

Muslim-friendly tourism development in Southeast Asia's tropical highlands: the Cameron Highlands case

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to deepen the understanding of Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT) development, using Cameron Highlands, a popular Malaysian destination, as a case study. It examines the attributes of MFT in the tropical highlands and analyses the dimensions of community-based and responsible tourism (RT) demonstrated in the location.

Design/methodology/approach – The theoretical framework is based on the principles of Muslim-friendly, community-based and RT. Data were collected through interviews with 20 respondents, including service providers, government and tourism institution representatives, residents and Muslim travelers in Cameron Highlands.

Findings – The study reveals that tourism offerings in Cameron Highlands include Muslim-friendly and community-based tourism, unique to highland vacations. However, RT elements are lacking in this destination. This study generates a new MFT development model illustrating the interplay of key enablers, attributes, inhibitors and outcomes. Comprehensive sustainable policies and enhanced public education are needed to promote responsible practices by stakeholders.

Originality/value – This study is one of the few to explore tourism in highlands destinations, through three key theoretical concepts of tourism, providing a holistic perspective of tourism practices and laying the foundation for further research and policy on sustainable tourism.

Keywords Cameron highlands, Muslim-friendly tourism, Highlands' tourism, Community-based tourism, Responsible tourism, Sustainable tourism, Southeast Asia

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Background

Tourism generally benefits both tourists and providers and contributes to the development of destinations, particularly in terms of economic, social and environment. In recent years, halal or Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT) has emerged as a fast-growing segment and gained worldwide traction driven by increasing Muslims' purchasing power, religious awareness and travel interest (Adham *et al.*, 2025a). The global MFT market, commonly referred to as the halal tourism market, is valued at approximately USD 320.3 billion in 2026 and is projected to

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reach USD 579.0 billion by 2036 ([Future Market Insight, 2026](#)). The number of Muslim travelers is expected to reach 230 million by 2028 ([Sarkar, 2024](#)). These figures highlight the importance of understanding MFT in different destination contexts, such as tropical highlands.

Globally, Malaysia has solidified its position as the world leader in MFT through its tourism brand, *Malaysia Truly Asia*. The recognition as the top destination in the Global Muslim Travel Index 2025 signifies Malaysia's prominence in catering to Muslim visitors' preferences ([CrescentRatings, 2025](#)). The tourism sector is pivotal to Malaysia's economy, accounting for 10.5% of GDP (RM198.7 billion or USD45.33 billion) in 2024, to the country's GDP in 2024 and employing 3.5 million people in 2025 ([World Travel & Tourism Council, 2024](#); [Statista Research Department, 2025](#)).

Academically, a knowledge gap exists because previous studies on MFT primarily focused on urban areas ([Marlinda, Al-Fadhat, Cipto, & Jubba, 2023](#)) and islands ([Adham et al., 2025b](#)), making the MFT concept implemented in such highlands under-researched. Theoretically, few research studies on MFT integrate Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and responsible tourism (RT). Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by addressing the following questions:

- (1) What are the attributes of MFT in the tropical highlands?
- (2) What are the dimensions of CBT and RT demonstrated in these destinations?

The significance of this study stands in its focus on the relatively underexplored segment of MFT in tropical highlands, a tourism context that presents considerable potential for sustainable development. This aligns with global discourse on sustainable tourism and bolsters national efforts to strengthen Malaysia's position as a leader in MFT.

Theoretically, this study broadens the understanding of MFT by integrating CBT and RT perspectives in the unique context of tropical highlands. Practically, it provides strategic guidance to local authorities, tourism operators and local communities to develop inclusive, sustainable and competitive MFT in the global market.

Cameron highlands as the context of study

Cameron Highlands (Cameron), located in Pahang, Malaysia, is the largest hill station in Southeast Asia ([Tourism Pahang, 2024](#)) and serve as the context of this study. Developed in the early 20th century by British administration as a cool-climate holiday destination, it is now known for its tea plantations, strawberry farms, vegetable and flower gardens, and eco-tourism attractions. Its temperate climate attracts tourists seeking relief from the tropical heat.

This study focuses on tourism across Cameron, including Kampung Taman Sedia, a Malay Muslim village near Tanah Rata town. Although Cameron is a Muslim-minority area, residents of Taman Sedia are Muslims and actively engaged in tourism activities ([Tourism Pahang, 2024](#)). Established in the early 1970s, Taman Sedia was the first Malay settlement in Cameron. By mid-2010, it was promoted as a competitive agro-tourism product ([Shuib, 2018](#)). By then, the residents were engaged in agriculture (farming and local products), homestays (tourist accommodation) and eateries with some are located within strawberry farms. Since 2015, the area has expanded into halal-certified strawberry product manufacturing, and by 2023, it has developed into an integrated tourism destination. In the greater Cameron area, many non-Muslim-operated eateries have also obtained halal certification, reflecting the growing demand for Muslim-friendly offerings.

Literature review

Muslim-friendly tourism

MFT refers to travel experiences designed to accommodate the needs of Muslim travelers through the provision of services and amenities aligned with Islamic principles and Shariah laws ([Rodrigo & Turnbull, 2019](#)). The core attributes of MFT include halal food and beverages, Muslim-friendly accommodation, prayer facilities and Shariah-compliant

activities (El-Gohary, 2016). These attributes have been further expanded to include Muslim-friendly logistics, shopping and impulse purchasing (Adham *et al.*, 2025b). The Maldives study further shows that MFT promotes mutual respect and benefits between tourists and hosts, enabling Muslim travelers to fulfil religious obligations while fostering cultural understanding (Adham *et al.*, 2025b).

