

## **Homestay Accommodations in Brunei Darussalam**

An exploratory study

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### **Abstract**

Homestay is an alternative product to mass tourism where tourists are accommodated with local family allowing the tourist to learn local culture and lifestyle. The changing tourists' preferences influence the phenomenon of this accommodation trend for unique experiences, increasing competition in the market, and the rapid development in communication technology. This paper aims to observe the current state of the homestay situation in Brunei. This research utilized qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with a total sample of 23 respondents consisting of homestay operators, local community and tourism officers. The findings are that homestay in Brunei experienced issues with licensing and standards due to unending bureaucracy and unclear instructions, an elusive search of successors for long-term sustainability, and issues on participatory management within the community. This paper contributes valuable insights to developing strategies for the sustainability of homestay tourism, particularly for the stakeholders involved, such as homestay operators, policymakers and tourism practitioners.

*Keywords: Homestay, Community-based Tourism, Community Development, Sustainability, Brunei*

### **Introduction**

Accommodation is an essential component of the tourism product, and it is observed that the phenomenon of tourist accommodation has changed over the past years. Alternative accommodations such as commercial homes, bed & breakfast establishments and guesthouses provide a substitute to tourists who prefer accommodation aside from conventional hotels. The growing popularity of homestay and community-based tourism is due to the intensified competition of creating

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distinctive tourism products, changing tourists' preferences reflecting demand for more unique experiences, and advancing communication technology. With the aid of communication and digital technology, the visibility of alternative accommodation, which is usually remote and isolated, is now accessible to more tourists creating better experiences and similarly better exposure for homestay owners (Lopes et al., 2019; Novelli 2005; Scarinci & Harold, 2008). They are idiosyncratic from the conventional hotels in personalized and customized services with an authentic, 'local' touch (Gunasekaran & Anandkumar, 2012).

Homestay accommodations have increased drastically, especially in developing economies and contributed significantly and directly to small-scale entrepreneurs (Yahaya & Rasid, 2010). This is highly emphasized to ensure tourists' spending goes now to the local communities within the host destinations, leading to a better standard of living and quality of life of residents (Chin, 2017; Chin & Hampton, 2020; Chin et al., 2017). The surge in homestay accommodation is also contributed by low entry barriers and the convenient use of the available resources. The concept of commercializing homes has been originally practiced in Europe, with opening up their privately-owned homes commonly situated in well-known American vacation areas to accommodate tourists (Nuntsu et al., 2004). Homestay venues are 'private homes in which unused rooms are rented for the purposes of supplementing income and meeting people' (Lanier & Berman, 1993, p. 15). In addition, homestay is defined as a form of "alternative tourism where tourists stay with the host's family in the same house and experience the everyday way of life of the family and the local community" (ASEAN Homestay Standard, 2016, p. 3). Homestays at the rural locality are typically popular among foreign tourists who are from affluent backgrounds and international students for their significant cultural experiences. The homestay development in the rural areas has been well-known for over a considerable period and establishes a crucial form and responsibility of the local community involvement in tourism. It is known to be a component of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), where it is small-scaled and practice a bottom-up approach. True CBT initiatives emphasize the direct involvement of the host community in tourism activities and, in turn, empower the local communities socially, economically or politically (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2013). Hence, the homestay programme is seen as one of the best ways to engage the local people to be more involved with tourism projects.

In the context of Brunei, one of the aims of the Tourism Development Department is to strengthen and ensure the sustainability of existing tourism products as well as developing more quality tourism such as cultural and heritage tourism (Ahmad, 2013), Ecotourism (Hamdan & Low, 2014), Film tourism (Chin & Liu, 2018; Liu et al., 2020) and homestay (Janaji & Ibrahim, 2020). One of the recent strategies was the recognition of homestay tourism which could highlight the appeal factor of Brunei

through local lifestyle, culture, music, traditional food, and the experience and uniqueness of homestay. However, it is notable that there are limited data, information and study on homestays in Brunei. Hence, this paper explores the overview and current state of the homestay businesses across the four districts within the country. If Brunei were to move forward in developing homestay products, it is vital to identify the existing problems and issues in homestay businesses' current state of affairs. This study, therefore, provides valuable insights in understanding such issues and espoused positive strategies for the sustainability of homestay tourism, particularly for the stakeholders involved, such as homestay operators, policymakers and tourism practitioners.

