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EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES OF ISLAMIC TOURISM IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is one of the country that rich in diversities, heritages and cultures, however, it is clearly declared that the official religion of the country is Islam. The fact, Islam is the official religion makes it easier to market Malaysia as an Islamic tourism destination. This research paper aims to analyses the current trends and opportunities of Islamic Tourism industry in Malaysia. A document analysis was initially employed to identify the objectives of this research paper. The results of the study have shown the current trends of some travel agents and service providers who have creatively come out with Muslim-friendly packages and tours to attract and gain the attention of Muslim travellers. Besides that, the results of this study have determined three major opportunities of Islamic tourism in Malaysia which are halal holidays, halal tourism smart phone apps and promotions. The futuristic elements of this paper are aimed to promote Islamic products that can be further developed in terms of its quality of production, the benefit of decision-making among Islamic countries, and the ability to raise the dignity of Islam in the eyes of the world.

Keywords: Tourism, Islamic Tourism, OIC.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is definitely one of the sectors that contributes in economic growth in Malaysia. It is an important sector in Malaysia because it contributes towards job employment and increase in foreign exchange gains in the country. Numerous initiatives have been done by the government to make Malaysia as one of the tourism destination in Asia.

Malaysia is one of the country that is rich in diversities, heritages and cultures. However, the official religion of the country is Islam. In Malaysia, people live in harmony despite having different religions and beliefs. Even though Islam is the official religion, people can freely practice any belief. Often mosques, churches and temples are located at the same area in the country. The fact that Islam is the official religion makes it easier to market Malaysia as an Islamic tourism destination.

Islamic Tourism

Tourism is closely connected with a lot of Islamic aspects. Researchers have emphasised that Islam reinforces tourism activities to bring enhancement on social functions and more importantly religious activities. Islamic Tourism definition is closely related with spiritual and religion which is the push factor of travelling and motivation. Rituals as well as religious events, buildings and festivals act as tourist attractions (Islam et. al., 2011). Nowadays, Islamic tourism is a new tourism destination in the world. It has been reported that there are 54 Muslim countries in the world and Malaysia is one of it. This type of tourism would help widen the prospect of Islam as a whole.

The connection between travel and Islam has attracted widespread attention, especially in Islam and tourism attractions (Islam et. al., 2011). Islamic Tourism has different meaning between the one who travels and the one who works in the tourism industry. The spiritual nature of Muslim is related with economy-driven aspects of tourism sector.

ISLAMIC TOURISM ATTRIBUTION IN MALAYSIA

Islamic Tourism attributes in Malaysia could be seen through Islamic-tourism destinations that deliver the value of Islamic-Malay culture and heritage (Battour, Battor & Bhatti, 2013). Moreover, the attributes of Islamic Tourism in Malaysia can also be analysed in economic region aspect (Tourism Council, 2018).

Culture and Heritage

Built cultural heritage is a big responsibility in tourism industry (Bakri, Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2015). Apart from that, Malaysia is a county that has recorded large Malay population which reflects Islamic-Malay culture. This can positively impact Islamic tourism attributes in Malaysia through culture and heritage site. The clear attribute is that Islam is a religion which has primary influence to legal system, social and culture. Hence, the Islamic-Malay culture which has its own history can be a cause to improve Islamic tourism in Malaysia.

To support the statement, Husin (2013) argued that Malay-Islamic value is one of the foundation of the Malay community's culture that can be delivered through culture and heritage building and it is considered as Islamic tourism attraction in Malaysia. In addition, there are many buildings in Malaysia that have been developed for Islamic tourism through

Islamic-Malay civilisation architecture such as Administration Centre in Putrajaya, Masjid Jamek in Kuala Lumpur, Zahir Mosque in Kedah, Masjid Al-Hussain in Kuala Perlis, and Floating Mosque of Tanjung Bungah in Penang. Malaysia government's effort in developing Islamic tourism could be seen by combining the Islamic-Malay ethnic regional through Islamic teaching in many aspects such as attire, halal food culture, soft spoken language and so on (Norhasniah, Husin, Ong & Liaw, 2013).

Economic Region

The attributes of Islamic tourism in Malaysia can be seen in economic region. The growth of Islamic tourism industry has positively affected Malaysia economy through Economic Transformation Program (ETP) and Gross National Income (GNI) (Kamarudin & Ismail, 2016). Besides, the quality of Islamic facilities and infrastructure in Malaysia Could attract more Muslim and non-Muslim travellers to visit Malaysia. Thus, it can be considered as the indicator for economic development region in Malaysia, namely Iskandar Malaysia in Southern Johor (IRDA), Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER), East Coast Economic Region (ECER), Sabah Development Corridor (SDC) and Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE).

