

THE MAKING OF "AUTHENTIC" TOURISM EXPERIENCE: THE CASE OF BARIO, SARAWAK

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Bario, a remote village located 3280 feet above the sea level in Kelabit highlands of Sarawak, Malaysia is a favourite ecotourism destination (Jiwan, Paul, Teo and Jiwan, 2006). At the moment, the main tourist attraction in Bario is the recreational forest which has drawn many international tourists mostly from developed countries to this rural destination. These tourists come chiefly for jungle trekking or hiking in the forest because of its pristine nature in the heart of Borneo. This case study presents brief observations of the experience of international tourists to Bario, where the authenticity of the experience begins prior to a tourist landing in Bario.

At the outset, a tourist's decision to travel to Bario could be seen as a normal travel experience to visit a village. However, as there is no good road apart from the logging road in and out of the village to the major towns and cities, tourists soon realize that it could take about 14 hours on a four-wheel-drive vehicle or 10-12 days of trekking across the forested mountains to get to Bario. The other access option is via a light Otter aircraft twice a day. Interestingly, the first thing a tourist will experience is when he or she is asked to stand on a scale machine to determine his or her weight by the airline staff before boarding the plane, because the carrying capacity of the aircraft is limited to a gross weight of 1000kg (Bala, 2002). The aircraft is not equipped with air conditioner. Rather, the aircraft lets in the breeze from the outside and circulates it around the aircraft. This forms the second experience to be encountered as a tourist compared with the modern commercial aircraft.

Furthermore, the plane has two pilots; there is no air host or hostess, no lavatory, menu is not served, no demarcation between the passengers and the two pilots. This gives the tourists an opportunity to interact with the pilots and ask questions during the flight as the plane is flying over different villages. Many tourists claim that these interactions between the tourists and pilots in a small aircraft add to the authenticity and enjoyment of a trip to Bario. As have been previously suggested by Bala (2002); Lo, Mohamad, Mohamad and Yeo (2012), access to Bario is difficult but in this study, we propose that the essence of this difficulty adds to the tourist experience and could be a selling point for the destination. As soon as the plane takes off from the major airport at Miri town, the experience is enhanced and some of the tourists have described their experience as a bonus package because it was unexpected. Accessibility to Bario with a smaller aircraft from a tourist point of view is an adventure and rewarding. The rationale behind this is that the plane does not fly too high so one can view and take photos of the beautiful and the green forest from the air. This makes the visit to Bario more memorable and experiential for tourists.

However, the 55 minutes journey from Miri to Bario could become more interesting if the plane sometimes makes two stop overs (which it sometimes does) - one in Marudi where additional passengers are added to the flight and thereafter, in Ba'kelanan. At both airports, passengers are encouraged to disembark, walk round and have a feel of the place. From Ba'kelanan to Bario, it takes about thirty minute's flight time; this will depend on the weather condition. This experience serves as a motivation for the visitors to look forward to when it comes to departure time to Miri. In fact those who came via direct flights have asked the airline staff at Bario to change their flight schedule for an opportunity to make stop over at Marudi and Ba'kelalan. This is an indication that tourists view their trip to Bario as a form of adventure. Additionally, if the weather condition is bad, the pilot might decide to return back to the respective airport where it took off initially; this offers another opportunity to explore the Borneo forest from the air and also experience the cloudy weather. Therefore, we propose that the element of accessibility in and around the village can be conceptualised as destination attraction to visit Bario.

More interestingly is the tourist's experience from the landscape perspective. This is an unforgettable experience; in most cases it takes place when the aircraft is approaching the Bario airport for landing because the village is surrounded by mountains. It will appear as if the plane is touching the trees and the mountains. At times one is tempted to touch this gift of nature but it is not possible. One major benefit of this experience is the opportunity to take photographs of the aerial view of the village. This experience is unique when compared with other rural tourism destinations in Malaysia where in most cases the tourists travel by road or ferry. Even in destinations where tourists fly in, the experience of being in such seemingly close proximity to nature from a small aircraft is exceptionally thrilling. Likewise, when viewed from the air, the rice field which Bario is well known for before the advent of tourism reminds one of sustainable agricultural practices of rice plantation in Bario – the field is green, inviting and appears like a mega football field.

Finally, as the aircraft lands at the Bario airport the locals who are mostly elderly women dressed in their traditional attires are lined up to receive the tourists. While some destination managers may deliberately impose costumes on their employees in an attempt to provide tourists with ostensible authentic experience, the case of Bario is one that is unique. This is because what the villagers wear is less of a show and more a glimpse into the reality of who they are and where they come from. For example, the elders wear their tattoos proudly on their bodies to symbolize the valour of their legendary head-hunting ancestors but they have being so long before the arrival of tourists. The women in Bario today still wear their heavy brass earrings on elongated earlobes, along with their locally-made beads, caps and traditional clothes. These womenfolk welcome tourists at the airport with sweet juicy pineapple because it was the pineapple (along with its rice) that has really promoted the name of Bario to the outside world (Jiwan, Alan and Lepun, 2007). The serving of pineapple is followed by handshakes by the old women. This practice is unique to the community and indicates friendliness, sometimes to the extent that they might invite tourists to join them for a meal. This practice has given Bario its identity as the 'Land of a Thousand Hand-shakes' (Tarawe, 2011). These unique ground experiences have led to the sense of place among the indigenes of Bario from the community point of view (Kyle, Mowen, and Tarrant, 2004).

In conclusion, there are four main factors that have been identified in this case study, these include; transportation, weather, landscape – forest and mountains, and community identity. These factors are unique features that have added to the authenticity of tourist experience in Bario. Although the many notions of authenticity have been debated and discussed in

past studies, the four factors that contributed to the experiences of the tourists described in this case study seem to fit into what Wang (1999, 2000) and; Kim and Jamal (2007) described as existential authenticity. This is also referred to as activity-related authenticity, as tourists "are engaging in non-everyday activities" (Wang, 2000 p.50). Therefore, visiting or travelling to Bario should not be seen alone from the challenge perspective often described by past studies (Bala, 2002; Lo et al., 2012). Rather, the tourists' experiences can also be incorporated into the destination branding framework of Bario to distinguish it from other rural tourism destinations in Malaysia.

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