

ART TOURISM: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN SABAH, MALAYSIA

by

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ABSTRACT

The identity of art could determine the ability to attract visitors to a country through infusing the sense of place and imprint the memories on the visitors. The purpose of the paper is to explore the current development of art tourism in Sabah, Malaysia where the inception of the highly publicised IMCAT (1Malaysia Contemporary Art Tourism) festival has sparked interests in researching art tourism and its issues. The literature review indicated that art tourism is part and parcel of cultural tourism and mainly centred in urban area. These art tourists visit art exhibitions and galleries, folk life and craft centres, theatres and museums, festivals and fairs. The methodology of this study is exploratory where the primary data gathered through interviews with the stakeholders in art tourism development and the secondary data were gathered through literature search. The data were triangulated through respondent's validation method. The research suggested that the pursuit of art tourism would not only yield economic spin-off but also set the path in discovering its cultural identity through the expression of the local arts. Further research direction could focus on the structure of the local art sector in order to maximise the economic benefits and minimise the leakages. It is also suggested that there should be an exploration of the different types of art and identifying those that should be continuously developed to ensure the art sector can be constantly dynamic and sustainable.

KEYWORDS

Art tourism, Cultural Tourism, Exploratory Study, Cultural Identity, Sustainable

INTRODUCTION

One of the fastest growing sector of the travel industry world-wide with annual average growth rate of 15%, which is three times of the average growth of the general tourism, is cultural tourism where arts and heritage are the key components (Sarah Lebski Associates, 2010). Malaysia, a federation of 13 states and three federal territories, is South East Asia's major tourist destination and constantly developing new tourism products and the industry is the second biggest contributor to foreign revenue. Sabah, one of states in Malaysia, is located in the northern part of Borneo Island and is a melting pot of many different cultures and traditions, being home to more than 2.9 million people with more than 30 ethnic groups. It is renowned as one of the twelve mega-diversity sites in the world with strong sense of culture and heritage. The art sector in Sabah enjoys steady growth with a strong support from the local and foreign art collectors.

In recent years, Malaysia aspires to elevate the status of Malaysian art as an iconic product, which is desired, pursued and collected worldwide. Rather than focusing on the art sector itself, Malaysia decided that it should tied in with the tourism industry where the art community, such as the artists, art galleries owners or managers, art promoters, art critics, art lovers and collectors flocked to and around Malaysia buying collectible art, which is normally made by Malaysian artist.

In the last three years, Malaysia promotes art tourism through 1Malaysia Contemporary Art Tourism (IMCAT) event all over the country including Sabah. IMCAT is specialising in showcasing the art works and sculpture in the contemporary genre and supplemented by the 'Tourism Art Trail'. Tourists can visit the contemporary art galleries and attending art seminars and talks focusing on the current contemporary art scene. The objective of this paper is to explore and understand the art tourism in Sabah.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stylianou-Lambert (2011) suggested a comprehensive exploration on art tourist definitions where she reconstructed and expanded well-established cultural tourist typologies through explanation of the differences on cultural tourists in art museum from the general cultural tourists. Using exploratory research, her study has drawn the experiences, memories and perceptions of art museum local visitors and developed Museum Perceptual Filters (MPFs) with eight (8) different ways in approaching art museums. The eight MPFs identified are professional, art-loving, self-exploration, cultural tourism, social visitation, romantic, rejection and indifference. The study also suggested that the participants that visited art museum in their home will probably do so when they are travelling and those who do not, will also not visit art museum while travelling.

Art tourism is also thought to be able to attract new businesses and residents through enhancing the positive image of the host city (Kolb, 2005). The distinctive difference to the arts as a tourist product is the departure point of the marketing process where it starts with product analysis. This enables the art product to be able to reposition as a tourist activity. This is certainly different with the traditional marketing process that starts with identifying the factors for external environment and decided if those factors such as social, political, legal and technological changes have indicated a potential consumer market.

The literature reviews suggested that art tourism is part and parcel of cultural tourism and mainly centred on urban area. It is mainly integrated as part of economic development where the incoming flow of tourists hoped to bring more positive impacts while enhancing the local community's quality of life at the same time. There is a lack of literatures that discussed the issues and the evaluation of art tourism as many studies focused on the current existing art scene and researching them as part of urban development program.

METHODOLOGY

The scope of this research is only limited to IMCAT events and contemporary art works. Contemporary art denotes the art of the present day and relatively recent past where they are usually avant-garde in nature. The operational definition is extended to the commercial side of art where the consumer views, hears and acquires a form of art works and sculpture or artistic expression in exchange of payment. This is to fit in to the view of art tourism where the promotion of art is tied in with the pursuit of economic benefits.

