

# MALAYSIAN DOMESTIC TRAVELERS: CHARACTERISTIC AND BEHAVIOR

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## ABSTRACT

Domestic tourism in Malaysia has experienced dramatic boom after government turns to domestic front and introduces various measures. Domestic travels were particularly promoted after Malaysia felt the effects of the financial crisis towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, Malaysians have been encouraged to spend their money at home and to visit local destinations. Several monetary regulations were also introduced such as the strict limitation on the amount of Malaysian Ringgits that can be taken abroad, as well as on the selling of the local currency. At the same time, continuous promotion and festivities have been carried out throughout the country all year round to spur domestic spending. While Malaysians continue to dream of, or perhaps prefer visiting foreign countries, these promotional strategies seem to result in positive domestic tourism development as more and more unique products are introduced for foreign travelers and domestic alike. This revitalization of tourism has built confidence in Malaysians in general that tourism does have potentials. Presenting a partial finding of a more comprehensive research on the psychographic background of Malaysian travelers, this paper analyses its initial findings on behaviors, travel patterns and types of Malaysian domestic travelers.

Key Words: Malaysia, domestic, travel behavior, travel trends.

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism industry in Malaysia has been traditionally concentrated and promoted towards international markets since its infancy stage in 1960s. Until today, the tourism sector has grown tremendously and has been ranked the second largest foreign income earners behind manufacturing in 2000 and its subsequent years (Tourism Malaysia, 2003). Despite the importance of alluring more and more international travelers to visit Malaysia, the domestic front cannot be overlooked for their vast benefits and numerous untapped potentials. After a string of crises that affect international arrivals on recent years, the domestic tourism industry in Malaysia started to be given priority by the Malaysian government. Continuous promotions and festivities have been carried out throughout the country all year round to spur domestic spending and holidaying. These promotional strategies seem to result in positive domestic tourism development as more unique products are introduced and developed. This paper discusses the behaviors and traveling characteristics of Malaysian domestic travelers. It is part of fundamental research funded by the Malaysian government to develop psychographic clusters of Malaysian domestic travelers based on the Plog's psychographic theory and model.

An understanding of the domestic tourists is crucial in generating specific and right promotions of destinations. Weaver and Oppermann (2000) highlighted that the number of domestic tourists taking vacations is massive compare to international tourists in most countries and even on global scale. According to the Malaysian Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (MOCAT), domestic tourism receipts were rising at an estimated 15% a year, and

surveys done by the tourist office indicated that over 50% of hotel bed-nights were occupied by domestic tourists (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 1994).

There is no widely accepted definition of domestic tourist (Inskip, 1991). However, the commonly used definition was a guideline from WTO (Chadwick, 1994), which defines a *domestic tourist* as any person or resident of a country visiting his own country or traveling to a place within his country other than his usual residence for a period of not less than 24 hours or one night but less than one year for the purposes of recreation, leisure, holidays, sport, business, meetings, conventions, study, visiting friends or relatives, health, mission work or religion. A *domestic excursionist*, on the other hand, is a visitor traveling in his country of residence for any of the reasons given for tourists, but who stays less than 24 hours at the destination (Smith, 1988).

A report by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (1999, p.1-3) proposed a domestic tourist to be "any person residing in Malaysia regardless of his/her nationality who travels to a place at least 40 kilometers away (one way) from his/her usual place of residence for at least one night or less than one night for any reason other than following an activity remunerated at the place visited". This definition will be temporarily used for this study. This paper also considered domestic excursionist to be included in the study since the advance system of transportation and highway have given much opportunity for domestic travelers to travel to their preferred destinations within a day.

## THE EVOLUTION OF DOMESTIC TOURISM IN MALAYSIA

In the early sixties and seventies, most of Malaysians traveled to Singapore and the most significant international travel among the Malay Muslims at this stage was pilgrimage to Mecca. The departures took place at Port Klang and Penang Port where relatives and friends bid the pilgrims goodbye on board their ships for the 3 months journey. Friends and relatives went on 3 or 4 buses and stayed at budget hotels or at friends or relatives' houses nearby, or even at mosques. Mosques became the main stopovers during these trips. The remnant of past businesses such as heritage hotels and hostels can be traced at Lebuah Acheh in Penang, used to be the port of embarkation to Mecca for Malaysia's northern pilgrims. Over the years, crowd started to be seen around the international airport in Subang, Kuala Lumpur when Malaysian Airlines System Berhad (MAS) began its inaugurated pilgrimage charter to Mecca in 1974 (Malaysia Airlines, 2000).

