



Homestays - Community programme or alternative accommodation? A re-evaluation of concept and execution

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Abstract

Homestay programmes - which form a part of Community-based tourism (CBT) vital in the development agenda of Third World Countries- provide tourists with a unique opportunity to experience the atmosphere, lifestyle practices and activities of rural communities in the countryside. The Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia has drawn up a set of guidelines and requirements for operating a homestay program that must be adhered to before approval is granted. The question that has arisen is whether homestay programs as practised in Malaysia truly present visitors with the opportunity to experience the host community's lifestyle, or merely serve as an alternative form of accommodation. This article overviews the various scenarios and dilemmas faced in implementing the homestay programmes in the Malaysian context, the causes that lead to its 'abuse', and some practical solutions that may be proposed to address the arising issues and challenges in an integrated manner.

Keywords: alternative accommodation, Community-based tourism (CBT), community lifestyle, homestay, host community, local experience

Introduction

Community-based tourism (CBT) is one of the sub-sectors of tourism being highlighted in the development agenda of Third World Countries. It encompasses several aspects namely environment, society and cultural integrity. The original aim of introducing CBT was to provide a source of income for rural populations by encouraging tourist visits to these communities and allow the locals to provide accommodation for these visitors. CBT is a practical method for the development of local communities because it empowers these communities to determine the rate of development, implement initiatives to protect the environment and promote awareness through cultural exchange (Janie, 2009). According to Amran (2009), community-based tourism (CBT) is an inclusive mechanism able to develop the potential and ability of local communities in managing tourism resources. One of the strategic goals outlined in the Rural Tourism Master Plan is to highlight the homestay program as one of the key products to be developed and strengthened.

The government has allocated MYR50 million to promote Malaysian homestay programs at the international level, as well as develop and manage the quality of the program. A total of MYR28.9 million has been allocated to achieve this under the 9th Malaysia Plan (RMK-9) covering the period of 2006-2010. Additional funds have also been provided to upgrade basic homestay infrastructure such as roads, community halls and open stages as well as bathrooms in a 'one-off grant' of MYR5,000 to each homestay program. The government has also provided funding of MYR5,000 through the New Homestay

Policy Provisions 2009 and allocated MYR10 million to the sector under the Homestay Second Economic Stimulus Package 2010 (Harian Metro, May 6, 2010). Homestay programs can thus serve as a catalyst to improve the socio-economic status of rural populations through tourism. Nevertheless, its success or failure depends largely on agreement and cooperation between villagers and the respective agencies involved (Johan Afendi & Mohamad Zaki, 2009). This article will firstly explore the concept of homestay and its guidelines before reviewing its implementation in the Malaysian context.

Definitions of homestay program

The concept of homestay holidays began in the late 1970s in Europe. However, there is no global and specific interpretation of homestay because it differs from one country to another. In Australia, the program is known as farm tourism. Its concept is similar to that of homestay in Malaysia, namely the provision of sleeping space, breakfast and participation in activities with family farm operators. Some other terms used for the homestay concept include “cultural stay”, “host families”, “farm stay”, “bed and breakfast”, “guest house”, “self-catering”, “small hotels” and “united states bed and breakfasts”. In addition, there are several other concepts involving homestay such as cultural homestay, heritage homestay, educational homestay, leisure stay, culture stay, volunteer stay and urban stay.

A homestay refers to the experience of tourists or visitors living together with a selected host family while interacting and experiencing the day to day life of the family, including their cultural lifestyle (Kalsom & Nor Ashikin, 2005; Amran, 2006; Phonwiset et al., 2008; Muhammad Farid, 2009; Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia, 2011). The visitors will have the opportunity to participate in routine activities of the community as well as interact with the hosts in the exchange of knowledge, culture and experience. As such, homestay programs can indirectly function as a tool of development by increasing awareness among rural communities on preserving the cleanliness of their environment. They can also act as a catalyst to enhance learning, exchanging and strengthening of communal values as well as preserving lifestyle and culture. The program can also serve as a basic guide in managing natural resources and enhance the distribution of income to the local population thereby reducing the outflow of economic benefits.

In essence, homestays cannot simply be classified as a form of accommodation because of its emphasis on the concept of lifestyle and experience, encompassing local culture and economic activities (Kalsom & Nor Ashikin, 2005). International tourists participate in homestays to experience for themselves the atmosphere of the village and its community's lifestyle. There are also visitors who join the program for cross-cultural study of language and rural communities' lifestyles. For domestic tourists, community programs and motivational courses also often involve homestay programs as the main package.

