

Industry Analysis

Second World Islamic Tourism Conference (WITC): Islamic Tourism New Norms and Revitalisation

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Abstract: This conference report provides an overview of the 2nd World Islamic Tourism Conference by extracting and synthesizing the aspects of the current Islamic tourism practices and future expectations, especially post-pandemic perspectives. The conference, focusing on the theme “Islamic Tourism New Norms and Revitalisation,” was held in a hybrid format, covering physical and virtual international academic and industry participants. A thematic content analysis was utilized through observation and rapporteur documentation to synthesize the discussion, highlights, issues, and concerns during the conference panel discussions and commentaries. The conference keynotes focus on strengthening the Islamic tourism ecosystem and preparing international tourism industry players with knowledge and skills to tap into this market. The conference panel discussion highlights the critical factors of Islamic Tourism sustainability: i) promotion of values that includes the spiritual aspect of Muslim-Friendly; ii) pandemic survival and mitigating the negative impacts; iii) handling multiple definitions of Islamic tourism concept; iv) universal and all-encompassing values such as respect, kindness, kinship, safety, welfare, responsibility, and more.

Keywords: *Conference report; Islamic Tourism; New Norms*

Introduction

The Second World Islamic Tourism Conference (WITC) was organized by the Islamic Tourism Centre of Malaysia from 15th to 17th November 2021 at the Kuala Lumpur World Trade Centre, Malaysia. The conference was hosted in Malaysia and is a follow-up to the first WITC conducted in 2017. The three-day conference brought thought leaders, policymakers, and travel experts over an academic and industry discourse on several core sessions, including i) Ambassadors and Leaders Forum; ii) Emerging Islamic Tourism Destinations; iii) Domestic Tourism Forum; iv) Islamic Tourism Business Forum; v) Islamic Tourism Lifestyle; vi) Islamic Tourism Scholars Forum, and; vii) Islamic Urban Tourism Forum.

The conference aims to create a clear and fruitful partnership among emerging Islamic tourism providers, moving from conflicting to strategic partnering management approaches. The conference reaffirms the burgeoning Islamic Tourism sector and how Islamic Tourism can be the crucial strategy towards global economic and destination recovery. The conference also highlighted the importance of Islamic tourism aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within their policymaking and marketing efforts.

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Next, a special dialogue session was conducted on the domestic tourism realm. The panelist discussed the domestic tourism revival for the Muslim market, focusing on Malaysia as the discussion setting. The dialogue revolved around the role of domestic tourism as a savior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) informed that the hospitality industry in Malaysia experienced a 55 percent drop in domestic demand with an astonishing 95 percent reduction in inbound demand. The airline industries also reported a similar pattern. Malindo Airways reported that the airline industry experienced a significant loss in revenues for international demand, mainly contributed by the China segment. However, the most significant challenge is maintaining the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), underscoring the need to harmonize the airline's operators' travel pass information, vaccination, and SOP requirements.

The Malaysia Economic Development Berhad echoed that priority should be given to recovering domestic and foreign tourists' confidence by commencing the 'travel safe' campaign. Notably, there is still eagerness to travel after COVID-19, especially with the progressive national vaccination campaign, increasing domestic travel momentum (Abraham et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020). However, the domestic demand remains low as most local travelers are vigilant with their travel plans. In addition, Restu Foundation Malaysia argued that the limited services offered by hospitality businesses to adhere to the strict SOPs demotivates the traveler's intention to travel. It is also interesting to note that all panelists agreed that the international market, especially the Muslim market, still plays an essential role in starting the Malaysian tourism industry back on its track.

Additionally, Dinar Standard argued that most tourism destinations come to understand that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for Muslim consumers and tourists. They may be Muslims, but they are sophisticated in their choices. They are looking for new experiences, willing to try new things, and expanding their travel interests to food, fashion, lifestyle products, and more. This trend is related to the need for Muslim-friendly value creation - adapting existing products and services to provide new experiences according to Islamic principles (Hanafiah & Hamdan, 2020; Marlinda et al., 2022). In other words, it raises the concern about how to bring the wisdom, heritage, and legacy of Islamic virtues to be enjoyed by all as unique, Muslim-friendly tourism experiences. Dinar Standard also highlighted a finding on leading trends that reflect a new normal for the global travel and tourism industry and government. According to them, hygiene should be considered the critical criterion in service offerings, highlighting the need for contactless travel innovation. Secondly, the Millennials and Gen Zs will be the crucial segments of the global Muslim market. Lastly, tourism suppliers need to broaden their business models to hedge tourism risks, as crisis preparedness is deemed one of the most crucial pull motivational factors for the tourism market. This perspective should be utilized as a central element in promoting Islamic tourism and cultural heritage tourism products by embedding the Islamic way of life.

