

The Potential of the Islamic Tourism Industry Based on Education in Pondok Institutions in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Islamic tourism refers to travel activities that comply with the principles of Islamic law (Shariah). One of the notable segments within this sector is educational tourism, which emphasizes religious knowledge and intellectual enrichment. The existence of Islamic educational centers both traditional and modern serves as a strong attraction in promoting the culture of knowledge, which holds a central position in Islamic teachings. Among these, pondok institutions, as traditional Islamic educational establishments, possess significant potential to become hubs for Islamic tourism. Educational-based Islamic tourism within these institutions represents a form of travel that combines religious learning with meaningful experiences and has been growing steadily in Malaysia.

The longstanding presence of pondok institutions has strengthened intellectual culture among Muslim communities, while their environment, scholarly teachers, syllabi, and unique teaching systems have successfully attracted knowledge-seeking tourists. This study adopts a qualitative methodology, employing library research and descriptive content analysis to explore the potential of pondok-based educational Islamic tourism in Malaysia. Findings indicate that this form of tourism has vast potential to contribute to the national tourism industry, although it is still in the early stages of development. Furthermore, it can position pondok institutions as prominent destinations for scholarly and spiritual tourism in both domestic and regional contexts. Recommendations are proposed to further develop and institutionalize pondok-based Islamic tourism, thereby generating substantial social and educational benefits for the wider community.

Keywords- Islamic tourism, educational tourism, pondok institutions, intellectual culture

INTRODUCTION

Based on Malaysian legislation, Section 2 of the Tourism Industry Act 1992 defines tourism as activities involving leisure travel, sightseeing, shopping, visiting places of interest or entertainment, and other activities typically undertaken by tourists. A tourist is described as any individual, whether a citizen or non-citizen, who visits any location in Malaysia for various purposes, including recreation, vacation, culture, religion, sports, business, meetings, conferences, seminars, education, or research. Similarly, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines a tourist as someone who travels to and stays in a location outside their usual environment for a period not exceeding one consecutive year for specific purposes (Abdul Aziz, 2015).

The tourism sector is a rapidly growing industry, contributing more than 13% of global GDP in 2019. According to Tourism Malaysia, the country's tourism industry generated revenue amounting to RM 21.4 billion, reflecting a 16.9% increase compared to the previous year (Zunaidah, 2019). The international tourism sector experienced

positive growth, with 10,954,014 tourist arrivals recorded in Malaysia between January and March 2019 (Tourism Malaysia, 2019). However, the global tourism industry suffered a severe downturn following the outbreak of COVID-19, which began in late 2019. In Malaysia, the tourism sector was significantly affected as the government-imposed border closures and enforced the Movement Control Order (MCO).

According to the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC), losses in Malaysia's tourism industry increased from RM 135 billion in 2020 to RM 165 billion in 2021 (Akmal, 2022). In response, MOTAC introduced several initiatives to revive the sector once the country's borders reopened on 1 April 2022. Among these initiatives was the Tourism Malaysia Strategic and Marketing Plan 2022–2026, which emphasizes the development of domestic tourism, smart partnerships, and the promotion of tourism through both online and offline platforms (Izwan, 2022). The government projected that revenue from the tourism sector in 2023 would reach RM 120.4 billion, as the industry contributed between 6% and 15% of Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) between 2019 and 2022 (Baharuddin, 2023).

Foreign tourists visit Malaysia for a variety of purposes, including nature tourism, religious tourism, cultural tourism, health and wellness, beauty and spa tourism, as well as educational tourism. Today, the tourism industry involves a large segment of the global Muslim population. Hence, meeting the needs of Muslim tourists has become a priority, encompassing aspects such as infrastructure, halal-certified food, and comfortable facilities for worship.

Islamic tourism is defined as encompassing activities, destinations, products, and values guided by Islamic teachings, involving both tourism operators and tourists. This sector has shown considerable growth in recent years, with an increase in Muslim tourist arrivals and a corresponding rise in demand for halal-based products and services (Noor Fiteri, 2014). Recognizing this potential, Malaysia established the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) under MOTAC in 2009 to manage and oversee the development and promotion of Islamic tourism products.

The Islamic tourism industry in Malaysia also incorporates education-oriented segments. Educational tourism is broadly defined as travel, either individually or in groups, with the aim of gaining knowledge, experience, education, and training. This includes visits to historically significant locations, formal educational institutions, cultural centers, and eco-tourism destinations (Ruzana, 2011). Malaysia is home to numerous sites that promote intellectual enrichment, such as museums, colleges, universities, and traditional Islamic educational institutions like pondok schools. Among the sub-segments of knowledge- and education-based tourism, pondok tourism has strong potential to attract domestic, regional, and international visitors, given its unique combination of spirituality, culture, and traditional Islamic learning.

