

Sustainability of Homestay Operators in Malaysia During The Covid-19 Pandemic

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The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has economically affected the Malaysian tourism industry. The government has anticipated losses worth billions of Ringgit Malaysia from the tourism industry due to the movement control order and closure of tourists' destinations. The current study explored the pandemic's impact on homestay operators during the pandemic and proposes several innovative actions that can be adopted by homestay operators to revive their economy to avoid financial distress. This study focused on homestay operators located in Pulau Langkawi and in the state of Kedah. Four interviews were undertaken with the coordinators of homestay operators from three villages. One interview was conducted with the Kedah Ministry of Tourism, Art, and Culture (MOTAC) development officer. Two of the interviews were conducted online due to the movement control order restrictions. According to the interviewees, the pandemic strongly impacted the economy of the homestay operators. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the homestay operators faced competition from surrounding hotels in Pulau Langkawi. Their situation worsened due to zero revenue during the MCO. Nevertheless, most of the operators consider the homestay business as a part-time income. The study provides enhancement on the knowledge of tourism sustainability impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: homestay businesses, sustainability, tourism in Langkawi, government support , pandemic covid-19



1. INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19), designated a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in early 2020, had a catastrophic effect on the tourism and hospitality industries, exerting immense strain on the global healthcare system. This unknown virus also had an immediate impact on Malaysia's tourism economy. The "tourism ambassadors" had lost their income but are now considering their future alternatives. The Malaysian government has agreed that "*some US\$453 million economic stimulus package will go towards the tourism industry, one of the hardest hits by the pandemic*" (Medina, 2020).

The current study explores the pandemic's impact on homestay operators during the pandemic. The study also proposes several innovative actions that can be taken by the homestay operators to revive their business economy. The suggestions will assist them in avoiding suffering from financial distress or going into liquidation in the near future. The study's findings will provide guidelines to the government in planning and designing economic recovery packages for the tour operators. Thus, in general, this initiative will assist the country in recovering from the current economic slump.

Tourism in Malaysia is undeniably one of the significant contributors to Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP). Recently, with the outbreak of COVID-19, this industry has been economically affected. The government expected losses of approximately RM3.37 billion in the Malaysian tourism industry within the first two months of 2020 (Dzulkifly, 2020; Majid, 2020). In addition, the government estimated Malaysia's GDP to decrease by 0.8% to 1.2%, a decrease of RM10.8 billion to RM17.3 billion (Dzulkifly, 2020). Due to the pandemic outbreak, people are not allowed to go on holiday although they wanted to do so.

Past studies have examined the impact of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic on the tourism industry and provided strategic tips on handling the crisis (Tew et al., 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic provided academics with an opportunity to study a business sustainability in the face of a very unpredictable occurrence. The sectors most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic are tourism, airlines, and hotel industries (Stephany et al., 2020).

Due to the pandemic crisis, the tourism sector has been advised to establish new and innovative ideas to assist the industry back on its feet. The movement control order has resulted in stillness in tourism activities. Langkawi Tourist Guide Association (LTGA) president, Mr Ardi Bahador, commented that tourist guides had suffered a loss of income and are presently doing other jobs, such as e-hailing services and operating online businesses, to deal with ever-increasing life difficulties. Mr Ardi stated that members of the organisation were appreciative of the one-time support of RM600 provided for registered tour guides and anticipated more owing to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourist business (Bernama, 2020a).



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Homestay programme in Malaysia

After the industrial sector, tourism is Malaysia's second greatest contribution to the economy. Homestay is a new tourist idea that has emerged in recent years in the travel industry and Malaysia. It is a life model that encompasses a wide range of possibilities. Presently, many visitors who visit Malaysia opt to stay in a homestay to experience the uniqueness of Malaysian culture, visit numerous places where people still observe traditional ways of living and enjoy the area's stunning natural beauty. The government's homestay programme is one of Malaysia's attractions and creates a good influence on the socioeconomic status of local citizens, particularly in rural areas (Albattat, 2017).

