

## **How Middle East Tourists View Malaysia as a Tourist Destination<sup>1</sup>**

**BY**

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### **Introduction**

As a tourist destination, Malaysia is many things to many people. One Middle East tourist who participated in a study to find out opinion of Middle East tourists about Malaysia describes Malaysia as “heaven on earth”. This may sound too much for some people, but this tourist’s comment was probably based on his experience. However, several others felt Malaysia is not Islamic enough, contrary to what they know before coming to Malaysia. These tourists thought Malaysia was a completely an Islamic country like some of the other Arab countries. But they were surprised to find there were many other races apart from the Malays who are Muslims. As there should be calls to prayers at prayer times. As such they were surprised that there were no call to prayers in such places as Bukit Bintang, where many Arab tourists stay. From the research perspectives, it would be important to know whether these views are common among the tourists? Whatever it is, these views are very important to any effort to encourage more Middle East tourists to come to Malaysia and to come again and again to Malaysia.

The aim of this paper is to provide fact and figures based on the opinion of Middle East tourists who visited Malaysia. This study used the survey research for obtaining data. The tourists were interviewed using a standard questionnaire. This paper will discuss some preliminary results of about 520 respondents randomly sampled and interviewed during the month of August 2008 in capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur and the northern state of Penang. Some of them were interviewed at the departure halls of Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and The Penang International Airport (PIA). The interviews were carried out in Arabic by Arabic native speakers from the Middle East who are students doing their post-graduate studies in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, International Islamic University of Malaysia and Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Additionally, three members of the research project visited Egypt and Dubai in November 2008 to get some ideas about the situation in those two places. While in Cairo, they managed to interview the Malaysian Ambassador to Egypt, Dato’ Zainal Abidin Abdul Kadir, and in Dubai, they interviewed Marketing Manager Tourism Malaysia in Dubai Mr Mohamed Ibrahim Masri and interviewed a manager of a

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<sup>1</sup> This is a preliminary report of a larger study called *Optimising and Sustaining Middle East Tourist Arrivals to Malaysia*, financed under the University Research Grant . Other members of the research project are Assoc. Prof Dr Redzuan Othman, Assoc Prof Dr Latiffah Pawanteh, Dr Mohd Anwar Omar Din, Dr Zamri Arifin and Norlida Hanim.

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major travel agent in Dubai which handled a large number of tourists from the Gulf states and surrounding areas.

Middle East tourists began coming in large numbers from 2003. Line chart 1998-2008 below shows an uptrend of Middle East tourist arrivals. Majority of the tourists came from Saudi Arabia, Iran and United Arab Emirates. The chart below represents Middle East Tourist Arrivals in Jan-Nov 2008.

