

# The Malaysian Tourists' Behaviors in Hat Yai Municipality, Songkhla Province: Voice from Hotel and Restaurant Stakeholders

## ■ Phongsak Thongneukang

**Abstract.** The tourism business in Hat Yai Municipality, Songkhla Province, has been threatened by the disorder in three provinces in Southern Thailand. Knowing the current Malaysian tourist behavior is a key to recovering it. This study investigates Malaysian tourist behavior when they come to hotels and restaurants in Hat Yai. Six hotel and restaurant stakeholders were interviewed and a questionnaire was administered to 400 Malaysian tourists for each business. The findings were grouped and shown according to 4P marketing strategies. Regarding the product factor, Malaysian tourists prefer standard service and various products. Malaysian tourists prefer a cheap, but reasonable, price in regards to price. For the place factor, Malaysian tourists prefer a location close to the accommodation, transportation, convenient, clean, safe and standard facilities for tourism service. Regarding the promotion factor, Malaysian tourists prefer promotions in advertisements and brochures. In general the results of the study are similar to the studies in Thai and foreign research. To increase the competitive advantage in the tourism business, the government of Hat Yai Municipality should control the quality of product, price, and hygiene. The tourism stakeholders should train and develop human resources about service skills, advertising skills, personality, and communication skills.

**Keywords:** Malaysian Tourist Behavior, Hotel Business, Restaurant Business

## Background

The tourism industry is an important industry, because it is a source of generating revenue, employment, and income for other related businesses. Tourism promotion in Thailand has a long history. It began in November, 1959, when Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat established the Tourism Organization of Thailand [TOT], whose name was changed to the Tourism Authority of Thailand [TAT] on May 4, 1979. In the last 50 years, Thailand has experienced various tourism phenomena that have resulted in increased and decreased numbers of tourists, depending on domestic and international factors.

Hat Yai Municipality, Songkhla Province is the hub of Malaysian tourists in Thailand. The number of Malaysian tourists during 1997 to 2010 is shown in Figure 1.

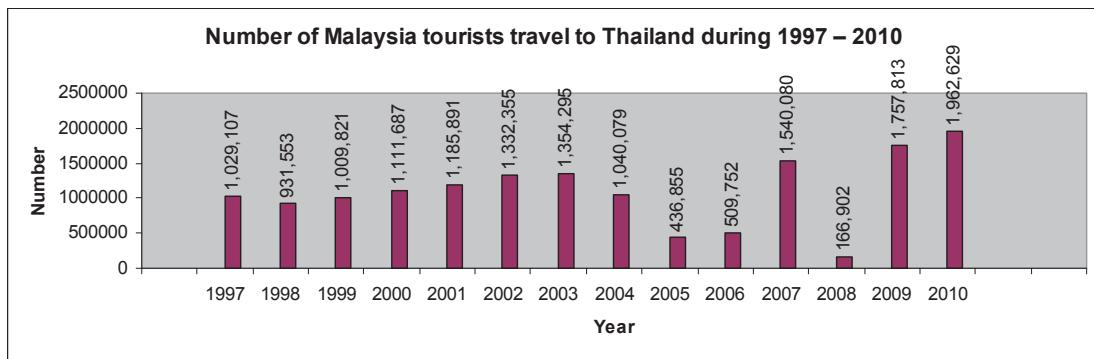


Figure 1. Statistics arrivals of Malaysian tourists travelling through the immigration checkpoint Songkhla province Thailand 2009 – 2010

Source : Immigration Songkhla office2011/pp.5

During the last six years, the number of Malaysians to Thailand has fluctuated. Tourism in Hat Yai is threatened by terrorism problems in the three southern provinces and the development of accommodation and entertainment venues located on the Thailand-Malaysia border. Both public and private sectors in Hat Yai are trying to encourage tourism and build confidence in the safety of tourists from Malaysia. In doing this, it is important to know the behavior of Malaysian tourists in the current situation, as well as to identify problems and the ways to solve problems that Malaysian tourists have encountered when traveling to Hat Yai. The purpose of this study is to study Malaysian tourist behavior and experiences that concern hotel and restaurant service businesses. The results of this research will be helpful for Thailand and the tourism business in Hat Yai to use as a marketing guide strategy, stimulate tourism and the sustainability of the tourism of Hat Yai in the future. The specific research questions are listed below.

