

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Tourism in Malaysia and Strategies for Revival of this Sector

Faizan Hasan Mustafa^{1*} & Awangku Hassanal Bahar Pengiran Bagul²

^{1,2}Department of Business, Economics and Accountancy, University Malaysia Sabah, Jalan UMS, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah 88450, Malaysia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

RECEIVED: 29-Nov-20

REVISED: 24-Dec-20

ACCEPTED: 17-Mar-21

PUBLISHED: 15-Jun-21

*Corresponding Author

Faizan Hasan Mustafa

E-mail: faizan.hasan@gmail.com

Co-Author(s)

Author 2: hbagul@ums.edu.my

Citation: Faizan Hasan Mustafa & Awangku Hassanal Bahar Pengiran Bagul (2021). Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Tourism in Malaysia and Strategies for Revival of this Sector. *Hor J. Hum. & Soc. Sci. Res.* 3 (1), 165–172. <https://doi.org/10.37534/bp.jhssr.2021.v3.n1.id1081.p165>.

ABSTRACT

The tourism sector is one of the major economic sectors in Malaysia that contributes to the country's GDP amounting to RM 84.1 billion in monetary value, with 25.8 million tourist footfalls in 2019. This sector was expected to grow during the year 2020 and earn RM 100.0 billion but suffered a serious setback due to the COVID-19 pandemic that devastated the global economies. This study was undertaken to better understand the effects of tourism disruption in Malaysia and highlight some post-COVID-19 tourism revival strategies using the content analysis and synthesis of information. Key terms such as "COVID-19 impact on tourism", "tourism and COVID-19", "tourism revival post-COVID-19" have been used to study the socio-economic effects of COVID-19 on tourism in Malaysia and ways and means of reviving this activity. It appears that domestic tourism will lead the way while international arrivals will begin in a phased manner according to guidelines that the government will review and update while monitoring the pandemic prevalence globally. Ecotourism is the area that is likely to give Malaysia an edge due to the rich natural resources in the country and interesting traditions and cultures that have thrived especially in parts of the country such as Sabah.

Keywords: Long-term strategies, post-COVID-19 scenario, risk management, tourism revival

Introduction

Malaysia's Investment in Tourism

Ever since Malaysia decided to develop the tourism sector as a matter of national policy, efforts were consistently made to develop the required infrastructure and human resources in the hospitality industry. As a result of this long-term investment, Malaysia has many coastal tourism resources, especially beaches, biodiversity-rich islands, world-class shopping malls, hotels and resorts, an impressive urban skyline, and an award-winning international airport among others that make the country one of the top tourism destinations (Bizandleisure, 2019). This can be imagined from the fact that the capital city of Kuala Lumpur has been rated amongst the most highly visited cities in the world. Tourism generated about RM 84.0 billion in the year 2018 (Tourism Malaysia, 2019),

making it a major economic sector in the country. It contributed 15% to the country's Gross Domestic Product (DOSM, 2019) and played a significant role in economic growth (Mohsen, 2015, Pua et al., 2018, Mustafa & Bagul, 2020). Agencies related to tourism were planning a major expansion under the "Visit Malaysia 2020" before the outbreak of COVID-19. This was a major economic loss to the country.

Pre COVID-19 tourism booms in Malaysia

The Malaysian tourism industry was thriving before COVID-19 made its devastating impact (Jong et al., 2018). As per the statistical data released by the Ministry of Tourism of Malaysia, the net income amounted to RM 86.14 billion in 2019 (Tourism Malaysia, 2019), with most of tourist arrivals to Malaysia being from Singapore

(5,381,566), Indonesia (1,857,864), China (1,558,782), Thailand (990,565), Brunei (627,112), India (354,486), South Korea (323,952), Philippines (210,974), Vietnam (200,314), and Japan (196,561). In terms of overall tourist expenditure, the ASEAN region remained the biggest contributor, generating a total of RM 43.72 billion. For tourists from West Asia, Malaysia is a good destination, and they contributed the highest per capita expenditure with RM 10,214, an increase of +2.7% compared to RM 9,947 in 2018 (Tourism Malaysia, 2019). Not only did international tourism make its contribution to the Malaysian economy, but domestic tourism also flourished with a total of 239.1 million domestic visitors in 2019, with a growth of 8.1% as compared to the previous year (7.7%).

