



## Readiness of the Tourism Service Providers in Sarawak in Catering to the Needs of Muslim Tourists: A Case Study in Kuching

CAESAR DEALWIS<sup>1, c</sup>, AIZA BINTI JOHARI<sup>2, b</sup> AND AFFIDAH BINTI MORNI<sup>3, c</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak Branch, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak Branch, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup> Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak Branch, Malaysia

<sup>a</sup>cjerdealwis@uitm.edu.my, <sup>b</sup>aiza@uitm.edu.my

& <sup>c</sup>affidah.uitm.edu.my

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### Abstract

Sarawak is playing an active role and now showing strong potential as a Muslim-friendly destination with the Sarawak tourism industry players being keen to leverage the growing Muslim tourists to the region. Using a qualitative approach, interviews were conducted to discover the practicality context through the point of views of the main players in the industry namely, Muslim travel agents, Muslim tour guides, Malaysian and international Muslim tourists, as well as the Muslim-friendly hotel providers in Sarawak. This target population was purposely selected to represent the stakeholders who are involved in the tourism industry, particularly in Halal tourism in Sarawak. To gain multiple perspectives sustaining to the Muslim tourists' needs, some data were also collected from the international Muslim tourists holidaying in Sarawak. In addition, observations were also conducted by the researchers on the execution of the Halal tourism industry in Sarawak by travelling to some tourists' attraction places in Sarawak themselves.

**Keywords:** readiness, tourism service providers, Sarawak, religious tourism

### 1.0 Introduction

Allah said:

*"Say: Travel in the earth and see how He makes the first creation, then Allah creates the latter creation; surely Allah has power over all things".*

(Surah Al-Ankabut: 20).

Malaysia is a multiracial and multi-religious country with a population of 32.4 millions (Department of Statistics Sarawak, 2020). In Article 3 of the Malaysian Constitution, it is stated that Islam is the official religion in the Federation but other religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Bahai and others are allowed to be freely practiced. The Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution also defines a Malay as a person, who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language (national language), and conforms to the Malay customs. Although being a Malay also equates to being a Muslim, there are also non-Malays who are Muslims in the country either by birth or through conversion. In fact, there exist several non-Malays Muslim groups such as the Malaysian Indian Muslim Association (PERMIM), Malaysian Chinese Muslim Associations (MACMA), and Bidayuh Muslim Association among others. Sarawak is the largest of the three regions in Malaysia: the other two being Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah. The Muslim population currently makes up more than 35 percent of the total of 2.3 million people in Sarawak, comprising of Malays who are Muslims and the minority Muslims who belong to the other ethnic groups living in Sarawak (Sarawak Statistical Bulletin, 2020). There are 37 ethnic groups in Sarawak, with Iban being the largest group, followed by Malays, Chinese, Bidayuh, Melanaus, Orang Ulu (Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Lun Bawang), Indians, and others. All Malays in Sarawak are Muslims and there is an increasing number of other ethnic groups who have converted to Islam largely due to exogamous marriages with Malays or Muslims in Sarawak and with Malays from Peninsular Malaysia who are working in Sarawak (Dealwis and Norseha, 2018).

Globally too, the Muslim population is increasing and according to Battour and Ismail (2016), this emerging opportunity on the increasing of Muslim population in the world (30 percent and rising) makes practitioners and researchers recognise tourism, to cater to Muslims' needs as a valuable market.



## Muslim Tourists' Arrivals

In terms of tourists' arrivals, Malaysia has been the topmost Muslim tourism destination in the world, having Indonesia and Singapore as its top market countries (Dinar Standard and Crescentrating LLC, 2021). It registered an estimated of 6.44 million Muslim tourists in 2020 (equivalent to 21.75% of Malaysia's total tourists' arrivals for the same year) compared to 5.22 millions in 2011 (Islamic Tourism). It is obvious that there is an influx of travelling Muslim tourists visiting Malaysia, which is now a fast-growing market in the once fledgling industry. In Sarawak, the Muslim tourist market is also a growing segment in the local tourism industry. Therefore, in tapping into this emerging market, it is pertinent to decipher and acknowledge the needs of the consumers in the market segment. Furthermore, with the growing of Islamization in Malaysia and Borneo, there are new possibilities to strengthen and spread Islamic values as there are various segments in the Halal tourism industry that can benefit Muslims and further increase the Muslim travellers market size. Religious tourism is developed based on the tourist motivation and faith. According to Shani et al., (2007), tourism is always influenced by religions which include Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and other religions. There are various Islamic religious sites in Sarawak such as the mosques, Islamic Museum, Islamic institutes, Islamic schools, and even Islamic malls. Personal communication with Associate Professor Dr Abdul Razak, the Deputy Rector of UiTM Mukah during Kaib 13<sup>th</sup> 2022, indicated that there is an increasing number of new mosques and surau registered with Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri Sarawak (JAIS), and Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM). Distinctive mosques in Sarawak have been categorised into State mosques, District mosques, university mosques and village mosques(*surau*). Other than mosques, there is a growing number of Islamic schools in Sarawak too.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### Sustaining to the Needs of Muslim Tourists

