



## PERLIS MUSLIM-FRIENDLY TOURISM AS SPECIAL INTEREST TOURISM

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### Abstract

This study delves into the perceptions of Perlis tourism operators regarding Perlis Muslim Friendly Tourism, intending to assess its potential to attract more tourists to the state. Specifically, it aims to evaluate the views of tourism operators regarding the idea of proposing Perlis Muslim Friendly Tourism. Despite its advantageous location near popular destinations like Langkawi Island and Thailand, Perlis significantly trails other Malaysian states in tourism development. This study gathers insights through an online survey, garnering responses from 22 participants. The findings reveal a mixed perception of Perlis Muslim Friendly Tourism, yet an overall positive inclination toward the concept. Furthermore, the study identifies several gaps that impede Perlis' tourism growth. It emphasizes the necessity for close collaboration between the Perlis state government and the Perlis Islamic Religious and Malay Customs Council (MAIPS) to address these challenges effectively and unlock the state's untapped tourism potential. Through concerted efforts, Perlis can leverage its unique assets and strategic location to emerge as a thriving tourist destination in Malaysia.

*Keywords:* Business Etiquette; Tourism Operators; Perlis Muslim-Friendly Tourism; Special Interest Tourism, Malaysia

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### 1. Introduction

This study aims to delve into the perceptions of Perlis tourism operators regarding Perlis Muslim Friendly Tourism and its potential to attract tourists. Perlis holds appeal as a tourism destination, particularly among residents, especially those from neighboring areas like Kedah, Penang, and Perlis itself. Its accessibility via land transportation, facilitated by the North-South Highway (PLUS) and Electric Train Service (ETS), has bolstered its popularity for domestic tourism. Travelers and excursionists are expected to go with their families on weekends for a day trip by car, bus, or train. Moreover, Perlis distinguishes itself from other states with unique attractions, such as shopping centers like Padang Besar, known for offering diverse products, including those from Thailand. For local tourists needing help to travel to Thailand, Padang Besar Complex is a convenient alternative for shopping tourism.

Additionally, gastronomy tourism in Perlis is enriched by Thai influences, particularly in dishes like *tom yum* soup, which may have a distinct flavor when prepared by local food operators. Furthermore, the government's focus on agro-tourism products, such as the renowned Harum Manis mangoes, adds to Perlis' allure. These mangoes are

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recognized as the world's best and thrive in Perlis's favorable soil terrain and hot climate. Perlis offers a unique blend of cultural, culinary, and agricultural attractions, contributing to its appeal as a tourist destination (Saad, 2022).

Perlis offers diverse tourism products and is a primary entry point from Thailand to Malaysia. Key entry points from Thailand to Malaysia in the north include Padang Besar, Wang Kelian, and Bukit Kayu Hitam (bordering Kedah). Additionally, Perlis provides a ferry service accessible from Kuala Perlis to Langkawi Island (Kedah) and vice versa. Notably, Perlis's tourism initiatives involve the palace's participation through the Perlis Islamic Religious and Malay Customs Council (MAIPS), significantly impacting the tourism landscape. One highlight is transforming places like Kampung Pelangi into tourism hotspots and fostering community-based activities coordinated by MAIPS. Regular Crown Prince of Perlis visits have spurred local engagement and government participation. *Perkampungan* Sunnah (Sunnah Village), held annually at Masjid Alwi, Kangar, promotes religious tourism by facilitating discussions on Islam and attracting international interest. Perlis boasts notable mosques such as the Al Hussain Mosque, renowned for its iconic floating structure and serene ambiance, which are meticulously maintained for cleanliness. These MAIPS-led efforts offer authentic cultural experiences, immersing visitors in Perlis's rich heritage.

