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AN IDEAL SHARI'A FOR BUSINESS & LIFESTYLE



# @Halal



## We Are Unique

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## Ready to bounce back

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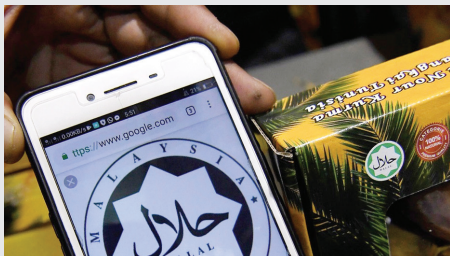
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## Opportunities open up

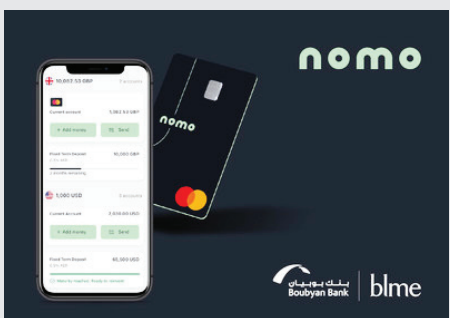
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It's the bank's first fully digitally Islamic saving account

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# Here to stay

**W**ITH the global growth of the Muslim population, Islamic Tourism is undoubtedly a promising segment. Many countries are now working to gain a more significant share of the pie by introducing many Muslim-friendly products and facilities at their attraction sites.

As the pandemic has made travellers more careful about their choices, this Muslim-friendly segment, which has always prioritised hygiene and cleanliness, will be here to stay.

But how would destinations prepare themselves to cater to these people is another question and requires a more comprehensive discussion.

Having the most recognised halal standards globally, Malaysia is a leading example of Muslim-friendly tourism.

Being a multiracial country with a majority Muslim population, Muslim travellers who come to this country can name every cuisine they crave without compromising the consumption of halal food.

Even mosques and prayer rooms can be found everywhere. On top of that, most of these mosques offer tourists a package of exciting stories and stunning architecture!

Despite the pandemic, Malaysia was named the Best Destination for Muslim Travellers by the MasterCard-CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2021.

It proves Malaysia's commitment to champion this segment of Muslim-friendly tourism. However, it should not be too comfortable in this game as the other players are aggressively catching up.

As the international border remains closed, industry players have to develop more innovative products and services to appeal to the domestic market. And eventually the international travellers.



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## the team

*Publisher*  
**KAY MATHY**  
kaymathy@revonmedia.com

### EDITORIAL

**JOHNSON FERNANDEZ**  
*Managing Editor*  
johnson@revonmedia.com

**CHARLES RAJ**  
*Editorial Consultant*  
charles@revonmedia.com

**KHIRTINI K. KUMARAN**  
*Writer*  
khirtini@revonmedia.com

**FATIH AH MANAF**  
*Writer*  
fatihah@revonmedia.com

**AINUR ALISA AMINUDIN**  
*Writer*  
alisa@revonmedia.com

**A.AZAM**  
*Creative Director*  
a.azam@revonmedia.com

*Strategic Advisor*  
**HASNIZA RAMLI**  
hasniza@globalhaltech.com

*Technical Advisor*  
**NOR AMIN MOHD NOOR**  
amin@globalhaltech.com

### SALES AND MARKETING DEPARTMENT

*Media Consultant*  
**SAHANA**  
sahana@revonmedia.com

*Media Associate*  
**Hash Plus Media**  
marketing@hashplusmedia.com

### MULTI MEDIA

**MAEZ KONG MEI SIM**

*Published by*  
**Revon Media Sdn Bhd**  
Revongen Corporation Centre  
Level 17, Top Glove Tower,  
No.16, Persiaran Setia Dagang,  
Setia Alam, Seksyen U13,  
40170 Shah Alam,  
Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.  
Tel: +603-3359 1166  
Fax: +603-3358 0303

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No. 16, Jalan IDA 1A,  
Industri Desa Aman, Kepong,  
52200 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.  
Tel: +603-6279 9474 /+603-6263 1856  
Fax: +603-6280 6802

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

In 2021, ITC was named the Strategic Business Alliance Award recipient at The Brand-Laureate 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 the 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 strengthening its efforts to be a prime mover and leading institution to ensure Malaysia is at the forefront of MFTH.

In an exclusive interview with @Halal, Dato' Dr Mohmed Razip Hasan, the Director-General of Islamic Tourism Centre, speaks on the development and potential of Mosque Tourism.

## What are the objectives of Mosque Tourism?

First of all, I wish to thank @Halal magazine for giving Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) this opportunity to share with readers about Mosque Tourism.

In the National Tourism Policy 2020-2030, which is our 10-year masterplan for the overall tourism industry in Malaysia, one of the key strategies is to enhance demand sophistication. It means nurturing demand for in-depth travel experiences in Malaysia and catering to customised travel needs to entice high-value tourists to stay longer and spend more.

Within that premise, ITC has actively thought through, innovated, and developed new products suitable to Muslim tourists coming to Malaysia based on their trends and preferences. One of them is Mosque Tourism.

Thus, to ITC the objective of Mosque Tourism is simple and focused i.e., to leverage the best available product that is closest to the minds and hearts of Muslim travellers. This is not a new product as mosques have always been part and parcel of tourism products and attractions in the tour itineraries or packages, especially in many top Muslim holiday destinations, including Malaysia. For example, we can see Sultanahmet Mosque (Blue Mosque) in Istanbul, Turkey; Al Azhar Mosque in Cairo, Egypt; Sultan Mosque in Singapore; Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei; Al Hilal Mosque in Jakarta, Indonesia; and Masjid Negara in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

To me, the word mosque or in Bahasa Melayu known as Masjid is synonymous with Muslims. A mosque is significant and unique to Islam from 1400 years ago and now. It is the intention and hope of Muslims to have the opportunity to visit three well known grand mosques in Islam namely Masjidil Haram in Mekah al Mukaramah, Masjid Nabawi in Madinah al Munawarah and Masjidil Aqsa in Baitulmaqdis.

