

CHALLENGES FACED BY OPERATORS TO SUSTAIN HOMESTAY BUSINESSES IN SELANGOR, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

A Homestay business is a well-known community-based tourism in the South East Asian region. In Malaysia, leisure traveling started to grow in the early 1970's and tourism has become the second highest source of foreign exchange earnings. As foreign exchange earnings increase and more people are employed in the tourism sector, this sector becomes a significant contributor to the Malaysian economy. The Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) and the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MRRD) have been promoting the Homestay programmes to enhance the quality of living of local hosts and to support the community development. Many operators receive monetary benefits from the business, thus encouraging more participants in the programmes. However, the registered Homestay statistics show that some operators have withdrawn and the number of registered operators has decreased. Therefore, the focus of this study is to investigate the challenges faced by Homestay operators to sustain their businesses. The findings show that a majority of Homestay hosts faces challenges from the conflict of attitude among hosts and the lack of Homestay regulations. Registered Homestay operators are also found to be demotivated due to the big gap in Homestay income between the registered and unregistered Homestay operators.

Keywords: homestay operators, unregistered homestay operators, community-based tourism, sustainable homestay, community development

INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia (MOTAC) reported that the tourism sector was the sixth highest contributor to the Malaysian economy in 2015. This sector has rapidly grown with an increase in the number of tourist arrivals and total tourism receipts for the past eleven years. Unfortunately in year 2015 this sector has decreased by 6.2 percent, (25,721,251) in the number of tourist arrivals and 4 percent, (RM 69,119,600) total tourism receipts (Tourism Malaysia, 2016). To ensure the sustainability of the tourism sector, the competitive advantage needs to be utilized in the highly competitive environment. According to the Malaysia Tourism Transformation Plan 2020, the industry targets 36 million tourist arrivals and RM168 billion in tourism receipts by 2020.

This study investigates the challenges faced by Homestay operators to sustain their Homestay businesses. Despite the multitude of studies on the homestay in Malaysia, very little attention has been given on the challenges faced by registered homestay operators to sustain their homestay

business. Most of the past researches in Malaysia focuses more research on homestay programme relating to the quality, measuring the tourist satisfaction, local community participation and the successful of homestay programme. It was noted that, through homestay programme, homestay operators receive the economic benefits from an opportunity to generate additional income. However these are not made the registered homestay operators rich as they would hope to be. No clear evidence how much homestay operating cost and profit that registered homestay operators may earned from their homestay business except homestay revenue generated from homestay business provided by MOTAC.

Further investigation to address challenges facing registered homestay operators to sustain their homestay business in Selangor, Malaysia is needed due to the dropped number of homestay coordinators and operators, increase the number of unregistered homestay operators, unethical unregistered homestay operator issue and lack of evidence whether registered homestay operator gain profit from their homestay business.

The news from the Star online date 3rd August 2014 untitled "Homestay horror for five" became viral in media due to unethical unregistered homestay operator used a hidden CCTV camera to record woman taking bath may tarnish the good name of registered homestay operators. Local residents who operate Homestay businesses are required to register with MOTAC. Unfortunately, there are many unregistered Homestay operators who may not be following the stipulated guidelines and procedures. The main objective of this study is to examine key challenges faced by registered homestay operators to sustain their homestay business. Hence the specific objectives of the study are to identify the problems faced by registered homestay operators when running homestay business, to identify how far a government has progressed in improving the quality and quantity for sustainable homestay and to determine whether registered homestay business with MOTAC has financial sufficiency.

Homestay financial sufficiency is one of the motivation factor if the homestay business able bringing enough profit thus homestay operator find the business is worthwhile to keep going for the foreseeable future. Increase in demand for homestay accommodation and greater government investment for tourism development especially in rural tourism development justify the need to explore any issues related challenges facing registered homestay operators to sustain their homestay business. This study provides an insight on the sustainability of homestay business that can be valuable to homestay coordinators, homestay operators, policy makers, tourism stakeholders and researchers. The research findings offer some implications for the purpose of improvement.