- (1) What is Malaysian tourist behavior, as described by the hotel and restaurant stakeholders in Hat Yai?
- (2) What are the problems of Malaysian tourists, as perceived by hotel and restaurant stakeholders in Hat Yai?
- (3) What kinds of problem solving can be used to solve the Malaysian tourist problem in Hat Yai?

## Literature review

Customer behavior, tourist behavior, and marketing strategies are considered as fundamental knowledge in this study.

## Customer Behavior

Kioumarsi et al. (2009) defined consumer behavior as the study of when, why, how, and where people do or do not buy a product. It blends elements from psychology, sociology, social anthropology and economics. It attempts to understand the buyer's decision making process, both individually and in groups. Chutchakul (1991) claimed consumer behavior refers to the behavior of individuals to decide the quality of goods or services. Customer behavior is influenced by marketing strategy. An appropriate marketing campaign creates product incentives for the purchase.

Customer behavior is studied based on consumer buying behavior, with the customer playing the three distinct roles of user, payer, and buyer. Morrisson (1996) defined customer behavior as the decision making before purchasing goods based on culture, traditions and budget. He explained further that customers behave in the way they select, use and behave after they have purchased

hospitality and travel services. There are two types of factors that influence the behavior of individual customers: personal and interpersonal. Customer behavior is stipulated by the factors of culture and society, private sector and philosophy (Kotler, Bowen, & Maken, 1999). Thachasawatt (2006) suggested three types of buying decisions, based on habits, limited information or internal decision making, and on a comprehensive or extended decision making.

### **Tourist Behavior**

Behavior of tourists refers to the expression of each person directly associated with the use of products and services in the tourism industry. Factors that influence tourist behavior are internal and external factors. Internal factors or personal factors include both the physical and psychological factors that motivate and push a person to travel. External factors or pull factors act as stimulation to tourists buying tourism products (Thanakit Sungchuy, 2007). Consumer behavior is a key to underpin all marketing activities which are carried out to develop, promote and sell tourism products (Swarbooke & Horner, 1999, p. 3). Understanding tourist consumer behavior is not merely of academic interest, but doing so would provide knowledge for effective tourism planning and marketing (Jelincic, 1999). Boonnak (2001) explained the importance of learning tourist behavior as: (1) to help the tour guide to understand more about foreign tourist culture; (2) to decrease the conflict between tour guide and foreign tourist during work time; (3) to help the tour guide to give services based on tourist satisfaction; (4) to promote an itinerary based on tourist satisfaction; and (5) to help the tour guide give faster service. Jitthungwattana (2006) explained the reasons of tourists making a decision to travel consist of eight reasons which included the need for adventure, to discover something new, the need for social acceptance, and to raise status and prestige. In addition to these factors, Ackarungkul (2006) stated the factors that influence tourists making decisions to travel include health, income, attitude and perception of experience, politics, economy, society, and culture.

