

Comparing the Mosque Tour Program (MTP) between Selected Mosques

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.92900001>

Received: 17 November 2025; Accepted: 24 November 2025; Published: 17 December 2025

ABSTRACT

Mosque tour program promotes tolerance and understanding through interfaith dialogue. This study examines how mosque tour program in Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin Mosque (TMZAM) in Malaysia, Al Fateh Grand Mosque in Bahrain, and Suleymaniye Mosque in Turkiye being conducted through interview and compare the nuances of mosque tour guiding practices across diverse cultural contexts. This study reveals that the guides in each mosque deliver the information of the purpose of mosque in Islam, and what the Muslims do within. Each mosque also has its own perks. For instance, the location of TMZAM in front of the Palace of Justice, simple but rich decorations of Al Fateh Grand Mosque, and historical and architectural aesthetic in Suleymaniye Mosque. Each mosque has its own selection and training criteria of the volunteers, as well as how they provide supports. This study concludes that the systematic and holistic mosque tour program is essential in achieving the appreciation and understanding of Islam and Muslim culture among non-Muslims. Future researches are suggested to observe the impact of tour program in yet to be studies mosques, as well as producing new tailor-made modules for mosque tour program and interfaith dialogue especially by combining the applicability of others' module and the uniqueness of the concerned mosques themselves. The inclusion of mosque tour program in national level program such as Visit Qatar or community level like Visit My Mosque also deserve certain attention.

Keywords: Al Fateh Mosque; Interfaith dialogue; Mosque Tour; Suleymaniye Mosque; TMZAM

INTRODUCTION

Interfaith dialogue is deeply rooted in Islamic teachings and is considered a vital method for spreading the message of Islam. The Holy Quran emphasizes the importance of dialogue in building positive relationships with people of other faiths. Allawi & Abd. (2023) suggested the Quranic verse in Surah Al-Nahl highlights the significance of dialogue as a means of seeking truth and understanding through contemplation of the creations, including their beginning and ending.

Mosque tour programs is one of the best media that promote interfaith dialogue. It has also gained increasing prominence worldwide as vehicles for education, cultural exchange, and community building. Guided tours of mosques allow visitors (often from non-Muslims communities) to learn about Islamic beliefs, history, and art by experiencing a key cultural landmark first-hand (Moghavvemi et al., 2021; Navajas-Romero et al., 2020).

In many countries, both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority, mosque open days and visitation programs have been organized by religious councils and tourism authorities. These programs often coincide with festivals (e.g. Qatar's annual "Visit Qatar" or the UK's "Visit My Mosque" weekend) and invite visitors for guided tours, discussions, or social events. The UK's "Visit My Mosque" that use open houses with Q&A sessions and joint

activities have proved its ability to combat Islamophobia and promote harmony by showcasing everyday Muslim life (Susilo, 2020). Governments and Islamic organizations have begun to recognize this trend: for instance, Malaysia's Islamic Tourism Centre and the Bahrain Tourism Authority actively promote mosque visitation as part of cultural tourism strategies (COMCEC, 2016). Malaysian and Singaporean governments are promoting a number of mosques that are also used as part of historical and cultural tour packages for anyone, to demonstrate cultural diversity, cultural understanding, tolerance between religions, Islamic history, and the history of mosques and the surrounding Muslim community in both countries (Adriani et al., 2022). Indeed, the Blue Mosque in Istanbul or the Sultan Mosque in Singapore receive tens of thousands of visitors annually, illustrating their draw as cultural heritage sites (Çıkı & Tanrıverdi, 2023).

METHODS

This qualitative study uses comparative analysis of data collection methods across Iron Mosque (Malaysia), Al Fateh Grand Mosque (Bahrain), and Suleymaniye Mosque (Turkey) reveals a progressive and multi-dimensional approach to understanding mosque tour guiding practices. Each data is collected through interviews with senior mosque tour guides, with additional method of naturalistic observation for Iron Mosque and Suleymaniye Mosque; and workshop participation for both of Al Fateh Grand Mosque and Suleymaniye Mosque.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of mosque tour programs at Iron Mosque (Malaysia), Al Fateh Grand Mosque (Bahrain), and Suleymaniye Mosque (Turkey) reveals distinct operational models and commonalities in visitor engagement. Key findings include significant variations in support system and modules are in Table 2