In the 70's, tourism was perceived negatively by the society. The sector was blamed for the spread of drug and other social problems. Parents would not allow their children to join tourism industry or to study tourism simply fearing that their children would become social outcasts. There was also no proper infrastructure for tourist purposes. Traveling for leisure purpose was almost non-existence and many Malaysians mainly travel to visit friends and relatives. Until today, Malaysians enjoy recreational activities such as picnics at the beaches and waterfalls. The most popular spots then were Batu Feringghi in Penang, Port Dickson in Negeri Sembilan, Cherating in Pahang, and Pantai Cahaya Bulan in Kelantan. Top destinations among Malaysians have been the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, the heritage cities of Melaka and Penang, the hill resorts of Cameron Highlands and Genting Highlands, and the island beach resorts of Pangkor, Redang and Langkawi. Most travelers were excursionists whom traveled within their own state. They mainly used public transportation especially bus. Recently, trips by students and graduates are also gaining popularity. In the early years, must visit locations when visiting Kuala Lumpur were the National Mausoleum (Tugu Negara), the National Mosque, the National Museum, the National Zoo, the Lake Garden and the Parliament Building. Today, visitors to the Klang Valley (where Kuala Lumpur and the new government center of Putrajaya are located) have more diversified choices. While the busy Petaling Street and Tuanku Abdul Rahman Street are still popular among the lower and middle class travelers, there are many mega-shopping complexes, the

formerly world’s tallest building of the Petronas Twin Towers, and well new Putrajaya center to be visited. On the international fronts, towards the end of the 80’s, many Malaysians stopped going to Singapore as a result of higher currency exchange and started to venture into the northern towns of Haatyai, Takbai, Padang Besar and Danok in Thailand. It was once reported that Malaysians spend over 2 million Ringgits a month in Thailand.

MALAYSIAN DOMESTIC INDUSTRY

The tourism industry in Malaysia has suffered an eroding numbers of international tourist arrivals since the economic downturn that hits Asian countries in 1997/1998, and when killer epidemics such as SARS and bird flu spread. Due to stiff competition and uncertainty in the world economy particularly in major markets such as USA, Japan, Europe and Australia, it is important to promote the growth of domestic tourism. Domestic tourism has been perceived to be less important for most of national governments including Malaysia since it does not involve much-valued foreign exchange into the country (Weaver & Oppermann, 2000). Improved economic conditions have led to increase leisure time for the population at large and Malaysian government is supporting and increasing allocation to build budget hotels and promotions to meet the needs of domestic tourists (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 1994).

As in other developing destinations like Malaysia, the Federal Government plays the leading role in promoting and developing tourism. The newly formed Ministry of Tourism in March 2004 (formerly Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism) realizes that domestic travels and products for local tourists must be developed and diversified. Therefore, various promotions, festivals, and new products will be developed to meet the growing demand of domestic travelers. The declaration of holidays for the public service for the first and third Saturday of the month effective 1<sup>st</sup> January 1999 and 1<sup>st</sup> February 2000 respectively, had a tremendous effect on domestic tourism. Ticket-less travel finds its way when Malaysian Airline System (MAS) introduced its application in 2000 on domestic routes to further enhance the domestic tourism. The introduction of the no-frills, privately owned air carrier called Air-Asia has given boost to the domestic tourism industry with its slogan “Now Everyone Can Fly”.

The traveling seasons for Malaysians mainly circle around the school holidays (Table 1). Other major holidays are religions or ethnic based festivals such as the Eids, Chinese New Year, and Deepavali. These festivals reflect the multiculturalisms of Malaysians, which has been promoted worldwide in the commercial “Truly Asia” slogan. During peak season as shown below, majority of domestic travelers will visit popular destinations in Malaysia such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Langkawi. Successive public holidays in May also give a long break for Malaysian. This is almost equivalent to the popular Japanese ‘Golden Holiday’ except unlike their Japanese counterparts, Malaysians travel domestically in general. Holidays in Malaysia often see massive exodus of travelers from big city centers, causing highway jam and long queues at the toll lines.