Focusing on literature about tourist behavior in this region, Wannaleart (2009) described the behavior of tourists in Asia as: (1) they like to buy cheap goods and quality products; (2) they consider before spending; (3) they plan before traveling; and (4) they need to save money for travel. Boonnak (2001) classified foreign tourist behavior in Thailand into several conditions: (1) They like to learn about Thai culture; (2) to visit unseen tourist destinations; (3) to stay in convenient accommodation that is clean and safe which includes food and transportation; (4) to gain new experiences, such as risky activity and exciting tour programs; (5) to wear a beautiful dress, enjoy shopping, especially for clothes, suits, and dresses based on a cheap price and good quality; (6) to buy souvenirs and visit gift shops; (7) to participate in social parties and try to make a conversation with strange people during travel; and (8) most foreign tourists have self-confidence. Pongsakornrungsrin (2008) studied the needs of Malaysian and Singaporean tourists in Songkhla province. The results showed that these tourists rank quality of tourism services at the top, followed by the attractive venue and festival, service providers and price promotion. Jareunwanit and Jeungsanguan Pornsook (1997) compared hotels between Thailand (Nongkhai province) and Laos (Wiangjan). The results of the study showed that the atmosphere, service, and security at the hotel influenced the tourists' decision making towards the hotel. Kertphiboon (2002) studied the factors that influence decision making while choosing a hotel in Phrae, Phayao, and Nan provinces. The results showed that the standard of services in the hotel is very significant and influences the tourist decision, followed by facilities in the hotel, safety and security of the location. Phongsakorn Rangsin (2006) studied tourist behavior in making a decision about the hotels in Nakorn Sitammarat. The results showed that the service provided influenced the tourist's decision towards the hotel.

### **Marketing tools (4P theory)**

Kotler (1999) conceptualized consumer behavior in terms of the marketing mixed model, known as the "4Ps": Product, Place, Price and Promotion.

1. Product: Anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use or consumption that might satisfy a want or need. It includes physical objects, services, persons, places, organizations and ideas.

2. Price: The amount of money charged for a product or service, or the sum of the values that consumers exchange for the benefits of having or using the product or service.
3. Promotion: Activities that communicate the product or service and its merits to target customers and persuade them to buy.
4. Place: All the company activities that make the product or service available to target customers.

## Methodology

### Participants

Key informants in this study were business owners and managers who were involved in the hotel and restaurant business and attracted Malaysians tourists in Hat Yai. Purposive sampling was employed, because it is usually used when researchers are concerned with exploring and understanding the audience (Kerlinger & Lee, 1999).

### Data collection, method and tools

The interview is a main data collection method in qualitative research (Creswell, 2003; Marshall & Roseman, 1995). The researcher selected a face-to-face interview as the main data collection method, because it is the method based on a direct meeting between interviewer and interviewee. By personal communication, it was possible not only to obtain much more information, but also to use visual materials (e.g., cards, pictures, packages, logos) to encourage responses. In the face-to-face situation, the researcher applies an in-depth interview, "a technique designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic" (Kvale, 1996, p.195), to gain a deep understanding from the key informants. Among the three types of interviews, structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews, the researcher chose a semi-structured interview that is positioned halfway between the ends of the continuum. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) mentioned, a semi-structured interview is a method of research used widely in the social sciences. It is flexible, allowing new questions to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says.

Kvale (2007, p. 56) defined an interview guide as "a script that structures the course of the interview more or less tightly. The guide may merely contain some topics to be covered or it can be a detailed sequence of carefully worded questions". The researcher created an interview guide from research questions and related literature. The draft interview guide was reviewed by two stakeholders in the tourism businesses in Hat Yai and one research methodology expert from Burapha University.

### Conducting an Interview

The researcher defined the top-ranked hotel and restaurant businesses and Malaysians tourists in Hat Yai as the target stakeholders. The list of prospective interviewees was prepared with specific names, addresses, and telephone numbers. Guided by the list, the researcher made personal telephone contact with each prospective interviewee and invited them to participate in the research. Moreover, introductory letters and guiding questions for the interview were prepared and sent to participants before the interview dates.

During the semi-structured interview, the researcher took interview notes and used a taperecorder. The interview period was approximately 30 minutes with each participant. Follow-up interviews were arranged for participants who provided insufficient information. Timelines for the second interviews depended on the information which the researcher needed to obtain. For the Malaysians tourists, the researcher used a questionnaire which was administered to a convenience sample of about 400 for each business.

### Interview Transcription

As guided by Miles and Huberman (1994), the researcher recorded interview data using handwritten notes and an Mp 3 recorder. The records were transcribed and printed with Microsoft Word.

