

Won't be a walk in the park

Travel sector may recover sooner than any other post-pandemic

LIKE EVERYTHING else, the halal industry was not spared the lashing from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Businesses suffered, and while halal was recognised possibly the fastest-growing model in that sector, it too faced constraints.

The Tokyo Olympics which was supposed to have been staged last year is a case in point.

Malaysian halal players were set to reap the benefits, but the Games was postponed to this year. While the organisers have stated that "the show will go on", there is still much apprehension.

Even if it does take place, number of countries will be drastically reduced, and in tandem, the total number of athletes, officials and spectators.

Malaysia epitomises the classic halal destination. However, needless to say, that industry has suffered, along with its stable-

mates such as hotels, F&B. Recently, it was announced that even Malaysia's national zoo may have to bring down the shutters by April. That was a favourite tourist destination.

Two major Malaysian halal players share their views on the expected halal trends, but with the caveat that it would all depend on the pandemic.

Halal International Selangor (HIS) Chief Operating Officer Zulkarnine Shah was pragmatic when he said recovery could start in the third quarter of 2021.

"The recovery will happen in a chain-effect manner," said Zulkarnine.

"People are looking forward to travel but do they dare?"

The Director General of the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) Dato' Dr. Mohmed Razip Hasan believed travel-ready destinations will bounce back faster than others post-Covid-19.

"The Muslim tourist market with a global population of 1.8 billion and inclination for an extended stay and high-value consumption is an untapped market with huge potentials once the world travels again," said Razip.

Zulkarnine and Razip shared with @Halal their hopes and expectations for 2021. 



The key to tourism and economic rebound may be in this niche market itself. Cleanliness and hygiene, safety and security will be top among travellers' priorities."

Tourism industry needs to plan ahead

BY **DATO' DR. MOHMED RAZIP HASAN**
Director General, Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC)

COVID-19 HAS disrupted the global economy. The tourism industry in many destinations has been impacted due to low travel confidence and border closures.

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation has indicated it may take between 30-48 months for travel to return to 2019 levels.

Meanwhile, Crescentrating's analysis indicates ASEAN may see travel recovery between 2021 and 2022. Nonetheless, healing is subject to how an individual destination strategises its recovery and promotion campaign and the readiness to travel by international tourists.

While a Covid-19 cure is a key factor in increasing travel confidence, I believe that travel-ready destinations will bounce back faster than others post-Covid 19.

It's essential to grasp this perspective so that destinations will be compelled to seize the opportunities now during this apparent downtime and reap the benefits later once travel re-opens.

Thus, while addressing the pandemic's impact on the industry, destination managers and tourism industry players need to plan well ahead and have a ready-made mechanism in place ready to launch.

In other words, Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) and National Tourism Organisations (NTOs) must be in a state of

readiness to act. The Muslim tourist market with a global population of 1.8 billion and inclination for an extended stay and high-value consumption is an untapped market with huge potentials once the world travels again.

Given this, Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) is ready to support industry players to increase their knowledge about this market and prepare them to benefit from this market's potential, especially post-Covid.

It is expected that once borders open, there will likely be pent-up demand for travel, and the Muslim tourist market is one market that industry players should be mindful of. DMOs worldwide need to consider this market segment when formulating their future strategies now.

The key to tourism and economic rebound may be in this niche market itself. Cleanliness and hygiene, safety and security will be top among travellers' priorities.

There will also likely be demand for sustainable and restorative travel, all of which are addressed by the foundations of Islamic tourism and Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality services.

Malaysia has recognised this market's potential as far back as 2009 with the establishment of the ITC under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC).

Since then, we have focused on research, training and capacity building, and certification of Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality services to equip tourism indus-



try players with the relevant knowledge and skills, and help develop the tourism ecosystem that would support this niche tourist market.

We groomed our tour guides to understand Muslim tourists' needs to be better able to handle this market. We collaborated with mosque administrators to create specific guidelines that would be welcoming to both Muslim and non-Muslim visitors.

In 2020, we successfully introduced the Muslim-friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) programme, an extension of MOTAC's hotel star rating system. It offers three categories of recognition, i.e. silver, gold and platinum MFAR.

ITC has issued MFAR recognition for more than 40 hotels in Malaysia, and we see that the interest among hoteliers is growing. Through the MFAR programme, we are helping hotels position themselves as a preferred choice for Muslim travellers from all over the world.

