

“Boosting Malaysian Tourism – The Food Way!”

Zulaika binti Zakariah¹⁺, Ratna Khuzaimah binti Mohamad² and Wardah Mohamad³

Faculty of Business and Management, Open University Malaysia

Abstract. Malaysia’s aim to become a developed nation has spurred growth in many areas of the economy including tourism. Malaysian tourism destinations have been well promoted along with the uniqueness of the Malaysian culture which is an exciting blend of the Malay, Chinese, Indian and other native subcultures. However, one of the reasons tourists repeatedly come back to the country has been neglected. This paper focuses on this – how food can be used as a strategy to boost Malaysian tourism. A comparative study is done on how Hong Kong and Singapore has capitalized on food in their tourism initiatives. Based on this, a comparison is then made on what has been done in Malaysia and what is still missing. Five key strategies are proposed to boost Malaysian tourism including food trails, on-line promotions, quality certification, culinary classes and packages and community involvement. These will contribute to the number of tourist arrivals, regional development, tourist pattern of dispersion and community development.

Keywords: Tourism Initiatives, Food and Culinary, Promotion Strategies

1. Introduction

Malaysia’s aim to be a developed nation has spurred the growth of many sectors in the economy including tourism. Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes (UNWTO glossary, 2012). Food has always been a satisfying factor for hunger (Burusukul; Binkley & Sukalakamala, 2011) and is one of the reasons people travel to Malaysia (Tourism Malaysia).

1.1. Background of the Study

Culinary, gourmet and gastronomic tourism are similar definitions for food tourism (Boniface, 2003; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Long, 2004) whereby “Food tourism” can be defined as visiting food exhibitions, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and experiencing food are the primary factors for travel (Hall and Mitchell, 2000). Food tourism is also one constituent of tourism strategy dedicated to making the best use of scarce resources through creativity and adaptability, made necessary by the lack of conventional natural and cultural tourism assets (Teo & Chang, 2000; Richard, 2002).

Tourists unavoidably have to engage in food consumption even in situations where food is found unfamiliar or less than acceptable (Tikkanen, 2007). Tourism researchers have stated that the pull and push factors influence people to travel and their choice of destination (Baloglu and Uysal, 1996; Kim *et.al.*, 2003). Hence culinary tourism is perceived to be one form of tourism product that creates interest, a pull factor for tourists to travel and for many countries cuisines have become a major pull factor to attract tourists like Hong Kong and Singapore (Enright & Newton, 2005 ; STB, 2007 and Hong Kong Planning Development as cited by Tsai and Horng, 2012). According to Long (2004), “Culinary Tourism” was first suggested in the year 1998, referring to the concept that tourists can experience other countries’ culture or exotic local cultures through tasting unforgettable cuisines which reflect a taste of the country’s culture (Wolf, 2002). Long (2004) cited by Horng & Tsai (2010)) refers to culinary tourism as tourists who plan their travels partly or largely on the basis of a desire to experience different and exotic culinary specialties and traditions.

2. Statement of Problem

Although many authors have propagated the use of food as a strategy for tourism (Enright & Newton, 2005 ; STB, 2007, Long, 2004), there is currently still little research on this (Cohen and Avieli , 2004) which scrutinises the importance of promoting or marketing foods in Malaysia. In view of this, the paper aims to build on previous researches that have studied food tourism and its related marketing strategies, focusing on Hong Kong and Singapore as comparative cases in the ASEAN region.

⁺ Email: zulaika@oum.edu.my

The study attempts to;

- 1) Discuss the advantages of food tourism; 2) assess and interpret successful marketing strategies in Hong Kong and Singapore, 3) to conceptualise a marketing strategy that can be applied to Malaysian food tourism and 4) to study the implications of marketing food tourism to Malaysia's tourism industry.