Basically, the readiness of tour operators to cater to the Muslim tourists' market needs equates with halal tourism. The Arabic word 'Halal' means lawful or allowable (Battaour & Ismail, 2016). When Muslims are allowed to consume, use, or avail any product or services through Islamic Shariah (IS) compliance (Islamic religious law), then it is considered 'halal' for them (Aziz & Chok, 2013). One of these halal services is Halal tourism which complies to halal products. *Halal* is an Arabic word referring to what is lawful and allowed in Islam based on Al-Quran (Surah -Al-a'raf.7:157)

*"Those who shall follow the [last] Apostle, the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah that is with them, and [later on] in the Gospel: [the Prophet] who will enjoin upon them the doing of what is right and forbid them the doing of what is wrong, and make lawful to them the good things of life and forbid them the bad things, and lift from them their burdens and the shackles that were upon them [a foretime]. Those, therefore, who shall believe in him, and honour him, and succour him, and follow the light that has been bestowed from on high through him - it is they that shall attain to a happy state" (Surah Al-A'raf, 7:157).*

Therefore, the Halal concept has become a market force, quality manifestation and choices for Muslims as it provides a sense of security, that the processes have followed what have been asked by Sharia (Aidi-Zulkarnain & Ooi, 2014).

Sharia provides the complete law including ibadah (ritual worships), halal food, entertainment, dress code and individual behaviour, where the law is absolute and should be followed by the Muslims (Laldin, 2008). For ibadah, Muslims are required to pray five times a day at five different times on all occasions whether during travelling or not. The requirement includes the availability of water for ablution or clean earth (if there is a non-availability of water). Other necessities include facing Kiblah (Mecca's direction) when performing prayer, and cloth covering aurat/intimate parts of the human body that must be covered from the sight of others (Siti Halimah Ab Hamid et.al 2018) According to Al-Ansi and Han (2019), halal tourism is a form of tourism which follows and provides the needs of Muslim tourists while they are visiting a destination. Muslim travellers' values and attitudes are inflated or deflated towards destinations whenever they perceived a high or low halal service quality. Muslim travellers have specific needs and restrictions in their travel as they have a need to follow the Islamic law. These needs must follow a specific set of criteria to be considered as safe to be consumed or worn, or 'Halal' (Javed, 2021). Halal tourism can also be summarised as any object or action which is permissible to use or engage in the tourism industry, according to the Islamic teaching (M. Battour & Ismail, 2016). Halal tourism is also defined as a type of religious tourism that represents allowable activities under the Islamic teaching in terms of behaviour, dress, conduct and diet (Javed, 2007).

Mohammad Arije Ulfy et. al (2021) conducted a study to examine the influence of affecting attributes on tourist's behavioural intention to visit Malaysia as a halal tourism destination. 394 responses were received from the Klang



Valley area of Malaysia. Findings from the study revealed that affecting attributes like, “Halal Certification for Food and Beverage”, “Destination Image” and “Emotional Incidents” have a significant positive influence on the tourist’s satisfaction towards behavioural intention in determining the destination. Ayyub (2015) opined that the halal certification is a great factor that would determine whether a Muslim tourist chooses certain travelling destinations. The availability of halal food and beverages is common in Muslim destinations (Euromonitor International, 2015, p. 17). According to the Sharia law, Muslim followers are not allowed to eat pork, animals that were dead without proper slaughtering, animals which have been slaughtered without saying the name of Allah, blood, alcohol, predatory animals or birds of prey (M. Battour et al., 2017; M.M. Battour et al., 2010; Dugan, 1994; Stephenson, 2014). Furthermore, drinking or selling alcohol is also prohibited for Muslims. Moreover, visiting places where alcoholic beverages are sold and gambling is practised are also not allowed (M. Battour et al., 2011; Din, 1989; Hashim et al., 2007).