Problem Statement

According to Mahfuzah (2022), the dimensions of Islamic tourism that emphasize education and human capital development, particularly those involving intellectual and spiritual enrichment, have received limited attention. Instead, there has been a stronger focus on recreational and leisure-oriented activities. Although certain tourism initiatives, such as visits to mosques, museums, tombs, and historical sites, are being implemented, these activities tend to be superficial in nature and do not aim to transform lifestyles or deepen the appreciation of Islamic values.

Fernandina (2024) highlights several challenges in positioning pondok institutions as prominent tourist destinations. Among the key obstacles are infrastructure and facilities-related issues, particularly the lack of sufficient funding to upgrade facilities and repair damages. Furthermore, the provision of essential amenities, such as accommodation, restaurants, retail outlets, tourist information centers, and efficient transportation systems, must be prioritized especially given that many pondok institutions are located in remote rural areas, which makes accessibility a significant concern.

Therefore, this article explores the potential of pondok institutions within the context of Islamic tourism in Malaysia, focusing on how strategic and proactive efforts by multiple stakeholders could actualize this vision. Although such initiatives are still in the early stages, proper planning and innovative strategies must be developed

to position pondok-based tourism as a viable contributor to economic growth while simultaneously promoting traditional Islamic educational institutions as an essential cultural heritage. This would ultimately play a pivotal role in strengthening the Islamic way of life within Malaysian society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism serves as an avenue for seeking knowledge, guided by religious values that foster piety and awareness of humankind's humble position before Allah SWT. Islamic tourism, during the early period of Islam and throughout the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), was primarily associated with journeys undertaken *fi sabilillah* (in the path of Allah). In essence, Islamic tourism is rooted in the activities of Muslim societies to promote unity, peace, and harmony, showcasing positive values and mutual respect consistent with Islamic teachings. The purpose of travel among Muslims includes performing *jihad*, disseminating Islamic teachings, enhancing spiritual awareness and piety, earning a livelihood, and gaining deeper knowledge (Abdul Aziz, 2015).

According to the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC), Islamic tourism is defined as:

“Any activity, event, experience, or engagement that occurs during travel which adheres to religious values and laws, with the aim of appreciating one or more aspects of human life, including history, arts, culture, heritage, lifestyle, economy, health, education, or other dimensions of human existence.”

Islamic tourism emphasizes respect for Islam, ensuring that Muslims are protected from negative elements prohibited by the religion (Rosmawati, 2014). It is grounded in compliance with the principles and values established by Shariah, where every activity undertaken during travel is intended to seek the pleasure of Allah SWT. In this regard, Islamic tourism is conceptualized as an act of worship (*ibadah*). Mahfuzah et al. (2022) emphasize that Islamic tourism promotes balance between worldly and spiritual aspirations by prioritizing Islamic practices encompassing faith (*iman*), law (*shariah*), ethics (*akhlaq*), as well as marketing, services, and goods.

In the pursuit of knowledge, classical Islamic traditions employ terms such as *rehlah* (journey), *musafir* (traveler), and *siyahah* (pilgrimage), which describe the process of seeking knowledge through travel (Noor Fiteri, 2014). The concept of *Rehlah Ilmiah* (intellectual journey) was deeply embedded in the practices of past scholars (*ulama*), who traveled extensively to study under eminent teachers and to disseminate knowledge. Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406 CE) emphasized the importance of such scholarly journeys as a foundational method for students to gain profound and authentic knowledge (Ibn Khaldun, 2004).

Aligned with this tradition, educational tourism has emerged as a promising sector within Malaysia's economic development agenda. This form of tourism has been steadily growing, as Malaysia has become a preferred destination for international students pursuing studies at public or private universities (Ruzana, 2011).

Pondok institutions play a vital role in reviving traditional Islamic scholarly activities inspired by the concept of *Rehlah Ilmiah*. Historically, Malay world scholars traveled from one region to another to seek and share religious knowledge. For example, scholars from Patani migrated to the east coast states of Peninsular Malaysia, such as Terengganu, to engage in teaching and learning activities (Kusyairi et al., 2019). Thus, the legacy of Islamic intellectual traditions must be preserved and promoted among contemporary society to reinvigorate the golden age of Islamic knowledge culture.

