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The Tourism Experience Offered by Religious Theme Parks: Taman Tamadun Islam (TTI) in Malaysia

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Theme parks are major drivers of tourism development and experience is a central concept in tourism research. This study investigates the experience potential associated with religious theme parks which offer a combination of religious and secular activities. The experiences of visitors to Taman Tamadun Islam (TTI), a Muslim theme park based in Malaysia, are identified through the analysis of visitors’ feedback on TripAdvisor.

Key Words: theme park, religion, experience, tourism.

Introduction

Theme parks are main drivers of tourism development. They play a key role in attracting national and foreign tourists to a specific destination who, once in the area, stay at local hotels, lunch and dine locally and visit other attractions. A theme park can be defined as

* a subset of visitor attractions, described as permanent resources which are designed, controlled and managed for the enjoyment, amusement, entertainment and education of the visiting public (Raluca & Gina, 2008:635).

Theme parks are associated with a unique atmosphere. Through their exhibits, restaurants, lodging and rides, they ‘give the visitor a total experience’ (Sun & Uysal, 1994:72). The theme and the concept of the park can reflect the personal values of their founder, as Walt Disney dreamed Disneyland to be

* a controlled society where everyone would live according to Disney doctrine, in a city free of dirt, slums and violence (Sun & Uysal, 1994:73).

Religious theme parks are a specific kind of theme park, centered around a given faith; they usually offer both religious and secular activities. Whatever the faith or beliefs which form their central theme, these parks are designed on the concept of spiritual and edutainment centers, the aim of which is to enable visitors to live their own faith onsite, learn more about a faith which is not theirs and enjoy good moments during the time spent on site.

Their success has been mitigated over time, as shown by the rise, fall and sometimes rebirth of some examples. The USA, cradle of the amusement park concept, pioneered the concept of the religious theme park in 1940 with Holy Land USA. Once the greatest tourist attraction of Connecticut, it closed down in 1984 and was reborn a decade later in Orlando as the Holy Land Experience. The most famous religious theme park in American history was probably Heritage USA, an American Christian theme park founded in South Carolina by televangelist Jim Bakker. The park included no less than a church, a Heritage Grand Hotel, a Main Street USA, an indoor shopping complex, a 400-unit campground, a Jerusalem Amphitheater, conference facilities, a skating rink, prayer and counseling services, full cable TV network production studios, a Bible and evangelism school, visitor retreat housing in addition to the Heritage Island water park and recreational facilities. At its peak in the mid-eighties, Heritage USA employed 2500 people and welcomed almost 6 million visitors per year, making it only third to Disneyland and Disneyworld in terms of attendance (McNichol, 1987). The park closed down in 1989 as a consequence of the degradation of its image following its founder’s involvement in sexual and legal scandals.

In 2016, less than a dozen large religious theme parks are in operation throughout the world. In the USA, Holy Land Experience operates in Orlando (Florida), next to Disney’s Magic Kingdom, Sea World and Legoland. Buenos Aires in Argentina is the home of Tierra Santa, a Christian park which focuses on the figure of Jesus Christ, telling the biblical stories of his birth, crucifixion and resurrection, and offering a performance of the stations of the cross at Easter time.
narrative approaches have been widely used to gain insights into experiential consumption (Stern Thompson & Arnold, 1998). The rise of online social networks, tourist blogs and platforms such as TripAdvisor or Facebook has made customer stories increasingly available online. These online stories provide a new and valuable pool of data for researchers in tourism to analyse. Customer experiences revealed through online customer feedback need to be taken into account by tourism marketing managers as they are known to influence future visitors’ decisions to travel to the destination (Cerutti & Piva, 2016).

Religious theme parks, thanks to their dual focus on religion and edutainment, provide a unique combination of spiritual and traditional touristic experiences, where the sacred and the secular largely overlap (O’Guinn & Belk, 1989). In this paper, we investigate whether a visit to Tamal Tamadun Islam (TTI) can generate these stimuli.

