

ASSESSING MUSLIM-FRIENDLY RURAL TOURISM READINESS IN BALIK PULAU, MALAYSIA: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *Balik Pulau, on the western side of Penang Island, combines orchards, rural landscapes, agricultural heritage, creative enterprises and family-oriented attractions. Yet its readiness to operate as an integrated Muslim-friendly rural tourism destination remains insufficiently documented. This study assesses five attraction clusters: Container Art Kampung Terang and countryside cycling, Countryside Stables, Lokarisma Studio, Bao Sheng Durian Farm and Audi Dream Farm. An exploratory qualitative case study was conducted through structured document analysis of official standards, institutional sources, operator webpages and peer-reviewed literature available. Evidence was coded against nine dimensions that integrate faith-based needs, destination-supply readiness and Maqasid al-Shariah. Balik Pulau demonstrates strong potential in nature-based recreation, agricultural and creative learning, family bonding and local enterprise. However, publicly verifiable evidence remains uneven for halal food assurance, prayer and ablution access, water-friendly washrooms, privacy, accessibility, safety procedures and formal Muslim-friendly recognition. The attractions should therefore be characterised as potentially Muslim-friendly rather than certified or fully ready.*

Keywords: *Agritourism; Balik Pulau; Destination readiness; Maqasid al-Shariah; Muslim-friendly tourism; Rural tourism*

Introduction

Muslim-friendly tourism has moved from a niche proposition to a strategically important segment of the international visitor economy. The Global Muslim Travel Index 2026 estimates that international Muslim arrivals reached 196 million in 2025 and may reach 262 million by 2030, while Malaysia retained the leading Organisation of Islamic Cooperation destination position for an eleventh consecutive year (CrescentRating, 2026; Islamic Tourism Centre [ITC], 2026). This growth increases the need for destinations to provide credible halal information, prayer access, appropriate sanitation, tourist information and guide, safe family experiences and transparent service assurances rather than relying on broad promotional labels (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Saiman, 2024; Jamaludin et al., 2023).

Halal tourism, Islamic tourism and Muslim-friendly tourism overlap but are not conceptually identical. Halal tourism usually denotes tourism products and activities that comply with Islamic principles, whereas Muslim-friendly tourism is a more flexible service orientation that enables Muslim travellers to meet faith-based needs without necessarily claiming comprehensive Shariah compliance (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Muslim & Harun, 2022). In Malaysia, MS 2610:2015 and the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) programme provide formal reference points for verifiable service delivery and caution against unsupported self-labelling (Department of Standards Malaysia, 2015; ITC, n.d.).

Rural destinations can broaden Malaysia's Muslim-friendly portfolio beyond established urban, heritage and resort settings. Balik Pulau, situated on the western side of Penang Island, offers paddy landscapes, orchards, farms, craft activities, cycling routes and small-scale tourism enterprises (Tan & Abdullah, 2022; Explore Balik Pulau Venture, n.d.). For geographical precision, the MyCensus 2020 population of 132,344 refers to the P.053 Balik Pulau parliamentary constituency rather than the entire Barat Daya administrative district (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2026; Tan & Abdullah, 2022).

Previous work identifies Balik Pulau as a promising agritourism area but also reports inadequate infrastructure, labour constraints, seasonal income, limited institutional support and pressure from urban development (Tan & Abdullah, 2022; Yanan et al., 2024). More broadly, sustainable rural tourism depends on community participation, local value retention, environmental stewardship and coordinated destination governance (An & Alarcón, 2020; Yanan et al., 2024). What remains underexamined is whether Balik Pulau's attractions collectively support Muslim travellers across the entire visitor journey? To what extent are rural tourism destinations systematically ready to accommodate Muslim travellers, beyond the attractiveness of their individual tourism products? The presence of farms, orchards and recreational activities does not necessarily indicate that visitors can access reliable halal information, suitable prayer arrangements, appropriate sanitation, safe facilities and other relevant services throughout their visit.

Therefore, Muslim-friendly readiness in Balik Pulau has not been systematically assessed across the selected rural and agritourism attractions in an integrated manner within the scope of this study. Existing knowledge of the area's tourism potential and operational constraints provides a useful foundation, but it does not necessarily establish whether the attractions and

their supporting services collectively meet the relevant needs of Muslim travellers. Furthermore, comparatively limited attention has been given to the journey-level rural destination system: the interconnected sequence of attractions, transportation, food services, prayer facilities, visitor information, sanitation and other supporting arrangements that shape the overall travel experience. An attraction may offer suitable individual experience while the wider destination remains difficult to navigate because supporting services are inaccessible, insufficiently coordinated or inadequately documented.

This study addresses that gap through an exploratory case study of five attraction clusters. Document analysis is appropriate for establishing a transparent preliminary evidence base, while case study logic supports contextual examination of a destination system in its real-world setting (Bowen, 2009; Crowe et al., 2011). The study does not present a certification audit or substitute documentary inference for on-site verification; instead, it distinguishes documented provision from partial evidence and unresolved verification needs. The purpose of this study has two objectives; firstly, to identify the experiential and potentially Muslim-friendly attributes of selected rural and agritourism attractions in Balik Pulau. Secondly, to assess the attractions through faith-based needs, destination-supply readiness and Maqasid al-Shariah.