Dealwis, Affidah and Aiza (2022) also conducted a study on halal tourism to explore the perceptions of non-Muslim tourists in Kuching, Sarawak towards joining halal tourism packages. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews with non-Muslim tourists in Kuching were carried out. Five major aspects were identified that described the perceptions of non-Muslim tourists in the city of Kuching towards halal tourism, namely halal food, *busana* Islam, Muslim friendly hotels, gender segregation, and visiting Islamic sites. The non-Muslim respondents were aware that halal tourism is getting popular in Malaysia and have no problem with joining halal tourism packages. For this study, the main objective investigates the readiness of the tourism sectors in Sarawak in catering to the needs of the Muslim tourists. Thus, it focuses on the discovery of practicality context through the point of views of the main players in the tourism industry namely, Muslim travel agents, Muslim tour guides, Malaysian and international Muslim tourists, as well as the Muslim-friendly hotel providers in Sarawak.

### 3.0 Research Methodology

In order to gauge the readiness of the tourism operators in Sarawak in catering to the Muslim tourists’ needs, a qualitative method of data collection has been employed. Through semi-structured interviews with those involved in providing the services and taking up the services, the data were analysed and interpreted by constructing meanings and values to the personal opinions expressed by these respondents. This is in accordance with Creswell (2014) who stated that by using the interpretative approach, the researchers can better understand the construction of meaning and value of the phenomenon by assessing the personal views. The researchers chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with the respondents because halal tourism is a new product in Sarawak, and it is important to hear their voices in order to discover the practicality context through the point of view of the service providers and those who utilise such services. Firstly, the interview Protocol aimed to obtain background information about the respondents, followed by their perception of the readiness for halal tourism market in Sarawak. The 6 main questions were related to the dimensions of Itinerary/Package, Halal Food, Tour, and shopping location sites; and Morality. The sub-questions were developed from the responses given by the respondents. The questions prepared covered issues and challenges of halal tourism in Sarawak, and possible solutions to the challenges as suggested by the respondents. Each interview roughly lasted an hour and was audio recorded using the researchers’ handphones. Table 1 below shows the participants involved in the study.

Table 1: Respondents

| <i>Types of respondents</i>         | <i>Number of respondents</i>                                                                            |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tourist guide (TG)                  | 5 respondents<br>TG1-TG5                                                                                |
| Travel agent (TA)                   | 5 respondents<br>TA 1-TA5                                                                               |
| Muslim Malaysian tourists (MMT)     | 5 respondents<br>MMT 1- MMT 5                                                                           |
| Muslim International tourists (MIT) | 5 Respondents (Origin)<br>Saudi Arabia-1; Egypt -1; Pakistan-1; Jordan-1;<br>Indonesia-1<br>MIT 1-MIT 5 |
| Hotel providers (MHP)               | 5 respondents<br>MHP 1-MHP5                                                                             |



The researchers participated in the 2 separate tour packages. A total of 20 hours of semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded at various venues such as Kuching International Airport Departure Hall, Sarawak Islamic Museum, Masjid Darul Abidin, Masjid Jamek Negeri Sarawak, Masjid Bahagian Kuching, Masjid Darul Ikwan, Masjid Darul Salam, Sultan Iskandar Planetarium, Kuching Civic Centre, Kuching Waterfront, Kuching Reservoir Park, The Astana, Friendship Garden, Sarawak Cats Museum, Main Bazaar, Fort Margherita, Sarawak State Library, Chinese History Museum, Sarawak Textile Museum, Kuching City Mosque, and Muslim-friendly hotels in Sarawak. To gauge multiple perspectives, data were also gathered from the international Muslim tourists holidaying in Sarawak. Besides that, observations were also conducted by the researchers on the implementation of tour execution of the halal tourism industry in Malaysia by travelling to some tourists' attraction places in Sarawak themselves. According to Creswell (2014), the number of samples for a qualitative study can vary from 1 to 40, whereby a larger number is hard to manage and resulting in superficial perspectives. For this research, the sample size was 25 participants consisting of five tourist guides, five tourist agents, five Muslim tourists from other parts of Malaysia, five international tourists holidaying in Sarawak and five hotel providers.