### **Homestay conceptualized**

The concept of homestay is well studied among academics worldwide, hence having a variety of different definitions and views. Homestay is described as “a type of accommodation where tourists or guests pay to stay in private homes where interaction with a host and/or family, who usually live on the premises and with whom the public space is, to a degree, shared” (Lynch, 2003, p. 528). Kayat (2011) asserts that it is a home setting equipped with exclusively owned facilities and managed in delivering comfortable and friendly services for guests in which friendship and bond with the hosts are expected to develop. This definition agrees with Yahaya and Rasid (2010) that tourists also value quiet scenes of natural beauty, indicated expanded enthusiasm to connect with the way of life of host inhabitants they are staying with and make social collaborations. Such tourists are known to be experiential as they discover genuine back-of-house knowledge that has not been treated for consumers. In addition, Frederick (2003) also points out that homestay is a prominent choice to cater to international students that will be hosted by a local family, which provides them with authentic learning experiences and culture outside of the classroom setting.

Homestay activities are common worldwide with varying degrees depending on the city or the country. According to Hamzah (2009), the economy, culture and political situation of a country fundamentally affect the concept of homestay development. Subjecting upon the place, homestays vary in terms of their location, whether within the heart of a village, close to the beaches and even within a plantation area. The admiration towards homestay is rising solely to its assimilation of all aspects of the rural environment that offer a mix of natural, cultural and human interaction experiences (Amir et al., 2015). The opportunity to gaze and engage in village residents' daily lives enables the visitors to get involved with the local community in ways that differ from typical tourism interactions and settings. This is what rural homestays have to offer (Dolezal, 2011). As a matter of fact, Kayat and Nor (2006) highlight that homestays are characterized beyond an accommodation, as it stresses

on the idea of lifestyle and experience of the local culture and economic activities. Therefore, homestay is an interrelated term with specific cultural aspects. It is believed that the concept of homestay compliments community-based tourism (CBT) as a new addition to the tourism industry. This is supported by the findings of Korir et al. (2013), where the effects from engaging in homestay tourism not only merely benefit the socio-cultural and economic benefits on the host inhabitants but also protect the cultural identity of the host communities.

### **Propensity and Constraints of Homestay Tourism**

Homestays are typically classified as a programme initiated and encouraged by the government as it is perceived as a distinctive product that supports the country's tourism sector and encourage the protection of the authentic local heritage (Agyeiwaah et al., 2014; Galbreath, 2017). This is in agreement with Pusiran and Xiao (2013), who suggest that running homestays in rural communities can be a means of achieving sustainable development by enhancing the destination representation and lowering the poverty rate. In a community-based approach to tourism, the inclination towards homestays can be motivated in regards to stimulating socio-cultural interactions or exchanges (Nor & Kayat, 2010; Sweeney, 2008), providing extra income and employment (Liu, 2006; Sweeney, 2008), preserving local culture (Wang, 2007), providing an authentic learning environment for hosts' children (Richardson, 2004) and empowering women in rural communities (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013). In other words, Dahles (2000) simplifies that homestay accommodation services have contributed an indirect source of extra income to perform other commitments while maintaining their religious and social standing.

However, literature has also exhibited numerous challenges encountered by homestay operators, particularly in the course of service delivery which comprises of the mismanagement with the establishment, administration, monitoring and the sustainability of homestay tourism (Kayat & Nor, 2006; Nor & Kayat, 2010; Shukor et al., 2014). Cultural shock, seasonality of homestay business, insecurity and delayed payment by intermediaries have appeared as constraints for operating a homestay business (Agyeiwaah et al., 2014). This shows similarity with the discovery from a study by Nor and Kayat (2010), where the challenges can be derived from both within (internal) and outside (external) the community. Internal challenges refer to the aspects that can be controlled by the homestay participants or associations themselves, such as unbalance demography, passive community, leadership problems, informal organizational structure, over-commercialization and conflicts in the community. Meanwhile, external challenges are defined as factors arising beyond the control of these stakeholders, which include misconceptions of homestay programme and methods of payment. A recent study by Nor and Awang (2017) found that the two

