

THE ANALYSIS OF MALAYSIAN DOMESTIC TRAVELERS

Badaruddin Mohamed

School of Housing, Building & Planning
Universiti Sains Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Various crises, such as the Bali Bombing, the spread of SARS and the haze, among others, had left tremendous impacts on the tourism sector. After years of concentrated efforts to attract foreign tourists to visit this country, the Malaysian government has started to acknowledge the importance and the potential of domestic tourists. Domestic travels were particularly promoted after Malaysia felt the effects of the financial crisis towards the end of the 20th century. Malaysians have been encouraged to spend their money at home and to visit local destinations. Several monetary regulations were also introduced to limit the outflow of the Malaysian Ringgits abroad. At the same time, continuous promotion and festivities have been carried out throughout the country all year round to spur domestic spending. While Malaysians continue to dream of, or perhaps prefer visiting foreign countries, these promotional strategies seem to result in positive domestic tourism development as more and more unique products are introduced for foreign travelers and domestic alike. This revitalization of tourism has built confidence in Malaysians in general that tourism does have potentials. This paper reports on initial findings of a more comprehensive research on the psychographic background of Malaysian travelers. It discovers, among other things, Malaysian domestics are mainly made up of urban travelers, prefer to engage in rather conventional activities.

Keywords: Malaysia, domestic, travel behavior, travel trends

INTRODUCTION

Tourism industry in Malaysia has been traditionally concentrated and promoted towards international markets since its infancy stage in 1960s. Until today, the tourism sector has grown tremendously and has been ranked the second largest foreign income earners behind manufacturing in 2000 and its subsequent years (Tourism Malaysia, 2003). Despite the importance of alluring more and more international travelers to visit Malaysia, the domestic front cannot be overlooked for their vast benefits and numerous untapped potentials. After a string of crises that affect international arrivals on recent years, the domestic tourism industry in Malaysia started to be given priority by the Malaysian government. Continuous promotions and festivities have been carried out throughout the country all year round to spur domestic spending and holidaying. These promotional strategies seem to result in positive domestic tourism development as more unique products are introduced and developed. This paper discusses the behaviors and traveling characteristics of Malaysian domestic travelers. It is part of fundamental research funded by the Malaysian government to develop psychographic clusters of Malaysian domestic travelers based on the Plog's psychographic theory and model.

An understanding of the domestic tourists is crucial in generating specific and right promotions of destinations. Weaver and Oppermann (2000) highlighted that the number of domestic tourists taking vacations is massive compare to international tourists in most

countries and even on global scale. According to the Malaysian Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (MOCAT), domestic tourism receipts were rising at an estimated 15% a year, and surveys done by the tourist office indicated that over 50% of hotel bed-nights were occupied by domestic tourists (Cockerell, 1994). Despite arguments there is no widely accepted definition of domestic tourist (Inskeep, 1991), the WTO defines a *domestic tourist* as any person or resident of a country visiting his own country or traveling to a place within his country other than his usual residence for a period of not less than 24 hours or one night but less than one year for the purposes of recreation, leisure, holidays, sport, business, meetings, conventions, study, visiting friends or relatives, health, mission work or religion (Chadwick, 1994). A *domestic excursionist*, on the other hand, is a visitor traveling in his country of residence for any of the reasons given for tourists, but who stays less than 24 hours at the destination (Smith, 1988).

A report by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (1999, p.1-3) proposed a domestic tourist to be “any person residing in Malaysia regardless of his/her nationality who travels to a place at least 40 kilometers away (one way) from his/her usual place of residence for at least one night or less than one night for any reason other than following an activity remunerated at the place visited”. This definition will be temporarily used for this study. This paper also considered domestic excursionist to be included in the study since the advance system of transportation and highway have given much opportunity for domestic travelers to travel to their preferred destinations within a day.