The study contributes by reframing Muslim-friendly rural tourism as an evidence-based readiness problem rather than a promotional category. It also operationalizes Maqasid al-Shariah through observable concerns involving faith practice, safety, knowledge, family well-being, local economic benefit, and environmental responsibility.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Rural Tourism, Agritourism and Muslim-Friendly Tourism

Rural tourism, agritourism and Muslim-friendly tourism represent distinct but potentially complementary approaches to tourism development. Although these concepts overlap in their emphasis on visitor experiences and destination services, they differ in their primary objectives, operational characteristics and evaluative requirements. Understanding these distinctions is essential for developing an integrated framework for Muslim-friendly rural agritourism, particularly in destinations where agricultural activities, local livelihoods and religiously informed visitor expectations intersect. Rural tourism encompasses tourism activities conducted in non-urban environments, where visitors engage with natural landscapes, local culture, traditional lifestyles, agriculture and community-based experiences (UN Tourism, n.d.). Lane (1994) distinguishes rural tourism from conventional urban or resort tourism through its association with low population density, traditional social structures and rural economic activities, including farming and forestry. In Malaysia, rural tourism extends beyond homestay programmes to include tourism products reflecting the environmental, cultural, social and economic characteristics of rural communities (Lo et al., 2015). These perspectives establish rural tourism as a potential instrument for local economic development and cultural preservation. However, the existence of rural attractions does not automatically translate into sustainable tourism outcomes. The extent to which local communities participate in tourism planning, retain economic benefits and protect their environmental and cultural resources remains central to determining its developmental value.

Agritourism represents a more specialised form of rural tourism in which agricultural activities constitute a central component of the visitor experience. Phillip et al. (2010) distinguish agritourism according to the relationship between tourism and agricultural production, while Ammirato et al. (2020) highlight its potential to diversify farm income and strengthen rural

economic sustainability. Activities such as farm visits, harvesting, agricultural demonstrations, farm stays and direct engagement with farmers enable visitors to experience agriculture beyond its conventional productive function. Nevertheless, the economic diversification associated with agritourism should not be interpreted as an automatic benefit. Its contribution depends on the capacity of agricultural operators to manage visitors, maintain productive activities, develop appropriate facilities and balance commercial objectives with agricultural and environmental responsibilities.

The distinction between rural tourism and agritourism is therefore analytically significant. Rural tourism provides the broader destination context, whereas agritourism identifies a particular mechanism through which agricultural resources are transformed into tourism experiences. This distinction is especially relevant to Balik Pulau, where agricultural landscapes and farm-based attractions may form part of a wider rural tourism network. An assessment that treats all rural attractions as equivalent could overlook the specific operational requirements associated with agricultural activities, farm safety, food provision and direct interaction with agricultural production.

Muslim-friendly tourism introduces another analytical dimension by examining whether tourism services accommodate Muslim travellers' religious practices and associated service expectations. Previous research indicates that religion can influence destination choice, satisfaction and loyalty, although Muslim travellers differ in their levels of observance, demographic characteristics and travel purposes (Battour et al., 2012; Battour et al., 2017). Consequently, Muslim-friendly tourism should not be understood as a uniform package of requirements applicable identically to every traveller. Instead, it requires an appropriate balance between essential religious needs, service quality, accessibility and the diversity of visitor expectations. Besides, halal food assurance and access to prayer facilities are important components of this service environment, while sanitation, safety, privacy and reliable information contribute to the overall visitor experience (COMCEC, 2016; Saiman, 2024). Nevertheless, providing one or two Muslim-friendly facilities is insufficient to establish the readiness of an entire destination. A farm may offer an appropriate agricultural experience but remain difficult for Muslim visitors to access comfortably if food information is unclear, prayer arrangements are unavailable or essential facilities are inadequate. Muslim-friendly tourism must therefore be examined in relation to the wider destination service system rather than as an isolated characteristic of individual attractions. While the role of standards and guidelines further distinguishes evidence-based Muslim-friendly provision from general marketing claims. MS 2610:2015 establishes requirements relating to accommodation premises, tourism packages and tourist guides, while the Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) provides a recognition mechanism for qualifying businesses under its applicable guidelines (Department of Standards Malaysia, 2015; ITC, n.d.). However, the applicability of particular standards or recognition schemes must be considered in relation to the type of tourism operator and service being assessed. Such frameworks cannot simply be assumed to cover every farm, rural attraction or informal tourism enterprise. Concerns about the potential confusion between terms such as pork-free, halal-style and independently verified halal status further demonstrate the importance of clear evidence and transparent communication (Aziz, 2018; Battour & Ismail, 2016).

Rural Tourism, Agritourism and the Context of Balik Pulau

Rural tourism is frequently associated with economic diversification, local entrepreneurship, cultural preservation and the maintenance of rural livelihoods. There is potential contribution of rural tourism to local development and sustainability (Alarcón (2020); Yanan et al. (2024)).

However, these potential benefits should be critically evaluated rather than assumed to arise from tourism growth alone. Increased visitor numbers may generate additional income, but the distribution of benefits depends on local ownership, community participation, employment opportunities and the capacity of local enterprises to participate in tourism supply chains. Similarly, the commercial use of rural landscapes may support conservation when appropriately managed, but it may also create environmental pressures if tourism development exceeds local infrastructure and resource-management capacity.

These considerations are relevant to Balik Pulau, where durian orchards, animal farms, cycling routes, craft workshops and countryside landscapes provide opportunities to develop interconnected rural tourism experiences. Tan and Abdullah (2022) identify motivations among local agritourism entrepreneurs that include income generation, health, knowledge preservation and the sharing of agricultural practices. At the same time, infrastructure limitations, labour constraints, seasonal demand and development pressures can restrict the capacity of these enterprises to sustain tourism activities. These findings suggest that agritourism development is shaped by a relationship between local entrepreneurial motivations and the structural conditions within which rural businesses operate.

An important implication is that the presence of agricultural attractions should not be equated with the readiness of a destination to deliver a coordinated tourism experience. Individual farms may possess attractive resources and specialised knowledge, yet their contribution to destination development depends on connectivity with other services, visitor information, transportation, sanitation and supporting facilities. Seasonal agricultural production may also influence the availability and consistency of visitor experiences. Consequently, the assessment of Balik Pulau should consider both the strengths of individual attractions and the organisational arrangements required to connect them into a coherent destination offering.