Despite its growing prominence, MFT remains a subject of academic debate. Scholars argue that the term “Muslim-friendly” emerged as a pragmatic alternative to “Islamic” or “halal” tourism, as strict Shariah compliance would require the complete absence of alcohol, gambling and non-compliant entertainment, conditions that are difficult to achieve in contemporary tourism settings (El-Gohary, 2016). Consequently, MFT is often viewed as a more flexible and realistic construct that accommodates Muslim travelers’ needs without necessarily guaranteeing total religious conformity (El-Gohary, 2016). The operationalization of MFT also differs across stakeholders and destination contexts. Governments and tourism authorities frequently position MFT as a strategic branding and economic development tool to attract the growing Muslim travel market, whereas tourism practitioners often perceive Muslim-friendly services as part of ethical hospitality and customer-oriented service (Slamet *et al.*, 2022).

Recent literature has also shifted from focusing solely on functional attributes toward the broader Muslim-Friendly Tourism Experience, where tourists’ experiences are shaped not only by functional values, but also by emotional, social and epistemic values rooted in Islamic faith (Battour, Bhardwaj, Sujood, & Ashraf Fauzi, 2026). Furthermore, MFT outcomes are highly context dependent. In Muslim-minority destinations, Muslim travelers often encounter challenges in accessing halal services and maintaining religious compliance (Mustaqim, Hana, & Alimin, 2025). Conversely, in Muslim countries such as the Maldives, MFT is basically a “dignified tourism,” fostering reciprocal respect, value co-creation and cultural harmony between tourists and host communities (Adham *et al.*, 2025b).

MFT in tropical highlands

Although MFT has received widespread attention in urban (Marlinda *et al.*, 2023) and islands contexts (Adham *et al.*, 2025a), its application in tropical highlands remains underexplored. Highlands destinations offer distinctive tourism value through natural scenery and eco-agro activities, and climate-driven attractiveness, which significantly influence visitor satisfaction (Aziz & Zainol, 2009). However, rapid tourism growth in such areas has increasingly raised concerns regarding overtourism, environmental degradation and ecosystem fragility (Tiwari & Rani, 2024; Tomczyk & Ewertowski, 2023). Studies highlight that unregulated tourism development in mountainous regions contributes to land degradation, biodiversity loss and resource pressure, necessitating more sustainable and context-specific governance approaches (Al-Romeedy, 2025; Li *et al.*, 2024).

While existing literature emphasizes sustainable tourism, community involvement and adaptive governance in fragile ecosystem, these discussions largely evolve independently of religious-based tourism frameworks. As such, limited attention has been given to how MFT principles can be integrated into sustainability-oriented highland tourism development. In Malaysia, initiatives such as the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) standard provide structured guidance for tourism providers (ITC, 2025). However, empirical evidence on how such frameworks operate within environmentally sensitive highland contexts remains scarce. This gap highlights the need to examine MFT through a sustainability lens that balances religious requirements, environmental protection and community well-being.

Community-based tourism and responsible tourism

In response to sustainability challenges in fragile highland ecosystems, CBT and RT have emerged as critical approaches for balancing tourism development with environmental and

social sustainability. CBT refers to tourism managed by local communities to enhance their socio-economic development through active participation, local ownership and equitable benefit-sharing (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Mtapuri, Camilleri, & Dłużewska, 2022). This tourism concept aligns with the principles of MFT, which emphasize community well-being, environmental sustainability and ethical business practices. Prior studies highlight that community participation and inclusive communication are critical in strengthening social cohesion, local ownership and long-term sustainability in CBT initiatives (Nathanael, Hapsari, Kinseng, & Istiyanto, 2025). However, CBT implementation is often constrained by structural challenges such as power asymmetries, unequal benefit distribution and limited decision-making authority among local communities, which may undermine genuine empowerment (de Lange & Bricker, 2024; Kamble *et al.*, 2026). RT, in contrast, represents a broader ethical framework that promotes socially, culturally and environmentally responsible behavior across tourism stakeholders (Mohamadi, Abbasi, Ranaei Kordshouli, & Askarifar, 2022; Mishra, Jain, & Arora, 2024). It emphasizes environmental protection, cultural and heritage respect, community benefits and sustainable resource management. Importantly, RT extends responsibility beyond tourists to include service providers, local communities and government agencies as the policymakers in mitigating tourism's negative impacts and enhancing community well-being (Mathew & M, 2022; Chan & Fiffy, 2021).

While CBT emphasizes local participation and empowerment, RT provides a broader ethical and governance foundation for sustainable tourism. As such, CBT can be viewed as the practical implementation of RT principles at the community level (Giampiccoli, Mtapuri, & Dłużewska, 2020; Sarabia-Molina, Soares, & Lois-González, 2022). Despite this complementary, existing studies often examine CBT and RT in isolation, resulting in limited theoretical integration (Tuyen, Phan, Hieu, & Le Anh, 2025). In addition, issues related to governance complexity, stakeholder coordination and equitable participation remain underexplored, particularly in niche contexts such as MFT in highlands.