Case Study: Taman Tamadun Islam (TTI) in Kuala Terengganu (Malaysia)

Taman Tamadun Islam is an Islamic civilisation park located in Kuala Terengganu, in the north eastern part of Malaysia. The park was built on an island on the Terengganu river which is famous in local history as it was home to the first Muslim settlers in the area. Kuala Terengganu is the capital and main economic centre of the Sultanate of Terengganu. Its population was about 250,000 inhabitants in 2000 and is predominantly Malay (95%) and Muslim (97%) (Malaysia Department of statistics, census 2000). The Islam practiced in the Terengganu area is traditional and rather conservative.

Religious Theme Parks and Visitor Experience

Experience is a central concept in tourism research, the importance of which has long been recognised (Cohen, 1979). It involves

everything a tourist goes through at a destination as experience, including behavior and perception, cognition and emotions; either expressed or implied (Oh, Fiore & Jeoung, 2007, cited in Bosangit, Hibbert and McCabe. 2015:1).

Experiences are unique, memorable and personal (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). According to Lin and Kuo (2016), Brakkus et al. (2009) and Schmitt (1999), experiential stimuli are: sensory, affective, behavioral, intellectual and relational.

According to Lin and Kuo (2016), the nature and range of tourist experiences offered by a destination determines the destination’s value and in turn, customer satisfaction, loyalty to the destination and intention to return. Therefore, customer experience understanding and management are essential for tourism professionals.

Customer experience is partly revealed by the stories customers tell (McGregot & Holmes, 1999) and
Taman Tamadun Islam (TTI) park aims at providing:

alternative family recreational and educational activities based on the Islamic principles [and presents itself as] an illuminating experience that encompasses a lifestyle as a whole and not only as an edutainment park. With its many attractions designed to awaken your mind, to the immensely intricate and rich heritage of Islam history, a journey at TTI is a truly endless experience (www.tti.com.my).

TTI is made of two adjacent zones (see Figure 2). Monument Park (Zone A) is accessible for a fee. It features sized down (scale 1:22 to 1:2) replications of 22 monuments from 21 countries (see Figure 3). These monuments represent the diversity of Islamic architecture, as well as the spread of Islamic civilisation throughout the world. Each replica is faithful to the original monument as it is an exact replication of its architecture and is built with locally sourced materials. For each monument (some of which are big enough to be entered) historical elements are presented through interactive digital exhibits, educational games, photos, and artefacts. The information provided encompasses key elements of history, culture, country facts and scholarship that relate to a particular monument. Modern technology such as virtual reality is used to create a pleasant cultural, educational and entertaining experience.

Access to Monument Park is possible through the public part of the park (Zone B). The iconic attraction of the public zone, the access to which is free of charge, is Crystal Mosque. Built entirely from steel and glass, the mosque is decorated with crafted frosted glass windows and meticulous calligraphy. It is a place
TTI also features a modern Convention Centre equipped with all the latest technology equipment for a large range of events such as opening ceremonies, company promotions and product launches. In order to be in accordance with Islamic principles and lifestyle, a prayer room is available inside the building for guests to be able to perform their religious duties. On site accommodation is available at Crystal Villa, a good standing hotel with a family atmosphere. Visitors can lunch and dine at B’beteng Restaurant, where traditional halal Malay food is served. Laman Selera is an open air area located by the river, where visitors can eat food for sale at the restaurant. TTI also provides catering services for events held outside the park.

A range of leisure activities such as a river cruise, a toy train ride and various educational and fun activities are available (see Figure 5 & 6). These activities all have a link with Islamic culture and history.

A Souvenir Shop (Figure 7) is available for visitors to bring home a tangible memory of their visit at TTI. Souvenirs include miniatures of Crystal Mosque as well as mugs, t-shirts, caps and educational materials.

The description of Taman Tamadun Islam theme park suggests that the range of experiences available to the visitor is rich, thanks to the dual nature of activities offered: spiritual and secular.
Results

Analysis of visitors’ feedback revealed that the vast majority of visitors who expressed themselves on Tripadvisor enjoyed their time at TTI. Thematic analysis led to the identification of both secular and more spiritual experiences.

The two dominant experiences revealed by visitors’ feedback are getting an educational experience and having a good time.

