

NETWORKING AND COMPETITIVENESS IN SMALL FIRM TOURISM
BUSINESSES IN ISLAND DESTINATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF KAMPUNG
AIR BATANG, TIOMAN ISLAND

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I lovingly dedicate this thesis to my dear parents who supported me through every single step of the way and were always there for me. And to my dearest sister and brothers whom I had love and support from all the moments.

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ABSTRACT

Small firms tend to form networks within themselves to boost their business-related problems and to provide the whole participants of the network with all the resources shared in the network. These informal networks are mainly formed around social networks with family, friends, relatives and acquaintances. This study will investigate the size and different aspects of small firms in Kampung Air Batang, Tioman Island, and is about to search for networking activities within local community which is affecting competitiveness factors of study area. A qualitative research method was used for the study and the respondents who were owner/managers of chalet accommodation firms were the main source of study's primary data. A semi-structured in depth interview with owner/managers in Kampung Air Batang was used for data collection. Local community has been involved in tourism business since a few decades ago and has successfully established their family businesses. As all the participants involved in tourism activities of this area are family members, very close relatives or friends and within a limited area of village with ethnic linkages they have formed an informal network within themselves. Based on the trust and informal ties owner/managers are benefiting from these networking activities as they freely share business-related matters with other members of the network. Receiving financial support from family members as well as help and advice from friends and relatives are the main motivate factors that persuade them to participate in a network. The network has even influenced the competitive environment of the village. The whole tourism and hospitality community members agreed on by having these ties within themselves they have been collaborating rather than competing each other and have competed well with other villages in the island.

ABSTRAK

Syarikat-syarikat yang kecil lebih cenderung untuk membentuk jaringan di kalangan mereka bagi sama-sama berganding bahu dalam menyelesaikan masalah yang mereka hadapi dan juga berkongsi segala sumber yang mereka perolehi dalam jaringan tersebut. Jaringan sosial tidak rasmi ini selalunya dibentuk di kalangan ahli keluarga, rakan-rakan dan juga rakan-rakan perniagaan. Kajian ini mengukur aspek dari pelbagai saiz dan perbezaan bagi syarikat-syarikat kecil di Kampung Air Batang, Pulau Tioman, dan untuk mengetahui aktiviti-aktiviti jaringan tersebut dalam masyarakat tempatan yang boleh mempengaruhi persaingan dalam perspektif kajian ini. Kaedah kajian kualitatif telah digunakan dalam kajian ini dan responden yang terlibat adalah daripada kalangan pemilik atau pengurus perkhidmatan chalet yang menjadi sumber utama sebagai data premier. Temuduga berstruktur separa telah digunakan sebagai kaedah pengumpulan data dan pemilik/pengurus di Kampung Air Batang telah ditemuduga secara mendalam. Masyarakat tempatan telah terlibat dalam perniagaan pelancongan sejak berabad lamanya dan ia telah mengukuhkan perniagaan di kalangan keluarga mereka. Memandangkan semua yang terlibat dalam aktiviti pelancongan ini adalah terdiri daripada ahli keluarga sendiri, saudara mara yang rapat dan rakan sekampung di daerah yang mempunyai jaringan etnik yang unik, ini secara tidak langsung telah membina jaringan tidak rasmi di kalangan mereka. Berdasarkan kepercayaan dan hubungan tidak rasmi, mereka secara sukarela berkongsi perkara yang berkaitan dengan perniagaan dan turut menerima sokongan dari segi kewangan dari ahli keluarga mereka yang turut membantu dan menasihati bagi memberi semangat dan motivasi untuk menggalakkan mereka bekerjasama dalam jaringan tersebut. Jaringan ini secara tidak langsung telah mempengaruhi persaingan yang hebat di kampung tersebut. Semua pemilik perkhidmatan pelancongan di kampung tersebut bersetuju dengan adanya jaringan dan hubungan baik yang wujud di kalangan mereka serta bersaing secara sihat dengan pengusaha-pengusaha pelancongan di kampung-kampong lain di pulau tersebut.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Despite the current economic crisis, to which tourism is not immune, UNWTO forecasts 1.6 billion international tourists by the year 2020. The extraordinary growth of tourism requires increasing attention from all stakeholders on its sustainability. UNWTO has already undertaken a number of initiatives aimed at achieving a win-win situation for tourism and biodiversity, and the International Year on Biodiversity celebrated in 2010 was another opportunity to devise new ideas and joint actions. The notion that tourism can constitute a solid tool for sustainable development and poverty alleviation is gaining ground (UNWTO, 2010).