The three perspectives interact to support sustainable destination development, i.e. MFT focuses on Muslim travelers' needs, CBT emphasizes local empowerment and economic participation, and RT ensures that tourism development is conducted responsibly by and for all stakeholders. Specifically, RT serves as the overarching lens through which destination sustainability and stakeholder participation are understood. The RT perspective emphasizes the role of multiple stakeholders in balancing economic, social, cultural and environmental objectives, thereby incorporating key elements associated with stakeholder theory and sustainable destination development. According to stakeholder theory, long-term sustainability can be achieved when the interests and expectations of relevant stakeholder groups are appropriately balanced (Freeman & McVea, 2001). In the tourism context, sustainable destination development requires collaboration among stakeholders to generate economic benefits while protecting social, cultural and environmental resources (Byrd, 2007). This perspective aligns closely with RT and CBT, both of which emphasize stakeholder participation, shared responsibility and sustainable outcomes for local communities.

Overall, the literature indicates that, although MFT has grown rapidly globally and in Malaysia, the potential of this segment in the tropical highlands has yet to be optimally exploited. This study uses CBT and RT principles to build a conceptual framework that advances MFT knowledge while providing practical guidance for sustainable destination development.

Conceptual framework

The framework of the study is based on the three main tourism concepts of MFT (Said, Adham, Muhamad, & Sulaiman, 2022), CBT (Mtapuri *et al.*, 2021) and RT (Goodwin, 2016). The study extends on the existing literature by integrating the three concepts of MFT, CBT and RT as the foundation for conceptualizing MFT in highlands, providing a holistic understanding. The conceptualization builds upon the strengths of the concepts of MFT, CBT and RT, which

emphasize mutual benefits for all stakeholders. This framework was utilized to guide the exploration of MFT in highlands (Figure 1).

In this conceptual framework (see Figure 1), MFT in the highlands is explained through the integration of the three concepts of MFT, CBT and RT. These three concepts collectively demonstrate the normative view of MFT in the highlands, suggesting that MFT should not only possess Muslim-friendly attributes, but must also ensure that all tourism offerings are managed responsibly. As illustrated in Figure 1, the attributes of MFT, CBT and RT constitute the key foundations underpinning the concept of MFT in the highlands. MFT concept explains that the MFT attributes comprise eight dimensions. Meanwhile, CBT highlights the importance of local participation and engagement in MFT highland tourism through direct business ownership and managerial involvement within the tourism ecosystem. RT further emphasizes that MFT in the highlands should be managed responsibly by all stakeholders, including agencies, businesses and travelers. The key dimensions requiring responsible management include the environment, culture and heritage, and the overall wellbeing of the local community.

Research methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to address the research questions as it could provide researchers with in-depth insights into respondents' experiences and perspectives. Based on Merriam and Tisdell (2016)'s work, the research design involved developing a conceptual framework, developing interview questions and selecting interview respondents via purposive sampling, i.e., selecting respondents who could provide the most accurate information to fulfil the study's purpose.

Data collection

Four groups of respondents were interviewed, namely (1) entrepreneurs or business owners, managers and business operators, (2) executives/managers of local and state government authorities, economic development agencies, entrepreneur development support organizations and financial institutions, (3) residents and (4) Muslim travelers to Cameron. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling based on their experience and involvement in tourism activities and whose information-rich insights aligned with the study's objectives. Interview protocols were tailored to each group to capture context-specific perspectives.

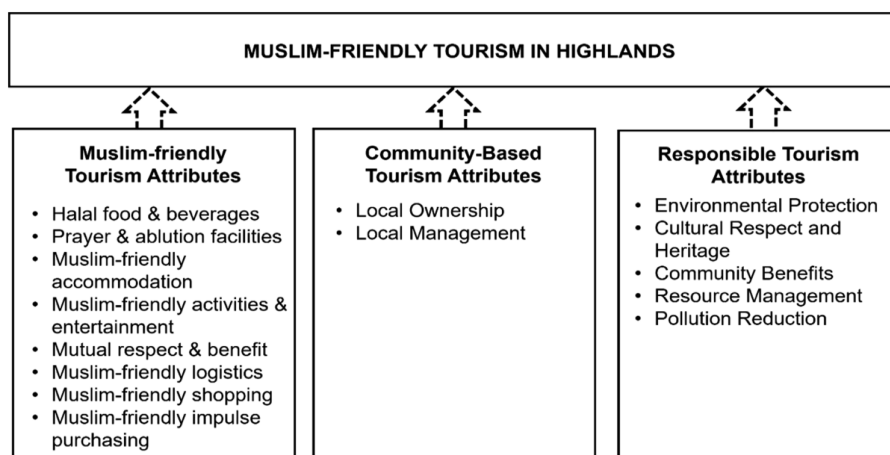


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of MFT in highlands. Source: Created by the authors

Twenty interviews were conducted in 2023, with each interview lasting between one and two hours to enable in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. This sample size is considered sufficient for qualitative inquiry and consistent with recommendations on sample adequacy (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018). Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, where no new insights emerged from subsequent interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All interviews were conducted with the interviewees' consent, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim immediately afterwards. The resulting transcripts constituted the primary dataset for analysis. Throughout the study, confidentiality and anonymity of respondents were strictly maintained.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and the study's conceptual framework (see Figure 1), employing an abductive approach that integrates both theory-driven and data-driven insights. Themes identified from each transcript were systematically cross compared with those emerging from subsequent interviews using constant comparison approach to refine categories and ensure analytical consistency across dataset.

Initially, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, followed by a manual coding process to identify recurring concepts, patterns and meaningful units with the data. The researchers serve as the primary instrument of analysis and was involved directly in conducting manual coding allowing close and iterative engagement with the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The coding process was guided by the research questions, with emerging themes related to MFT attributes addressing Research Question 1, and themes related to CBT and RT addressing Research Question 2. First, open coding was conducted, and this was followed by axial coding, whereby codes were grouped into broader categories and subsequently developed into themes. The identified themes were iteratively refined through comparisons, first amongst respondents within the same category and subsequently across different groups of respondents, to ensure coherence and relevance. Overall, the interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, refine and categorize emerging themes and sub-themes. Comparison across interviews was undertaken to enhance the consistency and robustness of the findings.