Background and development of homestay programs in Malaysia

The homestay program which was officially introduced in Malaysia since 1995 has received an encouraging response, attracting 143,404 local and international tourists who experienced life in rural areas throughout the country between January and October 2010. About 37,320 of them were international tourists, accounting for an increase of 51 percent compared to the same period during the previous year. The majority of the tourists were from Singapore, Japan, Europe, Australia and Korea (Ministry of Tourism and Culture of Malaysia, 2011). The total income of homestay operators also recorded a notable increase of 11.5% yielding MYR8.9 million in 2010 compared with MYR8 million for the same period in 2009. The average occupancy rate in homestays also showed an increase from 19 percent for the period January to October 2009 to 22.7 percent during the same period in 2010. It was reported that homestays can yield a lucrative income of about MYR8,000 a month to the operators

(Homestay Performance Report: MTCM , 2011). According to statistics available up to October 2010, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture has registered 138 homestay program, 2,987 homestay operators and 4,042 rooms in 225 villages across the country which adhere to the prevailing rules and conditions (Ministry of Tourism and Culture of Malaysia, 2011).

International tourist arrivals have increased from year to year, in line with the aspirations of the Ministry of Tourism and Culture of Malaysia and Malaysian Homestay Association that this program should contribute towards the development and promotion of rural tourism, In 2006, a total of 10,038 foreign tourists participated in this program. The number of international tourists then doubled to 20,361 people in 2007. In 2008, the number of foreign tourist arrivals to homestays increased to 23,517. It was found that this program not only attracts recurring tourists but also student groups during the school holidays, for example, students from China. Amran (2006) also noted that a Japanese youth exchange program in Malaysia exemplified the objectives of homestay programs whereby the program became a platform to introduce the local way of life and local culture and traditions. In fact, many participants from these school groups return to visit Malaysia again with family and friends after experiencing the initial homestay program.

Concepts and guidelines for homestay

A village selected to participate in the homestay program must meet specific criteria and comply with guidelines issued by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia in order for homestay programs to be carried out effectively and efficiently (Maimunah & Abdul Rahim, 2009). These criteria can be divided into three main components, namely Products, Participants and Principles (3P). There are several resources or attractions that can be used as a homestay *product* in a village such as its environment – jungle, hills, rivers and lakes – the unique culture of the community, architecture of the houses and the village, historical sites or structures, arts and crafts, cultural activities and music, specific rituals or ceremonies and food and drink. There are three categories of homestay *participants* namely participants interested to be entrepreneurs or homestay operators in selected villages, participants considered as 'wait and see' and participants who do not want to get involved due to political differences, beliefs, race, as well as age and health. Among the important aspects of *principles* that need to be considered are leadership, personality, integrity, knowledge and social network.

According to Kalsom and Nor Ashikin (2005), the homestay program is open to all Malaysians, and those who wish to participate are required to register with the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia. They should also engage with other parties involved in the tourism sector on the aspects of price, food, transportation and other items relevant to program packages. Several features should be present in the villages and houses of homestay operators including basic infrastructure, cleanliness, security, good accessibility, attractive landscapes, signage and interesting products (food, crafts, culture, traditional games and so on). The homestay operators' premises should also be clean and comfortable especially the bedrooms, bathroom, living room, kitchen area and surroundings.

Services and hospitality, food, peaceful environment and security are important elements required of a homestay house (Muhammad Farid, 2009). As such, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia has specified a number of criteria to be fulfilled before a village is selected to participate in the homestay program. These include easy access, separate bedrooms and proper bathrooms while the homestay host must not possess any criminal records nor suffer from any disease. The security and cleanliness of the premises must also be of a satisfactory level. According to Nor Ashikin and Kalsom (2014), the success factors of the homestay programs largely depends on the collective efforts from the local community. Their total commitment, acceptance, participation and cooperation for the programs are pre-requisites to success, otherwise the program will not take off effectively.

Rules and regulations

The implementation of homestay in Malaysia is subject to the rules and regulations set and constantly monitored by the responsible parties from time to time. To ensure the success of a homestay, professional management must be prioritised by the operators. Homestays must meet the rules and regulations to ensure the comfort and safety of tourists. Below are the rules and regulations for homestay programs as prescribed by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia.