The Muslim-friendly dimension introduces additional requirements into this relationship. Although the agricultural setting may provide family-oriented and educational experiences, the suitability of these attractions for Muslim visitors depends on the availability and accessibility of appropriate supporting services. COMCEC (2016) and ITC (n.d.) highlight the importance of service provision and destination-level arrangements in Muslim-friendly tourism. In the context of smaller rural enterprises, however, the resources required to establish dedicated prayer facilities, obtain relevant halal-certification expertise, maintain accessible washrooms and implement formal visitor-management procedures may be difficult to secure independently. This creates a potential mismatch between the attractiveness of rural tourism resources and the capacity of local operators to accommodate Muslim travellers consistently. Importantly, this mismatch should not be interpreted as evidence that small operators are inherently unsuitable for Muslim-friendly tourism. Rather, it raises questions about the distribution of responsibilities between individual businesses, local communities and destination-management stakeholders. Shared facilities, verified visitor information, coordinated prayer-stop arrangements and operator training may offer more practical solutions than requiring every small enterprise to independently establish the same infrastructure. Such arrangements could strengthen destination readiness while preserving local participation, although their feasibility would need to be evaluated against the geographical distribution of attractions, visitor demand and available resources. The literature therefore indicates that the development of Muslim-friendly agritourism in Balik Pulau requires more than the promotion of agricultural attractions. It requires an understanding of how local enterprises, shared facilities and destination-level coordination interact to support a satisfactory visitor experience. While previous studies provide a basis for understanding entrepreneurial motivations and rural tourism constraints (Tan

& Abdullah, 2022), further assessment is needed to determine how these factors influence the actual availability and accessibility of Muslim-friendly services across the destination. This distinction provides a rationale for evaluating readiness at both the attraction and destination levels rather than relying solely on the presence of tourism products.

Faith-Based Needs and Destination-Supply Readiness

Faith-based requirements are important considerations in the design and evaluation of Muslim-friendly tourism services. The literature identifies halal food, prayer facilities, Ramadan-related arrangements, suitable washroom facilities, avoidance of prohibited activities and privacy in selected recreational settings as relevant components of the Muslim travel experience (COMCEC, 2016; Saiman, 2024). However, the practical significance of these requirements extends beyond whether individual facilities exist. Their usefulness depends on their accessibility, adequacy, reliability and integration into the visitor journey. Battour and Ismail (2016) and ITC (n.d.) support the importance of considering tourism services within a broader destination context. Accommodation, food services, transportation, attractions, tour operations and visitor information collectively influence the quality of the travel experience. This perspective challenges approaches that assess Muslim-friendliness through isolated indicators, such as whether a restaurant serves halal food or whether a particular attraction provides a prayer space. Even where individual services are available, gaps between them may create difficulties for visitors travelling between attractions or planning their activities around prayer times.

Destination-supply readiness should therefore be understood as a multidimensional construct involving both the availability of relevant services and the capacity to deliver them consistently. For example, the presence of a prayer facility does not necessarily demonstrate effective provision if visitors cannot readily locate it, access it during operating hours or obtain accurate information about its suitability. Similarly, an operator's claim that food is halal requires evidence appropriate to the nature of the claim. This distinction is particularly important where the terminology used in tourism marketing may not clearly communicate whether halal status has been independently certified, otherwise documented or merely assumed.

However, a further analytical distinction concerns the difference between the absence of prohibited elements and the positive provision of appropriate services. A tourism site that does not serve alcohol, for instance, cannot automatically be considered fully Muslim-friendly if food assurance remains unclear, essential facilities are inaccessible or visitor safety is inadequately managed. Likewise, privacy in a recreational setting cannot be established merely by describing a facility as private; its actual arrangements and operational controls must support that claim. These examples demonstrate why negative indicators, such as the absence of certain activities, should be distinguished from positive indicators that establish the adequacy of Muslim-friendly services.

The implications are especially important for rural destinations, where informal business practices and variations in infrastructure may affect the availability of documentary evidence. An assessment based solely on operator statements risks overstating readiness, whereas an assessment based exclusively on formal certification may overlook relevant services provided by small enterprises. A more balanced approach should distinguish between verified provision, partially documented provision and requirements that remain unverified. This approach enables the researcher to identify both existing strengths and areas requiring further investigation without treating the absence of documentation as conclusive proof that a service does not exist.

Accordingly, the present study conceptualises destination readiness as the relationship between faith-based requirements, the services available to meet them and the evidence supporting their implementation. Documentary review can establish the existence of policies, certificates, facilities or published information, while field observation and stakeholder engagement can help determine whether these arrangements are accessible and operational. The combination of these approaches is particularly relevant to Balik Pulau because the readiness of a rural tourism destination may vary between individual attractions and the wider service network.

The central analytical implication is that Muslim-friendly destination readiness should not be reduced to a checklist of facilities. Instead, it should examine whether the destination provides a coherent, accessible and sufficiently evidenced service environment across the visitor journey. This perspective provides a more defensible basis for identifying readiness gaps and prioritising improvements than an assessment based only on the presence or absence of individual facilities.