In addition, efforts were undertaken to ensure the trustworthiness of the research while minimizing researcher bias. First, credibility was enhanced through triangulating data across the groups of respondents and the use of verbatim excerpts as evidence. Second, dependability and confirmability were supported through systematic coding procedures and continuous comparison of interpretations. Collectively, these procedures served to minimize researcher bias by ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than the researchers' preconceptions. Researcher bias was also minimized through ongoing discussions among the research team, whereby emerging interpretations and themes were critically reviewed and compared against the interview data. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis.

Analysis and findings

The study identified 17 emergent themes: eight confirmed MFT attributes, four acted as enablers of MFT offerings, and three themes highlighted future concerns for Cameron as a sustainable MFT and RT destination.

Attractions and MFT activities in Cameron Highlands

Traditionally, tourists visited Cameron for its cool weather and scenery, enjoying agricultural activities like vegetable and strawberry farming, British-style accommodations and buying products from local markets. Tourism has evolved from natural to diverse man-made attractions. The latest attractions include a sheep sanctuary, flower gardens and campsites.

Tourists can choose leisure or adventure activities, from mountain hiking to family-friendly strawberry picking that showcases local agriculture. At the tea plantation, visitors enjoy food and tea at the café, stroll through greenery, shop for local products and tour the tea factory.

For food products, some purchases are planned, while others are impulsive. Impulse purchases are made when tourists come across items they want to bring back as souvenirs, like pot plants and dried flowers.

While many local attractions are accessible independently, some remote locations need specialized transport. Along the way, tourists can see Orang Asli (indigenous people) villages selling forest products like rattan-made items, ornamental plants, herbs and honey, which are signature Cameron souvenirs not found in the lowlands.

Accessibility, safety and MFT logistics

Cameron is accessible by personal or public land transport and helicopters, but its winding roads and frequent rainy-season landslides make travel challenging. Drivers must remain attentive to avoid fatal incidents, especially during heavy weekends and holiday traffic, which often causes significant delays. One traveler shared her experience:

Before my trip, I made sure that my car was in good condition because the journey to Cameron took about five hours from Kuala Lumpur. So, safety first. I usually go there during weekdays as it is less crowded. Otherwise, with the crowd and heavy traffic, I can't really enjoy the peacefulness of Cameron. When it rains, I become worried as the possibility of encountering a landslide or fallen tree is high. I have experienced one tree falling across the road. In situations like this, the Public Works Department (JKR) works closely with Orang Asli community to help clean the road [Traveler 1]

Given that highlands' tourism occurs in elevated geographical areas, the movement of tourists, residents and businesses to and from Cameron is closely linked with safety concerns. All travelers understand the danger of traveling to remote locations, with concerns over accessibility to medical treatment if needed. The local authorities are generally responsible for road maintenance.

In addition, the weather significantly influences tourists' movement and tourism activities in highland areas. Even during the dry season, accessing Cameron can be difficult because of the challenging road conditions (e.g. sharp turns, landslides and truckers' dangerous driving).

Many mosques, often near petrol stations along the road to Cameron, make prayers convenient for Muslim travelers, and all travelers interviewed drove their own vehicles, further easing this. These features, which make it easier for Muslim travelers to fulfil their religious obligations, reflect Muslim-friendly logistics in Cameron. These prayer facilities in Cameron enhance its attractiveness as a preferred destination for many Muslim travelers.

Halal foods and products create an MFT environment

One aspect of MFT is accessibility to halal food. Local service/product providers and residents generally obtain supplies from the lowlands. This means a halal environment must be established in the Cameron district to meet the needs of Muslim residents and tourists. This is critical since Cameron is highly susceptible to natural disasters like landslides.

All the travelers interviewed were happy with the availability of halal food options in Cameron. One traveler described the situation as follows:

What is being done here in terms of halal foods in Cameron is very good. The whole area of Taman Sedia is operated by Muslims. Outside of that village, when the restaurants or cafés were run by non-Muslims, many have halal certification. This is impressive given that the actual population of Cameron is Muslim-minority. Actually, we stopped at the KEA farm and saw that many local products have halal logo. [Traveler 4]

These travelers agreed that Cameron was considered a Muslim-friendly destination, and they were comfortable with dining and buying local products. One respondent was particularly happy with Taman Sedia:

We stayed in a homestay near Taman Sedia for five days. So, while we were there, the first thing we went for breakfast. There were many choices of food there. All the food operators are the village people, and all are Muslims. Basically, there was everything at Taman Sedia. There are also retail shops, prayer room, and kiosks that sell Cameron halal food products. [Traveler 3]

Taman Sedia is a hub for Cameron's specialty products. All business owners and restaurant, café, and kiosk employees are Muslims. One entrepreneur selling strawberry products explained his commitment to getting all his products halal-certified.