The effects of tourism are often compared to that of fire: it can cook your food and heat your home, but it can also burn the house down. Tourism provides employment and income opportunities (some estimates point to 10% of the global job market), can finance protected areas and raise awareness of visitors and hosts, and often has fewer environmental impacts than other industry sectors. On the other

hand, it consumes significant amounts of natural resources and can degrade ecosystems, may raise the cost of living for local people, may degrade local culture and sell it as a “commodity”, and its revenues may flow out of the destination with few local benefits.

Tourism must be sustainable over time, meaning it needs a range of attitudes, behaviors, strategies, plans, laws and regulations in response to economic, social and environmental needs. A comprehensive tourism policy is required to enable an improvement in the country’s economic opportunities, which benefit communities and enterprises, and to contribute to personal, social and economic growth for men and women.

Islands are special places with a natural attraction for tourists and a special challenge to sustainability. The thousands of islands on the face of the earth include some of the finest and most sought after destinations, such as the Balearic Islands, the Hawaiian Islands, the Galapagos Islands, the Canary Islands, the French Polynesian Islands, and the Caribbean islands. The mystique associated with islands is dependent on a blend of different lifestyles, indigenous cultures, unique land formations, flora and fauna, and ocean and coastal resources. To keep that mystique alive and thriving, islands must implement sustainable tourism policies in all areas including environmental, economic and socio-cultural (Sheldon, 2005).

Island tourism creates an image of fantasy and escape from routine and stress; a paradise with an exotic lifecycle (Baum, 1997). Increasingly, people travel to obtain the island experience and visit communities that are isolated, display rich and diverse cultures, unique environmental attributes and exotic species (Douglas, 2006). Island communities have varied languages, histories, societies, governance forms and livelihood (Kelman, 2009).

In many islands performing as tourist destinations, most of the activities and services offered to the customers are mainly produced by the small family firms. According to Peters and Buhalis (2004) small firms dominate the tourism and hospitality industry worldwide and are of critical importance for the competitiveness of destinations. Small/family hotel businesses are characterized by number of specific business processes which generate particular training and educational needs. It is increasingly clear that small businesses are not miniature versions of larger ones, but they have different structures, priorities and strategic objectives.

Charles (2001) suggests that the survival of a business venture, particularly a small one, can be greatly aided by interaction with and the support of other entities (networking). In the business environment, “the network is a group of two or more firms that have banded together to carry out some new business activity that the members of the network could not pursue independently” (Sommers 1998, p. 54). Many entrepreneurs, particularly in rural or developing areas, rely heavily on the informal (or social) network to run their business (Erutku and Vallee 1997; Ozcan 1995).

The competitiveness of industries and firms has been one of the most important themes of research in the fields of economics and business studies. As the tourism and hotel industry continue to prosper in the global economy, competition, whether it be international or domestic among members of the industries, becomes fiercer. Possessing competitive advantages could be the key to success for those members (Tsai et al. 2009). This study will examine the competitiveness existing among the small firms participating in the tourism activities of the study area.

1.2 Background of the study area

1.2.1 Tioman Island

Tioman is the largest island in Pahang state and in fact is the largest off-shore island in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia which lies around 32 km from Mersing, Johor. It is about 39km long and 12 km wide with a total land area of 133.6 sq. km. In size this Pahang Island is the third largest island in Peninsular Malaysia after Penang and Langkawi. The roughly pear-shaped Tioman Island is part of the Tioman Archipelago of 64 volcanic islands off the coasts of Pahang and Johor, which extend about 100km in latitude from Pulau Cebeh in the north to Pulau Tokong Yu in the south.

The dragon-like appearance of Tioman Island is at the root of a legend surrounding its origin: A dragon princess from China was flying to her prince in Singapore and stopped to rest in these calm, warm waters. Enamored by the beauty of the area, and the waves lapping at her sides, she discontinued her journey and took the form of an island.

Tioman Island has been used for many years by fishermen as an important navigation point and a source of fresh water and wood. During the past thousand years, it has played host to Chinese, Arab, and European trading ships, and often porcelain shards can be found on beaches around the island.

