

Marketing Malaysia to the Middle East Tourists: Towards A Preferred Inter-regional Destinations

Ahmad Azmi M. Ariffin

azmi@ukm.my

School of Business Management
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

and

Mohd Safar Hasim

msafar@ukm.my

Institute of West Asian Studies
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Abstrak

Artikel ini cuba menunjukkan betapa pentingnya pasaran Timur Tengah kepada industri pelancongan Malaysia, untuk membincangkan profil kembara dan tingkah laku pelancong, dan akhir sekali mencadangkan strategi untuk memperbaiki kedudukan Malaysia sebagai destinasi antara-rantau yang paling diminati di kalangan pelancong Arab. Adalah dianggarkan sejumlah 35 juta pelancong Arab dari Timur tengah akan datang ke Malaysia pada tahun 2020. Pelancong Arab cenderung tinggal lebih lama, berbelanja lebih besar dan cuaca panas tidak menjadi penghalang kepada mereka. Rantau Timur Tengah adalah juga suatu pasaran yang cukup berpotensi untuk pelancongan kerana penduduk mudanya sedang berkembang dengan pendapatan per kapita yang tinggi, terutama Arab Saudi dan UAE. Kertas ini juga membincangkan pola pelancongan keluar daripada rantau ini dan juga usaha pemasaran yang diambil oleh pemain pelancongan Malaysia untuk menarik pelancong dari Timur tengah. Usaha-usaha promosi yang dijalankan oleh Malaysia di kawasan Lembah Kelang dan pemain-pemain pelancongan di beberapa tempat lain di negara ini masih belum sampai ke tahap "Mesra Pelancong Arab". Adalah dicadangkan Malaysia patut memberi fokus kepada usaha pemasaran mereka untuk menawan pelancong dari Arab Saudi dan UAE, untuk membangunkan produk pelancongan yang jelas memberi penekanan kepada belia, untuk meningkatkan hubungan udara antara bandaraya pelancongan utama di Malaysia dan Timur Tengah, mula menggunakan internet dengan lebih meluas untuk tujuan promosi dan pengedaran, dan untuk menggalakkan orang Arab untuk membeli premis timeshare di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: *Pelancong Timur Tengah, Industri Pelancongan Malaysia, Pemasaran Pelancongan*

Abstract

This paper attempts to demonstrate the importance of the Middle East market to the Malaysian tourism industry, to discuss their travel profiles and behavior, and finally to suggest strategies to better position Malaysia as the most preferred inter-regional destination among the Arab tourists. It is estimated that there will be a total of 35 million outbound tourist arrivals from the Middle East in 2020. The Arab tourists tend to stay longer, spend more and are unfazed by the high tropical temperatures. The Middle East region is also a very viable market for tourism as it is home to a growing young population with a high per capita income, particularly the Saudi Arabia and UAE. This paper also discusses the pattern of outbound tourism from the region as well as the marketing efforts undertaken by the Malaysian tourism players to attract the Middle East travelers. Malaysia promotional efforts so far very much concentrated for tourism products and services within the Klang Valley area and tourism players in other parts of the country are still far from the so called “Arab Tourist’s Friendly”. It is suggested that Malaysia should focus more of their marketing efforts to well capture the Saudi Arabia and UAE outbound travel, to develop distinctive youth-oriented tourism products, to increase air links between major tourist cities in Malaysia and the Middle East, to start fully utilize the internet media for promotion and distribution, and to encourage the Arabs to purchase timeshare vacation homes in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Middle East Tourists, Malaysian Tourism Industry, Tourism Marketing.*

Introduction

Tourism is an important sector in Malaysia contributing RM49.6 million in the year 2008, an increased of 55 per cent from 2005. Tourist arrivals have increased from 16.4 million in 2005 to 22 million in 2007. For the first nine months of 2009, Malaysia already managed to record total of 17,378,040 tourist arrivals, indicating a sign of continuous growth of tourists to the country. It represented an increase of 6.4% compared to 16,329,855 for the same period in 2008.

