

Developing Halal Tourism Route In Sounthern Thailand: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Halal tourism is a global phenomenon in which many countries are currently trying to tap Muslim market by delivering products and services compliant with Islamic principles. Thus far, internet applications and the certification of Halal food, hotels and restaurants, and Halal tourism attractions have been developed in Muslim and non-Muslim countries. However, there is lack of complete Halal tourism routes identified. This paper therefore examines the integrated activities undertaken by various governmental and non-governmental organisations in southern Thailand to develop a well-structured Halal tourism. However, a number of challenges must be overcome before this project is a success. It is the hope that Halal routes will offer an enjoyable and distinctive experience for Muslim travelers from Thailand and neighbouring countries of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam.

Keywords: Halal Tourism, Halal Route, Southern Thailand

1. Introduction

Halal tourism is an emerging global phenomenon that advances growth and opportunities within tourism industry and beyond (Mohsin, Ramli, & Alkhulayfi, 2016). Many Muslim and non-Muslim countries have attracted with this new development and want to capture Muslim travelers who assumingly need specific *Shariah* compliant tourism requirements (Samori, Salleh & Khalid, 2016). Malaysia, a leading Halal product and service provider, have welcomed increasing number of Muslim travelers from around the world since the September 11 incident. It was estimated that over 5.44 million Muslim travelers visited Malaysia in 2012 and the trends continue (Samori, Salleh & Khalid, 2016). In some other Muslim countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Oman, Halal tourism has been given a great interest. However, substantial development is necessary before Halal tourism segment can be recognised as a key feature of tourism industry (Stephenson, 2014). In Japan, Halal tourism development is overwhelming. The number of Muslim tourists from Malaysia, Indonesia and the Middle East has been increasing over the year. In 2014, the growth of Malaysian and Indonesian arriving in Japan increased by 41.3% and 16% respectively (Samori, Salleh & Khalid, 2016). Other non-Muslim countries such as Korea, China, Russia and Thailand have also now developed their tourist attractions and destinations as ‘Muslim friendly’ or ‘Halal destination’ (Stephenson, 2014).

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Tourism is a key industry for Thailand. The statistics of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports reported that, in 2017 alone, 35.4 million visitors travelled to Thailand and these travelers contributed to approximately THB1,824,042 million Baht (USD 58,650 million) of revenues. Among them Muslim tourists from various parts of the world, especially the Middle East, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Brunei, recorded approximately 4.8 million visitors which is 13.6% of the tourists arriving in Thailand that year. The reported receipts were around THB161,721 million Baht (USD5,200 million Baht) or 8.9% of total revenues from tourism industry. The expenses per head of this group of tourists is around 33,950 Baht (USD1,091) which is considered high as compared to tourists from other parts of the world. In the past few years, the Royal Thailand Government has initiated various Halal development programmes. Like many other countries, the promotion is restricted to Halal food for export which consists of Halal science and Islamic religion Halal processes. Few programmes have been directed to Halal tourism. Many Halal tourism promotional activities have focused on internet applications on Halal destinations in the country such as Halal and Muslim friendly hotels, Halal restaurants, and Muslim tourism guides (Stephenson, 2014; Samori, Salleh & Khalid, 2016). There is lack of complete Halal tourism programme or Halal tourism route on offer in Thailand, if not in other countries of famous tourist destinations.

This paper will therefore explore the attempt to develop Halal tourism routes that provide not only Halal hotels, Halal restaurants and other necessary facilities for Muslim travelers, but also highlight opportunities and challenges facing the route developers who include a combination of governmental and non-governmental organisations, Halal entrepreneurs and ordinary Thai citizens. The following section shall provide a brief discussion on the concept of Halal tourism, followed by the efforts to develop Halal tourism routes in the southern provinces of Thailand. The next section shall highlight opportunities and challenges facing by the developing team. The paper ends with a conclusion.

2. Halal Tourism

The term Halal tourism refers to the provision of tourism products and services to Muslims who are believed to have specific requirements such Halal foods, places for prayer, entertainments which are not contradict with Islamic principles. Battour and Ismail (2010) argue that travelling is encouraged under the Islamic teachings i.e. the Holy Quran and the Sunnah or traditions of the Prophet to see the world and gain knowledge. It however has to follow the provisions in the Shariah or Islamic Law. Few terms in the Holy Quran relate to travel and tours (Mohsin, Ramli, & Alkhulayfi, 2016). Allah says in Quran:

“Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts (and minds) may thus learn wisdom and their ears may thus learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breasts.” (Al-Hajj: 46).