In more recent history, Tioman Island has hosted both British and Japanese during the Second World War and still the waters around the Island are littered by the remains of war. The battle cruisers of British Royal Navy, HMS Repulse and

HMS Prince of Wales, were both sunk by the Japanese aircrafts on 10th December 1941 in the South China Sea waters around Tioman Island.

In an earlier history, in 1958, some sources claim that the musical movie “South Pacific” was filmed at the footage of Tioman Island. This can also prove the fact that “South Pacific Chalet” and “Bali Hai” resort were named after the movie.

The natural beauty of the island is its biggest attraction. Lush tropical jungle covers about 12,000 hectares of the island and countless mountain streams and waterfalls sustain the many protected species of mammals and birds. The waters around the island are filled with corals of all shapes and colors and home to a vast diversity of sea creatures, including two species of marine turtle. There are a few excellent beaches on Tioman, and these curves of golden sand are usually tucked away at the edges of villages or fronting one of the many resorts (Tourism Pahang).

The remaining inland is mainly hilly and uninhabited with the tallest peak at 1053m in the north. It's mainly covered by the tropical rainforests in the center of the island with an average of 228 cm of rainfall per year. The stable temperature in the Island and high humidity has resulted in a diverse and magnificent flora and fauna. During the monsoon season in November to February, the island experience heavy rains and many stormy days which make it impossible for the ferries to travel to the Island from Mersing jetty. This season provides the Island with a supply of fresh water while it results in a dead season for tourism activities of the Island.

Tioman surrounding marine area also host a diverse marine ecosystem. The crystal clear turquoise waters of Tioman Island illustrate the white sands and healthy coral reefs of the area. Being part of the Indo Pacific basin which houses the world's greatest marine biodiversity, Tioman offers a multitude of marine treasures, from the

occasional whale shark and manta ray, threatened napoleon wrasse and graceful hawksbill and green sea turtles to the loveliest nudibranch.

Village life in Tioman Island is remarkably simple. The natural characteristics of the Island have been the primary reason to inhabitation in the Island. Some of the villagers are involved in the tourist trade of transporting and housing visitors and some still rely on harvesting coconuts and tapping rubber trees to supplement their income as it has been the very first reasons for living in the Island. Nevertheless, the islanders are down-to-earth, warm and friendly.

The Island is composed of 9 main residential villages, each known as a Kampung. The main part of the island is Kampung Tekek which is adjacent to the airport and the rest are as follows:

- Kampung Asah
- Kampung Mukut
- Kampung Nipah
- Kampung Genting
- Kampung Paya
- Kampung Air Batang
- Kampung Salang
- Kampung Juara



Figure 1.1: Tioman Island Map

1.2.2 Kampung Air Batang

Ayer Batang, Kampung Air Batang or easily known as ABC village is located in the north-west side of Tioman island between the marine park and Kampung Salang. It's the main Tioman backpacker hang-out with a less flashy beach than at Salang, but with a more down-to-earth village atmosphere. Its wide range of budget chalets and resorts along with the cheapest accommodation rates of any place in

Tioman make it a most popular choice among backpackers and simple travelers. The beach in ABC is usually best at the southern and northern ends, although the sands are constantly shifting.

Air Batang almost adjoins Tekek Village, but lays separated by a small and hilly coastal cape. This area stretches out between two hills that separate it from other parts of the island. From the southern part it is connected to the marine park by passing through the hill which is easily accessed as the path has been provided by some steps to facilitate the accessibility of the village. The southern part of the village is also famous for its sandy beach that is considerably the best part of Kampung Air Batang beach which is occupied by one of the best resorts in the village that is owned by one of the pioneers of tourism business in the island.

The other end of village is also hilly pathway to Panuba Bay or simply known as monkey bay. The path is not as good as the one in the southern end but here also has been provided by some ropes to facilitate the accessibility for the travelers. The northern part of the village has an eye catching view from hilltop over the shore. This part has also been taken by another resort which has some chalets on hilltop with breathtaking scenery from the chalets` terrace.

For those who travel by air it would be much more understanding to call it the gem of south china sea as they can have a sky view of the lush green trees all over the island as well as the crystal clear turquoise shores of Kampung Air Batang.

Undoubtedly, this part of the island is divers` heaven as well. There are nearly 6 diving centers in ABC and they are actively participating in tourism activities of the area. They offer both daily diving trips that are just for the beginners and are considered as fun diving as well as offering courses for those who want to

get a diving license which may take 5 days roughly. All divers would experience the beauty of underwater world with the magnificent coral reefs all around Tioman Island.