Therefore, the target respondents were purposely selected stakeholders who were involved in the tourism industry in Sarawak. The unit of analysis was the tourist guides and tourist agents who were at the frontline in facilitating the Muslim tourists. Hence, they would understand the issues and challenges better based on their experiences. All of them were based in Kuching, Sarawak and the trips varied, covering all parts of Sarawak. The tourist guides were the closest service providers to the Malaysian and International tourists since they were the ones that were executing the halal tourism packages. By doing so, they received complaints, critiques or compliments from the tourists directly concerning the services provided. The data were later transcribed in which the shared experiences and comments given were developed into themes that formed the main ideas in investigating the readiness of the tourism sectors in Sarawak in catering to the needs of the Muslim tourists.

## 4.0 Findings

### 4.1 Itinerary /Halal package

All the 10 Malaysian and International tourist respondents were delighted with the tour packages provided by the various travel agents in Sarawak even though they were not labelled yet as halal tour packages. The fact that the itinerary packages they took consisted of Muslim tourists including praying times in mosques and *surau* meant a lot to all of them. Respondent (MMT 1), a tourist from Kedah (Malaysia), said that *"I'm impressed with the beautiful mosques along the Kuching Waterfront and in Petra Jaya. They look very safe even to leave our belongings. I don't want to miss my solat times, so thumbs up to this package which was offered to me by a relative in Kuching."* This was also echoed by an international tourist, (MIT1), who noted that *"As Muslims in my country (Saudi Arabia), we can be caught for not praying when there is a call for prayers. So, I'm very safe and secured with this package even though there are so many non-Muslims here. There are mosques in the city. I came to know about this from the hotel where I'm staying with my family."*

Respondents were also happy that their travelling companions were mostly Muslims as they could enjoy and appreciate the activities together. Respondent (MMT2), a Malaysian tourist from Selangor, also stated that *"Travelling with other Muslims is a big different even though it is a big group because we get to do all the things together. Nobody goes separate ways. That is how it should be, like a family and Sarawak tourism agencies can provide this all-Muslim only package."* Another international tourist from Egypt, (MIT2), also commented that *"While it is common in my Muslim country to see all Muslims travelling together, it is not so in other parts of the world. Of course, travelling with fellow Muslims especially celebrating certain Islamic events such as Eid Aidil Fitr, make it more meaningful."* Although there were some non-Muslims travelling with them, the Muslim tourists were happy that the non-Muslims did not complain but were also enjoying something similar as a halal tour package.

Besides that, the tourists were happy that they were brought only to halal food courts and restaurants owned by the tour Malay guides. Respondent MM3, a tourist from Kelantan stated that *"It is very common to see Muslim tour package in Kelantan but not here in Sarawak. So, I'm grateful to know that there is an increasing number of Muslim owned travel agencies here especially in Petra Jaya."* This was also a major concern for the tourist from Pakistan, (MIT3) who stated that *"I'm delighted to see the mushrooming of tour packages in Peninsular Malaysia and the keenness of the Malaysian Muslims to travel to Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, and other Muslim countries. It is safe to travel among Muslims, and Sarawak tour agencies can offer similar halal packages."*

When asked to comment on what should constitute a halal package, a Malaysian Tourist, (MMT4), said *"Halal package is not just about halal food and hotel providing praying facilities but much more. It would be great if the local*



tour operators here can consider halal from other aspects such as, Muslim-friendly tourism websites, halal healthcare facilities and services and halal holidays.” An international tourist from Jordan (MIT4) added that “*The halal package can also include Muslim-friendly phone application, halal cruise and halal swimming attire.*” Generally, all the Malaysian and International tourists were happy with the services by the tour operators, but a lot can be added to make their stay more pleasant by offering a halal package only for Muslim tourists. A Malaysian Muslim tourist respondent (MMT5) commented that “*Here is obvious now a growing interest in halal tourism from the perspective of the tourism industry and a strategy to develop or market halal package products and services must be guided by Islamic teaching in all their aspects.*” An International tourist from Indonesia (MIT5) shared his view on this halal package by stating, “*Our travel is an action or activity that is accepted by Allah. It becomes Islamic when the intention of the tourist who performs the activity is to seek the pleasure of Allah*”. So, the halal package must cater for this intention of the Muslim tourists.

