



ITC, recipient of the Strategic Business Alliance Award  
The World's Best Halal Brands 2021  
by The BrandLaureate



# Enhancing Islamic Tourism Experience *Through* The Muslim-Friendly Tour Guide Programme

Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) is an entity under the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, tasked to develop the Islamic tourism segment for the nation. It advocates Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT) by offering research and market intelligence, training, industry development consultation, Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality (MFTH) service standards and certification, and information exchange.

In 2021, ITC was named the recipient of the Strategic Business Alliance Award at The BrandLaureate World Halal Best Brand E-Branding Awards 2021. It is a recognition of ITC's efforts and endeavours in formulating new strategies to meet the new normal of the business environment to ensure business continuity and sustainability, notwithstanding its role to develop and grow the Islamic tourism segment in Malaysia.

In addition, Malaysia was named top country in the region in the MFT sector by the State of the Global Islamic Economy (SGIE) Report 2020/21. Malaysia also retained the top-ranked destination in the MasterCard-CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2021, a position it has defended since the launch of the Index in 2015. These recognitions are an added motivation for ITC to continue to strengthen its efforts in being a prime mover and leading institution to ensure Malaysia is at the forefront of MFTH.

To understand more, Gaya Travel Magazine sits with the Director-General of Islamic Tourism Centre Dato' Dr. Mohmed Razip Hasan to find out more about ITC's latest moves, the organisation's role in cementing Malaysia's leading position as a Muslim-friendly destination, and enhancing the local tour guides' competencies to meet the global Muslim market demands.

**Gaya Travel: What are ITC's current projects? What are ITC's plans to revive Islamic tourism in Malaysia once the borders reopen?**

**Dato' Dr. Mohmed Razip:** The pandemic brought upon us a new challenge, and with it, a rare opportunity -- to do things differently. With the advent of the digital age, ITC has embraced this wave by taking to digital platforms to carry out its events and activities, all of which are designed to present new opportunities in the horizon with regards to Islamic Tourism.

Allow me to begin by sharing that on 8 July 2021, ITC held its inaugural ITC Corporate Forum (ITCF) entitled Women in Islamic Tourism Economy (WITE) – in conjunction with the lead-up to the Islamic Tourism Outlook Conference 2022 – to advocate and give recognition to the role of women in Islamic Tourism and the economy. It also shed more light on the importance of catering to the needs of female Muslim tourists as well as involving more women in the tourism workforce.

As part of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) subregional cooperative institution, ITC also conducted a webinar on 19 August 2021, entitled "Understanding Muslim-friendly Tourism" to promote MFTH in the region, and it witnessed a commendable reception from participants not just in ASEAN alone, but also other parts of the world such as Central Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The event was also intended to be among the pioneer steps towards achieving a common understanding of the MFTH concept and standards among the three nations.



*Director General, Islamic Tourism Centre,  
Dato' Dr. Mohmed Razip Haji Hasan*

Throughout June until August 2021, ITC even organised webinars as part of the Muslim-friendly Malaysia webinar series, with target audience being destination management organisations in ASEAN and local Malaysian tourism stakeholders. All our knowledge-sharing sessions are aimed towards getting the industry prepared for travel reopening, by being better equipped with necessary knowledge and intelligence, particularly where Islamic Tourism is concerned.

Recently on 24 August, ITC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Institut Pengajian Islam & Dakwah Sabah (IPDAS), an agency under Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) on a virtual platform. The collaboration is part of our human capital development initiatives to nurture a generation of leaders who are well-informed and well-equipped to lead the tourism industry, particularly Islamic Tourism, in the future.

All in all, the abovementioned initiatives, among many others, are in line with ITC's new business philosophy for 2021-2025 "New thinking, New actions, New results" - and it shows ITC is riding on the wave of digitalisation in delivering our initiatives whilst conforming to the necessities under the new norm.

**Gaya Travel: How is ITC's current relationship with the tourism industry players? In what ways does ITC add value to the Islamic Tourism industry?**

**Dato' Dr. Mohmed Razip:** The COVID-19 pandemic had impacted the global tourism industry. As a government agency, ITC continues to maintain close relations with industry players whilst providing motivation and support through this challenging period via continuous knowledge sharing of the latest intelligence and information with regards to tourism reopening. In addition, we also engage in the sharing of best practices and relevant upskilling and reskilling initiatives. Our efforts are geared towards the strengthening of the industry and to share opportunities in Islamic Tourism that can be tapped into.

As said earlier, in 2021, we introduced the new philosophy of "New thinking, New actions, New results" in response to a new industry landscape. Among the basic principles are to focus on cooperation with stakeholders, strengthening ties with industry, and fortifying the ITC branding both at home and abroad.

