

THE ROLES OF TOUR AGENCIES IN DEVELOPING MUSLIM-FRIENDLY TOURISMPACKAGES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS TO MALAYSIA

L. M. Kamarudin*, H. N. Ismail

Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Faculty of Built Environment, Universiti
Teknologi Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Tour agencies are the responsible parties for introducing and offering various tourism packages to tourists. One of these packages includes the Muslim tourism package, which is currently growing in popularity and demand. In Malaysia, the development and growth of Muslim tourism into a unique tourism market has provided a new perspective towards the country's tourism sector. However, there are a few aspects that must be emphasized in the development of this type of tourism package. Using the qualitative research method, a face-to-face interview was conducted with 15 representatives from tourism agencies, which emphasizes on their roles in developing Muslim tourism packages. Therefore, this study examines the implications of Muslim tourism to Malaysia in particular and the world in general.

Keywords: Muslim Tourism, Tour Agencies, Implications, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism is one of the alternative tourism segments that has its own group of researchers and practitioners¹³ in which it always be said as the oldest type of tourism⁵. The 9/11 tragedy in Washington triggered the emergence of Muslim tourism, as the word 'Islamophobia' quickly became synonymous with Muslims. Ironically, the tourism sector in Islamic countries was expected to decline sharply after the 9/11 incident.

Author Correspondence, e-mail: linamunirah@gmail.com

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However, the flow of tourists to the United States has changed dramatically, whereby Muslim travelers have started to divert their mode of traveling to Muslim countries, including Malaysia^{5,8,13,23}. Since then, Asian countries own the largest share of the Halal market with 63% or \$400.1 billion of the market share, and this makes them the fastest growing region in 2012²⁷.

It is estimated that the Muslim world population will increase to 25.13% of the global population in 2020 and this number is expected to grow to 33.14% by 2075¹⁶. In year 2020, tourism forecast indicates that the outbound tourist arrivals generated from Middle East will be 69 million²⁹. In line with this increase in the global Muslim population, so to the demand frequency for Muslim-friendly hospitality services that offer promising potential. This points towards a huge opportunity for tourism business operators to provide products and services that are Shariah compliance to tourists that tend to emphasize the importance of values and characteristics, which exist in the Islamic religion. Therefore, this study focuses on the roles of tourism agencies in developing Muslim tourism packages whilst simultaneously promoting Malaysia to the world as a Muslim-friendly hub.

2. TREND OF MUSLIM TOURISM IN GLOBALIZATION ERA

Business and religious people especially priest in the government thinks that tourism is an industry for the dogma of their religion in a ritual performed³⁵. However, Islamic tourism is considered as a popular form of alternative tourism where it has been introduced over the years in some countries, especially the Middle East and North Africa¹³. Since the concept of religious tourism emerged, the Islamic countries is seen not only able to grow at the local level but also have the ability to dominate in the international tourism market¹³. Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has introduced Capital of Islamic Tourism every year. Starting in 2015, Al-Quds Ash-Sharif has been chosen as the capital of Islamic tourism, followed by Konya (2016), Madinah Al-Munawwarah (2017) and Tabriz (2018). It is intended to create awareness about attractive tourist destinations among OIC member³⁴.

Dubai Islamic Economy Development Center (DIEDC) was established in 2013 which has put Dubai as the first capital of legislative Islamic global economy. DIEDC has been mandated to develop the legal infrastructures and institutions to accelerate the development of Islamic economic in Dubai from various sectors. This center is authorized to support the initiatives of the government and the private sector in seven key areas: 1) financial services, 2) Halal industry, 3) tourism, 4) digital infrastructure, 5) art, 6) knowledge and 7) standard. For

the tourism industry, Dubai has introduced “Family-travel” which was identified as a major segment to be addressed. The term of “Family-Travel” has been used to focus on the Islamic market segment as well as family-oriented tourism extensively. Accordingly, Abu Dhabi has taken the initiative in the National Tourism Organization (NTO) to bring the destination as a hub for Halal travel and tourism. Program Halal World Travel Summit in October 2015 as part of the initiatives that have been implemented for this purpose^{32,33}.

Stephenson¹⁸ suggested the development of Muslim-friendly tourism products is needed in order to attract the potential market segments who are likely interested in product safety, lifestyle and social civility. Instead of providing various tangible and intangible tourism products, it is noteworthy to emphasize the future development of Muslim products and services including Halal airlines, Islamic village tourism and Islamic cruises.