Homestay is a type of tourism offering that provides tourists with lodging. This service is available in tourist locations located outside of cities. As these tourist attractions are on the outskirts or rural regions and lack accommodation services such as chalets, resorts, and hotels, village residents have taken initiatives to offer accommodation alternatives by hosting travellers in their homes (Shukor et al., 2014).

The homestay programme has two main objectives, which will be achieved by the government and the people of a nation. Among the homestay objectives that the government offers are the alternative services of tourism at medium prices, helping people in the rural areas, strengthening the government's bond with people, and helping the poor. The homestay objectives for the nation's citizens are getting a chance to add family earnings, marketing local products, providing job opportunities to the people, and introducing the local culture, food, and activities to the tourists (Jabar et al., 2015).

2.2. Tourism in Pulau Langkawi

Tourism is acknowledged as an industry that contributes to the world economy. By recognising the importance of tourism, Malaysia and many other nations are putting in extra effort to build and exhibit individual brilliance to attract tourists. The rise of the tourist sector has been highlighted as a key component in assisting less developed countries in progressing in conjunction with global economic development (Kayat, 2009). Before Langkawi became a popular tourist destination, the primary income source for the local community was agriculture and fishery. Small-scale farmers and traditional offshore fishers made up the majority of the population. Nevertheless, the island's tourism developments have significantly boosted the local community's economic activities. The business and service sectors, primarily based on tourism, provide new economic opportunities for the local community. Various programmes have been implemented since 1991 to improve the image of Langkawi to capture demand from domestic and international tourists.



In Malaysia, the homestay programme is heavily encouraged as a community-based tourist experience. The Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism Malaysia (MOTAC) officially launched this programme in Temerloh, Pahang, in 1995. According to Rojas and Camarero (2008), tourists seek a complete experience of leisure, cultural heritage, social welfare, and social interaction. These activities can be carried out with their close ties within the local community. Local homestay operators must importantly play their roles properly to ensure that tourists continue to visit. This aspect pertains to the tourists' satisfaction with the service quality provided during their activities.

Locals may sell their property and leave the island with ease, but the government encourages them to stay and accept the new lifestyle while maintaining the status quo. Homestay is said to be the best alternate option. There are presently over 100 homestay units, which the industry has highlighted as essential aspects in helping to enhance the less developed countries in step with global economic advancement (Kayat, 2009).

2.3. Disasters impacting the tourism industry

AlBattat and MatSom (2014) discovered that Malaysia is also affected by worldwide disasters. These disasters are categorised as diseases, economic crises, natural disasters, and terrorism. As a result of the disasters, the tourist economy faces a downward trend, where the “tourist arrival” and “tourist receipts” decline (Bhati et al., 2016). According to Bhati et al. (2016), disasters affect the economic development of the destination country and the global tourism market as a whole. For example, an economic crisis causes a recession, fluctuating exchange rates, and withdrawal of investment funds.

Hazardous disasters hinder the development of the tourism industry. Reservations are cancelled, while expenditures on tourism are reduced. A post-disaster recovery plan is crucial, where recovery is the process of bringing business operations back to normal (Eisendrath et al., 2008). Recovery is identified as the process of self-analysis, healing, and rebuilding the damages done (Faulkner, 2001). Lindell (2011) stated that the disaster recovery attempt must be conducted immediately after the disaster ends to re-establish normal social, political, and economic routines.

Bringing the industry back to normal is not an overnight process. For example, Malaysia's tourism and hospitality industry took over six months to recover from SARS and Avian flu (AlBattat & MatSom, 2014). On top of that, Malaysia took almost two years to get back on track after the Asian financial crisis in 1997 (AlBattat & MatSom, 2014). Nevertheless, although the economic condition forced a decline in intra-regional travel in Asia, it has created considerable savings in inter-regional travelling costs to Asia, arrivals from America and Europe mainly, which has helped replenish Asia's tourism industry (Pine et al., 1998).

