DESTINATION ATTRIBUTES OF ISLAMIC TOURISM IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Religious tourism has existed since antiquity, and the term is commonly referred to as faith tourism, which is a type of tourism, where people travel individually or in groups for pilgrimage, missionary, or leisure purposes. The topic thus has a place in the literature that deals with the creation and representation of tourism spaces, many of which combine secular and spiritual meanings as evidenced in many countries. Much research has been conducted into aspects of the interconnectedness between religion and tourism, and parallels are often drawn between the two. The term Islamic tourism was first introduced about a decade ago, but there has been a growing interest and curiosity in what it actually means. Guided by their own respective understandings of the term, various parties and organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, have sought to promote Islamic tourism industry by offering tourist packages which they think fulfil the definitions and requirements of Islamic tourism. Empirical data is yet to be collected, and this conceptual paper attempts to examine circumstances in Malaysia, where Muslims are dominant, and assesses the challenges of effectively balancing the demands of Islam which is central to everyday life and those of modern tourism. This exploratory research aims to establish the typology and fundamental criteria for classifying the different types of Islamic tourism as well as to formulate Islamic tourism framework in the country. As the concept of Islamic tourism is new and ill-defined globally, the findings will add to the body of knowledge in tourism discipline, influence the process of formulating the appropriate strategies for positioning Malaysia as the top Muslim destination in the world, and subsequently will be used to map out Islamic tourism destinations according to its classification in the country.

Keywords: Islamic tourism, religious tourism, destination attributes

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the relationship between tourism and religion has been addressed in the literature on tourism, there remains a shortage of theoretical publications in the area of tourism in the context of Islam. Religion and religiosity are acknowledged factors influencing human behaviour according to various social settings, yet research that explores relationships between religion, behaviour and tourist destination choice remains highly limited (Din 1989; Rinschede 1992; Fleischer 2000; Howe 2001; Poria et al. 2003; Weidenfeld 2006; Weidenfeld & Ron, 2008). Din (1989) argues that social scientists have tended to overlook the importance of religion in tourism studies. When it comes to the relationship between tourism and religion, particularly Islam, the lack of literature is even more obvious, especially regarding Islamic religious attributes and their impact on tourist needs in general and Muslim tourists in particular. The current debate tends to focus on Muslim friendly
destinations, halal tourism, and provision of shari’ah compliant accommodation services, but no attempt has been made to universally define the term and formulate the typology of Islamic tourism, especially in Malaysia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has been conducted into aspects of the interconnectedness between religion and tourism (Rinschede 1992; Vukonic 1996) and parallels are often drawn between the two (Allcock 1998; MacCannell 1992; Schmidt 1980). In the past, tourism is traditionally closely linked to religion which has acted as a powerful motive for travel from the time of early pilgrimages to contemporary journeys to sacred places. Religious buildings, rituals, festivals and ceremonial events are important tourist attractions for those with a casual interest as well as more devout followers of the particular systems of belief represented. The topic thus has a place in the literature that deals with the creation and representation of tourism spaces (Britton 1991), many of which combine secular and spiritual meanings as evidenced in many countries.

It can be argued that religious tourism, travel primarily motivated by religious reasons, is one of the oldest types of tourism and “probably as old as religion” itself (Rinschede 1992, p. 53). Studies of religion and tourism are usually centered on the purpose and impact of tourism activities, destination images, and managing sacred sites (Hattab & Katz 2001; Jackowski & Smith 1992; Nolan & Nolan 1992; Schneider & Sonmez 1999; Sharpley & Sundaram 2005; Vukonic 1992). Rinschede (1992) suggested two temporal forms of religious tourism, short- and long-term. The former includes excursions to nearby pilgrimage centers and religious conferences, usually taking place within a day. Long-term religious tourism can last months, for example, Muslims spending 45 days in Mecca for their Hajj. Today, religious tourism has a broad scope and close ties with population growth and economic development (Jackowski & Smith 1992).