They have also begun leveraging this recognition to strengthen their marketing strategy and tap into the Muslim tourist market. This is a good sign for the industry, indicating their awareness for the potential of this market.

We've also seen significant interest in terms of research and development in the Islamic tourism sector. ITC has worked with and value academicians and researchers' contributions in exploring the potential growth areas in Islamic tourism.

Their research unearths the vast potentials in Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality, sustainable destination management, products and services to cater to this niche market, and marketing and branding, to name a few.

The breadth of research ensures that the industry has good references to undertake

development and policy formulation in Islamic tourism. During the pandemic, we've also seen the take-up rate for training increase.

We've conducted specialised training for tourist guides, equipping them with knowledge and information on the Muslim travel and tourism segment, particularly on Muslim visitors' needs and requirements.

ITC, as a registered training provider with the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF), also conducts a series of courses based on Malaysia's experiences and expertise in the area of Islamic tourism with international participants.

This indicates a strong interest among international destinations to learn about this market and develop it in their own countries. Overall, while we've seen tourism industry players struggle during this pandemic, we also see their diligent efforts to survive through this challenging time.

The focus is largely on surviving, recovery, connections, and sustainability, bearing in mind that the industry will rebound eventually -- and when that happens, industry players who are proactively preparing themselves for that future will win, Insyallah.

These are areas that ITC can offer through our range of services covering training and capacity building, standards and certification, and consultation on Islamic tourism development.

Our mission is to be an internationally-recognised centre of excellence and reference in Islamic tourism and Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality through strategic research, training, capacity building, standard and certification, and industry development, leveraging destination diversity, an inclusive ecosystem, and technology advancement.

Chain-effect recovery



BY **ZUKARNINE SHAH**
Chief Operating Officer
Halal International Selangor (HIS)

THERE WERE great expectations that the Covid-19 pandemic would abate and thereby open up the markets, including halal. However, we have seen new Covid-19 strains and countries suffering from 2nd and 3rd waves. Given this scenario, what are the expectations?

After a year of going through the pandemic, it is only natural that expectations are high, but the reality is, it will take longer than that for things to return to pre-pandemic. While specific industry prospers, it will take some time for the rest of the sector to bounce back. Assuming the recovery starts somewhere in the second half of 2023, the healing will also happen in a chain-effect manner. The halal industry is riding on the conventional industry. The business will be focussing on bouncing back and rebuilding, and I expect the halal industry will only gain momentum after this phase.

i) The Malaysian market (taking into account the Emergency too)

With the halal-meat scandal and expected cut in spending to further develop the halal market, the industry is expected to stagnate. The existing halal food players may have the advantage to grow (in volume) during this period but growth here if any is set off by the lack of new players and new markets.

ii) The international market

The international market will follow the above trend. Expected similar trends in halal player countries will dictate the global direction.

The Tokyo Olympics was postponed from last year to 2021. Malaysian companies were expected to be players by participating in the provision of halal goods and services. Do you think it will happen?

Assuming all the Malaysian companies will remain as participants in the provision of halal goods and services in the Olympics, whenever that may be. How they benefit from this depends mainly on how the Olympics will be received by the world (post-Covid-19). One thing for sure, pre-Covid-19 enthusiasm is unlikely to return.

The halal industry was the fastest-growing sector in the market pre-Covid-19. What are now the predicted numbers and volumes for 2021?

I am not sure it will remain the fastest-growing. I have no prediction numbers and volume if the choice is between up and down, I believe it will move south in 2021.

What would be the size, share, trends, market demand, growth, and opportunities be?

Any prediction on size and share can only be guesstimated. Hence, I will refrain from giving. Demand and growth will naturally pick up later accordingly. There will be opportunities for players with resources and ability to change with speed to adapt to the new normal and altered consumer behaviour due to the pandemic.

It is back to the drawing board for your agency. What are the expected adjustments and reviews?

Revamp of current programmes and creation of new programmes considering the effect and changes brought about by the pandemic.

How do you reckon is halal tourism being re-shaped?

Halal tourism does not exist in isolation as such re-shaping of halal tourism depends mainly on how the tourism industry recovers from the pandemic and the actions taken to bring back the confidence to travel. People are looking forward to travelling but do they dare? I think the re-shaping of the tourism industry depends immensely on the method and manner how the industry brings back the confidence to travel to the people.