Maqasid al-Shariah as an Evaluative Framework

Maqasid al-Shariah provides a normative framework for evaluating whether tourism development promotes human welfare, secures benefits and prevents harm. The five widely recognised necessities are the preservation of religion (hifz al-din), life (hifz al-nafs), intellect (hifz al-'aql), lineage or family (hifz al-nasl) and wealth (hifz al-mal) (Auda, 2008; Department of Islamic Development Malaysia [JAKIM], 2021). These objectives provide a basis for examining tourism beyond commercial performance, allowing the assessment to consider religious accommodation, personal safety, educational value, family well-being and economic benefits. In Muslim-friendly rural tourism, the preservation of religion may be reflected in reliable halal information, appropriate food provision and accessible prayer arrangements. The preservation of life may inform assessments of farm safety, sanitation, visitor protection and responsible environmental management. The preservation of intellect may be associated with educational experiences that develop visitors' understanding of agriculture, local knowledge and sustainable practices. Meanwhile, the preservation of family may guide the evaluation of family suitability, privacy and the accessibility of appropriate recreational activities. The preservation of wealth may inform assessments of fair pricing, local employment, income diversification and the distribution of economic benefits within rural communities (Harahap et al., 2025; Saiman, 2024).

Besides, translating these principles into tourism indicators requires careful conceptual reasoning. The five necessities are broad normative objectives rather than a ready-made operational checklist. A direct mapping between each objective and a particular facility may oversimplify the purposes of Islamic law and overlook the interactions between different dimensions of well-being. For example, improving access to prayer facilities may support the preservation of religion, but its practical value may also depend on personal safety, physical accessibility and the availability of accurate visitor information. Similarly, tourism activities that generate income may contribute to the preservation of wealth, but their overall contribution to welfare also depends on whether benefits are distributed fairly and environmental resources are managed responsibly. Thus, Auda (2008) provides a conceptual basis for understanding Maqasid al-Shariah as a framework oriented towards the purposes and outcomes of Islamic law. Applied to tourism research, this perspective encourages evaluation of the consequences of tourism practices rather than reliance on formal compliance alone. A destination may possess relevant facilities or claim to follow Muslim-friendly guidelines, yet the substantive objectives of Islamic law may not be adequately realised if services are inaccessible, visitors are exposed to avoidable risks or local communities receive limited benefits. Consequently, the evaluation

should consider not only whether a requirement is formally addressed but also whether its implementation contributes meaningfully to the intended objective.

The application of Maqasid al-Shariah also strengthens the relationship between Muslim-friendly tourism and sustainable rural development. Besides, Alarcón (2020) and Yanan et al. (2024) highlight the significance of community participation and environmental considerations in rural tourism. These concerns can be examined alongside the broader objectives of promoting welfare and preventing harm, although environmental sustainability and community participation should not be treated as automatically fulfilled by invoking Maqasid al-Shariah. Their relevance must be established through explicit indicators and evidence of actual practices. For the present study, Maqasid al-Shariah can therefore function as an evaluative lens through which destination readiness is interpreted, rather than as a substitute for empirical assessment. The framework can guide the development of indicators addressing religious accommodation, safety and sanitation, educational enrichment, family suitability, economic value and responsible resource management. Documentary evidence, field observations and stakeholder perspectives can then be used to examine the extent to which existing tourism arrangements support these objectives. This approach provides two analytical advantages. First, it connects operational Muslim-friendly requirements with the broader purposes of Islamic law, thereby avoiding an assessment limited to facilities and formal compliance. Second, it enables the study to evaluate rural tourism development in terms of both visitor needs and wider community welfare. However, the analytical value of the framework depends on clearly defining each indicator, identifying its relationship with the relevant objective and specifying the evidence required to support the assessment.

Thus, rural tourism provides opportunities for community development and the preservation of local resources, while agritourism creates a direct connection between agricultural production and visitor experiences (Lane, 1994; Phillip et al., 2010; Ammirato et al., 2020). Muslim-friendly tourism adds a service dimension by examining whether tourism products and supporting facilities accommodate the relevant needs of Muslim travellers (Battour & Ismail, 2016; COMCEC, 2016). Meanwhile, Maqasid al-Shariah provides a normative basis for assessing whether these arrangements contribute to religious practice, safety, knowledge, family welfare and economic well-being (Auda, 2008; JAKIM, 2021). Therefore, an integrated assessment is needed to evaluate Muslim-friendly rural agritourism readiness by examining the interrelationship between agricultural tourism resources, destination-level service provision, and the evaluative principles of Maqasid al-Shariah. In the context of Balik Pulau, this requires investigation into the extent to which existing attractions and supporting services accommodate Muslim travellers, the constraints experienced by tourism operators, and the improvements needed to strengthen destination readiness. The literature reviewed provides a conceptual foundation for this assessment, but the actual extent of the gap must ultimately be established through a systematic review of the relevant empirical studies, particularly research conducted in Malaysia and in comparable rural agritourism destinations.

Accordingly, this study can contribute by developing an evidence-based understanding of Muslim-friendly rural agritourism readiness in Balik Pulau. By integrating destination characteristics, faith-based service requirements and Maqasid al-Shariah, the study seeks to move beyond descriptive identification of tourism resources towards a more analytical evaluation of service adequacy, implementation gaps and opportunities for sustainable destination development. Its contribution would lie not merely in identifying what facilities and attractions are available, but in explaining how existing arrangements support Muslim-friendly tourism and where targeted improvements may be required.

Integrated Assessment Framework

Below shows the integrated framework for assessing Muslim-friendly rural tourism readiness.