In other verse of the Holy Quran, Allah says:

“Travel through the earth and see how Allah did originate creation; so will Allah produce a later creation: for Allah has power over all things.” (Al-Ankabut: 20)

The traditions of the Prophet have confirmed the evidence in the holy Quran by his sayings, practices and etc. These emphasise on the wisdom of travel on earth in which the Muslim travelers may attain the pleasure from Allah, the Al-Mighty. The Prophet used to say that:

“I heard Abu Burda who accompanied Yazid bi Abi Kabsha on a journey. Yazid used to observe fasting on journeys. Abu Burda said to him “I heard Abu Musa several times saying that Allah’s Apostle said when a slave falls ill or travels, then he will get reward similar to that he gets for good deeds practiced at home when in good health.” (Reported by Bukhari)

According to Morrison (1980) and Khogali and Al-Khawashk (1980), tourism which is compliant with Islamic principles, at first, focuses on travelling for religious purposes i.e. Hajj and Umrah where Muslims across the globe travel for pilgrimage to Makkah in Saudi Arabia. This is often termed as “Islamic tourism” or travel undertaken for religious and pilgrimage purposes and it associates with acts of faith (Henderson, 2009). Until relatively recently, the term “Halal tourism” was used to refer to tourism undertaken for recreational, leisure and social purposes. More importantly, the purposes must not contradict with Islamic principles (Mohsin, Ramli, & Alkhulayfi, 2016).

In summary, Halal tourism signifies travelling by Muslim travelers for recreational, leisure and social purpose in line with Islamic Law.

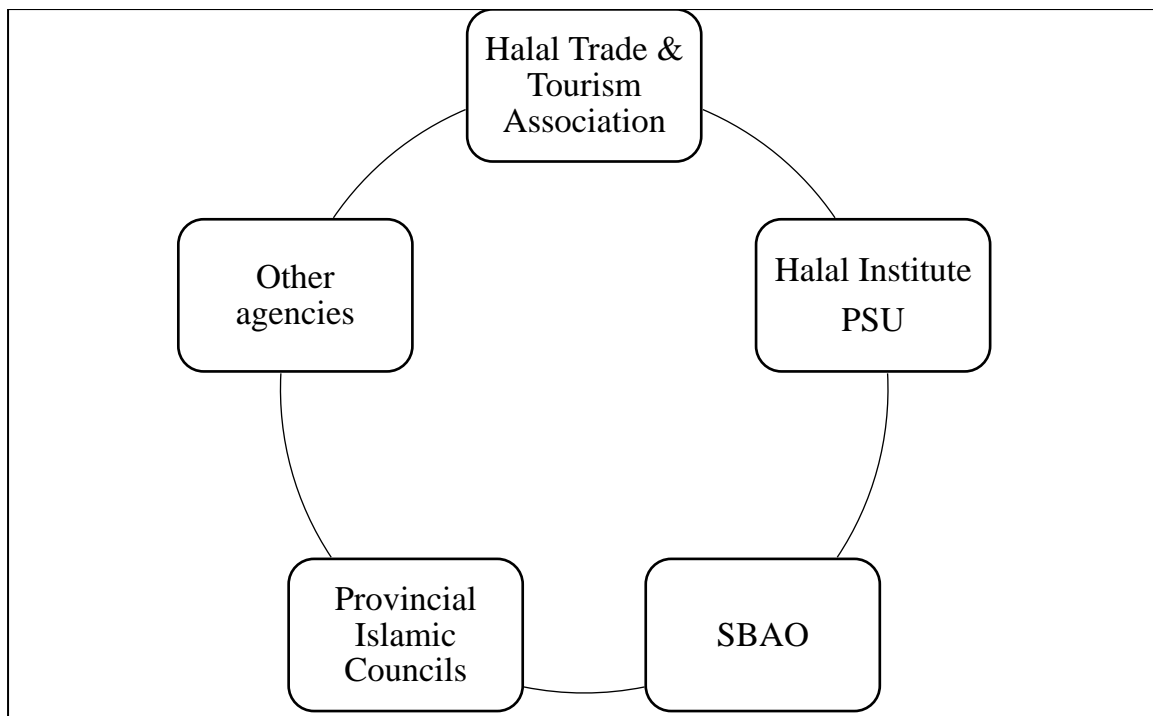
3. Developing Halal Routes in Southern Thailand

During the year 2016, Halal Tourism and Trade Association was established by Muslim tour operators, guides, and an academic institution in Thailand southern city Hat Yai, Songkla Province. The main objectives of this organisation are to promote southern Thailand as Halal destinations and to act as focal point for Halal tourism industry in Thailand. (See the website of the association: www.tahta.or.th). One of the first programmes is to develop Halal tourism for the 5 southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun, and Songkla which are rich of natural attractions, Muslim culture and heritage, local produces, hotels and restaurants, and local foods, that all can be incorporated into different Halal tourism routes. This attempt is the first of its kind in Thailand with the view to attract more Muslim tourists from not only other parts of Thailand, but also Malaysia, Indonesia. And Brunei who may have connections in some ways with the southern provinces of Thailand.