COVID-19 impact on tourism in Malaysia

The tourism sector is the worst-hit sector by COVID-19, as all international borders were closed (Karim et al., 2020). Before Malaysia closed its borders, the tourists arriving from China and other countries had brought the infection that started spreading across the country. ASEAN and the far-eastern regions have been the major contributors to Malaysian tourism, but unfortunately, Malaysia had to close all possible entry points to arrivals from these countries, resulting in a colossal damage to the tourism industry. COVID-19 outbreak resulted in a major setback to the Visit Malaysia 2020 (VM 2020) campaign as 50% of Malaysia's tourists originated from Singapore and China (Foo et al., 2020). The hotel industry has been the hardest hit. A total of 170,084 hotel room bookings during the period 11 January–16 March 2020 had been canceled, which caused a revenue loss amounting to RM 68,190,364. This loss was directly attributable to the outbreak of COVID-19 (Foo et al., 2020). For a country like Malaysia where the tourism sector alone contributes 15% of the Gross Domestic Product, and a significant number of tourists are from China, the economic consequences of this disruption are obvious. Furthermore, Malaysia had to increase investment in healthcare, which consumed a significant part of the national budget. Many people lost their livelihoods, and it will be a long road to recovery, not just for Malaysia but for the global tourism industry as well (Khan et al., 2020; The Star, 2020). Despite relaxation of domestic travel restrictions in Malaysia, many travelers are still doubtful about traveling at the cost of health concerns posed by the COVID-19 (Breaking Travel News, 2020).

Loss of jobs is one of the major areas of concerns in Malaysia due to COVID-19 (Khan et al., 2020). The most visible sector which seemed to have taken a positive turn

because of the pandemic is the online food delivery by companies like Food Panda and Grab Food. Most of the dine-in places had to close their operations and either reduced the staff salary or cut down on the number of staff. Malaysia's hospitality and leisure industry employed 1.3 million workers and underpinned many spin-off jobs and enterprises, including those associated with airlines, hotels, and eateries (WME-BTN, 2020).

Post-COVID-19 tourism recovery will take at least a year (Kanyakumari, 2020), though the government has allowed businesses to open with restrictions under the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Going by the numbers, the coronavirus outbreak triggered a loss of RM 3.37 billion during Q1 alone in 2020, which has caused Malaysia's GDP growth for the year to shrink by 0.8 to just 1.2 points with an overall potential loss of 17.3 billion forecast (Hamdan, 2020).

Literature review

It is pertinent to consider problems related to COVID-19 in the context of other hazards that often confront the tourism sector. This provides insights into the situation from across the world as well as learning from the successful strategies for recovery. Faulkner (2001) has suggested the importance of a tourism disaster management framework and highlighted the fact that tourism destinations in any part of the globe can be confronted by a disaster or a hazard in one form or the other. Despite the severity of the situation that a destination endures when hit by a disaster, only a few areas have properly developed disaster management plans to help them cope with such difficult times. A conceptual framework using a software system has been proposed by Shafiza et al. (2009) for integrated routing application for Emergency Response Management (ERM). This system is helpful in the decision-making process. Systems such as ERM can be modeled in different ways for any potential disasters. Specifically, for tourism, it requires collaboration and cooperation amongst the decision-makers and stakeholders as outlined by the World Tourism Organization under the Tourism Emergency Response Network (TERN).

Another significant impact of COVID-19 is on the medical tourism in Malaysia which before the pandemic was booming, as highlighted by Tatum (2020) in a report where 15,000 beds were ready for an anticipated influx of international patients. The Malaysian government predicted that two million international visitors, an expected 33% rise in 2019, would arrive for medical treatment as part of its well-promoted Year of Healthcare Travel plan (Tatum, 2020).

The aviation sector also suffered badly. A recent study conducted by Tan (2020) examined the effect of COVID-19 on this sector taking the case of Malindo Airlines that had to urge the employees to take unpaid leave because of a decline in passengers by 20%. Similar is the case with Malaysia Airline System, where the employees were asked to take unpaid leave due to financial constraints (AFP, 2020).

The hotel industry is a sector that is closely connected to tourism. Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) has estimated a loss of RM 560.72 million in revenues on account of the Movement Control Order (MCO) enforced by the government to contain the spread of COVID-19. The state-wise breakdown of the effects of tourism disruption as published by The Star (2020) provides a good idea of the consequences for the employees working in this sector. Out of the 56,299 employees that worked in the hotel industry, the highest number was in Kuala Lumpur (17,826), followed by Selangor (7,981), Penang (5,549), Sabah (4,934), and Langkawi (4,314). In Sarawak and Johor, the number of employees was 3,488 and 3215, respectively. Next (in terms of the number of employees) were the states of Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, and Terengganu where the numbers were in the range 1,872–1,298. The lowest number was in Kedah (692) and Kelantan (560). The maximum number of lay-off was 542. In other states, the retrenchment was limited: Perak (245), Selangor (238), and Pahang (231). Interestingly, there was no layoff in Kedah or Kelantan. In the rest of the states, the number fluctuated in the range 177–92. There is no consistent pattern except in Kuala Lumpur. This could be due to a variety of reasons, including retention of staff for maintenance work that still had to be carried out, the reluctance of the hotel management to retrench well-trained staff that enjoyed the confidence of the employers, and anticipated difficulties in stimulating the business operations with recruits following the revival of the tourism activity.