In 2007, a total of 245,302 Arab tourists visited Malaysia contributing RM1.4 billion in tourism receipts. For the year 2008, Malaysia targeted a total of 25.5 million tourists and RM50 billion in tourism receipts. Out of this figure, 400,000 arrivals are expected to come from the Middle East. The actual number of arrival recorded for the first quarter and from January to August 2008 were 59,554 and 191,179 respectively. Table 1 summarized the statistics of tourist arrivals to Malaysia from major Middle East/West Asia countries for the year 2000 (as comparison) and from 2006 to 2008 (after September 11).

**Table1 : Tourist Arrivals from Middle East/West Asia:
 Year 2000 and 2006-2008(Jan-Aug)**

Countries	2000		2006	2007	2008 (Jan-Aug)
Bahrain	Na		na	6,874	na
Egypt	Na		5,682	7,066	8,111
Iran	Na		18,753	27,215	37,916
Jordan	2,888		2,657	na	na
Kuwait	1,095		13,369	17,605	16,378
Lebanon	899		6,885	8,523	na
Oman	1,223		11,905	19,525	14,699
Qatar	Na		na	11,782	6,788
Saudi Arabia	27,808		67,679	78,298	57,496
Sudan	Na		na	na	7,199
Syrian	Na		5,772	7,481	2,968
Turkey	Na		7,654	9,580	5,421
United Arab Emirates	2,391		35,118	38,170	30,729
Yemen	Na		na	7,314	3,474 (Q1)

Source: Tourism Malaysia. 2008. Fact and Figures. Statistics of Tourism Malaysia.

It is very clear from the statistics presented above that Malaysia has actually capitalized on the turmoil of post September 11 travel. The inbound arrivals from the Middle East region soared to 132,000 from 53,000 between the year 2000 and 2002. In 2003, however the figure has decreased due to Asia's SARS outbreak but then tracked upwards again the following year. The figure of tourist arrivals from the region is still however very small compared to the other parts of the world that visit Malaysia every year. But the Arab tourists tend to stay longer,

spend more and are unfazed by the high tropical temperatures. According to Green Leaf World (2007), the Middle East tourists are one of the highest spending tourists in the world – spending as much as USD500 more than the average European tourists. These countries enjoy buoyant economies due to heavy reliance on high oil revenues. The report also indicated that the length of stay is 22 days on average. Due to the high growth and potential of the Middle East outbound tourism, many countries around the world have started making plans to draw tourists from the region.

Middle East Outbound Tourism

In the year 2005, Arab tourists took a total of 12.1 million outbound travel generating 22 billion Euros (IPK International, 2007). It is estimated that there will be a total of 35 million outbound tourist arrivals from the Middle East in 2020 (WTO, 2000) and this amount represents 5.8 percent of annual growth rate. Green Leaf World (2007) estimated that the outbound tourism from the region is growing tremendously from USD27.6 million in 2001 to USD44.8 million by the year 2010.

The six Gulf Cooperation Countries or GCC (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar) alone contributed 2.5 per cent or USD11.9 billions from the world tourism receipts in the year 2000 (IPK International, 2000). The Gulf nations generate 68 per cent of total outbound travel from the entire Middle East region. With more than nine million arrivals forecasted in 2020, Saudi Arabia is expected to be the Middle East's largest contributor to the outbound arrivals, followed by UAE and Egypt with two and 1.8 millions respectively. Although the UAE has only 12 per cent of the population of the Gulf nations, it generates 18 per cent of total outbound tourism from the Gulf.

In the year 2000, Dubai and Egypt received over one million and 0.75 million tourists from within the Middle East region making them among the most popular intra-regional destinations. There are a couple of major factors contribute to the high growth for the intra-regional travel. The first reason is due to the impact of the September 11 attack and the second one is because the region has started to look at tourism as one of the best ways to generate foreign exchange revenue.

The US and European countries are used to be very popular among the Middle East tourists but after the September 11, the destination choices have shifted to intra-regional destinations as well as Asian countries such as Malaysia and Thailand.