If you notice, there are many mosques in Muslim countries and non-Muslim countries that have become an attraction in themselves, drawing interest from both Muslims and non-Muslims alike who appreciate the unique

# A compelling product

Mosque Tourism was thought through for Muslim tourists coming to Malaysia



ITC 1

design and history of these houses of worship. Adding to their appeal as a tourist attraction are the surrounding natural landscapes, lakes, heritage, unique communities, authentic cuisine, and other local attractions within the area.

In recent years, ITC has keenly observed the growing interest in Mosque Tourism. Recognising this trend and growing interest, ITC saw the demand for mosque tours to be conducted in a systematic, tourist-friendly way and for tourist-related facilities to serve these needs better.

As such, in the context of Islamic Tourism, our objectives for Mosque Tourism are to present Malaysia's diverse culture, historical background, and Islamic identity through an appreciation for the architectural designs of mosques and their role in our society in a well-managed, innovative, and informative way. As I said earlier, mosques represent the lifestyle of the Muslim community of a destination

**One of the Mosque Tourism development activities in Sarawak attended by YB Dato' Sri Nancy Shukri, Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, along with Datuk Wira Dr Noor Zari Hamat, Secretary General MOTAC, and Dato' Dr Mohmed Razip Hasan, Director-General of ITC, at Masjid Darul Iman, Sadong Jaya, Sarawak.**



**Dato' Dr. Mohmed Razip Haji Hasan, Director-General, Islamic Tourism Centre pays a courtesy visit to Datuk Abdul Aziz Jusoh, Director-General of JAKIM, for discussions on Mosque Tourism and other matters pertaining to Islamic Tourism development.**

through its activities, so it is one of the best ways for tourists to learn about the locals and how they live.

Our efforts under the Mosque Tourism initiative are to expand the role of the mosque not only as a place of worship but also as an Islamic tourism product that would allow more people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to discover Malaysia and our diverse population, as well as how it all makes an impact upon our unique Islamic identity and way of life. While, from an economic perspective, this move will insha Allah provide a new source of income to the mosque and its surrounding community through the selling of merchandise and Islamic range of products and services. Some mosques have their cooperatives and commercial wings. ITC is confident, insha Allah, that with the right strategy and commitment, Mosque Tourism will bring tourists as buyers/consumers to the mosques while promoting the mosques as an institution of community excellence.

## What are some of ITC's efforts to develop Mosque Tourism?

I wish to recall the journey that ITC has taken to introduce Mosque Tourism as a niche product. Alhamdulillah, ITC facilitated the way and played a vital role in the development of Mosque Tourism by first recognising the opportunity, then sharing the importance of



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



tourism to society and community, and engaging with the relevant parties to inspire them of this idea. We connected with mosques, religious departments, and tourism industry players to share ideas and encourage their participation throughout the process.

One of our engagements was organising the inaugural National Imam Roundtable Conference in 2016 to raise awareness on the growing interest in Mosque Tourism. Among the resolutions passed at the conference were:

- to allow and facilitate mosque visits by non-Muslims under proper guidance
- to ensure the comfort and safety of all visitors to the mosque
- Two more Imam Roundtable Conferences in Terengganu and Penang were followed up in 2017 and 2019 respectively, to enhance the resolutions further.

The second effort by ITC in the development of Mosque Tourism was through a study that ITC commissioned in 2018 entitled, "Profiling of Mosques with Tourism-Related Attractions within the Tourism Corridors in Malaysia." The study analysed and evaluated the current status and prospects of Mosque Tourism in Malaysia. The study also helped ITC identify mosques nationwide that possess the potential to be included in the Mosque Tourism programme.

#### **How does ITC plan to push and promote this segment of tourism at both domestic and international levels?**

ITC's efforts in this area comprise strengthening the supply side while pushing for the demand of Mosque Tourism. We can't emphasise enough how important it is for us to leverage partnerships and collaborations with industry players and stakeholders to make this happen. Alhamdulillah, we've received tremendous support from everyone to make this possible.

Much of our work is first to raise awareness for Islamic Tourism's potentials and the many opportunities for Malaysia to tap into it. Through our training programmes and webinars, we seek to strengthen and motivate the industry players. This is especially important now when the pandemic has impacted the industry, and many are beginning to lose hope. We continue to share with industry players that there are opportunities in Islamic Tourism and that the Muslim tourist market is something to be looked into.

Regarding Mosque Tourism, we have collaborated with the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia - JAKIM). We organised three National Imam Round Table Conferences to encourage Imams and mosque committee members to include Mosque Tourism as part of their offerings and to look into new product development.

I'm also pleased to note that ITC is also working with State tourism boards to create awareness on Mosque Tourism. To quote a few, we collaborate with Tourism Selangor on developing Mosque Tourism packages. They will soon be launching Muslim-friendly Excursion Tours that feature visits to historic mosques in the Abode of Sincerity. Similarly, we will also work on Mosque Tourism trail packages with Tourism Perak soon and collaborations with other states, including Melaka, Kelantan and Terengganu, Johor, Pahang, and Sarawak.

In addition, ITC is also working with several Government agencies such as Department of National Heritage, National Archives of Malaysia, National Library of Malaysia, along with universities and academia for research and literature on mosques.