In a study conducted by Min and Huang (2007), Fuzzy AHP (Analytic Hierarchy Process) was applied to determine the weighting of various evaluation criteria for developing tourism recovery strategies. The authors found that the most important strategy was to develop and upgrade the domestic tourism attractions by encouraging private investment. The second most important strategy was for the government to expedite loan financing and simplifying the application processing so that the industry could obtain financial aid promptly. A strategy adopted earlier by the Tourism Ministry of Malaysia focused attention on selected destinations especially popular with tourists from certain countries. Such a response has paid

dividends as is evident from the work of Mao et al. (2010) who used a model to study tourism revival patterns through structured plans and specific policy goals.

Method

To develop the conceptual paper, this study involved managing data from multiple sources, articulation of the required information, and synthesis of key issues related to the effect of COVID-19 on the tourism sector. Using such an analytical approach as a means of investigating a topic of interest is to improve the understanding of how specific concepts are (or might be) used to convey ideas about a study area (Furner, 2004). The content analysis method was followed in this study for collecting data by identifying themes using keywords such as “COVID-19 impact on tourism”, “COVID-19 impact on Malaysian tourism”, “COVID-19 economic impact”, “Disaster management”, “Tourism revival plan”, “Tourism revival strategy”, and “Post COVID-19 tourism innovation”. It required utilizing the search engine capabilities to access online databases which include journals, published reports, news reports, and other authentic publications on the impact of COVID-19 on the Malaysian tourism sector.

Results generated by these efforts are based on the economic implications of the COVID-19 outbreak on the tourism sector of Malaysia and using the information for proposing strategies that can be utilized by the Tourism Ministry of Malaysia for reviving this sector.

Results and discussion

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is a subject of current interest in Malaysia. This is evident from the survey of literature published by Foo et al. (2020), Khan and Hashim (2020) and Karim et al. (2020). These published papers and others cited in this manuscript formed the basis of the content analysis, using specific keywords of the subject matter of this study.

Economic implications

Since the enforcement of the movement control order, Malaysia’s economy contracted 2.7% in the June-September quarter and the GDP declined by 17.1% in the first quarter and 16.4% in the second quarter (Prem, 2020).

A major impact that the pandemic has produced is on the budget hotels, which were expected to lay off 2,000

employees, with the closure of 40 hotels in major urban areas (MalayMail, 2020). The impact on tourism can be particularly seen in the East Malaysian state of Sabah, where Chinese travelers comprised 44% of the total tourist arrivals in 2018 with a compounded average growth rate of 12.7% per annum, whereas visitors from other places were only 0.6%. This is a huge loss to Sabah's economy as all flights from China, Hong Kong, and Macau were canceled to contain the spread of infection from China and other surrounding countries (Sadia et al., 2020).

Visit Malaysia 2020 (VM 2020) campaign which was forecast to bring 30 million tourists and generate revenue of RM 100 billion was halted before its launch, resulting in a massive loss to the Malaysian economy (Sadia et al., 2020).

Tourism Revival

Limited international travel from countries like Singapore, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan should be allowed to commence to help in the revival of tourism activity (John, 2020). This is because before the pandemic the bulk of tourists to Sabah have been from these countries. For this reason, the tourism networks of these agencies with their counterparts here have close working experience. This imparts a great level of trust and confidence which are important for networking and long-term business. Furthermore, these countries have had a good experience of effectively controlling the pandemic, and visitors from there are well-versed with the recommended measures while spending their time in Malaysia. Malaysian tour operators are also familiar with visitors from these countries and can guide them with the local SOPs.

Resumption of medical tourism and activating programs such as "Make Malaysia My Second Home" with the new requirements will probably offer attractive incentives to those seeking extended stay and even considering an investment in real estate or other sectors according to the government regulations.

Tax exemption strategies and fringe benefits for at least a year can also be considered. Efforts should concentrate on providing cash support to the businesses so that people associated with the industry start getting the benefits (Ranjith and Aparna, 2020).

Automation

Malaysia has decided in favor of digitalization with a certain degree of automation. This will be introduced in the

tourism sector. While it is too early to say what form it will take in the years ahead but areas such as artificial intelligence (AI)-based applications that can help reduce the load on call centers and streamline the passenger booking and refund processes will be considered at some stage. Orders can also be placed by phone so that the diners do not have to gather in dining halls and can easily follow the social distancing guidelines. Additional entertainment facilities can be enhanced in the hotel rooms to compensate for limitations on outdoor activities.

