



Sport as a tourism attraction in Malaysia: Potential and prospects

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Abstract

Sport tourism has become a popular sub-sector in the tourism industry today. Until the early 1990s, tourism and sports existed as two distinct areas of activities but the success in organizing the World Conference on Sport Tourism in Barcelona, Spain 2001 has resulted in more serious attention being paid to this sector. Before, scholars, decision-makers and governments involved in the field of tourism and sports perceived their respective profits independently of one another; now it is realised that the benefits generated by the synergy of both is far greater. This study examines the development of sport tourism in Malaysia. It was found that the success in organizing the race Le Tour de Langkawi in 1996 was a turning point in the government's focus on the development of the sport tourism sector. Currently, Malaysia is known for organizing several world-class sport events, among them the Royal Langkawi International Regatta (January), Ironman Triathlon (February), Formula 1 Grand Prix Malaysia (March), FEI Showjumping World Cup (May), Petronas Primax 3 Merdeka Millennium Endurance Race (July), Super GT (August), Malaysian Motorcycle Grand Prix (September), A1GP Malaysia (November) and Monsoon Cup (December). All these world-class sporting events bring substantial returns to the society and the economy. The strengths of sports as a tourism attraction include the length of time in which the events take place, extensive publicity coverage through the print and electronic media, sponsorship from various domestic and multinational companies and business opportunities provided to local residents during the event.

Keywords: sport publicity, sport tourism attraction, sport tourism potential, sport tourism prospects, sport tourism, sport tourism synergy

Introduction

According to Bhatia (1986), tourism is a smokeless industry because there is no production process in a factory; the source of income is generated through a variety of services offered to tourists. Tourism is a combination of a variety of activities, services and industries that provide a travel experience encompassing transportation, accommodation, food and beverages, shopping, entertainment, activities and other hospitality services which are provided to an individual or groups of tourists who are away from home (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006). This concept is closely related to the core tourism model proposed by Medlik (1996). According to him, tourism is an industry that includes the firms and organizations providing services and features of tourism attractions to the tourists. Recently in Malaysia, one of the tourism sectors has been emphasized, namely tourism involving sport activities. Sport-based tourism has the potential to become a tourism product which can yield high economic returns to the country. The presence of large audiences and the involvement of domestic and international participants in sporting events have contributed to the national income. The earnings from tourism has increased continuously each year. This indicates that the tourism industry in Malaysia will continue to grow and potentially

contribute hugely to the economy. This is not surprising since the country is endowed with many beautiful islands, attractive highlands and a variety of heritages.

Tourism and sport are both the largest and fastest growing sectors throughout the world, both in the social and economic aspects (Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2003). The success in organizing the World Conference on Sports Tourism in Barcelona, Spain 2001 was the beginning of more serious attention being paid to this sector and the resultant widespread coverage in the coming years (World Tourism Organisation & International Olympic Committee, 2001). Sport tourism involves all forms of active and passive participation in sporting activities, participated in casually or in an organized way for non-commercial or business / commercial reasons, that necessitate travel away from the home and work locality (Standeven & De Knop, 1999). Standeven and De Knop presented a theoretical framework related to sport tourism which is divided into the passive and active component. The passive form of sports holiday includes either *the casual observer* or *the connoisseur* while the active form of sports is divided into 'vacation sport activities' and 'holiday sport activities'.