I am of the view that working with the media is not an option but essential. Thus, we also help to provide media exposure to these mosques through our collaboration with the media on educational and familiarisation trips. In addition, product and technical tours of mosques are included in relevant courses conducted by ITC for local and international



**I wish to recall the journey that ITC has taken to introduce Mosque Tourism as a niche product. Alhamdulillah, ITC facilitated the way and played a vital role in the development of Mosque Tourism by first recognising the opportunity, then sharing the importance of tourism to society and community, and engaging with the relevant parties to inspire them of this idea.**

participants. These courses are now taught online, so such mosque tours are also to be done virtually.

Other promotional efforts done by ITC are through our collaborations with various mosques in the Klang Valley to organise the "Mosque Open day" programmes. In addition, ITC also contributes assistance in the form of providing tourists robes to various mosques in Malaysia, including Masjid Abidin, Trengganu; Masjid Kristal, Terengganu; Masjid Muhammadiyah, Perak; and Masjid Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, Selangor. I am excited about the potential of Mosque Tourism and its economic and cultural impacts on the community.

#### **What are some aspects that become the selling points of participating mosques?**

Some unique examples are the Masjid Muhammadiyah (Masjid Cina) in Perak; Masjid Kampung Kling in Melaka; Masjid Sultan Alauddin in Jugra, Kuala Langat, Selangor; and Masjid Zahir, Alor Setar, Kedah, just to name a few.

But the attraction of mosques goes beyond their beautiful physical attributes. Mosques are also an excellent place for tourists to learn about the culture of the local Muslim community. In the pre-COVID days, visitors could experience activities organised by the mosque committee or the local community. Among the popular ones are activities related to celebrations such as Eid and Ramadan.

In addition, mosques are seen as sacred places for worship, cleansing and spiritual development. These aspects are also appealing to get the Ummah closer to a mosque for mind and soul development, to promote togetherness and unity, love and caring, as well as to nurture an appreciation for knowledge and learning, Islamic history, heritage, and civilisation, which are reflected in every aspect of the mosque.

#### **How does ITC assist participating mosques in promoting and strengthening their Mosque Tourism programme?**

Being an agency that aims to develop Islamic Tourism through training, capacity building,

research, industry development, and branding, ITC provides training to equip the existing in-house tour guides or coordinators with a proper understanding of Mosque Tourism in Malaysia. Topics covered include soft skills and technical training on communications and storytelling, digital technology and others.

Mosque Tourism is an opportunity for local authorities to work together with the mosque and the nearby tourist attractions, local community, hotels, cafes and restaurants and other tourism-related operators to showcase the local area for tourism development. We hope to have this opportunity to collaborate more with mosque administrators and tourism industry practitioners in the future.

Besides this, we also utilise our social media platforms to provide publicity and exposure to mosques as tourist attractions.


#### **What are your thoughts on the potential of Mosque Tourism in Malaysia?**

Mosque Tourism can position itself as a key tourist attraction in the development of Malaysia's Islamic Tourism landscape and create economic benefits for all. The consumer base is vast because it is an attraction to the Muslim tourist population and non-Muslims everywhere. Furthermore, Mosque Tourism involves participation from everyone -- tour guides, transportation service providers, the hotels and resorts located near the mosque, the museums and other tourist attractions nearby, the travel agents, the local community -- and so the economic benefits also cascade down to them. In short, I can say that Mosque Tourism is an essential pillar in Islamic Tourism and Insha Allah will be more visible and recognised strongly. It has its ecosystem and supply chain.

Malaysia can leverage its unique position as an Islamic country with a multiracial, multi-faith population to attract visitors. We have a unique narrative about our diverse population, yet peaceful society of various cultures and races. I think people are interested to know how we can manage that -- how Malaysia can retain its Islamic identity within this rich tapestry of culture and heritage, and in fact, how those distinct characteristics have lent themselves to nurturing a very special way of life in Malaysia. It's manifested in the architecture and location of our mosques, for example. In Melaka, there is a street called Jalan Tokong, which the locals call the "Street of Harmony" due to the three places of worship for three different religions, i.e. the Kampung Kling Mosque, the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, and the Sri Poyyatha Vinayagar Moorthi Temple.

Also, due to all our races intermingling together, the Malaysian Muslims have their unique way of Eid Open House traditions and celebrating religious events and exceptional food and dressing -- all these arouse curiosity and appeal to visitors in the way Islam is practised here in Malaysia. It promotes just, love, respect and harmony.

So yes, Mosque Tourism has huge potential, and the way to leverage that is for the mosques involved to understand tourism and culture, the concept of service delivery, conservation and sustainability, public relations, the provision of touristic facilities, and to have an awareness of the opportunities to expand beyond providing worship services.

In this aspect, ITC's role is to help inspire them and share with them the opportunities out there in tourism, which we implement through our training courses and industry development efforts. Our efforts are also targeted to the entire tourism industry players, including the tour guides, the travel agents, the hoteliers, the local community because tourism is an interconnected industry where everyone can take part and everyone gains. In the spirit of Malaysia Prihatin, let's join hands, minds, and efforts, to develop and promote Mosque Tourism as an essential tourism product for Malaysia. Insha Allah we succeed. Wassalam. Thank you. 



# Unity amidst diversity

Chinese Muslim Mosque Ipoh highlights Malaysia's multicultural society

BY FATIHAH MANAF

**A**T FIRST glance, one might think that this building was another Buddhist temple in Ipoh.

“It doesn't look like a mosque. It looks like a temple,” said Dato' Dr Haji Fadzli Cheah Abdullah, describing the Muhammadiyah Mosque, also known as Chinese Muslim Mosque Ipoh.

The chairman of the mosque said the distinctive features of the Muhammadiyah Mosque aroused the curiosity of the people who pass by the place. Constructed in 2013, the mosque was officiated by Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, the Sultan of Perak.

