

SYNERGISTIC OPPORTUNITIES BETWEEN THE HALAL FOOD & TOURISM SECTORS TO CREATE VALUABLE GASTRO TOURISM EXPERIENCES

Yvonne M. Maffei, M.A

Founder, My Halal Kitchen, San Diego, CA, USA
myhalalkitchen@gmail.com

Soumaya Hamdi

Founder & Managing Director, Halal Travel Guide
London, UK
hello@halaltravelguide.net

Abstract

The Halal Travel market is estimated to be worth USD 225 billion by 2028 and remains one of the fastest-growing segments in global travel and tourism. With this growth naturally comes an increasingly competitive market. Meanwhile, there are new and evolving dynamics in the considerations of Muslim travelers, with regards to the desired experience, destination, and expectations. Considering the unprecedented competition and the resurgence of international travel, how can a destination create a competitive edge while also supporting sustainable and responsible tourism practices?

This paper explores the possibilities presented by the intersection of Halal Tourism and Halal Food, where the creation of culinary gastro-tourism experiences can be a valuable source of tourism that supports the local economy, protects cultural heritage and attracts high-value travelers. Primary research in the form of surveying Muslim travelers both before and during the pandemic forms the foundation of research in this paper and is supported with secondary sources in the form of reports, indexes and media sources.

Key word: Halal Travel market, Halal Tourism, Halal Food, Muslim travelers, pandemic.

JEL codes: L66, Z3

INTRODUCTION

Two very important sectors of the Halal industry- Halal Food and Halal Tourism- have an enormous opportunity for impact when they come together to create synergistic experiences for the consumer. There is no better time than the post-pandemic era for businesses and individuals across both sectors to analyze and prepare the opportunities for unique experiences to be offered to hungry and restless travelers. Culinary Tourism (also referred to as Gastro Tourism) is a growing industry where the main focus of attraction is the food or culinary heritage at the destination of choice.

The experiences offered host a springboard location for travelers to begin adventures and exploration. This is the perfect combination for the Halal industry to embark upon in that there is a perfect intersection of Islamic heritage sites intertwined with culinary legacy throughout the Muslim world and beyond. When professionals in both industries create combined experiences that benefit local communities, business owners and the environment, they can begin to provide the modern traveler with everything he or she is seeking while at the same time meeting UN SDGs and preserving instead of exploiting cultural significance and heritage sites that are being explored.

This paper serves to describe the landscape of the business environment and all of its digital tools and resources, making it ripe for success. It will also discuss the key factors necessary for the mobilization of efforts to put experiences in place which combine both the Halal travel and Halal food industries in the most efficient and economically viable ways.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research conducted for this study was done in various ways. Halal Travel Guide conducted primary research in November 2021 by surveying 262 Muslim travelers from around the world. Fieldwork has been conducted between August 2021-present, whereby Soumaya Hamdi has met with Muslim travelers on trips and obtained anecdotal information. One of the most important and research-driven ways used by the author was attending key conferences and meeting with chief Halal industry leaders and influencers in both the food and tourism sectors. The author served as an advisor to the Uzbekistan government by presenting at the Tashkent International Tourism Fair (2020); presenting Demystifying Muslim Food-Loving Travelers at the World Food Travel Association Food Trex Global (2020); presented Around the World on a Halal Diet for Food Travel Talk TV (2021); Rethinking Experiences and Activities: The Next Big Thing at the Halal in Travel Global Summit (2021). Reading key journals and studies in the culinary tourism sector was also conducted. Other sources are cited in the bibliography.

STATE OF THE HALAL TRAVEL MARKET POST-PANDEMIC

Estimated to be worth USD 225 billion by 2028 , the Halal Travel market continues to prove itself as one of the fast-growing segments in global travel and tourism. With 70% of the global Muslim population under 40 years old and 60% under 30, the Muslim Travel market is also one of the first to show signs of a strong recovery since the pandemic first impacted international travel in 2020. The terms ‘Halal Travel’ and ‘Muslim Travel’ market will be used synonymously in this paper, referring to the global population of approximately 2 billion people who follow the religion of Islam. This is a very diverse market that spans several languages, cultures and continents. We must therefore note that such a vast and varied market will require different approaches tailored to each sub-segment. For the purposes of this paper, we will be

focusing on the largest and most economically powerful segment of the market; the 70% of Muslim travelers aged 40 and under. This segment is:

- Highly educated
- Technologically savvy
- Speak English (whether as a first or additional language)
- Care about maintaining their religious values both at home and abroad

Though we have not restricted our audience based on gender, it would be remiss not to note the influential role Muslim women are having in shaping the Halal Travel market, both as consumers and as entrepreneurs.