major challenges in running a homestay are the conflict of attitude and the insufficiency of homestay regulations as there is inadequacy observed in terms of general awareness concerning the concept of homestay. With the emergence of conflicts, Nor and Kayat (2010) state that the sustainability of homestay will be at risk due to the pessimistic behaviour and disintegration of unity. Malaysia's Ministry of Tourism claimed that the improper use of the 'homestay' title by unregistered operators has led to the uncertainty of what homestay supposedly constitutes and negatively influenced the registered operators' income (Nor & Kayat, 2010). The emphasis is that the lack of monitoring by government and state agencies may have brought about the mushrooming of unregistered homestay operators. Nor and Awang (2017) addressed that it has resulted in demotivation as the homestay income distribution has to be shared between the registered and unregistered homestay operators. Moreover, financial issue is a major concern among homestay operators as this type of tourism is unable to bolster consistent income on a monthly basis and that homestays are primarily utilized on a seasonal basis such as during school holiday (local and international) and public holiday (Ariff et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Pusiran and Xiao (2013) add that the problems such as an unbalance demography and lack of youth participation or successors may have considerable effects on homestay programme. Malaysia's homestay programme was susceptible to the risk of inaccessibility of successors in taking charge of the functioning of homestay from the parents or former operators (Mohamed & Aminudin, 2016). In addition, Shakur and Holland (2000) prove the importance of the availability of successors to secure from disruption in the homestay programme. There are several ways to foster such matter by generating consciousness (Silparcha & Hannam, 2011), inspire and shape them to be passionate (Ateljevic, 2009; Ibrahim & Razzaq, 2010), encourage empowerment and possess heritage skills (Sung et al., 2012). The role of the family in encouraging is one of the essential motivational factors that impact the participation of successors in the homestay programme. Such a factor is further explained where the acceptance of their parents' advice may depend on the children's perceptions as the potential successors by considering the outlook of how homestay programme was managed by their parents (Mohamed & Aminudin, 2016).

The availability of additional income, the contentment of the parents' and the sense of belonging within the community, are some of the aspects taken into account before accepting the role of a successor. In addition, Razzaq et al. (2010) extend that the reason behind the need to recruit young people is their ability to continue the homestay programme by producing and developing alluring packages and activities. This is certainly substantiated with the vitality, social skills and home-grown experience provided by young people in order to create, organize and lead nature- and culture-based activities (Muslim et al., 2017). Moreover, the advantage gained from the active

participation of the youths in handling the activities enhances the value of homestays, either emotionally, educationally or experientially (Jamal et al., 2011).

### **Homestay in Brunei Darussalam**

The introduction of 'One Village One Product' started in 1993 with aims to encourage the culture of self-employment efforts, to increase the community spirit and interest in local products and to strengthen the local community to specialize in a sustainable community-oriented economy. This initiative is to focus on the brand values of local village products and to promote a community-based rural development mechanism that utilizes local resources for the development of products or services to each village. The homestay programme is a product listed in one of the four main categories, with the first project implemented in Temburong District in 2008.

In order to streamline the concept and features of what homestays should constitute, the Tourist Accommodation Standards - Homestay was established by National Standards Council Brunei Darussalam in 2016. It serves as a guideline for homestay accommodation in Brunei by introducing specific criteria to ensure that the service quality and facilities conform to the standards. According to Brunei's Homestay Standards, it is regarded as a form of hosted accommodation at a residence where guests stay with the host's family and experience the everyday way of life of the family and community. Most of the criteria from Brunei were adapted from the ASEAN Homestay standard<sup>†</sup> with minor adjustments to the local environment. For instance, supplementary criteria and requirements were listed in the Brunei Homestay standards to ensure the best fit in the Brunei locality. The additional criteria include 'host' from the homestay can be independent house owners; the need for homestay to obtain approval from Authority of Building and Construction Industry (ABCI) or relevant authorities; homestays situated on water such as in Kampong Ayer should have proper sewage disposal. The criterion listed in both the ASEAN and Brunei Homestay Standard includes categories such as the host, accommodation, activities, authenticities, management, location, safety and security, marketing and sustainability principles. The establishment of ASEAN Homestay standard is necessary, providing an opportunity to standardize a base level understanding of what a homestay is and to establish a minimum standard across all ASEAN member states. The standard also facilitates a coordinated approach, encouraging partnership with the relevant stakeholders, creating a positive environment while revitalizing the rural economy as well as poverty reduction (ASEAN, 2016).

