

Guest editorial

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Contemporary trends, issues and challenges in Southeast Asian tourism cities: introducing the special topic

The Co-Editors of IJTC are dedicating the Special Issue on “Contemporary trends, issues and challenges in Southeast Asian tourism cities” to the late Professor Philip L. Pearce of James Cook University (Australia). Before tragically passing away, Philip proposed this Special Issue together with Dr Hera Oktadiana. Philip was a strong and consistent supporter of our journal from its outset. He was an influential leader of the International Tourism Studies Association (ITSA), one of the greatest tourism scholars in an era spanning 40 years and a wonderful mentor to many early researchers as well as more established academics. Thank you, Philip, for your vision and encouragement.

According to [UNWTO \(2019\)](#), Asia and the Pacific was the fastest growing region in 2018. Tourism growth was particularly strong in most of Southeast Asia. The share of international tourist arrivals and tourism receipts in this subregion were the second largest in Asia and the Pacific ([UNWTO, 2019](#)). The development of Southeast Asian tourism undoubtedly brings benefits (e.g. economic growth, infrastructure improvements and employment opportunity), as well as challenges (e.g. socio-cultural impacts and environmental issues) to the region ([ASEAN, 2015](#); [Coca, 2019](#); [Southeast Asia, 2021](#)). Such conditions can be predominantly seen in the urban areas. The growing number of inbound travellers to Southeast Asian cities, particularly business travellers and students, help in boosting income, employing larger workforces and generating higher demand for goods and services ([Mastercard, 2021](#)). Nevertheless, the cities are also facing problems derived from an imbalance in tourism activities. The increasing number of tourists visiting ASEAN cities can cause pollution, degrade local landscapes, damage tourism assets (i.e. culture and heritage), and as a consequence, these negative effects reduce place sustainability and the quality of life of local residents ([The ASEAN Post, 2019](#)).

The current biggest challenge facing Southeast Asian tourism is the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, which has been severely hitting the tourism sector globally. Tourism contributed approximately 12% or \$380bn of the total GDP in Southeast Asia in the pre-pandemic era. In 2021, the GDP in this region dropped to 8.4% due to border closures and lockdowns ([Zainuddin, 2021](#)). Although there have been some signs of recovery in the tourism sector as vaccines are being rolled out worldwide, the evolution of the pandemic remains a challenge for the tourism industry ([PWC, 2021](#); [UNWTO, 2021](#)). Some Southeast Asia's tourism destinations in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam are starting to reopen to the fully vaccinated international travellers ([Goel and Pitrelli, 2021](#); [Zainuddin, 2021](#)). Despite the major concerns over the pandemic and its effects on tourism sector in the region, it is believed that Southeast Asia is now better prepared and equipped to deal with the crisis. Its economy, technology and services are more advanced, while governments have implemented initiatives to assist businesses ([Le, 2020](#)).

This Special Issue of the *International Journal of Tourism Cities* aims to provide insights into the advancement of Southeast Asia's tourism cities. It covers a range of topics related to contemporary tourism in ASEAN, represented by five out of ten ASEAN member countries that are renowned for their tourism resources. They are Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore,

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Thailand and Vietnam. The issue discusses four areas of tourism and hospitality research: destination identity, tourists and tourism markets, resident perspectives on tourism and hotel management. The articles presented in this issue cover studies undertaken before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Destination identity

One of the features of identity as a concept is its vibrancy. An identity should be created and retained – it represents the personality of a place. Place identity is associated with regional development (Gibson and Connell, 2005; Peng *et al.*, 2020), and is directly linked to the peculiarities of a destination (Gibson and Connell, 2005). Several elements contribute to the development of a place or destination identity. They include culture, environment, infrastructure, designscape, attractions, stakeholder interaction, local community and visitor experiences, destination structure and governance, place complexity, products, heritage, destination strategy and destination communication (Hanna *et al.*, 2021; Saraniemi and Kompola, 2019).