Sport tourism: Literature review

According to Glyptis (1991), until the early 1990s tourism and the sports sector have evolved as two distinct areas of activities. In the period 1990-1995, a large number of scholars, decision-makers and governments involved in the field of tourism and sports appeared to have ignored the potential and benefits that can be generated collectively from the synthesis of both fields. This is despite studies that have examined the interdependence between tourism and sports (Redmond, 1990; Weed & Bull, 1997; Standeven & De Knop, 1999). Studies at the international level revealed that sport tourism creates quite an impact on the economy of a country when particular sporting events are organized. A survey done by Jones (2001) on the Rugby World Cup Championship (RWC) tournament held in Wales in 1999 found that a profit of \$ 1.3 billion was earned by the country and attracted 1.7 million visitors to watch the tournament. Similarly, the organization of an international golf event held at La Costa, California, United States drew a crowd of 75,000 people, including spectators, tournament officials, team officials and media crews. The PGA Tour Championship in United States brought a return of \$ 25 million to the local economy, particularly in food, entertainment and souvenirs (Md Amin, 2003). There are a variety of classifications of sport and tourism depending on interests of the researchers on the particular matter. Sport and tourism are closely interrelated and have become one of the booming tourism products in developing countries. It can also attract a large number of viewers and augment the economic activities of the local community (Mules & Faulkner, 1996).

Sport tourism involves attractions providing physical activities which encourage travellers to take a day off in a particular tourism destination. According to Gibson (1998), sport tourism occurs when an individual leaves his usual everyday environment and travel to a place in a state of holiday. During the holiday, he is either directly involved in physical activities or at least is watching a competition where these activities take place. The ability of a country to organize world-class sports can be the catalyst for infrastructural development, income generation and economic development.

However, a study by Nunn and Rosentraub (1997) on the impact of sports on the host community where professional sports are held concluded that the expected benefits from the organization of sports are hardly enjoyed by the local residents. New employment opportunities are not generated as these jobs or services are usually associated with a professional team and require skills which the local residents may lack. In addition, there is no significant increase in spending on food and beverages, room rentals or workers' salaries contributed by the participating sport teams to the local community. Instead, the benefits that are associated with such events are related to non-economic aspects such as the pride of being the host, a chance to enjoy the entertainment and enhancement of the image of the community.

The development of sport tourism in Malaysia

The successful organisation of the Commonwealth Games (SUKOM 98) in Kuala Lumpur in 1998 was an eye opener as it highlighted the value of hosting international sporting events. The Commonwealth Games is the second largest sport event in the world after the Olympic Games. Undeniably, there have been criticisms that the organization of sport tournaments at the international level is a waste of resources. This is because the financial requirement of hosting such a sporting event is enormous. Large financial outlays are necessary to ensure that the sport infrastructures are in accordance with the specifications set by international organizations. However, the potential returns may actually be many times more than the figures released as the income is multiplied by the entry of foreign tourists and the participation of local spectators desiring to witness an international tournament. In general, sport tourism encompasses a journey that requires costs and time to reach the destination where the sport event is organised. Usually, those involved are members of a team including the managers, coaches, officials and support assistants and athletes or players. In actual fact, the number far exceed the list of participants as it is supplemented by their family members, sports enthusiasts who want to watch the sports live, and those who choose to attend for reasons such as the prestige of the tournament or admiration and support of the players. According to Hudson (2003), world tourist arrivals are estimated to increase annually by 4.3% and is expected to reach 1.6 billion by 2020 and sport tourism is one of the factors accounting for this upsurge.

Before SUKOM 98, Malaysia had hosted a prestigious cycling event, that is, Le Tour de Langkawi in 1996. However, it failed to stir the interest of the relevant parties about the potential of sport tourism. However, after SUKOM 98, Malaysia became well-known around the world and the community at large became aware of the profits that can be obtained from organizing an international sporting event. The failure of Le Tour de Langkawi as a catalyst in highlighting the potential of sport tourism to the community can be attributed to its disorganised and poor planning. However, in the next edition of the race, the organizers applied the lessons learnt from SUKOM 98 with great success. Le Tour de Langkawi presently attracts the participation of world class riders and the participating teams have managed to draw cycling enthusiasts to Malaysia.