Figure 1.2: Location of Kampung Air Batang

1.2.3 Resorts and Chalets in Kampung Air Batang

There are 12 resort and chalets located in Kampung Air Batang out of which only 10 were operating at the time this survey was done in the island. Apart from the accommodation in this part of the island, diving centers are also participating in tourism activities of the island which compared to the area of ABC beach the number of these centers is also considerable. There is 5 diving center in ABC that mainly operated by the foreigners mainly from Australia and England. All these resorts and diving centers are widely promoted either through their own websites or through other tourism related portals or guide books.



Figure 1.3: Resorts and diving centers in Kampung Air Batang

1.3 Research objectives and purpose of the study

The small firms usually tend to form networks within themselves to boost their business-related problems and to provide the whole participants of the network with all the resources shared in the network. Within the small firms which may also have been located in the small destinations, like Island destinations, the networks formed are usually social networks or better to say informal ones. These networks are among families, relatives, friends or acquaintances who participate in the tourism activities of the same area. Sharing of the resources with the other members of the network will provide each member with better opportunities to compete with the other competitors in their neighboring market.

This study will investigate the success and failure of small firms existing in Kampung Air Batang. These small firms which are mainly in the form of family business can also be referred to as Owner-Operated or Owner-Manager firms. Later on the study will try to search the existence of the network among the accommodation providers of this area which by the nature of the people in this network is an informal network. Therefore the objectives are:

1. To study the size of firms operating in Kampung Air Batang and illustrate the main characteristics of these firms
2. To investigate the existence of any possible network among the stakeholders and participants of the tourism community in the respected area
3. To study the type, advantages and disadvantages of the network formed among the members of tourism and hospitality community in Kampung Air Batang

4. To investigate the competitiveness elements in the firms operating in the study area that may have resulted to increase their share in tourism market

I hope that the findings of this research will result in finding the present condition of small firms working in Kampung Air Batang and it may later on help them to elaborate and improve their position in their neighboring tourism market. Studying the small firms considering their advantages and disadvantages as well as types of networks and any kind of information and experience shared within a network can be considered as a valuable guideline for the local community in their future progress and the outcomes can bring about some handy and useful recommendations to sustain the tourism activities in study area.

1.4 Statement of research problem

This study will try to find the answers to the following questions that have been aroused from the main literature of the study or generally objectives of the research:

1. What are the main characteristics of the firms participating in the tourism activities of Kampung Air Batang?

2. How is the present condition of relationship between the stakeholders in Kampung Air Batang regarding the existence of informal network among them?

3. To what extent the network formed within these firms have been able to elaborate and improve the quality of the services offered in the area?

These objectives will work as guidelines in conducting questions within interviews to the respondents. Therefore, researcher is supposed to make the interview questions according to objectives of this study. The aim is to conduct an academic research regarding one of main aspects of tourism industry. I hope the findings will be of interest for tourism scholars of this field and applicable to other destinations with similar situation.

1.5 Significance of the study

The critical need to have a sustainable tourism development in island destination will indicate the importance of this research to be carried out. In one hand, every small island is facing a considerable number of problems regarding its economic, environmental and socio-cultural problems and on the other hand, implementation of numerous small firms or family businesses in tourism to provide required services for their specific market needs the formation of informal networks to reap the resources that are not available within. These two fundamental problems will highlight the importance of investigating small firms in the study area and search the existence of a network within as well as studying the competitiveness factors

resulting in success of ABC stakeholders compared to their counterparts in their neighboring area.

1.6 Study outline

In the first chapter of the research topic was introduced, followed by discussing the formulation of the problem and its relevance to academic and to present the research question and objectives. The second chapter concentrates on literature review, where previous concepts, findings regarding to the topic, the notions and theories of participation and related definitions are explained. In the following chapter the methodology of data gathering explained. At this point the case study is introduced. The major imperial results, gathered from case study will present in fourth chapter and the fifth chapter will contain the main experiential outcomes obtained from the qualitative fieldwork. Analyses through narrative and open content analysis the findings will discuss in the fifth chapter. In this part, the link between research goals, the theoretical framework and empirical study will present. Finally in the last part, the main findings will present and recommendations will demonstrate.

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