Some aspects of destination identity in this Special Issue include tourists' experiences, infrastructure, culture and environment. This section begins with the study of destination image in the capital city of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. Urban destinations such as Kuala Lumpur often have diverse tourism activities. Therefore, constructing a destination image to help prospective tourists in selecting a destination and to meet their expectations remain a challenge. Syed Muhammad Rafy Syed Jaafar, Hairul Ismail and Nurul Diyana Md Khairi, in their paper entitled "Tourist's real-time destination image of Kuala Lumpur", underline the issue of presenting an accurate destination image. The authors propose the use of the Volunteer Employed Photography approach to capture the real-time tourist images of the city. The study discovered that the real-time images of Kuala Lumpur, positive and negative, are based on visitor age, region and travel companions. Further research is suggested to investigate and compare the tourist perceptions of image before, during and post visit.

Another approach to build a destination image and identity is through an architectural design. In the paper titled "Modern architectural tourism in Singapore", Keith Kay Hin Tan and Camelia May Li Kusumo illustrate how the cutting-edge modern architecture can shape the image of Singapore. They argue that there are still limited studies on architectural design and city image and identity in Southeast Asia. Tan and Kusumo examined various models of Singapore's architecture and conducted interviews with professionals in the field. A unique aspect of this study is its focus on contemporary architectural design, which has the potential to become another tourist attraction in the city. Such design supports the lifestyle of the locals and offers experiences for the visitors (i.e. culinary, social and cultural amenities). Moreover, this architourism will help to lessen the crowds and overtourism in already popular sites. This study makes a positive contribution towards the socio-cultural sustainability of advanced Asian cities.

Culture as an element of destination identity establishment has been widely known. Thomas Bustomi and Bhakti Nur Avianto, who present the paper called "City branding of the 'music-design culinary' as urban tourism of Bandung, West Java", propose that music, design and culinary traditions can play important roles in building a good image of a city as a tourism destination. Bandung is one of the major cities in Indonesia and the capital city of West Java province. It is also known as Paris of Java. The authors explore how the identity of Bandung could be formed by combining the top cultural elements of the city: music–design–culinary. Zhaoyu Chen and Jinjing Yang's paper entitled "Different social representation of the same belief in urban tourism cities in Southeast Asia and China" follows the discussion of cultural aspects of destinations. Their study reveals that a destination identity can also be shaped by the beliefs or religious practices. Chen and Yang use Social Representative Theory to seek the roles of intangible cultural heritage realm (i.e. social practices, rituals and festive events) in the case of Mazu belief. Mazu belief and customs are listed in the UNESCO Representative

List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The authors compare different social representations of the same religious belief in four cities in China, Macao, Vietnam and Malaysia.

The above articles reflect [Peng et al.'s \(2020\)](#) suggestion that the meanings of place identity are on the external looks of the place (e.g. physical shape – building and design), people external looks (e.g. traditional practice) and the internal thoughts of the people and place about the place identity (e.g. attitude and feelings, and individual and collective perceptions).

Tourists and tourism markets

Various parties are interested in tourist behaviour, including tour and travel operators, hospitality businesses, destination managers, destination residents, media observers, government, tourism organisations, academics and researchers, and the tourists themselves ([Pearce, 2019](#)). In the article titled “Knowledge of tourist spatial behaviour to improve Melaka world heritage site management”, Nurul Diyana Md Khairi, Hairul Ismail and Syed Muhammad Rafy Syed Jaafar investigate tourist spatial behaviour. The data were collected from tourist diaries and GPS tracking system on smartphones when visiting Melaka, Malaysia. Their study demonstrates that group conformity, culture, length of stay and repeat visitation impact tourist spatial behaviour. The spatial and non-spatial data combined provide an opportunity for World Heritage sites to advance their visitor management plans.

The next paper describes tourist experiences. Memorable tourism experience can be associated with the positive or negative emotions and feelings ([Tung and Ritchie, 2011](#)). Tuan Phong Ly, Kim Quang Yi and Hilda Fok, in their paper called “Returning to a scamming destination: insights from Vung Tau, Vietnam”, explore the behaviour of domestic tourists after being scammed in Vung Tau. Interestingly, their study shows that tourists are still keen to return to the destination despite their negative experiences of being deceived. Such behaviour is due to the perceived uniqueness of the destination (i.e. attractions, geographical proximity and social interaction) and the ability to overcome scammers after having repeated visits, which enrich travel experience and familiarity with the place. Besides personal travel history, recommendations and information from family, friends and online reviews help in identifying scams.