#### **4.2 Morality**

All the five Muslim friendly hotel providers stated that morality seemed to be of great concern for their Muslim tourists staying in their hotels. This is an important aspect of halal tourism which the hotel providers do not ignore in their business. One International Hotel Manager in Kuching (HP1) said “*Although we serve alcohol and have cocktail parties, our hotel does not invite Muslim patrons to such cocktail parties. We also do not engage Muslim staff to serve alcohol and we are aware of the sensitivity of serving beverages in our hotel.*” The hotel providers did not want to ruin their business and tarnish the image of Malaysia by being insensitive to Muslims. Another hotel provider (HP2), responded as such “*It is best that all tourists and those who stay in our hotel do not leave with a bad impression of our hotel. Our hotel does not like to be questioned on the sensitivity of the hotel management which will eventually leave unfavourable image towards the hotel specifically, and Malaysia in general.*” Hence, the hotel providers in Sarawak wish to match with other states in Malaysia to be one of the top Muslim-friendly destinations. A Beach Hotel Resort Manager (HP3) stressed that the activities in the hotel cater for all Muslims and non-Muslims which include spas and massaging. She was aware of the modesty issue when the massage service was performed at beach resorts where the Muslim guests were staying. However, she was quick to explain that “*Taking care of aurat is important in Islam and direct touching between men and women is forbidden in Islam except to the spouse and mahram (unmarried kin).*” So, her beach hotel resort did not offer such services in open spaces.”

Sarawak tourism industry must leverage with Malaysia, which is recognised now as the top-ranking halal friendly destination, by providing high-level Muslim friendly facilities. Another Hotel Manager (HP4) remarked that “*Morality in halal tourism as judged by Muslims is based on tourism products and services that fulfil the Muslims’ religious needs. Morality is not restricted to holidaying only but also travellers who are engaged in behaviours and conduct of other hotel guests residing in our hotels.*” So, the homestays and hotel facilities and services must cater to the Muslims’ religious needs by ensuring that the environment is comfortable for the Muslims who have ‘aurat’ and morality issues to adhere. Another International Hotel Provider (HP5) also commented that “*The major challenge is to cater to both the needs of mass tourists and the Muslim tourists simultaneously, but the awareness of the hotel industry in Sarawak in handling this situation is still improving. True to say, that although Sarawak city centres can boast many Muslim friendly facilities which are easily available in the areas outside the major cities and towns, such facilities are not quite fully available yet.*” This could be explained by the fact that Muslims make up 33.7 percent of Sarawak’s population (Department of Statistics Sarawak, 2020), and many of the interiors are not inhabited by Muslims but by Dayak groups who are either Pagan or Christians.

The hotel industry is one of the important sectors in Malaysia’s tourism industry and Sarawak is gradually seeing the increase of the number of international hotels being built in the State. With the beautiful flora, fauna, museums and a show case of cultures, Sarawak sees the tourism industry as a great potential because it does not only provide intensive employment opportunities but also significant in generating income in domestic and foreign exchange. The International hotel provider (HP5) also added “*There is a constant increase with fluctuations during the covid-19 pandemic in tourist arrivals in Sarawak, so, hotels in Sarawak must be ready to cater to all the needs of all types of travellers. I hope the Sarawak State government will promote and develop more resources and infrastructures throughout the State for the increasing number of Muslim tourists.*”

#### **4.3 Halal Food**

It is to be expected that Muslim tourists would request for halal food and beverages when visiting non-Muslim countries. So, in Sarawak where there are both Muslim and non-Muslim food choices made available, Muslims tourists are often apprehensive on the food being served by non-Muslims because such food is assumed to be non-halal. The



tour agents were also questioned on how they handled issues related to halal food when queried by Muslim tourists before purchasing the food products. The responses of the five tour agents were recorded. Tour Agent 1 (TA1) explained that *"I always assure the Muslim tourists that our halal certification is managed and conferred by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). This seems to be a major issue with the Muslim tourists coming from Peninsular Malaysia and less from international Muslim tourists."* All the Muslim tourists believed that the halal process would make the quality of the food better and safer for consumption.

According to Regenstein, et. al (2003), the primary sources of Islamic law are the Holy Quran and the Hadith. These form the basic principles of Islamic law and remain definite and unaltered over the centuries. However, the interpretation of these principles in the Holy Quran and Hadith may vary and change according to Ijma (a consensus of legal opinion) or Qiyas (reasoning by analogy). Another Tour Agent (TA2) also added that he has also been queried about the slaughter of animals for food consumption. *"Increasing knowledge of what is and is not permissible under halal slaughter could alter attitudes with regards to halal animal products among Muslims coming from different countries. Some demonstrated to be unclear about some of the stipulations that Islamic tradition requires. Generally, women and the older tourists were more concerned than the younger tourists about the consumption meat of slaughtered animals."*

