



## THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS AS A CULTURAL HERITAGE ATTRACTION: KOTA KUALA KEDAH MUSEUM

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**Abstract:** *Museums have historically been seen as cultural institutions whose prime functions are education and learning. However, as society has changed, more museums are aware of their potential to add value to their community economically by attracting visitors to the destination. As the demand for tourism increases, museums have become key partners in the cultural heritage tourism industry of a destination. Consequently, greater emphasis is now being placed on their leisure function. In parallel with the development of museums as visitor attraction, museums need to be the place where visitors can visit, see and experience the important aspects of the community and area within the destination. In this sense, the process of exhibiting, communicating and explaining to visitors the significance of the place or resources they are visiting is important in ensuring visitor satisfaction. In this paper, the role of Kota Kuala Kedah Museum as a cultural heritage tourism attraction in Kedah is explored. Findings revealed that the museum has great potential to attract visitors. The museum, furthermore, is able to connect the visitors with the historical values of the fort to the community in Kuala Kedah specifically, and Kedah generally. As a conclusion, this paper concludes that the management of Kota Kuala Kedah Museum should be ready to meet the challenge of practicing a more visitor friendly approach while continuing to meet their heritage preservation and education mandates.*

**Keywords:** *Museum, Tourism Attraction, Visitor Experience*

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## **Introduction**

Cultural heritage tourism has become one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry. In many societies, cultural heritage manifests itself in oral history, traditional music and dances and social practices. As such, it is said that cultural heritage tourism can boost local culture. For these reasons, it has become one of the important pillars of tourism industry in many countries. On the same note, museums play an important role in cultural heritage tourism worldwide. Through museums, societies represent the relation with their own history, and to that of other cultures and people (Lumley, 1988:2). Like elsewhere in the world, museums play an important role in cultural heritage tourism in Malaysia. At present, there are more than 150 museums in Malaysia, under the management of either the museum department, state government, or private sector. With increased level of competition in the tourism industry, it is becoming more important for museum managers to identify factors that will enhance the attraction and retention of museum visitors.

## **Literature review**

### ***Heritage***

Generally, heritage is defined as consisting of traditions or living expressions that are inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants. Because of its role as a carrier of historical values from the past, heritage is viewed as part of the cultural tradition of a society. Today, the term cultural heritage is increasingly attached to present-day activities linked to the past. The present-day activities, furthermore, have expanded during recent years in their range and scope, with the recognition of the growth of the so-called 'heritage industry' (Hewison, 1987). It highlights the commodification of heritage, with tourism development as the prime objective in the heritage industry.

In support to the discussion above, several authors (Bendix, 2009; Du Cross, 2007; Arthur & Mensah, 2006) indicate that a higher demand for cultural heritage tourism may be due to three factors. First is an existing dissatisfaction of the market concerning present-day product. Second is a rising focus on learning while travelling in order to enhance one's knowledge and appreciation of other cultures. Finally, the governments' realization on the demand for cultural heritage tourism and the creation of facilities to assist the development. As the cultural heritage tourism product is gaining momentum, the museum, as a part of heritage industry is experiencing the same scenario as a tourist attraction.

### ***Museum***

A museum is a 'non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development and is open to the public. It acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of study, education and enjoyment (International Council of Museum, 2007). In addition to preserving and studying collections, 'museums exist for the purpose of serving the community' (Ambrose & Paine, 2012:11). As part of the 'heritage industry', the role of museum is not only to educate people about the place they are visiting, but also to provide enjoyable and entertaining experience for visitors

(Prentice & Anderson, 2007). Museums are actually competing with other tourism products in getting the attention of visitors. In this sense, in order to be competitive, museums need to not only be educational, providing information, and engaging the minds of visitors, but also be interesting, attractive and alive. De Ruyter, Wetzels, Lemmink and Mattson (1997) explain that there are six different components in the delivery process of museums. The combination of the components would influence the level of satisfaction of visitors visiting museum. The components include:

- permanent collection
- temporary collection
- restaurant
- museum shop (souvenir shop)
- wardrobe

### ***Museum visitors***

In the beginning, visitors of cultural heritage attractions, including museums, are seen as a homogeneous mass of people. However, recent literature has begun to consider them as a heterogeneous group with different perceptions, characteristics and needs (Brida, Desegna & Scuderi, 2014; Sheng & Chen, 2012; Ryan & Hsu, 2011). Pekarik, Doering and Karns (1999), on the other hand, explained on the kind of experience visitors find in museums. There are four kinds of experiences which include:

