

Exploring Muslim-Friendly Services and Halal Tourism in Sarawak: Stakeholder Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Sarawak is increasingly recognised as a promising Muslim-friendly destination, with its tourism sector actively developing to attract more Muslim tourists. Zamani-Farahani and Eid (2021) suggested that Islamic Tourism should support sustainable development by promoting ethical travel practices that align with Islamic teachings, including environmental respect and community support. Globally, many countries are capitalising on the economic potential of Muslim travellers by offering halal-certified services and amenities. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore such opportunities in Sarawak by conducting in-depth interviews with the key stakeholders involved in the Islamic tourism sector, such as Muslim-friendly tour guides, mosque visit guides, and providers of Muslim-friendly accommodations. Additionally, insights were gathered from international Muslim tourists visiting the region. On-site observations of various tourist attractions provided further understanding of local Islamic tourism implementation of Islamic tourism packages. The findings emphasise the importance of ongoing collaboration among stakeholders and industry players to enhance the capacity of Sarawak's Islamic tourism industry. These efforts focus on addressing Muslim visitors' needs through initiatives that standardise practices in alignment with Malaysia's broader Islamic Tourism Industry guidelines. Such initiatives aim to build Sarawak's reputation as a credible Islamic tourism destination. The study addresses a significant gap by providing qualitative data on the perceptions, satisfaction, and expectations of international Muslim tourists regarding Muslim-friendly services in Sarawak. It also sheds light on how local stakeholders operationalise Muslim-friendly facilities and practices in the region. Ultimately, this research highlights the potential socio-economic benefits of Islamic tourism for Sarawak and underscores the strategic role of industry cooperation in advancing Muslim-friendly tourism offerings. By fostering authentic and inclusive travel experiences tailored to Muslim tourists, Sarawak can strengthen its position within the global Islamic tourism market and contribute to sustainable regional development.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the population of 34.4 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2026), Malaysia is characterised by its multiracial and multi-religious society, comprising of diverse ethnic communities across its states. In Malaysian Constitution (Article 3), Islam is acknowledged as the official religion in the federation while

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individuals are freely practising other religions and in Article 160, Malay is defined as a person who embraces Islamic religion, commonly speak Malay (national language of Malaysia) and adheres to Malay customs. As a consequence, Malay identity generally relates to being a Muslim. Islam is not only confined to Malays, but non-Malays from other ethnic groups are found to be Muslims. In Sarawak, there are several associations established to support them, such as Malaysian Indian Muslim Association (PERMIM), Malaysian Chinese Muslim Associations (MACMA), and Bidayuh Muslim Association.

Sarawak is the largest region in terms of land area and the state is represented by multi diverse ethnic communities where Muslims and minority Muslims (other ethnic groups) constitute over 35% of 2.3 million Sarawak population (Sarawak Statistical Bulletin, 2020). Sarawak is home to over 37 ethnic groups in Sarawak, with Iban representing the highest ethnic population, followed by Malays, Chinese, Bidayuh, Melanaus, Orang Ulu (Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit and Lun Bawang), Indians, and others. Most Malays in Sarawak are Muslims, and the number of Muslim converts among non-Malay ethnic groups indicates a gradual rise. Dealwis (2019) reveals that this trend may be attributed to exogamous marriages involving Malays or other Muslims in Sarawak, as well as with the Malay individuals from Peninsular Malaysia employed in Sarawak.

The global Muslim population has experienced a continuous increase over recent years. Battour and Ismail (2016) highlighted that the growth of Muslim population, estimated at 30% of the world population has attracted both researchers and industry practitioners to acknowledge tourism as a potential aspect for addressing the specific requirements of Muslim travellers. The present study seeks to examine the current state of halal tourism development in Sarawak by looking into the availability and implementation of Muslim-friendly facilities and services. In addition, the study aims to investigate Muslim tourists' perceptions, satisfaction levels, and expectations, with particular emphasis on international visitors regarding the availability and quality of Muslim-friendly tourism services in Sarawak. The investigation focuses on five key dimensions; itinerary and halal tourism packages, morality and ethical considerations, halal food availability, tourism destinations, and shopping facilities. By studying these aspects, the study intends to identify existing issues, challenges, and potential strategies for improvement, thereby enabling relevant stakeholders to enhance tourism services and better accommodate the needs of Muslim travellers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Muslim Tourists' Arrivals

In terms of tourists' arrivals, Malaysia has been one of the top Muslim tourism destinations in the world, with Indonesia and Singapore as its top markets (Dinar Standard and Crescentrating LLC, 2021). It registered an estimated 6.44 million Muslim tourists in 2020, equivalent to 21.75% of Malaysia's total tourists' arrivals for the same year, compared to 5.22 million in 2011 (Islamic Tourism). It is obvious that there is an influx of Muslim tourists visiting Malaysia, which is now a fast-growing market in what was once a fledgling industry. In Sarawak, the Muslim tourist market is also a growing segment in the local tourism industry. Therefore, in tapping into this emerging market, it is pertinent to understand and acknowledge the needs of consumers in the market segment. Furthermore, with the growing 'Islamisation' in Malaysia and Borneo, there are new possibilities to strengthen and spread Islamic values as there are various segments in the Halal tourism industry that can benefit Muslims and others, and further increase the Muslim traveller market size.