The typical Chinese architecture, minarets and the 'ong' bright red colour make it hard for people to believe this building is a mosque as it does not have the typical dome-shaped architecture like other Malaysian mosques.

Haji Fadzli shared that ceramic tiles of the Muhammadiyah Mosque were imported from Longyan and were worth the investment as they look exceptionally shiny and beautiful after the rain.

“Our concept is 'mosque in the garden'. It is an open concept,” said Haji Fadzli, adding the objective of having Chinese architecture is to deliver the message that Islam is universal and does not belong to just one particular race.

In enabling the mosque tourism programme at Muhammadiyah Mosque, Haji Fadzli shared that the mosque has formed a tourism subcommittee and mobilised the committee members to welcome and engage with the visitors.

“We prepare jubah (robes) and headscarves for the non-Muslims, pamphlets on the mosque and Islam, as well as souvenirs. Our mosque is also disabled-friendly as it has a wheelchair ramp,” said the chairman.

## Promoting unity and universality

He then shared the renovation and extension plan for the mosque that had started last year but had to pause due to the pandemic.

He stated: “We have this plan to make this



Dato' Dr Haji Fadzli Cheah Abdullah



**We prepare jubah (robes) and headscarves for the non-Muslims, pamphlets on the mosque and Islam, as well as souvenirs. Our mosque is also disabled-friendly as it has a wheelchair ramp.”**

— Dr Haji Fadzli

mosque not just as a place for prayer but a place for many cultural activities.

“For instance, we have been having the Chinese New Year celebration. The Mooncake Festival is coming, but unfortunately, this year we cannot do it. We have the Mooncake Festival, we have the Lantern Procession, which we can't do.

“Also as a unity centre, we want to get people, all races, to come here and celebrate together with us and provide them with a

better understanding of Islam. Not we try to convert them, but we want people to understand what Islam is.

“We have an art gallery to depict the history of the mosque and the history of Islam in our new building.

“We are also thinking of having religious school and Chinese Muslim nursery,” shared the chairman, who is also a neurosurgeon by profession.

Haji Fadzli also revealed that the mosque had attracted several tourists, including the locals.

“There were tourists from Hong Kong, the United States, Australia, Taiwan, Japan and Europe,” said the chairman, noting an incident where a tourist group from Japan asked the bilal to show them how Muslims perform their prayer.

In promoting the mosque as a tourist destination, Haji Fadzli said the mosque worked closely with the State tourism department and travel & tour companies. 



BY FATIHAH MANAF

**F**EDERAL TERRITORY Mosque, located near Government Office Complex along Jalan Duta, was built between the year 1998 to the year 2000.

Officiated by the 12th Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin ibni Almarhum Syed Putra Jamalulail on Oct 25, 2000, the mosque shows a perfect combination of Ottoman Empire and Malay architecture.

“The Blue Mosque in Turkey influenced it,” said the Grand Imam of the Federal Territory Mosque, Ustaz Muhyiddin Aziz.

Visitors who step into the mosque will have the chance to witness the spectacular designs of its interior, which features stunning geometric patterns and alluring calligraphy.

They can also observe a hint of traditional Malay arts through the carvings on its wooden doors.

The mosque has 22 domes with turquoise-glazed tiles and a vast area of approximately 33 acres. It also provides other facilities other than the praying areas such as halls and hostels.

Muhyiddin said the mosque’s big hall could accommodate up to 1000 people and is usually used for seminars, while the smaller hall is usually used for wedding ceremonies.

“We also have hostels for visitors and guests such as Imams who come here during Ramadan. However, since the pandemic, we use this hostel as a temporary shelter for the victims of domestic violence.”

Despite being located in the centre of the busy city, the Federal Territory Mosque offers excellent scenery for visitors to enjoy. Dubbed as the Jewel of Kuala Lumpur, it is surrounded by a beautiful garden and pond.

### Social and welfare unit drives the mosque tour programme

The grand Imam shared the Federal Territory’s mosque tourism programme is under the mosque’s social and welfare unit. The unit has come out with a schedule for volunteers to entertain the tourists. According to Muhyiddin, these volunteers come from different backgrounds.

He said: “Some of them are freelancers and professionals, such as retired lawyers and engineers.

“The volunteers have their own room to discuss and do the briefing.”

The mosque admin equipped the volunteers with basic relevant training and brought them to visit other mosques to learn about the different experiences of the mosques.

Tourists who visit the Federal Territory Mosque are provided with appropriate attire and a brief explanation regarding the mosque.

“They can walk to the counter. We will bring them to the volunteers’ room and show them the mosque’s corporate video.”

Muhyiddin said the programme’s main objective was to create a harmonious society




## A fusion of Ottoman Empire and Malay architecture

Retired professionals are among mosque tour volunteers

and provide a better understanding of Islam. Moving forward, he wished to expand their target group of visitors.

He said: “Instead of waiting for people to come, we would like to invite them and expand our target market to the university students.

“I also want to strengthen the volunteer training, collaborate with relevant agencies and maybe do networking with mosques in other countries.”

The mosque had recently developed its volunteer system. Muhyiddin also acknowledged the lack and limited promotion of the Federal Territory Mosque and hoped to have a 3D tour for the mosque in the future. 



Ustaz Muhyiddin Aziz



**“We also have hostels for visitors and guests such as Imams who come here during Ramadan. However, since the pandemic, we use this hostel as a temporary shelter for the victims of domestic violence.” – Ustaz Muhyiddin Aziz**



hyiddin Aziz

# Knowledge exchange platform

Darul Fitrah Terengganu uses mosque tour guide programme to engage with non-Muslims



**They also wanted to know about the history of the mosque. Since Crystal Mosque is quite new, there's not much history about it. It is more about the ambience and architecture. But for the Abidin Mosque, it is very rich in history. They enjoyed listening to the history of the mosque."**



"They were curious. They got to see the 'akad' procedure during the solemnisation and really enjoyed it.

