

Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services in Malaysia Opportunities and Challenges for the Tourism Industry

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ABSTRACT

Islam is a religion that emphasizes compassion, dignity, and respect for human values, and these principles are increasingly reflected in the development of Muslim friendly hospitality services. In Malaysia, the demand for such services has grown significantly in tandem with the global expansion of Islamic tourism and the rising expectations of Muslim travelers for faith-consistent facilities and experiences. This paper examines Muslim friendly hospitality services in Malaysia by analysing the main opportunities they create for the tourism industry and the key challenges that constrain their effective implementation. The study employs a qualitative literature review method, drawing on primary sources such as books, official policy documents, national standards, research reports, and journal articles related to Islamic tourism and hospitality. The findings show that Muslim friendly hospitality has the potential to strengthen Malaysia's position as a leading Islamic tourism hub, deepen Shariah compliance in hospitality operations, enhance service quality, and build trust among Muslim travelers through facilities and services that are aligned with their religious commitments. At the same time, the sector faces challenges that include non-uniform implementation of standards, limited awareness and capacity among industry players, and the need for stronger harmonisation with international frameworks such as OIC/SMIIC. From the perspective of Islamic law and the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, Muslim friendly hospitality seeks to uphold dignity, equality, and well-being, ensuring that tourism services support spiritual fulfilment while remaining competitive and sustainable. This study contributes to the literature on Islamic tourism and offers practical insights for policy makers, regulators, and industry stakeholders in advancing Muslim friendly hospitality in Malaysia.

Keywords: Muslim friendly hospitality, Islamic tourism, opportunities, *maqāṣid al-shariah*

INTRODUCTION

Islam is a religion that embodies *rahmatan li al-ālamīn*, bringing mercy and guidance to humanity and promoting dignity, compassion, and respect for human values (Aisha Y. Musa Musa,). These principles are not only reflected in daily worship but also extend to socio-economic practices, including the way hospitality and tourism are managed in Muslim societies (Mohamed Battour and Mohd Nazari Ismail ,2016). In fact, the spirit of *rahmah* underpins a holistic framework that connects spiritual devotion with social responsibility, reminding Muslims that their conduct in business, service delivery, and interactions with others must always reflect compassion and fairness. In the context of hospitality, this means that treating guests with dignity, ensuring their comfort, and respecting their needs are not merely commercial transactions but religiously inspired obligations. This holistic worldview positions hospitality not only as an economic activity but also as an integral part of religious life, demonstrating how Islamic teachings provide guidance that encompasses both material and spiritual dimensions.

In recent years, Muslim friendly hospitality has emerged as an important feature of the global tourism industry, shaped by the rising number of Muslim travelers who seek services consistent with their faith (Teoman Duman,2019) . The demand for halal-certified food, accessible prayer facilities, gender-sensitive recreational activities, and family-oriented spaces reflects the growing awareness among Muslim travelers of their rights to

enjoy tourism without compromising religious observances. International reports such as the *Global Muslim Travel Index* have documented how the purchasing power of Muslim tourists has created a niche market segment that is now among the fastest growing in the world(Mohammad Zaini Yahaya, Muhammad Adib Samsudin, And Mohd Izhar Ariff Mohd Kashim,2020) This growth also demonstrates how religious values can generate economic opportunities when translated into industry standards that ensure comfort, safety, and authenticity. It further shows that the global tourism market is increasingly attentive to cultural and religious sensitivities, with destinations that provide Muslim friendly services gaining a competitive edge in attracting a diverse pool of travelers.