However, despite its advantageous proximity to Langkawi Island and Thailand, Perlis trails behind in tourism popularity. Statistical data on tourism indicates that Perlis ranks last among Malaysian states. Statistics reported that Perlis is more on transit tourism. Perlis faces challenges related to infrastructure and services, particularly concerning traffic congestion at key checkpoints. In 2008 alone, Perlis witnessed approximately 700,000 tourists passing through its borders, with a significant portion originating from Thailand and up to 70% arriving from Padang Besar alone (Koridor Utara Malaysia, 2013). Perlis is a pivotal transit point for tourists heading to Singapore, Langkawi, or Kuala Lumpur (Malay Mail, 2013). In 2018, tourist arrivals reached 2.1 million, with 42.6% as tourists and 57.4% as excursionists, while domestic tourist arrivals in 2019 stood at 2.09 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Due to the contradicted scenario (diverse tourism products vs. low income from tourism), this study aims to evaluate the opinions of tourism operators regarding Perlis if it focuses on Muslim Friendly Tourism as a special tourist interest product in positioning Perlis in the tourism industry. This study conceptualizes Muslim-friendly tourism as a tourism industry that prioritizes adherence to Islamic business etiquette. However, this investigation focuses on tourism operators in Perlis' opinions in specializing in Perlis's tourism to Muslim-friendly concepts.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Research on Perlis Tourism

Among the few studies available, several key points about tourism in Perlis emerge. Hussain et al. (2022) emphasized repositioning Perlis's cultural resources. Khan et al. (2024) advocated for sustainable tourism by examining the homestay business from social, economic, and environmental perspectives. Sutrisno et al. (2024) argued that preserving a heritage mosque would enhance tourism value. Yusuf and Al-Haq (2023) proposed developing the *Perkampungan* Sunnah event into an Islamic tourism attraction. Additionally, Hashom et al. (2022) and Martaleni et al. (2021) highlighted the potential of halal tourism, focusing on creating halal logistics value and educational initiatives. These points collectively indicate significant potential for Islamic-related tourism in Perlis, with opportunities in event development, heritage preservation, and halal tourism enhancing the state's tourism industry and economic performance.

2.2. Government's Initiatives

To drive sustainable economic development in Perlis, the Perlis State Structure Plan 2030 (RSN Perlis) has been established as a primary guide for managing the state's physical development through 2030. RSN Perlis 2030 emphasizes the tourism industry under the Key Planning Policy (DPU 3), focusing on enhancing the quality of tourism products and internationalizing tourism services. The objective of DPU 3 is to ensure that tourism resources in Perlis are sustainable economically, environmentally, and socioculturally (Jabatan Perancangan Bandar dan Desa Negeri Perlis, 2012). Additionally, the Strategic Development Plan for Perlis (PSPP) 2012-2030 aims to transform Perlis into a developed, high-income region free from poverty, supported by the Economic Planning Unit (UPEN) Perlis. The PSPP outlines 64 strategic projects, with a strong focus on tourism alongside other key economic sectors such as agri-food, manufacturing, and urban development (Northern Corridor Economic Region, 2012). Table 1 shows the tourism-related projects focused on by the PSPP.