THE EVOLUTION OF DOMESTIC TOURISM IN MALAYSIA

In the early sixties and seventies, most of Malaysians traveled to Singapore and the most significant international travel among the Malay Muslims at this stage was pilgrimage to Mecca. The departures took place at Port Klang and Penang Port where relatives and friends bid the pilgrims goodbye on board their ships for the 3 months journey. Friends and relatives went on chartered buses and stayed at budget hotels or at friends or relatives' houses nearby, or even at mosques. The remnant of past businesses such as heritage hotels and hostels can be traced at Lebuah Acheh in Penang, used to be the port of embarkation to Mecca for Malaysia's northern pilgrims. Over the years, crowd started to be seen around the international airport in Subang, Kuala Lumpur when Malaysian Airlines System Berhad (MAS) began its inaugurated pilgrimage charter to Mecca in 1974 (Going Places, 2000).

In the 70's, tourism was perceived negatively by the society. The sector was blamed for the spread of drug and other social problems. Parents would not allow their children to join tourism industry, especially the hotel industry, or to study tourism simply fearing that their children would become social outcasts. There was also no proper infrastructure for tourist purposes. Traveling for leisure purpose was almost non-existence. Malaysians mainly travel to visit friends and relatives and this trend has served the Malaysian tourism industry even until today.

Top destinations among Malaysians have been the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, the heritage cities of Melaka and Penang, the hill resorts of Cameron Highlands and Genting Highlands, and the island beach resorts of Pangkor, Redang and Langkawi. Most travelers were excursionists whom traveled within their own state. They mainly used public transportation especially bus. Recently, trips by students and graduates are also gaining popularity. In the early years, must visit locations when visiting Kuala Lumpur were the National Mausoleum (Tugu Negara), the National Mosque, the National Museum, the National Zoo, the Lake Garden and the Parliament Building. Today, visitors to the Klang Valley (where Kuala Lumpur and the new government center of Putrajaya are located) have more diversified choices. While the busy Petaling Street and Tuanku Abdul Rahman Street are still popular among the lower and middle class travelers, there are many mega shopping complexes, the formerly world's tallest building of the Petronas Twin Towers, and new Putrajaya center to be visited. The end of the 80's saw Malaysians stopped going to Singapore as a result of stronger Singapore dollar and started to venture into the northern towns of Haatyai, Takbai, Padang Besar and Danok in Thailand. It was once reported that

Malaysians spend over 2 million Ringgits a month in Thailand.

MALAYSIAN DOMESTIC INDUSTRY

The tourism industry in Malaysia has suffered an eroding numbers of international tourist arrivals since the economic downturn that hits Asian countries in 1997/1998, and when killer epidemics such as SARS and bird flu spread. Due to stiff competition and uncertainty in the world economy particularly in major markets such as USA, Japan, Europe and Australia, it is important to promote the growth of domestic tourism. Domestic tourism has been perceived to be less important for most of national governments including Malaysia since it does not involve much-valued foreign exchange into the country (Weaver & Oppermann, 2000). Improved economic conditions have led to increase leisure time for the population at large and Malaysian government is supporting and increasing allocation to build budget hotels and promotions to meet the needs of domestic tourists (Cockerell, 1994).

As in other developing destinations like Malaysia, the Federal Government plays the leading role in promoting and developing tourism. The newly formed Ministry of Tourism in March 2004 (formerly Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism) realizes that domestic travels and products for local tourists must be developed and diversified. Therefore, various promotions, festivals, and new products will be developed to meet the growing demand of domestic travelers. The declaration of holidays for the public service for the first and third Saturday of the month effective 1st January 1999 and 1st February 2000 respectively, had a tremendous effect on domestic tourism. Ticket-less travel finds its way when Malaysian Airline System (MAS) introduced its application in 2000 on domestic routes to further enhance the domestic tourism. The introduction of the no-frills Air Asia has complemented Malaysian Airlines and given boost to the domestic tourism industry with its slogan "Now Everyone Can Fly".

The traveling seasons for Malaysians mainly circle around the school holidays. Other major holidays are religions or ethnic based festivals such as the Eids, Chinese New Year, and Deepavali. These festivals reflect the multiculturalisms of Malaysians, which has been promoted worldwide in the commercial "Truly Asia" slogan. During peak season as shown below, majority of domestic travelers will visit popular destinations in Malaysia such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Langkawi. Successive public holidays in May also give a long break for Malaysian. This is almost equivalent to the popular Japanese 'Golden Holiday' except unlike their Japanese counterparts, Malaysians travel domestically in general. Holidays in Malaysia often see massive exodus of travelers from big city centers, causing highway jam and long queues at the toll lines.