The reliability of interview transcription refers to the accuracy of the transformation of oral disclosure into written discourse (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002). Therefore, all the transcripts were then reviewed and corrected by comparing the transcription to the audiotape. The transcription was translated into English language with the assistance of a native English speaker.

An audit trail, triangulation, and authenticity were used to enhance rigor or trustworthiness. Records and evidence of every step in the research (e.g., interview plan, interview records, interview transcriptions, field notes, and the final report) were kept on an electronic file. Triangulation means using multiple sources of data in order to strengthen individual findings. It is a commonly suggested research strategy used to strengthen the reliability of research results (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1989). In this research, the technique of comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means within this research was applied. This was done through comparing the perspectives of people from different points of the tourists' facility (e.g., owner or manager. Authenticity in this study included informed consent from all participants, accuracy checks, and additional interviews with certain participants.

## Coding

The data was analyzed using Microsoft Word by breaking transcription into a half page of A4 paper and numbering each line, because it is easy to read and mark. A summary of each interview was added to the transcription. A key word was put in the margin to provide a reference to the point. Key words that described concepts in a paragraph or passage were circled. In general, concepts were coded if they were mentioned repeatedly or emphasized by the participants.

When all interviews were transcribed, a comparative analysis approach was used to see how themes were manifested. During this process, data were sorted, coded, and organized according to categories. Within each category, data were analyzed further and compared among the data. Then major themes emerged during this process when it was found that one or more codes had similar meanings and could be merged together. Finally, these themes were grouped and presented in the form of the 4Ps theory.

## Findings

### Background of Participants

Twelve stakeholders of tourism business were interviewed, six from the hotel business and six from the restaurant business. The participants' background (code, business, gender, and position) is shown in the table below.

Table 1. Background of the participants

Participants Code	Business	Gender	Position
H1	Hotel	Male	Owner
H2	Hotel	Female	Owner
H3	Hotel	Female	Manager
H4	Hotel	Male	Owner
H5	Hotel	Male	Manager
H6	Hotel	Male	Manager
R1	Restaurant	Female	Owner
R2	Restaurant	Male	Owner
R3	Restaurant	Male	Owner
R4	Restaurant	Female	Owner
R5	Restaurant	Male	Manager
R6	Restaurant	Female	Manager

RQ1: What is Malaysian tourist behavior, as described by the hotel and restaurant stakeholders in Hat Yai?

Findings about Malaysian tourist behavior in the hotel and restaurant business are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Marketing mix (4P) for Malaysian tourist behavior in the hotel and restaurant business

<b>Product</b>
<p><b>Hotel Business</b></p> <p>They need prayer rooms in the hotel.</p> <p>The type of room, they prefer is a connecting room features or a suite room.</p> <p>Malaysian tourists like hotels offering Karaoke, entertainment, and Thai massage.</p>
<p><b>Restaurant Business</b></p> <p>They like to eat all meals and seafood. The popular beverages are fruit juice and foreign beer brands.</p> <p>The popular fruits eaten after meals are watermelon, pineapple, guava, mango, and the beverages are iced coffee and tea. They like to drink imported beer () from Europe.</p>
<b>Price</b>
<p><b>Hotel Business</b></p> <p>They prefer the room rate between 17 – 50 US\$</p> <p>They check the room rate and other hotel information.</p> <p><b>Restaurant Business</b></p> <p>The Malaysian tourists spend about 27 – 50 US\$ . The group budgets are about 67 – 100 US\$</p> <p>They check the price of meals before ordering.</p>
<b>Place</b>
<p><b>Hotel Business</b></p> <p>They like hotels located in the city, near shopping malls, convenient transportation and close to entertainment places, swimming pools, internet, and Wi-Fi.</p> <p>Malaysian tourists families, also are concerned about the restaurants and the famous department stores</p> <p><b>Restaurant Business</b></p> <p>They usually choose the restaurant downtown or near a tourist attraction place which is easy to go to.</p> <p>They like to have meals at the famous restaurant.</p>
<b>Promotion</b>
<p><b>Hotel Business</b></p> <p>The Malaysian tourist emphasizes on hotel advertising and promotion prices.</p> <p><b>Restaurant Business</b></p> <p>They consider information in advertising brochures for selecting restaurants.</p> <p>They like to suggest a restaurant by word-of-mouth.</p> <p>The friends and relatives of Malaysia tourists influence decision making to restaurant service.</p>
<b>Other</b>
<p><b>Hotel Business</b></p> <p>They usually arrive to Hat Yai on Friday evening, for 3 days of travel.</p> <p>They like to participate with hotel staff who can speak English, Malay, and Chinese.</p> <p>They usually stay in Hat Yai municipality for 2 nights</p> <p><b>Restaurant Business</b></p> <p>Malaysian tourists spend 1-2 hours for services in the restaurant.</p> <p>They are concerned about the Halal signal and clean restaurants. They need () car parking, playgrounds, restrooms.</p>