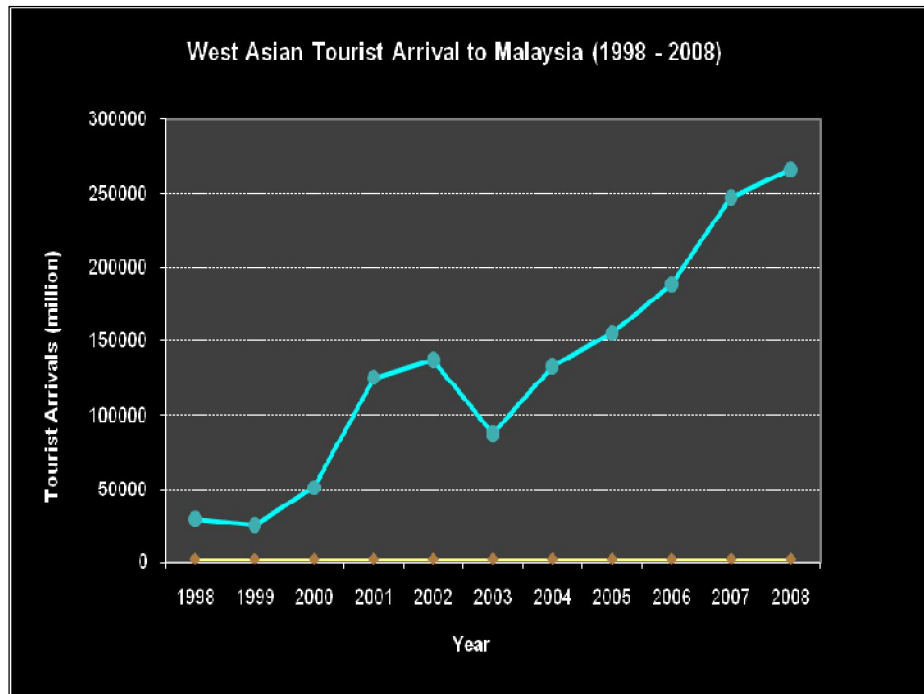


Chart 1: West Asian Tourist Arrivals to Malaysia, 1998-2008  
(Source of Data: Tourism Malaysia)

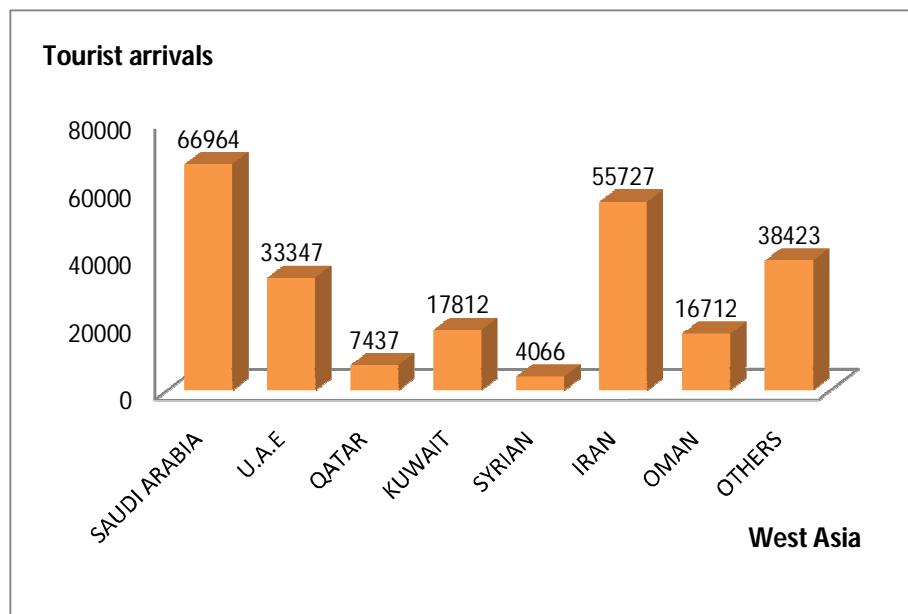


Chart 2: Tourist Arrivals to Malaysia from West Asia, Jan-Nov 2008.  
(Source of Data: Tourism Malaysia)



Chart 3: Tourist Arrivals to Malaysia from West Asia, Jan-Nov 2008  
(Source of Data: Tourism Malaysia)

Table 1: Overall Tourist Arrivals To Malasia (1998-2008)

Year	Tourist Arrivals (million)
1998	5.5
1999	7.9
2000	10.2
2001	12.7
2002	13.2
2003	10.5
2004	15.7
2005	16.4
2006	17.45
2007	20.9
2008	22.1

