



HALAL TRAILS: ISLAMIC TOURISM IN SARAWAK

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Abstract

Sarawak is emerging as a promising Muslim-friendly destination, with its tourism industry actively engaging to attract more Muslim tourists to the region. Islamic tourism, as affirmed by Zamani-Farahani and Eid (2021), has the potential to contribute to a more sustainable development by promoting ethical and responsible travel practices that align with Islamic teachings, such as respect for the environment and support for local communities. Today, an increasing number of countries are aware of the economic benefits of catering to Muslim travellers by providing halal-certified amenities and services. Thus, to explore these benefits in relation to Sarawak's domain, a qualitative approach was employed, involving interviews with key industry players, such as Muslim-friendly tour guides, mosque visit guides, and providers of Muslim-friendly hotels in Sarawak. These participants were specifically chosen for their involvement in the Islamic tourism sector. To gain a broader understanding, additional data were also collected from international Muslim tourists visiting Sarawak. Furthermore, the researchers also conducted on-site observations by visiting various tourist attractions in Sarawak, allowing them to assess the implementation of Islamic tourism in the region directly. The findings allow the stakeholders to be committed to consistently and continuously working with the industry players in the Islamic Tourism Industry. The goal is to build their capacity in Islamic tourism, thus ensuring that the needs of Muslim visitors are better served by taking more initiatives in standardizing Sarawak tourism's industry with Malaysia's Islamic Tourism Industry best practices, hoping to establish Sarawak's credibility as an Islamic tourism destination. The study is hoped to address the research gap on the lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the practical challenges and effectiveness of implementing standardized Islamic tourism practices in Sarawak.

Key words: readiness, tourism service providers, Sarawak, Islamic tourism

1. 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-Malay 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 also with Malays from Peninsular Malaysia who are working in Sarawak (Dealwis, 2019). Globally too, the Muslim population is increasing. 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.



2. Literature Review

Muslim Tourists' Arrivals

In terms of tourists' arrivals, Malaysia has been the top most 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 million 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 others, 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. Distinctive mosques in Sarawak have been categorised into State mosques, District mosques, university mosques and village mosques (*surau*). In Khidmat Islam Sarawak website (2025), it is reported that there are 1767 mosques, *surau* and *musolla* in the state and the number is increasing. Other than mosques, there is a growing number of Islamic schools in Sarawak too.

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 has been asked by Sharia (Aidi-Zulkarnain & Ooi, 2014). Sharia provides the complete law, including ibadah (ritual worship), 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 a 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 that follows and meets the needs of Muslim tourists while they are visiting a destination. Muslim travellers' values and attitudes are inflated or deflated towards destinations whenever they perceive a high or low halal service quality. They have specific needs and restrictions in their travel as they need to follow the Islamic law. These needs must follow a specific set of criteria to be considered safe to be consumed or worn, or 'Halal' (Mohammad Luthfan Jeffri, 2021). Halal tourism can also be summarised as any object or action that is permissible to use or engage in the tourism industry, according to 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 tourists' 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 or not 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 had no problem with joining halal tourism packages. This study is hoped to address accordingly to the research gap on the lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the practical challenges and effectiveness of implementing standardized Islamic tourism practices specifically in Sarawak compared to other Malaysian states. While exploring stakeholder perspectives and current initiatives, there remains limited knowledge on how well Sarawak's tourism industry aligns with Malaysia's broader Islamic tourism standards in practice, and how Muslim tourists perceive the authenticity and quality of these Muslim-friendly services on the ground. Addressing this gap could help identify specific areas for improvement and provide actionable recommendations to enhance Sarawak's competitiveness as a credible Islamic tourism destination.

3. 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 sites and shopping locations; and Morality and Ethics. 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' mobile phones. Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework of the study as described above.

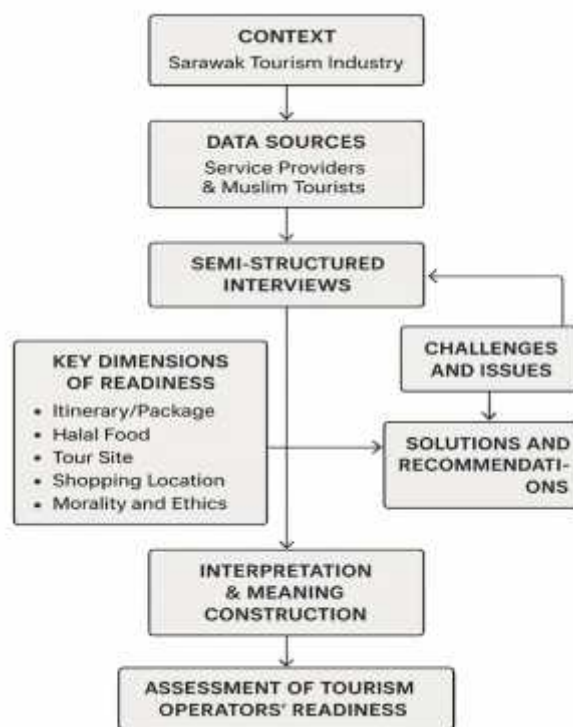


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Table 1 below shows the participants involved in the study. The researchers participated in the two 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. In order 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.

