

MANAGEMENT OF UMRAH PACKAGE OPERATIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF UMRAH OPERATING COMPANIES EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, Umrah package operations have recorded a significant increase every year. In the Malaysian context, the Umrah Service Management Manual (Manual Pengurusan Perkhidmatan Umrah, MPPU) serves as a guideline for umrah service operators to assist them in organizing umrah services for Malaysian pilgrims. Besides, the production of this Manual also aims to explain to the reader the orderly and systematic process in the administration and management of umrah. The publication of this Manual is a step by the Department of Awqaf, Zakat, and Hajj [1] to ensure that the umrah management process can be performed professionally and is the best for Muslims. Therefore, this study examines the management of umrah packages based on the Umrah Service Management Manual (MPPU). The study interviewed ten owners of different travel companies or agencies that offer hajj and umrah packages. The content analysis method was used to analyze the findings from the interviews. An analysis was performed on each transcript of the interviews using MPPU as a reference. The findings of the study found that the companies complied with the management guidelines for handling umrah packages as contained in the Umrah Service Management Manual (MPPU).

Keywords: Umrah Package, Umrah Operating Companies, Umrah Service Management Manual (MPPU)

INTRODUCTION

Umrah and Hajj are the *syariat* (religious rules) of Allah S.W.T which contain various secrets and wisdom. Among the wisdom that can be embraced is to train Muslims to be united in improving the *syiar* (greatness) of Islam, working together to uphold the religion of Allah S.W.T. The relationship between the Muslim community becomes closer, more cordial regardless of skin color, languages, customs, and cultures [2].

Umrah is performed, specifically, in the land of Mecca. Muslims from distant countries who wish to perform this worship need to prepare from the aspects of traveling, operations, worship, and so on that complete the umrah. Therefore, the presence of a party that provides umrah package operating services is vital for the convenience and completion of the worship to Muslims.

In the Malaysian context, the Umrah Service Management Manual (MPPU) has been prepared as a guideline for the management of umrah services to ensure more efficient operations. This manual will assist private travel agencies in organizing umrah services for Malaysian pilgrims. In addition, the preparation of this Manual also aims to provide an explanation to the reader about the orderly and systematic process in the administration and management of umrah [3].

The publication of this Manual is also a step by the Department of Awqaf, Zakat, and Hajj (JAWHAR)[1] to ensure that the umrah management process can be performed professionally and is the best for Muslims. Umrah package operations have recorded a significant increase every year in Malaysia. Muslims need to prepare from various aspects including travel, operations, and worship before leaving. So far, the handling of umrah operations is according to MPPU.

As umrah packages are among the most popular packages, some travel companies offer travel packages at cheap prices and attract a lot of attention. In the excitement of making a profit, the tourism companies involved have turned a blind eye and became selfish and prone to fraud. Following the cases of umrah fraud from 2012 to 2016, [4] found a few weaknesses in the existing management and legal systems. The introduction of the Consumer Protection Act 1999, which came into force on 15 November 1999, still could not curb some cases such as fraud. As a result, umrah companies are monitored and required to implement the regulations recommended by the government [5]. In addition, they need to be sensitive to changes in the current regulations and not act arbitrarily in their interests [6].

Thus, this study examines the experience of 10 companies that handle umrah packages. The experience is analyzed based on MPPU to observe the level of compliance of the companies in the management of umrah package handling as set by the Malaysian government.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative method which includes a content analysis of some literature and interviews with 10 owners of different companies or travel agencies that offer hajj and umrah packages. The following are the agencies involved in this interview for this study [7] [8].

1	Al-Nile Tour & Travel Sdn. Bhd
2	Az Zuha Group Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd
3	Daurah Travel & Tour
4	Jagong Mas Travel Sdn. Bhd.
5	Fadlim Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd
6	Rayhar Travels Sdn Bhd
7	Dasree Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd
8	Diaz Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd
9	Kembara Muslim Travel & Tours Sdn. Bhd.

10 Widad Tours & Travel Sdn. Bhd.

Content analysis is performed to analyse the data obtained through the interviews based on MPPU. A content analysis approach is used to systematically examine and explain the meaning and literal content of the documents studied as well as findings from interviews [9].