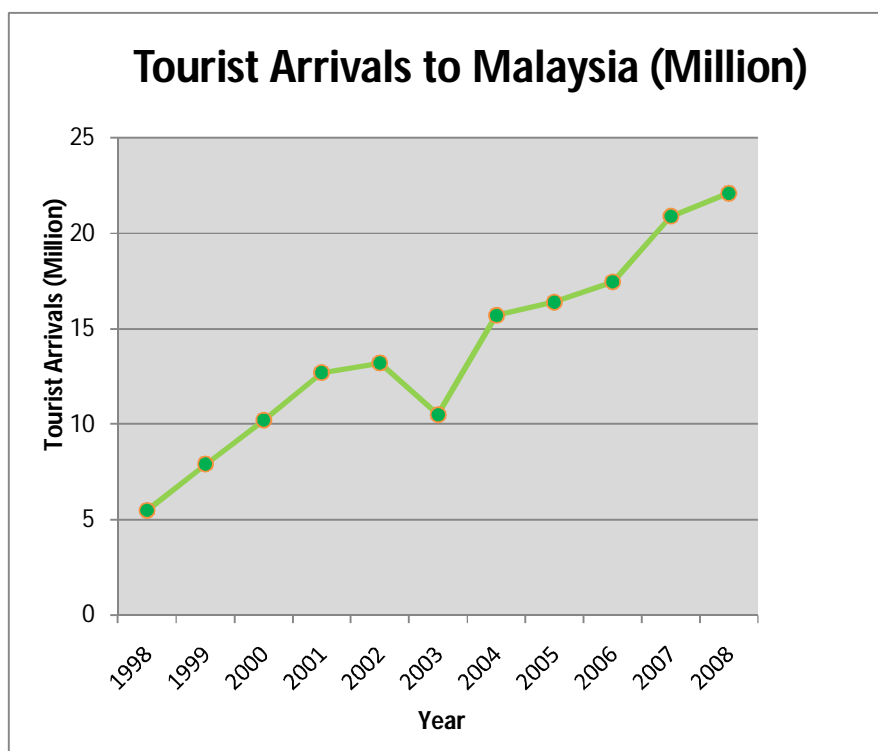


Chart 4: Tourist Arrivals to Malaysia 1998-2008 (Millions)  
(Source of Data: Tourism Malaysia)

Available records show tourist arrivals in Malaysia continue to rise unabatedly, except for the year 2003 when the SARS (bird flu) and the Iraq war made a dent in tourism figures. As can be seen from Table 1, in 1998 (when Asian financial crisis occurred), some 5.5 million tourists visited Malaysia. The following year a larger number of tourists came. And the year 2008, Malaysia broke previous record in spite

of recession looming over the world. The following Line chart showed the uptrend of tourist arrivals.

### Results of the study

Based on the 520 respondents interviewed, we provide the following descriptive breakdown. Of the 520 respondents, 407 were males respondents (78.3%), and the 113 female respondents (21.7%) . Some 259 respondents (50.6%) were in the 21 to 30 age group, while 140 or 26.9% in the 31-40 age group, and 78 or 15.0% in the 41-50 age group, and 32 or 6.2% in the 51-60 age group, and 3 or 0.6% and the 61 and over age group.

Table 2: Demographic Figures: Gender and Age

N=520		f	%
Gender	Male	407	78.3
	Female	113	21.7
Age	21-30	259	50.6
	31-40	140	26.9
	41-50	78	15.0
	51-60	32	6.2
	61 and over	3	0.6

Some 160 of the respondents (32.1%) have education lower than bachelor, 142 (28.5%) with bachelor's degree, 104 (20.6%) post-graduate, and 94 (18.8%) others.

Table 3: Breakdown of Education Level of Respondents

Lower than bachelor	160	32.1
Bachelor's degree	142	28.5
Post graduate	103	20.6
Others	94	18.8
Missing	21	4.0
	520	100.0

Quite a large number of the respondents came under the category of academican. Some 149 (28.7%) came under this category, while 96 (18.5%) were in business, 20

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(3.8%) were in the professional group. While 12 (2.3%) considered themselves unemployed.

Table 4: Breakdown Types of Employment

	f	%
Academician	149	28.7
Businessman/ businesswomen	96	18.5
Manager	53	10.2
Professional	20	3.8
Unemployed	12	2.3
supporting staff	3	.6
others	151	29.0
Missing	23	4.4

**Why Middle East Tourists Visit Malaysia?**

Majority of the Middle East tourists visit Malaysia for holiday, rest and relaxation. This group comprised 69.8% of the respondents. Some 91 (17.5%) came to Malaysia for honeymoon, 70 (13.5%) for shopping, 28 (5.4%) for business. Those coming to Malaysia for sports and recreation comprised 31 (6.0%) and the rest came for various reasons including culture travels, meeting and official business. Therefore, Malaysia need to understand in great details the needs and wants for holiday trips to ensure the products and services offered are up or beyond the expectation of this lucrative segment. Honeymoon segment also need to be given serious attention as around 17 per cent of tourists come to Malaysia for that purpose. The needs and wants for honeymoon trips are quite distinctive and therefore requires more studies to fully understand the market.