3. Conceptual Framework

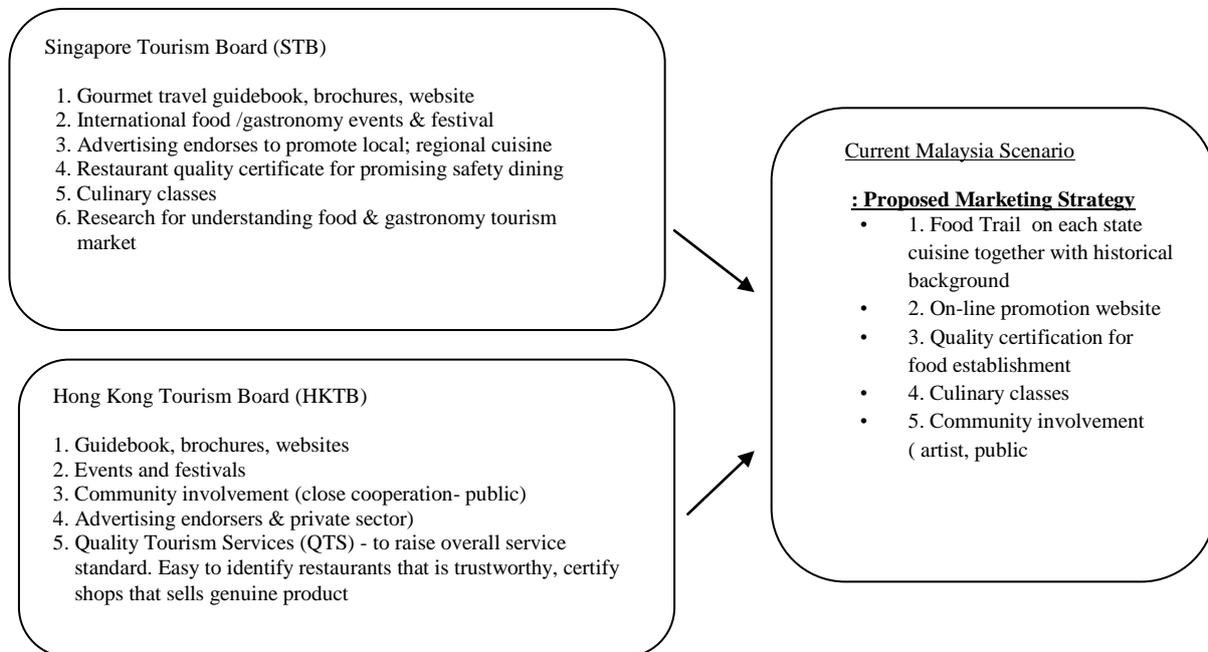


Diagram 1.0: Proposed marketing strategy for Malaysia food tourism based on comparative analysis between Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) and Singapore Tourism Board (STB) marketing strategies.

The conceptual framework combines the elements of successful food tourism marketing strategy utilized by the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) and also Singapore Tourism Board (STB) along with Malaysia's current scenario for food tourism. These countries are used as comparative cases to benchmark Malaysia's current scenario. The results of the comparison are then used to formulate future strategies for boosting Malaysian tourism.

4. The case Countries

4.1. Hongkong's Food Tourism

Hong Kong is known as the 'City of Life' and 'Asia's Most Popular Travel Destination'. It has a unique culture that combines western lifestyle with Chinese traditions. Various food and arts festivals have helped Hong Kong to build a favourable image overseas and attracted a large number of international visitors (Song *et.al.*, 2003). Hong Kong's reputation as a food paradise is said to be the key to the city's tourism industry (Kivela & Crotts, 2005,2006) and the primary focus of its tourism promotion campaign (Okumus *et.al.*, 2007). Food is used as a cultural marker to position Hong Kong as a sophisticated, international city that caters to all tastes while at the same time, using indigenous Chinese cuisine as a point of differentiation (Okumus *et.al.* , 2007). Furthermore, Okumus *et.al.* (2007), stated that Hong Kong brochures, booklets and websites provide detailed and appealing materials and photos on food in Hong Kong. 'Hong-Kong a traveller's guide' dedicated 8 pages to explain about its food and its whereabouts and the images of food were carefully selected to reflect the quality of food, to make it look delicious and well decorated.

4.2. Singapore

For many countries in Asia like Singapore, cuisines have become one of the major pull factors to attract tourists (Enright & Newton, 2005; Singapore Tourism Board, 2007) as they do not have abundant natural resources to develop more diverse tourism experiences. Singapore does have a diverse food and culture background, and with the combination of tourism and creativity, they can forge a culinary tourism which is

innovative, diverse, and able to attract people's attention, Tsai and Horng (2012). Moreover, Henderson (2004) found that for countries with lack of natural resources, the key point in culinary tourism is to make the best choice of food available which shows the composition of the society, the culture and the dynamics.