Table 1  
Traveling Seasons in Malaysia

Primary Season	Secondary Season
School Holidays (1 week in March, 2 weeks in June, 1 week in August, and 2 months in November & December)	University Breaks
Major Religion Festivals: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hari Raya (Muslim Eids)</li> <li>2. Chinese New Year</li> <li>3. Thaipusam and Deepavali</li> </ol>	Other Festivals: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Christmas</li> <li>2. Independent Day</li> <li>3. Labor Day, etc.</li> </ol>

May Holidays	1 <sup>st</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> Saturday holiday of each month
	Other Public Holidays

Since the 80's, various themes and campaigns have been used to promote domestic travelers. The most recent campaign "Cuti-Cuti Malaysia" (Malaysian Holidays) has been re-launched in February 17, 2004 until end of 2005 (Utusan Malaysia, 2004). Numerous exciting activities and travel programs are offered to intensify domestic tourism in Malaysia. Cuti-Cuti Malaysia is a tagline for domestic campaign that was first launched in 11 September 1999. The objectives of the campaign are to inculcate the travel culture amongst Malaysians and to get Malaysians to change their mindset and to regard holidays as part of life. The campaign also aims towards creating a planned holiday culture amongst Malaysians using tour packages. The former themes for domestic tourism campaigns include Our Malaysia, Malaysiaku (My Malaysia), and Malaysia Destinasi (Malaysia My Destination).

## METHODOLOGY

This empirical research and relevant data and information are rather limited on Malaysian domestic travellers. Primary data collection was necessary in order to identify and analyse market segments on the basis of Malaysian domestic traveller's characteristics and behaviours. A questionnaire was developed for data collection purposes and the nationwide survey has been running since March 2004. The questionnaire consists of four parts namely travel planning, travel choice, travel opinion and preference, and demographic. The process of questionnaire design involved a few testings, corrections and reductions. A pilot study was conducted to test the questionnaire and from there, several changes have been made. The preliminary test managed to secure 25 respondents and a more refined questionnaire was developed from the suggestions and comments from the respondents. The questionnaire was prepared in both Malay and English.

The sample used in this paper composes of domestic travelers mainly at major destinations in Malaysia ranging from adventure destinations such as Pahang National Park, to big cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang, and to theme parks like the Genting Highland. The first phase of the survey targeted 300 respondents, however only 118 respondents (or 39%) provided valid returns. The disproportionate stratified random sampling method was employed for this study. The survey employed self-administered questionnaire, which have been distributed and monitored by field surveyors. The field surveyors were instructed to approach every other traveler found at selected locations, chosen by the research leader. The locations include popular spots like beaches and waterfalls, embarkation spots like jetties and airports, and highway stopovers. Extensive data editing is undertaken before the final data can be analyzed using the SPSS program and evaluated.

## RESULT

### *Demographic Profile*

As presented in Table 2, respondents consist of 60 male and 58 female, with an average age of 29 years old, ranging from 18 to 57 years old. Most of the respondents belong to the private sector (33%) and working as engineer, sales executive and manager, among others. Their average monthly income was RM2, 500 (equivalent to US\$658), which vary from RM200 up to RM20, 000 monthly. Eighty-two percents of the respondents were Malays, followed by Chinese (10%) and Indian and others. This was perhaps due to the fact that almost all of the field assistants for this survey are Malays and they must have been more inclined to distribute the survey forms to the Malays. This bias should be corrected in the on-going survey. A great number of married travelers (36%) responded, even though single travelers were still be considered dominant (59%), resulted in the higher number of

university’s students who were mostly singles. Majority of the domestic travelers in Malaysia have received tertiary education and even higher degrees (60%).

