

ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN PROMOTING MUSLIM SPORT FACILITIES

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Abstract

Malaysia aspires to maintain its position as the number one tourist destination for Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services. Sports and recreational activities, although, is not typically a subject discussed as a tourism product such as hotels, tours, tourist packages and services, actually has the potential to draw tourism into Malaysia. Malaysia, being a progressive Muslim dominated country, with active participation in global sports, could woo Muslims from other countries to optimise the sports events and facilities available in Malaysia. The remaining issue is whether our sports and recreational activities are in line with the needs of the Muslims or in other words Muslim Friendly. This article examines the concept of Muslim Friendly Sports and Recreational Activities and analyses whether our sports and recreational activities are in compliance with the requirements of Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services.

Keywords: Sports and recreational activities, Muslim friendly sports facilities, sports tourism

Introduction

Sports tourism is a sub component of tourism. Previously, sports and tourism are two separate areas until it was found that sport events could also be a drawing factor for tourists. The term sports here entail two types of sport, 'high performance sport' and "recreational sports". Whilst the former refers to competitive sport, the latter refers to outdoor leisurely activities such as diving, go-karting and cross country cycling (Solha Husin, no date). Many countries have considered sports tourism as an important source of income from job creation, development of private sector and community. In fact, Malaysia aspires to excel in sports tourism being a progressive Muslim country and active in global sports. Some of the international sporting events that Malaysia has hosted includes Formula 1 Racing Series, Moto GP Racing Series, Monsoon Cup, Le tour de Langkawi, Royal Langkawi International Regatta (Mapjabil et. al., 2015). Thus, in line with Malaysia's aspiration to go global in Muslim Friendly Hospitality and Services, incorporating Islamic principles in sport tourism can be a factor to propel Malaysia as a tourist destination for sport tourism as well.

This article provides an overview of sports tourism products in Malaysia and the position of sports and recreation in Islam. Sports tourism is discussed as a subset of Muslim Friendly Hospitality and Services. Finally, the issues and challenges in the integration of Shari'ah principles in such activities is discussed.

Sports Tourism Products In Malaysia

As the world's largest social phenomenon (McPherson et al., 1989), sports appeals to every civilized human beings. At the same time, the technological advancement in tourism has enabled people to travel beyond the realm of their residences to seek pleasures in sports (Gibson, 1998). This new trend of lifestyle has resulted a shift in tourism marketing strategies in many industrialized countries worldwide (Neirotti,

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2003). Sports tourism activities have generated enormous economic impact on the area of tourism (Kurtzman and Zauhar, 2003).

In Malaysia, the country's Tourism Promotion Board has revealed that a single international tourist who came for the 16th Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games in 1998, spent an average of RM307.64 per day or RM3,845.50 for the duration of 12.5 nights stay (New Straits Times, 8/6/1999). As for the F1 Malaysian PETRONAS Grand Prix, which has become the country's annual event since 1999, has given from the total of RM500 million take to about RM1 billion to Malaysia (Utusan Malaysia, 17/3/2002). Another example is the 2002 Langkawi Ironman Challenge which saw the participation of 331 tri-athletes, had contributed RM5 million to the country's sports tourism industry (Utusan Malaysia, 2/2/2003).

These data has motivated the country to capitalize on sport events as a lucrative foreign income earner. Every sport event and sport tournament which takes place in Malaysia have the potential and prospect to be considered as a tourism product. These sports tournaments provide opportunities to market certain suitable location as a tourism location corresponding to the event that is being organized. Aside from that, the involvement of tourists in sports activities during their holiday period will also add vigour and provide an enriching experience for their holiday.

All those efforts, shown by the government and those who are in authority indicates that sport tourism has a huge potential and it is the responsibility of related agencies to make it economically beneficial to the country. According to Ahmad Kamil Mohamed from the MTCB, "although no studies have been made in order to determine the types of sport that could appeal to Muslim tourists visiting this country or number of domestic tourists, we are confident the Malaysian sport tourism sector is at least at par with those in developed countries" (New Straits Times, 25/4/2001).

