

In the mood for ambience tourism

Local homestays see surge in popularity as visitors seek authentic cultural experiences

INCREASINGLY, travellers are choosing destinations not for iconic landmarks or a packed itinerary of activities, but for something far less tangible – the atmosphere.

Known as ambience tourism, the concept shifts the focus from where people go, to how they feel while they are there.

Widely embraced by Malaysia's homestay operators, this emerging trend offers visitors the chance to immerse themselves in the rhythms of local life, where tranquillity, nostalgia and authentic human connections take centre stage.

Latest figures from the Statistics Department underscore the growing appeal of this form of travel.

The proportion of domestic tourists choosing homestays rose sharply from 3.4% in 2022 to 8.6% in 2024, reflecting changing travel preferences and the sector's expanding potential.

Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry (Motac) also projected that Malaysia's homestay industry could generate up to RM200mil during Visit Malaysia 2026.

Homestays form part of Malaysia's community-based tourism model, where guests live with host families and participate in their daily routines, offering an experience that goes far beyond conventional accommodation.

Memories and heritage

For many homestay operators, the greatest attraction lies in recreating the charm of traditional village life.

One such example is Laman Bendang Homestay in Sungai Haji Dorani, Sungai Besar, Selangor, where guests can stay in a beautifully preserved traditional Malay house.

Originally belonging to the family of Mohd Shuib Bahari, 42, the nearly 60-year-old house showcases classic Malay architecture through its timber construction, featuring premium hardwoods such as *cengal*, *balau* and *meranti*.

Inside, antique furniture and everyday household items once commonly used by Malay families – from earthenware jars to traditional kitchen utensils – evoke memories of a bygone era.

"We decided to open it to the public because of its immense heritage value," Mohd Shuib told Bernama.

Beyond spending the night in a traditional Malay home, visitors can experience village life through activities such as fishing, catching fish by hand in muddy paddy fields, cycling around the village and playing traditional games.

To complete the rural experience, guests are also treated to an array of authentic kampung dishes.

For visitor Mohd Rozaidy Shukry, staying at the homestay rekindled cherished childhood memories of returning to his grandparents' village during



The Laman Bendang Homestay at Sungai Haji Dorani in Sungai Besar, Selangor, features a traditional Malay house in a tranquil rural environment. — Bernama

school holidays.

"This is the unique experience I want to share with my children and the rest of my family."

For Kamarul Zaman Ajid, 65, owner of Firka Homestay in the same village, turning his family home into a homestay was driven by a desire to preserve and share his family's legacy.

The house, which is about the same age as he is, once sheltered him and his 11 siblings throughout their childhood.

"This family home is more than just a building."

"It represents the long history of our extended family and I want visitors to experience the sentimental value it holds."

Unlike many homestays that organise structured activities, Firka Homestay allows guests to enjoy the peaceful surroundings of its paddy field landscape at their own pace.

"Many guests tell me they appreciate the calm atmosphere and enjoy having uninterrupted time to simply relax during their stay," said Kamarul.

Natural advantage

Commenting on Malaysia's potential as an ambience tourism destination, Assoc Prof Dr Siti Suriawati Isa said the country's greatest strength laid in its unique blend of culture, biodiversity and community life, where traditional values and close-knit neighbourhoods remained very much alive.

The lecturer, from Universiti Putra Malaysia Forestry and Environment Faculty's Recreation and Ecotourism Department in the, said the country's diverse landscapes from forests and beaches to islands, combined with its multicultural communities, rich culinary traditions and living heritage provided the authentic local identity increasingly



Mohd Shuib says visitors can experience village life through activities such as fishing, cycling and playing traditional games.

sought by modern travellers.

She added that Malaysia also enjoyed competitive travel costs, good accessibility and widespread use of English, making it easier for international visitors to explore the country.

However, Siti Suriawati believes these strengths have yet to be translated into well-structured tourism products capable of competing on the global stage.

"Many tourism products still operate independently instead of being packaged into complete experiences that are easy for international travellers to understand and book."

"Many homestay operators are also not registered with Motac, limiting opportunities for international promotion," she noted.

She said the global rural tourism market continued to record steady growth and was estimated to be worth US\$126.88bil (RM516.78bil) in 2026, according to market research firm Coherent Market Insights, with the market projected to reach

US\$210.50bil (RM857.37bil) by 2033, driven largely by Millennials and Generation Z travellers seeking authentic, immersive and experience-driven travel.

In Malaysia, Motac data for 2024 shows that rural tourism continues to support the rural microeconomy.

Although its contribution remains modest compared with the national tourism industry's RM291.9bil contribution, or 15.1% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), its direct economic impact on local communities is particularly significant.

Siti Suriawati cautioned that ambience tourism must be developed responsibly to avoid excessive commercialisation that could erode the authenticity of destinations.

"When a destination becomes overly driven by tourism demand, its culture and atmosphere may gradually be altered or staged purely to satisfy visitors, eventually losing the very identity that makes it attractive in the first place."

"A successful destination is one that generates income without sacrificing the identity that defines it," she said.

She added that uncontrolled development could also threaten the village landscapes that form one of Malaysia's greatest ambience tourism assets.

Understanding the market

Uzaidi Udani, founder of Your Inbound Matters (an online community platform for Malaysia's tourism industry) said the key challenge now was determining how existing tourism assets could be transformed into ambience tourism products that appealed to different international markets.

He said every visitor segment

has distinct preferences.

"European travellers generally appreciate nature, local culture and rural lifestyles, while regional visitors such as those from Singapore tend to look for short but peaceful nature-based escapes."

"Japanese and Korean tourists also present strong potential because they value tranquillity, authenticity, aesthetics and meaningful interaction with local communities."

"Meanwhile, Millennials and Generation Z are increasingly searching for experiences that are personal, memorable and worth sharing on social media."

However, Uzaidi believes one of Malaysia's biggest weaknesses is that many rural tourism products are still not truly "bookable" for the global market.

"We already have the products and the ambience."

"What we still lack is clearly identifying our target market, defining the experience we are selling, offering competitively priced packages, providing seamless booking systems and explaining why international tourists should choose Malaysia over other destinations."

"Travellers want to be able to imagine the experience they will have even before they arrive."

Uzaidi believes the future of ambience tourism in Malaysia depends on the industry's ability to move beyond simply selling an atmosphere, towards building a well-structured, high-value experience economy.

"If we succeed in making that transformation, ambience tourism has the potential to evolve from a niche segment into a new driver of Malaysia's tourism industry, especially as more global travellers seek slower, more authentic and meaningful travel experiences," he said.