The halal market worth is in the trillions. So that is why I want to make all my products halal-certified. [First-generation entrepreneur 1]

The effort to ensure halal certification is commendable as, historically, the community has been predominantly non-Muslim. In the early days, local Muslims faced great difficulties in obtaining halal supplies. One elderly traveler reminisced about the past:

I visited Cameron in the 1980s. I remembered that I took many foods up to Cameron, because many of the halal food supplies were not available there. For their daily needs, my relative who stayed at Taman Sedia had to go to the main market, which was mainly run by non-Muslims. This changed over time. Now, there are so many halal things at Taman Sedia, and halal supplies are much easier to get in Cameron. [Traveler 2]

By 2023, halal products and MFT development safeguarded the halal access for Muslim residents and tourists in Cameron. One senior citizen recounted earlier time:

In the early times, many of the areas here in Cameron were basically jungle. So almost weekly, we went down to Gua Musang for the night markets to get some of our supplies. [Senior Resident 1]

MFT accommodation

Cameron offers a wide range of accommodation. While the greater Cameron has luxury resorts, hotels and apartments, the typical accommodation in Taman Sedia consists of homestays. These homestays, operated by Muslim villagers, become a preferred choice among Muslim tourists due to their family-friendly environment. Families with young children enjoyed the scenery and cool weather, and they valued their tourism experience, such as picking strawberries in gardens. Furthermore, Taman Sedia's eateries are within walking distance of the accommodation. "Glamping," camping equipped with complete amenities, is the newest type of tourist accommodation in Cameron, including in Taman Sedia.

The delivery of the above MFT services is enabled by four main facilitators, namely the spirit of community in Cameron, strong business and social networks of the residents, highly responsible residents and service providers, and the provision of comprehensive agency support for tourism ecosystem development in Cameron.

Spirit of community in Cameron

One senior resident recounted the development of Cameron and the hardships of living there, which required a close-knit community:

In the early times, only selected people could live in Cameron, as this place is remote. There was nothing here except the jungle. There was no village at that time. Only the strong ones could establish a living here. As we are disconnected from outside, we cannot survive on our own. There is a strong dependency on the community here. Without community, it is difficult for us to survive. [Senior Resident 1]

The need to survive in the hostile environment explains why Taman Sedia becomes the hub connecting Muslims in Cameron. Locals became close relatives. Moreover, some Taman Sedia villagers and the wider Muslim community have blood or by-marriage relationships, and some of the second-generation have returned to live and raise their families here. Such young families contribute to enhancing the “family environment” in Cameron. Thus, residents recognized the benefits of giving back to the community, having seen the advantages of long-term mutual assistance. One pioneering entrepreneur described his commitment to developing the community:

I was the first to plant strawberries in this village. After I successfully developed my farms, I began to help other locals to plant strawberries. It is good to get more locals involved in this farming as I can buy from them if I am in short supply. My business also benefited. [First-generation entrepreneur 1]

Business and social networks

Alongside a close village network, many first-generation locals grew up or worked locally before returning as permanent residents with outside connections to start businesses. Those who developed their careers in Cameron already have extensive work-related connections. The networks of the second generation revolve around family members and the wider community, assisting them when they establish businesses in Cameron.

Locals’ responsibility for future generations

There is a sense of responsibility among the locals. This includes the location’s cleanliness and hygiene, and the overall development of the community. This was evident amongst successful seniors, who were willing to provide both leadership to the business community and business opportunities for the younger generations. One second-generation entrepreneur described his experience:

When I finished schooling, I did not know what to do. Then my uncle, who was the founder of a café and strawberry business, asked me to work for him. He took the time to train me from scratch. Later, I helped my grandma in her café. Over time, my grandma began to trust me with the business. Then I got married and, together with my wife, we worked hard for this business. Now we have so many loyal customers of our nasi lemak, and we got kind of popular with group travelers. [Second-generation entrepreneur 1]

Another first-generation entrepreneur explained the continuous efforts to encourage young people to be involved in business:

I moved to Cameron and worked here as a research scientist right after I graduated from university. Once I retired, I began my business and now I have a strawberry farm and a café here in Taman Sedia. Going forward, a few of my friends in my generation got together to plan for the future of our children. We mentor our youngsters so they would have a head start in business. Now it is time for our younger generation to be involved. [First-generation entrepreneur 2]

RT providers

The travelers interviewed expressed a positive perception regarding the safety and cleanliness in Cameron. They appreciated the locals’ hospitable nature and reciprocated with mutual respect. Tourism growth has improved local jobs, despite traffic congestion; tourists wish to return. This indicates strong sustainability potential for businesses here. Regarding mutual respect and local economic benefits to the community, a form of RT seems to exist (Soleymani, Sojasi Qeidari, Shayan, Seyfi, & Tan, 2025). Particularly, the city council, residents and service providers felt that it is their duty to ensure that Cameron remains beautiful and clean.

Supportive ecosystem for tourism development

Cameron's tourism development is supported by government agencies, local authorities and entrepreneur development agencies (e.g., MARA and National Entrepreneur Group Economic Fund), agriculture-based agencies (e.g. the Farmer's Organization Board, LPP) and agricultural research and commercialization agencies like MARDI, at local and state levels. The tourism industry has benefited from the efficient district logistics department, which works 24 hours a day to address problems like landslides, potholes or road accidents.

MARA, a leading entrepreneur development support agency in Malaysia, provides an enabling tourism development ecosystem. It has launched the Resort Entrepreneur Development Program to develop entrepreneurs involved in resort and tourism businesses. Regarding halal certification, there is active involvement of certification authorities, which include the Pahang state religious council and JAKIM. Entrepreneurs seeking MARA's aid must comply with Malaysian environmental laws, as mentioned by an officer interviewed:

All the requirements must be met, and all the documents must be in good order for entrepreneurs to secure MARA approval for facility applications. Moreover, entrepreneurs receiving MARA facilities are regularly monitored to ensure best practice regarding laws and regulations [Senior Officer of Government Agency 1].