HOMESTAY AND SUSTAINABILITY

According to MOTAC, the official definition of a Homestay programme is "... tourists staying with the host family who offers their home for the tourists to experience the daily life and culture of the family, in both direct and indirect manners" (Amran, 2010). The Homestay concept in Malaysia is unique because tourists are not only exposed to the way of living with a local family, but also have the opportunity to experience the Malaysian culture, especially in the Malay community.

Community participation is a designed process to create conditions that generate economic and social progress for the whole community. A sustainable community meets the economic needs of the residents, enhances and protects the environment, and promotes development in local communities. According to the United Nations Environment Education Programme (UNEP), a sustainable tourism development should optimize the use of environmental resources while preserving the natural heritage and biodiversity. It is important to respect and maintain the local cultural integrity of the host community through conserving the living cultural heritage.

This may ensure sustainable and equitable economic operation, employment opportunities and social services to local communities while contributing to poverty alleviation. Similarly, Wood (2002) noted that a well-designed tourism programme should incorporate the conservation of biodiversity that sustains the well-being of local people and the interpretation or learning experience to be delivered to primarily small groups by small scale businesses, as well as the conservation of non-renewable resources. It should also focus on the participation, ownership and business opportunities for the rural population.

In Malaysia, the villages that participate in existing Homestay programmes are located in rural areas and some businesses have been established for more than 16 years. Homestay businesses remain a slow-growth market even though various incentives are offered to the Homestay operators by the government (Ismail, 2010). Many of these Homestay establishments are difficult to sustain over time. Small and rural communities are often viewed as dependent, weak and lacking in resources to help themselves (Gossling et al., 2002). Local communities who view tourism development as offering little benefits often play minimum role and have less incentive to participate (Gezici, 2006). Previous studies done on Homestay businesses in Malaysia focused on measuring the satisfaction level for tourists with regards to the services provided by Homestay operators (Ismail, 2010; Amran, 2004; Fazliana, 2004; Julaili, 2001), the performance of Homestay programmes (Jabil et al., 2011; Ismail, 2010; Yahaya, 2004) and local community participation (Ismail, 2010; Kalsom et al., 2006). However, there is little research on the challenges faced by Homestay operators in order to sustain the business.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objectives of the study, this study used qualitative method for data collection and analysis. Qualitative data consists of open-ended information that the researcher gathers through interviews allow the participants to supply answers in their own words. In-depth interviews are conducted among officers of governing bodies and Homestay operators. Sample data from the interviews include four homestay businesses in Selangor, two are not registered with MOTAC.

RESULTS

HOMESTAYS IN MALAYSIA

MOTAC introduced the Homestay programme in 1988 to provide an alternative for tourist accommodation. The programme is under the Rural Tourism Master Plan, with the objective to encourage the rural community to participate in the tourism sector. The homestay programme in Malaysia was first launched in 1995 when MOTAC and the State Economic Planning Unit (EPU) working in the homestay concept with community members and village elders from Desa Murni, Termeloh, Pahang to boost the homestay programme. The government provided certificates to host families, developed brochures and helped homestay promotion as well as replication of the program in other areas of Malaysia. Over time, this led to the development of the Malaysia Homestay Association (MOTOUR, 2011).

In 2015, total income generated from this programme increased by 22 per cent to RM 28,392,933.50, while the number of tourist arrivals also increased by 6.5 per cent to 391,225 from the previous year. Total income and tourist arrivals for the last ten years are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Homestay Total Income and Tourist Arrivals in Malaysia

YEAR	INCOME	TOURIST ARRIVALS	
		DOMESTIC	FOREIGN
2006	2,065,980.34	21,795	10,038
2007	4,923,433.30	45,354	20,361
2008	6,393,676.63	68,416	23,117
2009	10,920,877.90	130,038	31,523
2010	12,407,227.90	147,346	49,126
2011	15,736,277.60	195,324	59,657
2012	18,545,656.60	259,423	65,835
2013	21,570,949.20	288,107	62,847
2014	23,229,550.50	296,439	71,034
2015	28,392,933.50	319,395	71,830

Source: Industry Development Division, MOTAC (2016)