Religious tourism is developed based on tourist motivation and faith. According to Shani et al., (2007), tourism is always influenced by religions, including Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Judaism and other religions. There are various Islamic religious sites in Sarawak such as mosques, Islamic Museum, Islamic institutes, Islamic schools, and even Islamic malls. Distinctive mosques in Sarawak have been categorised into state mosques, district mosques, university mosques and village mosques (surau). On Khidmat Islam Sarawak website (2025), it is reported that there are 1767 mosques, surau and musolla in the state, and the number is increasing. Other than mosques, there is a growing number of Islamic schools in Sarawak too.

2.2 Sustaining the Needs of Muslim Tourists

The Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) did not release a single "2024 Report," but its activities in 2024 focused on promoting Malaysia as the top Muslim-friendly destination, as shown by its continued No 1 ranking in the Mastercard-Crescent Rating Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2024. Key activities included hosting the World Islamic Tourism Conference (WITC) 2024, which focused on forging connections and developing a sustainable ecosystem, and launching campaigns such as Islamic Tourism Month 2024, featuring events like the "Hari Terbuka Masjid" and TikTok Challenge. The centre also continued its programmes, such as the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) and the Muslim-Friendly Tourist Guide (MFTG) program, to support and elevate the industry. (Malaysian Tourism Statistic in Brief, 2024).

Basically, the readiness of tour operators to cater to the Muslim tourists' market needs is closely linked to halal tourism. The Arabic word 'Halal' means lawful or allowable (Battaour & Ismail, 2016). When Muslims are allowed to consume, use, or avail any product or services through compliance with Islamic Shariah (IS) compliance (Islamic religious law), it is considered 'halal' for them (Aziz & Chok, 2013). One such halal services is Halal tourism, which complies with halal products. Halal is an Arabic word referring to what is lawful and allowed in Islam based on the Quran (Surah Al-Baqarah 168):

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ كُلُوا مِمَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ حَلَالًا طَيِّبًا وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ إِنَّهُ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُبِينٌ

Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 168, in English translation, reads: "O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and good and do not follow the footsteps of Satan. Indeed, he is to you a clear enemy."

This verse instructs humanity to consume what is permissible and wholesome from the earth's resources, which also warning against the influence of Satan and his deceptive ways. It emphasises the importance of distinguishing between lawful and unlawful, and avoiding the path of evil as led by Satan.

Therefore, the Halal concept has become a market force, a quality marker and a choice for Muslims, as it provides a sense of security that the processes have followed what is required by Shariah (Aidi-Zulkarnain & Ooi, 2014). Shariah provides the complete code, including ibadah (ritual worship), halal food, entertainment, dress code and individual behaviour, where the law is absolute and should be followed by the Muslims (Laldin, 2008). Although Muslims are obligated to pray five times a day at five different times on all occasions as Ibadah, during travel, Muslim travellers could practise rukshah in their journey. In Islamic terminology, Rukhsah (رخصة) is a leniency or concession given to an accountable Muslim in performing Allah's commandments during certain situations due to obstacles or any matter permitting exception from general principle (Ishak and Ibrahim, 2020). This allows for convenient alternatives to be followed in specific situations rather than strictly adhering to the general rule.

Additionally, the requirement includes the availability of water for ablution or clean earth if water is unavailable. Other necessities include facing Kiblah when performing prayer, and a cloth covering aurat/intimate parts of the human body that must be covered from the sight of others (Ab Hamid et.al, 2018). According to Al-Ansi and Han (2019), halal tourism is a form of tourism that follows and meets the needs of Muslim tourists while they are visiting a destination. Muslim travellers' values and attitudes are influenced positively and negatively towards destinations whenever they perceive a high or low halal service quality. They have specific needs and restrictions in their travel as they need to follow the Islamic law. These needs must meet a specific set of criteria to be considered safe to be consumed or worn, or 'Halal' (Mohammad Luthfan Jeffri, 2021). Halal tourism can also be summarised as any object or action that is permissible to use or engage in the tourism industry, according to Islamic teaching (M. Battour & Ismail, 2016). Halal tourism is also defined as a type of religious tourism that represents allowable activities under the Islamic teaching in terms of behaviour, dress, conduct and diet (Javed, 2007).

Ulffy et. al (2021) conducted a study to examine the influence of affecting attributes on tourists' behavioural intention to visit Malaysia as a halal tourism destination. A total of 394 responses were received from the Klang Valley area of Malaysia. The findings revealed that affecting attributes such as "Halal

Certification for Food and Beverage”, “Destination Image” and “Emotional Incidents” had a significant positive influence on the tourists’ satisfaction and behavioural intention in determining the destination. Ayyub (2015) opined that halal certification is a vital factor in determining the travel destinations that a Muslim tourist would choose.

The travel experience of Muslim visitors is much influenced by the Shariah principles. Therefore, the provision of Muslim-friendly facilities and services is a core component in Islamic tourism destinations (Euromonitor International, 2015). Destinations need to be equipped with prayer rooms, mosques, ablution facilities, and privacy-oriented accommodation. In addition, Muslim-friendly tourism destinations could provide family-friendly attractions and information on nearby religious facilities. To enhance the comfort and satisfaction of Muslim tourists, the environment that promotes cleanliness, safety, business practices, and respect for Islamic values is essential (Battour, 2017). Top-tier hotels in Sarawak, such as Pullman Hotel, Hilton Hotel, Grand Margherita Hotel, and Waterfront Hotel, provide halal -certified dining, Qibla directions, and prayer mats in the rooms.