Most travellers have a distinctive desire in fulfilling their holiday. For example, tourists who are interested in sports such as scuba diving would definitely choose the most ideal holiday location which provides scuba diving apparatus and facilities such as Tioman, Redang and Sipadan Island. While, for other tourists who are interested in adventure sports activities such as hiking, kayaking and cycling will certainly choose locations like Tasik Kenyir, Mount Ledang and Mount Kinabalu as their holiday destination.

There are many other interesting places which provide facilities for sports activities that can be visited by tourists. For example, Langkawi Island is not only known as one of the most beautiful islands in the world, it is also a popular sport holiday location in Malaysia. Thus, sports tourism is one of the latest prospects in attracting domestic and international tourists to visit Langkawi Island. In addition, there are various international sport championships that have been held nowadays as a major attraction for tourists to come to Malaysia. Thus, providing sport and recreational facilities which that are Muslim friendly are essentials if Malaysia is heading towards a global *Halal* hub. Yet, a typical notion of Muslim friendly tour package involves the provision of accommodation, food and tourist sites that appeal to Muslims. What about sports tourism? How does one integrate the needs of Muslims into sports tourism? The article now examines the notion of sports and tourism in Islam.

The Notion of Sports and Tourism In Islam

The Muslims' worldview is that Islam regulates all their daily activities and colour all their worldly policies including tourism development. For Muslims, any form of hedonistic tourism are discouraged as Islam stresses on the sacred goal of submission to Allah (Graburn, 1977). Muslims as hosts and guests are repeatedly enjoined to support the concept of doing something *Lillaahi Ta'aala* or with the intention of doing everything for the sake of Allah, and this intention is maintained even when one is travelling.

Muslims are encouraged to travel through the earth so that they can appreciate the greatness of God through observing the signs of beauty and bounty of His creations which can be seen everywhere, both in the realms of past and present. The goal of travel is to help instill the realization of the smallness of man and the greatness of God. The spiritual goal of traveling is to reinforce one's submission to Allah, while the social goal is to encourage and strengthen the bond of Muslim fraternity among the Muslim community as well as other communities. According to Prophet Muhammad s.a.w, a traveller is granted similar reward to that given for good deeds practiced at home, as if the traveller was practicing the same while travelling (Sahih Al-Bukhari (SAB 1984) 4:239). The category of travel enjoined in Islam may be described as purposeful tourism which differs from the common practice of mass tourism which is motivated mainly by pleasure and personal pursuits.

The needs of the Muslim tourist may vary from one type to another, but all tourists need some form of accommodation, food, drink, transportation, shopping and to a lesser extent Muslim tourists also look for some sort of entertainment and recreational facilities that are permitted in Islam. The length of stay which is proportional to the amount of tourist dollars spent depends on the ability of the host community to provide sustained interests among the Muslim tourists. The rating of a destination obtained from the tourists will have a decisive influence on the probability of repeated visits in the future, which includes the further publicity by word of mouth.

One of the essential ingredients for tourism development is the provision of adequate infrastructural amenities. This may help to provide a wider range of product to make Muslim friendly destinations even more attractive. Unfortunately, there are very few Muslim friendly tourism activities and consequently inadequate facilities and attractions which lead to very little substance in promoting Muslim friendly tourism packages. The current effort to promote Islamic tourism that has been done by the Malaysian government. The government's deliberate promotional strategies in the Middle East which specifically promote Malaysia as a religiously clean destination is aimed at the Muslim segment of the market. Hence, Muslim friendly sports and recreational facilities can be viewed as one of the available options for Muslim friendly tourism which can contribute to a boost of the tourism in the country. Thus, Islamic sports and recreational tourism activities and related facilities can be an addition to attract Muslim tourists into the country.

Sports and recreation can be viewed as rest and recreation. In Arabic, it is called "*Riadah*". People require it as a form of leisure, entertainment for rest and recreation. This is something completely natural. Without it, a person cannot be productive in life. The Companion Abu al-Darda' said:

"I seek recreation in something that is neither useful nor unlawful, and this makes me stronger in the truth."