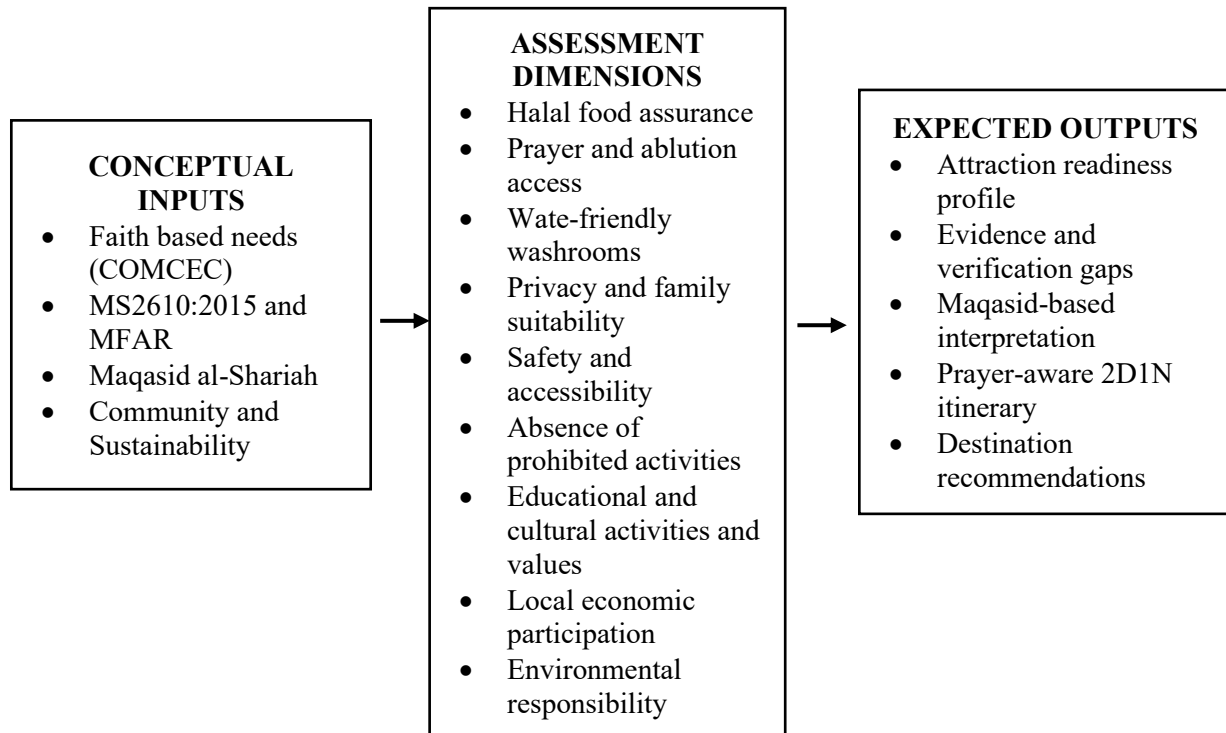


Figure 1: Integrated Framework for Assessing Muslim-friendly Rural Tourism Readiness

Source: Developed by the authors based on COMCEC (2026), MS 2610:2015 Department of Standards Malaysia (2025), Tumiran et al., 2025, Rohmatika et al., 2026.

The proposed framework conceptualises Muslim-friendly rural tourism readiness as a systematic assessment process that translates established Islamic tourism principles into measurable destination-level dimensions. The first component, conceptual inputs, draws on Muslim-friendly tourism requirements identified by COMCEC, the Malaysian Standard MS 2610:2015 Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services, the principles of Maqasid al-Shariah, and community-based sustainability considerations. MS 2610:2015 provides an important institutional foundation for Muslim-friendly hospitality in Malaysia, while COMCEC identifies essential Muslim-friendly tourism provisions such as halal food, prayer-related facilities and services that respond to the needs of Muslim travellers. Maqasid al-Shariah further strengthens the framework by moving beyond basic compliance towards the protection of religion, life, intellect, family and property, thereby positioning Muslim-friendly tourism as an ethical and socially responsible form of tourism rather than merely a collection of physical facilities (Tumiran et al., 2025).

These conceptual foundations are operationalised through the assessment dimensions, including halal food assurance, prayer and ablution access, water-friendly washrooms, privacy and family suitability, safety and accessibility, absence of prohibited activities, educational and cultural elements, local economic participation, and environmental responsibility. Collectively, these dimensions allow a rural attraction to be evaluated from both faith-based readiness and sustainable rural tourism perspectives, rather than focusing exclusively on halal food or prayer facilities. This approach is consistent with recent scholarship arguing that Muslim-friendly tourism should incorporate broader ethical, social and environmental responsibilities grounded

in Maqasid al-Shariah. The assessment subsequently produces practical outputs, namely an attraction-readiness profile, identification of evidence and verification gaps, Maqasid-based interpretation, a prayer-sensitive 2-day/1-night itinerary, and destination-level recommendations. Thus, the framework functions not only as an assessment tool but also as a decision-support mechanism for improving rural attractions in a manner that is Muslim-friendly, locally beneficial and environmentally responsible.

Methodology

Research Design and Data Sources

The study used an exploratory qualitative case study design and a structured document analysis procedure. Document analysis enables systematic review, interpretation and triangulation of documentary material, while case studies support contextual analysis of complex destination systems (Bowen, 2009; Crowe et al., 2011). Sources comprised: (i) attraction descriptions and the proposed itinerary in the source manuscript; (ii) Malaysian standards and institutional materials from COMCEC, the Department of Standards Malaysia, DOSM, ITC and JAKIM; (iii) official tourism directory and operator webpages; and (iv) peer-reviewed scholarship on Muslim-friendly tourism, Maqasid al-Shariah, rural tourism and agritourism. Targeted searches of publisher platforms, institutional repositories and official agency or operator websites were completed up to 17 August 2026 (Bowen, 2009; COMCEC, 2016).

Selection of Attractions

Five attraction clusters were purposively retained: Container Art Kampung Terang with countryside cycling, Countryside Stables, Lokarisma Studio, Bao Sheng Durian Farm and Audi Dream Farm. Together, they represent landscape, agriculture, animals, crafts, recreation and small-enterprise tourism documented in Balik Pulau (Penang Global Tourism, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Tan & Abdullah, 2022). The sample is illustrative rather than exhaustive and does not rank all attractions in the area; purposive case selection is appropriate when cases are chosen for their contextual and analytical relevance (Crowe et al., 2011; Bowen, 2009).