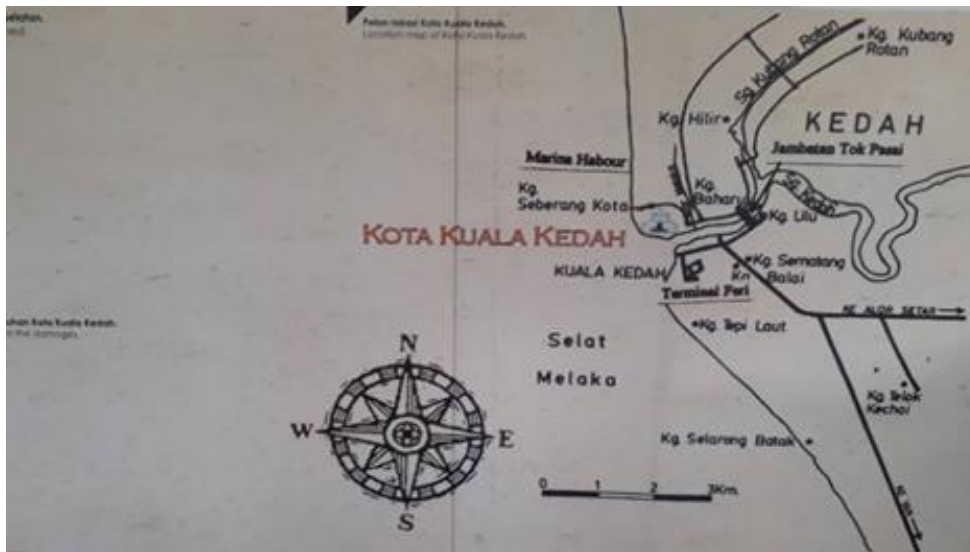
- Object experiences – permanent and non-permanent exhibitions
- Cognitive experiences – knowledge and information learned
- Introspective experiences – ability to imagining other (past) time
- Social experiences – togetherness with family, friends and loved ones

According to the authors, visitors may engage in some of the experiences depending on their motivation and the way museum collections are exhibited. Nonetheless, having the ability to engage in all four types of experience will enhance the level of visitors' satisfaction, and make their visit more meaningful. Driven by the motive to enhance visitors' satisfaction levels, public museums are encouraged to become more market oriented (Biran, Poria & Oren, 2011). This is because funding has to be justified more and more in terms of visitors' satisfaction. They are encouraged to utilize a variety of ways to engage visitors and provide them with intrinsic rewards, i.e. learning experience. Central to the issue is the need for the managers to understand how visitors perceive their experience in visiting museums. However, regardless of the growing pressure faced by museums in competing with other types of visitor attractions, the museums, particularly public museums, have been slow in subscribing to the idea of understanding their visitors. Thus, the objective of this paper is to investigate visitors' experience in visiting one of the public museums in Kedah, the Kota Kuala Kedah Museum.

### ***Kota Kuala Kedah Museum***

The museum is located in a fort, known as the Kuala Kedah Fort, situated at the northern shore of the Kedah River (photo 1). The fort was built in 1771 during the reign of Sultan Muhammad Jiwa. It was known as the centre for administration, trade and fortress of the Kedah's Malay Sultanate, as British government offices when Kedah was officially under the British rule in 1909, as well as a military training centre during Japanese occupation. The fort was acknowledged as a historical land site by the Department of Museums and

Antiquities (currently known as Department of Museums Malaysia) in 1978, and was officially opened to public in 1999. The fort consists of a museum, a lighthouse, several remains of buildings that were built during the British colony, a site that was said to be the sultanate's palace, several cannons, and two gateways. Photo 2 depicts the description.



**Photo 1: Location of Kota Kuala Kedah Museum**



**Photo 2: Kota Kuala Kedah Museum**

### **Methodology**

The research is based on a survey conducted in March 2017. Convenience sampling method was adopted as there were no sufficient information on the characteristics of the visitors to the museum. Interviews took place when the visitors exited the museum compound. Only one person per travel party was selected. The questionnaire consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. It is designed to capture the visitors' experience with the permanent exhibition in Kota Kuala Kedah museum.

## Discussion of findings

It should be noted at the outset that this paper focuses on permanent exhibition only. It does not, therefore, provide any discussion involving other components in the delivery process of museums as discussed by De Ruyter et al (1997). A total of 34 visitors were interviewed. All of the visitors are Malaysians, with 41% male and 59% female. Majority of the visitors (91.2% @ 31 respondents) are within the age of 20 to 29. About 76% of visitors are from outside Kedah. In addition, respondents are accompanied on average by three or four people, with 75% of them who made the visit with friends, while 9% with an organized group. Their three main sources of information about the museum come from family/friends, internet and tourist information centres. Findings also revealed that the three main reasons for visiting the museum are: ‘to occupy some leisure time’, ‘to accompany friend/family member’, and ‘recommended by someone’.