Table 2. Number of Registered Homestay Coordinators and Operators in Malaysia

YEAR	NO. OF COORDINATORS	NO. OF OPERATORS
2006	116	1939
2007	135	2533
2008	146	3034
2009	141	3283
2010	139	3005
2011	150	3211
2012	159	3424
2013	166	3431
2014	172	3519
2015	181	3653

Source: Industry Development Division, MOTAC (2016)

As shown in Table 2, the total number of Homestay coordinators in 2015 is 181, which is a 5.2 per cent increase from 2014. Meanwhile, there are more than 3,600 Homestay operators in Malaysia, registered and approved by MOTAC. Homestay coordinators represent Homestay establishments in Malaysia, whereas Homestay operators are local hosts participating in the Homestay programmes. Unfortunately, there are many Homestay operators who are not registered and operate their Homestay facilities without adhering to the guidelines set by MOTAC. To date, there are more than 1000 unregistered Homestay operators who offer accommodations similar to rental homes or budget hotels (MOTAC, 2014).

According to MOTAC, registered Homestay operators must fulfil certain requirements, such as a minimum of 10 homes per Homestay, accessibility in terms of transportation and communication, act-and-think tourism attitude, optimum levels of cleanliness and safety, and community activities that involve traditional games and introduction to local culture. Besides, the Homestay operators must also attend a basic Homestay course and participate in a practical Homestay training. Having fulfilled these requirements, the Homestay premises will be inspected every three years for compliance with regulations. Inspections will be supervised by MOTAC with the cooperation of various authorities such as the Health Ministry, Tourism Malaysia, State Homestay Association, and the respective Residents' Committee. Basic Homestay courses are jointly organised by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MRRD) and the Institute for Rural Advancement (INFRA). Table 3 shows the total number of participants who attended the basic Homestay courses from 2007 to May, 2016.

Table 3. Number of Participants in the Basic Homestay Course

YEAR	NO. OF SERIES	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
2007	11	477
2008	14	591
2009	7	203
2011	6	221
2012	4	132
2013	4	126
2014	3	118
2015	5	205
May 2016	3	125

Source: INFRA (2016)

Note: Data for 2010 is not available

Homestay operators have to follow a set of strict guidelines to ensure that visitors gain a real experience of living in the local culture. All Homestay operators must occupy the premises during the stay and not merely renting out the house to tourists. The ministry provides Homestay Malaysia trademark logos to the registered Homestay operators. The ministry owns the copyright of the logo and unregistered Homestay operators are prohibited from using it.

HOMESTAYS IN SELANGOR

Tourists are drawn to visit Homestays in Selangor for its culture and heritage experience. There are 15 registered Homestays in Selangor and most Homestays are operated by small-scale farmers and villagers with the assistance from the state government, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Tourism Malaysia and Tourism Selangor Sdn. Bhd. Table 4 shows that the number of Homestay operators has decreased to 443 in 2015 compared to 458 in 2013. However, the number of rooms has increased to 49 rooms in 2015.

Table 4. Registered Homestays in Selangor, 2013 - 2015

NO.	HOMESTAY	2013		2015	
		NO.OF OPERATORS	NO. OF ROOMS	NO.OF OPERATORS	NO. OF ROOMS
1	Air Manis	17	34	17	45
2	Banghuris	87	118	80	100
3	Bouganvilles	9	15	15	20
4	Sg. Haji Dorani	31	55	20	40
5	Kanchong Darat	38	50	50	75
6	Kg. Kundang	19	28	25	55
7	Kg. Batu Laut	19	19	17	22
8	Seri Kayangan	21	27	20	30
9	Sg. Lang Tengah	19	25	20	36
10	Papitusulem	32	55	32	79
11	Sepintas	20	20	20	20
12	Batu 23	37	50	25	30
13	Sg. Sireh	54	64	40	50
14	Kg. Endah	27	50	32	47
15	Sg. Tenggi	28	50	30	60
TOTAL		458	660	443	709

Source: Industry Development Division, MOTAC (2016)

Note: Number of operators and number of rooms is same for year 2014 and 2015

Table 5 shows homestay income and tourist arrivals in Selangor year 2014 and 2015. The regional Office Selangor states that Selangor Homestays received 59,011 tourist arrivals with a higher generated income of RM 3,127,511. Compared to the previous year, the generated income was RM 2,754,186. However, Selangor Tourism Association (2011) states that there are more than 100 Homestay establishments in Selangor, which are owned by unregistered homestay operators and operate without any endorsement from MOTAC.