Assessment Criteria

Sustainable tourism as defined by The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is tourism that takes full account of current and future economic, social and environmental impact.

Table 1: Muslim-friendly Rural Tourism Assessment Criteria

Criterion	Operational Meaning
Halal food assurance	Availability of halal-certified or otherwise clearly verified food and beverages; separation from prohibited and cross-contamination risks.
Prayer and ablution access	Availability, proximity and usability of prayer space, <i>qiblah</i> , prayer times information and appropriate facilities
Water-friendly washrooms	Access to water for cleansing adequate hygiene and reasonable maintenance
Privacy and family suitability	Family-oriented environment, modesty considerations and evidence supporting claims of private recreational facilities
Safety and accessibility	Risk controls, animal-interaction procedures, emergency arrangements and acces for children, older persons and persons with disabilities

Absence of prohibited activities	No documented gambling, alcohol-centred entertainment, sexualised activities or other clearly prohibited in the proposed experience
Educational and cultural activities and values	Opportunities for agricultural, environmental, artistic or heritage learning
Local economic participation	Contribution to local entrepreneurs, employment, craft producers and community supply chains
Environmental responsibility	Protection of agricultural landscapes, waste management, carrying capacity and responsible interaction with animals and natural resources

Source: Criteria synthesised from COMCEC (2016), Department of Standards Malaysia (2015), ITC (n.d.), Auda (2008), and An and Alarcón (2020).

Analytical Procedure and Evidence Classification

The unit of analysis was publicly documented attraction-level service provision, interpreted within the journey-level destination system. Evidence was charted against the nine criteria in Table 1 and classified as documented, partially documented or not verified. Documented required an explicit statement in a current official, institutional or operator source; partially documented indicated indirect or incomplete support; and not verified indicated that reliable documentary evidence was not located. An absence of documentary evidence was not treated as proof that a facility was absent (Bowen, 2009). Findings were then interpreted through the five Maqasid dimensions and checked against rural-tourism sustainability principles.

Scope and Limitations

This preliminary assessment does not replace JAKIM halal verification, MFAR assessment, a safety or accessibility audit, or an on-site inspection. Operating hours, prices, ownership, food arrangements and facilities can change, and operator webpages may emphasise promotional information rather than audit-ready evidence (Bowen, 2009; ITC, n.d.). No tourists, operators, residents or public agencies were interviewed, and no inter-rater reliability statistic was calculated.

Study Context: Balik Pulau, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

Pulau lies within the Barat Daya area of Penang Island and is reached through hilly road corridors from the island's more urbanised eastern and northern areas. Its villages, orchards, small towns, craft enterprises and agricultural landscapes support a distinctive rural tourism proposition, while distance and limited transport integration can constrain visitors without private vehicles (Tan & Abdullah, 2022; Explore Balik Pulau Venture, n.d.). These characteristics make journey-level planning particularly important for prayer, meals, transport and emergency access (COMCEC, 2016; Saiman, 2024).

The P.053 Balik Pulau parliamentary constituency recorded 132,344 residents in MyCensus 2020, with Bumiputera forming the largest ethnic group, followed by Chinese, Indian and other communities (DOSM, 2026; Tan & Abdullah, 2022). This diversity contributes to Balik Pulau's local identity, food agriculture and small-enterprise base. The area should nevertheless be described as an established but incompletely coordinated agritourism setting, not as an untouched or undiscovered destination (Penang Global Tourism, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Explore Balik Pulau Venture, n.d.).

Balik Pulau's competitive advantage lies in the combination of landscape, food agriculture, experiential learning and locally anchored enterprise. Its principal risks include seasonal

dependence, uneven infrastructure, transport constraints, environmental pressure and commercial development that could erode rural character (Tan & Abdullah, 2022; An & Alarcón, 2020). Muslim-friendly positioning must therefore strengthen service assurance without displacing farmers, degrading agricultural landscapes or homogenising the destination's multicultural identity (Yanan et al., 2024; Harahap et al., 2025).

Findings: Preliminary Attraction Readiness

Overview of Selected Attractions

Sustainable tourism as defined by The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is tourism that takes full account of current and future economic, social and environmental impacts.

Table 2: Attraction Profiles and Principal Verification Needs

Attraction	Core Experience	Potential Strengths	Priority Verification Needs
Container Art Kampung Terang and Countryside Cycling	Outdoor art and guided rural cycling	Local identity, recreation and landscape learning	Verify prayer rooms, washrooms, route safety and weather plan
Countryside Stables	Horse and animal encounters	Family recreation and animal learning	Verify prayer rooms, halal foods, washrooms, accessibility, welfare and riding safety
Lokarisma Studio	Ceramic workshop and craft participation	Creative learning and support for local craft enterprise	Verify operations, prayer rooms, washrooms and accessibility
Bao Sheng Durian Farm	Orchard experience and farm stay	Agricultural learning and local produce and rural accommodation	Verify halal food, prayer rooms, safety and actual privacy
Audi Dream Farm	Animal and farm-based family attraction	Child-friendly learning and nature interaction	Verify halal food, prayer rooms, washrooms, welfare, heat controls and accessibility

Source: Attraction profiles draw on official operator and tourism sources; verification needs were assessed against COMCEC (2016), Department of Standards Malaysia (2015), and ITC (n.d.).

a. Container Art Kampung Terang and Countryside Cycling

The Kampung Terang installation was developed through the Penang International Container Art Festival and represents local farming and rural identity through public art (Penang International Container Art Festival [PICAF], n.d.; Penang Global Tourism, n.d.-c). When paired with guided countryside cycling, the attraction cluster provides landscape interpretation, active recreation and contact with paddy fields, villages, farms and other rural settings (Explore Balik Pulau Venture, n.d.; Matahari Cycle Tours, n.d.). These attributes can support *hifz al-'aql* through place-based learning and *hifz al-nafs* through active recreation when routes are safely managed.

