdi, 2024). In this context, nature-oriented sightseeing bus journeys are described as having the potential to create awareness,

gratitude, and meaningful experiences. These journeys emphasize the positive impact of nature-oriented sightseeing travel on individuals' psychological well-being. Participants stated that this type of travel is not only seen as a mode of transportation but also offers a meaningful experience that enhances mindfulness and promotes psychological well-being through interaction with the natural environment. However, how this experience is shaped in different cultural groups and age categories is essential for future research. Although the effects of nature-oriented sightseeing bus travel on individuals' psychological well-being have been addressed in this study, more comprehensive and systematic analyses have emerged. Particularly in long-term follow-up studies, the enduring effects of these experiences can be explored in greater depth. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons can be conducted to assess how the experience varies across different social contexts. While this study represents a vital step in understanding the emotional and cognitive experiences associated with this specific form of travel, further research is required to enhance the theoretical framework surrounding nature-oriented sightseeing travel experiences.

However, it is also clear that the content of nature-oriented sightseeing travel needs to be expanded. Similarly, Yetgin and Ünal (2024) reported that the market size of nature-oriented sightseeing travel types has increased, offering attractive opportunities for entrepreneurs. In trips to historical and cultural destinations, increasing the number of planned stopover points, hiking trails, or visits to rural areas will strengthen the diversity of tourism and the spiritual satisfaction individuals derive from their travel experiences. Practices such as improving guidance services, increasing on-bus comfort, and enhancing the quality of stopovers can make bus travel experiences more enjoyable; however, one limitation of this study is the relatively small number of participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 10 participants, which were sufficient to reach thematic saturation. Future research should consider expanding the sample size to include a more diverse group of participants, thereby strengthening the robustness and transferability of the results. In this context, this study concludes that travel experiences that increase interaction with nature strengthen individuals' feelings of gratitude and support their spiritual and psychological well-being. New approaches to be developed in the tourism sector that consider these factors will enable the spread of a tourism approach that allows individuals to establish a deeper and more meaningful connection with the natural environment and themselves.

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Gökçe Yüksek works as a professor in the field of tourism marketing. She is particularly focused on sustainable tourism and the behavior of tourists. She is the head of the Department of Tourism Guidance. Yüksek has 106 articles, book chapters, and books published in these fields. She is also a member of Skal International Club, which comprises tourism professionals, and participates in sustainable community service projects.