1. *Residential location*: The location must be in a suitable area in terms of transportation. It should be free from pollution and have a suitable environment besides displaying the lifestyle of Malaysian society.
2. *Basic facilities*: The residential unit designated as a homestay should be of an appropriate size, with visitors housed in separate rooms. To ensure the comfort of the host's family members and guests, the maximum number of rooms permitted for visitors is limited to three decent sized bedrooms. The visitors' comfort should be prioritised and the premises must have proper bathrooms, toilet facilities, dining and living room as well as other basic amenities. The host should also supply meals, towels, mosquito coils, mosquito nets and *kain sarong* upon the visitors' request. Basic facilities should be well maintained to ensure the cleanliness of the premises and the comfort of the visitors.
3. *Cleanliness*: The home environment should be clean and clear of rubbish so that it does not become a breeding ground for mosquitoes and flies. Efficient waste disposal and drainage should be ensured to avoid unpleasant odours.
4. *Safety*: Insurance coverage is necessary to protect visitors and all parties in the event of an accident. For tour groups brought in by travel agencies, insurance coverage should be handled by the tour company. The host is advised to take out an insurance policy from any registered insurance company for the protection of individual visitors. Attention should also be paid to safety measures such as fire prevention.
5. *Guidelines for food preparation*: The storage and handling of food and running of food premises must be paid close attention. The cleanliness of these premises needs to be maintained and all unused containers (boxes, cans, bottles, etc.) which can become a breeding ground for 'vermin' such as mice and insects should be disposed of properly. Garbage must also be collected and disposed of frequently while waste disposal areas and containers must be cleaned regularly.
6. *Equipment and appliances*: All equipment and appliances used in the preparation and handling of food should be appropriate to prevent food poisoning. Equipment and appliances should be washed after use and kept in sanitary conditions.

Issues and challenges of homestay programmes in Malaysia

Although the homestay program officially commenced since 1995 and the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia has issued guidelines for its implementation, the question remains as to whether the homestay program is executed as a community program or whether it is merely treated as an alternative form of accommodation. In fact, some elements of the implementation of homestay do not match its original conception as a community program. The requisite elements of a homestay program should be fully adhered to in the organisation and not only during the initial application for licences. The organising committee to oversee homestay program may be formed either separately or together with the village

development and security committee (JKKK). This is important because JKKK can serve as a mediator and provide information about the program to the local community. The Homestay Program Committee in fact can work with several agencies in JKKK. This will encourage local residents, particularly women and young people to participate in the homestay program either directly or indirectly. In reality however, there are homestay programs which are monopolised by a selected few individuals, involving only a small segment of the local community while side-lining the JKKK. This scenario does not help to realise the homestay as a community program. According to Kalsom (2011), there is also a tendency for the hosts and participants to be manipulated instead of being motivated to participate and support the homestay program. It is noticeable that they have been persuaded in certain instances to be involved in the program for the benefit of the leaders.

Only a few houses are chosen as homestay operators after undergoing the screening process by authorities including the Ministry of Tourism and Culture of Malaysia. In some cases, homestay programs are initiated by departments or institutions of higher learning who organize programs with homestay as part of the package. Typically, the number of rooms in the houses of homestay operators are not sufficient, especially if each operator can only provide one room and two beds. There have been cases where international tourists turn up in large numbers of 80 or more. In such circumstances, even the houses of village residents who are not involved as homestay program operators are roped in to provide accommodation for the large numbers of tourists. As such, the condition in these other houses not registered as homestay operators could not be ensured to comply with the specifications in terms of the level of cleanliness, security, convenience and amenities provided. This does not only contravene the concept of homestay as prescribed by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia, but can also give rise to complaints from the visitors especially if they had been expecting better conditions befitting the status of homestay.

When large-scale programs are organised at certain venues, the demand for accommodation will also increase. For example, Langkawi Island is famous for several international events such as the Le Tour de Langkawi, Langkawi Ironman Triathlon and Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA). These events result in high demand for accommodation while most hotels and resorts would already have been pre-booked and as such are unable to accommodate additional bookings. In such situations, some hotels, travel agencies or homestay operators themselves offer to supply alternative accommodation in the form of homestays. Often, homestay accommodation charges will increase from the normal rate when a middleman is involved but there is no alternative. In other situations such as during the nationwide general elections or local by-elections, the demand for homestays will increase dramatically due to limited availability of hotel accommodation especially in small towns or remote areas. The locals who have relatively modest private houses would also offer their houses as alternative accommodation during the campaign period before the election.

There are a number of homestay operators who provide more than a homestay house, or build extra space or extensions near the main house for additional accommodation; some even provide more rooms or beds than allowed. Under the guidelines drawn up by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, each house is only allowed to allocate two to three bedrooms, with one double bed or two single beds in each room. When these guidelines are not adhered to, homestay operators in the same village or adjoining vicinities would naturally feel dissatisfied, especially if the homestay program in that particular location proves to be more popular. There are also instances where homestays only function as guesthouses since the number of tourists who come to stay are not many, between 2 to 10 people. Often the homestay operators do not stay in the same premises as their guests but rather, stay next door or elsewhere and charge visitors only for accommodation and maybe meals without providing activities with the host or the local community. Thus, the concept of homestay as a community program is a non-entity in such situations.