In 1999, another international level tournament, the Formula One Championship Car Racing (F1) was held in Malaysia. The former Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammad had proposed the construction of world-class racing circuit in Sepang to stimulate the expansion of the sport tourism sector in Malaysia. The Sepang International Circuit was officially opened on March 9, 1999 and Malaysia was only the second Asian country besides Japan to have a world-class racing circuit then. The completion of this circuit and the successful organisation of Formula One (F1) car racing and Moto GP racing helped to propel the country's fame internationally and in turn attracted the interest of foreign tourists especially fans keen on watching F1 car racing and Moto GP to come to Malaysia. Statistics showed that a single Formula One race event contributed more than RM139 million to the national economy and this figure is expected to soar (Azlan Akil, 2008). This indicates that sport-oriented tourism in Malaysia has great potential for development.

In 2005, the Fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, proposed that a yacht tournament be held in Malaysia. The state of Terengganu was chosen as the venue for hosting this competition, known as the Monsoon Cup. The Monsoon Cup championship in Terengganu is a catalyst to the country's economic development (Gilmour, 2008). The main objective of this competition is to help promote Terengganu and Malaysia all over the world, besides advancing sport tourism as one of the products to spur the country's economic development. In addition, this championship also encourages the participation of the local community in the event. The yacht racing championship succeeded in securing the coverage of 70 television broadcasting networks, both local and international. The total number of spectators watching this event has increased from year to year. In 2005, the total number of spectators was 25,000 people but this grew to 33,700 people in 2006 and 81,000 people in 2007. This implies that the total number of tourists watching the Monsoon Cup and those who travelled to the state of Terengganu has increased every year. The growth in the number of tourist arrivals has turned the state of Terengganu into

one of the most popular sport tourism destination while at the same time simultaneously developing the local economy.

Sport tourism can thus contribute to the development of a country. A small and developing country with limited natural resources has the potential to be developed as a location for organizing world-class sport events if it is able to utilise these resources to construct the necessary infrastructure and the supporting services (Jabil, 2014). In addition to organizing events like the Commonwealth Games, Le Tour de Langkawi, Formula One and Monsoon Cup, Malaysia also possess sport facilities which are among the best in the world. For example, the Bukit Jalil Sports Complex is not only the location of the National Sports Council Headquarters (NSC) but is also the site of the High Performance Training Centre, known as HPTC (High Performance Training Centre). With such facilities, Malaysia has successfully attracted the attention of several countries and well known teams to use such facilities for the final phase of their preparation before participating in a competition. Among the big names that have chosen Malaysia as the training location are the Brazilian national football team, Chelsea and Manchester United football teams and the Australian national swimming team before competing in the Beijing Olympics in 2014. This clearly demonstrates that apart from organizing sports events, the infrastructural facilities in Malaysia also serve as an attraction to international athletes to come to Malaysia.

Hosting international sports events in Malaysia

Formula 1 Racing Series

This series of car racing championship of the most sought for in the world was officially founded in 1946 and the race was originally known as the 'Formula A' before being renamed 'Formula 1'. This racing series is watched live on television by 580 million people worldwide. The race is sanctioned by the Federation International de Automobile (FIA). FIA is an organization that is responsible for setting the rules for this race series. The F1 race involves the participation of various parties such as the car manufacturers Alfa Romeo, Ferrari, Mercedes Benz, Bavarian Motor Works (BMW) and Toyota. There are also private teams like Sauber Petronas (now known as BMW Sauber), Jordan F1 Racing Team, Torro Rosso and others (Azlan, 2008). In Malaysia, the F1 race is held at the Sepang International Circuit (SIC).

Moto GP Racing Series

Moto GP racing series was founded in 1949 by the Federation International de Motocyclisme (FIM). The commercial right of this event is held by Dorna Sports Company. The teams participating in this race are endorsed by the International Road Racing Team Association (IRTA). The motorcycles to be used have to be manufactured by a factory or company registered with the Motorcycle Sport Manufacturers Association (MSMA). The motorcycles used for this race series are also motorcycles built specifically for racing and cannot be used by the general public on roads. There are three categories in Moto GP racing series, namely 125cc, 250cc, and the MOTO GP category which is 990cc.