The current COVID-19 pandemic crisis has not ended yet. Nevertheless, governments are working on getting their economies back on track. On June 7th, 2020, former Malaysian Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, announced that the domestic tourism sector is capable of resuming its



operations, and inter-state travelling restrictions are lifted. After over three months of MCO, this move encourages domestic tourism to accelerate the economic recovery phase. The tourism sector also involves other sub-sectors of the economy, namely hospitality, food and beverages, tour operators, and transport. Nonetheless, the reopening of this sector must comply with all the standard operating procedures set by the National Security Council and the Ministry of Health (Bernama, 2020b).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research involved online interviews with homestay operators in Pulau Langkawi and the state of Kedah, Malaysia. The interviews were conducted to obtain a preview of the loss of revenue amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Three online interviews with the coordinators of homestay operators from three villages were conducted. An interview was conducted with the development officer of MOTAC, Kedah, Malaysia. The interviewees were asked to deliberate on the following factors:

- Overview of the homestay business in their village
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy or revenue of the homestay operators
- The government assistance or economic survival packages during the pandemic
- The way forward post COVID-19

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Overview of homestay businesses in Pulau Langkawi

In Langkawi, homestay village business has existed since 2002. Five villages in the island conduct homestay businesses and are registered under Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism Malaysia. The villages are Kampung Pulau Tuba (the first village registered to be a homestay community), Kampung Wan Tok Rendong, Kampung Sungai Itau, Kampung Padang Lalang, and Kampung Bukit Tangga situated in Ulu Melaka, Langkawi.

4.2. Discussion of Interview Results

4.2.1. Interviewee 1

Introduction

I am from Kampung Wan Tok Rendong, Pulau Langkawi. In this village, there are 68 homestay entrepreneurs with different participation stages. At the initial stage of the programme in 2002, there were only 20 participants. The number of participants increased to 68 entrepreneurs in the following years. In the past years, the number of entrepreneurs in this village has been decreasing for various reasons, for instance, family problems, health constraints, and an increase in the number of family members. This village has been developed by KEDA, Lembaga Kemajuan Wilayah Kedah or Kedah Regional Development Authority. The residents were provided land to build their



houses. As more participants joined the homestay programme, the area became increasingly limited. The increasing number of family members had caused the house to be dominated by family members. These reasons have caused the number of homestay entrepreneurs to decrease. Currently, there are only 35 active entrepreneurs in the village.

The 35 active homestay owners have various specialities. For example, there are homestay owners who actively prepare rooms for guests. Some homestay owners are active in organising guests' events, such as organising food and drinks, arts and culture events, or traditional music shows. They are active in engaging with the guests and community. Before the pandemic, the competition in homestay business in Langkawi was very high as other accommodations were offered, such as hotels, chalets, motels, and boarding houses. Many illegal homestays are also offered, which is a challenge for the homestay participants to face. The guests or tourists were confused by the homestay concept offered by illegal homestay owners. The actual concept of homestay is that the guest must live with a family and join the activities organised by the family, which is the real concept of staying in a homestay. We highly competed with illegal homestays even before COVID-19.

The villagers work as farmers, and fishermen and some work in the industry. This village is situated in a rural area, surrounded by hills, flora and fauna which are the main attraction to the tourist. In the earlier establishment of the homestay program, the responsible agency provided the basic course in managing the homestay and also one-off finance support. The homestay is set up and run based on a community approach. The community is responsible to mobilise the homestays in the village and doing promoting and marketing to attract tourists.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

During this pandemic, not only homestays but all tourism sectors in Langkawi have been badly affected because the primary income source in Langkawi depends on tourism activities. Throughout 2020, our income has been badly affected by the pandemic. As the coordinator of this village and the chairman of the Langkawi homestay association, I advised the community to venture into different fields, such as cooking, baking, and creating small-scale flower nurseries, or activities that do not require large capital because they do not have any income while raising capital is highly burdensome. Some sell items through online platforms or cash on delivery. As far as I have observed, I can see good potential in selling small-scale items. In this village, there are as many as 130 houses located here. At least half of the population of this village can buy food or flowers, which is sufficient to cover the income. Indirectly, verbal promotions through mass media these days have massively helped expand small-scale businesses in the village. Within a limited time, delivering food via cash on delivery has been popular nowadays. These are a few ways to help the villagers cover their income during the pandemic. On the positive side, when we venture into new fields such as flower nurseries, the field will be an attraction for tourists to visit when the situation is back to normal one day. Before the pandemic, on average the participant achieved an income of



RM2,000. A few months after the implementation of the international travel bubble initiative in Langkawi, they managed to get around RM300 per month.