"Singapore: the Food Capital of Asia," is the slogan used for marketing culinary tourism and it also treats "food" and "dining out" as major factors in its tourist marketing (Henderson, 2004). In 2004, ten cuisines that were chosen to be the top 10 representative food of Singapore are Satay, Bak Kut The, Chilli/Pepper Crab, Hainan Chicken Rice, Roti Canai & Teh Tarik, Laksa, Curry Fish Head, Fried Kuey Teow, Rojak, and Carrot Cake (Tsai and Horng,2012). Food and beverage itself could be an attraction for a destination, such as the Chilli Festival in Singapore (Kivela and Crotts,2005). It is also a part of culture, a unique element of different regions and communities, and an important cornerstone of cultural identity (Tsai and Horng ,2012). According to Henderson (2004) some of the critical connections between food and tourism can be found in Singapore where food and eating out is a tourism promotion theme of growing prominence, and policies are shaped within the framework of the country's distinctive features. Singapore is moving towards becoming a higher order food destination (Hjalager, 2002) and according to STB (2008), Singapore cuisines reflect the best part of the multiethnic and multicultural interactions in the past decades on this island state. Dining is even categorized into Sky Dining, Tropical Garden Dining, Waterfront Dining, Romantic Dining, etc. At the same time, there are also food stands and food centers catering prepared food. All these give the culinary experience in Singapore more diversity and create more excitement for tourists.

4.3. Malaysia – the Current Scenario

In 2002, WTO ranked Malaysia as the World's Top Fifteen Destinations to be visited. According to Bessiere, (1998); Hall and Sharples, (2003) and Long, (2004), nowadays people are travelling for reasons of gastronomy and as a result, food tourism, in its broadest sense has gained a higher profile as a pull factor in destination marketing (Boniface, 2003; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Hjalager and Richards, 2002). In the previous literature, food related tourism allow tourists to achieve the desired goals of relaxation, excitement, escapism, status, education and lifestyle (Frochot, **2003**). Food and beverage as destination products can either act as a primary or secondary motivators (Quan and Wang, 2004) that add value to the image of a destination (Boniface, 2003; Boyne, Hall and Williams, 2003; du Rand Health and Alberts, 2003; Long 2004). Furthermore, the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) has planned for innovative food trails based on the distinct specialties of states, regions and communities to attract tourist to savour local delicacies. According to Artinah, Nizan and Nizam, (2010), the states of Melaka, Perak, Penang, Sarawak and Sabah could be highlighted as "the states for gastronomy routes".

Specific information about Malaysia's culinary offerings is important, (Shahrim and Chua, 2010) since food can provide a more superb and enjoyable holiday atmosphere and is undeniably a positive plus for the tourism industry. Therefore, with such an exciting diversity of food, Malaysia should be upheld as THE destination to enjoy the "art of eating". Hence, Malaysian gastronomy should be considered unequivocally or wholly when promoting local destinations. (Artinah, Nizan and Nizam, 2010). Malaysian cuisine are being introduced to the world, which represents a mix of Malay, Chinese and Indian cooking through the "Malaysia Kitchen", simultaneously helping to spawn side industries like the production of spices for the dishes. (*ibid.*).

5. Analysis and Discussion

Visual images are a very powerful marketing tool (Chor *et. al.* 2007) in which the visual representation can successfully create and communicate the image of the tourist destination (Mackay & Couldwell, 2004). Overall the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) and Singapore Tourism Board (STB) on-line website promotion are very comprehensive in terms of the introduction to the local food culture. Both tourism promotional boards, uses similar culinary marketing techniques on their websites, providing information for prospective tourists on all aspects of their countries' culinary tourism experience, there were still some individual differences and particular individual strength (Horng and Tsai, 2010). Both websites have an abundance of information on gastronomical information, promotions on special restaurants and special cuisines, culinary classes, food/gastronomy festivals, and restaurant certifications.

To ensure the tourists to have high quality cuisines, Hong Kong and Singapore both have strict quality assurance certification systems (Horng & Tsai, 2012). With certification on qualified restaurants, tourists were able to enjoy the quality –assured cuisines and developed positive impression of the whole culinary experience. HKTB developed a Quality Tourism Services (QTS) Scheme to raise overall service standards

and visitors confidence (Horng & Tsai, 2010) whilst STB offers the top 15 street food markets selected by Makansutra, a Singaporean culinary evaluation organisation. This enables tourists to find the highest-quality local snacks and desserts on the Island (Horng & Tsai, 2012). The relevance of quality standards is to educate tourists on the differences in quality and to recognise the characteristics of food that they are paying for.