Dealwis, Affidah and Aiza (2022) also conducted a study on halal tourism to explore the perceptions of non-Muslim tourists in Kuching, Sarawak, towards joining halal tourism packages. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews with non-Muslim tourists in Kuching were carried out. Five major aspects were identified that described the perceptions of non-Muslim tourists in the city of Kuching towards halal tourism, namely halal food, busana Islam, Muslim friendly hotels, gender segregation, and visiting Islamic sites. The non-Muslim respondents were aware that halal tourism is getting popular in Malaysia and had no problem joining halal tourism packages.

3. METHOD

In order to gauge the readiness of tourism operators in Sarawak to cater the Muslim tourists’ needs, a qualitative method of data collection was employed. The semi-structured interview data with the 25 tourist providers as well as local and international tourists were then, analysed and interpreted by constructing the meanings and values to the respondents’ personal opinions. This is in accordance with Creswell (2014), who stated that using the interpretative approach, the researchers can effectively understand the construction of meaning and value of the phenomenon by assessing the personal views. Semi-structured interviews were conducted because halal tourism is considered as a new product in Sarawak and thus, it is important to take note of the participants’ perspectives and reveal the practicality context (service providers and those who utilise such services).

The interview protocol collected the respondents’ background information and their perceptions of Sarawak’s preparedness for the halal tourism market, organised around six principal dimensions: itinerary/package design, halal food provision, tourist sites and shopping venues, and morality and ethics. The sub-questions were also developed from the responses given by the participants. The questions covered issues and challenges of halal tourism in Sarawak, and the possible solutions to the challenges as suggested by the participants. Each interview was conducted for about an hour and was audio recorded using the researchers’ mobile phones. Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework of the study:

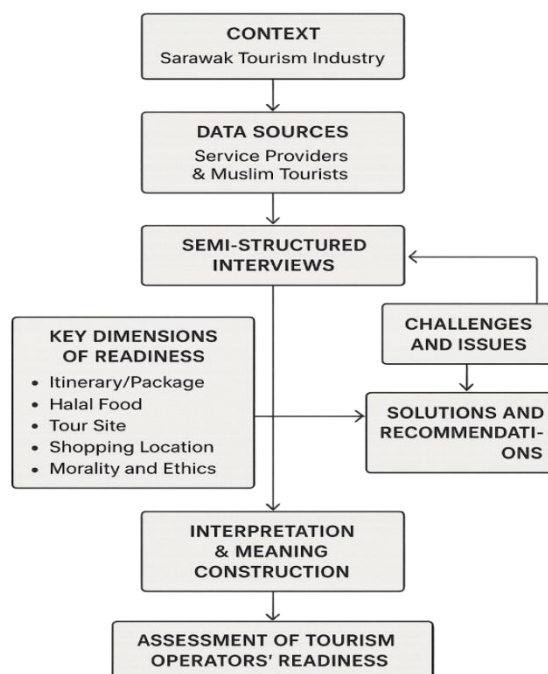


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

Table 1 below shows the participants involved in the study. The researchers participated in two separate tour packages. A total of 20 hours of semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded at various venues such as Kuching International Airport Departure Hall, Sarawak Islamic Museum, Masjid Darul Abidin, Masjid Jamek Negeri Sarawak, Masjid Bahagian Kuching, Masjid Darul Ikwan, Masjid Darul Salam, Sultan Iskandar Planetarium, Kuching Civic Centre, Kuching Waterfront, Kuching Reservoir Park, The Astana, Friendship Garden, Sarawak Cats Museum, Main Bazaar, Fort Margherita, Sarawak State Library, Chinese History Museum, Sarawak Textile Museum, Kuching City Mosque, and Muslim-friendly hotels in Sarawak. In order to gauge multiple perspectives, data were also gathered from the international Muslim tourists holidaying in Sarawak. Besides that, observations were also conducted by the researchers on the implementation of tour execution of the halal tourism industry in Malaysia by travelling to some tourists' attraction places in Sarawak themselves.

Table 1. Respondents

Types of respondents	Number of respondents
Tourist guide (TG)	5 respondents TG1-TG5
Travel agent (TA)	5 respondents TA 1-TA5
Muslim Malaysian tourists (MMT)	5 respondents MMT 1- MMT 5
Muslim International tourists (MIT)	5 Respondents Saudi Arabia-1; Egypt -1; Pakistan-1; Jordan-1; Indonesia-1 MIT 1-MIT 5
Hotel providers (MHP)	5 respondents MHP 1-MHP5

According to Creswell (2014), the number of samples for a qualitative study can vary from 1 to 40, whereby a larger number is difficult to manage and results in superficial perspectives. For this research, the

sample size was 25 participants, consisting of five tourist guides, five tourist agents, five Muslim tourists from other parts of Malaysia, five international tourists holidaying in Sarawak, and five hotel providers.

Therefore, the target respondents were purposely selected stakeholders who were involved in the tourism industry in Sarawak. The unit of analysis was the tourist guides and tourist agents who were at the front line in facilitating the Muslim tourists. Hence, they would understand the issues and challenges better based on their experiences. All of them were based in Kuching, Sarawak, and the trips varied, covering all parts of Sarawak. The tourist guides were the closest service providers to the local and international tourists since they executed the halal tourism packages. The complaints, critiques, or compliments from the tourists would be reported to the tourist guides directly.