Government assistance during the pandemic and way forward after the pandemic

There is an absence of economic packages, particularly for homestay entrepreneurs. The stimulus package offered by the government is not specific for homestays. Most of them are in loan forms. When a loan is offered, it is safe to say no because we are not capable of servicing the monthly payment. I do not encourage the loan package for homestays. In terms of a one-off payment, we have not received the payment for now.

We can still offer the uniqueness of staying in the homestay which is surrounded by the greeneries, the experience of living in the countryside, the various Malay culture, music, cuisine and ride the luck of Langkawi attractions. I hope the relevant authority will assist in eradicating the issue of illegal homestays, of which these illegal homestays are their main competitors apart from the hotels. I am also suggesting that the university will do a project with the homestay participants by bringing their international students to have the experience of living in their village and learn the Malay way of life. I am also suggesting that the cultural curriculum be embedded in the schools or university programs. This has been done by the more advanced country like Japan. Having a cultural curriculum, would encourage the schools and universities to visit the countryside and in turn, will boost homestay tourism. I am suggesting to the government also focus on assisting in recovering the homestay participant's economy. Effective projects should be developed to help the participants to revive the economy and the concept of homestay.

4.2.2. Interviewee 2

Introduction

My homestay which is in Kedah was built a long time ago, which was in the year 2000. My homestay has been running for more than 21 years. In the year 2000, we had 28 houses that voluntarily turned into homestay members, specifically to welcome guests from abroad and within the country. At that time, the response was pretty good, and the atmosphere was lively. We were excited to receive tourists from Japan, Europe, Korea, and other countries. Currently, I observed that the homestay projects are slowing down because we have not prepared a good master plan for homestay sustainability. For example, I was operating a homestay, and those who worked with me were those in the 20-30 years old age range. Now, they are 50 years old and above. At that time, the government did not think about how the children would contribute to tourism. Hence, when we reach 50 to 70 years old, some of us are not healthy. Therefore, it is less suitable for us to maintain the homestay programme. I can see that if no action is taken to sustain the homestay programme, sooner or later, this homestay project will disappear. Even the children do not want to know or are interested in this homestay programme, which is also worrying. We view this homestay as a fun programme, but it can also add to the economy. Today, the younger generation is no longer



interested in things like this. They are just selfish and want to earn their income. They feel it is not their time to entertain their family and these tourists.

We have suggestions for the government on how we can continue the legacy and provide income to the younger homestay operators. We can offer courses or classes in making handicrafts, spas, and massages to ensure that their income is guaranteed and contributes to the economy. For example, we once created an activity to prepare traditional cakes using the old way instead of the modern way. Nevertheless, the young people today do not use the old way. They have their oven, an electrical workshop, and a more sophisticated kitchen. These children did not get the exposure from the government and the ministry to pursue better workshops.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

This homestay is already a part-time job because we get money if only tourists come to visit. Therefore, I saw very few people affected during this pandemic because the homestay members in Kampung Relau have other main jobs. Recently, some have been advised by the government to make cash on delivery new jobs, such as food, particularly durians that we send to those who have ordered. If you want to compare with hotels, motels, or resorts, their income is specifically from the accommodation. The hoteliers are badly affected. For us, we only lost our side income, and we started looking for other sources. Like me, I grow vegetables, and others do the same, too. We send them to suppliers for sale. I am afraid that if we continue with this new job, the homestay programme will be left behind. Hence, the tourists will not be visiting us. We try to avoid cases such as the hotels or resorts being closed.