Since the 80's, various themes and campaigns have been used to promote domestic travelers. Examples of the campaigns are the "*Cuti-Cuti Malaysia*" (Malaysian Holidays) and the open houses fiestas that often staged in conjunction with big festivals like the Chinese New Year, the Eid and Christmas. The objectives of these campaigns are to inculcate the travel culture amongst Malaysians and to get Malaysians to change their mindset and to regard holidays as part of life. The campaigns also aim towards creating a planned holiday culture amongst Malaysians.

METHODOLOGY

This empirical research and relevant data and information on Malaysian domestic travellers are rather limited. Primary data collection was necessary in order to identify and analyse Malaysian domestic traveller's characteristics and behaviours. A questionnaire was developed for data collection purposes and the nationwide survey has been running since March 2004. The questionnaire consists of four parts namely travel planning, travel choice, travel opinion and preference, and demographic. The process of questionnaire design involved a few testings, corrections and reductions. A pilot study was also conducted to test the questionnaire. The preliminary test managed to secure 25 respondents and a more refined questionnaire was developed from the suggestions and comments from the respondents. The questionnaire was prepared in both Malay and English.

This paper reports on initial findings of the survey covering a total of 874 respondents. It is based on questionnaire collected by October 2004 at major destinations in Malaysia like the Malaysia National Park, Kuala Lumpur (including at Kuala Lumpur International Airport), Langkawi, Penang, and the hill resort of Genting Highland. Disproportionate stratified random sampling method was employed for this study. The survey employed self-administered questionnaire, distributed and monitored by field surveyors. The field surveyors were instructed to approach every other traveler found at designated locations. The locations include popular spots like beaches and waterfalls, embarkation spots like jetties and airports, and highway stopovers. Extensive data editing and cleaning were undertaken before the final data can be analyzed using the SPSS program.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile

As presented in Table 1, respondents consist of 47.8% male and 52.2% female, with an average age of 28 years old. The majority of the respondents are below 31 years old. They mainly worked in public sector (43.1%), 39.5% worked in the private sector, while another 17.4% were on their own. Their average monthly income was RM 2632.30 (equivalent to USD 689). The sample consists of 76.6% Malays, 11.5% Chinese, followed by Indians and others. This was perhaps due to the fact that many of the field assistants for this survey are Malays and they must have been more inclined to distribute the survey forms to the Malays. This bias will be corrected in the on-going survey. The majority of the travelers are single (66.2%) and more than half of them have tertiary education or higher.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Malaysian Domestic Travelers

Demographic Profile	Percentage (%)
Gender:	
Male	47.8
Female	52.2
Major Occupation Sectors:	
Government	43.1
Private	39.5
On my own	17.4
Highest Education Level:	
Higher Degree – Master/PhD	9.5
Tertiary Education	46.2
Professional Certificate	12
Secondary Education	30.8
Primary Education	1.3
No Formal Education	0.2

N=874, Missing data omitted.

Travel Characteristic Profile

The main purpose of travel was mainly for leisure or holiday (76.2%), followed almost equally by visiting friends and relatives (20.8%) and for business and convention purposes (20.6%) (Note: Respondents are allowed to choose more than one answers) (Table 2).

Table 2
Main Purposes of Travel

Purpose of travel	No. of respondents	Percentage
Leisure/recreation/holiday	666	76.2
Visit friends/relatives	182	20.8
Business/professional/convention/conference	180	20.6
Shopping	171	19.6
Balik Kampung (including VFR)	92	10.5
Sporting tournament/event	49	5.6
Others – Study/education	15	1.7
Total	1355	155.0

Note: Respondents were allowed to choose multiple answers

The survey discovered that the majority of respondents (84.8%) planned their trips. Today, planning the trips has been deemed necessary, especially during school and public holidays. Despite this, over 44% of them did not make any real reservations. Most of Malaysian travelers trust the words of mouths from friends and relatives (47.1%), followed by magazines and newspapers (31.9%)*. The television and radio as well as travel brochure and the Internet are also important sources of information for them. About 40% of the respondents traveled with their friends, while 35.9% traveled with family or relatives. Only 7.9% were traveling alone*. They spent an average of four days and three nights at destinations, majority visited the places between 1-3 times. The survey also discovered that attractions of the destination, unspoiled nature, leisure and recreational facilities attract them to visit the place. This study also found that public vehicles (39.6%), private vehicle (36.4%),