Table 2  
Demographic Profile of Malaysian Domestic Travelers

Demographic Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender:		
Male	60	51
Female	58	49
Occupation Sector:		
Government	27	23
Private	39	33
On their own	14	12
Ethnic Group:		
Malay	97	82
Chinese	12	10
Indian	6	5
Mix	2	2
Others	1	0.8
Marital Status:		
Single	69	59
Married	43	36
Divorcee/Widowed	1	0.8
Others	1	0.8
Education Level:		
Higher Degree – Master/PhD	13	11
Tertiary Education – Diploma/Degree	58	49
Professional Certificate	17	14
Secondary Education	25	21
Primary Education	4	3
No Formal Education	0	0

N = 118, missing data is omitted

*Travel Characteristic Profile*

The main purpose of travel was mainly for leisure or holiday (63%), whereas business related matters such as seminar, convention, conference or business deal, and visit friends or relatives (VFR) constituted 27% and 25% respectively. Therefore, the activity of *balik kampung* (travel to hometown), which has been perceived as one of the major purposes, was not reflected in this study (only 6% of respondents did so). Even shopping (15%) has attracted more travelers to travel compared to *balik kampung*. Other purposes of travel include sporting events (2), job interview (2), relaxing (2), study tour (2), and send relative to perform *umrah* (1).

The survey discovered that majority of respondents (78%) planned their trip. Planning the trip is necessary especially for accommodation booking especially during school holidays and public holidays. Most of them obtained their information prior to travel from their friends or relatives (46%) through the words of mouth and also from their own past experience (42%). Advertisements or write-ups in the magazines and newspaper (29%) also played an important role in delivering the travel information needed by the domestic travelers. Half of the respondents (50%) were traveling with their friends while 38% of them were traveling with family or relatives. Only 13% of the respondents were traveling alone. The

average number of persons traveling together was 6 people. Despite planning for their trips, 49% of the respondents did not make any real reservations.

Private vehicles continue to be the major mode of transportation for travels to destinations and within destinations. Fifty-nine percents of the respondents traveled on private vehicles to the destination. Other main transportations included bus or coach (33%), airline (22%), and by train (15%). While they were at the destinations, most of the respondents also used their personal vehicle (58%) and bus or coach (26%). As mentioned before, the majority of the respondents preferred to stay at their friends or relatives' houses (42%), followed by 37% of respondents who chose to stay at the 3 to 4 star hotels (22%). Other types of accommodation included resort (15%), chalet or inn (10%), and apartment or villa (8%). Most of the respondents did not buy travel package (85%). Malaysians in general, the Malays especially, are avid shoppers and bargain hunters. Pertaining this, the majority of the respondents bought souvenirs at the tourist bazaars (46%) with items such as clothes, bags or shoes were popular among the respondents (41%). The respondents also enjoyed buying local foods, beverages or fruits (31%) and chocolates or sweets (20%). Only a few of the respondents were looking for authentic local arts and crafts (19%) or handmade craft (10%). An average expenditure spend by the respondents was RM660 (approximately US\$174) ranging from RM20 to RM3, 000.

Table 3  
Activities at the Destination

No.	Activity	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Shopping	96	81
2	Sightseeing in cities	61	52
3	Dine at café or restaurants	59	50
4	Swimming/Sunbathing	39	33
5	Amusement/Theme Parks	28	24
6	Water Sports (diving, rafting,	21	18
7	kayaking, etc.)	18	15
8	Visiting National Parks	17	14
9	Visiting heritage/historical sites	16	13.6
	Golfing/Tennis/Popular Sports	16	13.6
	Museum/Art Gallery	16	13.6
10	Environmental/Ecological excursions	13	11
11	Visiting small towns and villages	12	10
12	Attend concert/theatre/musical	10	8.5
	Attend traditional cultural	10	8.5
13	performance	8	6.8
14	Rock climbing/caving	7	5.9
15	Visiting Orang Asli settlement	2	1.7
	Disco/Night clubs		
	Visiting Casinos/gambling		

N=118, Respondents were allow to report more than one activities

As mentioned before, the most popular activities undertaken by respondents are shopping (81%), followed by sightseeing in the cities (52%) and dining at the cafés or restaurants (50%).