Respondents are also asked to describe their museum experience, and the results are highlighted in table 1. Findings revealed that majority of the respondents have had a positive experience, with only a small number feeling the opposite.

**Table 1: Description on Museum Experience**

|                                       |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| Learning something new                | 85% |
| Having the feeling of wasting my time | 6%  |
| Feeling at ease                       | 92% |
| Feeling lost or disoriented           | 11% |
| Having fun                            | 95% |
| Feeling astonished by something       | 95% |
| Feeling bored                         | 6%  |

In addition, respondents are asked about their preferences in experiencing the museum. Findings revealed that majority of the visitors want to explore the museum and the surrounding area on their own. Although others feel the same way, they also like the idea that the staff are around and available, in case they wanted to ask questions. The two most preferred options in exploring the museum can be explained by the fact that the area within the fort is quite large, and the permanent exhibition within the fort is quite plentiful. Many of the objects and remnants within the fort comes with its own description. Thus, for those who are interested, they could spend some time reading all of the information. In the museum, in addition, are displayed photos, information and copies of important documents during the reign of Kedah sultanates, and their association with the British colony. These could also attract visitors who are interested to know about the history of the fort.

The preference of the visitors on how to spend their time in the fort, can be further explained by the duration of their visit. As explained in table 2, majority of the respondents spend more than one hour visiting the museum.

**Table 2: Time spent visiting Kota Kuala Kedah Museum**

| <b>Duration</b>    | <b>persons</b> |
|--------------------|----------------|
| Less than one hour | 7              |
| More than one hour | 20             |
| More than two hour | 7              |

Findings from table 2 support the assumption made earlier, which was summarized in table 1 that the visitors have not only visited the museum, but have also spent some time exploring the area within the fort.

Based on the qualitative interview made with the respondents, findings reveal that, throughout their visits, all of the respondents have encountered at least one of the four types of experience discussed in the literature. Such experience include experiences on object, cognitive, introspective and social. Many commented on the aspects of cognitive experience (specifically on the knowledge and information learned) based on their observation of the landscape and architecture of the fort. For example, according to respondent #5:

...I enjoyed the visit very much because the information is everywhere, and not just the writings in the museum. You have to walk and explore the fort to see and understand what have been written in the museum.

On the other hand, respondent #9 commented that:

...Beautiful surrounding, well kept. Many of the things are quite intact. Like wooden and brick doors. I could imagine how the fort would have looked like during its glorious days.

Respondent #9 was actually experiencing an introspective experience. That is the ability to imagine other times. The ability to imagine other times, furthermore, is important for heritage site as it can influence the overall satisfaction of visiting the site. An opinion given by respondent #9 was supported by respondent #18. As he explained:

...It is a good feeling to visit real artefacts rather than just replicas. It gives you a sense of place....by seeing all these relics you can imagine how important the fort was during the time. Sungai Kedah must have been a busy port.

On the same note, others were fascinated with the cannons and lighthouse displayed within the fort. Photo 3 provides an example of an original cannon, dated 1610, used to protect the fort from the enemies. The lighthouse, on the other hand, was built in 1891. Locally known as the Rumah Pelita/Pelita Pusing, the building of the lighthouse was backed by a financial assistance from King Chulalongkorn, the king of Thailand at the time. Thus, from the findings, it could be deduced that being able to see or study real objects is important for the visitors. Particularly when the site is filled with historical value.

Last but not least, majority of the respondents agreed that they have enjoyed visiting the museum. As noted by respondent #25:

‘...I enjoyed my visit to this museum. I am sure my friends shared my feeling as well’

Comment made by respondent #25 was echoed by respondent #28:

‘...yes very much. I came all the way from Johor with my family, on our way to Langkawi....this is a good stop.’

Comment made by the two respondents indicating that they were experiencing a social experience (togetherness with family, friends and loved ones).



Photo 3: Cannon and Lighthouse

### Conclusion

It is clear that the Kota Kuala Kedah Museum has successfully created all four types of experiences, and is consequently creating a positive experience for museum visitors. The fact that visitors learn and enjoy the walk within the fort signals that more emphasis should be given to the interpretation process. Some can be considered as old. Nonetheless, efforts to improve the site is evident at the compound. During the fieldwork, there was a work done to restore the lighthouse to its original colour (see photo 3). Thus, making the interpretation process more meaningful and precise. From the findings above, it can be concluded that Kota Kuala Kedah Museum is able to hold its role as a carrier of historical values from the past, as well as a cultural heritage attraction, that is filled with stories from the past which shapes the present and future of our land for Malaysia generally, and Kedah specifically.

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