Malaysia has been at the forefront of this development by institutionalising standards and policies to accommodate the needs of Muslim tourists(OthmanRashidi,2015) As a Muslim majority country with a strong Islamic identity, Malaysia positions itself as a hub for Islamic tourism, ensuring that hospitality services such as accommodation, food, and travel facilities are compliant with Shariah principles(Zahrah Fatimah Ariff Irshad, Noorul Huda Sahari, and Anis Husna Abdul Halim,2022). This positioning not only provides assurance for Muslim travelers but also strengthens Malaysia's competitiveness in the international tourism market (Marcus L. Stephenson,2014) .The country's success in securing the top ranking in the *Global Muslim Travel Index* for several consecutive years illustrates how consistent policy support, institutional frameworks, and cultural identity can be combined to create global recognition. The institutionalisation of the Muslim Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) scheme and the Malaysian Standard MS 2610:2015 reflects a systematic attempt to establish uniform guidelines that enhance industry credibility. Malaysia's leadership has also inspired other Muslim-majority and non-Muslim countries to emulate its model, with nations such as Japan and South Korea adapting their tourism services to appeal to Muslim travelers. This diffusion effect indicates the potential for Malaysia not only to strengthen its domestic hospitality ecosystem but also to influence international practices in the sector.

The development of Muslim friendly hospitality reflects a long-standing cultural and religious tradition of welcoming guests, which in Islam is regarded as both an ethical duty and a spiritual practice(Maryam Taha Manna,2020). Hospitality in Islamic tradition is linked to prophetic teachings that emphasize generosity, respect for visitors, and the moral obligation to protect travelers from hardship. By translating these values into modern standards, Malaysia demonstrates that Muslim friendly hospitality is not an innovation detached from history, but a continuation of deeply rooted ethical practices. At the same time, this connection to Islamic tradition reinforces the authenticity of Malaysia's model, ensuring that the hospitality industry does not merely adopt Muslim friendly branding for commercial gain but embodies genuine religious values. In the modern tourism context, however, Muslim travelers often face challenges when their faith-based needs are not adequately addressed, such as limited access to halal food, prayer facilities, and family-friendly spaces (Myzatul Aini Ma'asor @ Mansor et al,2023). The persistence of these challenges underlines the necessity of comprehensive standards, such as MS 2610 and MFAR, to close the gap between conventional tourism practices and the requirements of Muslim travelers.

Academic discussions on Muslim friendly hospitality have examined various aspects, including the role of Islamic law in shaping hospitality practices, the contribution of zakat and waqf in supporting tourism initiatives, and the marketing potential of Islamic branding in expanding the tourism sector(Mohd. Rizal Razalli,2019).These studies reveal significant opportunities for Malaysia, particularly in building a niche market, enhancing Shariah compliance, and increasing trust among Muslim tourists (Mohammad zainiyahaya, Muhammad Adib Samsudin,Mohd Izhar Ariff Mohd Kashim,2020). At the same time, they identify challenges such as uneven implementation across sectors, limited industry awareness, and the need for alignment with international standards like OIC/SMIIC (Arissa López Hernández,2022). The academic literature has thus far laid an important foundation, but there remains a need for more comprehensive and integrative analysis. The identification of this research gap underscores the importance of moving beyond descriptive accounts to critical and systematic evaluations that can provide concrete recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders in the tourism industry.

The framework of *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah* provides a meaningful lens to assess Muslim friendly hospitality, since its objectives include the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property (Noorliza Karia and Firdaus Ahmad Fauzi,2019).Muslim friendly services such as halal food provision, prayer space availability, and family friendly environments directly correspond to these objectives by ensuring the fulfilment of spiritual

and social needs (Ismah Osman et al.,2024) For example, the provision of halal-certified restaurants corresponds to the protection of religion (*hifz al-dīn*), safe and hygienic facilities relate to the protection of life (*hifz al-nafs*), and family-oriented accommodations uphold the protection of lineage (*hifz al-nasl*). These examples demonstrate that Muslim friendly hospitality is not only a response to market demand but also a manifestation of the holistic values embedded in Islamic law. When services fall short of these objectives, they risk undermining the credibility of Muslim friendly tourism and reducing it to a superficial marketing tool. Analysing the sector through the perspective of opportunities and challenges therefore highlights its dual character: on the one hand, it is an economic driver with vast market potential, and on the other hand, it is an ethical and spiritual commitment that ensures sustainability, inclusivity, and the preservation of human dignity. In Malaysia, this balance between profitability and Shariah authenticity is central to positioning Muslim friendly hospitality as a model that reflects both economic pragmatism and Islamic values.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a literature review approach. Primary sources such as books, official policy documents, government guidelines, and journal articles were examined to trace the development of Muslim friendly hospitality services in Malaysia. Particular attention was given to national standards, including the Malaysian Standard MS 2610:2015, and institutional initiatives such as the Muslim Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) programme introduced by the Islamic Tourism Centre. These sources were analysed to understand how definitions, policies, and recognition frameworks have shaped the growth of Muslim friendly hospitality in Malaysia and positioned the country as a global leader in Islamic tourism (López Hernández).