Learning about Islam

First, visitors emphasise the fact that they learn a great deal about Islam and Islamic civilisation while visiting TTI:

We drove directly to the mosque and had many pictures of the mosque as well as its surroundings. It's a beautiful structure and we were lucky as the skies were blue. A good experience for us to show our 7-year old where Muslims pray (Bubblyholiday, Malaysia).

After we saw the Crystal Mosque, we saw miniature replicas of world mosques, some of them which come with explanations and reproduce the inside of the mosque as well. A nice experience which shows us the wealth of Islamic architecture (Asma S, France).

The park is mainly a collection of scale models of the world's greatest mosques. All the models have been crafted with love and care with great attention to detail. I'm glad I got to see them all here in the park. There usually are informative paragraphs associated with each mosque and the more important mosques such

Methodology

In order to identify the various types of experiences lived by visitors to TTI, we used a qualitative approach. We relied on customer narratives available on online travel review sites. Tripadvisor being the most prominent such platform (Zherer, Crotts and Magnini, 2011), we used data extracted from their website (www.tripadvisor.com). The content of 44 online customer reviews (extracted 25/07/2016) was analysed. The majority of reviews were written in English or French, both languages being spoken by the researcher. When written in another language, we used the google translation provided by Tripadvisor to obtain an approximate English translation of the review. Two translated reviews were not taken into account as the text generated by the online translator was incomprehensible. Manual coding was used to perform thematic analysis and identify visitors’ experiences.
as Taj Mahal and Rock on the Dome have video presentation which were very good (Macedonboy, UK).

Nice place if someone is interested in the history of Islam. Highly recommended to the Non-Muslims who would wanna know about the history (Anik_Rahman, Bangladesh).

The holy places and great mosques of Islam in one single place! A must do!!! Digital screens present the history of Mekka’s Haram, mosques of Africa, America, Asia and Europe. It is a unique place!! (Tomswyer, France).

A tour of the world in one hour (Faradayx, France).

If you like history, or Islamic architecture, then this the place. Don’t expect much enjoyment. But it's a must visit if you already here near the Kristal mosque (Ayadice, Iraq).

An educational tour . . . Located along Sungai Terengganu, the place is very picturesque. Models of Islamic structures from around the world could be found here. Galleries, video shows are to be found also (Monada76, Malaysia).

The miniatures of the great mosques all over the world. very educative! It feels like a mosque tour around the world in just one day! You even get to see some videos on these mosques in the showrooms situated next to some of these miniatures (Ryunami, Malaysia).

Great place to better understand this religion (H2kim11, Singapore).

I gain more information on the knowledge of Islamic history . . . (Masitah_Muhamad, Malaysia).

As non Muslims, we learned a lot (Gary D, Canada).

Fun

Secondly, visitors relate the good time and fun they had while at TTI. This experience is available thanks to the various non educational activities people can have on site, including, the river cruise, bicycle and toy train rides, and eating at the restaurant.

You can rent bicycles or pedal cars. My kids were delighted . . . There is a well supplied souvenir shop, a nice outdoor restaurant ... enough to spend a few pleasant hours (Asma S, France).

(You) can also rent 4 cycling bikes. It was fun! (Ezzati f, unknown).

Came here twice and had a good time at each visit. You can rent a buggy, a bicycle. You can take the toy train. It was a lot of fun (Rizu T, unknown).

A beautiful park with miniature monuments about Islamic world. A lot of fun! (Elen L, Russia).

Good Experience! Good food! love local food so much! (Razmanras69, Malaysia).

We took river cruise. They bring us along the river and they have a very interesting stories for each side of the river (Ezzati f, unknown).

You can also experience a TTI cruise here (Hzrhkamal, Malaysia)

Also, the ride on the bicycle was soo fun (Ahmad T, Saudi Arabia).

Relaxation

People also enjoyed relaxing, the pleasant atmosphere and the serene environment, which is a type of experience that can be considered both secular and spiritual.

I went here and enjoyed the ambiance. It is situated down by the river and was a pleasant visit (Nadnerb2, Ireland)

Good experience . . . nature lover, nice environment, pollution free, i will come again for more experience (Kamarulijjkk, Malaysia).

Good Experience! good place to relax (Razmanras69, Malaysia).

Very calm and peaceful mosque . . . surrounded by river with nice view! There is a nice garden before entering to the mosque (Bomohpang, Singapore).

