

WAS THE TRAVEL BUBBLE A SUCCESSFUL IDEA? INVESTIGATION OF MUSLIM-FRIENDLY BUDGET HOTELS IN LANGKAWI

Noor Amalina Mat Yusof¹, Rozila Ahmad², Asmahany Ramely³, Nurhazani Mohd Shariff⁴, and Shahrul Aiman Soelar⁵

^{1, 2, 3, 4} *School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia*

⁵ *Clinical Research Centre, Hospital Sultanah Bahiyah*

ABSTRACT

During COVID-19 pandemic, various tourism activities were banned to prevent the widespread of the virus. Travel restrictions had a negative impact on the tourism sector. To save the travel industry, the Travel Bubble program was initiated in some destinations. In Malaysia, Langkawi Island was chosen as the pilot Travel Bubble program which started on September 16, 2021. This study aims to investigate the impact of the Travel Bubble, particularly on Muslim-friendly budget hotels, in two situations: during and one and a half years after the launching of Travel Bubble program. A qualitative method with semi-structured interviews was conducted with seven Muslim-friendly Budget Hotel managers. The findings revealed that the Travel Bubble program was initially helping boost the tourism sector. However, it only benefits several hotels, while others are still struggling. This research highlights the need to promote Muslim-friendly budget hotels' survival. It contributes to national and local planning, particularly in the tourism sector in Langkawi.

Keywords: Travel Bubble, Budget Hotel, Islamic Tourism, SMEs, Muslim-friendly Hotel

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector has a significant economic impact. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2021), this sector contributed 10.3 percent of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2019, before Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has triggered unprecedented tourism crises, giving the tourism sector immediate and immersive shock. To prevent widespread virus transmission, numerous tourism-related activities have been outlawed. Hotels were shut down and planes were grounded (UNWTO, 2020a, 2020b). Consequently, the GDP declined to 5.3 percent in 2020 as a result of ongoing restrictions on travel mobility (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2021).

A program called Travel Bubble was launched to aid the tourism sector in battling the unprecedented crisis of Covid-19. Also known as Travel Corridor and Travel Zone, this program enables travellers to visit neighbouring nations without having to undergo quarantine (Asia Regional Integration Center, 2020). In this program, a mutual agreement between two or more countries was made to permit unlimited movement of people between the countries. This program aims to expedite the tourism sector by facilitating the movement of travellers while minimizing the risk of Covid-19 imported cases.

Malaysia launched the Travel Bubble program on September 16, 2021, when YB Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri, Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC), announced Langkawi as the first tourist destination to be re-opened (MOTAC, 2021). This pilot program is limited to fully vaccinated domestic tourists, with Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to limit virus

transmission from undetected carriers. Upon arriving at Langkawi Island, tourists must go through Covid-19 screening. A total of 240 361 tourists visited Langkawi since it reopened, bringing in more than RM240 million in less than two months (The Straits Times, 2021).

This study focuses on Muslim-friendly budget hotels because they are a part of Tourism Small and Medium Enterprises (TSMEs), that play a vital role in the Malaysia's tourism industry (Mamad, 2020; Shin et al., 2020). Malaysia is one of the most popular Muslim-friendly destinations globally (CrescentRating, 2019), and many of the Muslim-friendly budget hotel operators are among the locals. The main research question of this study is "Was the Travel Bubble a Successful Idea?". This study is significant as it is consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals agenda 11, which is "Sustainable Cities and Communities." Furthermore, it helps to promote Muslim-friendly budget hotels' survival and profitability. The findings will add value to national and local planning, development and processes, poverty reduction strategies, and accounts.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Islamic Tourism in Langkawi

Islamic tourism is a growing segment; it encompasses a range of activities and services catering to Muslim travellers' needs and preferences (Battour & Ismail, 2016). Also known as Halal tourism, this type of tourism is characterized by adherence to Islamic values and practices, including dietary requirements (Halal food), modesty in dress, and respect for Islamic customs (Kessler, 2015). It is often referred to as a "goldmine" due to the economic opportunities it offers to various sectors such as food and beverage (halal food and drinks), Islamic finance, Islamic takaful industry, hotels, cosmetics, travel and transport services (Abdullah et al., 2020). Two main factors driving the expansion of Islamic tourism are the growing numbers in Muslim travellers and the rising awareness among businesses of the potential financial rewards of appealing to this particular market segment (Ekka, 2023).