Since 2020 last year, Alhamdulillah ITC has marked several new milestones:

- Expanded the Muslim-Friendly Tourism scope to include Hospitality as well, hence the coining of the term MFTH alongside its application in terms of definition, standards development, branding, business concept, etc.
- Registered ITC with the Human Resource Development Corporation (HRD Corp) under the Ministry of Human Resource Malaysia as an MFTH Training Provider to strengthen ITC's role in capacity building, domestically and internationally.



*Guests staying at MFAR hotels have triple assurance -- from MOTAC, JAKIM, and ITC*



*YB Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri officiates the Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition logo launch on 3 Sep 2020, witnessed by Datuk Wira Dr. Noor Zari Hamat, Sec-Gen of MOTAC, and Dato' Dr. Mohmed Razip Hasan, DG of ITC*

- Strengthened our recognition programme, the Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR), with strategic marketing and branding efforts through the launch of MFAR official logo and online seminars. To date, ITC has recognised 44 hotels in Malaysia as Muslim-friendly, comprising local and international brands and we see that the interest among hoteliers is growing.
- Conducted MFTH training during the pandemic for local and international clients, including governments, tourism boards, academia, tourism industry supply chain, etc. by providing a broad view of the Muslim tourist market potential, its role in the reopening of tourism, and how tourism industry players should respond to benefit from it.
- Commissioned academic and applied research to delve deeper into various aspects of Islamic Tourism.
- Collaborated with tourism industry associations and academia/training institutions to strengthen the Islamic Tourism landscape while preparing the new generation with skills and knowledge based on Islamic Tourism.



**Gaya Travel: Could you kindly share with us how the MFTG certification came about?**

**Dato' Dr. Mohmed Razip:** The MFTG certification is rooted in the Malaysian Standard MS2610, the standard which provides guidelines for managing tourism facilities, products, and services to meet the needs of Muslim travellers. The scope of standard has three main components: Accommodation, Tour Packages and Tour Guides.

Allow me to step away from MFTG, by firstly elaborating how ITC has gone about implementing the standard in its course of dealings. For the Accommodation segment, ITC has launched the above-mentioned Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) where hotels and accommodations can apply for the Muslim-friendly recognition. Among the local and international hotels across Malaysia that have adopted this MFAR initiative are Tamu Hotel & Suites Kuala Lumpur; The Light Hotel Penang; Perdana Kuala Lumpur City Centre and Perdana Kota Bharu; Sunway Hotels & Resorts; Mardhiyyah Hotel & Suites Shah Alam; The Pearl Kuala Lumpur; The Zenith Hotel Putrajaya; Première Hotel Klang; Attana Hotels & Resorts; Raia Hotels; Grand Ion Delemen Hotel in Genting Highlands; Mövenpick Hotel and Convention Centre KLIA; DoubleTree by



*Participants attend a live tour during ITC's Muslim-Friendly Tour Guide course.  
Picture by Raja Mohd Hafiz*

Hilton Kuala Lumpur; Pullman Kuching and Pullman Miri Waterfront; Amari Johor Bahru; Grand DarulMakmur Hotel Kuantan; Lotus Desaru Beach Resort & Spa; Adya Hotel Langkawi; Resorts World Langkawi; and Hyatt Regency Kinabalu.

When it comes to Tour Packages, ITC has formulated the Muslim-friendly Tourism Products and Hospitality Packages (MFT ProHPack) that are specifically designed for consumers in the niche Muslim travel market.

Regarding the Tour Guides, the credentials to qualify as an MFTG include a valid license, relevant skills, language competency and legal requirements. In addition, guides should be able to address the needs of Muslim travellers such as keeping them informed of prayer times, facilitating time for them to perform prayers, ensuring restaurants and eateries are Halal-certified, and providing Halal food whenever such food is not readily available.

In short, MS2610 is aimed at enhancing the ability of entities to produce and manage Muslim-friendly tourism products and services that comply with Shariah principles, preserving the integrity of Muslim-friendly tourism products and services through effective application of the standard, and to enhance the experience and satisfaction of customers by meeting their niche needs and requirements.



*ITC organised a webinar for the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) on 19 August to inform audiences of the huge potential in Islamic Tourism and Muslim-Friendly Tourism within the sub-region.*



**Gaya Travel: In your opinion, what are the attributes of the ideal MFTG? What competencies and skill sets should an excellent MFTG possess?**

**Dato' Dr. Mohmed Razip:** The niche faith-based needs of the Muslim tourists or travellers can be easily summed up in two factors: Halal food and prayer facilities. In addition, the behaviour of consumers in this niche market is exhibited by a tendency to travel in large groups, propensity to spend more and have longer stays.