Islam is complete and comprehensive, addressing all aspects of our lives and all of our needs, including diversions and recreation. It provides us a lawful means to fulfil this need. In the Al-Qur'an, it was stated how the brothers of Joseph (peace be upon him) appealed to their father, the Prophet Jacob (p.b.u.h) on the basis of this fundamental human need. It was revealed that they said:

*"Send him along with us tomorrow so he may engage in revelry and play.
We will indeed keep him safe."* (Surah Yusuf: 12)

Abu Bakar bin Al-Arabi, commenting on this verse, espoused the view that there is no real objection to this type of recreation. A man engages in play with his family, as well as engaging in horse riding, archery, and in any other form of recreation sanctioned by the sacred texts.

In another event, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said to Jabir when he married a mature widow:

"Why did you not marry a virgin whom you could play with and who would play with you?" [Sahih Bukhari Book 62, Vol 7, 172]

The recreation that these brothers were referring to was either foot racing or archery. This is what we can understand from the verse:

"We went off to compete with each other." (Surah Yusuf: 12)

Islamic scholars have attested to the importance of lawful recreation to the healthy development of a person's character. Al-Ghazali believed that a child should be allowed to play so that he can relax from the fatigue of his studies. His play should not tire him out. If a child is forbidden to engage in play and is forced to spend his time in perpetual study, this will result in his heart dying, his intelligence waning, and his manner of living becomes so wretched that he will seek from it any escape he can find.

In addition, according to Ibn Miskawayh, a child should be permitted on occasion to engage in play so that he can relax from the fatigue of a strict upbringing. His play should neither cause injury nor be very tiring. Moreover, Ibn Jamaah stated that there is nothing wrong with the student resting himself, his heart, his mind, and his eyes, if any of these grows tired or languid with play and recreation. This will return him to his proper state so that his time will not be wasted. There is nothing wrong with it being strenuous and exercising his body, for it has been said that this refreshes the metabolism, rids the system of excess toxins, and revitalizes the body.

Sports have many benefits and whoever practices it gains health, as well as emotional and social benefits. Sports teaches individuals the sense of belonging to a group, commit to rules and regulations, respect people's rights, accept losses, and develop healthy sportsmanship. More fundamentally, those indulging in these

activities must learn to maintain strong moral and ethical behaviour and avoid fanaticism towards one individual or a team. In Islam, sportsmen are not allowed to talk nasty against the opposing teams, and to treat their opponent with dignity. If any team were to succeed and throws a celebration, such celebration should be done appropriately.

Due to the strong respect and privacy given to the womenfolk, there are some Muslim scholars that frowns on the mixing of the sexes in sports. They also disapprove sports that provoke desire and cause immorality. As is incessantly reminded in the al Quran, one must not commit excesses as these may take the activities out of the domain of permissibility. As stated in al Quran:

“O ye who believe! Make not unlawful the good things which Allah hath made lawful for you, but commit no excess: for Allah loveth not those given to excess.”
(Surah Al-Maidah: 87)

Having said that, the position of sports and recreational activities as a form of Muslim friendly tourist products and services have rarely been examined. This article now turns to a discussion as to how sports and recreation facilities can be polished to be one of the tourist products that are Muslim friendly.

Sports Tourism as a Subset of Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services

The variety of Muslim friendly tourist products and packages on offer must conform to Islamic principles in order to be considered as Shari'ah compliant. It is an obligation of all stake-holders, either tourism industry players, the local authority or government that are involved in the Muslim friendly tourism industry. This includes the organizers of the sporting events, the tourism operators, the service providers and the tourist themselves to keep it within the parameters of Islamic principles. This obligation starts from the beginning of the trip and lasts throughout the trip until the end of the trip.