Profiles of Middle East Tourists

In the aftermath of September 11 and Islamophobia flames in some of Western nations, there is a distinct trend towards increased outbound inter-regional travel to “Islam friendly” countries from the Middle East region apart from the increased intra-regional travel. Among the popular inter-regional destinations are UK, Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Travel Market Characteristics

According to Global Intelligent (2008/2009 Q1), almost two-third of the leisure or vacation travel takes place in the hottest summer season and school holiday from June to August. July is the busiest month with 22 per cent outbound travel followed by June (17 per cent) and finally August with 13 per cent. For the rest of the year, travel is more for business purposes.

The Arab tourists usually travel with their immediate and extended families. Visit Britain (2008) reported that the size of the travel group can total up to 30 people. They also love to travel with their friends particularly among the male youths. Ladki et. al (2002) contended that Arab tourists usually travel in the family group of 14 to 21 members or in a group of eight to 12 young males. Majority of the Arab tourists (approximately 60 per cent) are male. However, the female tourists share has risen to more than 40 per cent, an increase of one per cent per year since the year 2000 (IPK, 2000).

The Middle East tourists demand a very high level of service in their travel experiences. They prefer five-star hotels and high quality service apartments even amongst the young people. They love to stay in suites or inter-connecting rooms which allow convenient access to their younger family members. The most popular accommodations are located in the city centre (Visit Britain, 2008).

The Middle East Outbound Travel Study (2002) reported that family and friends are key influencers in travel decision (53 per cent) followed by travel agents (18 per cent). The Mastercard Survey (2007) also found the high importance of personal recommendation for travel decisions as well as suggested that familiarity with a country via a previous visit also plays important role in the decision making process.

Internet is becoming an increasingly popular for holiday reservations as well as one of the major sources of travel information among the Arabs. This is particularly true for UAE that claim to be the country with highest internet penetration in the region. However, the overall rate of internet use in the Middle East is still very low at 101.6 persons for every 10,000 population. IPK (2007) reported that only three per cent of Arabs used the internet for travel booking and five per cent used the internet to gather information on travel opportunities. Although internet booking constitutes only small portion of all bookings, the growth rates are high and it is becoming a major tool in the tourism industry.

In general, Middle East is a very late booking market. Approximately 43 per cent of the respondents book their airlines three to four weeks in advance while 29 per cent in two weeks in advance. Booking through a travel agent constitutes 55 per cent and 40 per cent book directly with an airline (The Middle East Outbound Study, 2002). VisitBritain (2008) reported that 53 per cent of visit to the UK from UAE were decided between one week and three months before departure.

Tourist Profiles

Green Leaf World (2007) described the Middle East tourists as “young, affluent, enthusiastic and adventurous. The psychographics characteristics can be divided into two major segments – i) singles and couples, and ii) families. The first segment are avid tourists who love to discover new places, they want to reward themselves and treat themselves with a great vacation, they like to talk about their new experience with friends and peers, and they love to celebrate special occasion. The later segment consists of immediate and extended families who love long holiday together, they usually travel during the long school holiday in summer as well as during short breaks for Eid and Hajj, and they prefer to experience a different destination every year.

With one-third is below the age of 14 years, one-half is in the age bracket of 15-44, Saudi Arabia has a large pool of young population. 60 per cent of UAE population is in the age bracket of 15-44 years, 62 per cent of Kuwaiti is young people with age below 30. A report by Visit Britain (2008) reported that young people in UAE enjoy fun, freedom and adventure within safe, comfortable confines. According to Market Vision (2002), the UAE tourist is relatively well educated, well informed and very modern in outlook compared to other countries in the Middle East. Flamingo (2007) described the core attitude of young (under 25 years) Arabs national in UAE and Saudi Arabia as;

- i. Hospitality - welcoming of others is a key tenet of the Arab culture.
- ii. Collectivism (“we” not “I”) – belonging to family and friendship group are very crucial. Parents are highly influential in most decisions.
- iii. Islamic life – following the key tenets of the faith, abiding by the Islam principles.