Table 2 Key Characteristics

Mosque	Iron Mosque	Al Fateh Mosque	Suleymaniye Mosque
Country	Malaysia	Bahrain	Turkiye
Main attraction	Among Putrajaya visit trail	Grandiose of the building	Historical monument
NGO in charge	Islamic Outreach ABIM Centre (IOAC)	Discover Islam Society (DIS)	Cross Cultural Communication Center (Turkiye)
Support from government	Acknowledgement and hour-based allowance to the volunteers	Acknowledgement and some financial support	Acknowledgement
Main volunteer s' demographic	Local professional pensioners	Evenly matched between local and international University students	Mostly international university students
Financial supports for volunteers	Government pays the allowance; NGO provide training and materials	Everything provided by NGO	Everything provided by NGO
Type of visitors	Equal between individual and in group	Mostly in group	Mostly individual
Name of module	Mosque Tour Program	Awareness Through Mosque Tour	Cross-cultural volunteer program
Initiated in	2011	1987	2014
How are the non-Muslim visitors approached?	The mosque authority allocated a non-Muslim visitors' area where the mosque tour guides approach them	The non-Muslim visitors must go thru the Discover Islam Society reception. They'll welcome with tea and date. Then most	The mosque authority allocated a non-Muslim visitors' area where the mosque tour volunteers will approach. The NGO is also

		suitable guide will be appointed to	very active in various travelling websites and
		them based on gender and language	apps to promote the program and schedule the appointment
General explanation module concept after icebreaking & intro about the mosque	Icebreaking > History > Significant of the location > Significant of the architecture > Finding similarity between Islam & visitors' religion such as all are children of Adam> Uniqueness of Oneness, revelation and prophethood of Muhammad PBUH > Giving out reading materials and requesting the visitors to fill in feedback forms	Welcoming procedure at counter > Explaining about courtyard, congregation & unity > <i>Solah</i> (include adhan, wudhu, qibla, <i>saf</i> (row), right of women and offering the visitors to experience the <i>solah</i> 's movements) > Tawheed and Quran (include no statues/ images, Oneness, no mediators between human and Allah, calligraphy and geometrical > Giving out reading materials and invite who interested in longer discussion to special lounge inside the mosque	Icebreaking including emphasizing this is free of charge volunteerism service > History and some architecture quality> Mihrab, no statues, criteria of Imam, equality in Islam > Explaining pillars of Islam & Iman > Inviting the tourists > Giving out reading materials and invite who interested in longer discussion to NGO's office beside the mosque
Normal timeframe of interaction between mosque tour guide and a group of visitors	Undetermined	30-60 minutes starting from entrance to exit	15 minutes from the 1 st until the last word. More time will be allocated to who interest.
Posters	Have posters displayed. The most promoted are about the history of Prophet and his family tree	Have posters displayed. The most promoted are about how <i>solah</i> is performed	No poster displayed
Provision of <i>iftar</i> for non-Muslim tourists	Yes	Yes	Yes

Using comparative data on support systems, volunteer demographics, and module implementation, this discussion highlights the varied institutional models that shape visitor engagement and interreligious understanding. Each mosque developed its respective tour program at different times and with different strategic goals. Bahrain's Al-Fateh Mosque pioneered its module in 1987 under the Discover Islam Society (DIS), showing long-term vision in interfaith outreach. Malaysia followed in 2011 with its "Mosque Tour Program," spearheaded by the Islamic Outreach ABIM Centre (IOAC). Turkey's "Cross-cultural Volunteer Program" by Cross-cultural Communication Center (CCC) began more recently in 2014, reflecting the growing interest in engaging tourists at heritage sites. Despite the difference in inception dates, all three programs share a common mission: to educate non-Muslims about Islam in a respectful, informative, and culturally sensitive manner.

The method of engaging non-Muslim visitors varies. In both Malaysia and Turkey, visitors are informally approached in specially designated areas within the mosque, making the interaction more spontaneous. In contrast, Bahrain adopts a more structured process where non-Muslim guests must check in at the DIS reception counter, where they are warmly welcomed with tea and dates. This approach reinforces hospitality as a core Islamic value and enhances the quality of interaction. Turkey stands out by leveraging online platforms and travel apps to actively promote its program and schedule appointments in advance, enhancing accessibility and visibility.

While all three modules aim to introduce Islam and the mosque environment, their methods of delivery differ. The Iron Mosque's program progresses from icebreaking to architecture, comparative theology, and ends with an introduction to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Islamic belief fundamentals. Bahrain's module focuses on practical aspects of Islamic worship, including congregational prayer and rituals like ablution, with an immersive experience of prayer movements. Turkey's approach is shorter and concise, offering a 15-minute core module followed by optional deeper discussions at their adjacent NGO office. These variations reflect local cultural expectations, logistical limitations, and volunteer capabilities.

The time allocated for interaction also differs notably. Bahrain's structured module typically lasts between 30 to 60 minutes, suggesting a planned, consistent educational approach. Turkey's module is brief, just 15 minutes, but allows additional time for visitors who show interest. Malaysia's interaction duration is highly variable, likely due to its unstructured visitor arrival. This variability provides flexibility but may result in inconsistency in message delivery and depth of learning, depending on the guide and crowd.

Visual aids such as posters serve as silent educators and reinforcers of spoken messages. Malaysia and Bahrain make use of well-designed posters focusing on Prophet Muhammad's genealogy and the ritual of *solah*, respectively. These displays add a visual dimension to the tour content and help bridge language gaps. Conversely, Turkey's Süleymaniye Mosque does not display any posters, possibly to preserve the aesthetic and historical integrity of the site. While understandable, this lack may limit spontaneous learning for visitors without guides.