Monsoon Cup

It is a yacht racing regatta also known as *The Formula 1 of Sailing*. In the monsoon season, local fishermen are unable to go out to sea because of the strong currents, large waves and strong raging winds. The event is actually still new. In the year 2000, a union was formed with the name Swedish Match Tour and given the responsibility to manage and ensure that the Monsoon Cup tournament is run smoothly. This union encompasses the entire regatta racing associations participating in the yacht tournaments around the world and is managed under a union. The Monsoon Cup Malaysia is a prestigious match racing competition, categorised as 'Special Event' by the International Sailing Federation (ISAF). The event is

also the culmination of the Alpari World Match Racing Tour (AWMRT) series. It is the only Asian destination in the AWMRT calendar for this season and offers a total cash prize of RM1,475,000.00. As the final event of the Series, the Monsoon Cup is considered as one of the flagship stages of the World Championship Tour and awards higher points to the participating teams. Points are awarded at each event culminating in the crowning of the “ISAF Match Racing World Champion” at the Monsoon Cup. The prize pool also includes a US\$500,000 bonus fund for the top eight teams in the championship (monsooncup.com.my, 2015).

Le Tour de Langkawi

This is a series of highway bike racing and it was held for the first time in 1996. This tour has received recognition from the International Cycling Union (UCI) Asia Tour. The lucrative prizes and challenging racing tracks attract the participation of many world champions. This tour also advances the name of Langkawi as a popular tourism destination in the world. The cycling championship takes riders to all corners of Peninsular Malaysia. Besides that, the series of cycling tours in this championship is broadcast live by RTM 1 and ESPN Astro channel. In 1996 there were 12 stages of the race but this was reduced to 10 stages in 2002 at the request of UCI. Le Tour de Langkawi is now recognized as the most prestigious cycling championship in Asia and the fourth most prestigious in the world after the Tour de France, Vuelta d'Espania and Giro d'Italy. Le Tour de Langkawi is also part of a warm-up event for the professional riders before continuing to race in Europe. According to the Malaysian National Cycling Federation, each year an estimated number of more than 800 million television viewers and radio listeners follow the progress of the Le Tour de Langkawi. This event has successfully promoted Langkawi Island in particular and Malaysia in general as a popular sport tourism destination (Utusan Malaysia, 20 December 2008).

Langkawi Ironman Triathlon

The Langkawi Ironman Triathlon is an event that tests your fitness level and physical and mental strength. This involves three types of disciplines namely swimming, cycling and running. The Langkawi Ironman Triathlon was first held in the year 2000. This tournament is a compulsory event for professional triathlon athletes as it offers points to determine the athletes eligible to compete in the World Ironman Championships which is then held in Hawaii. The athletes taking part in this event are required to swim a distance of 2.4 miles, cycle another 112 miles and run for the final 26.2 miles. In the year 2009 edition, a total of 505 athletes participated in this event and it is expected to grow in the years to come. This sport is a world-class sporting event with a line-up of strong contestants competing for the title as the champion in extreme sports. Such similar events are held in 23 locations worldwide and when it was first held in Langkawi it was jointly organised by Langkawi Ironman Endurance Limited. (LIEM), Kedah State government, Kedah State Sports Council, Langkawi Development Authority (LADA), the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Ministry of Arts and Tourism (ironman malaysia.com.my, 2014).

Royal Langkawi International Regatta

This prestigious event was first held in the year 2003 and entered its seventh edition in 2009. This event is organized by the Royal Langkawi Yacht Club with the Prime Minister Trophy as the prize in the main category. There are also a few other categories in this competition, namely *Premier Cruising*, *IRC*, *Sportboat*, *Sportboat Platu*, *Multihull Racing* and *Club Cruising*. This prestigious event has successfully attracted well-known champions in yacht racing in the world such as Bruno Peyron. This event saw the participation of 60 Asian and 10 European contestants. Among the contestants from the Asian countries are those from Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong, South Korea, China, Philippines and Australia. From the European Continent participants came from Britain, Germany, Netherlands, France, Belgium and New

Zealand. Pulau Langkawi is one of the popular venues for the development of sailboat races in the world (langkawiregatta.com, 2014).