Nevertheless, Tour Agent (TA3) stated that the slaughtering of animals is a major concern among Muslim tourists. This is because in Malaysia some non-lethal methods of stunning have been adopted by Muslim scholars, provided certain pre-requisites have been fulfilled (Nakyinsige et al 2013). This is in line with the Halal Malaysia certification guidelines which highlight that to render the animal immobile or unconscious, various methods of stunning that allow the animal to bleed out while it is still alive can be utilised (Halal Malaysia, 2014). These methods of stunning are subject to approval by the Malaysian Fatwa Council degree and, must be reversible and not lead to death or cause permanent physical injury to the animal (Halal Malaysia, 2014). According to the Tour Agent (TA4) *"It is unknown whether Malaysians or Sarawak food operators who believed that stunning was never allowed in halal slaughter had only been exposed to slaughter without the use of stunning, or whether they were simply unaware of stunning being practiced at abattoirs."* Another Tour Agent (TA5) commented that *"Tourists from strict Muslim countries are more likely to have a positive attitude to halal slaughter if they have a higher level of education and are also more likely to believe that it is important to provide halal options within the tourism industry."* With regards to Islamic slaughtering, the Sunnah states that water should be provided to animals prior to slaughter and a very sharp knife must be used in order to swiftly slaughter the animal causing minimum suffering. It discourages slaughtering animals in plain view of other animals, skinning or cutting animals prior to death. Non-Muslims may be less aware or lack knowledge of the importance of these matters during halal slaughter (Ayyub, 2015). The food operators interviewed randomly noted that they were aware of requirements as stipulated in the Sunnah.

#### 4.4 Tour And Shopping Locations

Previously, the first and only destination for Muslim travellers was pilgrimage to Mecca and Madina, which explained the large number of travel agencies providing pilgrimage services those days (Suleaman, 2010). Nowadays, Muslim travellers have more options and travel reasons and interests besides going on pilgrimage, and these new interests need to be gauged by the tourism industry, including the Sarawak tourism industry. According to the Tour Guide (TG1) *"Sarawak has Islamic sites to offer besides halal products. These include the Sarawak Islamic Museum which is popular among Muslim tourists. The online platforms and the museum websites have been useful in the dissemination of information in social media."* The tourists liked all the seven galleries in the museum. These refer to the Islamic History of Sarawak gallery, Islamic Architecture gallery, Science and Technology, Economy, Education and Literature Gallery, Costumes, Music, and personal belongings; and an Al-Quran collection gallery. Another Tour Guide (TG2) also commented that the mosques in Kuching and other parts of Sarawak were also attractive places to visit and many Muslim travellers left positive comments after visiting these places. According to the Tour Guide, *"The Kuching City Mosque is unique in Kuching, Sarawak. Many tourists like to visit it because the design is based on the modern vernacular typology."*

The latest attraction in the City of Kuching after the Darul Hana Bridge is the Floating Mosque, located on the bank of the Sarawak River. According to the Tour Guide (TG3) *"This beautiful mosque becomes a symbol of the greatness of Islam here. At dusk, the panoramic view surrounding the mosque when it is flooded with the light of the golden sunset accentuates the majestic architecture. In the evening, the Floating Mosque built on the Kuching's heritage site will be illuminated by multi-coloured LED lights to increase the glow and ambience of the riverfront."*

As the mosque design was adapted from the Middle East, it seemed to attract the Middle Eastern tourists to the mosque. The Petra Jaya State Mosque also known as the Jamek Mosque, is also popular with great architectural interior design



but the tourists preferred the Floating Mosque because it is along the Kuching Waterfront and near hotels and commercial centres.

Another Tour Guide (TG4) also added that *“I take the Muslim travellers to Bangunan Baitulmal which is a Muslim shopping centre and India Street for smaller items. They get to choose local cakes, biscuits, handicrafts, souvenirs, and clothing in these places. A few have requested to visit the Samariang Muslim Cemetery and commented positively. The Malay villages in Buntal Santubong; the legend of Puteri Santubong and Puteri Sejinjang always left them mesmerised. They also loved to see Malay villages along the riverbanks such as Kampung Bako.”* Besides tour sites, the tour guides said that the Muslim tourists like to go shopping in certain locations. A Tour Guide (TG5) said *“The Muslim tourists from Peninsular Malaysia liked to go to the border market Serikin where they could also shop for clothing and other Indonesian products at a cheaper price.”* Those tourists from Peninsular Malaysia always requested the Serikin shopping to be included in their itinerary.