Besides the examples given above, there are also cases of arbitrary abuse of the concept of homestay by outside parties involving their private business premises. In principle, homes selected to carry out the homestay program have undergone a rigorous selection process and screening; the selected homestay providers are required to participate in several courses and eventually awarded a certificate of registration

as homestay program operators. For example, there are three registered homestay programs in the state of Perlis: the Homestay Ujong Bukit, Paya Guring and Felda Mata Ayer (Jabil et al., 2011). Without proper validation and certificates, premises that do not meet this criteria should not be called homestay but instead "bed and breakfast" or guesthouses (Kalsom, 2010). In certain strategic locations such as places in proximity of higher learning institutions or where there is no hotel accommodation roadside signs advertising homestay accommodation can be seen along the way. It is doubtful that all these facilities have been screened and certified by the relevant authorities. It needs to be emphasised that the concept of homestay essentially involves interaction between homestay operators and guests, in addition to permitting guests to experience the daily lives and knowledge sharing besides showcasing traditional games, musical instruments, dance, food and local economic activities.

The 'homestay' concept is also used and abused by parties registered under other residential (accommodation) service businesses (Jabil & Suriani, 2014). For example, the high cost of running scuba diving based tourist activities in Mabul Island, Sabah has prompted some parties to offer alternative accommodation packages using the concept of 'homestay' which includes the provision of scuba diving activities at a cheaper rate than those offered by the resorts. The concept of homestay here consists of a longhouse with several rooms in a fishing village. The accommodation packages also offer scuba diving activities, snorkelling, island-hopping tours and meals. A similar situation can also be observed in several other tourist islands such as Perhentian Island, Redang Island, Tioman Island and Pangkor Island. In addition, there are resorts that use the concept of agro-based 'homestay', offering accommodation and agro-activities for visitors. The existence of such resort businesses that flout the requirement for registration and certification will impart a negative effect on the future of the homestay program which is part of the agenda given special attention in the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006 - 2010) and the Rural Tourism Master Plan.

A review of homestay implementation in Malaysia

There are two major issues that need to be resolved in order for the homestay to remain relevant as a community-based program in Malaysia, namely the reality of the execution of the homestay program as outlined by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture and the mushrooming of 'accommodation business' which abuse the name or brand of homestay.

Towards this end, the execution of the original homestay program should be examined and updated from various aspects, such as;

- (i) There should be clearer and more detailed guidelines than those currently issued by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture;
- (ii) Specific legal provisions to deal with the arbitrary use of the concept of homestay must be drawn up;
- (iii) Regular monitoring and enforcement must be carried out on private business premises using the name 'homestay'. The Ministry of Tourism and Culture also needs to be involved by:
- (iv) Providing advanced/specialty courses that allow homestay operators to remain competitive such as organising courses for them on integrity, training on website design and information technology, English language communication skills, marketing strategies, financial management and entrepreneurship programs;
- (v) Create other package deals for those interested in venturing into the business of private accommodation to avoid the abuse of the concept or the word 'homestay' as an easy means to attract customers;
- (vi) Provide guidelines for individuals who would like to offer alternative accommodation either in the form of private houses or small private resorts so that they do not abuse the 'homestay' brand name.

Those who abuse the name 'homestay' are found to be driven by four factors. Firstly, there is no other specific term that can be used to attract customers. Second, they are taking advantage because the 'homestay' brand is well-known and accepted. Third, there is no specific procedure for which they can apply in order to offer homestay-style resort or guesthouse services. Fourth, in the issue of processing license applications there is no strict enforcement as applications are still approved for resorts/ private homes using the term 'homestay' for their business even though the running of the business contravenes the concept of homestay as prescribed by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture.

Conclusion

The homestay program in Malaysia has contributed significantly to the development of local communities and the local economy, and contributed to their income since being introduced in 1995. Within this period however, some issues have cropped up which while not appearing serious initially, can create negative impacts in the long run. To overcome these issues, the actual concept of homestay should be emphasized and disseminated to prevent misunderstanding among the various stakeholders. Guidelines issued by the Ministry must be followed and updated to ensure that the homestay program remains competitive in the future. Finally, it should be reiterated that alternative forms of accommodation may be cheaper compared to homestays, however the experience of staying with properly trained hosts and the opportunity to experience first-hand a village atmosphere is something unique and memorable that should be preserved and maintained.

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