

# INDONESIA IS SET TO LEAD THE WORLD IN SHARIA TOURISM



Indonesia is preparing an initiative to develop "sharia tourism". This came out as a result of the increase in the number of Muslim vacationers who seek holiday experiences in destinations that safeguard and promote the Muslim culture and values. This initiative is expected to be launched in June or July.

In an attempt to promote the initiative, the Indonesian government has begun to lay the foundation that will pave way for the development of this form of tourism. A historical move was taken by the government in December when the Ministry of Tourism and creative economy signed a Memorandum of understanding with Indonesia's Ulema Council on a program that is steered towards making this type of tourism a success.

According to the director general of destination development for the MTCE, Firmansyah Rahmin, **the sharia tourism can be best understood as a concept that involves integrating the Muslim religious values with leisure activities.** He argued that tourism will bring the services and facilities closer to the values of the Muslim culture.

It should be remembered that the sharia tourism is not an equivalent of religious pilgrimage which has existed for some time now. The distinction between the two disciplines is that the Sharia tourism involves the provision of a travel scenario under the consideration of the Muslim core values and observances. He concluded that sharia tourism is not a religious trip or outing. It is a unique form of tourism whereby no liquor will be served and in every living room, you will never miss a Qur'an.

Other than the government, it is of essence to bear in mind that this is a joint initiative that is spearheaded by various parties. For instance, there are several partners who are willing to offer total support to this form of tourism.

For example the Sofyan Hotel Chain is one of the key role players in the initiative who have declared that they are for the move. The Hotel management supports the project and it has even come up with a program to provide the Muslim Culture necessities like Qurans, Muslim prayer rugs and other amenities in their hotels rooms.

According to the head of the hotel chain, Riyanto Sofyan, everyone who is willing to comply with the guidelines is welcomed since a Sharia hotel is not meant for Muslims only. He asserts that the hotels are open to any person regardless of race, religion, and ethnic background so long as their acts do not contradict with the regulations. Mr Riyanto stated that the Sharia tourism had already existed before since statistics from the country's Directorate General of marketing shows that most of the Muslim visitors who visit Indonesia are interested in the Sharia tourism. For instance out of the 1.3 million foreign visitors who visited Indonesia in 2010, up to 18% were interested in the Sharia tourism.

**It is clear that the sharia tourism will thrive in Indonesia simply because the sharia tourism in the country is virtually untapped.** However, there are possible challenges.

The Indonesian cultural diversity ought to be taken into account since it may cause some blowbacks

to the promotion of a single form of tourism - the sharia tourism. The Sharia tourism is not appropriate to all parts of the country for instance Bali and Manado where the Muslims are a minority group. To emphasize this fact, the director of the tourism industry at the MTCE, Zoraida Ibrahim, mentioned that everyone has a choice to make since the sharia code is just a lifestyle. There is no obligation for the Indonesian tourism-related businesses to adopt the sharia practices.

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