The reviewed sources do not verify dedicated prayer facilities, water-friendly washrooms, sheltered rest areas or route-level emergency arrangements at the installation. A commercial

itinerary should therefore schedule a verified prayer and sanitation stop rather than assume complete on-site provision. Cycling operators should also document helmet provision, route difficulty, traffic exposure, child suitability, hydration, weather contingencies and emergency procedures (Explore Balik Pulau Venture, n.d.; Matahari Cycle Tours, n.d.).

b. Countryside Stables

Countryside Stables is listed as a rural attraction at Jalan Sungai Burung, Balik Pulau, and publishes visitor operating information through its tourism directory and operator pages (Penang Global Tourism, n.d.-a; Countryside Stables Penang, n.d.). Horse and animal encounters may promote family bonding and experiential learning, but the permissibility or cultural resonance of equestrian activity is not evidence of destination readiness. The service must also address safety, animal welfare, modesty, hygiene and accessibility.

Publicly available material does not sufficiently verify halal food assurance, prayer and ablution arrangements, water-friendly toilets or inclusive access. These matters require direct operator confirmation and on-site inspection under the evidence standards used in this assessment. Riding services should additionally publish age and weight limits, supervision arrangements, protective equipment requirements, emergency procedures and participant instructions, all of which are central to *hifz al-nafs*.

c. Lokarisma Studio

Lokarisma Studio provides appointment-based ceramic and pottery activities in Balik Pulau, adding a creative learning component to the destination portfolio (Lokarisma Studio, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Participatory craft experiences can preserve knowledge, encourage concentration and create local artisan value, corresponding to *hifz al-'aql* and *hifz al-mal*. Their small group format may also support family interaction when safety, accessibility and visitor comfort are appropriately managed.

The available sources provide limited detail on current capacity, booking procedures and Muslim-friendly facilities. Before commercial inclusion, the operator's location, schedule, group size, washroom condition, prayer contingency, ventilation, material safety and accessibility should be verified (Lokarisma Studio, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). The workshop should not be labelled Muslim-friendly solely because pottery is a permissible activity; the supporting journey and facilities also require evidence.

d. Bao Sheng Durian Farm

Bao Sheng Durian Farm presents itself as a third-generation orchard using organic farming techniques and offers durian tasting, farm visits and overnight accommodation in Sungai Pinang, Balik Pulau (Bao Sheng Durian Farm, n.d.; Tan & Abdullah, 2022). Its strongest Muslim-friendly potential lies in agricultural learning, nature appreciation, support for local produce and an extended rural stay. These attributes align with rural tourism goals, which must involve knowledge preservation and locally retained value (An & Alarcón, 2020; Yanan et al., 2024).

Several service claims require verification before Muslim-friendly marketing. A private pool does not by itself establish visual privacy, and food should not be described as halal without a verifiable certification or assurance basis (COMCEC, 2016; Department of Standards Malaysia, 2015). Prayer space, qiblah information, ablution access, room sanitation, emergency response and transport arrangements should be documented before the accommodation is promoted as Muslim-friendly (ITC, n.d.; Saiman, 2024).

e. Audi Dream Farm

Audi Dream Farm is an established family and school-group attraction in Sungai Rusa, Balik Pulau, with published farm-visit and animal-feeding packages (Audi Jaya Holdings, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Penang Global Tourism, n.d.-b). Animal interaction, planting and other farm activities can provide family recreation and experiential learning, supporting *hifz al-'aql* and *hifz al-nasl*. These strengths, nevertheless, concern the activity's educational suitability rather than the verified Muslim-friendly service readiness.

The principal evidence gaps concern halal food, prayer arrangements, water-friendly washrooms, accessibility, heat protection, hand-washing provision and animal-welfare procedures. These facilities and controls should be confirmed through a structured field audit rather than inferred from family-oriented marketing (COMCEC, 2016; Department of Standards Malaysia, 2015). Clear rules for feeding and touching animals, cleaning schedules, shaded rest points and procedures for allergies or mobility constraints would strengthen *hifz al-nafs* and inclusive visitor management.

Comparative Readiness

Table 3: Preliminary Documentary Readiness Matrix

Attraction	Halal Food	Prayer Facilities/ Water friendly suitability	Privacy and Family Suitability	Safety/ Accessibility	Absence of Prohibited Activity Documented	Educational and Cultural Activities and values	Local economic participation	Environmental responsibility
Container Art/ Country side Cycling	NA/ EMS	NV	PD	PD	D	D	D	D
Countryside Stables	NV	NV	PD	NV	D	D	D	D
Lokarisma Studio	NA/ EMS	NV	PD	NV	D	D	D	D
Bao Sheng Durian Farm	PD	NV	PD	PD	D	D	D	D
Audi Dream Farm	NV	NV	D	PD	D	D	D	D

Notes: Classifications reflect public evidence available up to 17 August 2026. 'Not verified' means that reliable documentary evidence was not located; it does not prove absence (Bowen, 2009; ITC, n.d.).

Documented: D; Partially Documented: PD; Not Verified: NV; Not applicable or external meal stop: NA/EMS.