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<sup>†</sup> <http://www.tourism.gov.bn/SiteCollectionDocuments/ASEAN-Homestay-Standard.pdf>

## **Methodology**

This research applied a qualitative approach as the techniques and methods allow greater spontaneity and adaptation of the interaction between the researchers and the respondents. The sample ( $n=23$ ) in this research was chosen using a non-probability method, specifically purposive sampling, based on the suitability for the aim of the study. The relevant respondents comprised of local communities, tour operators, homestay owners as well as government officials. The main purpose of choosing purposive sampling is to focus on those who are involved in homestay operations to obtain more reliable and detailed data. In addition, it is the most cost-effective and time-effective sampling method given the budget constraint. This paper recognizes the limitations that not all homestay has been covered within the scope of this study. However, the authors have paid particular attention to cover those active homestay operations throughout the four districts. In addition, authors have also reached 'data saturation where no new information was discovered from further interviewing the respondents.

For collecting data for this research, we utilized an in-depth, semi-structured interview. This combines a set of open-ended questions with the opportunity for the researchers to explore particular themes or responses further. This offers the informants a freedom to express their views on their own terms (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The interviews were conducted with an average duration of approximately 1 hour 15 minutes with consent from participants required to audio record the conversation to ensure that the researchers were focused. During fieldwork and interviews, direct observations and other notes were detailed down, and interview data were scrutinized in the light of emerging themes which enabled self-reflection in qualitative fieldwork. Related secondary data were used as supportive data to enhance the findings by conducting correlation and comparisons. The data were coded and analyzed using Nvivo software to draw out specific themes based on the components from both studies. Applying such an approach is the most appropriate strategy to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation in homestay businesses in Brunei.

## **Results and discussions**

### *Issues with intermediaries*

The notable point that most respondents mentioned is the confusion from the bureaucratic procedure of licensing and standards. Initially, the respective District Office, Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) handled homestay registrations in Brunei and is now under the jurisdiction of the Tourism Development Department, Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism (MPRT). The reason behind this is to promote the interest of local products within the country under the government's initiative 'One

Village One Product (OVOP)'. However, it has evolved to include homestay accommodations as part of the local tourism product, hence the inclusion of the Tourism Development Department. These changes were not clearly communicated to relevant stakeholders such as potential or existing homestay owners creating confusion and misperception of the administrative process to apply for licensing. Furthermore, with the introduction of ASEAN Homestay Standards in 2016 as part of the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan and the introduction of Brunei Homestay Standards, homestay owners must comply with both standards to be recognized at the local and ASEAN level.

Respondents have also pointed out the dissatisfaction of bureaucratic experiences to obtain a license. The different set of standards caused confusion and difficulty to homestay operators and inter-governmental procedures. Homestay operators need to start their registration process at Licensing and Enforcement Unit, where they receive the registration form. It then passes to the Standards Unit to perform an inspection on whether businesses or houses comply with the Brunei Homestay Standards. Once assessed, the form is returned back to the Licensing and Enforcement Unit to issue the licensing certificate. The standards have been adopted in the Tourism Premises Registration process at the Tourism Development Department for all accommodation premises owners in line with the regulations in Tourism Order 2016. The entire procedure above took at least four to six months or longer, as mentioned by respondents. "If your premise did not fulfill the requirements during inspection, you need to wait even longer to get a letter to know what has not been fulfilled. I cannot wait that long without doing any business" (Homestay owner respondent). With the updated registration process coupled with the established homestay standards and the time needed for inspection, most respondents are apprehensive about going through the bureaucratic process. This might be one of the reasons for the rise of unregistered homestays, as observed in Brunei.

#### *Elusive search for successors*

The lack of youth participation in homestay businesses is found to be frequently mentioned in the interviews conducted. Out of 23 respondents, only five homestays suggested that they have younger generations involved in operating the homestay, and they are likely to become the successor in the future. However, considering the demographics of the homestay operators (in their late 40s and 50s), they are mainly motivated due to hobbies or interest in meeting new people. Meanwhile, the younger generations involved in homestay ventures mostly have their full-time job and commitments. Hence, the main bulk of the operation is supported by their retired parents or their temporary unemployed siblings who stay in the house full time during weekdays. The younger generation participates full-time only during the weekends as tour guides, cultural performers, or transportation services. Most younger respondents



also mentioned that they have “no interest to continue the homestay businesses and they are only there to help their parents out temporarily.” Hence the risk of the continuity of homestay operation is seeking a successor is worrying.