These activities demonstrate MARA's efforts to incorporate elements of RT. Certain tourism development efforts are also undertaken by the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC), and the ITC program implementation in Cameron is supervised by the State of Pahang ITC.

The LPP, under the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, assists farmers by providing farm supplies, technology, marketing, and training. Generally, the district LPP ensures the smooth running of farms and the continuity of agricultural-based production. The local authority, the Cameron District and Land Office, provides management services, land management, district development and legislative support.

These collaborations among government agencies support the development of a thriving business community in Cameron. By addressing diverse developmental needs, they create a comprehensive support ecosystem that positions Cameron as the preferred tourism destination. The availability of enablers and MFT's attributes has fostered a thriving business community and a safe environment in Cameron.

From village to thriving business MFT hub

Cameron has become an established must-visit destination for those seeking to experience highlands' tourism. After over 50 years of evolution, Taman Sedia and the greater Cameron were bustling with tourism activities. One retiree explained:

There were 50 lots here in Taman Sedia. In the early 1970s, I registered for one lot and got it. Later, like 20 years ago, the village introduced homestays, so I made an extension to the house to rent it out to travelers. Then, 10 years ago, my son built this extension to run his steamboat restaurant. Steamboat is popular here, as the temperature drops at night, hence people need hot meals. [Senior Resident 1]

Since the mid-2000s, tourism in Cameron has peaked. Despite the severe effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry began to revive in 2022. By 2023, Cameron's tourism had almost returned to pre-pandemic levels. One entrepreneur recounted the post-pandemic revival:

My husband and I took over this business in 2016 from his grandmother. We used a branding strategy, and this branding went viral. Then we see people lined up for our nasi lemak. Since then, we pushed this branding further, making our own scones and strawberry by-products. Then, the pandemic hit us in 2020. So, we began to sell online and deliver our scones and jams to areas of Kuala Lumpur. Then, our sales were booming. Right after the pandemic, we opened our shop and started going for halal certification. For this, we connect with MARA to prepare our factory to meet the halal certification requirement. We have recovered from the pandemic and grow further. [Wife of second-generation entrepreneur 1]

A Taman Sedia business owner, who handed his business to his daughter in 2022, shared his entrepreneurship journey and his family's involvement in businesses:

In late 1990s, we started offering a few rooms for tourists. A few years ago, we opened a small café, selling snacks, and ice creams, all mainly made from strawberries picked from my own farms. Now, next to this café, my son sells his bundle goods, and my daughter runs both the homestay and the café. My youngest daughter runs a small retail shop nearby. [First-generation entrepreneur 3]

At least four business owners were in the process of handing their businesses to their children. These businesses also engage the indigenous local people, as explained by one café owner:

Waitress and kitchen operations at my cafe are Muslim aborigines from villages nearby. For these Orang Asli, cleanliness is embedded in their culture. They are also dependable and committed to their work. We provide these workers with accommodation to make it convenient for them to come to work and work uniform, so they appear professional. [First-generation entrepreneur 4]

These points show that tourism in Taman Sedia has positively impacted nearby Orang Asli communities. Travelers viewed Taman Sedia as a one-stop tourist hub, offering homestays, eateries, cafes and a mosque, all within walking distance. Most sought-after souvenirs include halal-certified products, fresh strawberries and freshly baked scones.

Overall safe environment of Cameron

Cameron's tourist areas are generally safe and clean. Those who were interviewed stated that Cameron is safe for female workers, and the city council keeps the city clean. The locals associated this with the close-knit community in which "everybody knows everybody." One senior resident explained this:

Cameron community is small. I know many people here. I know the government, the MARA, and MARDI people here. These people got posted here for several years and then they left for another posting elsewhere. Some remains our friends until now. Here we are like family. All of us live far away from our hometowns so these people here are our families. [Senior Resident 1]

The following emergent themes on Cameron's tourism sustainability include aging first-generation owners and business sustainability, mass tourism's environmental impact and irresponsible travelers.

Aging first-generation business owners and their business sustainability

Taman Sedia businesses were started by first-generation residents, now at least 70, some have passed away, with businesses inherited by the second generation or others. While two first-generation entrepreneurs who were interviewed successfully handed their businesses to their offspring, two first-generation entrepreneurs noted the difficulty of training the younger generations who are uninterested in taking over the business. These points highlight the sustainability challenges faced by first-generation businesses in Cameron.

Mass tourism and environmental sustainability issues

The main problem with tourism in Cameron is heavy traffic caused by mass tourism and natural disasters. Cameron is congested with traffic on weekends and during public and school holidays. All travelers interviewed agreed that traffic problems in Cameron make visits less enjoyable. The influx of cars and tourists into Cameron indicates unsustainable tourism practices. The construction of hillside accommodations and tourist attractions entails significant environmental impacts (Parzi, 2019). The overall indication is that Cameron has not yet achieved environmentally sustainable tourism.

Issues of irresponsible travelers

In terms of RT, Cameron has arguably not yet reached an acceptable level, specifically regarding travelers' and service providers' responsibility. One traveler summarized the environmental issue:

Tourism in Cameron is directly related to agriculture and agriculture products, which heavily involve farming. Farming is done everywhere. There is also excessive use of fertilizers on the farms. Enforcement is there, but more monitoring needs to be done. Based on the news, there are many environmental issues that cannot be controlled. Tourists do a lot of damage, with increased garbage causing buildups in dump sites and landfills. [Traveler 1]

Tourists showed little involvement in environmental protection, with reports of plant theft. Signage in Taman Sedia reminds tourists not to engage in this behavior, indicating local educational efforts. From a business perspective, frequent tourists' irresponsible conduct shows Cameron's tourism still lacks key RT elements like environmental protection and resource management.