Thematic analysis Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse all the transcribed data. Thematic analysis in this qualitative data analysis focused on identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the qualitative data. It involved systematically examining the data elicited from the semi-structured interviews with the 25 respondents. This method helped the researchers to make sense of large amounts of qualitative information by grouping similar ideas or topics.

The researchers first listened to the audio recordings and familiarised themselves by reading each transcript for several times. This was to ensure accuracy and to preserve the respondents' intended meanings. The reflective notes and analytic memos were then recorded to capture initial impressions, emerging patterns, and noteworthy statements from the respondents. The transcripts were subjected to open coding, whereby meaningful words, phrases, and statements relevant to the research objectives were identified and assigned descriptive codes. Similar codes were grouped and compared across all the respondents, which enabled the researchers to identify convergent and divergent viewpoints regarding the readiness of Sarawak's tourism industry to accommodate Muslim tourists.

In order to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the data collected, the codes were being refined, merged, and separated when fresh thoughts emerged until a coherent coding structure was established. This was to ensure that each theme actually reflected the respondents' experience and perceptions. The emerging themes were then, organised into broader themes, relevant to the research questions, explaining the issues, challenges, and opportunities of Halal or Islamic-friendly tourism in Sarawak. Finally, the respondents' quotations were selected from the transcripts as the evidences in supporting the interpretations of the qualitative data.

4. FINDINGS

The findings are presented according to the five major dimensions as indicated in the research objectives, and they are: itinerary/ halal package, morality and ethics, halal food, tour sites, and shopping locations.

4.1 Itinerary /Halal package

All 10 Malaysian and International tourist respondents were delighted with the tour packages provided by the various travel agents in Sarawak, even though they were not labelled yet as halal tour packages. The fact that the itinerary packages they took consisted of Muslim tourists, including praying times in mosques and *surau* meant a lot to all of them. Respondent (MMT 1), a tourist from Kedah (Malaysia), said that:

"I'm impressed with the beautiful mosques along the Kuching Waterfront and in Petra Jaya. They look very safe even to leave our belongings. I don't want to miss my solat times, so thumbs up to this package which was offered to me by a relative in Kuching."

This was also echoed by an international tourist (MIT1), who noted that:

"As Muslims in my country (Saudi Arabia), we can be caught for not praying when there is a call for prayers. So, I'm very safe and secure with this package even though there are so many non - Muslims here. There are mosques in the city. I came to know about this from the hotel where I'm staying with my family."

Respondents were also happy that their travelling companions were mostly Muslims, as they could enjoy and appreciate the activities together. Respondent (MMT2), a Malaysian tourist from Selangor, also stated that:

“Travelling with other Muslims is a big difference, even though it is a big group, because we get to do all the things together. Nobody goes their separate ways. That is how it should be, like a family and Sarawak tourism agencies can provide this all- Muslim only package.”

Another international tourist from Egypt, (MIT2), also commented that:

“While it is common in my Muslim country to see all Muslims travelling together, it is not so in other parts of the world. Of course, travelling with fellow Muslims, especially celebrating certain Islamic events such as Eid Aidil Fitr, makes it more meaningful.”

Although there were some non-Muslims travelling with them, the Muslim tourists were happy that the non-Muslims did not complain, but were also enjoying something similar as a halal tour package. Besides that, the tourists were happy that they were brought only to halal food courts and restaurants owned by the tour Malay guides. Respondent MM3, a tourist from Kelantan stated that:

“It is very common to see Muslim tour packages in Kelantan but not here in Sarawak. So, I’m grateful to know that there is an increasing number of Muslim owned travel agencies here especially in Petra Jaya.”

This was also a major concern for the tourist from Pakistan, (MIT3) who stated that:

“I’m delighted to see the mushrooming of tour packages in Peninsular Malaysia and the keenness of the Malaysian Muslims to travel to Pakistan, Iran, Egypt and other Muslim countries. It is safe to travel among Muslims, and Sarawak tour agencies can offer similar halal packages.”

When asked to comment on what should constitute a halal package, a Malaysian tourist (MMT4), said:

“Halal package is not just about halal food and hotels providing praying facilities but much more. It would be great if the local tour operators here can consider halal from other aspects such as, Muslim-friendly tourism websites, halal healthcare facilities and services and halal holidays.”

An international tourist from Jordan (MIT4) added that:

“The halal package can also include Muslim-friendly phone applications, halal cruise and halal swimming attire.”

Generally, all the Malaysian and International tourists were happy with the services by the tour operators but a lot can be added to make their stay more pleasant by offering a halal package only for Muslim tourists. A Malaysian Muslim tourist respondent (MMT5) commented that:

“Here is obvious now a growing interest in halal tourism from the perspective of the tourism industry and a strategy to develop or market halal package products and services must be guided by Islamic teaching in all their aspects.”

An International tourist from Indonesia (MIT5) shared his view on this halal package by stating:

“Our travel is an action or activity that is accepted by Allah. It becomes Islamic when the intention of the tourist who performs the activity is to seek the pleasure of Allah”.