Table 5. Homestay Income and Tourist Arrivals in Selangor, 2014-2015

NO.	HOMESTAY	2014		2015	
		TOURIST ARRIVALS	INCOME (RM)	TOURIST ARRIVALS	INCOME (RM)
1	Air Manis	2,090	530,142	3,770	331,553
2	Banghuris	10,746	572,280	12,205	801,740
3	Bouganvilles	2,793	105,855	2,412	156,685
4	Sg. Haji Dorani	7,351	309,051	9,991	380,242
5	Kanchong Darat	5,467	254,220	5,991	211,650
6	Kg. Kundang	1,502	95,455	1,250	497,910
7	Kg. Batu Laut	520	19,300	400	17,100
8	Seri Kayangan	n/a	70,225	n/a	n/a
9	Sg. Lang Tengah	686	37,315	932	37,790
10	Papitusulem	407	24,827	419	39,100
11	Sepintas	85	1,100	30	400

12	Batu 23	3,517	77,920	2,595	60,821
13	Sg. Sireh	6,325	388,996	9,696	468,850
14	Kg. Endah	18,742	102,300	8,710	59,270
15	Sg. Tenggi	923	165,200	610	64,400
TOTAL		61,154	2,754,186	59,011	3,127,511

Source: Selangor Regional Office, MOTAC (2016)

CHALLENGES

Conflict of Attitude among Homestay Operators

The concept of "homestay" is not about accommodation. Homestay programmes offer tourists an opportunity to experience the beautiful simplicity of life in a traditional village, and allow tourists to engage in the daily activities with a Malaysian family to learn about the lifestyle and culture. Unfortunately, there are individual operators who manipulate the word "Homestay" and offer unregistered accommodation to tourists. Signage with "Homestay" titles in front of individually-owned premises may mislead tourists who anticipate a full Homestay programme. An officer from the Tourism Selangor Office said, "...Tourists have complained of having been cheated in Homestay Programmes... Some did not fulfil the criteria as promoted in the package and the tourists were disappointed with the quality of service at the Homestay premises" (Respondent 2).

There is a substantial lack of public understanding regarding the Homestay concept. According to an unregistered Homestay operator, "This is an opportunity to do business. There is good demand and it gives high returns although we provide no cultural-related activities" (Respondent 5).

The misuse of the "Homestay" title by unregistered operators not only leads to confusion among tourists regarding the Malaysian Homestay concept as stated by Ministry of Tourism, but also affects the Homestay income of registered operators. For the registered Homestay operators, they have a committee account into which all payments received from the tourists will be credited. This committee will duly pay each operator a certain amount that covers the expenditure cost in hosting and some profit. Besides to upgrade the Homestay facilities, profits from the Homestay programme are also used for promotional purposes. Small profit and huge competition with the increasing number of unregistered Homestay operators have further demotivate registered Homestay operators to upgrade their facilities, which compromises the quality of service as received by tourists. According to Yahaya (2004), average monthly income received by a registered Homestay operator is between RM600 to RM800, whereas Respondent 5 claimed that an unregistered Homestay operator can earn between RM1,200 to RM2,000 per month.

On the other hand, according to Respondent 8 who is a registered Homestay operator, the number of tourists visiting the village has started to decrease since 2009 and their average monthly Homestay income is currently between RM 80 to RM 150. Therefore, some of the registered Homestay operators have opted to leave the programme. In addition, an online news report in the Star dated 3 August 2014 titled "Homestay horror for five" has become viral in the social media. The article reported the unethical act of an unregistered Homestay operator who used a hidden CCTV camera to capture women in the showers. This report had a negative impact on the reputation of registered Homestay operators and affected their businesses.