An MFTG, ideally, would start off by planning tour arrangements that consider Muslim clients' prayer times and their gastronomic needs, which is Halal food and with it, they can acquire knowledge on the difference between what foods are Halal and Haram.

From there, MFTGs can expand their knowledge to Islamic-related terms commonly used such as wudhu or ablution, and the names of the five prayer times – *Subuh, Zohor, Asar, Maghrib* and *Isyak* – in order to accommodate the needs of clients and engage with them better, hence making their stay and experience a more wholesome and comfortable one.

In addition, knowledge on ethics and practices with regards to Muslims' way of life would come in handy, for instance, greeting them with "*Assalamu'alaikum*" and "*Wa'alaikumsalam*", and refraining from shaking hands or making physical contact with the opposite gender.

Just like your regular tour guide, MFTGs must possess good communication skills to build rapport with clients. However, allow me to reiterate that the aforementioned niche set of knowledge would better equip MFTGs in daily dealings with their clients.



*24 August 2021 marked a momentous occasion for ITC when it signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) on human capital development in the Islamic Tourism industry and the enhancement of Islamic Tourism-related programmes and curriculum in tertiary education.*



*YB Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri delivering her keynote address at the ITC Corporate Forum on the theme of Women in the Islamic Tourism Economy on 8 July 2021*

**Gaya Travel: What improvements has ITC made on the programme over the years? Is ITC planning to expand the MFTG certification programme? What is the future of the programme?**

**Dato' Dr. Mohmed Razip:** As recently as February 2021, ITC conducted a refresher course for MFTGs in aspects of health and safety, particularly basic life support (BLS) skills. This is an extension of the regular training programme itself, to equip MFTGs with additional hands-on skills in their course of work.

All along, regular modules in training programmes for MFTGs have covered an extensive range of topics:

- Concept of Islamic Tourism and its elements
- Basic Islamic principles
- Islamic Code of Ethics
- Communication skills
- Requirements of Muslim travellers
- Muslim-friendly hospitality services as per MS2610

However, ITC has embarked on a journey to improve the MFTG training programme, taking into account the current landscape of the industry especially after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moving forward, the training will provide more focus on:

- Introduction to MFTH

- Understanding of different types of Muslim travellers -- those who travel alone, in groups, in pairs, the different age groups and backgrounds
- Basic principles of Halal and MFTH products and services in Malaysia

Moreover, we are looking to recalibrate our training courses by placing more focus on tour guides themselves, including the current scenario of the tourism sector, by shining more light on Malaysia's solid base as the top Muslim-friendly destination alongside its unique offerings and potentials, and the ways in which MFTGs can leverage upon them in their profession.

As an internationally recognised Centre of Excellence in Islamic Tourism and MFTH, ITC is humbled to have the MFTG initiative rolled out and to witness it garnering traction among industry players. Moving forward, we would like to strengthen our role in this regard and take the lead in improving the representation and quality of MFTGs themselves, notwithstanding the content and input of our MFTG training courses as well.

By getting more tour guides on board this initiative, we hope to create a more sustainable and inclusive tourism industry, in line with the aspirations of the National Tourism Policy (NTP) 2020-2030.



*Director General of ITC, Dato' Dr. Mohmed Razip Hasan giving the opening remarks to the MFTG refresher course aimed at equipping tour guides with life-saving skills*



*MFTG course participants learn about CPR techniques and how to handle crises*





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# Muslim-Friendly Tour Guides At Work

## *Putting Knowledge Into Practice*

Being the recipient of the Strategic Business Alliance Award under World's Best Halal Brands 2021 by The BrandLaureate, the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) has been relentless in its pursuit to stimulate Islamic tourism and Malaysia as an exciting Muslim-friendly destination.

Realising how critical the tour guides are in the whole tourism equation because they can directly make or break tourists' experience, ITC issues the Muslim-friendly Tour Guide (MFTG) certification to those who are keen to serve the global Muslim market while expanding their competencies and acumen.

The MFTG certification allows tour guides and travel operators to understand the Muslim tourists at a deeper level. Part of the training syllabus include understanding Muslim travellers' expectations and increasing awareness towards what constitutes Halal, including how to appropriately behave around their Muslim clients. Armed with such knowledge, the tour guides can create fulfilling tour programmes and itineraries that specifically revolve around the needs of the Muslim travellers.

To understand more about MFTG certification's merits and contributions to Islamic tourism, Gaya Travel Magazine talks to four experienced MFTG-certified tour guides who have been serving international clients, including non-Malaysian Muslims, in the course of their work:  
Chin Poh Chin, Ab Razak bin Abu Bakar, Deanna Chin Mee Lian,  
and Raja Mohd Hafiz bin Raja Nasharuddin.