Outside was a beautiful park, flowers were blooming (Kathymama, Japan).

A very plesant place’ (Subang, Indonesia).

It was nice walking around in the quiet park (Kiri, Finland).

Architecture

Admiring the beauty of the Islamic architecture especially the Crystal Mosque comes next:

Beautiful mosque. We were amazed at the play of lights on the mosque at the end of the day,
especially at sun set (Dounya78, France).

It's beautiful, especially at night (Hzrhkamal, Malaysia).

We visit this magnificent mosque in the late afternoon at sunset. Very impressive but simple inside! (Mohamed A, France).

Went to the masjid, I have to say the masjid is beautiful. Standing upfront is not really a way to appreciate it's beauty. Notice it on the way to the airport, sight is rather breathtaking (Nurhaninbinted, unknown).

The façade is beautiful in the day time and magnificent in the night time. This mosque is one of the most beautiful to visit! (Samira M, France).

Much more beautiful than I expected. It glittered, even the chandelier that hung on the ceiling inside, it was really impressive (Kathymama, Japan).

A unique Crystal Mosque even it is not all Crystals. The mosque has beautiful architecture and it is on a bed of Terengganu river . . . (Zainuddin A, Malaysia).

This is my third visit to the Crystal Mosque. Since my last visit more than 5 years ago, I find that the mosque is more beautifully lit at night especially with the changes in the colour wash (Lau D, Malaysia).

Tolerance and Welcome

The encounter with Islamic culture, the cross-cultural experience and the tolerant attitude of the staff at TTI are also appreciated by reviewers:

We were nicely welcomed, and we could visit the mosque, although we weren’t Muslim. They lent us clothes to cover our body so that we could visit it (Casedoudous, France).

It is accessible to both non Muslims and Muslims to see (Hzrhkamal, Malaysia).

The building is beautiful and majestic! we were lucky to be able to witness a muslim wedding (Ursina, Switzerland).

Unfortunately I arrived in short trousers, but a very nice attendant gave me a long over-garment so I could enter the mosque (Nadnerb2, Ireland).

I was ask to put on a cloth, a long robe and a headwear (Kathymama, Japan).

Spiritual Potential

Finally, some visitors expressed the spiritual potential associated with the visit:

You should visit crystal mosque when you come to Kuala Terengganu. This mosque performs 5 times prayer but not jumah prayer (Indi_andromeda, Malaysia).

The mosque can accommodate 200 Jemaah at a one time. I was told that Friday's prayers is not done due to less of Jemaah and villagers around (Zainuddin A, Malaysia).

Negative reaction

Although overall, visitor feedback is very positive, some people express negative feelings related to their experience:

It feels like you’re at Disneyland (X, France).

The downside is there are just too many food banners hanging around at the entrance thus marring the religious charm of this place (Lau D, Malaysia).

Some visitors were disappointed by the experience because of the poor maintenance of some monuments:

Some of the structures are in dire condition. It seems like they have been abandoned for quite some time. The management should put extra attention in taking care of this supposed to be a wonderful place (PakLang, Malaysia).

Conclusion

As a result of this study, we can confirm that a religious theme park such as Taman Tamadun Islam (TTI) has the potential to generate a large range of touristic experiences. The identification of experiences through the content analysis of visitors’ reviews reveals that edutainment experiences seem to dominate: learn about Islam and its civilization, enjoy oneself and have a good time with one’s family, admire the beauty of monuments and particularly Crystal Mosque.

The atmosphere of the park which is described as quiet, serene and the beautiful surrounding which include the river create a positive context to relax and enjoy experiences that lean more on the spiritual side. Indeed, the combination of educational experiences, the quietness and serenity of the environment, are favourable to one’s reflection on the values and
heritage of Islam, which can be compared with one’s own spiritual values and heritage.

The main limitation of this study is the nature of the data used for analysis. A visitor’s feedback provides shallower data than a personal interview would reveal. However, it does show the potential for such research, particularly since a resource costly, interview-based study would need to be completed via onsite interviews with visitors after they have visited the park. While this approach would gain a deeper insight to the experiences which visitors have lived, this study illustrates the useful findings in this regard.

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