### **Hotel business**

The findings demonstrated that the Malaysian tourists like hotel staff who are able to communicate in English, Malay, and Chinese. It allows them to save time in the conversation and receive faster service. Most Malaysian tourists like a hotel with a spa, swimming pool, fitness rooms, and prayer rooms. They also prefer hotels that offer internet Wi-Fi, Karaoke, an entertainment complex, and Thai massage. They focus on the cleanliness of the hotel. They need room service with standard infrastructure, such as electricity and air conditioning. It also should have a service counter for various services, such as ticket reservations and tour companies. Moreover, Malaysian tourists want a standard hotel room unless the travelers come in a family. Most Malaysian tourists travel to Hat Yai Municipality, Songkhla Province from Friday to Sunday. They depart from Malaysia on Friday morning and gradually returned Sunday afternoon and evening, while some groups returned on Monday morning.

The study found that most Malaysian tourists selected the room price ranging from 17 – 50 US\$. The price is a key part in the hotel selection and they often compare the price of hotels before deciding on services. The strategic pricing to design promotion are key factors for choosing the hotels by Malaysian tourists. In addition, public relations affect decision making in selecting the hotel by Malaysian tourists.

Most Malaysian tourists focus on the location of the hotel near shopping malls, and routes of convenient transportation, rather than hotels located in remote areas. Additionally, many tourists choose to stay in close proximity to entertainment venues, such as pubs and discotheques. For Malaysian tourist families, they also choose the hotels that are located in the city, near restaurants and famous department stores. In addition, hotel advertisements in Malaysia affect their decision, as many Malaysian tourists use a Malaysian tourist handbook when they reserve a hotel *via* the internet.

### **Restaurant Business**

Malaysian tourists like restaurants with a variety of food. They choose foods from the menus and they prefer to read Malay and Chinese rather than English or Thai. The most popular food is seafood. Large groups order about 6-7 items, and small groups order about 3-4 items. The popular menu items are fried crab with curry powder, steamed fish with shrimp sauce and baked with oyster sauce, seafood soup. The preferred beverages are carbonated soft drink and coconut juice. The groups prefer foreign beer brands. The popular fruits eaten after a meal are watermelon, pineapple, guava, mango, and the beverages are iced coffee and tea.

Malaysian tourists spend about 27 – 50 US\$ for one meal. The small group of 2-4 persons spends about \$US33 – 67, while the large group about \$US67 – 100. Most Malaysian tourists bargain to pay for food and ask for discounts for service in a restaurant. Malaysian tourists check prices before ordering meals, but some pay attention to the kind of food rather than price. They would like to pay in Malaysia RM, rather than pay in Thai Baht, and with no service tip.