FINDINGS

The results of the findings are discussed through two main sections, namely as found in the MPPU:

Part 1: Umrah Package and Visa Management Procedures

Part 2: Umrah Pilgrims Operating Procedures

Part 1: Umrah Package and Visa Management Procedures

Before starting any umrah operation, the first thing a company must do is setting the price of the umrah package. The companies seemed to have a similar marketing strategy in promoting their umrah packages. In offering umrah packages, travel agents will generally consider two main criteria, namely transportation and accommodation [10, 11].

The determination of the package price is also influenced by the distance of the hotel, as stated by Tuan Haji Daud (CEO of Jagong Mas Travel Sdn. Bhd), Tuan Haji Azhar (Kembara Muslim Travel & Tours Sdn. Bhd), and representatives from Fadlim Travel & Tours Sdn and Al-Nile Tour & Travel Sdn. Bhd.

“...in promoting the package, the determination of the package price plays an important role. One of the factors taken into consideration is the distance between the hotel and concourse of the mosque, where the most expensive package is staying at the Hilton Hotel, which is only 50 meters from the concourse”.

Flights are selected based on the type of flight. Usually, the most expensive package flights are direct to Madinah from Kuala Lumpur. Hajah Fatimah, the Manager of Rayhar Travels Sdn Bhd., noted

“... another factor to consider is the type of flight, there are Pilgrims who are quite fussy with the type of flight that has we provide. However, it all depends on the package that has been selected”.

The public can avoid being deceived by illegal travel agencies if the determination and offering of umrah packages follow the MPPU guidelines, as stated by a representative from Dasree Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd.

“... with the existence of MPPU and public awareness about MPPU, it will automatically help the public to understand the Umrah management process to avoid them from being deceived”.

Regarding marketing strategy, despite digital advertising methods such as social media (Facebook and Instagram), the Word-of-Mouth marketing method is considered more popular as a marketing tool. This view was shared by Tuan Haji Abdul Hadi (Az Zuha Group Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd), Tuan Haji Wan Affendi (CEO, Diaz Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd), and representatives from Daurah Travel & Tour and Widad Tours & Travel Sdn. Bhd.

“... marketing strategy is more towards word-of-mouth... which is based on the experience gained by the pilgrims who have performed Umrah with us. In addition, we also use digital marketing through social media such as Facebook and Instagram”.

Next, the discussion focuses on the umrah visa management procedure, which is the visa application process by umrah pilgrims. In managing Umrah visas for pilgrims, Tuan Haji Daud, the CEO of Jagong Mas Travel Sdn. Bhd and a representative from Fadlim Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd stated that they have no problem. A small problem that often exists is only on incomplete documents.

“ ... 99.0 per cent of the time, there is no problem in handling the Pilgrims umrah visas. It is only a documentation process. Even if there is a problem, it only involves document matters, such as incomplete documents”.

This is because administering the Umrah documents is easy and can be performed by the staff. This opinion was expressed by Hajah Fatimah (Manager, Rayhar Travels Sdn Bhd), Tuan Haji Azhar (Kembara Muslim Travel & Tours Sdn. Bhd), and representatives from Dasree Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd and Al-Nile Tour & Travel Sdn. Bhd.

“ ... there is no problem in managing the umrah visas, it is only a documentation process. With complete documents.....the visas can be issued. If there is any problem, HQ will take care of it”.

Next, Tuan Haji Abdul Hadi (Az Zuha Group Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd), Tuan Haji Wan Affendi (CEO, Diaz Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd), and representatives from Daurah Travel & Tour and Widad Tours & Travel Sdn. Bhd stated that the management of umrah documents is easier than the registration process as an umrah operator.

“.....even an ordinary staff can handle the pilgrims' umrah documents...unlike handling the registration as an umrah operator”.

Part 2: Umrah Pilgrims Operating Procedures

This section discusses the findings of the umrah operations by focusing on the preparation made before departure, during umrah performance, and until the safe home return.

Guidance Courses and Reference Materials

Guidance courses and reference materials are important elements in providing information and guidance to the Umrah pilgrims. This information was shared from interviews with Tuan Haji Azhar (Kembara Muslim Travel & Tours Sdn. Bhd) and representatives from Al-Nile Tour & Travel Sdn. Bhd., Daurah Travel & Tour and Widad Tours & Travel Sdn. Bhd

“... before departure, i.e. during or after the handling of documents or visas, each Umrah pilgrim will be required to follow a guidance course, and reference materials are provided so that the pilgrims can use them as a guide while performing Umrah.”.