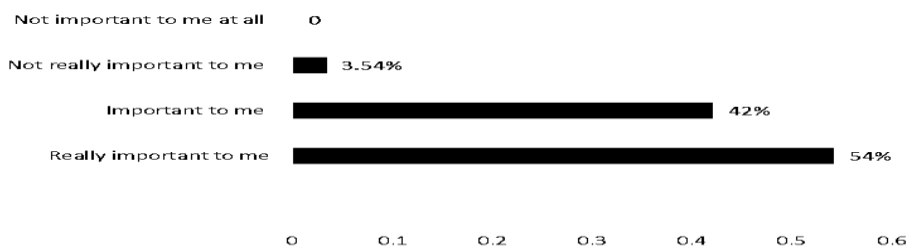
WHAT DO MUSLIM TRAVELERS WANT?

To put it very simply, Muslim travelers are seeking connection. They are searching for travel experiences that are transformative. They want to travel not just to rest or shop, but to feel a connection to the place and people they are traveling to, by exploring the local food and culture. This is not just observable anecdotally, from conversations the author has had with Muslim travellers, but also statistically.

Prior to the pandemic (in 2018), Halal Travel Guide surveyed 404 British Muslims and found that 83% of Millennial Muslim travellers like to connect with the local community.

In November 2021, Halal Travel Guide conducted another survey, this time with respondents from around the world. More than 260 Muslims from across the UK, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, US and Europe answered questions about their preferences when it comes to travelling abroad as a Muslim. When asked ‘How important is it for you to connect with locals and their food, history and culture while you’re traveling?’, their responses were almost unanimously agreed that yes, it is important. 96% of respondents said it’s either ‘important’ or ‘really important’ for them to ‘connect with locals and their food, history and culture’ while traveling (Figure 1).

Figure 1: How important is it for you to connect with locals and their food, history and culture while you're traveling?



Source: Results from the 2021 Halal Travel Guide survey into Muslim travelers from around the world. Respondents surveyed were from the UK, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, the US, Turkey, the Gulf States and Europe.

The results show something significant. Travel for Muslims appears to mean more than just taking a vacation. Muslims are traveling to explore and feel a sense of connection to the place they have chosen to visit. They are traveling to meet new people, learn about new cultures, try new food and explore their Islamic heritage. There are of course huge benefits to hosting travelers who are interested in connecting with the local community. From an economic perspective, there is a higher chance that the locals will directly benefit from the traveler's visit, whether it be by having the traveler eat at local restaurants or hiring a local tour guide. The intangible benefit is harder to measure but is perhaps much more impactful. Building bridges between the traveler and the local people in a destination can support the preservation of traditional crafts, traditional cookery and even traditional ways of life. For the traveler, access to experiences unique to a destination will create an emotional connection to the destination and will not only encourage the traveler to make future return trips, but to share their experience with their social networks, creating a ripple effect.

This type of experience that empowers the traveler to explore a foreign destination with the support of locals is currently underserved in the Halal Travel Market. Halal Tourism stakeholders, particularly tourism boards, have the opportunity to support the development of new tourism products that will attract this segment of Muslim travelers who are keen to access immersive travel experiences. Of course, to be truly immersive and supportive of responsible tourism, such tourism products must be created with the input and support of locals. By working with locals to produce these authentic experiences it becomes possible to develop new halal tourism products that bring direct benefit to the local community and economy, while supporting the preservation of intangible heritage and culture. This is a crucial step towards helping halal tourism grow in a way that is more sustainable and supportive of responsible, ethical business practises.

And while Halal Tourism in many countries is booming with the rise in halal resorts/hotels, there is still a lack of travel experiences being created designed with this type of Muslim traveler in mind. The gap in this service provision is starting to be filled through the efforts of private entities, but still lacks investment from tourism boards and governmental agencies.