Volunteer demographics reflect differing models of engagement. In Malaysia, local professional pensioners offer their time, bringing maturity and lived experience. Bahrain benefits from a well-balanced pool of local and international students, enabling it to cater to diverse linguistic and cultural needs. In Turkey, most volunteers are international students, often multilingual and flexible, but potentially lacking long-term commitment or formal training. Structurally, both Malaysia and Bahrain have fully functioning NGO offices within their mosques, facilitating coordination and continuity. Turkey lacks this infrastructure, which may limit strategic program development. Malaysia's program is highly institutionalized. Volunteers are compensated through government allowances and receive training and materials from the NGO. Bahrain's volunteers are fully supported by the Discover Islam Society, without direct financial aid from the government even though the NGO itself may receive some financial aid from related government agency. Turkey follows a fully self-sustained model, where all costs are borne by the NGO, despite receiving official acknowledgment. These funding structures impact not only volunteer motivation but also program consistency, capacity building, and expansion potential.

Visitor composition shapes program design. Malaysia's Iron Mosque caters equally to group and individual visitors, requiring adaptable modules. Bahrain is predominantly group-based, making it easier to conduct structured tours. Turkey sees mostly individual tourists, necessitating flexible, short, and accessible presentations. While Bahrain's and Malaysia's models benefit from group momentum, Turkey's one-on-one or small group interactions can offer more personalized engagement if adequately supported by trained guides.

All three mosques incorporate theological and cultural themes in their modules, but their emphasis varies. Malaysia highlights theological similarities and common ancestry (e.g., all are children of Adam), fostering interfaith resonance. Bahrain's module is more practice-oriented, emphasizing rituals and Islamic practices to demystify *solah* and *tawheed*. Turkey's module emphasizes architecture and social equality before explaining core beliefs like the pillars of Islam and Iman. Each pedagogical choice reflects strategic decisions about what aspect of Islam to highlight in a limited time frame.

CONCLUSION

Each mosque presents a unique model shaped by its historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. Malaysia offers a best-practice model of integration between the mosque, NGO, and government, with structured programs and well-supported volunteers. Bahrain blends hospitality and pedagogical rigor, targeting group outreach through a long-standing institutional framework. Turkey's model, while informal and heritage-driven, shows potential, especially if NGO operations are further institutionalized and supported. Moving forward, mosques aiming to foster cross-cultural understanding should consider balancing tradition with structure, spontaneity with preparation, and hospitality with strategic planning.

Key findings reveal distinct yet effective approaches across contexts. While volunteer demographics varied, ranging from local pensioners in Malaysia to international students in Türkiye, all programs emphasized cultural sensitivity and personalized interaction. Designated visitor areas in Malaysia and Türkiye, alongside structured reception protocols in Bahrain, ensured respectful engagement. Educational content was tailored to visitor constraints, balancing historical narratives, Islamic principles, and experiential learning. Despite differences in funding (government allowances vs. philanthropic support) and resource allocation, all sites reported consistently positive visitor reactions, indicating successful promotion of intercultural appreciation.

Practical implications suggest mosque administrators could enhance outreach by adopting modular content frameworks, integrating digital tools for multilingual support, and fostering cross-sector partnerships with tourism authorities. Volunteer training should emphasize intercultural communication alongside theological knowledge. Limitations include the focus on large, iconic mosques, potentially limiting applicability to smaller community mosques. Future research should evaluate long-term impacts on participants' interfaith attitudes, compare digital versus in-person tour efficacy, and develop standardized assessment tools for intercultural competency development.

The research contributes to religious tourism literature by demonstrating how mosque tours bridge cultural divides through adaptable, context-specific models. It establishes that effective programs prioritize three elements: trained volunteers as cultural mediators, structured yet flexible educational content, and logistical considerations balancing accessibility with worship integrity. In summary, mosque tours represent significant yet understudied mechanisms for promoting global religious literacy and social cohesion. Their continued refinement and expansion merit scholarly and institutional investment as platforms for sustainable peacebuilding. Future research could explore:

1. How mosque tour programs influence the long-term attitudes of non-Muslim visitors toward Islam, especially beyond the short-term positive feedback noted in the current study.
2. Secondly, there is a need to develop and test tailor-made tour modules that combine best practices from multiple countries while adapting to local cultural and religious contexts.
3. Third, comparative studies should also include smaller or community-based mosques, to assess scalability and inclusivity of tour programs beyond major urban or heritage sites.
4. Fourth, researchers can evaluate the effectiveness of digital mosque tours or virtual reality platforms in enhancing interfaith dialogue, particularly for those unable to visit physically.
5. Fifth, future work should investigate the integration of mosque tours into national tourism agendas, such as "Visit My Mosque" campaigns or "Visit Qatar," to measure their socio-economic and cultural impact.

These directions would not only strengthen the academic discourse on religious tourism but also support institutional efforts toward peacebuilding and cultural diplomacy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding from Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin International Islamic University (UniSIRAJ), under the grant number STG-085/2023.

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