Tuan Haji Abdul Hadi (Az Zuha Group Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd), Hajah Fatimah (Manager, Rayhar Travels Sdn Bhd), Tuan Haji Wan Affendi (CEO, Diaz Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd), and a representative from Dasree Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd opined that during the guidance course, the umrah company must allocate some time for question-and-answer sessions.

“... during the course, it is necessary to provide question and answer session, and it is important to answer the Pilgrims' concerns”.

Tuan Haji Wan Affendi (CEO, Diaz Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd), Tuan Haji Azhar (Kembara Muslim Travel & Tours Sdn. Bhd) and representatives from Al-Nile Tour & Travel Sdn. Bhd. And Widad Tours & Travel Sdn. Bhd., meanwhile, stated that their company offers a special question and answer session for the Female Pilgrims.

“... we provide a female staff especially to female pilgrims to answer any relevant questions”.

Process of preparing guidance staff or officers

To ensure the smoothness of the Umrah pilgrimage management process, a representative from Al-Nile Tour & Travel Sdn. Bhd., Daurah Travel & Tour and Widad Tours & Travel Sdn. Bhd stated that their company has different staff or guidance officers for conducting umrah, namely before departure, during umrah, and returning home.

“ ... we have different staff to manage the umrah operation, the first while in the home country, then while performing umrah and finally returning home”.

Process of reviewing Pilgrims' documents

To ensure that there are no problems with the Pilgrims' documents and visas, Tuan Haji Daud (CEO, Jagong Mas Travel Sdn. Bhd), Tuan Haji Azhar (Kembara Muslim Travel & Tours Sdn. Bhd), and representatives from Al-Nile Tour & Travel Sdn. Bhd.

And Widad Tours & Travel Sdn. Bhd stated that it is important that the Pilgrims' documents are reviewed from time to time.

"... the umrah review process is done in three stages, namely before leaving, during umrah, and before returning home. This is to ensure that the pilgrims do not lose or misplace their documents".

Due to that, Hajah Fatimah (Manager, Rayhar Travels Sdn Bhd), Tuan Haji Wan Affendi (CEO, Diaz Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd), Tuan Haji Abdul Hadi (Az Zuha Group Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd), and representatives from Fadlim Travel & Tours company And Dasree Travel & Tours added this is where document review is essential so that the Pilgrims are not careless or negligent.

"... concerning this document, either before leaving, during umrah and before returning home, the management always reminds the Pilgrims not to be careless".

Management process at the end of Umrah

The main thing in monitoring the return of the Pilgrims to the homeland is the documents. This information was told in the interviews with Tuan Haji Azhar (Kembara Muslim Travel & Tours Sdn. Bhd) and representatives from Fadlim Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd and Dasree Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd.

"... our priority here is to make sure the Pilgrims do not leave any important documents...if this happens, it will also affect other pilgrims".

Process of survey and evaluation of service

In general, most of the feedback obtained from the evaluation of services conducted through the distribution of the survey found that the main issues are those matters related to the Female Pilgrims. Similar findings from interviews were obtained from Tuan Haji Daud (CEO, Jagong Mas Travel Sdn. Bhd), Hajah Fatimah (Manager, Rayhar Travels Sdn Bhd), Tuan Haji Azhar (Kembara Muslim Travel & Tours Sdn. Bhd), and representatives from Fadlim company Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd and Dasree Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd.

" ... for female Pilgrims, we provide professional female staff to resolve any matters related to them. We discovered these issues from the results of the post-mortem conducted after the pilgrims return home, namely by surveying each pilgrim. It was found that most female pilgrims find it difficult to interact with male staff to get confirmation regarding their affairs".

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Umrah Service Management Manual (MPPU) has proven to be the main source of reference in conducting company and umrah operations. The existence of MPPU indirectly also provides the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for each company to run Umrah operations smoothly, and at the same time, prevent fraudulent schemes related to umrah. Nevertheless, the umrah service operators must always be alert to any new development of information and the needs of the pilgrims. They need to play their role responsibly and sincerely. Whatever package they offer must be delivered as promised. The umrah service operators also need to be thoughtful and always ready to improve the quality of their umrah package services by strengthening their management.

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