HALAL CULINARY TOURISM AS A DRIVER FOR CONNECTION AND ECONOMIC BENEFIT

As indicated above, Muslim travelers have expressed a deep interest in having experiences on their travels. The emergence of the Halal Food sector globally allows for the expansion of such experiences in the Halal Travel sector, even when travel is not necessarily within a Muslim country. With the availability of halal foods and a greater understanding of halal dietary guidelines and practices globally, the possibilities of culinary or gastro-tourism experiences are endless and can thus be created to provide a deeper understanding of a particular location, its food history and the Islamic heritage embedded in each locale- all of which are experiences requested and desired by Muslim travelers.

While some cities around the world are saturated with tourists, designing experiences in lesser known areas is an investment in unique, off the beaten path type of places that often preserve traditional lifestyles and culture. It is also a useful technique to deal with the harms of over-tourism that continues to increase with the proliferation of 'Insta-worthy' places to visit. Village life often includes a more natural and sustainable way of living and is an attractive experience for the stressed out traveler from larger cities. An investment in these villages may help preserve traditional cooking methods, organic farming, and sustainable animal husbandry in that tourism provides the opportunity to pump investment into these places - when conducted in partnership with the locals - and preserve a way of life that is dying out around the world.

In addition to satisfying the needs and desires of Muslim travelers, culinary tourism brings with it enormous economic benefits to the local economies in which each trip is planned. Travelers will spend approximately 25% of their money on food on any given trip, and if they are sent out to forage on their own, their spend could possibly end up in the hands of international food chains as opposed to local restaurants, culinary classes, and street foods owned by local vendors. Additionally, a well-planned gastro-tour would open up the location to expert locals with knowledge and information not found elsewhere, leaving the travelers with unique experiences they will take back to their home countries, as well as stabilizing income for local entrepreneurs who are deeply invested in the improvement and sustainability of their local economies. These key economic indicators also align well with the UNWTO SDGs for 2031. [3]

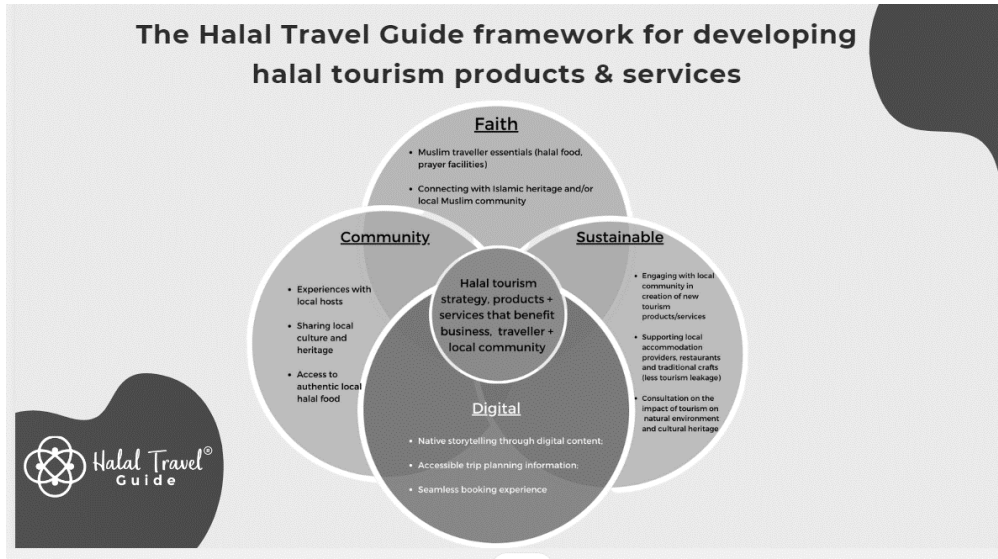
A MODEL FOR DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE HALAL TOURISM PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

While Halal Tourism continues to be one of the fastest growing segments of international travel and tourism, more research and work is needed to ensure that this growth is sustainable. If tourism is truly to be halal, we must always go back to the Maqasid of the Shariah - the aims of the Shariah - which is generally translated as: *"Fulfilment of goodness and righteousness and warding off or getting rid of corruption and destruction."*

Ahmad Raysuni, Introduction to Maqasid Shariah.

Halal Tourism, therefore, must be beneficial for a) travelers, b) destinations and c) people living in those destinations. And with the impact of climate change and overtourism, developing a responsible business model for Halal Tourism is not only beneficial; it is a necessity. To support this development, Halal Travel Guide has created a model for the creation of Halal Tourism products that support responsible tourism (Figure 2)

Figure 2: This model has been created using both qualitative and quantitative data gathered by the Halal Travel Guide over the course of several years, from targeted surveys along with visits to several countries and interactions with locals and Muslim travelers from around the world.