Islam is not intrinsically opposed to tourism, yet international tourism is adversely affected by poor relations between Western and Islamic nations. Islam has been associated with oppression, terrorism conservatism and anti-Western sentiment (Armstrong 2001), while the West is criticized as an imperialist aggressor pursuing economic, political and social domination (Al Ahmad 1984; Said 1979) whose people are infidels of lax morals. Our neighbouring country, Brunei is an exciting example of a ‘reluctant tourist destination’ whose wealth has undermined any economic incentive to help protect citizens from its ‘worst excesses’ and encourage international tourism (Baum & Conlin 1997, 91). About what constitutes compatibility or true Islamic conduct, there is no consensus and this is reflected in the debate about the practice and meaning of Islamic tourism concepts. In this research context, this phenomenon is interesting to be explored further as the prevailing federal government of Malaysia’s stance on the management of tourism and Islam, although mindful of local sensibilities, is to satisfy international visitors and not insist on compliance with Islamic strictures (The Straits Times 2002). Commercial objectives to maximise revenue through providing the leisure environments demanded by the tourism industry may therefore take precedence over religious considerations.

Islam, the world’s fastest growing religion (Essoo & Dibb 2004), should constitute 30% of the world population by 2025 (Huntington 1996). The existence of about one billion Muslims globally suggests a huge market potential (Sechzer 2004; Timothy &
Iverson 2006). Islamic tourism is agreed to be a powerful commercial force (Euromonitor 2008), especially within the Middle East, with excellent prospects (Mintel, 2005). Yet the world’s 57 Muslim countries (SESRTCIC 2006) garner less than 10% of global tourism revenues (Islamic Countries Seek Bigger Piece of Tourism Pie 2005). The four countries that dominate Muslim tourism - Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, and Malaysia - received 17.5 million guests in 2004. There is a call to open and promote Muslim countries’ tourism markets, as reflected, for example, by the November 2005 inaugural Tourism Fair of Islamic Countries in Istanbul (Islamic Countries Seek Bigger Piece of Tourism Pie 2005).

Although the term has not been universally defined and accepted, Islamic tourism has been developing rapidly in the last 10 years along three main trajectories: economic trajectory (intra-regional tourism growth), cultural trajectory (inclusion of Islamic cultural and religious heritage sites in tourism programs), and lifestyle trajectory (organization of tourist spaces to match conservative Islamic values). Several authors recount how Islam historically enjoined particular types of travel which have retained an important religious and social function, albeit constantly adapting to the changing world. This exploratory research is concerned with modern tourism and the Islamic religion, using the example of Malaysia as a case study to illustrate the problems and opportunities which arise when the two come into contact. Some general observations are to be made about the difficulties of the relationship, and conflicts between religious practices and tourist demands are to be identified, despite the fact that Malaysia was voted as the world’s top Muslim-friendly destination according to surveys by Dinar Standard, a leading US-based survey institute for the Muslim travel market, and Crescent Rating, a Singapore-based Muslim travel consultancy firm.

The typology development can be likened to the work of Oppermann (1996) who developed a conceptual model of non-urban tourism to distinguish the differences between wilderness tourism, rural tourism, farm tourism, non-farm tourism and natural tourism in protected areas. As Islamic tourism typology is not well understood globally, it is expected that the outcomes of this research would provide a holistic and universal understanding of the term, and not limited to narrow standpoints as currently understood and practiced.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to explore the fundamental concepts of Islamic tourism, establish fundamental criteria for classifying different types of Islamic tourism, formulate framework and designate Islamic tourism destinations according to its classification in Peninsular Malaysia. Desktop study has been conducted prior to this research to identify research problems and to refine research focus. This research is exploratory in nature. A mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques will be adopted to satisfy the research needs. The field study activities are divided into three parts: in-depth interviews with stakeholders, tourist survey and case studies to be concentrated in Terengganu and Kelantan. In-depth interviews will be conducted among tourism and religious experts in Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Terengganu and Kelantan in the first phase of the research to induce data and develop relevant themes relating to Islamic tourism typology. The authorities will include Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Tourism Malaysia (MPTB), State Economic Planning Unit, Islamic Tourism Centre of Malaysia, Islamic Development Department of Prime
Minister’s Office, JAKIM, Lembaga Tabung Haji, Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia, State Islamic Councils, Muslim travel agencies, etc. There is also the necessity to conduct interviews in Banda Aceh, Indonesia and Brunei Darul Salam as both are considered more prominent in their images as an ‘Islamic’ tourist destination in the region. Interviews will be based on purposive sampling technique, and the number of interview respondents will be determined when data saturation is reached.

