

FEATURES

A booming Muslim destination: A glimpse into Thailand's other side

| AZROL AZMI IN THAILAND |

SEVERAL Brunei journalists were recently on a five-day Muslim familiarisation trip to Bangkok, co-organised by the Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Royal Thai Embassy. The journalists were invited to have a first-hand look on some of the facilities and incentives provided for Muslim travellers to Thailand.

The group - made up of journalists from Borneo Bulletin and Media Permata alongside a few Brunei travel operators were accorded hospitality at its best at the prestigious Al-Meroz Hotel Bangkok.

Thailand's top Syariah-compliant and alcohol-free hotel, the Al-Meroz Hotel in Bangkok is a magnificent fusion of Arabian and Thai architectural designs, and has been frequented by tourists from Malaysia, Indonesia and even the Middle East.

Sanya Saengboon, Managing Director and General Manager of Al-Meroz Hotel in Bangkok, said the inspiration behind the hotel's design was the desire to provide Muslim guests with a comfortable stay while at the same time showing the hospitality and culture of Thailand.

The hotel is designed to cater to Muslim guests, even though non-Muslims are welcome to stay.

Separate female and male prayer halls - located on the third floor - are available, and there is also a whole floor staffed by female hotel employees, dedicated to single female Muslim travellers (30 per cent of the hotel staff are Muslim). Each hotel room has the Kiblat direction indicated and provided with a prayer mat, a prayer time schedule, and a copy of the Al-Quran. Male and female guests are allotted different times for swimming pool and gym usage.

The Kingdom of Unexpected Treasures, Brunei Darussalam has more to offer than meets the eyes, said Biravij Suwanpradhes, Ambassador of Thailand to Brunei Darussalam. A soft-spoken and humble ambassador who appreciates fine art and culture, he took time away from his busy schedule to share his experiences with the travelling Brunei group.

"Brunei Darussalam has a few hidden travel gems and some are simple things that Bruneians might take for granted, such as its beautiful sunsets. Brunei has one of the most beautiful and romantic sunsets anywhere in the world," Suwanpradhes said. He also commended Brunei for its sumptuous food and local cuisine, pointing out that it is a potential area to help boost Brunei's tourism sector.

"With the wide availability of Halal food, tourists wouldn't have problems satisfying their gastronomic desires in Brunei. I look forward to sampling laksa and roti in Brunei," the ambassador

Taking a first-hand look on facilities provided to Muslim travellers



Biravij Suwanpradhes, Ambassador of Thailand to Brunei Darussalam with the travelling Brunei group at the Arts of the Kingdom exhibition in Thailand

enthusied, later on inviting his friends and relatives from Thailand to visit Brunei and try out its delectable food.

The ambassador also praised the Bandarku Ceria initiative. "Family bonding is big in Brunei and Bandarku Ceria is great for this purpose. Joy and happiness can be seen with family members spending quality time together, riding their bicycles on the road. Cycling is very popular in Thailand and you can find dedicated cycling tracks throughout Bangkok," he said, comparing the similarities between Brunei and Thailand.

"It's also great to see His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Haji Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam and members of the royal family participating in events such as Bandarku Ceria and mingling with the citizenry; this is similar with Thailand: our King and royal family are very close to the Thai people."

Thailand is ranked in the top two - alongside Singapore - in the Crescent Ratings' annual survey of Halal destinations for non-Muslim-majority nations, while Brunei is placed 13th under the Muslim-majority nations list. This was revealed by Sriporn Bhekanandana, Deputy Executive Director, Asean, South Asia and South Pacific Region Department during a table-top sales and buyer welcoming dinner for travel tour operators from Brunei, Thailand and Malaysia (the reception dinner was part of the group itinerary during their stay in Bangkok). She also acknowledged the great potential of the Muslim consumer market - one of the world's fastest growing tourism markets.

She noted however, that one of the major concerns among many Muslim tourists is the availability of Halal food but assured that there are plenty in Thailand.



"Muslim food is easily available and found in major tourists spots. There are more than 3,600 mosques in the country, some of which are more than 400 years old, and in the vicinity of these mosques you can usually find Muslim restaurants - both large and smaller establishments," said Bhekanandana while commenting on a smartphone application by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT).

The app is a Muslim-oriented search tool, making it easier for users to find Halal restaurants, and also doubles up as a guidebook (available even when offline) to mosques and Muslim-friendly hotels in Thailand.

After a quick install and browse-through, one will discover that the software also offers other useful functions such as a Kiblat compass and map navigation.

Located strategically near to the train station and airport, the Al-Meroz Hotel is also just 300 metres from the Foundation of the Islamic

ABOVE: One of the two prayer halls at the Al-Meroz Hotel in Bangkok. The hotel is designed and fashioned to cater for Muslim guests, providing Kiblat direction, prayer time schedule, a copy of the Al-Quran, and also a whole floor staffed by female hotel employees dedicated to single female Muslim travellers



The swimming pool at Al-Meroz Hotel in Bangkok. Male and female guests are allotted different times for swimming pool and gym usage

Centre of Thailand - one of the largest mosques in Bangkok, with an accommodating capacity of more than 3,000 people and featuring two big prayer halls marked by a unique architectural design.

The hotel houses two restaurants serving Halal dishes: Diwan and Bakarati; the latter is a fine dining restaurant located on the mezzanine floor. It is 10km away from Bangkok's city centre, which is home to famous shopping spots such as the Mall, Central World, Paragon, Platinum and MBK. During peak hours, it will take roughly 30 to 45 minutes by car to reach the bustling city centre.

Thailand in its entirety is vast and welcoming, drenched in culture and exhibiting warm

hospitality. Its 'Amazing Thailand' tourism slogan is echoed not only in its major cities and tourist spots, but throughout the whole country. As someone who has travelled to Thailand a number of times and had visited Bangkok, Phuket, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and the Golden Triangle, I was glad to add another location to my list: Rayong, a Thai province three hours' drive from Bangkok.

There, our Brunei group were hosted to a round trip to Suphatra Land by the Governor of Rayong Province, Surasak Chareornsirichot - a close friend of Ambassador Suwanpradhes, where we enjoyed a fruit buffet and a luncheon at a Muslim restaurant, curiously named 'Makan Nasi'.

Members of the Islamic Committee in Rayong welcomed us at the restaurant. We are by no means the first Bruneian visitors to Rayong; Brunei's DPMM FC players have been here before for a friendly match against the PTT Rayong football club. What is interesting is that the Muslim community in Rayong are able to speak Malay, though not fluently; this made our visit much more memorable.

A trip to the Rayong province is not complete without visiting Pattaya. On our way to Bangkok, we managed to swing by the popular beach city. We ended staying overnight at the Centara Pattaya Hotel - one of Thailand's leading hotel and resort chains - and visiting some of the latest Pattaya tourist spots.

ABOVE: A view of the Al-Meroz Hotel's lobby, which features a magnificent fusion of Arabian and Thai architectural designs



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