

## **Homestay Experience in Malaysia (Nov 2018)**

Nowadays, tourists seek adventurous ways to explore the country they are travelling to. Such “experiential travel”, although not something new, has been rising in popularity. In Malaysia itself, travel itineraries on offer by travel agencies generally consist of either a homestay or accommodation. The homestay experience is a key component of experiential travel, particularly in multi-cultural countries like Malaysia. A homestay programme provides travelers the chance to stay with a local family, and experience what daily life is like in the chosen community. The visitors get to learn about the culture and lifestyle of that community, as well as join in selected activities.

In some countries, farmstays are a popular type of homestay. In Malaysia, what the tourism and hospitality industry usually promotes is the kampung homestay experience. This is where guests get to live in an actual kampung or village. In Malaysia, villages that take part in the homestay programme are carefully selected and need to comply with strict guidelines from the Ministry of Tourism in order to bring out the best homestay experience for guests. The villages involved in the programme are fully committed to ensuring that visitors experience village-style living first-hand.

Statistics from the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia (Motac) reveal that there are currently 206 registered homestays in Malaysia, offering a total of 5,604 rooms, as at the end of 2017. At the 20th Malaysia Tourism Awards earlier this year, 16 homestays were nominated for Best Homestay in Malaysia, and four were shortlisted: Homestay Teluk Ketapang in Terengganu; Homestay Labu Kubong in Perak, Misompuru Homestay in Sabah; and Homestay Sungai Haji Dorani in Selangor. The homestays in Terengganu and Perak tied to win the award.

### **How it all began**

The homestay programme in Malaysia was officially launched in 1995 as an experiential form of rural tourism that catered mainly to international school groups and youth associations, especially from Japan. It gradually became popular with Free Independent Travellers (FITs) who favoured affordable accommodation while visiting ecotourism attractions in the country. Given the high cost of developing tourist accommodation in rural and remote areas where most ecotourism sites were located, homestays provided the solution by offering basic accommodation, with a unique cultural experience of staying with host families and experiencing the local way of life.

According to Tourism Malaysia, compared to its Asean neighbours, Malaysia has a relatively systematic homestay programme, which enjoys generous support from the Government in terms of product development, capacity building, and publicity. In 2012, the homestay programme, under the auspices of Motac, won the Ulysses Award for Innovation in Public Policy and Governance, which is a testament to the success of the homestay programme in Malaysia.

### **The response**

Tourism Malaysia noted that the response to such kampung homestays has been positive. Statistics reveal that the programme attracted 382,961 visitors in total last year. The breakdown is as follows: 83.9% or 321,115 are domestic tourists, and 16.1% or 61,846 are international tourists. These homestays are promoted and marketed in domestic and international travel fairs, international seminars and roadshows in Japan, Singapore, and China. They are also publicised through websites, social media, and flyers.

The tourism ministry has also been actively supporting the kampung homestay programme by providing advice and assistance in starting things up including registration, training and promotion.

So, are such homestays a viable business and should more kampungs open their doors to visitors? The homestay programme is a catalyst for empowering rural communities. In 2017, this programme generated an income of over RM30mil for these rural communities, a 8.7% increase compared to the previous year. Partnerships with local cottage industries would also provide an increase in revenue, as higher tourist arrivals at rural destinations could see a bigger demand for local products.

### **Types of activities**

When travellers opt for a kampung homestay experience, they get to try out activities that they otherwise would not have access to. At Homestay Kuala Klawang in Negeri Sembilan, guests get to experience traditional Minangkabau culture. Photos: Tourism Malaysia. In Malaysia, homestay activities have been categorised into culture and lifestyle; economic activities; recreation; and environmental preservation. Culture and lifestyle include activities like experiencing traditional music, dance, games, or even attending a traditional festival or wedding ceremony. Economic activities include rubber tapping, fish breeding, as well as agricultural activities like paddy planting/harvesting, cocoa harvesting, oil palm harvesting, and fruit plucking. Guests can try their hand at rubber tapping at Kampung Temenin Baru Homestay in Johor.

Recreation includes sightseeing and visiting nearby attractions, as well as outdoor activities such as jungle-trekking and white water rafting. Environment preservation includes eco-friendly activities like tree planting. Each kampung homestay might offer different types of activities, depending on the culture, food, economic activity and location. Every state in Malaysia has its own uniqueness. For example, the Kadazandusun and Murut natives in Sabah, and the Iban and Melanau natives in Sarawak all have their own traditions, costumes, festivities, language and food that even some Malaysians are not familiar with. Presenting these to visitors, apart from giving guests more meaningful experiences, is also a clever way to promote places.

### **Uniquely Malaysian**

All the activities that a traveller gets to engage in are authentically Malaysian, and many are also unique to the particular place they are staying at. They get to experience a day in the life of a local, from waking up in the morning to watch the sunrise, to spending time with the host's children after they return home from school, and playing traditional games such as congkak, gasing or top spinning, and wau or kite flying.

Homestay Banghuris offers eco-friendly agro-activities like fruit tree planting. Tourists can also explore their natural surroundings and take part in outdoor activities. In some places, they get to learn how to make traditional handicrafts like basket weaving, batik painting and more. Besides partaking in the meals, guests can learn how to cook and make traditional dishes. Some villages would prepare nightly shows like cultural dances and musical performances, too.