

Chapter 35

Islamic Tourism in South Africa: An Emerging Market Approach

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ABSTRACT

New economic opportunities emerged during the post-apartheid period in South Africa. Tourism was one sector that presented untapped potential to its citizens and the global community. This sector became one of the key generators of economic activity, and “halal tourism,” also referred to as Islamic tourism, developed as part of this emerging market. Research in Islamic tourism is still in its infancy, but due to the historical presence of Muslims, Islamic culture has always been regarded as an integral part of the South African cultural heritage. Evidence that Islamic tourism is an emerging sector is the recently convened conference on “halal tourism” in South Africa. Islamic tourism cannot be understood without an appreciation of the history of Muslims in South Africa. Since their arrival as political exiles and slaves beginning in 1652, Muslims struggled against colonialism and oppression, and today, their vibrancy is visible in the cultural, social, and economic landscape of South African society. The critical question that informs this chapter is, What is the potential of Islamic tourism in South Africa? Through a theoretical lens, tourism is viewed from a postmodern perspective that critiques the dominant homogeneous views of Islam and Muslims. While Muslim culture evolved over time, it changed into a hybrid of cultural and religious confluences shaped by internal and external forces. Muslim culture consequently forms a significant component of the national heritage and is an integral part of the tourism industry. This chapter locates the manifestation of Islam in the context of tourism, arguing for its viability as a significant component of an emerging global Islamic tourism market.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic tourism is rapidly developing in many parts of the world despite its underdeveloped state of research and marketing. Not only has tourism assumed a new cultural role in a post cold - war

world but also an economic role which aims to increase competition in the global economy. Muslim and non-Muslim countries are realizing that a lack of research capacity in Islamic tourism needs immediate attention if its full potential is to be realized (Tajzadeh, 2013).

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The post -1994 South African state which resorted under the presidency of the late Nelson Mandela, placed the tourism portfolio as part of the Ministry of environmental affairs and tourism. The focus of this ministry was to develop and manage the rich natural resources and cultural heritage of the country. Although Islamic tourism has not been identified as an independent segment of the tourism market, its infrastructure and services rendered far exceed its official recognition. For many years Islamic tourism has been informally practiced by members of the Muslim community mainly inspired by their religious and cultural interests. However, those early efforts became the pioneering moments that gave birth to the current economic driven wave of Islamic tourism that has become the target of national and multi-national tourism agencies.

According to the latest research conducted by Singapore-based marketing research company, South Africa has been listed as the third most *halal friendly* country in the non-Muslim world (Crescenting, 2013). Given the minority status of Muslims in South Africa, it may be surprising to some that South Africa is also aspiring to hold an international *halal tourism* conference in the near future. This event may become reality only after the consolidation of a national network which already exists in a quasi-formal structure. A formal organization is earmarked to become the official custodians of Islamic tourism in South Africa. When this conference becomes reality, Islamic tourism in South Africa will formally be launched on a global level. Local interest in Islamic tourism has been triggered by a growth in international Islamic tourism and business opportunities on offer. While the promotion of Islamic tourism may promise new economic prospects it should be guided by ethical principles and practices. It would be a travesty of justice if Islamic tourism should leave behind the founders of Islamic tourism – the Muslim community. As a potential growth point in an emerging market the promotion of Islamic tourism should therefore be inclusive of all role

players, without any fear of control and exclusion by dominant players in the industry.

Notwithstanding the lack of research materials on the nature of Islamic tourism, available statistics brought about the realization of its future potential. The global Islamic tourism market is estimated at R126 billion a year and expected to increase to R192 bn or 12% of global tourism spending by 2020 (Travel news, 2013). For the purpose of conceptual clarity my understanding is that *halal* tourism focuses on the provision of religious and cultural needs of the tourist who may be Muslim by faith. *Halal tourism* does not include *religious tourism* known in Muslim countries where *halal* is taken for granted as public culture. Islamic tourism is a more holistic concept broadly defined as referring to interest in the intellectual and cultural expressions pertaining to Islam. The content of Islamic tourism includes aspects of the material and spiritual culture associated with the Islamic religion and its followers (Muslims). Islamic tourism may encompass cultural and heritage tourism and be inclusive of religious/cultural, pedagogical and self-confidence-building elements of a community (Al-Hamarneth & Steiner 2004:173). For the purpose of this chapter, Islamic tourism is a strand of tourism that is not confined to Muslims. It should be seen as a brand of tourism with the potential to attract the cultural and heritage tourist.

Muslims constitute 1.5 billion of the world population and are living in more than one hundred countries and inextricably an integral part of human history (Tajzadeh, 2013). The expressions of Islamic culture go beyond Muslim countries in the Middle-East and Africa. Islamic culture is often integrated in multicultural societies and offers opportunities for exploration and experiences that have become contained in the tourism industry. While Islamic tourism may include various material expressions of Islam, in this chapter it implies a dynamic and multicultural kaleidoscope of culture and heritage shaped by local and global contexts.

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