STB further puts emphasis on culinary classes so as to improve the culinary tourism experience by providing the tourists with links to the websites of every culinary academy (Horng & Tsai, 2010 & 2012). In Hong Kong, tourists have the opportunity to learn cooking from the chefs in a series called 'Cooking with Culinary Stars' (Jan, 11 (2012) – extracted from: www.hongkong-ic.intercontinental.com) The cooking classes that were introduced in both countries not only showcased the local cuisines but also showcased the diversity in international cuisines including, French, Middle Eastern, Japanese and many others by combining both traditional and modern techniques. Diversification in the showcase of cuisines is believed to have increased the participation of tourists from diverse backgrounds and to enable tourists to acquire as much experience as they possibly could during their stay in Hong Kong and Singapore.

In general, the marketing strategies used by HKTB and STB are commendable and is recommended as part of the strategies that should be applied in Malaysia's food tourism.

6. Food Trail

Malaysia has come up with a few researches that have focused on gastronomy routes (Artinah, Nizan & Nizam (2010); traditional cuisine (Omar *et.al.*, 2011) and recently the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia (MOTOUR) developed a website called 'Fabulous Food 1Malaysia' which highlights the popular foods of Malaysia and lists down the addresses and the location of the whereabouts of the popular foods. The website also works as a blog whereby the tourists or consumers who have experienced the cuisine could recommend places to the website reader. In fact, other states like Penang Tourism have also developed their own set of food trail that is called 'Penang Food Trail – Georgetown and Northern region' which can be downloaded from their official Penang Tourism website. Nevertheless, as for other 13 states in Malaysia there is yet to be documentation that showcases their food specialty in a form of food trail.

7. Community Involvement

Involvement of community is important because nobody knows better of their local food other than the locals themselves. Rationally the community's opinions of food tourism on their respective states should be included because the benefit of tourism implies that residents will gain personally from tourism. This in particular refer to small-scale, locally-owned businesses that local people can benefit (Dahles 1997:23- 24; Telfer 2002:59). In the Malaysian scenario, community based tourism initiatives are based on the development of community-owned and managed lodges (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009) or homestay programmes (Amran, 2010). By far, research that discusses food tourism and the involvement of community is lacking in academia.

8. Strategic Implications to the Country

Initialising the five strategies is expected to increase the number of tourist arrivals, both domestic as well as international. In the previous literature, tourist arrivals in Malaysia was estimated to grow at an average rate of 8.4 percent per annum and estimated to reach 24.6 million by 2010 (Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006 -2010) Artinah, Nizan and Nizam (2010). In addition, these 5 key strategies should also able to create a new niche market that will benefit the locals whereby they can increase their income as well as their standard of living due to the food tourism industry. Food trails for example, also contribute to the economic growth of local community through the linkage of specific products to a particular location (Munsters, 1994) and research done by Spars *et al'* (2003) discovered that between 60 and 90 percent of their respondents claimed that the quality of food outlets did not influence their initial decision to visit a destination but reported that their gastronomic experience would induce them to return to that destination. Community development can also be enhanced due to dispersion of tourists. Dispersion is important in tourism because it indicates that tourists are not just focused in one central hub but they will disperse to other areas and contribute to the local economy especially for the communities in the rural areas. Through tourist dispersion, the local community could get involved either directly (e.g. food stalls or kueh) or indirectly (e.g. mineral water or raw ingredients supplier) in the food tourism business. In Malaysia, there are strong linkages between the local food and

tourism, as these two sectors have a mutually beneficial relationship. The promotion of remarkable local food may represent the identity of a community; strengthen the local image and regional identity, thereby helping to promote local culture and heritage. Artinah, Nizan and Nizam (2010).

9. Future Research

The study highlighted the importance of aggressive and informative on-line promotion to potential tourists, lifting Malaysia food standards with a proper guideline and quality certification, creating unique packages like culinary classes to integrate the harmony and understanding among tourists with our local culture, connecting the dots of culinary or food expeditions through food trail and finally to involve the community with their ideas to better the development of food tourism marketing initiatives. Local food' has the potential to enhance the visitor experience by connecting consumers to the region and its perceived culture (Sims, 2009).

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