Lack of Homestay Regulation and Monitoring

There is a lack of monitoring by the ministry and state government on the unregistered Homestay operators. Their non-participation in the official Homestay programme not only contributes little to community development, but is perceived as unfair to the local registered Homestay operators as it induces unhealthy market competition and inequality in income distribution. A registered Homestay operator (Respondent 6) stated that, *"We are disappointed with the increasing numbers of unregistered Homestay operators, because of them, our small income and our good names are affected."*

According to an officer from MOTAC, *"Homestay operators who are not registered with us, we cannot monitor them. We also have limitation in manpower to look for them, but we believe there are a huge number of unregistered operators"* (Respondent 4).

There are no specific actions taken against unregistered Homestay operators. According to another MOTAC officer, *"Currently, we do not have specific laws for the ministry to act against the unregistered Homestay operators. There is no law to compel them to register with the ministry and no action can be taken because their businesses are operated legitimately"* (Respondent 1).

Moreover, according to an officer from Companies Commission of Malaysia (CCM), *"...We cannot stop unregistered Homestay operators because they are conducting legal activities and we cannot accuse them to be illegal Homestays just because they are not registered with the Ministry of Tourism,....but we can help the ministry by asking new company registrations for those using the "Homestay" title to attach an approval letter from the Ministry of Tourism before we proceed to process their application"* (Respondent 3).

Through in-depth interviews, we learned that registered Homestay operators are never involved in Homestay management and administration. A Homestay manager is selected by the local community to act as a leader. The manager is also authorised by the ministry to run the Homestay programme and determine the fees for the Homestay packages. Respondent 7, one of the registered Homestay operators claimed that *"It has been a long time since I last received visiting tourists. When the tourists come to our village, our Homestay manager always bring them to his own house. At first, I thought may be the tourists chose to stay there, but when other tourists come, they too stay at his house. Other Homestay operators are also aware of this issue but there is nothing that we can do"*.

Leadership problem, poor communication, lack of transparency, informal management system and personal interest are perceived to affect the management of Homestay programmes. When the conflicts in the community arise, the negative attitude and breakdown of unity may threaten the Homestay sustainability (Nor Ashikin and Kalsom, 2010).

CONCLUSION

To understand the compatibility of Homestay businesses with a sustainable community development, the first thing that needs to be addressed is the challenges towards sustainability. A sustainable community development cannot be achieved if there is no firm enforcement by MOTAC and the local authorities to control the increasing number of unregistered Homestays, as well as to monitor the overall Homestay programmes. Findings from this study support Gezici

(2006) and Nor Ashikin and Kalsom (2010), that local communities are more reluctant to give full commitment when they see little benefit to be gained from the programme. More registered operators are also likely to withdraw when there is no sufficient income generated from their participation in the programme.

Successful Homestay operators may have invested a substantial amount of capital and resources to upgrade their services, and strive to comply with the strict operating guidelines set by MOTAC. Unfortunately, many registered Homestay operators become demotivated by the presence and competition of individually-owned residential homes that have been turned into Homestays. These unregistered Homestay businesses have negatively affected the income of registered Homestay operators and the good image of tourism in Malaysia. Unregistered Homestay operators merely provide regular accommodation for tourists, similar to the services offered by hotels, and without any recreational activities related to introducing local culture. As a result, tourists become confused by the actual concept of Homestay programmes. Some unregistered Homestay operators even give bad impressions that may affect the good reputation of registered Homestay operators.

Furthermore, the United Nations defines community development as a 'process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation'. However, due to the large number of unregistered Homestay operators and conflicts of interest among appointed Homestay managers, many registered Homestay operators become less committed to deliver quality services to tourists. This is evidenced from the complaints by the tourists who were not satisfied with the services that they received.

Thus, the enthusiasm and commitment of the local community are necessary to enhance or further develop a sustainable community. Self-development as a motivation for the local community is important in order to create awareness of the socioeconomic benefits of the Homestay programme. It is also imperative to offset the negative impact imposed by unregistered Homestay operators.

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