The subsequent papers in this Special Issue address specific tourism markets. These papers reflect on the trend to promote Southeast Asia tourism to the markets other than the traditional Western tourists, namely the Chinese and the Muslim tourists. The number of Chinese tourists visiting Southeast Asia has been skyrocketing. The ASEAN member states have been experiencing a huge wave of arrivals from this market segment and they have economically benefitted from the Chinese tourists ([Dorsi, 2021](#); [Mordor Intelligence, 2021](#)). Several countries in Southeast Asia are also known as the Muslim-friendly and Halal tourism destinations, particularly Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, which are on the top list ([Fardah, 2019](#); [Puvaneswary, 2021](#)).

Two studies concerning tourism markets focus on Indonesia. One study is defined by nationality, and the other is built upon religious affiliation. In the paper titled “The influence of personal values on buying and purchasing intentions of Chinese tourists visiting Bali”, Permana Budi, Made Antara, Anak Agung Putu Wiranatha and I Nyoman Sudiarta examine Chinese tourists visiting Bali. Their study concludes that the personal value of a product affects buying intentions, while demographic variables influence this relationship. Monoarfa and colleagues in their article called “The influence of Islamic attributes on tourist satisfaction with pull motivation as an intervening variable” consider that Muslim tourists are an important market for Southeast Asia tourism. Their study suggests that Muslim tourists do not only consider general aspects of the pull motivation such as cleanliness but also specific Islamic attributes such as worship facilities and application of the Halal concept.

Resident perspectives on tourism

Increasing attention has been given to stakeholder perspectives, especially to the local residents of a destination (Peng *et al.*, 2020). It is recognised that residents and communities in tourism destinations play imperative roles. Articles within this theme published in this Special Issue explore different aspects of residents, including their perceptions, wellbeing and involvement in tourism in four ASEAN destinations: Sapa – Vietnam; Bandung and Semarang – Indonesia; Chiang Mai – Thailand; and Penang – Malaysia.

In the article titled “Segmenting local residents by perceptions of tourism impacts in Sapa, Vietnam: a cluster analysis”, Nguyen Van Huy evaluates local resident perspectives on tourism development with a focus on costs versus benefits. The author used cluster analysis to find three dominant groups of resident perceptions on tourism development in Sapa. The first group, named “supporters”, included residents who mainly benefit economically from tourism. The second group, named “pessimistic”, are those who perceive that tourism creates mainly problems and harm (e.g. environmental deterioration and increases cost of living). The third group, named “neutral”, represent respondents who were neither positive nor negative as regards their attitudes towards tourism. The study provides a good set of policy recommendations for tourism development, especially to the destinations that have residents of diverse cultures and different levels of tourism support and acceptance.

The pros and the cons of tourism activities are also voiced by Poeti Nazura Gulfira Akbar in her article “Can grassroots festivals serve as catalysts to connect and empower youth in urban informal settlements? A case study of art festivals in Indonesian kampungs”. Akbar explores community-based art festivals, one of the popular tourism events that are prevalent in the context of ASEAN destinations. The study showcases the benefits that a grassroots community-art festival can bring beyond a marketing or a branding tool. The study demonstrates that festivals can promote youth empowerment by increasing youths’ skills and capabilities, along with the networking ability. However, such events can also create social division and resistance from the local community because of the inequality of powers and profit contributions amongst the community.

The next two papers discuss the residents’ well-being. Edward Koh, Pipatpong Fakfare and Arunotai Pongwat assess various impacts of tourism development on the residents’ sense of wellbeing in the popular tourist destination of Chiang Mai, Thailand. Their article titled “The limits of Thai hospitality – perceived impact of tourism development on residents’ wellbeing in Chiang Mai” reveals that the community wellbeing was prioritised by the residents over other types of wellbeing, with material wellbeing being the least important. Resident employment in or affiliation with the tourism industry did not affect their perceived impact of tourism development on overall sense of wellbeing. The findings advocate the importance of community wellbeing as an outcome of tourism development.