The Tourism Development Corporation Act (1972) outlines programs aimed for the promotion of efficiency and coordinated growth of the Muslim friendly tourism development in Malaysia (Malaysia 1978). There is a move to promote Malaysia as a “clean destination,” i.e. not depending on unethical attractions such as the magnetic draws of casinos, cabaret, and prostitution. In this way, Malaysia is more appealing to the Muslim tourists that shun such destinations. Hence, Muslim friendly sport and recreational activities could be one of the attractions for Muslim-friendly tourism package. But what are the challenges that Malaysia faces in devising Muslim friendly sports and recreational activities?

Issues and Challenges in Developing Muslim-Friendly Sport and Recreation Facility

Lack of integrated approach

Pigeassou, in a study in (1997) observed that the progress of sport tourism in many countries around the world is often hindered by a lack of integrated approach in handling sport events. Any major sport events would include advertisement, food, beverages, premises, operation, operator, services, praying facilities, timing of events

that do not clash with prayer times, Shari'ah compliant outfit and separate facilities for women, men and families. All of these aspect has to be looked into if Malaysia were to claim such sport events to be qualifying as Muslim friendly.

Cooperation between local authorities and private organisers of sports event

The main obstacle to the development Muslim friendly sport and recreational facilities is the cooperation between the local authorities and the private company that operate sport centres. This is because only local authorities have the power to implement Shari'ah compliant sport and recreational facilities. Most of the public sport facilities and recreational park are under the supervision of the local authorities. Besides local authorities, private companies are also involved in providing and managing the private sports and recreational facilities. Thus, the cooperation of the local authorities are essentials and very important in order to develop a Muslim friendly sport facilities and recreational parks.

The Role of Governments and Local Authorities in Sport and Recreation Facility

Travel agencies, local government and mass media have an important role in promoting sports tourism products to attract the domestic and international tourists to be a part of the sports events. In addition, leisure travellers can also use these sports facilities provided as a venue for retreat. Our former Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad had once said that the government would give its support to any organizer of any event that aimed to promote the country positively (19/8/2002). Hence, in 2002, the government had increased the Special Tourism Fund from RM200 million to RM400 million and sport tourism was said to have its share in this fund (Utusan Malaysia, 20/9/2002). In the same year, the Sports Advisory Panel was set up by the Ministry of Sports and Youth with the task of formulating strategies for the development of sports, including sport tourism (Utusan Malaysia, 6/1/2003).

The first national conference on sports tourism with the theme "Destination Malaysia: Formulating Strategies and Action Plan for Sustainable Growth" that was held in June 2002 (New Straits Times, 10/5/2002). This conference gathered all interested participants from the public and private sectors with the aim to come up with collective strategies to develop sport tourism to its fullest potential. Thus, we can see that there are a lot of efforts from the governments in developing and promoting sports tourism in Malaysia. With the increase of the Muslim tourists in the recent years, the improvement of the sport facilities and recreation that suit with Muslim tourists are very important.

Conclusions

Organizing an international sport event will certainly bring a positive impact on the host country. Investments will be made for the long term such as building infrastructure, improving transportation systems, improvements in service quality aspects of public and private sectors. Besides that, there is an opportunity to market Muslim friendly tourism through aggressive and positive promotion of the sporting events in the international media.

Moreover, we are living in an age where sport has become a culture in our societies. It is obvious that a substantial number of tourists searching for sport-related

experiences. According to Hudson, the editor of "Sport and Adventure Tourism" book (2003), sport tourism is estimated to increase at about 10 percent per annum and as such, it has become one of the fastest growing industries in the world. The growing popularity of sport, health and fitness as well as the ease of travel and use of communication technology to promote events are among the contributing factors of this phenomenon. Moreover, sports tourism is also highly recognized in Malaysia which has a great tourist sport-oriented spots.

Although there are some obstacles standing in the way of the success of this industry, the industry players as well as the local authorities should perceive the problems as challenges which in turn inspire them to be more committed and creative in the process of capitalizing sport as one of the profitable products in this country. Developing Muslim friendly sport and recreational facilities will be an added value for Malaysia to move forward as the global *Halal* hub in the tourism industry.

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