

WORDS: WILHELMINA MBINJI

The rise and rise of Muslim travel

Beyond Hajj and Umrah, Muslims are increasingly looking for different travel options that can accommodate their specific needs, values and practices

The Hajj to Mecca is an essential part of the Muslim faith. Hajj is the holiest and also the most expensive trip to Mecca for Muslims, and no-one knows this better than the pilgrims themselves who, according to Al Jazeera, can spend from half a year's salary to over three years' salary to participate.

With the annual pilgrimage easily amassing over two million pilgrims in Islam's holiest city, it's impossible not to see the opportunity to capitalise on the season, and the religious tourism it brings.

Beyond Hajj and Umrah, Muslims are looking for different travel options – towards leisure and experience, and ones that can accommodate their values and practices.

Fazal Bahardeen, Singapore-based CEO of CrescentRating and HalalTrip, knows this all too well. His entire business has been built with the Muslim traveller in mind, sparked by his own personal experience. "As a Muslim traveller, I found it difficult sometimes to find places to eat, to pray. The hospitality industry probably at that time didn't realise that Muslim travellers, as a travel segment, [are] unique. That got me thinking that I needed to do something," he explains.

The challenging experience prompted him to found and launch CrescentRating in 2008. The aim of the website was simple: to provide a website for Muslims to rate hotels on their ability to meet their unique needs. CrescentRating has since grown to be one of the leading authorities in halal-friendly travel, and an advisory for businesses and those working in the travel and tourism industry.

Put simply, the Islamic tourism market, which some also refer to as halal tourism or halal travel, is the provision of facilities and services that can specifically address the needs of a Muslim traveller. These needs include halal food, separate facilities for men and women, and dry hotels. It also extends to the tours, where prayer times can also be accommodated while on excursions.

According to the Mastercard-CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index 2018, global tourism tracked an estimated 131 million Muslim international travellers in 2017, and this figure is expected to grow to 156 million by 2020. The travel expenditure for this segment alone is also estimated to reach 300 billion dollars by 2026.

Pew Research also states that Muslims are a majority of the population in 49 countries around the world. North Africa, in particular, is home to 20% of the world's Muslim population and is home to the largest Muslim population in the continent.

A common way of segmenting the Muslim travel segment is by dividing it



by Organisation for Islamic Co-operation (OIC) destinations and non-OIC destinations. OIC destinations are part of the 57-member state collective of the world's Muslim majority countries. Non-OIC countries are the opposite, but are still home to a significant Muslim population.

Despite the fact that more than 20 African countries are OIC members, South Africa is the only African country among the top four non-OIC destinations, according to the 2018 Mastercard-CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index, with a score of 47.7. Singapore is in first place, with a score of 66.2. South Africa's strong ranking means that it's a top travel destination for Muslims from all over the world.

Considering the country's strong economy and infrastructural development compared with other African countries, as well as its 200-year Muslim history, the ranking comes at a perfect time.

A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITY

Catering to the Muslim traveller could be a challenge for some, but for Cape Town, specifically, it's opened up a world of opportunity – especially for Cape Town Tourism – and with CrescentRating in particular.

In February, both parties collaborated to release the 2018 Cape Town Halal Tourism Basic Guidelines and Glossary, which provides a breakdown of faith-based needs for the Muslim traveller, tourist and local.

It's crucial information for any establishment looking to better accommodate Muslim travellers and patrons, and possibly cash in on what World Travel Market estimates will be a

\$238 billion market by 2019.

Some of the faith-based needs that the Cape Town Halal Tourism Basic Guidelines and Glossary mentions include the main types of "halal" assurance provided by food outlets and their acceptability to most Muslims, the need for washrooms that have a hand shower or the simple provision of a lota, and recreation facilities that are segregated or instead have different timings for Muslim women and men.

Such a guideline and glossary points to introducing basic Muslim-friendly service infrastructure as part of the general and already-existing travel and hospitality infrastructure such as in hotels, and providing such basics is not costly. If variety brings more customers, then having inclusive facilities in existing tourism and travel establishments can only mean even more business.

MORE TO HALAL LIFESTYLE

Catering to the halal lifestyle extends to fashion, finance, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics and even media.

What, then, does it mean to be a halal tourist? For Yaakub Azmi, a Malaysian tourist, it means being able to connect with one's roots beyond just religion. Azmi and a few of his friends visited South Africa earlier this year for the first time, and decided to see what the country had to offer using an Islamic tourism company. Their plan was to do more than just take in the sights.

"As a Malaysian Malay people, we [wanted] to experience the cultural link between ourselves and the Cape Malay community," says Azmi. For him, a



[and] people will start coming to you. At the end of the day, they come for tourism.”

NEED FOR CLARITY

No-one understands this better than Karim Saad, who runs his own management consulting and advertising agency based in Austria.

According to him, the Islamic tourism market, despite its estimated growth, still needs clear definition. “The [Islamic tourism] niche is becoming bigger and bigger. Also, I think the demand will increase, but I’d be quite cautious in terms of putting it into numbers,” he explains. “[This is] as long as there’s no clear definition of the term, of the phrase ‘halal tourism’, and really a transparent segmentation of what halal tourism is all about.”

The data from reports and studies also needs to be passed over with a fine-tooth comb, particularly in an age when online data can be manipulated. Social media platforms and listening tools nevertheless carry much importance. This is especially because the majority of the next generation of Muslim travellers have been building a community through travel, food and lifestyle.

It’s estimated that Muslim millennial travellers’ expenditure will likely exceed \$100 billion by 2025. Social platforms, however, are heavily curated, says Saad, and therefore, need to be used in conjunction with other less curated and filtered data sources.

“You can fake data in the best way ever in the digital century. So I think it would be really important to just go back and do super-detailed studies with the communities, and do very transparent segmentation,” says Saad.

“Muslims in the West would have totally

bigger focus on nurturing and catering for a Muslim traveller’s needs can only spell more freedom for leisure for Muslims while travelling. “We’re happy because we can travel without worrying about food and Muslim practices,” says Azmi. “This will create comfortable and stress-free holidays.”

For people like Khalid Vawda, CEO of Islamic Travels and Tours in South Africa, guests like Azmi are proof that the Islamic tourism in South Africa isn’t a just a trend. Because of this, halal literacy is key as the market strengthens. “One of the other challenges is educating people within the industry in South Africa. While some people are aware of the needs of Muslim travellers, quite a few people within the hospitality industry aren’t,” Vawda explains.

Bahardeen echoes Vawda’s sentiments,

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which is why CrescentRating and Salam Standard Certification grades, as well as platforms such as MyRating – Muslim Friendly Rating and Tripfez contribute to the overall formal establishment of standards and norms for the Muslim travel market.

“South Africa, because of its Muslim population, has already got the key elements in major cities like Durban and Cape Town – the access to prayer facilities are readily available [and] ‘halal’ literacy is strong,” Bahardeen explains. “Of course, it doesn’t mean that just because you have a halal restaurant, you have a Muslim population

different travel behaviour, as Muslims living in Muslim-majority countries. Just looking up a hashtag on social media doesn’t mean that this is a real thing. If you want to get real data, it is a combination of both worlds.”

While they may have faith-based needs, there is nonetheless a growing curiosity to see the world beyond OIC and Muslim majority destinations for leisure, culture and experiences. How this curiosity is harnessed in the next few years ultimately decides whether the Muslim travel market will continue to bloom as an industry, or thrive only as a trend. 🌈