Table 5: Why Middle East Tourists Visit Malaysia?

	f	%
Holiday,rest & relaxation	363	69.8
Honeymoon	91	17.5
Shopping	70	13.5
Education	67	12.9
Business	28	5.4
Visit Friends and Relatives	26	5.0

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Sports and Recreation	31	6.0
Culture Travels	17	3.3
Meeting, Incentive, Conference & Exhibition	10	1.9
Official Business	8	1.5
Health and Medical Treatment	6	1.2
Transit	2	0.4
Others	7	1.4

What Did The Tourists Do While in Malaysia?

Consistent with the reasons for coming to Malaysia, most tourists indicated they go for sightseeing in the city, visit beaches and visit islands. Very few of them were involved in cultural heritage and museum and historical sights. It would appear that majority of them prefer nature and the environment. It is very obvious that “city tourism” is the main type of touristic activities popular among the Arab tourists. This finding showed that is a need for the city municipal councils to work more closely with the Tourism Ministry to develop a more tourist friendly city for the Arabs. This is not only limited to the big cities like Kuala Lumpur and Penang but also other tourism-based cities like Malacca, Johor Bahru and Kuantan.

Table 6: What Did Middle East Tourists Do In Malaysia?

	f	%
Sightseeing in city	411	79.0
Visit beaches	317	61.0
Visit Islands	280	53.8
Highlands/hill resorts	273	52.5
Forests/national parks	254	48.8
Sightseeing in countryside	203	39.0
Museum and historical sights	122	23.5
Cultural heritage	36	6.9

Majority of respondents felt agreed with the statement that Malaysia offers good value for money. Some 37.2% strongly agreed with the statement, while 19.9% agree. Only 5.0% strongly disagree and 3.7% disagree. However, 24.4% are undecided.

Table 7: Malaysia Offers Good Value For Money

	f	%
Strongly Disagree	22	5.0
Disagree	16	3.7
Moderately Disagree	43	9.8
Undecided	107	24.4
Agree	87	19.9
Strongly Agree	163	37.2

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Total	438	100.00
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About one third of the respondents agreed with the statement that Malaysia exceeded their prior expectation. Taken together with “agree” some some 50.3% respondents said Malaysia exceeded their prior expectation. Only 10.2% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 8: Malaysia Exceed My Prior Expectation

	f	%
Strongly Disagree	24	4.6
Disagree	29	5.6
Moderately Disagree	47	9.0
Undecided	77	14.8
Agree	98	18.8
Strongly Agree	164	31.5
Total	439	84.4

Would the tourists visit Malaysia again in future? Some 57.5% said they would visit Malaysia again in future. This is a good indication that they tourists were quite happy with Malaysia and would probably visit Malaysia again. Only about 11.0% disagreed with the statement. However, whether they will come again depends on other factors such as economic factors, cost of coming to Malaysia and the attraction of other tourist destination. Indeed, the economic recession unfolding in the world today appeared to have an effect on the tourist arrivals from the Middle East.

Table 9: I Will Visit Malaysia Again in Future

	f	%
Strongly Disagree	40	7.7
Disagree	17	3.3
Moderately Disagree	28	5.4
Undecided	55	10.6
Agree	92	17.7
Strongly Agree	207	39.8
Total	439	84.4

Large majority or almost 60 per cents of respondents indicated that they would certainly come back to Malaysia in their future trips. These findings implied that Malaysia has no problem in sustaining the arrivals of Middle East tourists if it keeps improving its tourism offerings and infrastructures. The tourism products need to be consistently rejuvenated to ensure there are always new experiences to the returning tourists.

### **Sources of Information**

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Majority of respondents obtained their travel information from the Internet and international satellite tv. Only 14.5% obtained their information from travel agencies, newspapers (10.9%), magazines (7.3%) and to a lesser extent, local and national tv (1.0%) and radio (0.5%).

Malaysia should start finding the most ideal ways to reach the Arab tourists via the internet media. More studies are required to understand how the Arab tourists use the internet for tourism consumption. Concerted efforts among the various types of tourism players in Malaysia should be made to produce the most comprehensive tourism portal specially targeting the Arab tourists.