Critically, the findings reflect that Islamic tourism in Sarawak is still in the operational stage of development. Even though the participants were rather optimistic with the existing services and facilities, a systematic planning and standardisation for the Islamic tourism industry in Sarawak needs to be further improved. The only available efforts are those operated by individual travel agencies rather than driven by the State’s tourism policies. In this matter, Sarawak requires a Muslim -friendly destination branding to utilise its potential within the expanding Muslim tourism sector.

4.2 Morality and Ethics

All the five Muslim friendly hotel providers stated that morality seemed to be of great concern for their Muslim tourists staying in their hotels. This is an important aspect of halal tourism which the hotel providers do not ignore in their business. One international hotel Manager in Kuching (HP1) said:

“Although we serve alcohol and have cocktail parties, our hotel does not invite Muslim patrons to such cocktail parties. We also do not engage Muslim staff to serve alcohol and we are aware of the sensitivity of serving beverages in our hotel.”

The hotel providers did not want to ruin their business and tarnish the image of Malaysia by being insensitive to Muslims. Another hotel provider (HP2), responded as such:

“It is best that all tourists and those who stay in our hotel do not leave with a bad impression of our hotel. Our hotel does not like to be questioned on the insensitivity of the hotel management which will eventually leave an unfavourable image towards the hotel specifically, and Malaysia in general.”

Hence, the hotel providers in Sarawak wish to match with other states in Malaysia to be one of the top Muslim-friendly destinations. A beach hotel resort Manager (HP3) stressed that the activities in the hotel cater for all Muslims and non-Muslims which include spas and massaging. She was aware of the modesty issue when the massage service was performed at beach resorts where the Muslim guests were staying. However, she was quick to explain that

“Taking care of aurat is important in Islam and direct touching between men and women is forbidden in Islam except to the spouse and mahram (unmarried kin). So, her beach hotel resort did not offer such services in open spaces.”

Sarawak tourism industry must leverage Malaysia, which is recognised now as the top-ranking halal-friendly destination, by providing high-level Muslim friendly facilities. Another hotel Manager (HP4), remarked that

“Morality in halal tourism as judged by Muslims is based on tourism products and services that fulfil the Muslims’ religious needs. Morality is not restricted to holidaying only but also travellers who are engaged in behaviours and conduct of other hotel guests residing in our hotels.”

So, the home-stays and hotel facilities and services must cater to the Muslims’ religious needs by ensuring that the environment is comfortable for the Muslims who have ‘aurat’ and morality issues to adhere to.

Another International hotel provider (HP5), also commented that:

“The major challenge is to cater to both the needs of mass tourists and the Muslim tourists simultaneously, but the awareness of the hotel industry in Sarawak in handling this situation is still improving. True to say, although Sarawak city centres can boast many Muslim friendly facilities which are easily available in the areas outside the major cities and towns, such facilities are not quite fully available yet.”

This could be explained by the fact that Muslims make up 33.7 percent of Sarawak’s population (Department of Statistics Sarawak, 2020), and many of the interiors are not inhabited by Muslims but by Dayak groups who are either Pagan or Christian.

The hotel industry is one of the important sectors in Malaysia’s tourism industry and Sarawak is gradually seeing an increase in the number of international hotels being built in the State. With the beautiful flora, fauna, museums and a showcase of cultures, Sarawak sees the tourism industry as a great potential because it does not only provide intensive employment opportunities, but also significant in generating income in domestic and foreign exchange. The International hotel provider (HP5) also added:

“There is a constant increase with fluctuations during the COVID-19 pandemic in tourist arrivals in Sarawak, so, hotels in Sarawak must be ready to cater to all the needs of all types of travellers. I hope the Sarawak State government will promote and develop more resources and infrastructures throughout the State for the increasing number of Muslim tourists.”

Critically, the findings above show that morality is the core aspect of Muslim-hospitality tourism among hotel providers in Sarawak. This is significant since the Muslim population in Sarawak is 34.2% of the total population, 2,453,677, as compared to 63.5% of the total population, 32.4 million, in Peninsular Malaysia (Open DOSM, 2026). Furthermore, most areas in rural Sarawak are inhabited by indigenous people who are non-Muslims. So, Muslim -friendly facilities must be intentionally planned, developed, and located for Islamic tourism to thrive in Sarawak. The findings indicated that Muslim-friendly hospitality in Sarawak experiences practical adaptation rather than a complete ‘Islamisation’ of hotel operations. The findings suggest that Sarawak’s future competitiveness in Islamic tourism will not fully emulate the Peninsular Malaysia’s Islamic tourism model but could focus more on developing a distinctive multicultural Muslim-friendly hospitality model. Such a model should accommodate religious diversity while fulfilling the essential needs of Muslim travellers to Sarawak.

4.3 Halal Food

It is to be expected that Muslim tourists would request for halal food and beverages when visiting non-Muslim countries. So, in Sarawak where there are both Muslim and non-Muslim food choices made available, Muslims tourists are often apprehensive of the food being served by non-Muslims because such food is assumed to be non-halal. The tour agents were also questioned on how they handled issues related to halal food when queried by Muslim tourists before purchasing the food products. The responses of the five tour agents were recorded. Tour Agent 1 (TA1) explained that:

“I always assure the Muslim tourists that our halal certification is managed and conferred by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). This seems to be a major issue with the Muslim tourists coming from Peninsular Malaysia and less from international Muslim tourists.”

All the Muslim tourists believed that the halal process would make the quality of the food better and safer for consumption.