3. MUSLIM-FRIENDLY AND HOSPITALITY PRACTICES IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, the tourism sector is among the most important contributors to the country’s economy, and is controlled by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. Hence, the Government has introduced a few initiatives to develop the tourism industry so that it could add value to the country’s national income. Focus towards this industry has been stressed upon in the Tenth Malaysia Plan in which the tourism sector has been listed among the twelve industries that can potentially generate high income and contribute to the national economy. Starting from this initiative, the development and growth of the tourism sector has intensified, which is also a result of the Economic Transformation Plan (ETP), which was formulated to plan and coordinate the execution and development of this industry. To boost the country’s tourism industry, the implementation of Visit Pahang, Perak and Terengganu Year 2017 is expected to increase 31.8 million domestic and foreign tourist arrivals with RM118 billion revenue³⁰. In line with the campaign of ‘Cuti-cuti 1Malaysia Dekat Je’ (holidays in Malaysia, nearby only) encourage Malaysians to travel during off-peak seasons in local holiday destinations³¹.

As befits the ‘Muslim-friendly Tourism’ theme, the establishment of the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) in 2009 has intensified the growth of Muslim tourism travel in Malaysia. This is proven from the numerous efforts and strategies that have been planned and executed to introduce Malaysia as a Muslim-friendly tourism hub. For example, Islamic events and seminars are frequently being organized throughout the year with the aim of sharing knowledge and understanding of Islam not only for the stakeholders but also for the society at large. In this context, Malaysia has taken the initiative to organize the Global Islamic Tourism Exhibition and Conference in 2009 and the first World Islamic Tourism Mart in 2013. In

December 2014, Muslim Friendly Malaysia-Guides for 2015 were published during the World Travel Market in London, which showcases Malaysia's seriousness in offering various attractions to Muslim tourists. These Malaysia Guides list attractions such as mosques, restaurants, souvenir shops, tourism hoteliers, etc. that can be used as a reference for tourists. A combined effort to develop the Muslim tourism industry was spearheaded with the establishment of the Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services (MFHS) standard, also known as "MS2610:2015-Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services – Requirements", in March 2015, which was officiated by the Vice Minister of Tourism and Culture. This is the first standard that Malaysia introduced as a guideline for three critical components in Islamic tourism i.e. accommodation premises, tourism packages, and tourism guides. This standard also acts as a guarantee to preserve and protect the integrity of the products and services offered by the country's Islamic tourism providers⁷.

Additionally, the State of Kelantan introduced Kota Bharu as an Islamic city with the slogan 'Developing with Islam'²⁶, in which the State organized a programme 'Visit Kelantan 2012' that targets 15,000 tourist arrivals domestically and internationally. Accommodation providers for tourists must also introduce Muslim-friendly accommodations in which all necessities and facilities provided are Shariah compliance such as the provision of the Qiblat direction, a copy of a Quran in the room, separation of amenities usage according to gender, and provision of a comfortable prayer room. Examples of hotels that provide these services are the De Palma Hotel Ampang and the Grand Bluewave Shah Alam, both of which are frequently in high demand among customers.

The Islamic physical attributes and Islamic non-physical attributes value would give effects on customers' satisfaction²⁴. These include Islamic architecture such as the design of mosques and buildings, which refer to physical attributes, while cultural and norms of a Muslim refer to Islamic non-physical attributes¹⁸. Therefore, the exposure of both elements in Muslim tour packages would give a massive experience to tourists thus making their visit to Malaysia as something meaningful. Because of the various Muslim-friendly facilities and attractions available, Malaysia has been recognized as the first country from the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) to be chosen as the tourists' number one choice with an index score of 83.3%, as outlined in Chart 1 below:

Chart 1: Top 5 OIC Islamic Tourism Destinations

	Country	Index Score
1.	Malaysia	83.3
2.	Turkey	73.8
3.	United Arab Emirates (UAE)	72.1
4.	Saudi Arabia	71.3
5.	Qatar	68.2

Source: Global Muslim Tourism Index (2015)

Since 2004, Malaysia has been one of the Muslim countries that have received the highest number of tourist arrivals, besides Morocco, Egypt, and Turkey^{1,25}. In the context of South East Asia, Malaysia is seen as the most active country in seeking opportunities and in developing Muslim tourism followed by Singapore, Brunei, and Indonesia¹¹. Malaysia was awarded the first-choice tourism destination by the Global Muslim Travellers Index (GMTI) in March 2015. Accordingly, ITC used the ‘Muslim-friendly Malaysia’ tagline to more efficiently and effectively develop the Islamic tourism sector in the country²². Therefore, tour agencies play an important role in providing their effectiveness of Muslim tour services in order to bring Malaysia to the world.

4. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

To ascertain the roles of tourism agencies in designing Muslim tourism packages more clearly, this study used the qualitative method, involving a face-to-face interview with 15 representatives from various tourism agencies. The qualitative method is used when the researcher aims to understand a situation and phenomena in more depth¹⁴. Besides that, according to Easterby-Smith et al.²⁰, the interview technique is the best technique to collect as much data as possible. The selected respondents are representatives of tourism agencies that provide and sell Muslim tourism package services. All the agencies are legitimate agents registered with the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agent (MATTA). Each interview session took within the range of 25-90 minutes. Analyzing qualitative data is a process of inductive, thinking and theory building³⁶. The data from the interview were then transcript manually and a thematic analysis method was used to develop the related sub-themes.

5. THE ROLES OF TOUR AGENCIES IN DEVELOPING AND PROMOTING MUSLIM TOURISM PACKAGES AS PART OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE

In Malaysia, there are 5,559 tourism and adventure agencies that are registered with the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia¹⁹. From this number, there are 49 Umrah-organising agencies registered with the Arab Saudi Ministry²¹. Tourism agencies are responsible parties that offer Muslim-friendly tourism package services. Therefore, the roles of tourism agencies in developing Muslim-friendly packages are outlined as per Figure 1 below:

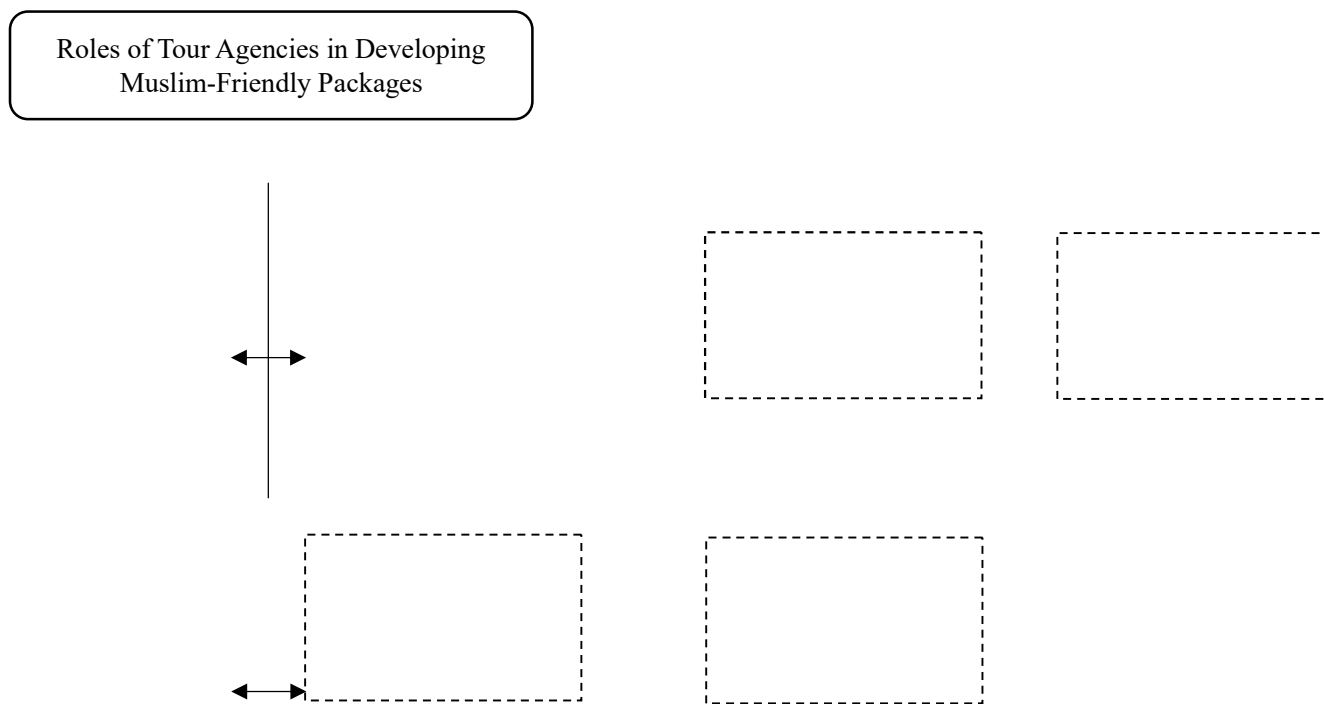


Fig.1. Roles of Tourism Agencies in Developing Muslim-Friendly Packages

Provision of Muslim-friendly services is an important element in developing Muslim tourism packages. This includes prioritizing the provision of Halal food to all the tourists as well as providing a place for worship. All the research respondents agree with this aspect stating that, “The main necessity in Muslim tourism packages is the provision of Halal food and facilities to perform prayers. Both of these items must be provided in a Muslim tourism package.” In line with this finding, tourism agencies play an important role in ensuring that the food provided to the tourists who are interested in joining the package are Halal and clean besides providing the facilities for them to perform prayers, which is the second Islamic Pillar for Muslims.