Source: Halal Travel Guide

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING FOR HALAL TOURISM

Much like the marketing of halal food to the world, marketing halal tourism should be prioritized for anyone interested in promoting well-designed experiences to any global destination. While the halal food industry is growing at \$500 million per year, we can say that the increased demand is part and parcel of the response to the availability of information online and ease of access for consumers to make requests of companies to carry halal foods as well as to ensure the quality and certainty of the halal certification. Consumer education and standards are growing with the sheer amount of time spent on social media channels such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube especially. Those with the disposable income to travel will not only seek out halal food wherever they go, but they will also seek out high quality experiences that they might have already seen on social media such as the TikTok and IG reels of Halal Travel Guide and My Halal Kitchen during recent trips to the Bosnian cities of Mostar and Sarajevo, where delicious foods enticed viewers to inquire about the next planned tours of these destinations.

THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF INFORMATION LEVELS THE PLAYING FIELD

There is no doubt that the internet and social media are having a huge impact on the development of Halal Tourism. Couple this with the fact that 70% of the global

Muslim population are under 40 and therefore likely to be regularly using the internet and social media to plan their trips, it is now easier than ever to send curated messages to Muslim travelers. Social media in particular is becoming increasingly powerful not just for marketing but also for purchases. In the last couple of years, social media applications such as Instagram and TikTok have grown to build their own in-app e-commerce capabilities, allowing users to shop without ever leaving the app. Despite the high level of internet connectivity and social media use amongst Muslim travellers, there is a perceived lack of messaging that aims to target and attract this market segment. When Halal Travel Guide surveyed 262 Muslims from around the world in 2021, the results showed Muslims still feel there is a lack of travel information designed to attract and inform Muslim travelers (Figure 3). This is significant, not just because halal travel is booming. It is because the majority of Muslims - 78% according to Halal Travel Guide research (Figure 4) - say they are more likely to visit a destination when they see a visibly Muslim traveler shown in travel marketing material.

Figure 3 How often do you see a visibly Muslim traveller featured (either online or elsewhere) in a travel advert, magazine or social media campaign?

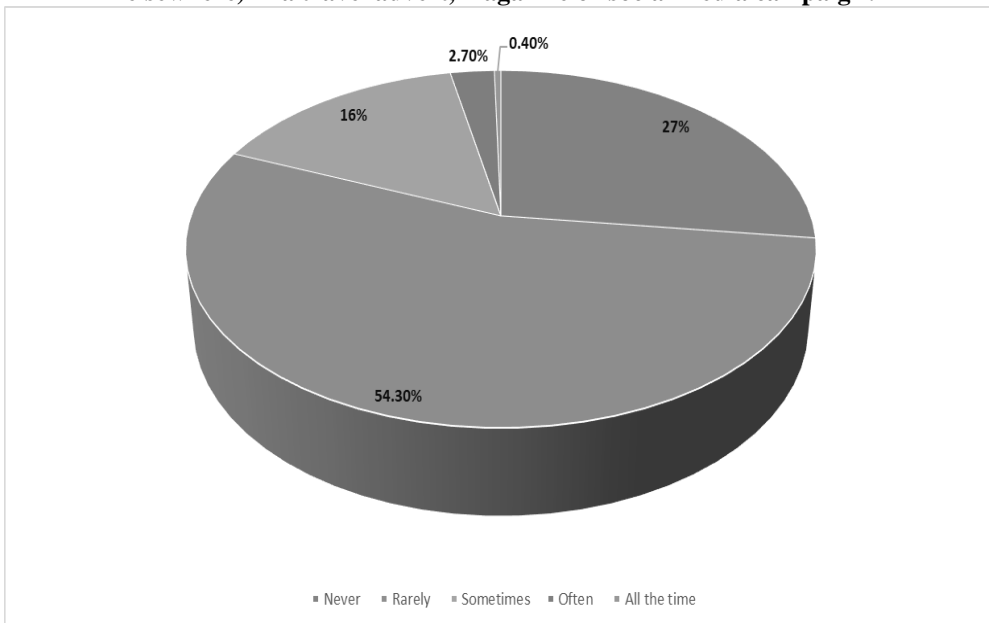


Figure 3: 81% of Muslims surveyed said they either ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ see a visibly Muslim traveler featured in travel marketing material.