In fact, Malaysia is one of the most active Muslim country in developing and exploring opportunities for Islamic tourism such as implementing Tourism Development Corporation (TDC). Besides, as being part of Organization Islamic Corporation (OIC) countries, Malaysia focuses more on Islamic tourism development like organizing OIC Global Islamic Tourism Conference and Exhibition. Hence, the implementation of many alternatives indicate the effective efforts in increasing the number of tourist arrival in Malaysia such as enhancing Islamic products and services like transportation, accommodation, tour guide, and place of interest and attraction. (Kamarudin & Ismail, 2016).

TRENDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Tourism sector acknowledges the increasing interest in Halal Tourism as well as Islamic Tourism. Hence, tourism experts have planned the initiatives to promote and market Halal Tourism which follow the Islamic law. The increasing interest might be because of the growing number of Muslim population in the world. Some travel agents and service providers have creatively came out with Muslim-friendly packages and tours to attract and gain the attention from the Muslim travellers. This kind of opportunities and trends made none other than to promote Islamic values and Halal tourism itself.

Halal Holidays

A new travel package in the tourism industry which serves holiday packages align with Islamic beliefs and practices is called Halal Holiday. The packages provide the halal resorts, hotels and the most important part is only non-alcohol beverages are provided. Some of the accommodations might have segregated pools, spas and other health facilities. Moreover, travel packages include Islamic Heritage tours for the travellers to explore and discover the morals and values practised by Muslims (Musa & Moghavvemi, 2015).

Halal Tourism Smart Phone Apps

One of the examples of smart phone apps is Halal Navi. It operates as smartphone apps and digital guidebooks for Muslim tourists and travellers. The website is run and developed by Muslims to ease the journey of other Muslim travellers. The website has information regarding halal eateries, Muslim-friendly accommodation and nearby prayer room available. Thompson said, the global Muslim market is about RM 7.4 trillion which makes it a hot topic to be discussed. A Malaysian who developed Halal Navi and Have Halal Will Travel claimed that Halal Navi is completely community based service. It started as an information provider within Japan, but nowadays, South Korea, Thailand and Germany are also inclusively included in this apps.

KEY PLAYERS IN PROMOTING ISLAMIC TOURISM IN MALAYSIA

This section will emphasise on the key players in promoting Islamic tourism in Malaysia by focusing on two approaches which are organising tourism fair, festival and exhibition, and facilitating visa among the OIC countries.

Organising Tourism Fair, Festival and Exhibition

Islamic tourism in Malaysia is an industry that contributes the most in international trade. It is proven that the diversification of Islamic tourism products could be seen through increasing competition in international markets by producing Halal hotels, Halal transports (Airlines), Halal tour packages, Halal food premises and Halal finance. Thus, it is important to organise tourism fair, festival and exhibition in promoting Islamic tourism among OIC countries including Malaysia.

Organising tourism fair, festival and exhibition is an alternative way to grab huge opportunities in order to promote Islamic tourism products among locals. The regional fair and exhibition activities encourage local communities to promote and market their touristic destination and heritage site that will positively affect tourism activity in their region. Regarding to this matter, Islamic culture festival provides chances for people living in the neighbour cities or countries to know more about each other. Therefore, these effective approaches could be used by all Islamic countries to explore possible Islamic tourism products in the future (Islamic Cooperation, 2017).

Visa Facilitation among the OIC Countries

To explore the possibilities of Islamic tourism in Malaysia, it is important to know the current laws and regulations that give benefits towards Islamic tourism industry in Malaysia which is visa facilitation among OIC countries. It plays important roles in attracting more tourists to visit Malaysia which deals with the ability of tourists to enter the destination and those seek employment in the tourism sector.

According to the Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, restrictive visa policy will give negative impacts towards tourist arrival where it discourages potential tourists to visit the countries in their respective region. Hence, by creating a universal tourist visa, it can facilitate the member of the country to join the scheme. For instance, Malaysia is an OIC member that gets benefits from visa facilitation among OIC countries. OIC countries have various geographical regions that could easily develop visa regimes to promote and market intraregional tourism and enhance Islamic regional integration (Islamic Cooperation, 2017).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Islamic tourism in Malaysia has its own uniqueness that provides opportunities to a new dimension of tourism in Malaysia industry. Exploring the possibilities of Islamic tourism in Malaysia is one of the challenges for Malaysia government to improve the tourism sector in many aspects of social, cultural and heritage, economy, technology and so on. However, this is not a barrier to make Malaysia as a developing nation that applies Islamic principles in tourism industry. In a nutshell, this paper aims to promote Islamic products that could be further developed in terms of its production quality, the benefit of decision-making among Islamic countries, and the ability to nurture the dignity of Islam in the eyes of the world.

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