"They also wanted to know about the history of the mosque. Since Crystal Mosque is quite new, there's not much history about it. It is more about the ambience and architecture.

"But for the Abidin Mosque, it is very rich in history. They enjoyed listening to the history of the mosque," explained the president.

### Provide a better understanding of Islam

Norhana said the tourists were happy with the existence of tour guides and volunteers who were there to explain and answer their questions regarding the mosque.

"Sometimes these people have questions about Islam," added Norhana.

She said these non-Muslim visitors, especially Christians, found it interesting to learn what Islam and their religion had in common. She mentioned for them, the explanation and experience were such an eye-opener.


"So, this is an exciting experience for them to come and visit Malaysia and at the same time learn about Islam and Malaysian culture.

"Some of them were very surprised to know that our volunteers are university students. They thought Islam does not encourage education."

According to Norhana, these volunteers are trained and equipped with the information of mosque tours, the etiquette in handling and engaging with visitors, the history, function and background of the mosque and the frequently asked questions about Islam.

She also highlighted that the mosque tour programme was an exciting experience for her.

"Not only do the visitors learn from us, but we also learn from them," she said.

She then stated that Darul Fitrah Terengganu wishes to improve the awareness regarding the programme as she believed Malaysia have yet to acknowledge the importance of the mosque as a tourism product. 



Datin Norhana Ng Abdullah

BY FATIHAH MANAF

**I**SLAM IS often associated with some misconceptions, such as promoting violence and act of terrorism. Muslims have now come forward to address these false allegations. One way to do this is by having dialogues with non-Muslims and explaining the fundamental concept of Islam.

With more and more non-Muslim tourists choosing mosques as their destination to visit, Muslims or the mosque administration can use this opportunity to debunk their misunderstanding regarding this peace-loving religion.

According to the President of Darul Fitrah Terengganu, Datin Norhana Ng Abdullah, the mosque tour guide programme is the best platform to engage with these non-Muslim visitors.

The programme started in 2012. Darul Fitrah Terengganu has the experience of managing and conducting the programme at several mosques in Terengganu, such as Crystal Mosque, Abidin Mosque and Floating Mosque.

Norhana shared before the pandemic the programme had attracted numbers of

international tourists.

She said: "The tourists mostly are from China and France. From France, we have a good number of Muslims as well. They like to come because here they are free to wear hijab and get access to halal food.

"We also have the ones from England, the United States, New Zealand and Japan."

She revealed that most tourists were very excited during the tour and delighted whenever weddings took place at the mosque.







# 228-year-old white mosque

Abidin Mosque Kuala Terengganu retains traditional Malay carvings 'awan larat'

BY FATIHAH MANAF

**I**T IS hard to miss this unique white building when you visit Kuala Terengganu. Even from the gates, its features can awe passersby with its resemblance to the English colonial buildings and subtle trails of traditional Malay architecture.

Abidin Mosque, strategically located in the heart of Kuala Terengganu town, is the State's oldest royal mosque. Its building was initially built from cengal timber in 1793 during the reign of Sultan Zainal Abidin II and later replaced with red bricks during Sultan Omar's command.

Abidin Mosque, also known as Masjid Putih (White Mosque), is neighbour to Istana Maziah, the official palace of Sultan of Terengganu, Bukit Puteri (Princess Hill) and connected to the Terengganu Royal Mausoleum.

"The mosque has been here for 228 years, more or less," said Ustaz Wan Mohd Hazim Wan Mohd Hashim, Chief Executive of Abidin Mosque.

"Inside the mosque, you can see the doors embedded with some traditional Malay elements. The doors feature attractive carvings of Quranic verses and Arabic poems. The verses were carved with a floral motif called 'awan larat' (meandering clouds)."

According to Wan Mohd Hazim, this traditional Malay carving, commonly used in many Malay houses, can rarely be found in today's mosques. Being at the centre of the town, Abidin Mosque is also near other local attractions such as Pasar Payang, Chinatown, government offices and Shahbandar Jetty.

## Mosque Tour Guide Centre

Wan Mohd found a picture, dated June 1961, on the Internet, and it featured a Swedish

family with a background of Abidin Mosque. He opined the mosque had been long indirectly involved in mosque tourism. However, it was only in 2016 that Abidin Mosque officially launched its mosque tourism programme.

"The effort started in 2016 with the establishment of Mosque Tour Guide Centre (MTGC). This idea was supported by the President of Darul Fitrah Terengganu, Datin Norhana, who has more experience in handling such programmes," said the chief executive.

He shared the centre provided visitors with pamphlets, copies of the Quran with translations and modest attire. Upon reaching the



Ustaz Wan Mohd Hazim

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Ustaz Wan Mohd Hazim



MTGC office, the available committees would welcome the visitors and engage them with a tour of Abidin Mosque.


Aside from providing these facilities to enable mosque tourism, one of Abidin Mosque's efforts to strengthen the programme was by holding a seminar to educate Abidin Mosque community regarding the programme.

This seminar aimed to give a better understanding to the mosque community as some of them might have different perceptions of having non-Muslim visitors in the mosque.

"Some jamaah (mosque community) used to be a bit strict when it comes to having non-Muslims inside the mosque. They would ask if the visitors had washed their feet or not, which is unnecessary.

"We include this information and knowledge of having non-Muslim visitors in talks and sermons so they could understand better."

In terms of promotion, Wan Mohd Hazim said the centre would distribute flyers to nearby hotels and actively update its activities on Facebook.

He said: "Before the pandemic, we would also visit Chinatown and distribute gifts during Chinese New Year. We would also invite the non-Muslims for iftar during Ramadan." 