## WAITING FOR THE BORDERS TO OPEN

"Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism went to a slump not only in our country but globally because of travel restrictions. While waiting for the pandemic to subside, I conduct virtual tours through <http://exploremalaysiavirtually.com/>, a site created by LokaLocal," city guide Deanna shares.

Poh Chin, who is the President of Penang Tour Guide Association (PTGA), informs that her association is "planning to run Virtual Tours soon to introduce places of interest in Penang online and to keep the passion towards the 'Pearl of the Orient' alive."

Raja Mohd Hafiz currently works as a Technical Lecturer at PMD International College Sdn Bhd (PMDIC) in UiTM Sarawak, Kota Samarahan Campus 2. "Besides, I teach and train students who bring Muslim tourists to Saudi Arabia, especially for Umrah trips to Makkah and Madinah. I also did virtual tours on the topic of Negeri Sembilan twice, specialising in its history, culture and unique matrilineal tradition," he adds.

Ab Razak, who has been MFTG-certified since 2018, implores the Malaysian tourism industry players, officials and policy makers to use the downtime during lockdown to strategise themselves so that they can build back their businesses once the borders reopen to ensure that Malaysia remains competitive as an international tourism destination, especially when other destinations within the region like Indonesia, Vietnam and Philippines are fast catching up.

"Of course, to adapt to the current border closures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in Malaysia, many guides and industry players have resorted to conducting digital walking tours to maintain the global audience's interest towards the destination. However, I am sure many would agree that the satisfaction derived from following the digital walking tours is not the same as physically being there," observes Ab Razak.



Tour Guide  
Chin Poh Chin



Tour guides learn hands-on about how to develop specialised tours for Muslim tourists in the ITC Muslim-Friendly Tour Guides course.  
Picture by Chin Poh Chin



Tour Guide Deanna  
Chin Mee Lian



The ITC Muslim-Friendly Tour Guide course is an eye-opening course on the Muslim tourist market potential, needs and requirements.  
Picture by Chin Poh Chin

## MUSLIM MARKET POTENTIAL

Deanna notes that Islamic tourism is a rapidly growing market. Muslim citizens have a global population of 1.8 billion across Muslim-majority countries that includes Indonesia, Malaysia and the Middle East. By 2030, it is estimated that Muslims would make up 26.5% of the world's population. According to the study by CrescentRating, there are approximately 1 billion Muslims under the age of 30, whereby 60% of them form the Millennial group. A parallel research by MasterCard in 2017 estimates that the total expenditure in Islamic tourism across the world could surpass the United States by a hundred billion in 2025; the overall Muslim Travel segment is projected to reach USD300 billion by 2026 globally. This comprehensive report assesses the potential of the Muslim Millennials Market for tourism destinations, tour operators, airlines and the tourism industry stakeholders, attesting to the significance of Islamic tourism.

Though the terminology of Islamic tourism has no clear boundaries, Malaysia shapes its own Islamic tourism by upholding Islamic values without erasing Malaysia's distinctiveness and originality. As an extension to this, Islamic Tourism Centre defines Islamic Tourism as a sphere of interest, activity or event that is related to travel, tourism and hospitality to explore Islamic history, arts, culture, heritage, economy, education, health and wellness, business, civilisation, signs of the Almighty's creations, and/or to experience the Islamic way of life in conformity with the Islamic faith. Deanna believes the country has what it takes to remain as a leading Muslim-friendly destination featuring Muslim-friendly hotels, Halal food, prayer facilities, family-friendly entertainment, safety and security. "Malaysia has made a great effort in developing its Islamic tourism by organising the first OIC Global Islamic Tourism Conference and Exhibition in 2010, followed by events such as Islamic Fashion Festival (IFF), Halal Showcase, and World Islamic Tourism Mart. The country has been hosting various regional seminars on Islamic tourism as well," she recounts.

Likewise, Poh Chin has been witnessing the Muslim market's fast growth in the last decade, especially from China, Indonesia, Thailand, America and Europe, which are home to affluent Muslims who have the means to travel and speak non-Arabic languages like Chinese and English. In fact, Ab Razak gauges that the Chinese Muslim market

holds such a large potential and can be easily tapped by Malaysia considering the nation is Muslim-friendly (Halal food and Islamic facilities are widely available) and provides Malaysian tour guides who are fluent in Mandarin.