* Note: Respondents were allowed to choose multiple answers.

and airlines (34%) were used as main modes of transportation from the places of origin to destinations*. The majority of the respondents stayed at hotels (41%) and resorts (23.6%) followed by at their friends' or relatives' houses (18.8%). This reflects a wind of change on term of preferred places of stay during travels, from looking for friends' or relatives' house to a proper type of tourist establishments, especially at hotels between 2 to 4 stars.

Malaysians in general, the Malays especially, are avid urban shoppers and bargain hunters. As shown in Table 3, shopping was one of the major activities done by over 75% travelers during their holidays, followed by city sightseeing (49.7%) and dining (46.2%). The findings also indicate that Malaysian domestics do not really like to engage in adventurous activities or going the remote places or small villages. The main items they purchased were souvenirs at tourist bazaars (47%), clothes, bags or shoes (45.8%), followed by chocolate or sweets (38.3%) (Table 4).

Table 3
Main Activities During Travels

Activities	No. of respondents	Percentage
Shopping	656	75.1
Sightseeing in cities	434	49.7
Dine at café or restaurant	404	46.2
Visiting heritage/historical sites	306	35.0
Museum/art gallery	266	30.4
Amusement/theme parks	257	29.4
Swimming/sunbathing	233	26.7
Visiting national parks	228	26.1
Environmental/ecological excursions	209	23.9
Water sport (diving, rafting, kayaking)	202	23.1
Visiting small towns and villages	189	21.6
Rock climbing/caving	154	17.6
Attend traditional cultural performance	133	15.2
Golfing/tennis/popular sports	123	14.1
Attend concert/theatre/musical	105	12.0
Visiting Orang Asli settlement	84	9.6
Disco/night clubs	61	7.0
Visiting casinos/gambling	37	4.2
Others	36	4.1
Total	4117	471.0

N=874 Note: Respondents were allowed to choose multiple answers.

As mentioned before, the most popular activities undertaken by respondents are shopping (81%), followed by sightseeing in the cities (52%) and dining at the cafés or restaurants (50%). On average, Malaysian domestics spent over RM1183.00 during the travels.

Table 4
Items Purchased During Travels

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Souvenirs at the tourist bazaars	411	47.0
Clothes/Bags/Shoes	400	45.8
Chocolate/Sweets	335	38.3
Authentic local arts and crafts	304	34.8
Local foods, beverages or fruits	260	29.7
Handmade craft	104	11.9
Others: Household items	4	0.5
Others: Toys	1	0.1
Total	1819	208.1

N=874 Note: Respondents were allowed to choose multiple answers.

MALAYSIANS AS TRAVELERS

Nowadays, a large number of Malaysian female either single or married travel. The change of mindset on traditional believe that female should stay at home has made ways for female to enjoy traveling as much as male counterpart. This also perhaps reflects the high level of safety, convenience, and affordability among Malaysian females to travel alone. The average age of domestic travelers is 28 years old reflects the normal age for traveling as Malaysian at this age would have steady job and disposable income. Many Malaysians are having tertiary and higher education at this age, providing them with necessary knowledge and life experience to indulge in traveling experience. Improved economic situation has helped more Malaysians to secure jobs in the private sectors or to do their own business, apart from working in government sectors. Increase in disposable income as well as leisure days have also promoted domestic travel in general. More and more exciting tourism products being introduced by both government and private sectors alike, with special amenities and facilities such as, parking space for the handicapped travelers, prayer rooms and tailor-made toilets been built to assist Muslim travelers. Single travelers are domineering the Malaysian traveling pattern, reflecting a sense of adventure and independence. Single people are more mobile, have more disproportionate income, and they are more receptive towards what the travel experiences can offer.