One practical initiative is to establish pondok institutions as educational tourism destinations, known as “Pondok Tourism.” This concept opens opportunities for individuals from all walks of life to engage directly with religious scholarship under the guidance of esteemed scholars who teach in pondok schools (Takiyuddin et al., 2010).

However, promoting traditional Islamic educational institutions such as pondok schools as hubs of intellectual activity through Pondok Tourism programs is relatively new within Malaysia's tourism sector. The primary aim of these programs is to provide Muslim tourists particularly domestic travelers with religious knowledge and

spiritual enrichment through immersive travel experiences.

Among the states pioneering this initiative is Kelantan, which hosts a significant number of pondok institutions in Malaysia. These institutions are popular destinations for communities seeking religious knowledge during specific periods. The Pondok Tourism Program in Kelantan seeks to position the state known as the “Verandah of Mecca” and the “Land of Divine Revelation” as a center for intellectual and spiritual tourism (Mazne, 2013).

The original idea for this program was introduced in 2010 by the late Kelantan Chief Minister, Tuan Guru Dato’ Bentara Setia Haji Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat (1931–2015). His vision was to generate economic growth for Kelantan through the tourism sector while simultaneously encouraging the advancement of intellectual culture among both local residents and visitors from outside the state.

Kelantan’s credibility as a state with numerous pondok institutions and a legacy of producing respected Islamic scholars provides a strong foundation for the realization of this initiative. The continuous presence of qualified scholars teaching at these pondok institutions ensures that Kelantan remains a vibrant hub of Islamic learning and a suitable focal point for developing Pondok Tourism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilizing library-based research as the primary method of data collection. The researchers conducted an in-depth analysis of various documents, including journals, conference proceedings, books, and newspapers, to obtain accurate information and data related to Islamic tourism and pondok educational institutions. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis and descriptive analysis, guided by document analysis techniques, to provide comprehensive explanations and generate findings relevant to the aspects discussed.

The content analysis method was applied to systematically examine documents to identify key themes, patterns, and emerging trends. According to Krippendorff (2013), content analysis is a research technique designed to ensure the validity of inferences drawn from specific texts or similar sources within the context of the study.

Meanwhile, descriptive analysis was employed to clearly illustrate the scenarios and activities studied without altering the original data, thereby offering a holistic and accurate picture of the research context. This approach required a systematic and detailed analysis of the data to explain and interpret the information gathered.

Through these methods, the researchers were able to develop a deeper understanding of the topic under investigation, producing a comprehensive and well-founded analysis of the potential of pondok institutions in the context of Islamic tourism (Cresswell, 2014).

DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

Efforts to Develop Islamic Tourism Based on Pondok Institutions in Malaysia

Scholarly Tourism

The effort to position pondok institutions as a destination within the Islamic tourism sector brings about various positive impacts. Tourists visiting these institutions are provided with immersive experiences of traditional learning environments. Additionally, they gain a deeper appreciation for the unique traditions of Islamic education while learning about the diversity of cultures surrounding these institutions (Farahdina et al., 2024).

To achieve this, pondok institutions need to take proactive initiatives by organizing scholarly tourism programs to foster the development of the knowledge-based tourism industry in Malaysia. These institutions should offer tourism packages, promotions, and supporting infrastructure, such as accommodation facilities, to ensure a comfortable stay for visitors.

For example, Pondok Kandis Learning Centre in Telong, Bachok, Kelantan, has introduced tourism packages combined with educational activities, allowing tourists to participate directly in the pondok learning system. To

support this, the management has built four dedicated houses for visiting tourists, with plans to expand by constructing an additional 20 units to meet growing demand (Arif, 2019).

Pondok Kandis is expected to be developed further as a central location for Kelantan's Pondok Tourism Program, strategically located near fishing villages in the Tok Bali area, which are already popular destinations within Kelantan's broader tourism sector (Mazne et al., 2013).

Pondok institutions may also host scholarly programs, such as *Ijtima' Pondok* (Pondok Assembly), academic seminars, and lectures delivered by renowned scholars from across the Nusantara region. Takiyuddin et al. (2010) suggested several programmatic approaches, including:

1. Educational tourism packages for school and university students,
2. NGO collaboration with pondok institutions in areas such as spiritual development, team building, problem-solving workshops, and case studies,
3. Rehabilitation programs for ex-convicts, at-risk youth, and individuals recovering from substance abuse,
4. Development of community-based accommodation such as homestays.