A successful and sustainable homestay and community-based tourism need young and active successors to continue to give impacts within their community and beyond. One very common thing that most younger generations use is an information technology (IT), such as building websites, advertising in social media and online booking sites which aided in the exposure of the homestays. The findings concur with Gunasekaran and Anandkumar (2012) that the role of communication technology is pivotal. We argue that the current demographics of homestay operators may not be able to utilize IT better as compared to the younger generations. With the use of IT, even remote homestays can be promoted widely.

#### *Participatory management of the community*

Managing and empowering community participation can be a challenging task. The involvement of women is actively visible in conducting demonstrations of handicrafts, local delicacies, and traditional cakes as Acharya and Halpenny (2013) believed that the importance of inclusiveness within the community portrays positive impacts and empowers women in communities.

In Brunei, homestays are mostly grown organically by volunteer participants with a bit of initial push from the government. However, this has created a community that becomes over-reliant on a government agency. According to Yahaya and Rasid (2010), one of the criteria to ensure successful homestay operations is that participants are willing to take part in investing time, money and effort. According to the respondents, the attitude of most communities in Brunei is ‘wait and see’. Problems such as lack of leadership skills, the lack of proper management system such as a homestay organization, working committees are all constraints faced by homestay operators. Additionally, the lack of willingness and the inability to see the benefit of working together makes the difference in opinions. Additional barriers were evidenced within the interviews. “I know two other people who are running a homestay too within the village, but we have an entirely different opinion. I can advertise my own homestay without working with tour operators. Why give a cut of commission to them? I can simply use social media” (Respondent 5). Respondents 7 and 9, who stayed in the same village, however, thinks that “engaging in tour operators will bring bigger market, for example, China, where social media platforms are different from ours. We have to think long term and reach out wisely.” Due to the difference in viewpoints, working committees were not set up, and individual homestay owners usually focus on their own businesses. However, some villages in Tutong district have participatory initiatives for activities such as handicrafts,

woodwork and cooking showcasing different ways of life and unique traditions. A 'head' is formally nominated as a spokesperson to liaise with outsiders (tour operators and visitors) and agreed on a specific date of visit. The head then organizes community dance from active youth participants or community activities like fishing, carving, cooking etc., involving men and women within the village. Most of them are usually volunteers participating, usually only during their free time.

A number of respondents mentioned that the government had offered useful courses such as languages, tour guide and standard homestay management. Of course, cooperation and understanding are important between communities to create a synergy in amplifying the involvement of the community. This is to ensure that the community is being empowered to be more proactive and participative in accelerating the progress of homestay tourism in Brunei.

### **Conclusions**

In response to greater demands and changing tourists' preferences, alternative forms of tourism, particularly homestay, exhibit great potential in the tourism industry. This is mainly due to its distinctive features incorporating cultural values where conventional tourist accommodations do not exist. The emphasis is on its important contribution to smaller-scale enterprises and the standard of living of the local communities in developing economies. Hence, the community-based approach has drawn homestay to be a niche segment in the tourism industry.

The findings show that the regulatory process for homestay was unclear as it was originally administered as One Village One Product under the Ministry of Home Affairs. With the establishment of homestay standards in ASEAN and Brunei context, the Tourism Development Department has taken part in assessing the true homestays based on the criteria set. However, the multiple standards to adhere to has brought confusion to the registered and potential homestay operators. Such effort was however made to ensure that homestay establishments are registered because unlicensed homestay establishment was growing. The creation of public awareness and clear communication of streamlining the licensing process is therefore crucial. Moreover, the homestay operators encountered difficulty in looking for successors, either among their families or the community. This has created a sustainability challenge for homestay businesses. The majority of the younger generation has a full-time job and has little interest in running a homestay business usually owned by their family members. Therefore, initiatives, awareness and strategies need to be established to appeal to the younger generation in homestay businesses. Lastly, management and empowerment among the local community are deemed to be below the optimum capacity. The lack of leadership skills and the lack of a proper management system

appeared as challenges in this study. Brunei is already a tight-knit community, but a sense of belonging needs to be strengthened so that community could work hand in hand to ensure an overall greater tourist experience. The engagement of the community at various ages and statuses should be encouraged and supported by the government.

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