The potential and prospects of sports as tourism products in Malaysia

Every sporting event and sport championship that takes place has its own potential and prospect. The sporting events that are organized involve several locations that are suitable for the impending event. The same applies to tourists' involvement in sport activities during their vacation. Most travellers have determined their own plans for their holidays. For example, travellers who are interested in scuba diving will choose the state of Sabah as the most appropriate location for their vacation. Similarly, tourists who are keen on challenging sports activities, for instance mountain climbing, kayaking and cycling, are more inclined to pick Tasik Kenyir as their holiday destination. There are many other interesting places which also provide facilities for sporting activities which can be visited by the tourists and one of them is Langkawi. Langkawi is not only well known as one of the most beautiful island in the world but is also a popular location for sports vacation in Malaysia. Sport tourism is thus one of the latest strategy in attracting both domestic and international tourists to a particular tourism destination. In addition, there are also various international level tournaments which are seen as major attractions to tourists to visit Malaysia. The travel agencies, local governments and the mass media have an important role to play in promoting sport tourism products to attract domestic and international tourists to come to watch the on-going sporting events, in addition to encouraging tourists to use the sports facilities at the holiday destinations.

There are differences in the form of promotion and the length of time in organizing and planning sports tournaments in order to attract incoming viewers to witness the on-going tournament. There are some also special features in sport which make it a tourism attraction with a high impact on the national income.

The duration of the hosting

At the world-class level, three prestigious sporting events receive widespread attention from the international media namely the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games and World Cup Soccer. The three sporting events take place for quite a length of time and attract interest from all over the world. For example, the Olympic Games in Beijing was held over 16 days with the opening ceremony on August 8, 2008 and the closing on 24 August 2008. A total of 10,000 athletes from 204 countries competed in the Beijing Olympics. The Olympics tournament is held once every four years. As for the Commonwealth Games, it is also organised once in every four years, involving elite athletes from the Commonwealth countries only. A total of 5,000 athletes usually take part in the Commonwealth Games. The Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) is the body that is responsible for the direction and management of the Commonwealth Games. Similarly, the World Cup Soccer Tournament (FIFA), which is held once in every four years, involves teams from across the continents. This is the most prestigious tournament and has become the focus of the world's population regardless of the level of the society. It takes place over a duration of 31 days. Additionally, in Asia there is also a sporting event that draws athletes from the Asian continent only. The Asian Games Championship is a multi-sports event that is held once in every four years among Asian athletes. In Malaysia there are, in particular, several popular sporting events such as the Malaysian Games (SUKMA), Malaysian Schools Sports Council (MSSM), University Sports Council (MASUM) and Sports Staff University (SUKUM). For example, the Malaysian Games is held once in every two years, with all the states in Malaysia participating.

Early preparation before the tournament

Before a sports tournament is held in each state or country, the host will carry out specific preparations in terms of preparing the sports facilities, accommodation for athletes, stadium maintenance, logistics and many other tasks. Well maintained and adequate infrastructure facilities are essential to ensure that every event is run flawlessly. Moreover, each host country also has to enlist the services of sports volunteers to assist in the upcoming tournament. The officers and management committee are also given training and special courses. Additionally briefings on the tournament are held for officers of the teams taking part in the sporting event. The committees that have important roles in organizing the sports event are the Technical Committee and the Competition Committee. All these preparations accounted for the success in organizing the 98th Commonwealth Games which opened the eyes of many parties to the fact that Malaysia is capable of organizing international level sports. Most of the countries which participated in SUKOM 98 were very satisfied with the quality of the organization shown by Malaysia. In order to organize an international level sports competition, all the factors need to be considered and rigorous preparation must be done initially so that the tournament will not experience any problem. The competition committee should examine and investigate all aspects of management to ensure that every event runs smoothly and systematically. Failure to carry out proper preparation will degrade the reputation of the host country and decrease the confidence in organizing other tournaments in the future.