Worship Tourism

Pondok institutions also have the potential to implement worship tourism programs. These involve organized visits to Islamic educational facilities such as pondok schools, tahfiz centers, mosques, and madrasahs.

In addition to participating in learning activities, visitors can also contribute through donations or charity, supporting the maintenance and development of these institutions. These programs integrate religious education with tourism experiences, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the cultural and spiritual lifestyle of pondok communities.

A notable example is the Majlis Dakwah Negara (MDN) initiative, which transformed the Jeli Da'wah Centre in Kelantan into a modern pondok known as Pondok Perdana. Pondok Perdana offers worship tourism packages for the Jeli district and surrounding areas near the Malaysia-Thailand border. These packages include cross-visits to other pondok schools in the region, boosting local economies and encouraging infrastructure development (Shamsuddin, 2018).

One of the highlighted activities is a worship tourism package to Pondok Tahfiz Cek Deng-Buketa, Narathiwat, which combines travel with religious lectures delivered by respected mudir (principals) of the pondok (Pondok Perdana, n.d.).

Additionally, religious seminars (*haul*) could be organized to attract visitors. These events may include special lectures, forums, and academic paper presentations by distinguished scholars. Such programs create opportunities for knowledge sharing while simultaneously promoting the pondok institutions involved.

Accommodation and Infrastructure

To position pondok institutions as viable tourism destinations, infrastructure and facilities must be upgraded and managed systematically. Guesthouses and homestay accommodations should be developed to provide visitors with an authentic pondok lifestyle experience, while also enabling them to attend daily communal lectures (*kuliah umumi*).

Several pondok institutions have already offered such services, including Pondok Pasir Tumbuh, Pondok Beta Hilir in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, and Pondok Perdana in Jeli, Kelantan.

Balqis (2019) notes that pondok institutions in Terengganu hold great potential to become tourism hubs if managed effectively. These institutions can be transformed into religious homestays, providing tourists with a unique opportunity to experience daily life in a religious learning environment.

Furthermore, Mahfuzah (2024) introduces the concept of "Pondokstay", a community-based tourism model

focused on Islamic education. This concept allows visitors to fully engage with pondok life, including direct interaction and participation in activities with both the pondok community and surrounding local residents.

The program aims to offer tourists:

1. A hands-on experience of daily routines at the pondok,
2. Exposure to local cultural, economic, and heritage values, and
3. A strong emphasis on personal interaction between visitors and residents throughout the program duration.

The success of Pondokstay depends on meeting core requirements, including accommodation, facilities, accessibility, attractions, and well-planned activities.

Collaborations

Partnerships between pondok institutions and tourism companies are essential to promote pondok schools as tourist destinations. These collaborations should involve both state and federal governments to ensure widespread recognition and support from relevant agencies.

Additionally, tour companies can be engaged to develop exclusive packages featuring visits to pondok institutions, marketed as part of Malaysia's Islamic tourism offerings.

Promotion

The government plays a key role in promoting pondok institutions as educational and cultural tourism destinations at the international level. Historically, pondok institutions in Malaysia have been widely recognized across the Malay Archipelago (Nusantara) as prestigious centers for Islamic education, attracting both local and foreign students.

Through the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC), MOTAC has initiated efforts to position pondok institutions as flagship Islamic tourism destinations. These efforts include developing pondok-based homestays, particularly targeting visitors from Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and Indonesia, who wish to study Islam in Malaysia.

In addition to promoting pondok schools as centers of religious learning, ITC also plans to organize scholarly programs, drawing local and international visitors to explore Malaysia's rich Islamic educational heritage (Radhuan, 2019).

Educational Programs

Pondok institutions can introduce short-term study modules for the public, providing structured programs with flexible durations. These could focus on introductory Jawi manuscripts or concise religious texts that can be completed in a few days or weeks, depending on the syllabus (Takiyuddin et al., 2010).

Moreover, monthly lecture series conducted by prominent scholars could attract participants nationwide, encouraging repeat visits and strengthening the pondok's role as a hub of Islamic learning. Terengganu has been identified as one of the pioneering states implementing such initiatives (Kusyairi et al., 2019).

Galleries and Libraries

To enhance the tourism experience, pondok institutions should establish exhibition galleries that showcase the history and development of Islamic education. These galleries could display:

- Historical Jawi manuscripts,

- Photographs documenting the growth of the institution,
- Organizational flowcharts, and
- Other historical artifacts related to the pondok's heritage.

Additionally, well-equipped libraries should be provided to encourage external visitors, including students from both public and private higher education institutions, to conduct research.