Discussion

Tourism development in Cameron has reached a mature stage, transforming the area from a remote rural settlement into a destination known for its distinctive highland tourism offerings. Over the years, local Muslim communities in Taman Sedia and the wider Cameron Highlands have actively contributed to shaping a tourism destination that attracts a growing number of visitors. In particular, Taman Sedia has emerged as a notable MFT hub.

Key MFT attributes in Cameron include the availability of halal foods, halal-certified products, Muslim-friendly services and accommodation that addresses religious needs and obligations. Having these attributes has helped foster a supportive MFT environment in Cameron.

The first key distinction of MFT in the highlands relates to accessibility and logistics, where geographical constraints make travel safety and mobility critical concerns. This study identified three interconnected themes in Cameron, namely accessibility to locations, tourism attractions and activities, and access to halal food and other essential services, including medical care. While the findings suggest that travel to and within Cameron is generally manageable with proper planning, accessibility remains uneven across locations and services. The adequacy of halal facilities and support services also appears to depend heavily on tourists' prior knowledge, travel arrangements and the concentration of tourism activities, which highlights the need for more integrated and inclusive halal tourism planning.

The second distinction of MFT lies in the nature of tourism activities, which are centered on highland-based experiences, such as visits to forests, tea plantations and halal food exploration. The first two reflect elements of adventurous and nature-based tourism. Some halal food experiences in Cameron possess distinctive characteristics shaped by the local environment. Many cafés adopt garden-style concepts that integrate dining with agricultural activities, such as strawberry picking, which creates a more immersive tourism experience. In addition, eateries in Cameron operate from early morning, allowing tourists greater flexibility and time to explore the area and maximize their travel itineraries. Accommodation in this area also reflects a unique highland identity, often inspired by English-style architecture and complemented by ornamental flowers and fruit trees, which reinforces the destination's aesthetic appeal.

The third aspect of MFT in Cameron relates to shopping and impulse purchasing of halal local products, including fresh fruits, vegetables, tea, flowers and ornamental plants. These activities are linked to CBT, where local entrepreneurship plays a significant role in sustaining the tourism economy. The findings suggest a local business culture, supported by community networks and intergenerational involvement, with senior residents actively contributing to business continuity and local economic resilience. Muslim-owned businesses, particularly

food outlets, further strengthen the MFT ecosystem by enhancing tourists' confidence in halal accessibility. At the same time, the reliance on foreign Muslim labor in agricultural activities reflects the broader labor dynamics underpinning the highland tourism economy. MFT and CBT in Cameron are well supported by state policies and a broader tourism ecosystem led by government agencies, such as MARA, JAKIM, the Pahang State Religious Council and local authorities in Cameron.

While MFT and CBT practices are evident, the responsibility dimension of tourism remains underdeveloped, especially among tourists. Although local communities and tourism providers in Cameron demonstrated emergent elements of RT, tourists show little awareness of sustainable practices, as reflected in issues such as plant and flower theft. In addition, tourism stakeholders in Cameron have yet to consistently incorporate basic environmental sustainability practices into tourism operations. Thus, it is critical to address environmental sustainability issues. These findings reinforce the arguments of [Goodwin \(2016\)](#) and [Fennell \(2008\)](#), who emphasize that responsibility for the negative impacts of tourism should be shared among tourists, businesses, local communities and government agencies, i.e. all are responsible for tourism's negative impacts. This study highlights the strong sense of responsibility among local communities toward long-term community development and destination sustainability, which may help protect Cameron from unsustainable tourism growth.

Overall, these findings suggest that tourism in Cameron is Muslim-friendly and community-based, while also exhibiting emerging elements of RT, thereby contributing to a more holistic understanding of these interrelated concepts.

Emergent model of the study

Importantly, a new model of MFT development in highlands has emerged from the analysis, illustrating the interplay among identified key enablers, attributes, inhibitors and outcomes of MFT ([Figure 2](#)). This study identifies the enablers of MFT in the highlands, which support the development of eight attributes of MFT toward building a thriving MFT business community in the area and creating a conducive environment for MFT in the highlands.

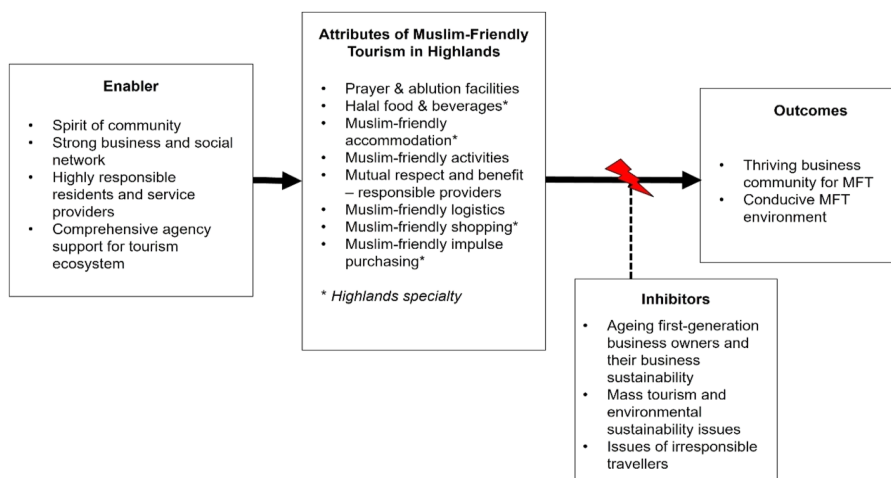


Figure 2. Emergent model of MFT development in highlands. Source: Created by the authors

The development of Cameron's MFT offerings illustrates how a once-remote rural area can develop businesses and transform into an attractive tourism destination with normative MFT attributes. These attributes affirmed the existing literature on normative MFT attributes, although with features centered on highland specialty or uniqueness.