When evaluating the global Muslim market, tourism destinations need not overstretch themselves by casting their nets worldwide but instead concentrate on selected source markets, especially those closer to home. "There are about 1.9 billion global Muslim population worldwide, definitely a big market for Malaysia. In 2019, Malaysia received RM86.14 billion in tourist receipts on the back of 26.1 million tourist arrivals. Out of this, 17.88 million arrivals were from ASEAN alone. When we zoom in, Indonesia on its own has 229 million Muslims out of 276.4 million population. Even if we focus and strategise to invite only Muslims from Indonesia, this is already a huge market to venture into. It should be fruitful for Malaysia to focus on meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (MICE) because Indonesian corporations love to tour Malaysia. It is cheaper for them to do so since air tickets to other destinations within Indonesia can be more expensive than visiting Malaysia," Raja Mohd Hafiz analyses.

Apart from Muslims in Indonesia and the ASEAN region, Raja Mohd Hafiz prompts the Malaysian tourism industry players to not forget Muslim tourists from other parts of the world, for example Saudi Arabia with its 31.9 million Muslim population, Morocco (37.93 million) and Algeria (41.2 million Muslims). "It is worth noting that Saudi Arabian tourists – though they only registered 121,444 tourist arrivals to Malaysia in 2019 – contribute high tourism receipts for the country, with Saudi families staying longer, between seven and 14 days, and spending more. As long as we cater to their needs, two weeks' vacation in Malaysia is nothing. They might even stay longer," he explains.

Raja Mohd Hafiz further cites the French-speaking and Arabic-speaking tourists from Northern Africa as target markets. "They love Malaysia because food is easy. They also love the night markets, the beaches, and the availability of Muslim-friendly facilities. We have guides who speak Arabic, and some can even speak French," he claims.

When it comes to promoting Malaysia to the global Muslim market, Deanna is confident that it can be done easily due to the country's appeal. "Given its central location bordering Thailand, the South China Sea, Brunei and Indonesia, it is hard to resist. Malaysia has mixture of cultures and ethnicities. One can explore colonial architectures amidst



Tour Guide Raja Mohd Hafiz bin Raja Nasharuddin with guests from Middle East

thriving modern cities, relax on the beautiful and unspoilt beaches. For the more adventurous, they can go diving, hiking through lush green jungles, exploring caves and more. The possibility is endless," she raves. Deanna proposes that Malaysia should continue banking on its multiculturalism and the different ethnic groups living in harmony, culturally enriching one another: "Malaysia is a hub for biodiversity, history and culture. We could even speak by stringing English, Tamil, Chinese and Malay words in one sentence. Malaysians are united not by blood but by behaviour and attitude when we address any of our elders as 'Uncle' or 'Aunt'. It has enthralling stories and folklores, alongside rich cuisines that stimulate your taste buds, making it fascinating and memorable. After all, Malaysia is Truly Asia," she deduces.

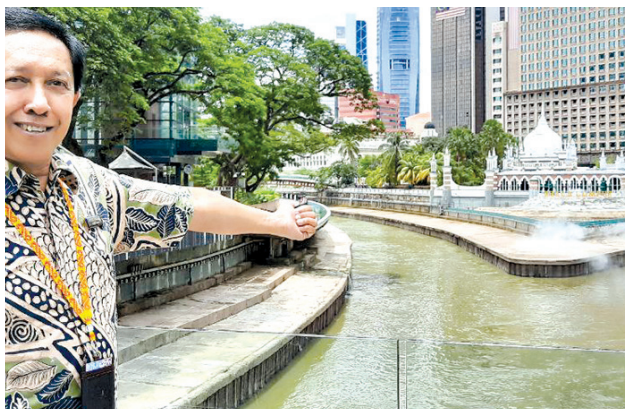
## OPTING FOR MFTG CERTIFICATION

"When ITC announced they were organising a Muslim-Friendly Tour Guide training programme, it caught my curiosity at that time and I was eager to find out what it was all about. My initial intention was to learn and understand about this new segment in the tourism industry," recalls Deanna.

"The MFTG certification opens my eyes to the fact that Islamic tourism is not defined as just visiting mosques alone, but include activities relating to nature, culture or creativity that is acceptable in Islam. Islamic tourism is not just limited to religious tourism but comprises tours based on *Shariah* (Islamic law) and Islamic values," she adds.

During the MFTG training by ITC, Deanna confesses that she learned the most important components of Islamic tourism such as Halal hotel compliance, Halal food, Halal packaging, Halal transportation and Halal finance. "Halal means lawful or permitted as opposed to *Haram* (forbidden), thereby the item must be good for the human being, socially responsible, and fit for consumption, processing, producing, cleansing, making, manufacturing, and storing in line with the *Shariah*. As such, it is imperative for me to deliver proper requirements for Muslim travellers," she expounds.