Table 10: Main Sources of Information

	f	%
Internet	150	36.3
International Satellite TV	84	20.3
Travel Agencies	60	14.5
Newspapers	45	10.9
Travel Fairs	38	9.2
Magazines	30	7.3
Local and National TV	4	1.0
Radio	2	0.5
Total	413	100.0

However, friends and relatives appeared high in the respondents source of information on Malaysia. Almost 80% rely on their friends and relatives for their information on Malaysia. Second to that is the internet, mass media, travel agents and promotional materials.

Personal sources particularly friends and relatives are found to be very powerful to influence the Arabs with regard to tourism consumption. Therefore, strategy needs to be formulated to determine the “opinion leaders” in the Arab communities to help promote Malaysia as a prime tourist destination in this part of the world. This opinion leaders can be the celebrities, politicians, academicians, or sportmen who will be acting as the tourism ambassador for Malaysia. Apart from appearing in the advertisements, they will also have their own “travel forum” in websites to communicate with the public.

Table 11: Sources of Tourists Information on Malaysia

	f	%
Friends & Relatives	415	79.8
Internet	272	52.3
Mass media	104	20.0
Books and Guide	77	14.8
Travel Agents	63	12.1

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Promotional materials	39	7.5
Tourism Malaysia ads	23	4.4
Airlines	22	4.2
Broadcast materials	16	3.1
Trade fairs/exhibition	15	2.9

#### What The Tourists Think of Malaysia?

Middle East tourists felt Malaysians are friendly people. They also felt that Malaysia is a safe destination. They also think Malaysia in terms of variety of goods available in Malaysia. The fact that people in Malaysia are friendly and the destination is safe will make people wanting to come again and again. This will contribute to sustaining their arrivals.

Malaysia must not be comfortable with the above favorable findings. To be a world-class tourist destination, Malaysia must be known more for its tourist spots, destinations and services. Thus, Malaysia should go all out promoting its unique and distinctive tourism products and services that cannot be found anywhere else.

Table 11: What The Tourists Think of Malaysia?

	f	%
Friendly people	173	33.3
Safe destination	164	31.5
Variety of goods	102	19.6

#### **Perception of Malaysia**

This paper also look at the perception of Middle East Tourists before coming to Malaysia and after visiting Malaysia. The perception is based on four continuum, namely:

- i. Pleasant-Unpleasant Continuum
- ii. Arousing-Sleepy Continuum
- iii. Relaxing-Distressing Continuum
- iii. Exciting-Gloomy Continuum

The following tables show their response. Generally, their perception of Malaysia do not change much between before coming and after coming.

The image of Malaysia as a tourist destination is found to be highly favorable among the Middle East tourists. This study shows that this phenomenon is true for both before and after they actually visited Malaysia. Large majority of respondents (more than 55 per cents) found Malaysia to be a pleasant, arousing, relaxing as well as exciting country for vacation. However, there are still a lot of rooms for improvement as more than 10 per cents of respondents were found to be in the “undecided” situation, before as well as after their visits.

i. On Pleasant-Unpleasant Continuum

	f		Up/Down
	Before Coming	After Coming	
Unpleasant	5.3	4.3	Down 1.0
Just unpleasant	3.8	2.0	Down 1.8
Not so unpleasant	5.3	4.8	Down 0.5
Undecided	11.1	12.7	Up 1.6
Just pleasant	16.3	18.7	Up 2.4
Pleasant	58.3	57.5	Down 0.8
Total	100.0	100.0	

ii. Arousing-Sleepy Continuum

	Before Coming	After Coming	Up/Down/
Sleepy	3.9	4.4	Up 0.5
Just sleepy	3.9	2.8	Down 1.10
Not so sleepy	6.5	6.7	Up 0.2
Undecided	13.2	13.1	Down 0.1
Just arousing	14.8	17.9	Up 3.1
Arousing	57.7	55.1	Down 2.6
Total	100.0	100.0	

iii. Relaxing-Distressing Continuum

	f		Up/Down
	Before Coming	After Coming	
Distressing	2.6	3.7	Up 1.1
Just Distressing	4.9	3.4	Down 1.5
Not So Distressing	8.3	8.2	Down 0.1
Undecided	13.0	13.9	Up 0.9
Just Relaxing	13.5	15.3	Up 1.8
Relaxing	57.7	55.5	Down 2.2
Total	100.0	100.0	

iv. Exciting-Gloomy Continuum

	f		Up/Down
	Before Coming	After Coming	
Gloomy	3.4	4.2	Up 0.8
Just gloomy	4.2	6.1	Up 1.9