In order to explore the issue of art tourism in Sabah, it is appropriate to conduct qualitative-based research with exploratory as the methodology. This enables the researcher to build a strong and reliable foundation that could uncover motivations, reasons, impressions, perceptions and ideas of individuals. This includes extensive information from each respondent and a search for meaning, ideas and relevant issues. According to Wood (2006), the validity of interactionists qualitative research commonly rests upon three main features, which are 1) unobtrusive, sustained methods; 2) respondents validation; and 3) triangulation.

The data are gathered from primary and secondary sources. The primary data gathered through interviews with a local tourism authority, a local contemporary artists and a local art collector while the secondary data gathered through literature search. The data were triangulated through respondent's validation method. Results were derived from the interviews analysis where data from the interviews clustered into groups based on the themes that emerged from the data.

FINDINGS

The findings of this research suggested that art business are still very much at its infancy with the only art auction house in Malaysia, Henry Butcher (Malaysia) started very recently. Henry Butcher (Malaysia) is a company that rather well known for property management and have not achieved what the established international art auction houses such as Sotheby's (established in 1744) and Christie's (established in 1766) in promoting art business through their art auction. An alternative that the art sector could explore in today's Internet age that there are also online art auctions available such as Online Auctions, Auctions Result and eBay Art. These online art auctions are not just for buying and selling but they also served as databases for the auction items and connecting auction houses and bidders worldwide. Today, most of the conventional auction houses have a web-enabled method for the bidders to bid online.

There are also other types of art that could be promoted as contemporary art in Sabah such as photography and comic book art. A local contemporary artist that specialised in contemporary art expressed his opinion on the art sector's focus in Sabah where *'...art is everything but the authority only favoured fine art, but we have more types of art that can*

define us as a society...' He also noted the commercial value of contemporary art where *'...a senior artist once told me that you could not sell any pop art to the tourists because it does not represent the tourism images...it depends on the market because different tourists have different taste...'* (C. R. Francis, personal communications, November 5, 2011)

The increasing competition between cities that tied in with the promotion of their own art and tourism sector around this region such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo and Taipei only emphasised on the importance of effective marketing strategies. The investment in art for Sabah has been outlined in the Sabah Development Corridor Blueprint (SEDIA, 2007) where the vision of Sabah's Tourism is to make the state to be among the most liveable places in Asia by 2025. This is planned to be achieved by setting up world-class infrastructure that could nurture a vibrant arts and cultural scene. Art and Culture Development Fund of RM250 million is due to be set up to support budding creative talents and emerging arts organisations in the fields of indigenous art preservation, community cultural development, dance, music, theatre and visual art and craft. The Head of Tourism for Kota Kinabalu City Council expressed similar opinion where *"we (Sabah) have so much performing art as an attraction at this moment and it is good that we can diversify that especially with something new like art tourism"* (F. Awang Samad, personal communication, July 15, 2012).

The Malaysian art identity has been questioned by Mohamed (2008) in a cultural sense as he suggested that Malaysia have been emphasising on its cultural vibrancy with the successful tourism campaign *"Malaysia: Truly Asia"*. The vibrancy is due to the various ethnic groups i.e. Malay, Chinese, Indian, Indigenous People, Serani etc. and the Bumiputeras of Sabah and Sarawak that have more ethnic groups under this category. All of the races made up the population of Malaysia now and each usually keep their own ethnic identity while being Malaysian through the integration process rather than assimilation process. Mohamed questioned the ownership of culture as he noted the multiculturalism in Malaysia has become the foundation of Malaysia's tourism and he raised an important question on whose culture should be promoted to represent Malaysia. This raised a simple but important question, which is *'what is Malaysian art?'* An art collector based in Sabah expressed his view on what is Malaysia Art, where he notes *"...if you ask me about Malaysian art, it must have primary and secondary ingredients...the primary one is the artist must be Malaysian and the secondary ones are the motifs and objects must have strong cultural significance to the Malaysian culture..."* (C. B. Yap, personal communication, December 27, 2011). Since Sabah population have strong identity that linked back to their culture, this raised an issue of the object and expression of the art that made in Sabah or any other art made in the country of origin of the artist's forefathers, hence the authenticity of the art itself as Malaysian art. The study on art identity linked to the marketability of the art and it would be useful in having a greater understanding of the art sector and promoting it more effectively.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of art tourism issues in Sabah suggested that there is potential for economic yield and there is a need to discover its cultural identity through the expression of the local art. The identity of the art could also develop a strong sense of place that could imprint the memories on the visitors while instilling pride to the local community. Art or art-based tourism experiences that are being promoted in Sabah is currently through the IMCAT only includes contemporary art works but other types of contemporary art that can also be promoted such as theatre, dance, music, literature, cinema, visual arts and crafts, design and architecture, public art, photography and digital media to ensure the art sector can be constantly dynamic and sustainable.

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