Abdul Halim Ali Hassan Council member of the Malaysian Institute of Planners (MIP) Director of City Expo Malaysia1.

# Emphasis on storytelling

Unique storylines are the essence of mosque tourism

BY FATIHAH MANAF

**M**OSQUES ARE an essential component in Malaysian neighbourhoods. These dome-shaped buildings can be seen in every part of the country. As it is common to have at least one mosque in every locality, the locals view these places merely as a place to perform prayers.

Going back to the mosque's history, Town Planner Abdul Halim Ali Hassan, the council member of the Malaysian Institute of Planners (MIP) shared that mosques have always played multiple roles aside from being a place of worship.

He said: "As with other worshipping places, mosques served as an area for community engagement, community gatherings,

a place to uphold justice whenever there's a dispute, educational centre and rehabilitation institute."

Unfortunately, mosques today are often viewed only as a praying area. According to Abdul Halim, Malaysian mosques should utilise and optimise space just as town planners do in city planning.

"Mosques, if they are fully utilised, can be one of the best tourist attractions, a must-visit in Malaysia," said the town planner.

However, it is pretty challenging to push the idea of mosque tourism, especially to the local communities, unless the mosques offer their visitors a package of exciting themes and history.

Abdul Halim opined that in making mosques a tourist attraction, Malaysia needed to learn from other countries. He believed that with the right concepts, themes, and storylines, this tourism segment could slowly

**The mosque can also highlight its heritage. For instance, when the Minangkabau people came to Negri Sembilan, this was the first mosque that they built."**

— Abdul Halim

gain traction in Malaysia.

"We can take a look at the Blue Mosque in Turkey. It is one of the most visited mosques in the world. If you go there, you can feel the grandeur of the building.

"The designs, domes and materials are all mesmerising. The historical part plays a role in attracting tourists," said Abdul Halim.

He then gave another example of Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi.

"In Sheikh Zayed, there are three selling points. One of them is that it has the world's largest carpet, which took them two years to finish. This is the kind of storyline that it promotes."

From a town planner's perspective, he believed it was important for mosques to have this storytelling element before inviting Muslim and non-Muslim tourists.

"If you have no story to share, it will be hard to appeal to these people," he added.

He shared that town planners will consider a few elements such as population catchment, mosque hierarchy, and geographical settings in mosque planning.

He emphasised the need for a mosque to optimise its role and space and act as a community centre surrounded by economic activities.

## Themes are essential for tourist attraction

Abdul Halim said the main objective of promoting mosques as a tourist attraction was to avoid people's misunderstandings about Islam. He said mosque was the best place for these people to learn about Islam, in the sense that it will help clear their misconceptions about the religion.

He said: "Some people misunderstood. They said Islam is promoting terrorism, aggressiveness and Muslims are too radical. The claims are untrue. Islam is a peaceful religion."

However, to push mosques as a tourist attraction, Abdul Halim highlighted that Malaysian mosques must have themes and offerings different from other mosques.


"In approaching the tourists, mosques must have their themes. For example, a mosque might have a historical theme, promoting itself as the oldest in the State or the country. It would be best if you had a storyline. Only then people will become interested in coming.

"The mosque can also highlight its heritage. For instance, when the Minangkabau people came to Negri Sembilan, this was the first mosque that they built.

"It can highlight the designs. Maybe the design and architecture are unique. It can be traditional Malay designs, Chinese designs etc.

"Or maybe it is the first green mosque which uses renewable energy," he added.

Abdul Halim also acknowledged one of the challenges to the Malaysian mosques in mosque tourism was the absence of expertise to advise them on the necessary actions.

"They have to get input from professionals, be it on the programme, initiatives, marketing. They cannot just rely on themselves to improve this segment." 



# Mosque

## as one-stop centre

Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia shares its insights and tour experience

BY FATIHAH MANAF

**A**S MALAYSIA starts to see the light at the end of the tunnel with its vaccination rollout speed, there seems to be some hope for the tourism sector.

Hospitality was one of the most affected sectors. However, domestic tourism will soon start welcoming Malaysians who have been eagerly waiting to go on vacations after being stuck at home for more than half a year.

The Islamic Tourism Centre Malaysia (ITC) is keen to push mosque tourism to drive the domestic tourism sector. The agency sees the potential of Malaysian mosques in providing a better understanding of Islamic heritage, arts and culture to the local tourists, both Muslims and non-Muslims.

With the high probability of international borders remaining closed for longer durations, the mosque tourism segment can attract more local tourists.

In Malaysia, the architectural styles and historical backgrounds of the mosques are diverse. Some of the designs are influenced by Malaysia's multicultural practices and inspired by other great mosques in different parts of the world.

Abdul Wahid Ibat, Assistant Manager at Marketing & Events Department of Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM), believed the mosque is a one-stop centre for learning about Islamic arts and culture.

He said, through this mosque tourism programme, non-Muslims will gain more access to the Muslim world.

Wahid shared: "There were people who came to us saying that in their country, Islam is pictured as poor and doesn't have that kind of beauty or treasures.

"But after they walked through the exhibition at our museum, they're surprised to discover that the Muslim world has this kind of beauty."

### Potential of mosque tourism in Malaysia

"Malaysia's mosque tourism will attract tourists because of the diversity and multi-racial communities. You can see mosques with Indian and Chinese influences in Malaysia.

"Mosque tourism has enormous potential. But again, we cannot rely on the mosque itself as their own committees manage some mosques. The government, particularly the ministry of tourism, can support these committees regarding the promotion and others.

"They probably can give some incentive packages to the mosques, provide their tour guide with training on how to handle and approach visitors who come from different backgrounds," said Wahid.

Giving an insight on how to engage and entertain the tourists during the mosque tourism programme, Wahid said it was impossible to control the group of visitors who come to the place.