Islamic tourism has proven to be a key factor in promoting Malaysia as a preferred Muslim-friendly destination. The Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) consistently ranks Malaysia as the top travel destinations for Muslim travellers, for nine consecutive years (CrescentRating, 2019). It is also one of the preferred forms of travel among non-Muslims (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Henderson, 2009). In 2017, Malaysia managed to draw 25.9 million tourists, with 5.3 million or 20 percent of the tourists are Muslims (Star, 2018). The high number of tourist arrival indicates the potential for budget hotels to revive in the post pandemic period.

Langkawi Island is a renowned tourist destination, attracting both domestic and international tourists. Langkawi can be accessed by ferry and flights. Its status as a duty-free zone enhances its appeal to tourists who seek shopping opportunities. Langkawi is suitable for Muslim leisure travellers due to several motivations; (a) sightseeing, dining and shopping, (b) visiting relatives and friends, (c) honeymoon, (d) Islamic heritage and history, (e) adventure seekers, and (f) to experience the local culture (COMCEC, 2016).

2.2 Tourism Small and Medium Enterprises

Tourism Small and Medium Enterprises (Tourism SMEs) refers to small to medium-sized tourism operations that offer various tourism products and services. These are lodging, food and beverage service, transportation, travel tours, cultural and recreational services and other tourism services (Set, 2013). Tourism SMEs indeed play a vital role in the tourism industry. This is because most tourist destinations are commonly initiated by small enterprises, thus the tourism providers is

largely made up of tourism SMEs (Mamad, 2020; Shin et al., 2020). Before the Covid-19 pandemic, SMEs in the services sector (wholesale & retail commerce, food and beverage, and accommodation sub-sector) made up more than half of all jobs held by SMEs (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Therefore, tourism SMEs have a significant contribution to both tourism industry and the Malaysian economy. In addition, it reduces poverty and raises the standard of living among local residents.

According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020b), tourism SMEs are among the vulnerable segments that need support to recover amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Since many tourism destinations rely heavily on small enterprises, ensuring the sustainability of tourism SMEs is crucial for the overall revival of the tourism sector. Compared to well-established large corporations, SMEs face greater vulnerability to market pressures due to limited capital and lack of necessary skills which can hinder the progress of tourism development (Dayour et al., 2020). However, there is limited information on how Travel Bubble program have affected the performance of Muslim-friendly budget hotels based on the operator's perspectives.

2.3 Muslim-friendly Budget Hotels

The term Muslim-friendly budget hotel is quite rare. Muslim-friendly hotels refers to accommodation that cater to the needs of Muslim travellers, offering amenities such as prayer mats, halal food options, non-alcoholic environment and segregated recreational services for women (Mannaa, 2020). While Malaysian tourism is widely accepting the Muslim-friendly concept (Musa, 2021), Muslim-friendly budget hotels are relatively less known compared to the full-service Muslim-friendly hotels.