Table 1: Respondents

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

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 results 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 who executed 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 and tabulated, in which the shared experiences and comments 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. Findings

Itinerary /Halal package

All 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 secure 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 difference, even though it is a big group, because we get to do all the things together. Nobody goes their 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.

Morality and Ethics

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 insensitivity 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 on 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 home-stays 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 Christian.

The hotel industry is one of the important sectors in Malaysia’s tourism industry and Sarawak is gradually seeing an increase of the number of international hotels being built in the State. With the beautiful flora, fauna, museums and a showcase 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.”

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 been queried about the slaughter of animals for food consumption stating:

“Increasing knowledge of what is and is not permissible under halal slaughter could alter attitudes with regard 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 of meat from 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 decree and in particular, 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 who were interviewed randomly noted that they were aware of requirements as stipulated in the Sunnah.

Tour and shopping locations

Previously, the first and prior destination for Muslim travellers was pilgrimage to Mecca and Madina, which explained the large number of travel agencies providing pilgrimage services in 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 on social media.”



The tourists liked all 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 it is flooded with the light of the golden sunset, accentuating the majestic architecture. In the evening, the Floating Mosque built on 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 seems to attract 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 prefer 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 river banks 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. Discussions

The Sarawak tourism industry is increasingly prepared to cater to Muslim tourists by offering halal tourism packages, reflecting a broader expansion in response to rising international arrivals, particularly facilitated by improved air connectivity between Kuching and Kuala Lumpur. The global Muslim travel market is substantial, with Muslim travellers spending \$151 billion in 2015 and this figure is expected to rise to \$243 billion by 2021. Recognizing this, several non-Muslim-majority countries such as Singapore, Japan, and Thailand have introduced Muslim-friendly services, including halal food and prayer facilities, to attract this demographic. Sarawak, already providing similar services, is encouraged to intensify its promotional efforts to draw more Muslim tourists from both Muslim and non-Muslim countries. The launch of the direct Kuching-Jakarta flight in June 2023 is seen as a significant step in this direction. Halal tourism encompasses all activities and services in tourism that comply with Islamic teachings (Shariha). For a tourism package to be considered halal, it must be Sharia-compliant, with the intention (niyyah) of seeking Allah’s pleasure, as emphasized by the Prophet Muhammad’s hadith on the importance of intentions in actions¹. Stakeholders interviewed in the study agreed that halal tourism should align with Islamic principles, ensuring that all offerings are both permissible and intended to fulfill religious obligations. Stakeholders expressed a strong commitment to upholding Islamic ethics, particularly regarding modesty and morality, as outlined in the Quran (An-Nur 24:30-31). They acknowledged that while interpretations of Sharia differ among Muslim-majority countries—ranging from comprehensive application in Saudi Arabia and Yemen to more secular systems in Malaysia and Turkey—core practices such as daily prayers, consumption of halal food, and modest conduct are universally expected.



The Sarawak tourism sector is advised to remain sensitive to these variations while maintaining generally accepted standards. Hotel providers in Sarawak have prioritized Muslim-friendly services, including certified halal kitchens, staff trained in Muslim cultural practices, prayer facilities, and special provisions during Ramadan¹. Although women-only floors are not standard, accommodations are made for female guests, such as prioritizing non-smoking and family-only floors, and providing pools for children and women. These efforts are designed to meet the needs of Muslim travellers and expand Sarawak's share of this growing market. Strict adherence to Shariah law is observed, particularly regarding the prohibition of alcohol, as its presence in hotels and restaurants is a sensitive issue for Muslim tourists¹. Hotel operators ensure compliance with Islamic guidelines to maintain the integrity of halal tourism offerings. Malaysia's recognition as a top destination for Muslim travellers, supported by facilities such as abundant halal food, prayer spaces, and Islamic banking, provides a strong foundation for Sarawak's aspirations in halal tourism. The Sarawak Islamic Museum and the presence of the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) further enhance the state's appeal. Ongoing collaboration with the ITC and continuous capacity-building initiatives such as research, workshops, and outreach are recommended to standardize best practices and bolster Sarawak's credibility as an Islamic tourism hub. Despite Muslims comprising less than 40% of Sarawak's population, international Muslim tourists report feeling culturally comfortable, thanks to the state's integration of Islamic norms and the development of Muslim-friendly facilities. Halal tourism remains a niche yet promising segment, particularly during peak periods such as the Arab season. The sustainable growth and successful marketing of halal tourism in Sarawak depend on the consistent application of Islamic teachings and principles across all tourism activities.

6. 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 with 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 definitely 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 the avoidance of wrongdoings. After all, in Al-Quran, it is mentioned that Muslims should travel in order 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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