According to Regenstein et. al (2003), the primary sources of Islamic law are the Holy Quran and the Hadith. These form the basic principles of Islamic law and remain definite and unaltered over the centuries. However, the interpretation of these principles in the Holy Quran and Hadith may vary and change according to Ijma (a consensus of legal opinion) or Qiyas (reasoning by analogy). Another Tour Agent (TA2) also added that he has been queried about the slaughter of animals for food consumption stating:

“Increasing knowledge of what is and is not permissible under halal slaughter could alter attitudes with regard to halal animal products among Muslims coming from different countries. Some demonstrated to be unclear about some of the stipulations that Islamic tradition requires. Generally, women and the older tourists were more concerned than the younger tourists about the consumption of meat from slaughtered animals.”

Nevertheless, Tour Agent (TA3) stated that the slaughtering of animals is a major concern among Muslim tourists. This is because in Malaysia, some non-lethal methods of stunning have been adopted by Muslim scholars, provided certain pre-requisites have been fulfilled (Nakyinsige et al 2013). This is in line with the Halal Malaysia certification guidelines, which highlight that to render the animal immobile or unconscious, various methods of stunning that allow the animal to bleed out while it is still alive can be utilised (Halal Malaysia, 2014). These methods of stunning are subject to approval by the Malaysian Fatwa Council decree and in particular, must be reversible and not lead to death or cause permanent physical injury to the animal (Halal Malaysia, 2014). According to the Tour Agent (TA4):

“It is unknown whether Malaysians or Sarawak food operators who believed that stunning was never allowed in halal slaughter had only been exposed to slaughter without the use of stunning, or whether they were simply unaware of stunning being practiced at abattoirs.”

Another Tour Agent (TA5) commented that:

“Tourists from strict Muslim countries are more likely to have a positive attitude to halal slaughter if they have a higher level of education, and are also more likely to believe that it is important to provide halal options within the tourism industry.”

With regards to Islamic slaughtering, the Sunnah states that water should be provided to animals prior to slaughter, and a very sharp knife must be used in order to swiftly slaughter the animal causing minimum suffering. It discourages slaughtering animals in plain view of other animals, skinning or cutting animals prior to death. Non-Muslims may be less aware or lack knowledge of the importance of these matters during halal slaughter (Ayyub, 2015). The food operators who were interviewed randomly noted that they were aware of requirements as stipulated in the Sunnah.

To note, Muslim tourists rely on formal halal certification rather than uncertainty about food preparations. Although Sarawak tourism often focuses on its indigenous dishes, it creates challenges for Muslim visitors to the State who are unfamiliar with local food preparations and Shariah compliance. Henderson (2016) similarly argues that certification functions as a mechanism of trust, reducing perceived risk and strengthening destination competitiveness in the Muslim travel market. Nevertheless, as reported in Sarawak Tribune (2026) Sarawak government is continuously encouraging halal certification beyond the Muslim market. UKAS (2025) indicates that approximately 69.5% of halal certificate holders in Sarawak are non-Muslim entrepreneurs, illustrating that halal certification has evolved into a strategic quality assurance mechanism rather than a purely religious requirement.

4.4 Tour and Shopping Locations

Previously, the first and prior destination for Muslim travellers was pilgrimage to Mecca and Madina, which explained the large number of travel agencies providing pilgrimage services in those days (Suleaman, 2010). Nowadays, Muslim travellers have more options and travel reasons and interests besides going on pilgrimage, and these new interests need to be gauged by the tourism industry, including the Sarawak tourism industry. According to the Tour Guide (TG1):

“Sarawak has Islamic sites to offer besides halal products. These include the Sarawak Islamic Museum, which is popular among Muslim tourists. The online platforms and the museum websites have been useful in the dissemination of information on social media.”

The tourists liked all seven galleries in the museum. These refer to the Islamic History of Sarawak gallery, Islamic Architecture gallery, Science and Technology, Economy, Education and Literature Gallery, Costumes, Music and personal belongings; and an Al-Quran collection gallery. Another Tour Guide (TG2) also commented that the mosques in Kuching and other parts of Sarawak were also attractive places to visit and many Muslim travellers left positive comments after visiting these places. According to the Tour Guide,

“The Kuching City Mosque is unique in Kuching, Sarawak. Many tourists like to visit it because the design is based on the modern vernacular typology.”

The latest attraction in the City of Kuching after the Darul Hana Bridge is the Floating Mosque, located on the bank of the Sarawak River. According to the Tour Guide (TG3)

“This beautiful mosque becomes a symbol of the greatness of Islam here. At dusk, the panoramic view surrounding the mosque is flooded with the light of the golden sunset, accentuating the majestic architecture. In the evening, the Floating Mosque built on Kuching’s heritage site will be illuminated by multi-coloured LED lights to increase the glow and ambience of the riverfront.”

As the mosque design was adapted from the Middle East, it seems to attract Middle Eastern tourists to the mosque. The Petra Jaya State Mosque, also known as the Jamek Mosque, is also popular with great architectural interior design, but the tourists prefer the Floating Mosque because it is along the Kuching Waterfront and near hotels and commercial centres. Another Tour Guide (TG4) also added that

“I take the Muslim travellers to Bangunan Baitulmal which is a Muslim shopping centre and India Street for smaller items. They get to choose local cakes, biscuits, handicrafts, souvenirs and clothing in these places. A few have requested to visit the Samariang Muslim Cemetery and commented positively. The Malay villages in Buntal Santubong; the legend of Puteri Santubong and Puteri Sejinjang always left them mesmerised. They also loved to see Malay villages along the river banks such as Kampung Bako.”