Budget refers to "cost" and "worth", and the price is rather cheap. Budget hotels typically offer basic accommodation and fewer amenities compared to full-service hotels (Bastaman et al., 2022). As classified by Malaysia Budget Hotel Association (MyBHA), budget hotels fall under the three-star and below category (MyBHA, 2022). This type of hotel commonly attracts young travellers who have a limited budget, but love to travel (Bastaman et al., 2022). Therefore, the Muslim-friendly budget hotels can be defined as accommodation that cater to the needs of Muslim travellers, offering amenities such as prayer mats, halal food options, non-alcoholic beverage and segregated recreational services for women at a low cost.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Data collection was conducted in March 2023 and lasted for a duration of two weeks. This study used a qualitative approach to gather information from managers of Muslim-friendly budget hotels. The selection of these hotels was carried out using purposive sampling, in which researchers choose specific members of the population to participate in the study. It was deemed suitable for the study because its primary focus was uncovering novel and comprehensive insights rather than generalizing findings. Only budget hotels that are registered with MyBHA, certified by reputable organisations (such as Salam Standard, CrescentRating, Muslim-friendly Hospitality Services (MFHS), or Islamic Quality Standard (IQS)), and promoted their hotels on halalbooking.com (a reservation platform specifically catering to Muslim-friendly hotels) were approached for in-depth interviews. Managers were chosen as the information provider because they play a crucial role in business planning and crisis management, particularly during challenging times like the Covid-19 pandemic.

An interview protocol with semi-structured questions was used to guide the interview process, which took an average of 20 minutes per interview. Respondents were interviewed individually to ensure comprehensive responses. It also allows the researcher to guide the interview session effectively. This approach encourages participants to share detailed information about the

challenges they have to face during and after the Travel Bubble period. The main interview questions are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview questions

No.	Interview questions	Situation
1.	What is your opinion about Travel Bubble program implementation in Langkawi?	During Travel Bubble
2.	What is the current situation of Muslim-friendly budget hotels, after 1.5 years of Travel Bubble?	After almost 1.5 years of Travel Bubble

Following the guidelines outlined by Creswell (2017), seven respondents were interviewed, and permission was obtained from the interviewees to audio record the interview session. After the seventh interview, no new information emerged, indicating data saturation. As recommended by Gill (2020), data collection was stopped at this point. To facilitate data analysis, the recorded interviews were transcribed.

The data was analysed using Thematic Content Analysis. Thematic Content Analysis is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data that involves identifying, analysing, and reporting data patterns. Thematic content analysis begins with familiarization with the data. All interviews were transcribed. The interview transcripts were reviewed and cross checked with the recorded audio to determine the accuracy of the transcribed data. The researcher recorded all the initial ideas in the transcript. Next, the transcripts were coded, and all the interrelated codes were grouped under the same theme. The themes were named and read repeatedly to ensure consistency. Miles and Huberman (1994) name this stage as data reduction, as it refines and organizes the data so that conclusions can be confirmed. Finally, the themes were interpreted, and this report was generated. Interpretation of the data is influenced by the researcher's understanding of the studied phenomena as narrated by the respondents.

4.0 FINDINGS

The first respondent interviewed is coded as R1. The respondents' profile is listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondents profile

Code Name	Age	Position
R1	50-55	Front Office Manager
R2	35-40	Assistant General Manager
R3	50-55	General Manager
R4	25-30	Executive Manager
R5	30-35	Front Office Manager
R6	30-35	Front Office Manager
R7	30-35	Reservation Manager

The themes are categorized based on the Travel Bubble's duration: during Travel Bubble implementation, and approximately 1.5 years after Travel Bubble was launched. Only one theme emerged for the first duration, which is "travel bubble provides short-term benefit." For the second duration, three themes were identified: "Langkawi is expensive," "business minded financial management" and "strategic location and loyal customers."

Table 3. Themes

Duration	Themes
During Travel Bubble	Theme 1: Travel bubble provides short term benefit
After 1.5 years of Travel Bubble	Theme 1: Langkawi is expensive Theme 2: Business minded financial management Theme 3: Strategic location and loyal customers

4.1 During Travel Bubble

4.1.1 Theme 1: Short-term Benefit from Travel Bubble

Based on the primary data, the implementation Travel Bubble had a positive impact on Langkawi's tourism industry, leading to a significant boost in tourist arrival numbers. According to R3, this is due to travel restrictions which only allow domestic travel. According to R3, *"In the travel bubble, people were not allowed to go to other places except Langkawi. Everyone had to come to Langkawi; it was like the whole of Malaysia was heading to Langkawi."* R4 added, *"It appears that the international border has not fully reopened for travel mobility."* Hence, tourists were limited to domestic travel and took the opportunity to visit Langkawi.