The interview findings will provide the foundation to design questionnaire items to investigate the tourist market’s understanding and requirement of Islamic tourism typology. The survey in phase 2 will be distributed to Muslim tourists, both domestic and foreign, in Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Kuala Terengganu and Kota Bharu using a non-probability convenient sampling method. The aim of the interview and tourist survey is to establish the typology and develop the conceptual framework of Islamic tourism in Malaysia. Pursuant to the above findings, case studies in phase 3 will be conducted in Terengganu and Kelantan to investigate the conformity and suitability of the typology and application of the framework. Findings from the case studies will be used to map out and designate Islamic tourism destinations according to different classifications in the east coast states.

4. DISCUSSION

Islamic tourism can be defined as tourism mainly by Muslims, although it can extend to unbelievers motivated to travel by Islam, which takes place in the Muslim world (Al-Hamarneh 2008; OIC 2008; Henderson 2009). Purposes are: ‘first, the revival of Islamic cultures and the spread of Islamic values; second, economic benefit for Islamic societies; and third, the strengthening of Islamic self-confidence, identity and beliefs in the face of negative stereotyping in comparison to other cultures and lifestyles’ (Al-Hamarneh 2008, 2). Islamic tourism is agreed to be a powerful commercial force (Euromonitor 2008), especially within the Middle East, with excellent prospects (Mintel 2005).

Thus, it can be argued that tourism of many sorts is compatible with Islam and encouraged by its teachings. The religion demands adherence to stipulations about conduct, dress, food and prayer. Interpretations of religious strictures are not uniform, with variations within and among countries that have correspondingly different socio-cultural impacts (Hassan 2005), but societies as a whole tend to be conservative. Political factors are also critical and the religion has become highly politicised, including among traditionally moderate regimes. Several have been compelled to assert their Islamic credentials in the face of opposing parties claiming the role of religious champion for themselves. The trend has implications for international tourism and certain visitors are targets for extremists, exemplified by attacks in Egypt (Aziz 1995) and Indonesia (Robinson & Meaton 2005). Islamic scholars are particularly influential in much of the Middle East where governments are rigid in the implementation of Islamic law as a consequence (Goldsmith 2007).

A greater degree of liberalism is likely to make travel easier for non-Muslims, although it must be remembered that Muslims have obligations as hosts and a tradition of offering hospitality to strangers, which many Western travellers have appreciated. Nevertheless, tourists are advised to be respectful of local norms and abide by rules. An additional constraint is that Islam is often associated with ultra-conservatism, terrorism, oppression and anti-Western sentiment by outsiders (Armstrong 2002), and the marketing of Islamic destinations can be a daunting task.
(Henderson 2008). The political tensions between the West and some Muslim countries have also reinforced mutual suspicions, which may be aggravated by media reporting.

It is hoped that this research would provide a new impetus for the healthy growth of Islamic tourism on a global scale that would help promote not only a deeper understanding of Islam and its civilization which is characterized by unity in diversity but also a deeper mutual understanding between the world’s cultures and civilizations that is so essential to world peace. In Islamic intellectual tradition, the Islamicity of things is judged in the light of two principles: tawhid-compliance at the level of ideas and beliefs and shari’ah-compliance at the level of practices and ethical values. These two principles determine the scope of Islamic tourism. The universality would help guarantee the broad scope and the global significance of Islamic tourism.

REFERENCES