Based on IAMM's experience, he said



**Mosque tourism has enormous potential. But again, we cannot rely on the mosque itself as their own committees manage some mosques. The government, particularly the ministry of tourism, can support these committees regarding the promotion and others."**

– Abdul Wahid Ibat

some of the visitors could be as young as kindergarten students who might need different approaches and engagement.

"So, what we do, besides having the exhibition, is to have various activities.

"For instance, when a family comes with two or three young kids, we will give them some worksheets. Maybe the parents can teach the kids to find the Islamic patterns on our exhibits during the tour," explained Wahid.

Abdul Wahid Ibat, Assistant Manager at Marketing & Events Department of Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM).



Mr Wahid Ibat



Mr Wahid Ibat

Assistant Manager, Marketing & Events Department  
Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM)

# Mosques as National Heritage

They must have historical importance and cultural associations

BY FATIHAH MANAF

**A**SIDE FROM being promoted as part of Islamic Tourism products, Malaysian mosques, with their distinctive architectural designs and unique history, can also be the key driver to the growth of cultural heritage tourism in the country.

A mosque that's gazetted as a national heritage will likely attract more tourists, which will help the mosque with its tourism programmes.

Mohd Azmi Mohd Yusof, Director-General at the Department of National Heritage (DNH), shared that a total of 29 mosques were gazetted under the National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645), 11 of them categorised as National Heritage and the other 18 as Heritage. He revealed the department was also looking at 119 mosques with the same potential.

"Heritage in Malaysia is an embodiment of the history, culture and values of Malaysians. It is a source of national pride and an asset that attracts visitors and generates income," said Mohd Azmi.

The director-general opined that mosques, in general, had steadily attracted the attention of both Muslim and non-Muslim tourists due to their unique architectural styles and outstanding heritage values.

He firmly believed mosques had the potential to become a key segment in Malaysia's tourism products.

"The architectural styles of the mosques in Malaysia are interestingly diverse," said Mohd Azmi, adding mosque tourism may help clear non-Muslims' misconceptions about Islam and reduce Islamophobia.

Mohd Azmi stated the mosque tourism segment should target both Muslims and non-Muslims around the world. He said people who had great interest and appreciation towards cultural buildings and history were more likely to participate in the programme.



**Heritage in Malaysia is an embodiment of the history, culture and values of Malaysians. It is a source of national pride and an asset that attracts visitors and generates income." – Mohd Azmi**

## Gazette requirements for mosques

To be gazetted as a National Heritage, Mohd Azmi said, a mosque is evaluated thoroughly to define its significance and authenticity. Alternatively, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) can also suggest mosques it feels have the potential to be expanded and declared as a National Heritage building.

"A mosque has to meet at least one criterion under Section 67 (2) to be gazetted as a National Heritage," said Azmi.

According to the director-general, there are nine criteria under this section. They are:

1. The historical importance, association, with or related to Malaysian history.
2. The excellent design or aesthetic characteristics.
3. The scientific or technical innovations or achievements.
4. The social or cultural associations.
5. The potential to educate, illustrate or provide further scientific investigation concerning Malaysian cultural heritage.
6. The importance of exhibiting a richness, diversity or unusual integration of features.
7. The rarity or uniqueness of the natural heritage, tangible or intangible cultural heritage or underwater cultural heritage.
8. The representative nature of a site object as part of class or type of a site or object.
9. Any other matter which is relevant to the determination of cultural heritage significance.

## DNH's role in the maintenance of Natural Heritage

According to Section 21 of the Act, Mohd Azmi said DNH would provide

financial assistance and expert advice for the conservation, maintenance and promotion of the gazetted National Heritage.


"Technically, DNH can supervise conservation projects and also advise on conservation works.

"DNH also conducts activities to disseminate knowledge on preserving heritage buildings to the general public through workshops and courses. This is also part of the efforts to promote heritage buildings," said Mohd Azmi.

Speaking on hope and aspiration, Mohd Azmi stated DNH wished to have more mosques being gazetted as heritage sites. He further highlighted the architectural styles of local mosques reflected the diversity in the designs as some were inspired by the world's magnificent mosques, traditional Malay architecture, and regional patterns and culture.

"The department seeks further cooperation from the society, stakeholders and State authorities for this purpose (of promoting cultural heritage tourism). The collaboration with the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) and Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) will bring a more remarkable impact.

"DNH, JAKIM and ITC play different roles. But if we collaborate, the appreciation towards the heritage will become more valuable and memorable," said Mohd Azmi.

He then highlighted that aside from promoting heritage buildings as part of cultural heritage tourism, DNH's ultimate objective is to protect the authenticity and integrity of the buildings. 





**Datuk Wira Dr Noor Zari Hamat**



prayer rooms, he stated that it was good to have additional products such as Muslim-friendly healthcare facilities, cosmetics, fashion, and pharmaceutical products.

“Don’t forget, people will only come to your place if they can be comfortable to know that the products offered are halal,” said Mohd Ilyas.

He then laid out some strategies that destinations can do to champion this segment of tourism, which are:

- Promoting the destinations well on social media.
- Offering appealing ambience and social media-worthy food presentations.
- Being creative in creating new products, investing in digital marketing.
- Engaging with potential clients via social media and introducing some technologies in staff training.

### Muslim-friendly hospitality services standard (MS 2610)

“The development of Malaysian Standard (MS) 2610 was initiated and started in December 2012,” said Fakheezah, Senior Assistant Director of Standardisation Division at Department of Standards Malaysia.

After a lengthy process, the final draft of MS was approved on Jan 6, 2015.

“The general content of MS 2610 is scope, normative reference, terms and definitions, general requirements, specific requirements, legal requirements and compliance.”

