

## Halal Tourism

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In today's globalised world, where inter connectivity has made traveling a part and parcel of everyday life, tourism has become an important source of revenue for many countries. Halal tourism is a new product in the tourism industry. Thus, there is a need to develop tailored halal tourism products and services to cater to this dynamic and emerging market.

The concept of halal, meaning permissible in Arabic, is not just being applied to food, but it includes any Shari'ah compliant products ranging from bank dealings to cosmetics, vaccines and in this case, tourism. This means offering tour packages and destinations that are particularly designed to cater for Muslim considerations and address Muslim needs.

Halal tourism, as a form of religious tourism, is commonly associated with Middle Eastern countries, especially when it comes to Hajj and Umrah packages for pilgrims. This niche market offers a great potential for halal tourism products and services as it has a strong inelastic demand and demonstrates high resilience. Muslims all around the world will travel for their faith annually to perform Hajj and Umrah, which are pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina, even in times of insecurity. Nowadays, it has been a trend for pilgrimage packages to include an extended stay for travel beyond Mecca and Medina, where these religious tourists or pilgrims extend their stay after performing their pilgrimage, to visit other religious sites and learn more about the local culture or retracing the holy route taken by the prophets.

Halal tourism, however, is not limited to Middle East countries. The world Muslim population has been growing rapidly across the world as the years pass by. From about 1.84 billion in 2007, the global Muslim population is estimated to be approximately 3 billion in 2010. With this growing population, halal tourism has the potential to develop into one of the most resilient forms of tourism. As such, countries around the world should start tapping into the unexploited halal tourism market by ensuring Muslim travelers are provided with maximum convenience during their trip and are able to fulfill religious obligations whilst on holiday.

One way to entice these Muslim tourists is by creating tour packages that comply with the Shari'ah rules which the Muslim families abide by. An important point to note is that Muslim tourists should not be targeted the same way as non-Muslim tourists. A major difference is to offer activities that totally eliminate gambling, drinking and all other party-related activities. Visits to mosques and other Islamic related sites could also be included in the itineraries. It is also very important to provide halal meals and to set aside time for prayers throughout the tour.

Apart from that, flights to these destination countries should provide a wider selection of in-flight halal meals where no pork or alcohol is served. It would also be a better experience for Muslim tourists if the airline could announce prayer timings and broadcast religious programs as part of the entertainment on board. Having copies of the Quran on board, which is made available upon request, would definitely be an added value.

In addition to specially tailored tour packages and unique flight experience, the hospitality industry also plays an important role in promoting halal tourism. International hotels should accommodate to the Muslim tourists' taste and spiritual needs on top of providing a 5-star quality environment of comfort and luxury. This is simply about creating the right themes, ambiances, architecture, interior and exterior that would make them feel at ease during their stay. The hotel rooms should have a Qibla pointing signage stuck on the ceiling or in drawers, and a prayer mat to allow the Muslim travelers to perform their religious obligations.

Besides that, these hotels should have restaurants which serve halal food, in accordance to the teachings of Shari'ah law and is free of any forbidden products such as pork and alcohol. It could also consider having separate swimming pools and spa facilities for men and women or go to the extent of employing people of different origins to provide translation services and other assistance that may be needed by the tourists from Muslim countries, especially those who are unable to communicate in English.

Furthermore, other simple steps such as having prayer rooms at shopping complexes and tourist attractions will make the Muslim travelers' trip a more pleasant one.

Malaysia, for instance, has been leading the way in the halal tourism industry and has been successful in trying to attract Muslim tourists from all over the world, especially the Middle Eastern travelers, by offering facilities in accordance with the religious beliefs of these Muslim tourists.

At a time when other countries did not really see the potential of halal tourism, Malaysia was quick enough to respond to this latest trend in the tourism industry and to realize that it was indeed a marketable product. This is especially the case since the September 11 incident. Increasing security measures and difficulties in obtaining visas for Middle Eastern travelers to the West are some of the several reasons these travelers have been less inclined to go on a holiday and invest their money in the US and Europe. Thus, there is shift in how they spend their money and where they go for holidays. With all these restrictions, the Middle Eastern travelers redirect their attention to other different destinations.

Malaysia, as a Muslim majority country, seems to be the perfect destination as it is able to cater to most of their needs. From the first moment of their arrival, the Middle

East tourists will feel at home and welcomed. At the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), they will be able to see signs in Arabic everywhere and there are also Arab-speaking staff to guide them. They will also be provided with promotional booklets, maps and all the necessary tools that will help them during their holiday in Malaysia.

Malaysia has also developed its hotels, restaurants and shopping malls to accommodate to their needs. The hotels are equipped with all the necessary facilities required. Almost all hotels in Malaysia have a Qibla sign and a prayer mat and most do serve halal food. The shopping malls in Malaysia usually have many halal restaurants, Arabic signs and also a 'surau' or prayer room, thus making it more convenient for these Muslim tourists to shop.

Malaysian Tourism has also launched its first Arabic language website and a "feel-at-home" campaign specifically to target the Middle East tourists. Even a Kuala Lumpur street has been given the Arabic name "Ain Arabia". It is like a mini Arab town, showcasing various Arabic and Middle Eastern food and cultures.

Malaysia has targeted a certain time of the year in which they call the 'Arab season'. In the month of August, it is usually really hot in the Gulf states. In order to avoid the extremely hot weather, the Middle Easterners will take a break and bring the whole family on a holiday. They usually stay for at least 3 weeks or a month and would rent an apartment or a few rooms in a hotel. While in Malaysia, besides visiting tourist attractions, they will spend their money shopping or some might even start up a business or invest in properties.

So clearly, Malaysia has been successful in positioning itself as one of the Middle Eastern travelers' preferred holiday destination. Last year, it managed to attract 147 646 tourists from Middle Eastern countries, which is an increase of 17% from the previous year.

Halal tourism has definitely gained popularity and has become a new phenomenon in the tourism industry and countries across the globe should not miss on the opportunity to tap into this market.