The analysis also drew on comparative and normative perspectives. International frameworks such as OIC/SMIIC standards were reviewed alongside Malaysia's domestic policies to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and adaptation. The study further employed the framework of *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah* to interpret the ethical and religious dimensions of Muslim friendly hospitality, linking Shariah objectives with the operationalisation of tourism services. By synthesising evidence from these multiple sources, the study critically evaluates the opportunities created by Muslim friendly hospitality for Malaysia's tourism sector, as well as the challenges that hinder its consistent implementation and sustainability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Opportunities of Muslim Friendly Hospitality in Malaysia

The development of Muslim friendly hospitality in Malaysia has created multiple strategic opportunities that extend beyond tourism and contribute directly to the country's broader socio-economic agenda (Karia and Ahmad Fauzi) .The first opportunity lies in the establishment of clear standards and formal recognition mechanisms. The introduction of MS 2610:2015 and the Muslim Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) programme represent pioneering initiatives, making Malaysia the first country to institutionalise a comprehensive standard for Muslim friendly hospitality(Osman et al) . These standards go beyond halal food requirements to include accommodation, transport, wellness, recreation, and service delivery that emphasises modesty and ethics (Huseyin Pamukcu and Mehmet Sariisik, 2021) Such clarity provides service providers with operational guidelines while building confidence among travelers. This positions Malaysia not merely as a service provider but as a thought leader whose model can be emulated internationally.

The second opportunity arises from policy direction and institutional support. Malaysia, through the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture and the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC), has integrated Muslim friendly hospitality into its national tourism strategy (Yaty Sulaiman et al.,2023). Its consistent ranking as the top destination in the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) demonstrates the effectiveness of these policies in elevating Malaysia's profile on the global stage. Strong policy frameworks and institutional support send a clear message to investors and stakeholders that Muslim friendly tourism is not a passing trend but a long-term national priority. This creates an enabling ecosystem where hotels, travel agencies, and local operators feel encouraged to invest in compliance and innovation.

Religious principles provide another critical opportunity when Muslim friendly hospitality is examined through the framework of *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*. The provision of halal-certified food, prayer facilities, and family-oriented environments reflect the preservation of religion, life, and lineage (*hifz al-dīn, al-nafs, al-nasl*) (Yuhanis Abdul Aziz and Nyen Vui Chok, 2013). This alignment strengthens Malaysia's unique selling proposition compared to destinations that focus primarily on profit. By embedding *maqāṣid* into hospitality practices, Malaysia not only caters to the spiritual needs of Muslim travelers but also attracts tourists seeking ethical, safe, and family-friendly services. The integration of Shariah objectives ensures that Muslim friendly hospitality is not just a business model but also a value-driven framework, which deepens consumer trust and loyalty.

The economic potential of Muslim friendly hospitality is particularly significant. The global Muslim travel market is projected to reach USD 225 billion by 2028, and Malaysia is strategically positioned to capture a substantial share of this growth (Boshra Mohajer et al., 2022). The benefits extend across multiple sectors, including hotels, restaurants, airlines, retail, and local communities. By promoting Muslim friendly services, Malaysia not only increases tourism receipts but also strengthens local supply chains, supports halal product development, and creates employment opportunities. Importantly, this economic opportunity is not limited to attracting travelers from Muslim-majority countries. It also encompasses Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries such as Europe, Australia, Japan, and South Korea, thereby widening Malaysia's potential customer base.