Promoting virtual tourism can be the new norm till traveling returns to its normal state. Tourism Malaysia can promote virtual tourism whereby a traveler can enjoy traveling to a place while sitting in the comfort of his home or hotel room. Such virtual platforms can be created with the help of information and communication technology tools that combine hardware and software capabilities to make a virtual travel experience for a user. Virtual tourism will not only provide potential tourists the experience of traveling to their favorite destination while maintaining social distancing norms but also minimize resources that are used in travel and tourism.

Mitigating the impact

Some of the strategies being adopted by other countries can also be considered for their feasibility of implementation here. Promotion campaigns can be launched targeting countries where the impact of the pandemic has been successfully reduced. Tourism networks of Malaysia can align with the selected agencies through ideas that are being proposed such as "COVID-19-Free Corridor" or "Green Bubble" to gradually revive travel and tourism.

Visit Malaysia 2021 campaign can be deployed in places where COVID-19 has been tackled successfully. It might be high time for government agencies to promote the local airline industry to offer special tour packages for those arriving from safe international zones. Private and government aviation companies can join hands to minimize loss and to work in full flow towards the betterment of the country's economy.

Strategies can be developed by hotels in the form of promotional packages, especially for the locals who can enjoy them at affordable rates. This will not only help in reviving the hotel business which took a massive hit during this pandemic but also contribute to raising hopes among the locals that COVID-19 will be behind them. Many of the locals who are jobless for months need a break from the so-called new normal. Special discounts

can be given to those who provided essential services such as groceries, medical supplies, food delivery, enforcement, and others. It might be a good way to show appreciation for the efforts of those who provided crucial services during the lockdown.

Domestic Market

The focus should now be on boosting the domestic tourism through investment in the empowerment of the indigenous communities. There are unique traditions and cultures deep in the interior areas, sustainable lifestyles of the people, adaptive innovations, arts, and sports that could be attractive to many visitors not familiar with the rich heritage of places like Sabah. Involving the local community should be the way forward. It will open the remote rural areas to the development of infrastructure and help in ameliorating the hardships endured by the indigenous people, especially during the pandemic. These communities are stakeholders and stewards of the natural capital and deserve a better deal through ecotourism.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for a prompt response system to prevent infection from outside and for better preparedness in terms of sufficient supply of personal protective equipment, and essential facilities in the hospitals. Malaysia closed its borders in March 2020 with restrictions imposed to contain the spread of the infection. This has helped in keeping the COVID-19 infection to less than 100,000 and deaths to 439 so far. How severely the tourism suffered can be imagined from the fact that the country lost more than RM 100 billion (US\$24.61). Malaysia was targeting 30 million tourist arrivals through its ambitious Visit Malaysia 2020 program but that did not happen. Malaysia has launched a 10-year plan for the revival of the tourism sector in December 2020 and is hoping to implement the various strategies for revival in 2021. It will be a gradual process but is expected to pick up as the vaccines break the cycle of infections. Malaysia will do well by promoting its ecotourism potential, balancing conservation with development, initiating structured programs for preserving the natural capital, and capitalizing on its heritage among other focused areas of sustainable tourism with a competitive edge. Disaster management strategies and systems need a structural review to be better prepared for potential pandemics. This is where the role of information technology comes into play. Digitalization

is receiving a great deal of attention in Malaysia and is permeating many of the sectors of business and entrepreneurship, and of course, it will support tourism revival post-COVID-19.

Competing Interest Statement

All authors have read and approved the manuscript and take full responsibility for its contents. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank reviewers and editors for their review of the article and University Malaysia Sabah for providing a post-doctoral research grant (Grant number PRF0010-2019) to pursue research and publication.

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Biographical Statement of Author(s)

Faizan Hasan Mustafa obtained his PhD in management from Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Currently, he is working as a post-doctorate fellow in tourism management, Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.



His specialization is in knowledge management and its applications.

Dr. Faizan has more than 5 years of working experience in the corporate sector as a management consultant. He has a strong interest in nature tourism and other related sectors involving new knowledge management tools.

Dr. Faizan Hasan Mustafa

Post-doctorate Fellow
Department of Business, Economics and Accountancy
University Malaysia Sabah
Jalan UMS, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah 88450
Malaysia
Phone: +60 11-3313 7620

E-mail: faizan.hasan@gmail.com

Awangku Hassanal Bahar Pengiran Bagul holds a PhD in tourism management from university of Wellington, New Zealand. He is currently an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.



In addition to serving as Associate Professor, he also holds position of a Fellow at Borneo Tourism Research Centre and Development and Health Research Unit, UMS-EcoHealth Alliance.

Dr. Awangku is also the Editor-in-Chief of BIMP-EAGA Journal for Sustainable Tourism Development and Journal for BIMP-EAGA Regional Development.

Dr. Awangku Hassanal Bahar Pengiran Bagul

Associate Professor
Department of Business, Economics and Accountancy
University Malaysia Sabah

E-mail: hbagul@ums.edu.my