Malaysian tourists want clean and splendid restaurants with sufficient restrooms. Malaysian Islamic tourists focus on the Halal sign ensuring the food is cooked and served according to religious recommendations. The car parking is important to Malaysian tourists. A restaurant which provides sufficient parking spaces and is easy to find motivates Malaysian tourists' decisions to use its services. In addition, Malaysian tourists focus on restaurants that have an area for children to play and relax in restaurants. Malaysian tourists are interested in promotion brochures, as well as recommendations by relatives or friends who have come and had meals in restaurants. They also focus on special prices and special menus of food and drink in restaurants. This is a process that can create incentives for tourists. If they are impressed by the restaurant services, they will return to have meals at the same restaurant. Towel distribution and providing candy after eating are the activities Malaysian tourists see as important and delightful in receiving attention. In addition, presentation of special food with photos of what the food looks like is important in designing menus for Malaysian tourists to make a decision as well.

RQ2: What are problems of Malaysian tourists as perceived by hotel and restaurant stakeholders in Hat Yai?

The findings about Malaysian tourist problems in hotel and restaurant businesses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Marketing mix (4P) for Malaysian tourists: problems in hotel and restaurant businesses

Product
<b>Hotel Business</b> The lack of standards in accommodation rates.
<b>Restaurant Business</b> The taste of food does not match with the preferred flavors of Malaysian tourists. The menu design is not clear and attractive.
Price
<b>Hotel Business</b> The room rate is not constant The room rate is not reasonable Discount competition
<b>Restaurant Business</b> Price of food is not constant
Place
<b>Hotel Business</b> There is not enough car parking The lobby in the hotel is not comfortable Restaurant Business There is not enough car parking There are not enough restrooms The cleanliness and hygiene is not of the required standard
Promotion
<b>Hotel Business</b> The hotel's lack of advertising The promotion activity of the hotels in Hat Yai is not enough to present to Malaysian tourists.
<b>Restaurant Business</b> Do not have promotional activities in the restaurants
Other
<b>Hotel Business</b> There are communication problems with staff in hotels. The security services are not sufficient.
<b>Restaurant Business</b> Personality of many staff is unsatisfactory Staff do not have service skills. Staff do not have necessary language skills

#### **Hotel business**

Many Hat Yai hotels lack staff who can speak Malay, English, and Chinese, and lack one-stop services, such as Thai massage and karaoke entertainment.

Malaysian tourists have problems with uncertainties of hotel rooms and accommodation rates which are increased during festivals. Moreover, they feel the rates in some hotels do not correspond to reality; some hotels are more expensive than the facilities provided warrant, especially hotels located in shopping areas.

Many Malaysian tourists have encountered problems and difficulties traveling to a hotel. There are not many parking spaces, there are sometimes traffic jams, and some hotels have cramped parking spaces. Some hotels also do not have a sufficient lobby area for business center. Some hotels do not have a place to sit in private.

**Restaurant business**

Service in some restaurants is not impressive. Some restaurants provide too much spicy food. The amount of food on each plate is too much and there is no plate decoration. The staff cannot communicate fluently and continuously because of language barriers, so no one can describe the taste, ingredients in each type of food, or the production process.

The menu does not provide clear food prices. When added to limited staff ability, the communication may not match the price of food. Some restaurants do not have a discount policy. This makes Malaysian tourists dissatisfied, especially when food prices in the high season are much higher than in the low season. In addition, Malaysian tourists are not satisfied when beverage prices, such as the addition of ice or soft drinks are higher than they expected.

Some restaurants do not have enough facilities, such as sufficient parking and restrooms, especially, if the restroom is dirty and narrow. Some restaurants have fixed seats. Some restaurants' decor is not interesting and attractive. The colors inside the restaurant are not bright, as preferred.

RQ3: What kinds of problem solving can be used to solve the Malaysian tourist problems?