Key Parties Involved in Developing Halal Tourism Routes

The parties involved are exhibited in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Parties Involved in Developing Halal Tourism Routes



Activities and Processes

A committee was established to develop Halal tourism routes for the southern provinces, comprising the representatives from Halal Trade and Tourism Association, Halal Institute of Prince of Songkla University as academic partners, the Provincial Islamic Councils of the 5 provinces. The committee shall undertake the following activities:

- a) Identifying attractions to be included in the Halal routes.
- b) Preparing a proposed Halal tourism routes for the provinces.
- c) Obtaining budget for the project.
- d) Organising a field trip to assess the proposed attractions.
- e) Deciding on the proposed attractions.
- f) Improving the conditions and developing new products and services.
- g) Finalising the Halal routes for the southern provinces.
- h) Marketing and promotional activities.
- i) Assessing the success of the project and identifying further improvement.

Identifying attractions to be included in the Halal routes

This activity was done by the members of the committee, comprising tour operators, tour guides, academic from Halal Institute, Prince of Songkla University, members of provincial Islamic councils, and local government staff. Based on their experiences, they proposed and discussed on the potential of places of attractions, places of worship, hotels and restaurants, local products and services, to be included in the list of each Halal routes.

Preparing a proposed Halal tourism routes for the provinces.

At first, the list of these attractions were very long and cannot be covered in one single trip. The committee agreed upon places with highest potential of each province to be included in the Halal route. Halal Institute, Prince of Songkla University, provides most information on local Halal products in these provinces who in some stage, have gone through ‘Capacity building Programme for Halal Entrepreneurs’ consistently organised by the Institute.

Obtaining budget for the project.

At the beginning of the project, Halal Institute, Prince of Songkla University, provides budget for the Halal route activities. The budget was allocated from the Institute's annual budget which is given by the Royal Thailand Government through Prince of Songkla University.

Organising a field trip to assess the proposed attractions.

The committee then organised field trips to every proposed Halal routes in the 5 provinces to obtain first-hand information and experience as well as the current status of all attraction places and facilities. During the trips, the committee have conducted interviews with various stakeholders of the places, including local leaders, religious leaders, villagers, and governmental agencies. This is to ensure that the people around the Halal tourism sites have the willingness, are prepared and provide support for the project. They may also identify the potential benefits of the project in the future.

Deciding on the proposed attractions.

After obtaining data on the proposed places of attractions and other facilities, the committee decided on the attractions to be included in the final lists. The committee also prepared one final Halal route for each of the 5 provinces.

Improving the conditions and developing new products and services.

The next stage is improving the conditions and perhaps developing new Halal tourism products and services from resources available in local areas. The activities involve governmental agencies in the provinces such as provincial tourism and sports offices, local government administration organisations, provincial Islamic councils, the Halal Institute at Prince of Songkla University, and the Association of Halal Trade and Tourism. The improvement of attractions and facilities are often done by governmental authorities and local governmental organisations. The Halal Institute identifies suitable hotels and restaurants and local products to be included in Halal tourism shops placed in different tourist attractions. The Institute also takes necessary actions to ensure that those hotels and restaurants and products are of high standards and follow Islamic guidelines. The provincial Islamic councils also assist the Institute to develop Halal products and services. This activity is in progress.

Other activities

Other activities including finalising the Halal routes for the southern provinces, marketing and promotional activities, and assessing the success of the project and identifying further improvement, will be done in due course. It is expected that the Halal route shall be opened for top-table sale.

In summary, the development of Halal tourism routes for the southern provinces of Thailand is involving many governmental and governmental parties and comprising various activities to ensure that Muslim tourists can enjoy their stay in the areas and do not contradict any of Islamic principles in any way.

4. Opportunities and Challenges

The opportunities for Halal tourism in southern Thailand are vivid. Muslims from Bangkok and other parts of Thailand are interested in religious related attractions, cultural heritage, and natural places in the provinces. Muslim tourists from Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam are still interested to visit their brethren in this part of Thailand. Improved Halal facilities and places can facilitate this activity.

The government supports for Halal tourism are also continuing. The challenge is acquiring the government funding and channeling them to improve the Halal tourism facilities which require time and long processes. The time-consuming funding approval might slow down the project and affect the Halal tourism plan in long-run. This might be particularly true for tourism projects required large funding. The cooperation between governmental and non-governmental organisations are extremely important for the success of the Halal tourism programmes in southern Thailand.

5. Conclusion

The development of Halal tourism routes for the 5 southern provinces of Thailand is underway. Without well-coordinated activities from various parties, rich of natural resources and attractions may not bring about success. Halal tourism shall offer a well-structured programme of tourism that suite the needs Muslim travelers into the 5 southern provinces. A number of activities have been undertaken in the past months while some are to done in the near future. However, challenges must be overcome so that this project can be a success.

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