The study discovers that Malaysians are taking more holidays, recreation or leisure pursuits. The reasons lie in several factors which include lesser working days for the government servants, more private companies adopt flexible working hours, and more holidays have been granted on the basis of improved working hours. Despite the belief that Malaysians prefer to engage in *balik kampung* travels, this study, however, observes that only a small number of Malaysians considered *balik kampung* as their traveling purpose. Malaysian domestic travelers did not regard *balik kampung* as their way of getting away from their usual environment. Most Malaysians planned their trip prior to the journey. This scenario shows that Malaysians are less willing to take a chance and risks of not having accommodation at the destinations. Malaysians rely heavily on their friends or relatives' word of mouth in recommending the destinations to go. They are also more prone to travel to previous destinations they have been visiting due to their past experiences. The placement of advertisements or write-up in the newspapers or magazines has helped to market and promote the destinations or tourism products as Malaysians do obtain travel information in newspapers or magazines. Malaysians enjoy company when traveling, especially with their friends and family. The situation exists since Malaysians are practically having close-knit relationship with their family and friends, therefore they will feel more comfortable traveling with people they know. Despite planning the trips, Malaysians do not make any reservations especially if they plan to stay at their friend or relative's houses, where majority of Malaysians still like to

do. However, since there are more affordable budget hotels of 3 to 4 star rating are available throughout the country, more Malaysians choose to put a night at the hotels.

Malaysians prefer to drive their own personal vehicle from their place of travel origin to the destination, and also when going around at the destination. The next major transportation used is by bus or coach, especially the interstate buses, which has grown tremendously because better highway system. Since they drive on their own, the majority of Malaysians do not buy any travel packages. Ministry of Tourism has acknowledged this trend and has encouraged travel agency companies to be creative and to do more promotions to target the domestic travelers to buy travel packages. Malaysians like to buy common items sell at tourist bazaars, which can be seen all over Malaysia. Certain states in Malaysia hold certain uniqueness that reflect the place, cultures, traditions, clothes, or even the food. This study revealed that Malaysians do spend a quite significant amount of money when traveling. The most popular activities are certainly shopping, sightseeing, and dining. These three activities are mainly the major activities carried out by Malaysians at large, therefore these travel characteristics are common to notice everywhere in Malaysia. It shows that Malaysians are mostly the type of travelers who enjoy doing and experiencing low level of activities.

CONCLUSION

Continuous promotions on domestic tourism, coupled with development of more interesting tourism products have promoted domestic traveling in Malaysia towards potentially a boom. While Malaysians in the past traveled for other purposes than leisure, today's Malaysians start to realize the value of getting away from their homes and seeing new faces and places. While there are still remnants of past trends such as putting up at friends' and relatives' houses, Malaysians are seen to be more practical in traveling nowadays, valuing the privacy of both themselves and the hosts and opting for hotels or resorts nearby. This also reflects a greater affordability among them. This research will continue to uncover many other aspects of Malaysians as travelers, including typical requirements and their psychographic backgrounds, in order to gain better understanding and to plan better products to suit their needs.

REFERENCE

- Chadwick, R. A. (1994). Concepts, definitions, and measures used in travel and tourism research. In J. R. Brent Ritchie, & C. R. Goeldner (Eds.), Travel, tourism, and hospitality research: A handbook for managers and researchers (2nd ed.) (pp. 65-80). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Cockerell, N. (1994). Malaysia (EIU International Tourism Reports No. 2). The Economic Intelligence Unit Limited.
- Inskip, E. (1991). Tourism planning: An integrated and sustainable development approach. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Smith, S. L. J. (1988). Tourism analysis: A handbook. Essex: Longman Scientific & Technical.
- Tourism Malaysia (2003). Tourism in Malaysia: Key performance indicators 2002. Kuala Lumpur: Planning & Research Division, Tourism Malaysia.
- UKM Report (1999, February). Domestic Tourism Study (Final Rep. Vol. 1). Bangi, Selangor: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bureau of Consultancy.
- Weaver, D., & Oppermann, M. (2000). Tourism management. Brisbane: John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd.
- Welcome to Malaysia Airlines. (2000, June). Going Places, 6.
- 8th Malaysian Plan 2001-2005 (2000). Tourism. Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Bhd.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to extend appreciation to the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) committee from the Ministry of Education and Universiti Sains Malaysia who make this presentation possible.