

Halal Tourism In Iran

Tran Anh Duc

Abstract: *Halal tourism has become an important trend in the global tourism industry. Therefore, research on Halal or Halal tourism is necessary, especially when the Halal market is growing strongly. Halal tourism development is no longer new in Muslim countries, especially countries like Iran. Despite initial successes in the development of Halal tourism, Iran still faces many difficulties and challenges. Research on the development of Halal tourism in Iran will have many practical meanings, especially for Vietnamese enterprises that intend to export Halal-standard goods to this market.*

Keywords: Halal, Halal tourism, Iran

1. Definition of Halal and Halal tourism

Halal in Arabic means permitted (lawful), and in Islamic terminology, Halal refers to standards and values according to the Quran and Sharia Law (Crescent Rating, 2015). The term Halal has existed for about 1,400 years but has only been of global interest in recent decades. The opposite of Halal is Haram, which means forbidden (not allowed). Initially, Halal only applied to some food products. Over time, Halal standards have been applied to many other products such as cosmetics, pharmaceuticals or tourism services. There are products, such as farmed seafood or tea products, that were not previously halal but are now required to comply with this standard. In some areas, the water used to process the products also requires Halal certification. Halal is now not only a religious or food safety issue but also an Islamic identity and brand issue. Halal has now become a concept directly related to Islamic values, beliefs and norms, a value that is no longer only applied to food or drinks but also includes various goods and services provided to Muslim tourists (Samori, Salleh & Khalid, 2016).

Unlike the long-standing concept of Halal, the concept of Halal Tourism is a new term. Halal Tourism is essentially a tourism activity that provides goods and services that meet Halal requirements for Muslim tourists. Currently, there is no unified definition of Halal tourism because each individual and organization will have their own definition. However, it is worth noting that the concept of Halal Tourism is often confused with the concept of Islamic Tourism. Many people think that these two concepts can be used interchangeably, however, these two concepts are significantly different. Islamic tourism activities are mainly carried out for religious and pilgrimage purposes (Henderson, 2016). Meanwhile, Halal Tourism is a type of tourism used for many different purposes, including both religious and recreational purposes (Ryan, 2016). In general, Halal tourism should be classified separately from religious tourism as the concept can be extended to all forms of tourism (Shakiry, 2006),

Hassan (2007) argues that Halal tourism is one of the new ethical aspects in tourism, in the narrow sense it is religious tourism, visiting holy places in the Muslim world, in the broad sense it includes a type of tourism that respects Islamic values and laws. Meanwhile, Akyol & Kilinc (2014) argue that Halal tourism includes specific service activities such as Halal Hotels, Halal Flights, restaurants with Halal food and drinks, and Halal travel packages, and assert that this type of tourism includes closely related and interactive components.

Halal tourism is a new concept in the international market of goods production and tourism. Promoting the production, export and promotion of Halal goods and services to the market is one of the urgent requirements to meet the growing demand of this emerging and dynamic market (Thenderson, 2010). In fact, Halal tourism tries to emphasize the importance of the Islamic lifestyle in travel and its difference from the lifestyle and behaviors common in Western tourism (Sriprasert, Chanin & Abd Rahman, 2014). Considering the common point of the definitions provided on this issue, it can be said that Halal tourism is a type of tourism that focuses on providing goods and services to Muslim tourists, trying to meet the material and spiritual needs of tourists, creating satisfaction in every trip, whether it is a pilgrimage or a leisure trip.

The rapid increase in the world's Muslim population has led to an increase in international Muslim tourists. According to a 2016 statistic, the total number of Muslim tourists traveling worldwide in 2015 was about 117 million, expected to increase to about 168 million by 2020, and revenue from this segment of the tourism industry will also increase 10 times from 20 billion USD (in 2000) to 200 billion USD (in 2020) (COMCEC, 2016). According to the assessment of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the Global Islamic Economy Report, spending on Halal food will increase by 3.1%, expected to reach 1,400 billion USD in 2020 to 1,900 billion USD in 2024 and 15,000 billion USD in 2050. The demand for Halal products is increasing strongly not only due to the increase in the number of Muslims but also due to new consumption trends. The emergence of Halal tourism is a bright spot for the tourism sector of Muslim countries as the majority of people increasingly want to use Muslim-friendly services and facilities during their travel experiences (SESRIC, 2019). Although in many aspects, Halal tourism is still lagging behind conventional forms of international tourism, the contribution of this sector and its potential for future development are undeniable. In 2015, Halal tourism contributed 139 billion USD to the global GDP and created 4.5 million jobs worldwide, bringing a large source of revenue to countries participating in the business chain. The path of Halal tourism development in countries does

not follow the same pattern (Scott and Jafari, 2010). Although there are common points, the Halal tourism development model in each country will have certain differences (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018).