Besides tour sites, the tour guides said that the Muslim tourists like to go shopping in certain locations. A Tour Guide (TG5) said

“The Muslim tourists from Peninsular Malaysia liked to go to the border market Serikin where they could also shop for clothing and other Indonesian products at a cheaper price.”

Those tourists from Peninsular Malaysia always requested the Serikin shopping to be included in their itinerary. Other interesting places visited by the Muslim tourists as reported by the tour guides were Sarawak Islamic Museum, Masjid Darul Abidin, Masjid Jamek Negeri Sarawak, Masjid Bahagian Kuching, Masjid Darul Iqwan, Masjid Darul Salam, Sultan Iskandar Planetarium, Kuching Civic Centre, Kuching Waterfront, Kuching Reservoir Park, The Astana, Friendship Garden, Sarawak Cats Museum, Main Bazaar, Fort Margherita, Sarawak State Library, Chinese History Museum, and the Sarawak Textile Museum.

Critically, the findings above indicate Muslim tourists do not restrict themselves to visiting exclusive Islamic attractions but they also visit multicultural attractions such as Fort Margherita, the Sarawak Textile Museum, the Chinese History Museum, the Sarawak Cats Museum, Kuching Waterfront, the Astana, Friendship Garden, and the Kuching Civic Centre. This shows that comprehensive travel experience is a great option as it includes provisions for their religious needs. Rather than creating a separate “Islamic tourism” product, Sarawak enhances its tourism appeal by embedding Muslim-friendly services and facilities within its broader multicultural tourism framework, and preserving its diverse cultural identity.

This is important because Sarawak can combine Islamic heritage with the indigenous culture, multicultural history, riverfront urban landscapes, and nature-based tourism. Sarawak’s competitive advantage does not primarily depend on expanding number of Islamic attractions but, in enhancing destination integration through comprehensive tour packaging, multilingual promotional materials, and coordinated marketing strategies. Adopting such an integrated approach would strengthen Sarawak’s position in attracting and capturing the expanding Muslim travel market.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The Sarawak tourism industry is increasingly prepared to cater to Muslim tourists by offering halal tourism packages, reflecting a broader expansion in response to rising international arrivals, particularly facilitated by improved air connectivity between Kuching and Kuala Lumpur. The global Muslim travel market is substantial, with Muslim travellers spending \$151 billion in 2015 and this figure is expected to rise to \$343 billion by 2030. Recognising this, several non-Muslim-majority countries such as Singapore, Japan, and Thailand have introduced Muslim-friendly services, including halal food and prayer facilities, to attract this demographic.

Sarawak, already providing similar services, is encouraged to intensify its promotional efforts to draw more Muslim tourists from both Muslim and non-Muslim countries. The launch of the direct Kuching-Jakarta flight in June 2023 is seen as a significant step in this direction. Halal tourism encompasses all activities and services in tourism that comply with Islamic teachings (Shariha). For a tourism package to be considered halal, it must be Shariah-compliant, with the intention (niyyah) of seeking Allah’s pleasure, as emphasised by the Prophet Muhammad’s hadith on the importance of intentions in actions¹.

Stakeholders interviewed in the study agreed that halal tourism should align with Islamic principles, ensuring that all offerings are both permissible and intended to fulfill religious obligations.

Stakeholders expressed a strong commitment to upholding Islamic ethics, particularly regarding modesty and morality, as outlined in the Quran (An-Nur 24:30-31). They acknowledged that while interpretations of Shariah differ among Muslim-majority countries, ranging from comprehensive application in Saudi Arabia and Yemen to more secular systems in Malaysia and Turkey, core practices such as daily prayers, consumption of halal food, and modest conduct are universally expected. The Sarawak tourism sector is advised to remain sensitive to these variations while maintaining generally accepted standards.

Hotel providers in Sarawak have prioritised Muslim-friendly services, including certified halal kitchens, staff trained in Muslim cultural practices, prayer facilities, and special provisions during Ramadan. Although women-only floors are not standard, accommodations are made for female guests, such as prioritising non-smoking and family-only floors, and providing pools for children and women. These efforts are designed to meet the needs of Muslim travellers and expand Sarawak's share of this growing market.

Strict adherence to Shariah law is observed, particularly regarding the prohibition of alcohol, as its presence in hotels and restaurants is a sensitive issue for Muslim tourists. Many hotel operators ensure compliance with Islamic guidelines to maintain the integrity of halal tourism offerings and they are also aware of the policy and ethical challenges for Muslim-friendly hotels in Sarawak. For example, excluding Muslim guests from hotel cocktail parties where alcohol is served. From the Syariah viewpoint, excluding the Muslim guests from such parties does not reflect a truly Islamic compliance premise, especially when the hotels are earning income from such "un-Islamic" activities.

According to *Maqasid al-Shariah*, the operational decisions at hotels should be assessed in compliance with the five important objectives in Islamic law, namely, religion (*hifz al-din*), life (*hifz al-nafs*), intellect (*hifz al-'aql*), lineage (*hifz al-nasl*), and wealth (*hifz al-mal*). For example, avoiding alcohol consumption protects the intellect, one of the fundamental objectives recognised in Islamic law (Razzaq et al., 2016).