"The training has enlightened me on the basic knowledge pertaining to the principles of *Hukm Taklifi* (law that governs the conduct of Muslims by way of command or option) that has five elements: *Wajib* (obligatory), such as five-time prayer or fasting in the month of Ramadhan; *Mandub* (encouraged to be practiced but not punishable if not performed), for example giving charity, and *Duha* prayer; *Haram*



Tour Guide Ab Razak bin Abu Bakar





As a non-Muslim tour guide, the ITC Muslim-Friendly Tour Guide course really opened up my understanding and perception in handling this niche tourist market and in providing Muslim-friendly tourism services in compliance with Shariah laws," said Chin Poh Chin (second from left).

(impermissible and must be avoided) for instance consuming usury (*Riba*) or not respecting parent; *Makruh* (disapproved but not as severe as *haram*) like swearing; and *Mubah* (neutral or permitted), for example eating at night during Ramadhan. These fundamental principles have significantly challenged my core idea as a guide; now I realise that I must take cognisance of Muslims' compulsory (*wajib*) practices when travelling. Therefore, as a tourist guide, there's a paradigm shift in my guiding practice; one has to become more aware and sensitive within this framework in order to have a successful assignment," Deanna elaborates at length.

Besides Deanna, Poh Chin also benefits from the MFTG training. "As a certified Muslim-friendly tour guide, I'm more aware of the special needs of Muslim travellers and how to cater for them from culinary to religious requirements. ITC's training equips me with the essential knowledge in dealing with Muslim travellers and how to design the itinerary following their needs in terms of Halal food, location of mosques for prayer, and things to avoid. It helps me to come up with niche offerings like 'ladies only' tours, which Muslim tourists may find appealing," she declares.

Raja Mohd Hafiz is enthusiastic about the Muslim market potential. "The interest has always been there, and the MFTG certification couldn't have arrived at a more suitable timing. I was and am still interested in Islamic tourism because the world needs to know to what extent a tour guide can accommodate the needs of Muslim travellers, no matter where they come from. We are ready, and we welcome all Muslim tourists to Malaysia," Raja Mohd Hafiz assures. "From the MFTG training delivered by ITC, we learned about the basic needs of Muslim tourists, from Halal meals to prayer rooms or halls. In addition, we learned that the Malaysia 'Halal' certification does not only mean 'Permissible' in Islam. It means the food must be of good quality (*halalan toyyiban*). The training exposes us to Islamic touristic spots and how to present these spots in better light. For example, we were trained to take tourists to landmark mosques in Kuala Lumpur, but we don't just leave them there. They'd learn more about Islam in Malaysia and what do the mosques mean to the local community, including their history and architecture. Combining sights and sounds with excellent guided tour equals to a fantastic Islamic tourism experience," he exclaims.

By the same token, the MFTG certification allows Ab Razak to expand his business and clientele. "Having been certified as a Muslim-Friendly Tour Guide (MFTG) by ITC for almost four years, I had the opportunity to serve the Muslim tourists from Egypt, Turkey and the

Levant before the COVID-19 pandemic hit global tourism. Since I was part of the original batch of guides who worked with Kuala Lumpur City Hall to offer walking tours and heritage trails in the city, I plan to bring more Muslim tourists along such tours and trails, especially around Kampung Baru, so that they can immerse themselves in the destination more intimately," he discloses.

"ITC has done a good job in organising useful seminars and courses to upskill the tour guides, for instance how to administer first aid and perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). The training received from ITC makes the guides, especially the non-Muslims, more sensitive towards the needs of the Muslim tourists or travellers such as food requirements and prayer times," praises Ab Razak.

As an organisation, ITC is approachable, actively listens to and works closely with the actual people who are on the ground, in this case the guides and industry players. "I hope ITC can hold more dialogue sessions between ITC and the tour guides because such sessions are productive. ITC should become the conduit where tourist guides and industry players can channel their views to mosques or Islamic tourism attractions on how to improve themselves," Ab Razak suggests.

Possessing the MFTG certificate makes the tourist guides hopeful of the future as well. "Though the number of tourists dwindles due to the pandemic, many international Muslims still voice their interest to visit Penang when the situation improves and fully vaccinated tourists are allowed to enter Malaysia," adds Poh Chin.

The similar tune is echoed by Ab Razak. "I have been receiving many queries from overseas, especially from the Netherlands and Middle East, on when the Malaysian borders are going to open again so that tourists can return, which up to this point, is still uncertain. It is heartening to learn that many overseas tourists are looking forward to visiting Malaysia once it is safe to do so, indicating that Malaysia still holds its allure as an attractive tourism destination," he concurs.