2. Overview of Iran's tourism industry

Iran is an Islamic country located in the Middle East with an area of 1,745,150 km², GDP in 2020 was 191.7 billion USD; the population is about 82 million (World Bank, 2021). According to statistics, 99.4% of Iran's population is Muslim (Iran Statistical Center, 2012). Iran borders Armenia and Azerbaijan to the northwest; the Caspian Sea to the north; Turkmenistan to the northeast; Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east; the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman to the south; and Turkey and Iraq to the west. It can be seen that Iran is a country with a unique geographical location, located at the intersection of many continents and important trade routes, contributing to shaping a diverse culture and history and creating a unique feature on the world tourism map (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018; SESRIC, 2019).

Tourism is one of the important economic activities in Iran. Along with direct impacts, this sector also creates many indirect impacts and influences on the entire economy and society of Iran. In 2017, the tourism sector directly contributed 11.8 billion USD (equivalent to 2% of GDP) to the economy. This contribution comes from revenues from hotels, airlines, travel agencies, and passenger transport services. The total contribution (including direct and indirect) of the tourism industry amounts to US\$30.7 billion (equivalent to 7.3% of GDP), which is lower than the world average of 10.3% (ILIA, 2019). In 2018, Iran welcomed more than 7 million international visitors, contributing about 28 billion USD (6.5% of GDP) to the economy. This growth is significant, especially during the difficult period when Iran faced the embargo (UNWTO, 2019; WTTC, 2019). However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has greatly affected Iran's tourism industry. During the 2019-2020 lockdown period, the number of international visitors to Iran decreased by 97% while the number of domestic visitors decreased by 86%, resulting in a decrease in tourism revenue of more than 90% (Farzaneh Gerami, 2022).

In terms of tourism development advantages, Iran's tourism heritage has been accumulated from many eras, from the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BC), Parthian Empire (247 BC–224 AD), Sassanid Empire (224–651), Safavid Empire (1501–1736), Afsharid Empire (1736–1796), Zand Dynasty (1750–1794), Qajar Dynasty (1785–1925) and Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–1979). Iran is considered the cradle of world civilization, a place where both history and the development of modern society converge (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018). As of 2021, Iran has 26 UNESCO-recognized heritage sites, including 24 cultural heritages and 2 natural heritages, ranking 9th in the world. Tourists who come to Iran want to visit ancient cities with majestic mosques and pristine natural landscapes. This is one of the competitive advantages of Iran's tourism industry. The Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts is the agency responsible for organizing tourism policy planning in Iran, with the participation of many other government agencies (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018). The most visited areas in Iran include Razavi Khorasan (7 million visitors/year), followed by Tehran (6 million visitors/year), Isfahan and Fars (3 million visitors/year), and Yazd (0.5 million visitors/year) (ILIA, 2019). In addition, Iran also has UNESCO-recognized intangible heritages such as the Qalisuyan carpet-washing ritual of Mashhad-e Ardaha, Pahlavani and Zoorkhaneh rituals, Khorasan music, Tazieh art, carpet weaving in Kashan and Fars, Nowruz and Radif.

The Iranian government has considered tourism as one of the 10 economic development spearheads in the 6th Five-Year Economic Development Plan (2016). Growth in this industry is considered an important goal in Iran's Vision 2025 report. According to calculations, the ratio of international visitors to Iran compared to the total number of visitors worldwide will increase from 0.9% in 2004 to 1.5% in 2025, equivalent to about 20 million visitors. Iran's tourism revenue compared to the world will increase from 0.7% to 2% in the same period. Therefore, Iran's tourism revenue will reach about 25 billion USD by 2025. To achieve this figure, the number of tourists to Iran must increase by about 16.8% annually (ILIA, 2019).