Table 1: Tourism-related Projects in Perlis

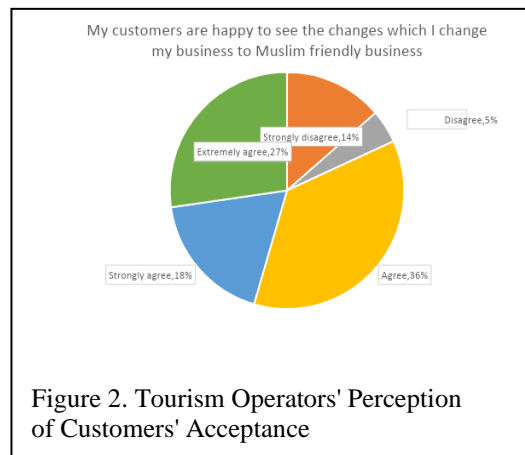
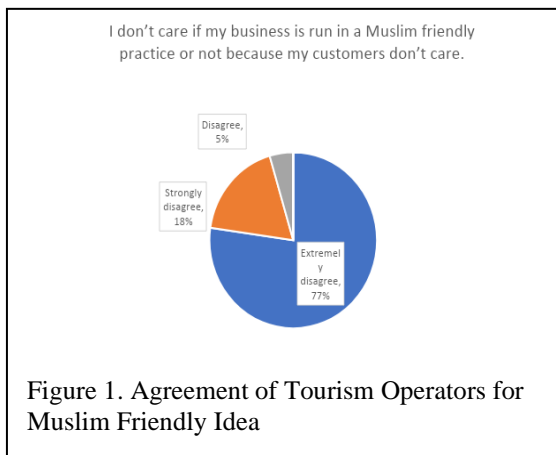
Project code/ name	Action Plan	Flagship project
DSP 3.1: Strengthen and improve the tourism industry as one of the main drivers of the economy of Perlis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed the Perlis Tourism Action Plan with various government agencies to plan, coordinate, and monitor tourism development.</li> <li>• Created an attractive investment scenario by approving tourism development applications immediately and offering a five-year land tax exemption.</li> <li>• Host international sports events like the "Perlis Marathon," "Rally Perlis," "Paragliding," "Parachute," and "Ironman Triathlon."</li> <li>• List Perlis State Parks as UNESCO World Heritage sites for natural resources.</li> <li>• Organize a competition to create an exciting tagline for Perlis tourism branding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perlis Tourism Action Plan</li> <li>• Organizing standard sports international</li> <li>• Park Management Plan</li> <li>• Perlis State Park for UNESCO nomination</li> <li>• Branding</li> <li>• ICT Infrastructure</li> <li>• Visit Perlis Year, 2012</li> </ul>
DSP 3.5: Improve tourism infrastructure in aspects of accessibility and support facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upgrade the public transport system to enhance tourist mobility.</li> <li>• Discuss with operators like Star Cruise to provide cruise services to Perlis.</li> <li>• Create a welcoming atmosphere with urban fabric attractions.</li> <li>• Offer efficient local taxis and buses.</li> <li>• Ensure adequate and affordable accommodation facilities.</li> <li>• Establish water taxis as a new transportation mode.</li> <li>• Develop a boutique hotel at Empangan Timah Tasoh with 20-40 exclusive chalets facing Banjaran Nakawan.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodation accessibility facilities and support facilities.</li> </ul>

### 3. Methodology

This study conducted a cross-sectional study through an online survey to investigate the perception of local tourism operators in Perlis. This study used convenient samplings and snowballing approaches, and the data collection stopped within two weeks. The question items were adopted and adapted from Zhang and Zhang (2018), which focused on future intentions for business operations.

### 4. Findings

Only 22 tourism operators conducting business in the three primary cities of Perlis – Arau, Padang Besar, and Kangar – voluntarily participated as respondents. Since Perlis is the smallest state in Malaysia and relatively less frequented by tourists than other regions, this study opted to cease data collection upon reaching this participation threshold. Most respondents have been operating their business in Perlis for over 10 years. All of them are from small-scale enterprise (SME) business backgrounds and are Muslim. Their dominant age range was 25 to 40 years old (41%), followed by 18 to 24 years old (27%) and 41 to 56 years old (23%).



Two pivotal questions were posed; the initial query inquired whether tourism operators are indifferent to whether their business aligns with their customers' preferences. A significant majority, comprising 77%, expressed disagreement with this notion (refer to Fig. 1). Conversely, the second question explored whether customers would be content if the operators shifted their business focus towards a more Muslim Friendly Tourism destination. As depicted in Fig. 2, the findings largely affirmed the first question regarding agreement with the concept of Muslim Friendly Tourism. Nevertheless, nearly 20% of respondents disagreed with the statement.

### 5. Conclusions

The survey in Perlis offers critical insights into tourism operators' perspectives. 77% of operators align proactively with customer preferences, prioritizing customer satisfaction. However, opinions on shifting towards a more Muslim-friendly tourism approach vary; while most support the idea, around 20% disagree. The finding

underscores the need to consider diverse viewpoints and challenges in catering to specific demographic preferences. Overall, the findings stress the importance of understanding and accommodating customer preferences in the tourism sector and the complexities of adapting to evolving market demands. These insights are valuable for Perlis' tourism operators and beyond, guiding strategic decisions to enhance customer satisfaction and foster inclusivity in the industry. These findings stress the importance of ongoing market research and customer engagement for tourism operators in Perlis and beyond. Regularly seeking feedback through surveys and focus groups helps operators stay informed about changing preferences and market trends. Developing flexible business strategies that accommodate diverse demographic preferences, including cultural and religious considerations, is crucial. Operators can boost satisfaction and attract new market segments by responding to customer feedback. Additionally, promoting inclusivity within the industry by catering to the needs of all demographic groups fosters a more welcoming and diverse tourism environment.

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