In terms of scope, she explained this Malaysian Standard provides guidelines and requirements for managing tourism facilities, products and services for Muslim travellers in accommodation premises, tour packages and tourist guides. However, this Standard is not applicable for health and beauty facilities such as spa and massage or any balneotherapy facilities, products and services.

“In terms of normative reference, there are two documents. MS 1500, which is on halal food, and the Tourism Industry Act 1992 (Act 482),” said Fakheezah.

She explained the general requirements in the MS covered the elements of quality management, and the specific requirements emphasised the accommodation, tour packages, and tour guide.

Fakheezah also highlighted that under this MS, all products and services should, in other aspects, comply with the legislation, including relevant requirements in force in Malaysia.

She then informed that MS 2610 was under revision and highlighted Malaysia’s participation in the Standards and Metrology Institute for Islamic Countries (SMIIC).

### Muslim-friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR)

Sharing about Sunway Group’s experience in Muslim-friendly tourism was Ahmad Faizal, the Director of Sales-Wholesale at Sunway City Kuala Lumpur Hotels. He said the already established Muslim-friendly environment at Sunway City helped in pursuing to get recognised as Muslim-friendly. Sunway Hotels’ services and facilities for Muslim guests include prayer rooms, Arabic-speaking guest relation officers, wash room, bidet, qibla direction sign in the guest rooms, and a certified halal kitchen.

“If the guests choose to pray inside their room, they can always request prayer mats,” said Ahmad Faizal, adding that having the Muslim-friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) by ITC is important in this segment of tourism for the hotel industry. Hoteliers can apply for the MFAR programme through ITC’s official website. “Once we obtained the MFAR recognition, we were able to drive more businesses into Sunway Hotels and Resorts.”

At the end of the session, Dato’ Dr Mohamed Razip Hasan, the Director-General of ITC, highlighted the importance of strategic and applied research and capacity building in exploring the Muslim-friendly Tourism concept. 

# Understanding Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality

## Muslim tourists seek halal standards and certification while travelling

BY FATIHAH MANAF

**T**HE GROWTH of the Muslim travel market has seen many industry players becoming interested in this tourism segment, including the non-Muslim countries.

The Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) recently held a webinar titled ‘Understanding Muslim-friendly Tourism’ to provide insights regarding Islamic Tourism and Muslim-friendly destinations.

The webinar aimed to highlight the potential of Islamic tourism within the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) and sought to strengthen IMT-GT’s position as a top destination in Islamic tourism.

Datuk Wira Dr Noor Zari Hamat, the Secretary-General of Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture (MOTAC) Malaysia and the Chairman of ITC, issued the keynote address.

He highlighted that tourists would likely make more considered travel choices due to the pandemic by prioritising health and safety in their travel decisions. He urged destinations to understand the new needs of travellers and ramp up their efforts to address those needs.

He said: “It would be beneficial for Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand to work together in strengthening our Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality offerings so that this triangle will be a key destination for Muslim tourists.”

The webinar featured speakers Assoc. Prof. Dr Mohd Hafiz Hanafiah, Datuk Mohd Ilyas Zainol Abidin, Fakheezah Borhan and Ahmad Faizal Iskandar.

### Muslim-friendly Tourism from an academic perspective

Mohd Hafiz, Deputy Dean at Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management of MARA University of Technology (UiTM), discussed Muslim-friendly tourism from the demand and supply perspectives.

He stated that Indonesia, Thailand, Japan and Taiwan have also aggressively pushed this segment of Muslim-friendly tourism. These countries have come out with halal standards and certifications to cater to the needs of Muslim travellers.

Based on his study, Hafiz stated in visiting non-Muslim countries, Muslim travellers’ halal consumption relied heavily on their level of religiosity, how they perceive themselves as Muslims and who could influence their

decision-making.

He also highlighted that Muslims mostly travel for leisure but are urged to comply with their Islamic teachings and religiosity.

“The higher the level of religiosity, the more attitude they display towards consuming halal food,” said Hafiz, adding tourism marketers need to understand this behaviour for them to market themselves among the core Muslim market.

He said Muslims relied heavily on other people’s opinions who had prior experience in visiting these non-Muslim countries.

“The Muslim-friendly tourism strategy in Japan comprises offering Muslim-specific complementary services while maintaining Japanese local wisdom,” explained Hafiz.

While Japan separated this Muslim-friendly tourism as a separate niche market, New Zealand did not find the need to view them as a different market as these Muslim travellers have similar leisure behaviours like other tourists.

The academician also pointed out the importance of smart applications and online presence, which would be helpful for Muslim tourists.

He said: “Young Muslims are one of the key motors for growth in Muslim travel, and they are very attached to new technologies.”

### Opportunities and strategies for non-Muslim destinations

Mohd Ilyas, the Executive Chairman of Ample Prospects Sdn Bhd, said while the world embraced the new normal, many countries were preparing to reopen their borders to welcome tourists with various offerings.

He said: “I believe, unless and until you make new offerings, it is quite hard to attract tourists to your destination, particularly if it is a non-Muslim destination.”

Moving forward, he said the growing Muslim travel market would remain optimistic despite the pandemic. He then divided the Muslim travellers market segment into five parts: family travel, leisure travellers, business travellers, millennial Muslim travellers, and female Muslim travellers.

These groups of travellers have different needs and wants that must be catered to by the hospitality providers. He also pointed out that 36 to 40 per cent of these Muslim travellers are millennials.

Looking at the top non-OIC destinations, Mohd Ilyas believed Muslim-friendly tourism products would be here to stay.

Aside from the halal food and comfortable



**Assoc. Prof. Dr Mohd Hafiz Hanafiah**



**Ahmad Faizal Iskandar.**



**Fakheezah Borhan**



**Datuk Mohd Ilyas Zainol Abidin**