4.2 After Almost One and Half Years of Travel Bubble

4.2.1 Theme 1: Langkawi is Expensive

During the Travel Bubble period, Langkawi experienced a surge in popularity and became a preferred destination. However, after approximately 1.5 years of its launch, tourism in Langkawi faced challenges as the demand for travel to Langkawi decreased. R1 and R4 said *"Travel bubble has seen an increase. Then, it has now declined again."* According to R3, these travellers were not interested in returning to Langkawi for another visit. He stated, *"After they came to Langkawi, they wouldn't want to come here again. During the travel bubble, there was no choice; they were forced to come to Langkawi."* R5 mentioned that tourism trend has changed. It is different from what it was before the Covid-19 pandemic. R5 said, *"Travel bubble experienced an increase, but now it has declined again. Moreover, the tourism trend is not the same as before Covid."* (R5)

According to R6, many people choose to travel to Hatyai, Thailand, instead of Langkawi because they believe that vacationing in Hatyai offers better value for money compared to Langkawi. It is perceived that Langkawi requires higher expenses. *"It has gone viral that many people are heading to Thailand Hatyai. They claimed that vacationing there is more worth it compared to Langkawi. It requires higher expenses in Langkawi."*

4.2.2 Theme 2: Business Minded Financial Management

After approximately 1.5 years of Travel Bubble program, Muslim-friendly budget hotels encounter several challenges. One of the significant issues they face is low occupancy rates, which result in financial difficulties and reduced revenue. R1, R2, R6, R7 and R4 said;

"Currently, the hospitality industry in Langkawi is experiencing unsatisfactory business conditions. Our hotel occupancy is also very low. Today's occupancy rate is only 6%." (R1)

"The occupancy rate is only 40%-50%. It has decreased by 60% compared to before Covid-19 pandemic. It's terribly bad but we are not incurring losses." (R2)

"The occupancy rate decreased to 70%." (R6 and R7)

"Today, my occupancy is below 15%, and there are times when it goes below 10%. The break-even point is around 40-45%, so it's definitely a loss for us." (R3)

"We are maintaining a safe occupancy rate of 80%-85%. But we are not opening all the rooms." (R4)

The decline in hotel occupancy has a direct impact on profitability, making it challenging for these establishments to cover operating expenses and pay salaries. R1 said, *“Indeed, in terms of salary payments, we have to pay salaries every month. Utility bills still need to be paid.”* R3 also expressed the same difficulties. R3 said *“Low occupancy rate. The hotel needs to pay many costs such as salaries, utility bills etc.”*

However, some hotels, like R2, have managed to remain financially stable by being debt-free and practicing cautious financial management. This hotel operates on a cash-only basis. They do not offer credit purchases and they do not have debts. This approach minimizes financial risk associated with debts.

“This hotel operates on a cash-only basis. There is no debt. We manage things step by step. By now, any previous debts should have been cleared.” (R2)

On the other hand, R5 mentioned that the hotel has opportunities for growth, and is investing in expansion despite the challenging circumstances. Its strategic location has resulted in increasing demand. Although the demand is not as good as the demand during pre-pandemic, the hotel is in its development phase. It is expanding its capacity by adding more buildings to meet customer demands. R5 said,

“Due to its strategic location, the demand for this hotel is increasing. Although it may not be at the same level as before Covid-19, the hotel is currently in the development phase. We are now adding more buildings to accommodate our customers' needs.” (R5)