Muslim friendly hospitality also aligns strongly with global sustainable development and ethical tourism agendas (Martina Bosone, Francesca Nocca, and Barbara Pirelli, 2024). Its emphasis on cleanliness, fairness, safety, and family values resonates with contemporary trends toward responsible and sustainable tourism. This alignment gives Malaysia the chance to frame its Muslim friendly services not only as Shariah-compliant but also as socially responsible, environmentally conscious, and community-oriented. Such dual branding increases Malaysia's competitiveness, as it appeals to both religiously motivated travelers and the growing number of tourists who seek meaningful and ethical travel experiences.

Finally, the recognition of existing weaknesses within the sector should also be understood as an opportunity for improvement. Identifying issues such as limited industry awareness, uneven service delivery, and insufficient workforce training allows Malaysia to design more targeted interventions. Through inclusive training, expanded outreach, and stronger enforcement mechanisms, the country can strengthen its leadership role in Muslim friendly hospitality. By framing weaknesses as opportunities for policy refinement and industry development, Malaysia can ensure the resilience of its Muslim friendly ecosystem and safeguard its leadership position in the long term (Suddin Lada et al., 2024).

Challenges of Muslim Friendly Hospitality in Malaysia

Although Malaysia has made significant progress in establishing itself as a leader in Muslim friendly hospitality, a number of complex challenges continue to hinder the consistent growth of the sector (Ilhaamie Abdul Ghani Azmi, Hasan Al-Banna Mohamed, and Zarina Kassim, 2024). One of the most pressing concerns is the uneven adoption of standards across the industry. While the MS 2610:2015 standard and the MFAR recognition programme provide a clear framework, their implementation is far from uniform. In major cities and international hubs, hotels and service providers may successfully integrate Muslim friendly features, but in smaller towns and rural destinations the adoption is often incomplete or inconsistent. This lack of uniformity creates gaps in service delivery, leading to variations in visitor experiences. For international travelers, inconsistency can result in confusion or disappointment, ultimately weakening the credibility of Malaysia's branding as a reliable Muslim friendly destination.

Another major challenge lies in the level of industry readiness. Many small and medium-sized enterprises, which constitute a large proportion of Malaysia's tourism sector, often lack the financial resources, staff expertise, and training required to meet Muslim friendly standards (Alexander Trupp et al., 2025). While larger hotel chains may have the capacity to implement comprehensive compliance, smaller operators face barriers such as the cost of certification, lack of access to training programmes, and insufficient institutional support. This imbalance risks creating a two-tier system where only larger, urban-based providers can sustain Muslim

friendly recognition while smaller businesses fall behind. Such disparities undermine the goal of creating a fully integrated Muslim friendly ecosystem across the country.

Malaysia also faces growing competition from other countries that are aggressively pursuing the Muslim travel market. Indonesia and Turkey, for example, have developed comprehensive strategies that combine infrastructure investment with strong international marketing campaigns (Mohd Hafiz Hanafiah, Mohmed Razip Hasan, and Ahmad Puad Mat Som, 2022). Non-Muslim countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Thailand are also rapidly improving their services for Muslim travelers, introducing halal food options, prayer facilities, and tailored tour packages (Makmun Syadullah and Dhani Setyawan, 2021). This growing competition means that Malaysia cannot rely solely on its first-mover advantage. Instead, it must continuously innovate and ensure that its services remain attractive and differentiated. Without strategic innovation, Malaysia risks losing its long-standing position as the global leader in Muslim friendly tourism.

A further challenge relates to authenticity. The rapid commercialisation of Muslim friendly hospitality has created opportunities for branding, but it has also opened the door to superficial adoption. Some businesses may market themselves as Muslim friendly without genuinely adhering to Shariah requirements, offering only cosmetic adjustments rather than substantive compliance. This phenomenon, often described as the dilution of authenticity, threatens consumer trust. Muslim travelers, who base their choices on confidence in Shariah-compliant services, may feel misled if the reality does not match expectations. Once trust is eroded, rebuilding credibility becomes extremely difficult. Therefore, maintaining authenticity in branding and practice is essential for the sustainability of Malaysia's Muslim friendly hospitality sector.