In terms of tourist structure, international tourists to Iran are mostly from countries in the Middle East. In 2016, 28% of the total number of tourists to Iran were from Iraq, followed by Azerbaijan (19%), Afghanistan (13%), Turkey (8%), Pakistan (5%), and the rest were from other countries around the world (ILIA, 2019). It can be seen that Iran's political characteristics have created certain limitations and have narrowed the scope of tourists. International tourists to Iran are mainly from countries in the Middle East, due to the close geographical distance and similar religious culture. This trend will continue in the future, especially when Iran's international relations with many other countries in the world have not improved significantly. In the short term, Iran's tourism will certainly continue to focus on exploiting customers from neighboring countries, especially focusing on the Halal tourism segment. Besides international visitors, the number of domestic tourists traveling within Iran is also significant. In 2016, Iran had more than 75 million trips between cities. The largest number of visitors was in the first 3 months of the year (according to the Iranian calendar) due to favorable weather conditions. According to statistics, 33 million visitors were visiting relatives, 22 million were for leisure tourism, about 8.4 million were for medical tourism, about 5.4 million were pilgrims and about 3.5 million were for shopping (ILIA, 2019).

Iran's tourism industry is limited by political and economic factors but is currently showing many prospects. In recent years, due to the impact of sanctions on the oil and gas industry, the Iranian government has begun to realize the importance of the non-oil economic sector, specifically the tourism industry, for economic development. A number of policies to encourage this smokeless industry have helped Iran increase the number of visitors as well as revenue.

3. Halal Tourism in Iran

Halal tourism is one of the areas that the Iranian government is interested in and actively plans to develop and attract tourists (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018). The government wants to take advantage of the available cultural, religious, and economic potential to create a stable and increasing source of revenue from Halal products and services. According to Iran's tourism authorities, many principles and standards of Halal tourism such as serving Halal meat on airplanes, Halal standard hotels, Halal restaurants or banning the serving of alcoholic beverages in certain areas are strictly implemented. This is part of a popularization program to ensure that tourists respect local traditions and cultures for the benefit of Muslims (SESRIC, 2019; Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018). This also shows that Iran is capable of implementing and meeting the needs and standards of Halal tourism. The Iranian government's orientation and determination to develop tourism have contributed to creating momentum for the country to expand and develop Halal tourism. Among Iran's 24 UNESCO-recognized world heritage sites (including natural and cultural heritages), six are related to Islam, which is one of Iran's advantages in attracting Muslim tourists. As the largest Shia Muslim country in the world, Iran has the richest system of monuments, mosques, sites (both historical and modern), and religious rituals and ceremonies in the world, which is a favorable condition for developing Halal tourism. As of 2022, Iran has more than 1,100 Shia shrines spread across the country. The rich heritage system, shrines and rituals are the basis as well as the competitive advantage for Iran to believe in the development potential of Halal tourism.

Goods and services suppliers in Iran are capable of meeting the needs of Halal food and beverages, prayer facilities, friendly toilets, facilities and amenities that satisfy the basic needs of Muslim tourists during their travel (Kian et al., 2017). Moreover, the two main religious festivals related to Islam, namely Eid-al-Fitr (marking the end of Ramadan) and Eid-al-Adha (Hajj festival) are celebrated nationwide as a holiday period for Muslim families, which is an opportunity to exploit Halal products and services. The anniversaries of historical and religious figures celebrated locally also attract a large number of followers and tourists, creating a unique atmosphere for festivals and customs (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018).

Overall, the Iranian government plans to turn the country into the world's Halal tourism hub, with the potential to attract 20 million tourists by 2025 and over 15 million Muslims from around the world in the near future (SESRIC, 2019). According to the 2019 Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) report, Iran is ranked 12th in the world and 11th among the member countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in the list of countries with the most popular Halal tourism destinations. According to this report, Iran is among the top 20 output markets and top 8 input markets for Halal tourism among OIC members. In addition, Iran is also known as one of the top 10 destinations for providing Halal services and products to Muslim tourists (Mastercard & Crescent, 2019). In fact, Iran has great potential as a Halal tourism destination but has not been fully exploited. The main reason is the lack of a long-term strategy and policy system to encourage Halal tourism by the government (Kian et al., 2017). Similar to the development policies of other non-oil economic sectors, Iran's Halal tourism development policies and orientations are not comprehensive, fragmented and have not been improved to meet the diverse and changing needs of the market. Tourism development policies are proposed and implemented by state agencies without consultation with experts. The lack of policy direction and rigid implementation of policies have limited the effectiveness of Halal tourism development. The private sector still does not have the space and favorable conditions to participate strongly in Halal tourism development.