Figure 4: Does seeing a visibly Muslim person on a country's travel branding and advertising make you more or less likely to visit that country?



Figure 4: 78% of Muslims surveyed said that they are more likely to visit a country that uses a visibly Muslim traveler in their marketing material.

For example, Halal Restaurant week in South Korea sends a warm invitation to Muslims to “come as you are to enjoy authentic Korean food, and we’ll even show you how to make the halal versions of our recipes”. In OIC countries this can go even further to deeply explore Islamic food history of the Silk Road, the Ottoman Empire and so much more. Recently, the government of Uzbekistan reached out to the authors of this paper to garner specific ideas for gastro-tourism programs in the country, much of which would include the utilization of social media to record and publicize local art, culinary and heritage sites in the country. It is initiatives like this, stemming from government institutions with their ministry of tourism that will help to elevate and execute such important and impactful initiatives that bring about global travelers to experiences places they might not have otherwise thought to visit.

In non-Muslim countries, tourism boards can work with Muslim chefs and experts to tweak authentic and traditional recipes to make them halal so that Muslims may enjoy and feel welcomed - quite literally a form of culinary diplomacy - shaping the reason for connecting with food during travel in the first place.

Particularly for Muslim travelers who require extra assurance due to halal requirements, more effort is needed than the average food traveller. Yet most places don't have easy access to one stop shops to find the best halal local food. This is an opportunity for halal certification bodies to join the halal tourism sector and work together on certifying various restaurants and local food vendors verified by legitimate halal tourism operators, all of which will give a value-added benefit to travelers, lending to more assurances, respectability and economic stability to all parties involved.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, halal food and halal tourism go hand in hand in a multitude of ways that should not be ignored. The parties involved in each sector have ample opportunities to come together for the benefit of their individual business ventures and for the long-term sustainability of the socio-economic and environmental impact of tour locations while satisfying the needs and desires of the Muslim Traveler. When business practices are in line with the UNWTO SDGs and concrete marketing plans are created and implemented by government agencies and businesses alike, the impact can be seen almost immediately. It is with good intention that the authors of this paper hope to advise and encourage a holistic, healthy approach to sustainable food and travel (Halal Gastro Tourism) programs in the Halal Food and Halal Tourism sectors combined.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Belopilskaya, Yulia. How Halal Tourism is Reshaping the Global Tourism Industry. EHL Insights. <https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/halal-tourism-global-industry>
2. Daily Sabah: Turkey's Halal Beach Resorts a World Wide Success.
3. <https://www.dailysabah.com/feature/2017/09/11/turkeys-halal-beach-resorts-a-world-wide-success>
4. Evans, Michelle. How to Win Over Today's More Impatient and Informed Consumer. Forbes. October 4, 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michelleevans1/2017/10/04/how-to-win-over-todays-more-impatient-and-informed-consumer/#494d1238716e>
5. Food Travel Talk TV: Around the World on a Halal Diet: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwWar7jPC_s
6. Global Muslim Travel Index 2019 and 2022 by Mastercard-Crescent Rating.
7. <https://www.crescentrating.com/reports/global-muslim-travel-index-2019.html>
8. Halalbooking.com
9. Halaltrip.com
10. HalalTravelGuide.net
11. The Independent. Halal Holidays: What it's Like to Take a Muslim Beach Break. September 16, 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/europe/halal-holidays-muslim-travel-beach-burkini-turkey-safety-fco-halalbookings-a7307271.html>
12. M. Maffei, Yvonne. My Halal Kitchen by Yvonne. www.myhalalkitchen.com
13. The New York Times: The Rise of Halal Tourism.
14. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/18/travel/the-rise-of-halal-tourism.html>
15. Patel, Neil and Ritika Puri. The Complete Guide to Understanding Consumer Psychology. <https://www.quicksprout.com/the-complete-guide-to-understand-customer-psychology-chapter-1/>
16. Sherwood, Harriet. The Guardian. Halal Holiday Bookings Soar as Muslims Opt for the Med. March 10, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/10/halal-holiday-bookings-soar-as-muslims-opt-for-the-med>
17. State of the Global Islamic Economy Report. 2017/2018
18. Tapping into the Muslim Consumer Potential Based on International Values Research: The Fastest Growing Consumer Market Globally. Lampert, Martin. Papadongonas, Panos and Ahmed Ait Moha.
19. TRT Reportage about Halal Tourism. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hiks7urJC>