In short, the MFTG certification enriches the tour guides intellectually due to the depth of knowledge gained about Islam and economically because they can tap on the large Muslim market potential. The MFTG training programme inadvertently moulds the guides into little ambassadors of Islamic tourism, irrespective of their background or creed.



Old Palace of Seri Menanti is the tallest timber palace in Malaysia with over 100 years of history.





The Masjid Putra, commonly known as the 'Pink Mosque', is one of the most iconic structures in Putrajaya that often excite architecture lovers.

Based on her newfound knowledge of Muslim travellers' needs, Deanna painstakingly ensures that her Muslim guests' accommodation has signage indicating the *Qiblah* (direction pointing to Mecca), *Sajadah* (Muslim prayer mat), and bidet in the bathroom or at least water hose next to the commode for easy washing. When taking her Muslim guests on tours, she keeps track of the prayer times and where they could comfortably perform their prayers. She is also mindful not to expose them to non-halal activities like gambling or drinking, and the places should be safe and secure, free from Islamophobia, and foster interaction with the locals. If her Muslim guests travel to Malaysia during Ramadhan (Muslim fasting month), she makes it a point to provide her guests with *sahur* (pre-dawn meal as preparation for fasting during the day) and dates alongside proper meal when it is time for *iftar* (breaking of fast at dusk).

Meanwhile, Ab Razak tries to follow his clients' interests as much as possible when they follow the package tour itinerary. "For example, if they were interested to witness the architecture of the mosques in Malaysia, I will arrange for them to visit sites that are quintessentially Malaysian such as **Masjid Jamek** and **the National Mosque** in Kuala Lumpur; including **Masjid Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin**, popularly known as the Iron Mosque, in Putrajaya. International Muslim tourists are more interested to explore landmarks that specifically represent the Malaysian character, style and identity," he affirms.

## THE GUIDES' UNIQUE SELLING POINTS

040 When it comes to serving the Muslim tourists, Raja Mohd Hafiz drills in the point that Muslims all over the world essentially seek tour destinations that fulfil their travel needs and they are willing to invest their money to have their vacation at touristic spots that are not only worth their time but pleasurable in accordance with Islamic values. "Based on my experience, Muslim travellers are mostly families who want a safe, enjoyable and relaxing tours. Our guarantee that their basic Islamic needs like abiding to prayer times, availability of prayer rooms and Halal meals will persuade them to stay longer and even visit Malaysia again in the future. By meeting their needs, they would pass the good news about Malaysia being a Muslim-friendly destination to their friends. Nothing beats 'word-of-mouth' marketing," he beams.

"As Muslim-friendly tourist guides, we cater to their prayer times and where they could conduct mandatory prayers. In addition, we explain to them about Islam in Malaysia, its sights, significant and historical places related to Islam, including attending Islamic talks and lectures at mosques in Malaysia if they were inclined to that," reveals Raja Mohd Hafiz.

He continues to explain that advising where to obtain Halal meal is a must, even though Malaysia is a Muslim majority country and finding Halal meal is not a problem. "Considering Malaysia is a multi-religious society, we dispense guidance on which good Halal food to be enjoyed and where. We even have a list of Muslim-friendly hotels where the pools are segregated by gender; based on time or location. If they want exclusivity, Muslim couples can enjoy in privacy by booking selected accommodations in Malaysia that come with en-suite pools," Raja Mohd Hafiz discloses.



The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia houses more than seven thousand exceptional artefacts of Islamic civilization, from Asia and the Middle East.



## WHERE MUSLIM TOURISTS SHOULD GO IN MALAYSIA

Starting with Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur, Deanna encourages first-time Muslim tourists to Malaysia to begin at the iconic **Petronas Twin Towers**, which represent the combination of modern technology and Islamic symbolism through their steel and glass façade designed to resemble motifs found in Islamic art. One of the towers is fully owned by Malaysia's national petroleum company, PETRONAS, while the other is occupied by established international companies and their associates. At the base of the towers, travellers can find a world-class philharmonic hall, **Suria KLCC shopping centre**, an aquarium, and integrated transport facilities. Adjacent to these tallest twin towers in the world are the well-manicured **KLCC park** and accessible **As-Syakirin Mosque**. "This is the place where tourists can be entertained, whet their appetites, or just relax or enjoy the serene surroundings amidst a bustling city," she describes.

A stone's throw away from the PETRONAS Twin Towers is **Bukit Bintang**, which has a wide array of international Halal buffet and a myriad of cuisines, which should intrigue Muslim tourists because the area is replete with various Halal-certified Muslim-friendly restaurants that serve delicious international fare at affordable prices. Bukit Bintang retails international brands and local designers' goods too. Bargaining and haggling for cheaper prices might be possible, except at shops where prices are fixed. Late night shoppers might want to try the famous *teh tarik* while sitting down and mingling with the locals for a glimpse of Malaysian night life along **Jalan Alor**.