Findings about solving the problems of Malaysian tourist behavior in hotel and restaurant businesses are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Marketing mix (4P) for Malaysian tourist problem solving in hotel and restaurant businesses

<b>Product</b>
<b>Hotel Business</b> The hotel should have more activities Increase the number of spacious and luxurious rooms The hotels have to improve and increase entertainment services Develop the English, Malay, and Chinese language skills of the staff
<b>Restaurant Business</b> The restaurants should develop the tastes to match the flavors of Malaysian tourists. The restaurants should focus on the cleanliness of the restrooms and the restaurant areas.
<b>Price</b>
<b>Hotel Business</b> The hotel association should control the prices and standards of hotels. <b>Restaurant Business</b> The restaurants have to show the prices for tourists. The restaurants should provide discounts for meals to Malaysian tourists.
<b>Place</b>
<b>Hotel Business</b> Develop parking service <b>Restaurant Business</b> The restaurants have to improve parking. The restaurants have to renovate interiors to increase convenience.

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## Promotion

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### **Hotel Business**

The hotels should have promotional activities

Improved hotel signs in Malaysian and Chinese languages should be provided.

### **Restaurant Business**

The restaurant must have promotional activities.

The restaurant must join with other restaurants to provide sales promotions.

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## Other

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### **Hotel Business**

Provide security guards in the hotel

### **Restaurant Business**

The restaurants should improve the personalities and uniforms of the staff.

The restaurants should be training the staff especially in communication ability.

The Muslim restaurants should show the Halal sign in front of the restaurant.

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### **Hotel business**

Hotel staff and security guards should increase their communication abilities. They should use foreign languages to communicate with travelers. Hotels also should increase the number of spacious and luxurious rooms and the facilities, such as Karaoke, Thai massage and spa.

The Thailand Hotel Association should guide and control prices during the various seasons. The room rates should be determined by a central organization, and should match the services provided within the hotel. The room rates should be defined clearly and be transparent, so that the tourist can compare them *via* the internet or documents, such as brochures.

Hotels should have enough parking spaces. In addition, the hotel must be managed to provide attractive interiors, such as a lobby and an area for business meetings. It should have improved hotel signs in Malaysian and Chinese language which are easy to observe.

Hotels must have promotional activities to motivate Malaysian tourists, for instance, the low price of rooms in the low season, because some groups want cheap rates and want to come during the low season. Hotels should have more activities, such as beer festivals or vegetarian food festivals.

### **Restaurant business**

Restaurants should improve the food quality with fresh ingredients, and cook with concern for Malaysian tourist tastes. Restaurant workers should wear clean and tidy clothes. Restaurants should determine the service prices for tourists, and not change them during the season and not take advantage of tourists. Restaurants may sometimes reduce the cost of food to make a good impression on tourists, so that they may come back again.

Restaurants need to increase parking spaces and improve the cleanliness of their restrooms and the restaurant areas. In addition, restaurants should be renovated to become more attractive.

Restaurants should have promotional activities, such as discount prices, and offer free fruit to the Malaysian tourists after the meal. In addition, there is the need for promotions, in terms of making flyers, brochures, radio advertising, and websites.

## Discussion

In this section the hotel and restaurant businesses are discussed according to the 4Ps principles Product factor

This study found Malaysian tourists are concerned with many factors in making decisions to select a product. In the hotel business, in addition to room type, they are also concerned about hotel facilities (e.g., an entertainment complex, Thai massage, internet WiFi, Karaoke), and the communication ability of hotel staff. In the restaurant business, they are concerned not only about taste but also the cleanliness and the information on the menu. This finding supports Kertphiboon's (2002)

study, which found that service is very significant and influences tourist decision making. In addition, the finding that the atmosphere, service, and security at the hotel influences the tourists' decision making supports the previous findings of Jareunwanit and Pornsook (1997).

However, the study found significant new information. Malaysian Islamic tourists need prayer rooms, because they have to pray five times a day. With this finding, the researcher argues that tourism stakeholders should be concerned about tourists' religion and take this into consideration when providing rooms and food for Malaysian tourists.

#### Price factor

The finding that price is a major factor for Malaysian tourists in hotel selection corresponds to the findings of Patchotirung (2006) about foreign behavior in selecting hotel service in Bangkok. "The room rate" influences Malaysian tourists' decisions, they check the room rate before their decision making, and this **supports previous findings that foreign tourists expect cheap rates and good service when visiting Thailand (Wannaleart, 2009)**.