Among the main holiday activities are shopping, sightseeing, dining out and enjoying the nightlife. IPK (2007) reported that shopping is very important to 75 per cent of the Arab tourists traveling overseas. Dining out is another important aspect of the Middle East vacation. The UAE nationals in particular consume a great variety of food including Indian, Italian, Thai and Chinese. However, they must be Halal. The Arab tourists in general prefer taxis or limousine compared to other public transports.

Middle East Tourists to Malaysia

There are very few studies have been conducted on the travel behavior of the Middle East tourists to Malaysia. Among the significant findings from the studies conducted by AC Nielsen (2002) and Wong (2001) are:

- i. Single main motivator factor in visiting Malaysia is natural environment and scenery (39.5 per cent).
- ii. 79.2 per cent organized their vacation by using tour agencies. “Free and Easy” package is the most popular type of travel.
- iii. 78 per cent stayed in five-star city hotel.

- iv. The most popular items purchased during their holiday are clothes and textiles (39.1 per cent). Shopping, sightseeing and visiting beaches are among the major activities.

Khalilah (2006) carried out a case study to understand how the Middle East tourists evaluate the place characters of Kuala Lumpur and to measure their overall tourism experiences in Kuala Lumpur. The study found that “memories” as the most important place character for the Middle East tourists in selecting their travel destination followed by “active”, “identity”, “opportunity”, “awareness”, “sequence”, and “choice”.

There are still a lot of rooms for improvement to be made as none of the place characters of Kuala Lumpur surpass their expectations. The analysis has found that the widest gap between expectation and the actual experience is placed on “memories”. Basically, this means that the Middle East tourists describe Kuala Lumpur as lacking of characters or attributes that relates to their memories, fantasies, feelings or images. However, the other attributes have closer gaps, which mean that their expectations are somewhat attainable. “Active” which is the second most important place character is also the most attainable (narrowest gap) place character or attributes.

With aggregate mean score of 4.04 on a five-point scale, the study showed that Middle East tourists are satisfied with their visit to Kuala Lumpur. However, there are still a lot more opportunities to enhance their travel experiences in Kuala Lumpur as their assessment did not actually close enough to the “strongly agree” level. The study also indicated that KLCC or Petronas Twin Tower is the most visited (20 per cent) tourist attraction in Kuala Lumpur followed by the Arab Street (18 per cent), Chinatown (10.6 per cent), KL Tower (7.9 per cent), Bird Park (5.9 per cent), Butterfly Park (5.6 per cent), Jamek Mosque (5.6 per cent) and Central Market (4.4 per cent).

For shopping purposes, at 16.3 per cent, Suria KLCC emerged as the most visited shopping place by the Middle East tourists followed by Star Hill (12.2 per cent), Lot 10 (11.5 per cent), Bukit Bintang Plaza (11 per cent), Sungei Wang Plaza (9.8 per cent) and Berjaya Times Square (8.9 per cent). The study also discovered that 60 per cent of them travelled to Kuala Lumpur with their family and relatives.

The majority or 30 per cent are within the age bracket of 20 to 29 followed by 26 per cent within the range of 30 to 39. With regard to prior experience in Kuala Lumpur, 52 per cent are first time visitors, 29 per cent second time and 19 per cent are on their third visit or more. Around 43 per cent of them stay in Kuala Lumpur for five to seven days and 42 per cent stay for more than seven days. Rented transport (44 per cent) is the most popular mode of transportation among the Arab tourists in Kuala Lumpur.

Malaysian Tourism Market Efforts

Malaysia has participated in the Arabian Travel Market (ATM) which is the largest trade and consumer travel fair in the Arab world since a long time ago. In ATM 2008, Malaysia delegation is comprised of approximately 85 companies from both private and government

sectors with the aim to leverage the prestige of the exhibition to showcase Malaysian attractions as well as to strengthen relations particularly with the travel players of the region. Apart from actively participates in prestigious travel expos in the Arab world, Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board also has been organizing regular familiarization trips for journalists and travel agents from the Middle East.