Government assistance during the pandemic and way forward after the pandemic

The Prime Minister has recently announced that the government will provide a one-off payment for members registered with MOTAC. In my village, for example, there are 20 houses. If RM600 is multiplied by 20 houses, RM12 000 will be given to my village. If the payment is provided to an individual account, these members can live with a little luxury for two or three months. Then, the homestay participants will go back to living in the old way. Personally, it would be better for the government to do something with that money besides channelling it to the homestay programme. Instead, the government can provide RM12,000 from the Ministry of Agriculture. For example, we can launch an innovative crop project so that young people can now continue gaining economic income from homestays and for themselves. These are my suggestions for the respective villages.

Recently, state crossing between the green zones was started by using a sightseeing bus registered under the travel agency. I took these tourists to Terengganu and stayed in registered homestays, where the standard operating procedures are maintained. Secondly, maybe the government can help with the financial assistance to open entrepreneurial workshops to cultivate the interest of young people to earn income from homestay programmes. Third, maybe homestay operators from Kedah



can come to Terengganu or homestay operators from Terengganu can come to Kelantan. Hence, we can collaborate with homestay programmes around Malaysia in this way.

4.2.3. Interviewee 3

Introduction

I run a homestay in Sungai Tau, Pulau Langkawi. The homestay in Sungai Tau consists of 19 houses. The homestay business in Kampung Sungai Tau started in 2009. In the earlier days, the programme was fun, and tourists came. Now, Langkawi has rapidly built expensive and luxurious hotels, especially on Chenang Beach, which is a tourist attraction. My homestay is located in the village, and no one is interested because tourists are more interested in accommodation near the beach and have other facilities, such as restaurants. We are in the village, with fewer choices. Two years before the pandemic, we had less response. Due to the COVID-19, we were empty. I do not know how long this situation will continue. Only due to team spirit did the participants maintain the status of this homestay. This homestay is an effort to earn additional or side income only. If we want to make it primary, it cannot meet our needs as no tourists are arriving. We also face competition from hotels that offer better accommodation, while homestay participants in the present circumstances bring their respective features. We maintain this homestay business only because other homestay participants move to other fields to increase their income. During COVID-19, the homestay operators do activities such as sea activities, cake baking and others that are common to them. Nevertheless, I feel happy because they are still eager to revive this homestay programme at any time.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Worst still, there were no tourists at all during this COVID-19. It was as if there was no homestay business here. We are determined to keep the business alive so that this homestay can operate again after COVID-19 or the next two years. If there is no pandemic, I think the number of tourists will still decline. Hence, we need to do something to reintroduce homestays in Sungai Tau to tourists. Income before the pandemic was already low, although there were tourists. It is a struggle to attract the tourists as the village is far from the town and the beach, though the village has its attractive nature such as the waterfall, hot water spring and the mangrove. We are determined to continue this homestay business. The average income a house can reach is usually in a month is RM100-RM200.

Government assistance during the pandemic and way forward after the pandemic

I think the authority can help in terms of promotion by offering projects with the universities and other departments that can bring in both domestic and international tourists. This also will motivate the homestay operators to run the activities as before the pandemic. Secondly, infrastructure in homestays should be improvised. The homestay room is not as cheerful as before. Hence, I think they should make an effort to help these operators cheer up the homestay atmosphere. Thirdly, the



authority should help in beautifying the village. For example, this village has tourist attractions, namely Durian Berangin, Paya Bakau (mangrove), and Jungle Tracking. Financial assistance is crucial as we have no direct income. Thus, we cannot spare capital to upgrade this village. Finally, the competition with the illegal homestays which are mushrooming is a real challenge. I suggest the authority take firm action against the unauthorised homestays.