The topic of resident wellbeing is also investigated in Penang Island, one of the famous tourist destinations in Malaysia, during the time of pandemic. Ahmad Salman, Urwashi Kamekar, Mastura Jaafar and Diana Mohamad in their article “Empirical analysis of COVID-19 induced socio cognitive factors and its impact on residents of Penang Island” applied the cognitive appraisal theory to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on the psychological wellbeing of the Penang’s residents. Owing to the pandemic, the residents of Penang are likely to have a high level of pandemic-induced anxiety. However, they also tend to have a good level of awareness and proper observation of preventive measures. The study recommends local authorities to promote mental health-care initiatives and to enhance the sense of wellbeing of the residents who are affected by COVID-19.

The latter two studies on resident wellbeing are deemed imperative, especially for the policymakers and destination managers. While tourism development is an important mechanism to stimulate the economic growth and infrastructures development, such improvement should not jeopardise the wellbeing and quality of life of the local residents.

Residents with a good sense of wellbeing will show more positive acceptance towards tourism development in their area.

Hotel management

The current pandemic is changing the way people travel and the type of accommodations they book. Undoubtedly, the roles of leaders and staff, as well as strategic initiatives and management practices, are critical to sustain business. In this section, three topics are discussed: the notions of employee loyalty during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Halal hotel (an important hotel segment in the ASEAN market) and environmental sustainability.

Providing satisfactory service to customers is one of the main aims of a hotel operation. To achieve that goal, hotels need to attract and retain good quality staff. The study by I Nengah Aristana, I Wayan Edi Arsawan and Ni Wayan Rustiarini titled "Employee loyalty during slowdown of COVID-19: do satisfaction and trust matter?" addresses the importance of leader support on employee loyalty, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Indonesia as a study context, the authors investigate the role of leader support on employee loyalty, by using trust and satisfaction as mediating variables. Employee trust and satisfaction are important mediators for employee loyalty. This research is timely and benefits the hotel industry during the pandemic recovery, when many hotels start to seek experienced staff as well as to retain them.

An article written by Attie Rachmiatie Attie, Fitri Rahmafritria, Karim Suryadi and Ajeng Ramadhitaby Larasati entitled "Classification of Halal hotels based on industrial perceived value: a study of Indonesia and Thailand" sheds light on another important aspect of the ASEAN hotel industry, namely Halal hotels. Based on the interviews with the general managers of Halal business hotels in Indonesia and Thailand concerning perceived Islamic values, the authors classify the hotels into three categories. These three groups of hotels pose different degrees of presenting the Islamic values in the hotel setting. The first category are hotels that use the universal Halal concept into practice, but not for their branding. The second group are hotels that demonstrate and implement strong Halal values and Islamic principles in their operations and management. The third group are hotels that consider the Halal concept as a product branding tool to boost market expansion and profit. The study sheds light on the nature of Halal hotels in the two countries and the significant disparity amongst these businesses.

The final study in this Special Issue titled "Less is more: the role of frugality in the Malaysian hotel industry" by Nur Zulaikha Mohamed Sadom, Farzana Quoquab, Jihad Mohammad and Nazimah Hussin addresses the environmental impact in the hotel businesses. The authors examine the effect of green marketing strategies on frugality, by using customer's green attitude as a mediator. Underpinned by Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory, the study demonstrates the positive effect amongst all three constructs. It also provides implications on the environmental, as well as financial, benefits to hoteliers who are targeting frugal and environmentally conscious customers. The green marketing strategies can be well applied to these target groups and can provide a social benefit in creating a "less consumptive" community.

The articles in this Special Issue present an interesting mix of themes, methods, challenges and solutions for tourism destinations, tourism development and current issues that concern the tourism and hotel industries in the ASEAN countries. The studies described here can be an eye-opener to various stakeholders concerning the state of tourism in Southeast Asia.

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