In 2008, intensive promotional efforts emphasizing on the Malaysian life and culture, eco-tourism, medical and health tourism, spa, honeymoon as well as Malaysia My Second Home program is used to lure tourists from the Middle East during the summer season. Apart from that, Malaysian television promotion, Malaysia Truly Asia and a laid-back lifestyle are continuous reminder of what Malaysia has to offer. “Ain Arabia” or the Arab street located within the busiest shopping district of the Golden Triangle is a strategy under a “Feel-at-Home” campaign to target the Middle East tourists to shop, dine and meet. The street is a showcase of various Middle Eastern cultures and foods.

Signage in Arabic texts has been placed at the KLIA and Arabic-speaking employees have also been assigned at the airport to assist the Arab tourists. The government also encouraged employment of more Arab-speaking staff at travel agencies, hotels and restaurants as well as urged the shopping complexes to put up signs in Arabic. Some restaurants even have their menus printed in Arabic. Upscale hotels and shopping malls also seen to arranged special events such as the “Arabian Nights” where Arab singers and musicians perform and Arab food is served.

To make the Arab guests feel more at home, Nikko Hotel, one of the popular hotels among the Arabs has added the Arab Radio and Television (ART) into the hotel’s TV channel offerings. Mandarin Oriental Hotel has a permanent Arabic guest recognition officer and in 2007, the hotel employs management trainees from the Middle East during the peak season. The hotel also has printed guestroom letters, leaflets and brochures in Arabic. To cater for the need of Arab tourists who usually travel in a family of up to eight members, a large fleet of airport limousines is also provided at the KLIA. Malaysia has also launched the first local Arab newspaper title “Ahlan Wasahlan” which means “welcome”. The monthly newspaper aims to provide detailed information on Malaysian tourism activities.

Most Arab tourists enjoy modern shopping environments in Malaysia especially for luxury goods. Theme-parks are also huge popular among the Arabs particularly the Sunway Lagoon, Genting Highlands and the one in Berjaya Times Square. One of the Malaysia’s best selling points is visa-free access where Arabs and Gulf states nationals do not require visas to visit Malaysia and they can stay for a maximum of three months in the country.

In 2005, Tourism Malaysia started to adopt a strategy to encourage the Middle East tourists to go beyond the Klang Valley. The strategy has begun to show its positive results where according to Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agent (MATTA), the Middle East tourists are now started to travel to destinations like Langkawi and Penang. The average length of stay of these Arab tourists in Kuala Lumpur has also shortened from two weeks to

only seven or eight days. MATTA also informed that the Arab tourist arrivals are now spread throughout the year.

An increasing number of Middle East tourists are also discovering the excellent healthcare services available at more than 50 private medical centers in Malaysia offered at reasonable charges. Health tourism packages has been offered and promoted aggressively by the tour operators.

Tour and Travel Trading in The Arab World

Tour Agents and Operators

Since international travel for leisure purpose is quite new for the Middle East and travel is primarily on FIT basis, the travel and tourism trade or business structure is relatively not well developed. A formal and structured association for travel operators is hardly found across the nations in the region. According to Market Vision (2002), there are only 2,881 travel agents across 12 countries in the region based on the lists found in the yellow pages, government publications and internet sources though there will be considerably more travel agents in the regions. Selling of airline ticket is merely the primary business of these travel agencies.

In the Middle East, tour operators are parts of the national airlines such as Emirates Holidays (the largest), Saudi Holidays, Gulf Air Holidays, Qatar Holidays, Kuwait Holidays and Middle East Holidays. In general, they are only focusing on the destinations that they fly to. There are also quite a number of international airlines that promote their holiday packages in the Middle East such as Singapore Airlines, Thai Airways, British Airways as well as Malaysian Airlines. Advertisement in the consumer press is the most widely used promotion tool particularly in the season leading up to the summer break.