Table 3 that the strongest evidence concerns educational activities and values, privacy and family-oriented activities, the absence of explicitly prohibited elements in the proposed experiences, local economic participation and environmental responsibility. The weakest evidence concerns the service infrastructure that converts a permissible attraction into a dependable Muslim-friendly journey, particularly halal assurance, prayer access, sanitation, accessibility and risk controls. Balik Pulau therefore has substantial Muslim-friendly potential, but the reviewed attractions should not all be presented as fully ready without field verification and coordinated improvements

Maqasid al-Shariah Analysis

Table 4: Application of Maqasid al-Shariah to The Balik Pulau Assessment

Maqasid Dimension	Tourism Application	Assessment Implication
Hifz al-Din (Religion)	Verified halal food information, prayer-aware scheduling, qiblah guidance, ablution access and avoidance of prohibited elements.	Currently the least documented dimension; requires destination-level coordination.
Hifz al-Nafs (Life)	Safe cycling, riding supervision, hygienic washrooms, hand-washing, heat protection, emergency procedures and safe accommodation	Relevant to every attraction and should be assessed through formal risk controls
Hifz al-‘Aql (Intellect)	Learning about agriculture, animals, ceramics, local identity and environmental stewardship	The strongest cross-attraction contribution in the current itinerary
Hifz al-Nasl (Family)	Wholesome family activities, child-friendly learning, modest conduct and genuine privacy where claimed	Strong potential, but privacy and child-safety arrangements require evidence
Hifz al-Mal (Wealth)	Transparent pricing, support for local operators, fair employment, craft sales, farm income and avoidance of misleading claims	Potentially significant for rural enterprise if benefits remain locally anchored

Source: Operational interpretation informed by Auda (2008), JAKIM (2021), Harahap et al. (2025), and Saiman (2024).

Balik Pulau's most clearly documented contributions lie in knowledge, family experience and local economic participation. These strengths do not compensate for weak documentary assurance under *hifz al-din* and *hifz al-nafs*, where prayer, halal food, sanitation and safety require priority attention. A credible strategy should therefore protect faith practice and visitor well-being while retaining the educational and community qualities that distinguish the destination (JAKIM, 2021; Saiman, 2024).

A Maqasid-based approach also requires environmental and social responsibility. Excessive visitor numbers, waste, inappropriate development, animal-welfare failures or the displacement of small farmers would undermine the claimed public benefit of destination growth. Carrying capacity, agricultural land protection, local participation and fair value distribution should consequently be treated as readiness conditions rather than optional sustainability add-ons (An & Alarcón, 2020; Yanan et al., 2024).

Discussion

Balik Pulau's value proposition does not depend on explicitly religious attractions. Its principal strength is a portfolio of permissible, educational and family-oriented experiences that can be organised around Muslim travellers' faith and service needs. This finding is consistent with evidence that Islamic destination attributes, motivation and satisfaction interact in shaping Muslim tourist experiences (Battour et al., 2012; Battour et al., 2017). It also supports a service-oriented understanding of Muslim-friendly tourism rather than a narrow focus on religious sightseeing (Muslim & Harun, 2022; Saiman, 2024).

The analysis also exposes a recurring destination-branding risk: appealing experiences may be described as Muslim-friendly without adequate evidence of the services that make the visitor journey feasible. Halal food, prayer access, sanitation, privacy and safety must be properly documented rather than assumed (COMCEC, 2016; Department of Standards Malaysia, 2015). Transparent statements specifying what is verified, what is nearby and what visitors must arrange themselves can strengthen trust and reduce reputational risk even where formal certification is not yet available (ITC, n.d.; Battour & Ismail, 2016).

Balik Pulau should consequently be managed as a coordinated destination ecosystem. Small individual operators may be unable to supply every facility independently, whereas a shared model can provide verified mapping, designated prayer stops, common visitor information, training, central booking, emergency coordination and shuttle services. This governance approach directly addresses infrastructure and institutional support constraints reported by Balik Pulau agritourism entrepreneurs and reflects wider rural-tourism evidence on collaboration and local participation.

From a Maqasid perspective, ceramic workshops, agricultural learning, animal interaction and local enterprise can generate benefits beyond leisure consumption through knowledge, family connection and rural value creation. These benefits remain conditional on safety, environmental capacity, animal welfare, fair participation and agricultural-land protection. Tourism growth that weakens rural livelihoods or converts farmland through poorly controlled commercialization would conflict with both sustainable rural-tourism principles and Maqasid-based public benefit.

In summary, the findings theoretically support Muslim-friendly rural tourism readiness whereby the attraction level assesses the permissibility, quality, and documented facilities of individual experiences, while the journey level examines meals, prayer, transport, sanitation, information, and risk management across the itinerary. This distinction explains how a destination can offer attractive and permissible activities while remaining operationally fragmented, and it turns conceptual differentiation in Muslim-friendly tourism into an auditable destination systems proposition.

Conclusion

Balik Pulau has a strong foundation for Muslim-friendly rural tourism through its orchards, countryside routes, animal attractions, ceramic activities and family-oriented setting. These assets can generate relaxation, learning, cultural appreciation and locally anchored economic value. The documentary assessment nevertheless finds stronger evidence for experiential suitability than for halal assurance, prayer and ablution access, water-friendly sanitation, privacy, safety and accessibility. Therefore, Balik Pulau has considerable Muslim-friendly potential, even though not every selected attraction is yet fully ready or formally recognized. Destination auditing, transparent mapping, minimum operator standards, community participation and environmental safeguards are the immediate priorities for credible market. Future research should combine structured on-site observation, operator and agency interviews, visitor surveys, halal-status verification, accessibility assessment and route testing across seasons. These methods would permit triangulation of the documentary categories and evaluation of visitor outcomes, thereby converting the preliminary framework into a validated destination-readiness model. Comparative application in other Malaysian rural destinations could also test transferability and clarify how local governance, infrastructure and community participation shape Muslim-friendly readiness.

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