On the Islamic tourism lifestyle, Travel Impact Newswire spoke about how COVID-19 has become the catalyst for a new way of measuring tourism success, i.e., not in terms of economic profit but on ecological value. This perspective will frame Islamic Tourism as the sustainable, inclusive tourism strategy we must strive for. It is worth examining how tourism destinations measure tourism through tourist arrivals, the average length of stay, and expenditure but struggle to measure the carbon footprints: garbage produced and water used by each tourist. On the other hand, Indonesia Halal Tourism Association highlighted the three mega shifts in consumer behavior. The Indonesian government predicts that there will be more online and virtual activities, health and wellness preferences, and prudent and compassionate travel behaviors. Besides, to inculcate better skills and knowledge for the new future of tourism, the industry must prioritize the importance of standards and certification to provide assurance and confidence to the Muslim tourist market, equipping industry players, products, and service providers with training and upskilling, and knowledge-seeking.

Attiya Spa Sarawak highlighted the emerging importance of the domestic tourist market in aiding tourism industry players' pandemic survival and mitigating the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the industry. Another interesting point was how tourism businesses responded and pivoted to continue delivering their promised products and services during the pandemic. By collaborating with industry players, governments and embassies, they utilized technology and adapted it to business continuity. An example was how Qatar Airways undertook risk management by using the ultra-bio cleansing system to create confidence for their travelers during the pandemic.

Among the biggest problems with Islamic tourism are numerous terms, such as MFT, Islamic tourism, Sharia tourism, and many more coined by various agencies and scholars. Most of the time, destination marketers

use these interchangeably without being interpreted according to Sharia principles. On the other hand, there is a need to change how government planners approach Islamic tourism. Surprisingly, the Malaysian tourism ministry's recent Tourism Policy 2020-2030 does not use the term 'Islamic tourism'; rather, 'Muslim-friendly tourism' is preferred. Besides, the panelist argued that it would be timely to have an Islamic tourism plan and a strategic tourism plan focusing on feasibility studies, maintenance, and financial allocations needed to invest in Islamic tourism. Meanwhile, it is argued that the value of technology and automation in Islamic tourism and how destinations must utilize it to better understand and respond to Muslim consumers at every stage of their journey, from planning to post-holiday (Adel et al., 2021).

A discussion on Halal Branding also occurred during the conference where one of the panelists mentioned, "Halal means permissible, but you have got to make the permissible 'unmissable'" and the need to "Put the Spirit in Spirituality." Both essentially mean that Halal, Islamic Tourism, or Muslim-Friendly, is all about portraying the Muslim identity and the values of Islam in a way that resonates with and is meaningful to the respected audience. Moreover, this does not necessarily mean parroting religious scriptures or sermons back to them, it means showing that Halal is "love," "care," "respect," and "energetic," and that Halal is good, fun, and exciting. He also pointed out that the playing field is level as destinations emerge from the pandemic and restart tourism. Islamic Tourism must be supported by strong leadership, firm policies, decisive thinking, strong attention, and substantial investments to move the agenda forward. The transformation can only succeed with such efforts, and Islamic Tourism can be positioned as a critical sector it deserves.

CONCLUSION

The power of the Muslim consumer must be taken seriously because there are 1.8 billion Muslims on the planet are a rising group of consumers. By 2024, the spending value of the Muslim tourist market is worth USD208 billion, portraying the opportunities available for tourism industry players. It paints a picture of the potential demand for products and services that fulfill Muslims' faith-based needs. This includes demand for tourism and hospitality products and services such as accommodation, food, recreation, entertainment experiences, and transportation. With destinations gradually reopening their borders for international travel, we look forward to meeting the expanded demand for Islamic Tourism.

Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality branding and marketing can uniquely position a destination to appeal to Muslim tourists and the broader tourist markets. There must be innovative tourism products, services, and facilities that provide enjoyment, ease, comfort, and convenience to the Muslim traveler, besides complying with Shariah requirements to embrace the Islamic Tourism concept. Perhaps, this could be facilitated and made possible by creating awareness, training tourism industry players, implementing standards and certification, undertaking and applying research, and using branding and identity management strategies.

The conference's academic and industry partners agreed that the critical factor of Islamic Tourism is promoting values that include the spiritual aspect of Muslim-Friendly, including universal and all-encompassing values such as respect, kindness, kinship, safety, welfare, responsibility, and more. They also emphasized Islamic tourism's role in enhancing their tourism industry and local culture synergies. Perhaps, this is where Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) comes in to strengthen the understanding of Islamic Tourism and develop the tourism ecosystem of the industry, locally and globally.

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