National Tourism Boards

Tourism promotions are also carried out by a several countries through their national tourism board's offices in the Middle East. Among the pioneering authorities that had their presence in the Middle East (Dubai) are the Government of India Tourist Office and the British Tourist Authority. Several others addition later are the Singapore's Tourism Board, Australian Tourism Commission, Thailand's Tourist Authority including the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board. Other openings have been by Germany, Turkey, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Switzerland, Korea and Cyprus. Most of the offices can be found in Dubai, UAE as the city is regarded as the tourism hub of the Arab world.

Tourism Trade Media

The Arabic media is considered the best media vehicle to reach the Arab tourists since the English media appeals only to the non Arabic-speaking expatriates. Among the influential tourism and travel trade magazine in the region are *The Arab Traveller*, (in Arabic and published in Bahrain), *Middle East Travel* (in English and published in Lebanon), *Travel &*

Tourism News Middle East (in English and published in Bahrain), Business Traveller's Middle East edition (in English and published in United Kingdom) and Travel Trade Gazette Middle East & North Africa (in English and published in Cyprus). There are four major travel fairs or expositions in the region including:

- i. Arabian Travel Market in Dubai which is held in May every year.
- ii. Mediterranean Travel Fair
- iii. Gulf Travel
- iv. Arab World Travel and Tourism Exchange

Strategies to Lure More Middle East Tourists

Based on the understanding of the Middle East tourists' market and behavior as discussed in the earlier sections, followings are the strategies that can be implemented to draw and sustain more of the Middle East tourists to Malaysia:

- 1) To concentrate on the Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) markets.
Saudi Arabia is a very rich country with the largest GDP in the Arab world. A total of 22.8 million or 46 percent of its population is categorized in the upper socio-economic segment. The country is the largest contributor in terms of number of arrivals (40 per cent) as well as tourism spending for outbound travel to Malaysia and many other destinations. Tourists from Saudi Arabia spend approximately USD6.7 billion annually on overseas vacations.

The US Census Bureau estimates the population of UAE at 4.4 millions in 2007. The nation also has a higher density of millionaires than even in the US and the growth rate is at 9.8 per cent. Tourists from UAE spend around USD5 million on overseas vacations. The trend towards multi vacations is noticeable among the UAE travelers with two to three trips throughout the year. Further more, Dubai is no doubt the tourism hub for the entire West Asia. The UAE's population represents less than two per cent of the Middle East's total population but the country represents nearly 15 per cent of the total outbound travel from the region.

- 2) To emphasize on teens and youth oriented travel.
The composition of Arab population is dominated by the young population. One-third of Saudi Arabia population for instance is below 14 years and 30 per cent in the age bracket of 15 to 29 years old. Thus, Malaysia should develop more tourism products and services to cater for the needs of this age group of tourists.

Ecotourism and adventure tourism (including sport tourism) are closely tied to the youth tourists while entertainment tourism appeals more to the teen tourists. Ecotourism includes activities such as visiting to the National Parks, island resorts, recreational forests and zoos. Adventure tourism on the other hand refers to activities such as camping and hiking, cycling, kayaking and water sports. Among the popular

entertainment tourism activities are visiting to the theme-parks, attending music concerts, theatrical performances, night clubs as well as open air events.

Young people tend to be in the vanguard in visiting new destinations and attractions and are thus playing an important role in the development of a destination's tourism product. Finally, and perhaps most importantly; once a youngster has become a satisfied customer he or she not only has a potential buying life of half a century; but becomes an easier marketing target.

- 3) To increase the frequency and services of air connections.

All countries that benefit with large pool of the Middle East tourists have good air links with several major cities in the region. Although Malaysia is increasingly becoming a popular destination among Arab tourists, the strong growth in traffic to Malaysia could be seriously impaired with long-term implications for tourism if adequate air connections are not available from the West Asia region to Malaysia. Therefore, Malaysia should go all out to increase the number of flights as well as direct route flights between Kuala Lumpur and the Middle East region.

Apart from the current route connecting between Kuala Lumpur and Dubai, air links must also be established between Penang and Langkawi with other major cities in the Middle East.

- 4) To utilize the internet media aggressively and effectively as a promotion and distribution channel tools.