Media coverage

In the organization of sports events, the print and electronic media are the key pillars in the promotion of the tournament to be held. The mass media plays a role in carrying out advertising and promotion before the tournament begins; the coverage during the tournament itself and the analyses of the event after the tournament ends. The electronic media such as the internet is the most influential medium in providing information about a particular sports tournament such as reporting on the latest medal ranking, information on the competing teams, sponsorship of advertising products, tournament schedules and continuous coverage in the host country. The information related to sporting events can be accessed via websites, blogs and government websites such as Tourism Malaysia, Ministry of Youth and Sports and the official website of the on-going tournament. The importance and effectiveness of the internet as a commercial channel in the context of providing information to the tourists have been constantly discussed in previous studies (Bonn et al., 1999). The website has become an important communication for the tourists and effective distribution channel for tourism operators and related service providers (Law et al., 2004).

Sponsorship

Every sports competition, without exception, requires sponsorship and promotion through advertisements to raise funds and attract incoming spectators to watch the competition. There are a number of official sponsors such as media broadcasting, fitness drinks, telecommunication companies and others. Moreover, the primary sponsors are both the government and organizations that are directly involved in the success of a sporting event to be held. The support from sponsors is very important to help the host provide facilities such as accommodation, food and beverages, clothing and sports equipment that are to be used by the participants. The sponsoring companies derive mutual benefits from the advertisements endorsing their products. In addition, major benefits are acquired by the tournament organizers hosting the championship. For example, the organization of prestigious sporting events, for instance the Formula One championship (F1), secures a lot of sponsorship from leading car companies such as Mercedes Benz, Ferrari, Renault, BMW, Lotus and others. There are also beverage companies which have become the official sponsors of a particular championship namely Red Bull, 100 PLUS, Coca-Cola, and Revive. In the

broadcasting domain, it is a tradition for ASTRO, RTM and TV3 to be the official sponsors for the television channel covering the live broadcast of a sporting tournament in progress.

Individuals involved

Inherently, in organizing a sporting event, the athletes, team managers, coaches, team officials and spectators have to be considered. For each on-going tournament, the athletes are the most prominent individuals involved in the events. Huge sporting events such as the Olympics, Commonwealth Games and the World Cup Soccer undoubtedly involve a large number of competitors. The total number of athletes or players, team officials, coaches and team managers are estimated to exceed thousands of people. Besides that, the spectators at the on-going tournament venues exceed tens of thousands of people. The involvement of all the parties at each competition venue can be classified as sport tourists. Next, the profits earned by the host country augment the country's total income. Sports is a tourism product that provides the largest contribution to the local economy as well as stimulate the growth of national economy. Besides that, the infrastructure facilities, such as in communication, accommodation, and telecommunication, are also improved. According to Kurtzman and Zauhar (2003), in order to organize a sporting event, specific facilities may have to be built and the existing facilities upgraded. The economic aspect is usually to maximize the benefits in the short-term and to sustain long-term value. The facilities that have been developed will remain and become the main attraction to those visiting the tourism destination. Local communities also benefit from promoting local products such as food, handicrafts and community cultures in a particular location.

Conclusion

Organizing international level sporting events undoubtedly brings many positive impacts on the host country. The investments made are for the long-term such as the building of infrastructural facilities, improvements in the transportation system, upgrading the quality of services from the public and private sectors, the opportunity to market their products and the name of the country and finally very valuable promotion through the international media. However, it must be stressed that any event has to be planned carefully and that all factors and eventualities taken into account because only systematic and quality management are capable of yielding the desired results and profits. Small management mistakes can cause a sporting event which should have brought great returns to become a total loss and a catastrophe. The popularity of a sporting event such as the Olympic Games, World Cup Football, and Formula One Racing Series (F1) which are capable of attracting a large number of visitors attests to the fact that sport tourism is a 'gold mine' if it is properly managed.

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