Besides that, the culture and norms of the Muslim community can be introduced to the world through the provision of Muslim tourism packages. Tourists from around the world, regardless of race or religion, will be given the opportunity to mingle with the Muslim community, enabling them to exchange ideas and perspectives in regard to each other's culture. A similar statement was given by respondents 1,2,6, and 15 i.e. "Tourists who take up Muslim tourism packages in our company will be exposed to visitation of Islamic villages such as in Kelantan." This could enable the locals and the tourists to become even more acquainted with each other's culture. Besides that, the tourists will be brought to Muslim events and festivals, as stated by respondents 5 and 6 i.e. "The Muslim package itinerary will also bring the tourists to Quranic recitation events and Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha festivals, so they will gain valuable experience interacting with the Malaysian people."

The main role of tourism operators and providers is to provide facilities that comply with the needs and demands of tourists. In the context of Muslim tourism, tourist agencies hold a huge responsibility in ensuring that all the provided services comply with Muslim Shariah laws. Therefore, tourism agencies must not only be responsible for the provision of Halal food, but also must ensure that the supplier also understands the real concept of Halal food. This includes inspections on how the animals are slaughtered and the acquisition of the Halal certificate by the respective restaurant. Nevertheless, the selection of tourist guides based on their all-encompassing understanding of Shariah-compliance is highly emphasized so as to avoid any misunderstanding between them and the tourists and locals.

The success of developing and executing Muslim tourism packages requires a high degree of collaboration between numerous parties. According to respondent 5, "We cooperate with ITC and Tourism Malaysia because they are very helpful in terms of promotions and guidance". Respondent 8 also agrees with this statement in that communication between each tourism body is crucial in ensuring that all parties are aware of the programmes organized for the industry. As stated by Marzuki², tourism can be categorized into four groups, which play an important role i.e. (1) The Government departments, (2) Private companies, (3) Leaders of society, and (4) Interested parties such as Non-Governmental organizations (NGOs). Hence, the cooperation among various stakeholders is essential to ensure the smooth running of Muslim tourism thus ensuring the satisfaction of tourists' needs and demands.

6. MUSLIM TOURISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS TO MALAYSIA

In the context of experiences in Malaysia, the Muslim tourism potential is highly promising due to the demand from not only the Malaysians but from the whole world as well. The

progressive promotional programmes and organization of Islamic events and seminars at the national and international level, for which Malaysia is frequently nominated as host, support this fact. Moreover, the advantage of Malaysia as an Islamic country dominated by a Muslim population is that it facilitates the effective progress of Muslim tourism. Consequently, the term 'Muslim-friendly' is appropriate and widely used instead of 'Halal holidays'¹⁷.

In the same vein, Muslim tourism is seen to offer new knowledge and experience to tourists in which they can learn the history of Islamic civilization and the Muslim way of life. Therefore, effective and good infrastructures development play an important role in determining the flow of tourist arrivals. This includes facilitating tourist movement to a certain destination such as to Muslim villages in rural locations, which must be seriously considered, so that their arrival to the destination is not interrupted in any way. Besides that, facilities for tourists to perform ablutions for prayer is also crucial, as this is part of the provision of facilities wherein a sitting place is provided for veteran groups, pregnant mothers, and the group with disabilities, to facilitate them when performing ablutions.

The marketing of Muslim tourism is not always easy due to the variance demands between Muslim and non-Muslim tourists. In terms of developing a marketing strategy and market segment for a tourism package, tourism agencies or better known as destination marketers must articulate the choice of holiday activities for tourists and their tendency to seek new things (novelty-seeking)¹⁵. For Muslim tourism, promoting and developing this sector could study in three aspects including religious, socio-cultural and economic⁵. Therefore, tour agencies and Malaysian government need to use their creativity to cater the needs of Muslim tourists without neglecting the demands of non-Muslim tourists. Nevertheless, the international rapid collaboration among OIC member appears to benefit political and economic stability, effective marketing strategies and safety.

To enhance the country's attraction as a Muslim tourism hub, a joint venture between local Government bodies, non-Government bodies, and the locals is of utmost importance to ensure that the industry progresses smoothly and safely. This joint venture can be achieved once safety factors are taken into account with the cooperation of numerous parties to eradicate crime and terrorists, so as to avoid any incidence that could disturb public security.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The accelerated progress of Muslim tourism in Malaysia has resulted in the country being awarded the Best Halal Travel Destination in 2015 by Crescent rating Travel & Tourist Guide. The success of the development and growth of this sector could provide a new image and

branding to Malaysia—as a Muslim-friendly Islamic country besides one that practices *wasatiyah* (moderation) in all aspects. With this, Malaysia can become the world's best example, especially in South East Asia, in realizing the efficient and effective execution of Muslim tourism.

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