### MALAYSIANS AS TRAVELERS

Nowadays, a large number of Malaysian female either single or married travels. The change of mindset on traditional believe that female should stay at home has made ways for female to enjoy traveling as much as male counterpart. This also perhaps reflects the high

level of safety, convenience, and affordability among Malaysian females to travel alone. The average age of domestic travelers is 29 years old reflects the normal age for traveling as Malaysian at this age would have steady job and disposable income. Most of Malaysians are having tertiary and higher education at this age, therefore provided them with necessary knowledge and life experience to indulge in traveling experience. With improved economic at macro and micro level has helped more Malaysian to secure job in private sectors or do their own business, apart from working in government sectors. The average monthly income of RM2, 500 fairly show the average monthly income among Malaysians as a whole. This study supports the fact that improved economic conditions of Malaysians have helped promoting domestic tourism industry. More Malays are traveling domestically nowadays since more exciting destinations and tourism products have been introduced by government and private sectors alike, with special amenities and facilities such as prayer rooms and tailor-made toilets been built to assist Muslim travelers. Single travelers are domineering the Malaysian traveling pattern, which is quite similar to any travelers around the globe. Single people are more mobile, have more disproportionate income, and they are more receptive towards what the travel experiences can offer.

Malaysian domestic travelers are taking more holidays, recreation or leisure pursuits. The reasons lie in several factors which include working days have been reduced for government servants, more private companies adopt flexible working hours, and more holidays have been granted on the basis of improved working hours. Despite the belief that Malaysians prefer to engage in *balik kampung* travels, this study, however, observes that only a small number of Malaysians who considered *balik kampung* as traveling purpose. Malaysian domestic travelers did not regard *balik kampung* as their way of getting away from their usual environment. Most Malaysians planned their trip prior to the journey. This especially true when news break that many accommodation facilities at major destinations like Langkawi and Cameron Highlands experience 100% occupancy during holidays. Malaysians rely heavily on their friends or relatives' word of mouth in recommending the destinations to go. They are also more prone to travel to previous destinations they have been visiting due to their past experiences. The placement of advertisements or write-up in the newspapers or magazines has helped to market and promote the destinations or tourism products as Malaysians do obtain travel information in newspapers or magazines. Many enjoy company when traveling especially with their friends and family with average number of 6 persons in the group. This is perhaps related to the fact that many travel in private vehicle. Malaysians are practically having close-knit relationship with their family and friends; therefore they will feel comfortable to travel with people they have known for so long. Some do not make any reservations especially if they plan to stay at their friend or relative's houses, where majority of Malaysians like to do. However, since there are plenty budget hotels of 3 to 4 star rating are available throughout the country, more Malaysians choose to put a night at the hotels. There is also a growing trend, especially the urban yuppies and middle incomers, to prefer spending time in hotels despite the fact that there are friends and relatives staying nearby.

Malaysians prefer to drive their own personal vehicle from their place of travel origin to the destination, and also when going around at the destination. The next major transportation used is by bus or coach, especially the interstate buses, which has grown tremendously because better road system has been built for more travel convenient. Since they drive on their own, therefore majority of Malaysians do not buy any travel package. Ministry of Tourism has acknowledged this trend and has encouraged travel agency companies to do more promotions to target domestic travelers to buy value for money or cheap travel packages. In term of shopping, Malaysians like to buy common items found at tourist bazaars. The most popular activities are certainly shopping, sightseeing, and dining. It reflects that Malaysians are mostly the type of travelers who enjoy doing and experiencing low level of activities.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Continuous promotions on domestic tourism, coupled with development of more interesting tourism products have pushing domestic traveling in Malaysia towards potentially a boom. While Malaysians in the past traveled for other purposes than leisure, today's Malaysians start to realize the value of getting away from their homes and seeing new faces and places. While there are still remnants of past trends such as putting up at friends' and relatives' houses, Malaysians are seen to be more practical in traveling nowadays, valuing the privacy of both themselves and the hosts and opting for hotels or resorts nearby. This also reflects a greater affordability among them. This research will continue to uncover many other aspects of Malaysians as travelers, including typical requirements and their psychographic backgrounds, in order to gain better understanding and to plan better products to suit their needs.

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