4.2.3 Theme 3: Strategic Location and Loyal Customers

The statements provided by R1, R2, R3, R5 and R6 shed light on various aspects of the hotels' characteristics, customer based, competition and location of Muslim-friendly budget hotels. R1 points out the differences in the location. Cenang is a “must-visit” destination for tourists traveling to Langkawi, making hotels in that area more attractive to visitors. On the other hand, Pekan Kuah may face a different level of demand due to its location and tourist preferences. R1 said *“The situation between hotels in Cenang and Pekan Kuah is different. Cenang is a must-visit place when traveling to Langkawi. Most of the tourists prefer to stay there.”* R6 stated that the hotel has a significant number of foreign long-stay guests. R6 said, *“This hotel has many foreign long-stay guests.”* R3 heavily relies on group visits. R3 said *“This hotel depends on group visits.”* R2 has a number of loyal customers who frequently return to stay at the hotel. Such loyalty provides a stable source of business and helps the hotel withstand competition. R2 said *“The competition is not very high. We don't feel it much because we have a good number of loyal customers.”* R5's hotel is popular among influencers, who promote the hotel for free, providing valuable exposure and marketing. This aids the hotel to reach a wider audience and attract potential guests. R5 stated *“This hotel is popular among influencers. It receives free promotion from them.”*

5.0 DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

The concept of Travel Bubble was widely discussed as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, most of the article focuses on the travellers' view on Travel Bubble such as the convenience and benefits for travellers, the potential destinations included and the safety measures (Chusakul & Nonthapot, 2021; Fusté-Forné & Michael, 2023; Langgat et al., 2021; Luo & Lam, 2020; Yu et al., 2021). Besides that, these articles also discussed the benefits for the tourism industry in terms of reviving business and promoting economic recovery. However, there

is insufficient information on the perspective of destination countries regarding the Travel Bubble concept and how they benefit from it.

This study discovered that Travel Bubble provides a short-term relief to the Muslim-friendly budget hotels. These hotels, which cater to specific dietary and religious needs, experienced increased bookings, and occupancy rates as a result of the Travel Bubble arrangement. The Straits Times (2021) reported, 240 361 tourists came to Langkawi within less than two months of Travel Bubble launching date.

The true significance of this study lies in its examination of the Travel Bubble outcomes approximately 1.5 years after its launch. This answers the question “Was the Travel Bubble a Successful Idea?” Travel Bubble successfully boost tourism in Langkawi and Muslim-friendly budget hotel occupancy during the pandemic. However, after 1.5 years, when international travel restrictions were lifted, tourists’ arrival to Langkawi started to decrease. Consequently, Muslim-friendly budget hotel occupancy started to slowdown. According to Datuk Noorazly Rosly, the Langkawi chapter chairman of MyBHA, visitors arrivals have plummeted by a significant 70 percent compared to before the pandemic (New Straits Times, 2023). As Langkawi can only be assessed by ferry and flights, he assumed the main factor for the reduced demand was infrequent ferry trips to the island which made it difficult for visitors to plan their journey. In addition, this study discovered that Langkawi needs to compete with Hatyai, Thailand that is perceived to be more “worth-it” because Langkawi is a more expensive destination.

In conclusion, this study highlights the short-term positive impact of Travel Bubble on Muslim-friendly budget hotels. These hotels may need to address these concerns by reviewing their offerings, pricing strategies, and value propositions to stay competitive and appeal to a diverse range of travellers. To sustain, the operators must business mindedly managed their finance, engage with visitors, and respond to their feedback. This will help improve the overall tourism experience, thus encouraging more return visits. This study has its limitation. It merely provides information on the effect of Travel Bubble on seven Muslim friendly budget hotels in Langkawi. Further research is necessary to understand the broader implications of Travel Bubble program on the entire tourism ecosystem, local economies, and the global efforts to manage the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic. Evaluating the long-term effects and lessons learned from various Travel Bubble arrangements can help improve future policy decisions and help refine such initiatives for the benefit of the tourism industry stakeholders.

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