Other interesting places visited by the Muslim tourists as reported by the tour guides were Sarawak Islamic Museum, Masjid Darul Abidin, Masjid Jamek Negeri Sarawak, Masjid Bahagian Kuching, Masjid Darul Iqwan, Masjid Darul Salam, Sultan Iskandar Planetarium, Kuching Civic Centre, Kuching Waterfront, Kuching Reservoir Park, The Astana, Friendship Garden, Sarawak Cats Museum, Main Bazaar, Fort Margherita, Sarawak State Library, Chinese History Museum, and the Sarawak Textile Museum.

## 5.0 Discussions

Generally, the Sarawak tourism industry is ready to offer halal tourism packages to Muslim tourists coming to visit the State. The industry is expanding especially with the increasing number of flights between Kuching and Kuala Lumpur where the international tourists first arrive in Malaysia through the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. In 2015, Muslim consumers spent \$151 billion in travel which comprised of 11.2% of the global expenditure and increased to \$243 billion in 2021 (Thomas Reuters, 2022). Many non-Muslim countries such as Singapore, Japan and Thailand are presently taking advantage of this opportunity by providing Muslim friendly services such as halal food and praying facilities. Therefore, the Sarawak Tourism industry which is already providing Muslim friendly services and facilities must increase its promotional campaigns to attract more Muslim tourists from both Muslim and non-Muslim countries to visit Sarawak. The inaugural Kuching-Jakarta direct flight on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2023 is another milestone to attract more Muslims visiting Sarawak. Since ‘halal’ refers to any activity or practice in tourism which is ‘permissible’ according to the Islamic teaching (Sharia), the halal package can be acceptable if it is ‘Sharia compliant’ or ‘halal’. The travellers want their activity to be accepted by Allah and so the packages provided by the tour agencies in Sarawak must be Islamic and halal which are *Niyyah* or with intention. As commented and agreed by other respondents in this study, an Islamic action or activity is accepted by Allah when the intention of the person who performs it is to seek the pleasure of Allah. This is based on the very famous hadith by the Holy Prophet Muhammad:

*‘Verily actions are by intentions, and for every person is what he intended. So, the one whose “hijrah” (migration) was to Allah and His Messenger, then his “hijrah” was to Allah and His Messenger. And the one whose “hijrah” was for the world to gain from it, or a woman to marry her, then his “hijrah” was for what he made “hijrah” for’* (Al-Bukhārī and Muslim).

Based on the above hadith, the companions of the Holy Prophet were discussing the actions of their fellow Muslims performing Hijrah (moving from the Holy city of Makkah to Madinah). The Prophet S.A.W. divided the actions into two categories—those that were accepted by Allah and those that were not. The former is when the intention was to seek the pleasure of Allah, whilst the latter is when the intention or motives were for other than pleasing Allah. Therefore, a halal package is an activity that is accepted by Allah and deserving of reward from Him, which is categorised as ‘Islamic’. Such is the halal package which offers products and services in the tourism industry that should be promoted in Sarawak as suggested by all the stakeholders (respondents) in their respective interviews with the researchers. The various stakeholders in this investigation were also concerned with morality issues and ready to improve their shortcomings. They were aware that Muslim tourists would pay close attention to other branches in *Sharia* which consist of a code of conduct. As mentioned in the Quran, verse An-Nur, 24:30-31, both men and women must practice Islamic ethics by taking care of their modesty. All the stakeholders did not compromise with morality issues as these are integral in halal tourism. This concurs with Battour et al, (2011) who stated that some of the morality and modesty aspects that must be followed by the Muslims include modest entertainment, taking care of *aurat* and decent public conduct. The stakeholders were also aware that morality is held differently in different Muslim countries and did not expect all the Muslim tourists to abide by certain specific conditions regarding morality. For example, there are slight differences of interpretations of *Shariah* between the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Yemen that apply the whole *Sharia* law while Malaysia, Indonesia, Tunisia, and Turkey use the secular system in governance and the *Sharia* in governing



the lifestyle of its Muslim citizens. Therefore, the stakeholders in Sarawak tourism industry should be sensitive of these differences in interpretations. However, there are certain practices and values which are generally accepted including praying five times a day, the consumption of Halal foods, morality, and modesty.