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Not so gloomy	8.2	7.7	Down 0.5
Undecided	11.1	11.9	Up 0.8
Just exciting	15.9	16.4	Up 0.5
Exciting	57.1	53.8	Up 0.7
Total	100.0	100.0	

### **Comparing Malaysia With Other Countries**

Attempt is also made to compare perception of Arab tourists by comparing Malaysia with other tourist destinations using the following 10 attributes, namely: Tourism product & Services, Natural Environment, Value for money, Food & Cuisine, Entertainment, Safety, Shopping, Transportation, Accommodation, and Hospitality. Table 12 represents their perceptions.

### **Analysis of Perception Of Competing Destinations**

It can be implied from the results that the Arab tourists found that Malaysia is less superior compared to the competing destinations in offering 8 out of the 10 tourism attributes under study. Malaysia is perceived to be ahead of a few countries only with respect to its natural environment and entertainment product and services.

Majority of the respondents indicated that many countries are doing better or more satisfactorily than Malaysia in terms of safety (38.5%), accommodation (40.2%), tourism product & services(38.7%), hospitality (36%), food & cuisine(39%), transportation (36.7%), shopping(29.9%) and value for money destination(34.3%).

These findings were not surprising as Malaysia can still be considered as a new long-haul destination among the Arab tourists when compared to destinations in Europe and the North America. Countries like the United States, Germany, and United Kingdom were used to be among their most favoured holiday destination to escape the hot summer in the Arab worlds and of course these highly developed countries are very advanced in terms of their tourism and hospitality offerings.

Although majority or 29.9% indicated that many countries exceeded Malaysia with regard to shopping facilities, another 27.3% believed that Malaysia is ahead of a few countries for the same attribute.

Malaysia is also found to be ahead of a few countries with regards to hospitality, safety, and tourism products and services by a total of 27.7%, 27.3%, and 26.2% of respondents respectively.

However, only very small percentages of respondents (not more than 11%) feel that Malaysia is ahead of many other countries with regards to all the 10 attributes. In other words, there are many other countries throughout the world that manage to provide much more better services to cater for the needs of the Arab tourists compared to Malaysia.

Even though more and more Middle East tourists choose to come to Malaysia, Malaysia still need to enhance its image to draw more of these tourists to Malaysia.

Table 12. Comparing Malaysia With Other Tourist Destinations (Countries)

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	Tourism product & Services	Natural Environment	Value for money	Food & Cuisine	Entertainment	Safety	Shopping	Transportation	Accommodation	Hospitality
Many countries exceeded Malaysia	38.7	28.0	34.3	39.0	26.7	38.5	29.9	36.7	40.2	36.0
A few countries exceeded Malaysia	19.9	21.4	25.9	24.5	24.6	19.8	21.2	25.1	23.5	19.1
Malaysia is about the same level with other countries	6.3	7.5	11.3	6.6	14.4	7.9	10.6	9.2	9.1	10.8
Malaysia is ahead of a few countries	26.2	35.2	18.8	19.5	27.0	27.3	27.7	22.7	21.2	26.6
Malaysia is ahead of many countries	8.9	7.8	9.6	10.4	7.4	6.5	10.6	6.4	6.1	7.6
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

### **Conclusion**

Malaysia may have been successful in tourism promotion but it has to do a lot more inside the country. This paper has indicated some pertinent points with regards to views and perceptions of Middle East tourists about Malaysia.

We have seen travel agents in Middle East promote Malaysia as a tourist destination. Tourism Malaysia also promotes heavily in international media. There is a very slight discrepancy between what is promoted and what is real. This discrepancy should be corrected.

In general, Malaysia holds a positive and favorable images among the Arab tourists. However, Malaysia needs to keep enhancing and innovating its tourism product and services to provide new travel experiences to the returning tourists. The internet media need to be fully utilized in promoting the country not only because it has become very popular among the Arabs but also because of its effectiveness.

### **References**

1. Tourism Malaysia. Malaysia Profile 07 of Tourists by Selected Markets.
2. Data for Graphs, Tables and Charts Are from Tourism Malaysia.