Finally, Malaysia must grapple with the challenge of aligning global standards with local religious interpretations. International frameworks such as OIC/SMIIC provide broad guidelines that are meant to harmonise Muslim friendly tourism practices across countries (Paolo Pietro Biancone et al, 2019). However, these global benchmarks may not always align neatly with Malaysia's socio-religious context or the interpretations of local religious authorities. Differences in interpretation can cause confusion among service providers who are uncertain about which standard to prioritise. This tension can also affect travelers, who may encounter variations in what is considered acceptable or compliant. Ensuring coherence between international recognition and local authenticity is a delicate task, yet one that is essential if Malaysia is to sustain its credibility in the global tourism industry (Desiderio Juan García-Almeida, 2019).

In summary, the challenges facing Muslim friendly hospitality in Malaysia are multifaceted, spanning issues of consistency, industry capacity, international competition, authenticity, and the harmonisation of standards. These challenges are not insurmountable, but they require sustained effort, coordinated policy responses, and active engagement with both domestic and international stakeholders. If left unaddressed, they have the potential to weaken Malaysia's leadership in Muslim friendly tourism. However, if managed strategically, overcoming these obstacles could further consolidate Malaysia's reputation as a pioneer in the field (Alfred Gerstl, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Muslim friendly hospitality services in Malaysia present both significant opportunities and critical challenges for the tourism industry. The establishment of MS 2610:2015 and the MFAR recognition programme, supported by the Islamic Tourism Centre and the Ministry of Tourism, has enabled Malaysia to pioneer a structured framework that integrates Shariah compliance into hospitality (Rashidi Othman et al., , 2015) . These initiatives, together with the incorporation of *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah* principles, strengthen Malaysia's competitive advantage and align the sector with global ethical and sustainable tourism trends (Abdullahi A. An-Na‘im,2017).

At the same time, Malaysia faces challenges that could undermine its leadership. Inconsistent implementation across states, limited readiness among small and medium enterprises, intensifying competition from regional and non-Muslim destinations, and the risk of superficial branding highlight the fragility of current achievements. Moreover, tensions between international standards and local religious interpretations, combined with weak enforcement mechanisms, create further obstacles to coherence and credibility (Zahrah Fatimah Ariff Irshad, Noorul Huda Sahari, and Anis Husna Abdul Halim, 2022).

Moving forward, Malaysia's success will depend on addressing these challenges through inclusive policies, stronger governance, and innovation. By doing so, Muslim friendly hospitality can continue to drive economic growth while reflecting Malaysia's religious identity and commitment to ethical tourism.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop a unified national standard for Muslim friendly hospitality

Government agencies such as MOTAC, JAKIM, and JSM should strengthen and harmonise existing guidelines into a clear national standard for Muslim friendly hospitality, aligned with international frameworks such as OIC/SMIIC, to reduce variation in implementation across states and industry segments.

2. Enhance training and awareness among industry players

Systematic training programmes on Shariah-compliant practices, Muslim friendly facilities, and maqāṣid al-shari‘ah should be offered to hotel operators, tour agencies, homestay owners, and tourism frontliners to improve their understanding and capacity to cater to Muslim travellers.

3. Strengthen certification, monitoring, and incentives

A more robust certification and monitoring mechanism for Muslim friendly hospitality services should be established, supported by incentives such as tax reliefs, marketing advantages, or recognition schemes to encourage wider industry participation and compliance.

4. Promote innovation and digital solutions in Muslim friendly services

Stakeholders should invest in digital platforms, mobile applications, and online rating systems that provide reliable information on Muslim friendly facilities, prayer spaces, halal food, and Shariah-compliant services, thereby increasing visibility and trust among Muslim tourists.

5. Foster multi-stakeholder and international collaboration

Collaboration between policy makers, tourism boards, Shariah scholars, industry associations, and academic institutions should be intensified, including partnerships with other Muslim friendly destinations, to share best practices, conduct joint research, and continuously refine Malaysia's position as a leading hub for Muslim friendly hospitality.

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