According to Gupta (2008), the growing consumer confidence and high social use of internet show that the Middle East region is prepare to embrace internet or web as a channel for travel distribution. The Middle East region had 42 million internet users in 2008, a growth of 1,177 percent from 3.3 million Internet users in 2000. The Internet penetration in UAE is 40 percent (1.76 million users) while in Saudi Arabia around 18 percent (4.9 million users). However, the online travel market is still far off from its potential where only 2 percent of travel bookings are made online. Among the major hurdles in this region are the low credit cards penetration, issues related to online payment gateway and the 13 different currencies. Malaysian tourism players must improve the quality of services, decrease costs and enhance security in order to make online transactions efficient and safe and local banks should be encouraged to offer efficient payment gateway solutions, also aimed to facilitate the increase of credit/debit card penetration.

Web promotion is important as it helps increase brand awareness, up sell and cross sell premium tourism products/services, reach the targeted segment of tourists and develop database for the tourism players. It also helps reduce cost compared to traditional marketing and track tourist's interest and trends as it happens.

- 5) To encourage Arab nationals to own residences, timeshare vacation condominiums, homes or properties in Malaysia.

For instance, it is noted that a number of Saudis own residences in the UK and they tend to spend the whole summer holidaying in UK while staying in their own houses. Middle East tourists usually travel with their extended families up to more than 20 people in a group or in group of more than ten young males. The relatively limited hotel room space does not meet the needs of the Middle East family who might require the use of five to 10 rooms.

According to Ladki et. al (2002), the choice of accommodation is also shaped by the length of stay. The long stays away from home makes staying in hotels less attractive for large families. The Middle East tourists might shift their destination preference to other countries like the UK and Lebanon which aggressively promote the idea of vacation homes for their international tourists.

As another alternative, the Arab tourists can also be encouraged to purchase timeshare vacation homes or condominiums in the country. A timeshare is a form of ownership or right to the use of a property, in which multiple parties hold rights to use it. Each sharer is allotted a period of time in which they may use the property. Timeshares may be on a part-ownership or lease/"right to use" basis, in which the sharer holds no claim to ownership of the property. Malaysian resorts or developers should start market their accommodation properties by encouraging guests to "stop renting a room" and instead "buy the hotel".

- 6) To intensively promote tourist attractions outside the Klang Valley – beach, island and highland resorts.

Apart from promoting what all Kuala Lumpur and its vicinity have to offer, emphasize should also be given to some major tourist attractions outside the Klang Valley with particular attention to the beach, island and highland resorts. It is the time now for these resorts to be “Arab friendly” just like the many upscale hotels and tourist spots in Kuala Lumpur.

With improved service and rejuvenated tourism products, Port Dickson, Langkawi Island and Cameron Highland are among the major destinations with high potential to draw more of the Middle East tourists. Beach resorts for instance might want to allocate one half day in a week as “ladies evening” or sort of to cater for the needs of the Arab females who require a more private time and space with the absence of the males.

- 7) To conduct a special training for the taxi drivers on Arab’s hospitality.

The training can be organized by the Malaysian tourism authority or the taxi companies them selves. The training should not only focus on the Arab’s culture and communication but also on the aspect of “customer care”. Some of the negative feedbacks from the Arab tourists are regarding the discriminatory charges of the taxi services.

- 8) To work closely with the travel agencies, media and other tourism players in the Middle East.

Malaysia Tourism should maintain a database of media and travel agencies in the Middle East and continuously update them on what Malaysia has to offer and newly developed tourist attractions. Malaysia tourism players such as Malaysia Airlines can also co-partner with local banks to offer customers more Malaysia travel-related benefits for using their credit card. According to Global Intelligence (2008/2009 Q1), a MasterCard survey among UAE consumers showed that Malaysia (7 per cent) is the third favorite country for holiday after India (42 per cent) and Egypt (8 per cent).

