

Developing Pondok Institutions as a Religious Tourism Product

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a research in progress about the potential of pondok institutions or Islamic religious seminaries to be developed as a spiritual or religious tourism product. It puts forward how traditional religious education providers might be utilised and developed into spiritual tourism product. It analyzes the current status and conditions of these religious seminaries located at various locations in Malaysia. At the same time, it identifies what are the attributes that are able to attract and motivate the tourists to visit the places and contribute to the local economic development. In order to explore various attributes of pondok institutions, series of in-depth interviews with the operators is applied. Based on the evidence from six pondok operators in the country, the potential of pondok institutions or Islamic religious seminaries to be developed as a spiritual tourism product is very promising. All the operators seem to agree to market the product more extensively especially through the internet to reach for more broad audience. However, most of the institutions are still lacking in terms of basic facilities such as accommodation, classrooms and number of religious teachers. Various important attributes are identified such as having knowledgeable Islamic teachers, curricular contents and providing good facilities and services. With the increase numbers of visitors or tourists come to Pondok to learn about Islamic religion and searching for a peaceful mind, Pondok institutions may able to expand as a reputable Islamic education provider.

Keywords: Religious tourism, Pondok Institutions, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present a research in progress about the potential of pondok institutions or Islamic religious seminaries to be developed as a spiritual or religious tourism product. This article reports the preliminary findings of the study based on the views from the pondok operators in terms of the pondok's current condition and various pondok attributes that can be developed as a tourism product. It also identifies some of the challenges in marketing the institutions to the wider Muslim audience and concludes by providing recommendations to the operators in order to attract more Muslim visitors to the place. Presently, there are various pondok institutions available in the country particularly at various locations in Kelantan, Kedah, Perak and Penang.

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specific period of time listening to the face to face lecture from tuan guru or grand master, that person may able to reflect about being a truth Muslim. While staying at the pondok with no contact from the outside world such as the internet and mass media, that person can really focus on the religion and seek meaning in their life. Presently, Pondok institutions are not opened for Non Muslims. Visitors are only among Muslims who want to learn about basic knowledge of Islam such as reading Quran, Tauhid, Fiqh and Tasawuf. Learners also will be exposed to other subjects such as Quranic interpretations, eloquent recitation, traditions of the prophet Muhammad pbuh, jurisprudence and others. The text used is written in original Jawi Malay by Islamic scholars who received Islamic education in Mecca. Each pondok student is required to purchase the text and to get ready in front of the tok guru for talaqqi (face to face) session. The teacher will read and explain sheet by sheet and any question raised about a particular topic will be explained in detail.

What is Pondok institution?

Pondok institution is a traditional Islamic education school in Malaysia. The institutions are historically important to the Muslim community in Malaysia. The main role of Pondok institution is to provide religious instruction and also in deepening the community understands of Islam. Moreover, it is closely related to the Malay-Muslim identity and often acts as the axis of the Malay social life. Traditional features in Pondok education has become one of the tourist attractions for religious travelers. Currently, these institutions are able to attract visitors as far from Cambodia, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand (Fauzi, 2010). Pondok education is very popular among people in Kelantan, Kedah and Penang. The word pondok (literally: hut) is an arabic word *alfundug* meaning 'residential house, hostel or house. It is also defined as an accommodation for three or four students in a form of small houses. Pondok system also is popular in Indonesia and it is known as 'pesantren' meaning religious students. Based on the definition provided by Kamus Dewan (a Malay Dictionary), pondok means 'madrasah' (school) or hostel which is as a place to learn about Quranic recitation and religious knowledge. In the traditional pondok systems, everyone can apply to learn about Islam under the supervision of tuan guru or grand master. The religious experience and Islamic environment provided by Pondok is very interesting indeed. Historically, the history of Islamic education in Kelantan began since the 12th century and it started at the royal palace for the family of Sultan and state government dignitaries. Subsequently, it was continued in surau, madrassas and mosque taught by tok guru.

Table 1
Number of Pondok institutions by States in Malaysia

State	Total Number of Pondok Institution
Kelantan	39
Terengganu	12
Kedah	27
Pahang	6
Perak	1
Negeri Sembilan	2
Melaka	2
Selangor	3
Johor	3
Total	95

Source:Pusat Pembangunan Pondok (2012)

<http://epondok.wordpress.com/pondok-malaysia/>

METHOD

As noted above, the purpose of this research is to identify various pondok attributes that can be developed in order to transform the institutions as a tourism attraction. Therefore, it focuses on pondok institutions available in the state of Kelantan, Kedah and Penang. Based on the list provided by the center of Pondok development, there are ninety five pondok currently operated in the country. Presently, a total of six pondoks have been approached for the study and the details are as follows:

List of Pondok Institutions Approached for In Depth Interviews

Pondok Institution	Location	Year of Establishment
Pusat Pengajian Pondok YIK	Kandis, Bachok, Kelantan	2005
Madrasah Diniyah Bakriah	Pondok Pasir Tumboh, Kota Bharu Kelantan	1954
Madrasah Ar Rahmaniah Ad Diniyah	Pondok Lubuk Tapah, Pasir Mas, Kelantan	1931
Yayasan An Nadhoh	Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang	2003
Pondok Bandar Hilir	Sik, Kedah	1992
Madrasah Ar Rahmaniah	Sik, Kedah	N/A

Facilities and Services

Many informants state that pondok institutions need to upgrade their facilities and services in order to cater for tourists who want to visit the places. For examples, they need to increase the number of rooms, dormitories or hostels if they want to open the institutions to a larger society. They also need have their own transportation to assist the tourists, recruit more religious teachers and add more facilities such as eating places and other relevant facilities.

CONCLUSION

This paper reports preliminary findings of the research on the potential of pondok institutions in Malaysia to be developed as a spiritual tourism product. Based on the evidence from the in depth interviews with six pondok operators in the country, the potential of pondok institutions or Islamic religious seminaries to be developed as a spiritual tourism product is very promising. All the operators seem to agree to the suggestion of opening up their institutions to the wider market. They also appear to support the idea of marketing the pondok as a tourism destination more extensively especially through the internet to reach for more broad audience. However, most of the institutions are still lacking in terms of basic facilities such as accommodation, classrooms and number of religious teachers. The management structure of the pondok also is not clear seems most of the pondok are managed and run as a family owned institution. It is difficult for the management to make decision if the owner is not available. From the pondok operators point of view, they are interested to promote their pondok institutions for the sake of spreading Islamic religious knowledge to the society. However, due to the financial constraints and lack of human resources such as religious teachers, they seem not convinced in promoting pondok institutions as a religious tourism product. Pondok operators also need to improve the way they manage the institutions. It is imperative for the operators to commercialize the institutions by doing marketing and educating more people to seek Islamic religious knowledge. Based on the demand of specific courses taught at Pondok, the operators should develop tourism packages in collaborating with other tourism organisations such as travel agencies and hotels. Presently, the researchers are developing a survey questionnaire to get a feedback from the public about developing pondok institutions as a spiritual tourism product based on the attributes identified. It is hoped that Pondok institutions may contribute to the success of the growing tourism industry and to become one of the popular Islamic tourism products.

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