SWOT analysis on Halal tourism in Iran

Strengths	Limitations	Opportunities	Threats
Many monuments and mosques are spread throughout the country, travel costs are relatively lower than in many other Muslim countries	There is no overall Halal tourism development strategy, the government has set development goals but no specific direction.	The global and regional Halal tourism market is expanding in both scale and demand.	Relations between Iran and major countries
Being a large Muslim country, having influence in the region and the world.	Specific development policies are still fragmented and not focused.	Demand for Halal tourism combined with health check-ups is increasing.	Ability to implement Halal tourism development programs
The manufacturing and service sectors are capable of meeting the standards and demand for Halal goods and services	Political instability, the impact of embargoes and sanctions from the West		Instability and conflict in the region as well as in the world
Adequate infrastructure system, capable of meeting market demand			

Source: Author's analysis

In addition to the issues of Western economic sanctions and embargoes that have a direct impact on the Halal tourism industry, the important reasons why Halal tourism in Iran has not really taken off are the lack of a long-term development orientation, the ineffectiveness of management agencies, the lack of enforcement and monitoring mechanisms as well as the participation of the private economic sector (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018). The issue of Halal tourism development has been considered in Iran's tourism planning and policy-making system since 2011, but in reality, the Iranian government and relevant agencies do not have a specific plan and no branding strategy. Iran's Halal tourism development policies are also only temporary, not paying attention to harmonizing domestic conditions with international demand (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2013). Therefore, the advantages and potential for developing Halal tourism in Iran have not been fully exploited. In addition, the views on developing Halal tourism of many leaders and residents in Iran are still limited and negative, believing that tourism development will have a negative impact on Iranian culture and will destroy historical relics. Basically, Iran should take advantage of the advantages and opportunities to effectively export Halal goods and services on the spot, promote culture combined with providing convenient tourism services, and spread Iran's values to the region and the world. Halal tourism is also one of the appropriate ways for Iran to limit the impact of international sanctions, contributing to increasing the country's position and voice in the region and in the international arena. It can be said that focusing resources on developing Halal tourism in the case of Iran is completely reasonable and promises to bring many results.

REFERENCES

1. Crescent Rating (2015), *Muslim/Halal Travel Market: Basic Concepts, Terms and Definitions*, Singapore: Crescent Rating Pte Ltd.
2. Farzaneh Gerami (2022), *Digitization of World Heritage Sites of Iran as a Tool for Facilitating Online Access during Worldwide Pandemic: Case Study of Pasargadae World Heritage Site*, Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal). 6564
3. Henderson, J. C. (2016), *Halal food, certification and Halal tourism: Insights from Malaysia and Singapore*, Tourism Management Perspectives, 19, 160–1.
4. Heydari Chianeh, R., Rezatab Azgomi, S. K., Soltani, N., & Motamedi Mehr, A. (2013), *An analysis on the tourism policymaking in Iran*, Journal of Tourism Planning and Development, 2(5), 11-3.
5. Heydari Chianeh, R., Soleimanirad, I., Fekri, F., Ahmadi, P., Ghanbari, M., & Ranjbarzadeh Tamaj, Y. (2018), *Iran`s Islamic and Halal tourism development challenges*, In Kozak, M., & Kozak, N (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 6th Interdisciplinary Tourism Research Conference* (pp. 194 - 199). Turkey: Nevşehir
6. Kian, B., Heydari Chianeh, R., & Babaei Aghdam, F. (2017), *Halal tourism development in Iran: Prospects and challenges*.
7. Rahghoshay, M. (2016), *Iran`s share of \$ 150 billion in halal tourism revenue is less than one percent*.
8. Ryan, C. (2016), *Halal tourism*, Tourism Management Perspectives, 19, 121-1.
9. Samori, Z., Salleh, N. Z. M., & Khalid, M. M. (2016), *Current trends on Halal tourism: Cases on selected Asian countries*, Tourism Management Perspectives, 19, 131– 136.
10. Shakiry, A. S. (2006), *The academy of Islamic tourism project*, Islamic Tourism, Islamic Tourism Prospects, 1(25).1-2.
11. COMCEC (2016), *Muslim Friendly Tourism: Developing and Marketing MFT Products and Services in the OIC Member Countries*. Ankara: COMCEC Coordination Office.
12. ILIA (2019), *Iran Travel and Tourism Industry: current status and opportunities*, Tehran, Iran.
13. Mastercard and Crescent Rating (2019), *Global Muslim travel index 2019*, Singapore: Crescent Rating.
14. SESRIC (2019), *International Tourism in D-8 Countries: Prospects and Challenges*, Ankara: The Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries.
15. UNWTO (2019), *Tourism Highlights 2019 Edition*, Madrid: World Tourism Organization.
16. WTTC (2019), *Travel & Tourism Economic Impact 2019 Iran*, London: World Travel and Tourism Council.