#### Place Factor

This study discovered the "location of the hotel" influences Malaysian tourist behavior. They select hotels located downtown or city hotels, because they prefer shopping during visits to Hat Yai. This finding is similar to Patchotirung (2006) about customers who use hotel services in Bangkok, where the results showed that customers were satisfied with the service and accessibility.

This study discovered that the convenience of restaurants is an important factor that influences Malaysian tourists' decisions. It means the restaurant should have enough car parking, playgrounds, and restrooms. The results of the study relate to research of Lovelock (1996) about the criteria of the standards for service quality for a service user.

#### Promotion factor

Both special price room rates and special price menus affect Malaysian tourist decisions in selecting both hotels and restaurants. This finding relates to research of Jelincic (1999). She argued that understanding tourist consumer behavior is not merely of academic interest, but doing so would provide knowledge for effective tourism planning and marketing. Wannaleart's (2009) argument that tourists in Asia like to buy cheap goods and quality products is also consistent with the findings of this study.

However the finding that if Malaysian tourists are impressed with the restaurant services, they will return to have meals at the same restaurant without change reflects one type of buying habit (Thachasawatt, 2006) that the decision to buy is based on information previously stored in memory along with new data from a limited experience.

#### Problem and solving problem factor

Room rate fluctuation during the high season, having not enough car parking and communication with staff are the major problems perceived in the hotel business. In the restaurant business, the lack of prices in the food menu and communication between staff in the restaurant and Malaysian tourists are the major problems. The other problems are the restaurant facilities and cleanliness of tables and rest rooms. The findings support the need for a standard service quality (Lovelock, 1996).

For the way of solving these problems the government of the municipality in Hat Yai should control the quality of product, price, and hygiene and staff service, both in the hotel and restaurant businesses. The tourism stakeholders should immediately train staff in other languages, such as Malaysian, English, and Chinese, and renovate old hotels and restaurants, because these factors influenced tourist decision making (Rangsin, 2006).

### Conclusion

This qualitative study investigated the experience of 12 Thai people involved in hotel and restaurant businesses in Hat Yai. The findings were grouped and discussed according to the 4P principle. Regarding the product factor, Malaysian tourists prefer a standard of service and various products. This finding supports previous research (Patchotirung, 2006; Wannaleart, 2009). Regarding the price factor, Malaysian tourists prefer a cheap, but reasonable price. This finding supports previous findings of Suaua (2003). Regarding the place factor, Malaysian tourists prefer the location to be

close to retail outlets, transportation, , clean, safe and standard facilities for tourism service. This finding supports the findings of Suauea (2003) and Lovelock (1996). Regarding the promotion factor, Malaysian tourists prefer promotion in advertisements and brochures. The results of the study are similar to the studies of Thai and foreign research in this field.

The way of solving problems can be classified into two levels. At the upper level, the government of municipality of Hat Yai should control the quality of the product, price, and hygiene. At the lower level, the tourism stakeholders should immediately train staff in other languages, such as Malaysian, English, and Chinese, and renovate old hotels and restaurants, because these influence tourist decision making (Rangsin, 2006).

### **Limitations of the study**

The major limitations of this study are, first, that this study focused on specific entrepreneurs' ideas about Malaysian tourists. It is quite difficult to generalize the results to other cities and regions of Thailand. Second, the interview research method collected second-hand information. Malaysian tourist behavior was studied through Thai entrepreneurs' lens, not from the Malaysians themselves.

### **Recommendations for future study**

Future research is recommended on the following three topics:

1. The behavioral differences between tourists who travel to Hat Yai Municipality and to other places both in Thailand and Malaysia.
2. The strengths and weaknesses of the tourism business industry in Songkhla and the other provinces in order to find ways to improve the strategic efficiency in line with Malaysian tourist behavior.
3. The strategy for the promotion of Malaysian tourists in Songkhla province .

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