Conclusion

The Middle East region is a very viable market for tourism as it is home to a growing young population with a high per capita income. Unfortunately, very little academic research has been carried out with regards to its market behavior. More well structured research are needed to unveil the many facets of the Middle East outbound travel behavior particularly in the Malaysian tourism industry. This is especially important taking into consideration the claim that the tourists from the Middle East are very demanding, require high level of service standard but a very late booking market. Malaysia should focus its marketing efforts in two most lucrative markets namely Saudi Arabia and UAE as well as to increase air connectivity between the two countries and Malaysia.

With respect to tourism products and services, Malaysia needs to develop more unique and attractive teen and youth-orientation products. Malaysia must also aggressively promote its major international standard beach, island and highland resorts outside the Klang Valley in order to provide more diverse travel experiences to the tourists. Apart from that, to cater for the needs of Arab tourists who travel in large group and on long holiday, Malaysia should also starts to encourage the Arab nationals to own residences, vacation homes or property in Malaysia. This strategy can help Malaysia to optimize as well as to sustain large tourist arrivals from the Middle East region.

References

- AC Nielsen. (2002). Study on Promoting Malaysia as a Tourist Destination for the Middle East Market. AC Nielsen Malaysia.
- Global Intelligence. (2008/2009) Q1. April – June 2008.
- Green Leaf World Marketing Management. 2007. *Destination/NTO Representation in Middle East. Dubai.*
- Gupta, R. (2008). *High Internet penetration makes Middle East market an attractive proposition.* EyeforTravel News.

IPK International. (2007). *World Travel Monitor Results*. Dubai.

Khalilah Zakariya. (2006). *Refining Tourist's Place Experience Through Placemaking: A Case Study on Middle East Tourists in Kuala Lumpur City Centre*. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Unpublished Master's Thesis.

Ladki, Said M., Mikdashi, T.S., Fahed, W. & Abbas, H. (2002). Arab Tourists and the Lebanese vacation Ownership Industry: A Quality of Life Perspective. *Hospitality Management*. 21: 257-265.

Market Vision. (2002). *A Study on Outbound Travel to ETC Destinations from Source Markets in The Middle East*.

Mastercard Consumer Lifestyle Survey – UAE, Kuwait, Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. (2007).

Flamingo. (2007). *Visit Britain Arab Youth Research*.

The Middle East Outbound Travel Study.(2002). Visit Britain.

The Travel and Tourism Competitive Report. (2007). *World Economic Forum*. Geneva.

The UAE National Decision Making Process Research. (2004). In VisitBritain (updated January 2008).

Visit Britain. (2008). *United Arab Emirates (UAE): Market and Trade Profile*. January.

Wong, Y.B. 2001. *Analysis of Middle East Market in Malaysia: Perception of MTPB in Positioning Malaysia as a Tourist Destination to Middle East Market*. Taylor's College. Unpublished Bachelor's Thesis.

About the Authors

AHMAD AZMI M. ARIFFIN (Ph.D) is an associate professor in the School of Business Management, University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and associate member at the Graduate School of Business UKM. He currently serves as the coordinator for the MBA-Executive program as well as the Managing Editor of “Jurnal Pengurusan”, an international Scopus-indexed journal published by the university. Azmi obtained his MBA from UKM in 1998 with concentration in the field of services marketing. He graduated with Ph.D in tourism and hospitality marketing from University of Malaya in 2006. He is actively conducting research on various aspects of tourism and hospitality behaviour, services marketing, as well as the marketing-entrepreneurship interface. His research publications have appeared in journals such as Journal of Hospitality and Tourism, International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism

Jurnal Antarabangsa Kajian Asia Barat
International Journal of West Asian Studies
Vol. 1, 2009 (pp 39-53)

Administration, Event Management, ASEAN Journal of Hospitality and Tourism, and International Journal of Management Studies. He can be contacted at azmi@ukm.my

MOHD SAFAR HASIM (Ph.D) is professor of journalism and international communication at the School of Media and Communication Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. He is also an Associate Principal Fellow at the Institute of West Asian Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. His current research is on tourism, with special emphasis on West Asian tourists and Islamic media and communication. He can be contacted at msafar@ukm.my. drmsafar@gmail.com.