The responses given by the hotel providers indicated that the Muslim-friendly services were the concerns to those staying at their hotels. These included certified halal food or kitchens, well-trained staff about Muslim's culture, adequate provision of female staff for women guests. Although their hotels did not provide women-only floor, the single female occupants were given priority to no smoking floors. Besides that, there were family only floors to cater to guests who wished to stay with their own family members. Ladies did not have a separate session for swimming but there were pools for children and women. There were prayer rooms provided for Muslim guests and during Ramadhan there were special buffet provided for all guests. Therefore, the hotel providers took care of the needs of the Muslim market, and they could see the potential to tap the increasing number of Muslim tourists by providing Muslim-friendly services. This could add on the market size of Muslim travellers to Sarawak. All the Muslim friendly hotel providers were aware of the Shariah law. In *Sharia*, Muslims should not engage in any activities involving alcohol in their jobs as alcohol is not permitted and thus "haram" (forbidden) in Islam. This issue of hotels and eateries serving alcohol in Sarawak is a sensitive issue to the Muslim tourists and this can give a bad impression on halal tourism in Sarawak if the hotel providers, tour agents, tour guides do not take the necessary precautions before offering such packages. Nevertheless, all the hotel providers interviewed made sure the Islamic laws were adhered by both hotel guests and staff.

Sarawak must take leverage on the fact that Malaysia has been chosen as the world's top destination for Muslim travellers for three consecutive years in the recent surveys conducted by Singapore's Crescent Rating and the United States' Dinar Standard. Thus, it hardly comes as a surprise as Malaysia has all the necessary facilities of an ideal Islamic tourism destination. Sarawak too, has an abundance of halal food, praying facilities though there may not be many Islamic attractions yet in the State. Nevertheless, Sarawak's rich Islamic history and heritage as depicted in the Sarawak Islamic Museum form layers of fascinating experiences just waiting to be discovered by international Muslim tourists. Right from the shops at the Kuching International Airport, there is no end to the variety of halal products and services that can be found, from halal food to Islamic banking, Sarawak provides end-to end local halal goods with universal appeal. The Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) with a branch in Sarawak plays a pivotal role in bringing Sarawak to the forefront of Islamic tourism. The years ahead with more Islamic attractions being added to the State tourist sites will be important for the stakeholders in Sarawak Tourism Industry to be consistently and continuously working with the industry players in Islamic Tourism Centre. The goal is to build their capacity in Islamic tourism, thus ensuring that the needs of Muslim visitors are better served. This can be done by taking more initiatives in standardizing Sarawak tourism's industry with Malaysia's Islamic Tourism Industry best practices through research, seminars, workshops, and outreach programmes, hoping to establish Sarawak's credibility as an Islamic tourism destination.

As Muslims continue to grow in numbers, Sarawak infuses the Islamic culture as a norm in its routine as a state. Although, the Muslim population is less than 40 percent, the tourists interviewed did not feel stranded and out of place in terms of culture and traditions. With state officials continuing to develop Muslim friendly facilities and halal food in Sarawak, the international Muslim respondents on tour in Sarawak felt comfortable. Halal tourism is a niche market in Sarawak Tourism Industry which can be given more focus since there is an Arab season in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the success of developing and marketing halal tourism with Sarawak as a destination must be guided by the adoption of Islamic teaching and principles in all aspects of Sarawak tourism activities.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Malaysia already has a well-developed halal industry and an extensive network of halal eateries. Hence, among two new attractions to attract more Muslim travellers into visiting Sarawak are *The Floating Mosque* and *The Borneo Cultural Museum*. Sarawak, maybe new to the concept of Islamic tourism but it can leverage on the systematic halal assurance system and halal standards which are implemented nationwide to welcome more local and international Muslim tourists to the State. Adhering to the high halal standards plays a crucial role in establishing Sarawak's credibility in the global Islamic tourism industry, which is to be done through streamlining best practices, creating systematic development, and avoiding the misuse and abuse by irresponsible, profit-motivated operators. It is vital and non-negotiable for Sarawak to comply to the standards and guidelines in Malaysia if it were to attract more Muslim travellers. This enhances the visitors' confidence in Sarawak's products and services which increases Sarawak's attractiveness and value as a tourist destination in the eyes of Muslim travellers.



In Islam, the activity of travelling and exploring the world may be considered as ‘ibadah’ and ‘da’wah’. Tourism will become an ibadah if the purpose of travelling is for God’s blessings and avoidance of the wrong doings. Afterall, in Al-Quran, it is mentioned that Muslims should travel to visit friends and relatives and fully appreciate the beauty of God’s world. Those who welcome the travellers should perform their responsibility in providing hospitality for them (Laderlah et al., 2011).

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