Pondok Pasir Tumbuh, Kota Bharu, Kelantan, is among the institutions actively working to implement these initiatives, aiming to make pondok education more accessible and engaging for the broader public.

Potential of Pondok-Based Islamic Tourism in Malaysia

Pondok institutions have the potential to be developed as a new segment of the tourism industry, addressing society's increasing need for knowledge acquisition and spiritual development. These needs can be fulfilled within specific periods, including holiday seasons, when people often seek meaningful and enriching activities. In today's fast-paced and challenging world, many individuals travel not only for leisure but also to find inner peace and relieve the pressures of daily life.

In this context, the Pondok Tourism Program, as developed in Kelantan, represents a strategic initiative to attract the public to learn religious and spiritual knowledge through immersive experiences in the pondok environment. The program is designed to encourage public participation and commitment to lifelong learning, positioning pondok institutions as a pathway for individuals to discover new directions for personal and spiritual growth (Mazne et al., 2013).

Pondok institutions hold strong appeal as tourism destinations due to their longstanding historical legacy as some of the earliest formal Islamic educational establishments in Malaysia. Beyond their historical value, these institutions are renowned for their role as centers of scholarship and da'wah (Islamic outreach), attracting students and seekers of knowledge from across regions. The traditional pedagogical methods employed at pondok schools, such as halaqah (study circles) and talaqqi (direct transmission of knowledge), focus on the core disciplines of aqidah (creed), fiqh (jurisprudence), and tasawwuf (spirituality). These authentic and experiential approaches offer visitors a unique opportunity to experience Islamic learning first-hand.

Moreover, the charismatic personalities of pondok teachers, recognized for their scholarly authority and piety, serve as an additional attraction for both local communities and tourists. The use of classical Jawi manuscripts as primary study materials deepens the intellectual and cultural value of the learning process, fostering a greater appreciation for traditional Islamic scholarship. Visitors are also able to immerse themselves in the pondok lifestyle by participating in religious gatherings, public lectures, and community activities, gaining a holistic understanding of life within these institutions.

With support from relevant agencies and active government involvement, pondok tourism has the potential to be commercialized and scaled up, elevating the status of these institutions while simultaneously promoting a culture of learning and spirituality among both local and international communities. According to Farahdina (2024), the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC) has proposed positioning pondok institutions as key destinations within Malaysia's Islamic tourism market, thereby enhancing their role as vital centers of Islamic education. One practical approach involves transforming pondok schools into homestay-based tourism hubs, particularly appealing to Muslim visitors seeking authentic religious experiences. Such initiatives can also generate economic opportunities, benefitting both local communities and the pondok institutions themselves. For instance, pondok schools can generate revenue by offering tourism packages that include accommodation services alongside Islamic-centered activities, such as Qur'an classes, spiritual retreats, and guided visits to historical Islamic landmarks.

Overall, the future of pondok-based tourism in Malaysia appears highly promising, driven by society's growing demand for spiritual enrichment and religious education. However, its successful development requires a multi-

faceted evaluation that considers social, economic, and cultural dimensions. Based on the conceptual framework by Mazne et al. (2013), the development of pondok-based Islamic tourism is influenced by two sets of factors:

Driving Factors

- Religious motivation
- Education and learning
- Rest and relaxation
- Family bonding
- Social interaction
- Desire to travel or participate in pondok programs

Supporting Factors

- Government policies
- Geographical conditions
- Environmental ambiance
- International recognition
- Festivals and special events

CONCLUSION

The tourism industry contributes significantly to national economic growth, and Malaysia, as a country where Islam is the foundation of its religious identity, should promote Islamic tourism as a key attraction. Ensuring Shariah-compliant infrastructure and services will increase Malaysia's appeal, particularly among Muslim tourists.

Pondok-based Islamic tourism offers visitors a unique blend of education and spirituality, showcasing the rich heritage of Malaysia's oldest Islamic educational institutions, which remain active in states such as Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, and Perak.

The commercialization of pondok institutions aligns with three core national objectives:

1. Establishing Malaysia as a global hub of Islamic knowledge,
2. Promoting lifelong learning, and
3. Developing self-sustaining economies for both pondok institutions and surrounding communities.

To achieve this vision, multi-stakeholder collaboration is essential. By combining efforts across government, academia, industry, and society, pondok institutions can be transformed into internationally recognized educational tourism destinations, enriching Malaysia's cultural and spiritual landscape while contributing to its tourism economy.

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