4.2.4 Interviewee 4

Introduction

My task focuses on the development agenda. Among my job scope is to organise homestay events, activities with the students' tourism clubs, and industry training under the "Visit My Village" project. We have seventeen homestays in Kedah and five in Langkawi. Kampung Relau homestay in Bandar Bahru Kedah, is one of the most established homestays. This homestay's speciality is durian growth. The Wang Tok Rendong is the second most advanced homestay, and its speciality is offering ethnic dancing. The traditional dance attracts many from Singapore.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The tourism industry was significantly impacted by the pandemic since the inception of the disease. The industry is also the slowest industry to recover from the situation. As a consequence, certain travel agents and hotels have closed down their businesses. The homestay business is only a part-time activity for the house owner. The majority of the homestay operators have another form of income, and this homestay business is their alternative source of revenue. Therefore, the impact of the pandemic on these operators is minimal, as revenue from homestay business is not their main source of income. The operators also sell the products such as traditional cookies, cakes and chips online, in which they earn extra money during the closure period.



Government assistance during the pandemic and way forward after the pandemic

Every year, a financial budget is set aside for the "Visit My Village" program. This budget is mostly spent to upgrade skills or provide training to homestay operators. The top priority in training is English communication so that they would be at ease speaking with the international tourists. Thus, we co-organize English Communication courses with the local universities. We also collaborated with Homestay Relau in Kedah to teach the basic Japanese language as well as the polite culture of Japanese tourists, as the majority of visitors to Homestay Relau were Japanese. Next, among the incentive that the government had to offer was conducting the courses, outside the homestay area, such as in Cameron Highlands. The expenses were borne by the government, including food and lodging. The relevant authority also had offered an online marketing course that exposed these operators to how to market their products through online platforms such as Facebook. In addition, we also offer basic courses in traditional massage and reflexology as an add-on service to the homestay. The basic room cleaning and table setting classes course were organized by a hospitality college. The relevant agency envisioned a hotel-class housekeeping service, despite the fact that the operators offer a stay in traditional or kampong houses.

Among the challenges in monitoring homestay businesses is the ageing participants. The older homestay operators have difficulty adapting to new technologies. Even though we have provided many courses via online systems for the improvement of technology, the people in the Lowlands and Highlands are getting older and age. We've also launched an initiative to recruit second-generation homestay entrepreneurs. We started this program two years ago, and during the course, the second-generation homestay entrepreneurs were welcomed to assist the older operators in the digitalization initiatives. The homestay business is voluntary participation, thus most of them did not do online marketing. The majority of the homestays are located in rural areas, which means less internet coverage at their location. The relevant agency has taken some initiatives to overcome this issue in this regard.

5. CONCLUSION

The homestay operators have hardly earned any income during the pandemic, as per the interview findings. Most of the operators conduct the homestay businesses as a part-time income. The respondents suggested that the authority provide financial assistance to the operators to improve the homestay's infrastructure and upgrade the village's atmosphere to attract more tourists in the future. In June 2021, MOTAC announced that a "green bubble" strategy would be launched in Langkawi to rebuild confidence among international and domestic tourists to revive tourism activities. The island can reopen to tourists when the community has achieved herd immunity. Moreover, only tourists who have received two doses of COVID-19 vaccines can visit this tourist destination. Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri, Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture, announced the launch of a "green bubble" strategy in Langkawi which permitted travel between states where there are fewer than 40 active Covid-19 cases, with the aim to re-establish trust among international and domestic tourists and rejuvenate tourism. The project, which was set to start in September 2021,



was predicated on the assumption that by then, 80% of the island's population have been immunised, resulting in herd immunity. According to Nancy, Langkawi was chosen for the pilot project because it is remote, has a small population, and only has one entry and exit point (Bernama, 2021).

Homestay is a very unique and attractive program. Homestay encourages community engagement and involvement. It offers the experience of living in the village or countryside with the villagers, the learning process of culture and the enjoyment of natural and beautiful ambience. It also offers income generation to the community. Thus, various actors e.g. Government, schools and higher learning institutions must play their roles to assist the homestay participants or operators to ensure the success of these noble projects.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

The interviews were conducted online and face-to-face (within a limited period) during the period of the pandemic. The researchers opined that more interviews could be conducted if undertaken in a normal situation and with more participants. Comprehensive information can be gathered if questionnaires are distributed to the respective homestay operators to obtain their perspectives.

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