The growth of MFT in this context is driven by four distinctive enablers: strong community spirit, robust business and social networks, highly responsible residents and service providers, and comprehensive agency support for the tourism ecosystem. The first two emergent enablers are basically elements of CBT, while the third element is related to RT. In turn, these enablers are facilitated by comprehensive agency support. Specifically, in the case of Cameron, agency support helped institute regulations necessary for the effective implementation of RT. These emergent factors extend the discourse on MFT to include factors fostering its growth in remote locations and serve as a potential benchmark for other rural areas seeking MFT development.

This model also highlights the existence of potential inhibitors for the sustainability of MFT in highlands. The study raises concerns over aging first-generation business owners and their business sustainability, and issues of mass tourism and environmental sustainability, highlighting the importance of sustainability in MFT and CBT. Another concern is tourists' lack of RT, reflecting unsustainable practices in the area. Interestingly, some MFT and CBT elements facilitate RT achievements, highlighting the need for sustainable policies and further education on RT.

The literature suggests five categories of inhibitors for MFT service offering and development: cultural, economic, regulatory, infrastructural and technological (Salleh, Nor, Azmin, Samori, & Anas, 2019; Wazin, Maskuroh, Peristiwo, & Suganda, 2024; Ploybut, 2026; Battour *et al.*, 2023). Based on this categorization, the emergent factors of aging first-generation business owners can be categorized as organizational factors, while issues of mass tourism and irresponsible tourists can be categorized as environmental factors. While these environmental factors have been highlighted in the broader tourism literature, they are not given focus in the MFT literature.

Practical and managerial implications

Practically, these findings support the government's overarching tourism objective outlined in the Tourism Malaysia Marketing Plan 2022–2026 (TMMP 2022–2026). This plan seeks to enhance the visibility and awareness of Malaysia's sustainable and RT practices, with particular emphasis on eco, rural, experiential tourism, CBT, agrotourism, and cultural and heritage tourism (Tourism Malaysia, 2022). All these efforts are aligned to support the achievement of related UNWTO Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

To ensure the achievement of the TMMP 2022–2026 and in alignment with SDGs, first and foremost, there is a need to address tourists' lack of RT through a strategy of informing visitors about the importance of conservation through signage and eco-tours. Collaboration with local businesses and authorities to enforce regulations and incentivize eco-friendly actions would also help preserve the area for future generations.

This study provides valuable insights for tourism businesses and policymakers regarding further development of Cameron as an MFT destination. Understanding MFT highlights accessibility, safety aspects and unique highland features, serving as a model for similar Asian locations aiming for MFT. The study emphasizes sustainable tourism practices and responsible services that benefit tourists and locals, supporting a tourism model that aligns with Islamic values and regional economic growth. Insights into the inhibitors, which include aging first-generation business owners and mass tourism, enable businesses and policymakers to strategically plan for the future.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings contribute to the understanding of MFT attributes and development in the highlands. This study finds that Cameron's tourism includes MFT and CBT elements driven mainly by local businesses. Tourism has positively impacted the destination's socio-economic development. This community also exhibited some elements of RT, through the providers and community engagement, supported by policies and a strong tourism ecosystem. This study also generates a new model of MFT development in the highlands with both enablers and inhibitors.

Tourism in Cameron is growing and offers key elements that Muslim travelers seek in highlands' tourism. Its unique features, accessibility, activities, specialty accommodation, dining and shopping distinguish it from other highlands. Mutual respect means that providers are committed to offer MFT services, and Muslims travelers appreciate and value the MFT environment. However, some travelers exhibit a lack of environmental responsibility.

This study is among the few studies that integrate three perspectives, namely MFT, CBT and RT, into a single model of MFT development. This represents the novelty of the study and distinguishes the emergent model from existing MFT models, which have not paid sufficient attention to the combined perspectives of MFT, community participation and RT principles. By incorporating these complementary perspectives, the model extends the existing MFT literature by providing a more holistic understanding of tourism development from the perspective of multiple destination stakeholders.

The limitation of this study is its focus on a single highland destination and the use of a qualitative methodology, which limits the generalization of the findings. The emergent model developed in this study represents an interpretive synthesis of the key findings on MFT development in the highland destinations. Its primary value lies in providing a contextually grounded understanding of MFT development rather than predicting specific outcomes. Nevertheless, the identified enablers, attributes, inhibitors and outcomes offer a useful analytical framework for future studies seeking to examine MFT development in other destinations. These dimensions may serve as a foundation for refining, extending or adapting the model across different tourism contexts, such as rural or island tourism destinations, to examine its relevance, applicability and transferability across diverse settings.

Given that the study highlights environmental and tourism sustainability issues in the context of highland destinations, further research could examine the role of MFT in supporting the sustainable livelihoods of local and indigenous communities and in achieving environmental sustainability, in order to inform more inclusive and sustainable tourism policies and strategies. The low RT awareness calls for further studies to develop practical educational and training modules to increase awareness and improve understanding of RT best practices among tourism stakeholders.

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