After exploring Kuala Lumpur, Deanna brings her Muslim guests to Malaysia's seat of administration, **Putrajaya**, around 30 kilometres away. Putrajaya – a manifestation of Malaysia's ambition as a progressive Muslim-majority nation – is a model city that works in tandem with the natural environment based on two main concepts: a city in the garden, and intelligent city with indigenous identity. Numerous inspiringly designed edifices, scenic bridges, assiduous gardens, and expansive boulevards grace Putrajaya. One landmark that she never fails to introduce to her guests is the pink-hued **Putra Mosque**, the first ever structure to be completed in Putrajaya overlooking the Putrajaya Lake on the core island.



Petronas Twin Tower during the night and during the day  
(Images by Deanna Chin)



Bukit Bintang in the evening (Image by Deanna Chin)



Putra Mosque during the day (Image by Deanna Chin)



Down south from Putrajaya is the state of Negeri Sembilan, which Raja Mohd Hafiz fervently promotes to Muslim tourists, particularly **Seri Menanti** and **Kuala Pilah**, where foodies can savour mouth-watering Negeri Sembilan dishes like *masak lemak lado api ayam* atau *daging salai* (smoked chicken or beef cooked in coconut milk laced with bird's eye chilli). The crown jewel of the area is the **Old Palace of Seri Menanti**, the tallest timber palace in Malaysia with over 100 years of history, erected using local timber without the use of nails. Another attraction that Muslim tourists should not miss in Negeri Sembilan is the **Army Museum at Port Dickson**, possibly one of the best museums in Malaysia, where a group of visitors can hire a local army personnel as an in-house guide. "The museum boasts real weapons, intriguing history and cool replica of a Communist tunnel," he expresses excitedly.

As tourists proceed to the north of Peninsular Malaysia, they will encounter the cosmopolitan state of Penang. "Muslim travellers have been coming to the Malay Archipelago for many centuries. As part of Malaysia Truly Asia, they are bound to discover that Penang has it all," touts Poh Chin. Among the attractions that Muslim travellers should explore in Penang is **The Street of Harmony** in **George Town**, where different religions co-exist with the **Masjid Kapitan Keling** as the area's most prominent landmark, reflecting the Muslims' high level of tolerance and understanding towards others and how harmony is maintained for all. The legendary **Nasi Kandar** (northern Malaysian rice-based dish popularised by Tamil Muslims) also originated from this street.



The Army Museum Port Dickson celebrates Malaysia's military achievements throughout history (Image by Army Museum Port Dickson)



The funicular railway that brings travellers up to Penang Hill, the oldest British hill station in Southeast Asia



Sarawak Cultural Village celebrates local ethnic groups through longhouse replicas, activities & cultural performances

Poh Chin recommends **Penang Hill** and **Habitat** as well. Penang Hill's relatively cooler temperature up at the station 800 metres above sea level is a welcome respite from the humid George Town. The ride along the one-mile-long funicular rail line (longest and steepest in Asia) never fails to impress every visitor. The main draw is the hills' pristine surroundings and the panoramic view of Penang from above. At the summit, there is a small mosque, including delicious halal food spread, interspersed with the occasional delightful presence of squirrels and monkeys. Conversely, the northern coast of **Batu Ferringhi** and nature-themed parks like **Entopia**, **Tropical Spice Garden**, **Tropical Fruit Farm**, **The Escape**, and **Penang National Park** feature unrivalled sea and tropical jungle immersion experience in a short span of time and distance.

Ab Razak strongly feels **Sabah** and **Sarawak** need to be more exposed to the global Muslim travellers so that they can obtain a more comprehensive picture about Malaysia. It is a way to equitably disperse tourists throughout the country, giving the Muslim tourists more choices on where to go and what to visit within Malaysia, especially among those who have already explored the Klang Valley and Penang. Places like **Kuching** and **Kota Kinabalu**, including to some extent **Bario**, can be offered to the Muslim tourists to further enrich their experience in Malaysia.

To him, **Kuching** is excellent for the uninitiated Muslim tourists to start exploring Malaysian Borneo. Attractions like the **Sarawak Museum**, **Sarawak Cultural Village**, **Sarawak River cruise**, the **Old State Mosque**, **Jong's Crocodile Farm**, **Semenggoh** to witness orangutan and many forms of indigenous wildlife, **Bako National Park**, and **mangrove cruise**, including dining at popular **seafood** joints, are just some of delights that await Muslim travellers to Kuching.