In addition, mandatory regulatory framework that governs the certification of Muslim-friendly hotels in Malaysia is not found. However, Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) programme, developed by the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) has provided voluntary guidance and participation by hotel operators remains optional. Due to this, Muslim travellers might lose confidence, especially those who are concerned about the transparency and standardised hospitality services (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2026)

Malaysia's recognition as a top destination for Muslim travellers, supported by facilities such as abundant halal food, prayer spaces, and Islamic banking, provides a strong foundation for Sarawak's aspirations in halal tourism. The Sarawak Islamic Museum and the presence of the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) further enhance the state's appeal. Ongoing collaboration with the ITC and continuous capacity-building initiatives such as research, workshops, and outreach are recommended to standardise best practices and bolster Sarawak's credibility as an Islamic tourism hub (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia, 2020).

Despite Muslims comprising less than 40% of Sarawak's population, international Muslim tourists reported feeling culturally comfortable when visiting Sarawak due to the state's integration of Islamic norms and development of Muslim-friendly services and facilities. Halal tourism remains a niche yet promising segment, particularly during peak periods such as the Arab season. Attracting tourists from the Middle East to Sarawak through halal tourism packages has the potential not only to generate economic benefits for the state's tourism industry but also to contribute to the development of a sustainable Islamic tourism framework that leverages Sarawak's distinctive demographic composition, rich cultural heritage, and diverse tourism offerings. Thus, the sustainable growth and successful marketing of halal tourism in Sarawak depend on the consistent application of Islamic teachings and principles across all tourism activities (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2022).

Halal tourism in Sarawak has potential policy benefits like economic growth through a growing Muslim travel market, and financial implications, including investment opportunities in halal-certified infrastructure and services. However, policy challenges exist in standardising "halal" criteria, managing high costs for businesses transitioning to halal standards, and the need for skilled human resources. Financial implications also include the need for government support for infrastructure, a potential multiplier effect on the local economy, and the risk of high business transition costs.

6. LIMITATIONS

The qualitative study was conducted using a limited number of respondents of 10 Muslim tourists, 10 Muslim tourists, five hotel providers, five tour agents, and five tour guides. Therefore, the findings may not reflect the viewpoints of the overall stakeholders involved in Sarawak's tourism industry. The main focus of this study was in Kuching Division and its surrounding areas, whereas Sarawak is the largest state in Malaysia, and tourism infrastructure and facilities in the rural divisions of Sarawak might differ from the more sophisticated facilities in Kuching.

The views of non-Muslim tourists, non-Muslim tourism operators, policymakers, local communities, or certification authorities were not included in this investigation. The lack of information from these stakeholders limits a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities, challenges, and potential social implications associated with developing halal tourism within a multicultural destination.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, Sarawak should strengthen the Shariah-Compliant Standards and Certification by collaborating even more closely with the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC), tourism stakeholders, and relevant government agencies to strengthen the implementation of the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) programme. Secondly, Sarawak should develop an integrated halal tourism product based on *Maqasid al-Shariah*. Such products must comply with Shariah requirements but also promote Islamic ethics, *ibadah*, and *dakwah* while preserving Sarawak's multicultural identity. Thirdly, Sarawak could enhance strategic marketing campaigns for Muslim travellers, besides investing in human capital development and multilingual digital information. Thirdly, the prospects of Halal tourism in Sarawak are indicated in Figure 2 below.



Fig. 2. Exploring Sarawak's Potential of Green Halal Tourism for Sustainable Travel

8. CONCLUSION

Sarawak can succeed as a strong Islamic tourism destination by leveraging the existing and building more Muslim-friendly infrastructure, especially with the new Air Borneo airline connectivity in operation. With the increasing global demand for halal tourism, Sarawak has the potential to attract Muslim travellers from Peninsular Malaysia and other Muslim countries in the world. Undeniably, Sarawak, being the largest state in Malaysia, with unique flora and fauna, a multicultural environment, combined with Islamic heritage attractions, can achieve long-term success but not without collaborations among the Islamic Tourism Centre, tour operators, and local communities. Finally, from an Islamic viewpoint, Islamic tourism is an act of *ibadah* and *dakwah* when it is implemented according to the Syariah law and with the intention of seeking Allah.

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10. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

11. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Aiza Johari and **Caesar De Alwis**: carried out the research, wrote and revised the article; **Adib Sarkawi**: provided the theoretical framework, analysed the data, and formatted the paper; **Affidah Morni**: anchored the review, edited and conducted revisions.

12. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Perplexity AI, solely to improve language, grammar, spelling, and readability. The tool was not used to generate research data, analyse the interview data, develop the study's findings, or create the manuscript's scholarly arguments. All AI-assisted output was critically reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

13. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The analysed datasets during the current study are not publicly available because they contain information obtained from human participants and may compromise participant confidentiality. However, selected anonymised data and relevant supporting materials may be obtained from the corresponding author, Aiza Johari, and the first author, Caesar de Alwis, on reasonable request, subject to ethical restrictions and the approval of the relevant institutional ethics committee.

14. ETHICS STATEMENT

Formal institutional ethics approval was not obtained for this study but all procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki, where applicable. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation and audio recording. We protected the participants' privacy by removing names and keeping their information confidential.

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