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EXPLORING HALAL TOURISM AS INDONESIA'S SUPER-PRIORITY DESTINATION: MUSLIM TRAVELERS' NEEDS IN LABUAN BAJO

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Abstract

Introduction to The Problem: Labuan Bajo is considered one of the potential destinations for the development of halal tourism in Indonesia. However, the predominance of a non-Muslim population in the region presents a distinctive challenge in the implementation and promotion of halal tourism practices.

Purpose/Objective Study: Explore the needs of Muslim travelers who visit the Super Priority Destination of Labuan Bajo, one of the tourist destinations where most population is non-Muslim.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The approach used is qualitative, with data collected through in-depth interviews with Muslim Traveler informants who have visited Labuan Bajo. The in-depth interview questions are based on the extension of the theory of travel.

Findings: The research results show that the main motivations for Muslim travelers visiting this place are recreation and work, where natural beauty and ease of access are the main factors attracting Muslim tourists to visit this place. However, there are still many challenges that need to be addressed, such as the limited availability of prayer facilities in some island destinations, the lack of halal-certified food options, and the insufficient communication between tour providers and tourists. This study concludes that Labuan Bajo is a Muslim-friendly destination, but the improvement of worship facilities and halal food must be optimized. This research is expected to serve as a foundation for the development of halal tourism in predominantly non-Muslim destinations that are inclusive and sustainable.

Paper Type: Research Article.

Keywords: Halal Tourism; Labuan Bajo; Muslim Traveler; Super Priority Destination; Tourist Needs.

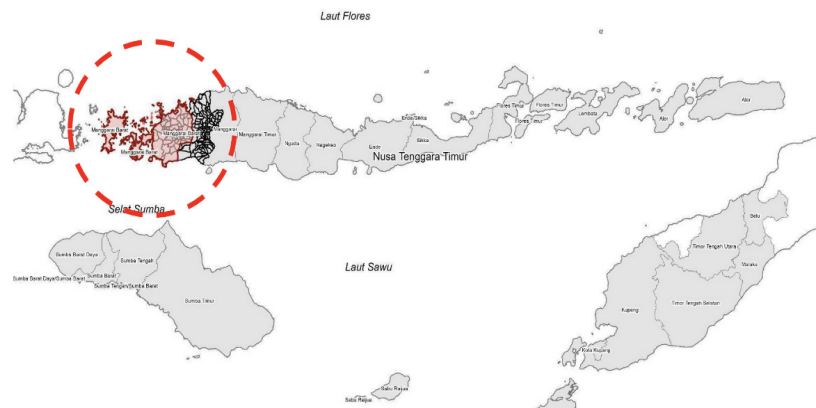


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INTRODUCTION

Halal tourism is often understood as Islamic tourism where all aspects must comply with Islamic laws (Mutmainah et al., 2022). However, halal or Muslim-friendly tourism is not limited to religious destinations or predominantly Muslim destinations. What is most important is that the destination offers halal facilities that enable Muslims to fulfill their obligations (Al Farisi, 2022). Although research on halal tourism is still in its early stages, this topic is very interesting and continues to be developed in the discourse on global tourism. In its journey, halal tourism has gradually recovered post-pandemic, as reflected by the increasing number of international Muslim arrivals (Halim & Baroroh, 2021). Based on data released GMTI 2024), the motivations of Muslim travelers in their journeys are diverse, not only for worship but also for business, education, medical purposes, and leisure. Therefore, Muslim travel destinations are not limited to places where most population is Muslim. When traveling to predominantly non-Muslim destinations, the availability of facilities for worship, halal services, and halal food and beverages is crucial in shaping Muslim tourists’ perceptions (Yuni et al., 2023).

Figure 1. Strategic Development Areas for Tourism Destinations in West Manggarai



Source: Gai et al. (2025)

The Indonesian government has established 10 priority destinations: Mandalika, Likupang, Labuan Bajo, Lake Toba, Borobudur, Wakatobi, Tanjung Kelayang, Morotai Island, Mount Bromo, and the Thousand Islands (Hamdani et al., 2025). Figure 1 shows the area of strategic tourism development in West Manggarai. UNESCO, through the Man and Biosphere Program, has designated Labuan Bajo as a Biosphere Reserve, which is a conservation area for biodiversity consisting of terrestrial, marine and coastal regions. The tourist destinations available in this authoritative area are also diverse, including Bukit Cinta, Komodo Island, Pink Beach, Rinca Island, Padar Island, Manjarite, Kanawa Island, Gili

Lawa, Gunca Wulang Waterfall, and Rangko Cave. Not only does it offer natural beauty, but UNESCO has designated the Labuan Bajo authority area as a World Heritage Site, where its nature and culture become a legacy for future generations.

According to data released by BPS (2024), Labuan Bajo is a destination that is predominantly non-Muslim. According to Akbar & Mallongi (2022) the current direction of halal tourism research is toward destinations that are predominantly non-Muslim. The percentage of Muslims in Manggarai Barat is only 9.01%. Based on data released by the Labuan Bajo Flores Authority Executive Agency (BPOLB), the number of visitors in the past five years has fluctuated, with the highest number being in 2023, totaling 596,683 visitors. Meanwhile, the target set by the Ministry of Tourism is 1.5 million visitors. Based on the official website of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of East Nusa Tenggara, Labuan Bajo has become the center for accelerating halal certification in East Nusa Tenggara, as evidenced by the mandatory halal campaign organized by BPJPH in 2004. As of May 2024, the number of halal certifications in East Nusa Tenggara is only at 4,000 halal certificates. Based on the KNKS Guide in 5 Muslim-friendly destinations (Wibisono et al., 2021) there are currently 4 mosques, 7 halal restaurants, and 4 hotels that provide facilities for Muslims.

Based on the research conducted by Martin & Woodside (2012), the theory of travel is used to explore the tourism process experienced by tourists visiting certain tourist destinations. This theory was then developed by Said et al. (2022) to understand the needs of Muslim travelers in predominantly non-Muslim areas, namely Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. Research with the same objective was also conducted by Iflah (2020) with a focus on studying the habits of Muslim travelers in the United States. In building halal tourism, halal awareness is greatly needed by stakeholders in providing the necessities for Muslim tourists (Pratiwi & Chariri, 2021). This is an effort to build Muslim-friendly tourism in destinations that are predominantly non-Muslim. This research attempts to explore the needs of Muslim tourists visiting the Labuan Bajo authority area and then inform the stakeholders, with the hope of increasing the number of incoming tourists to meet the set targets. Furthermore, if tourism in the Labuan Bajo region is managed well, it can reduce the poverty rate (Gai et al., 2025). In general, the results of this research are expected to increase the number of Muslim tourists to other predominantly non-Muslim destinations in Indonesia (Yuanitasari et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This research uses qualitative methods to obtain an in-depth explanation of the potential development of halal tourism in Labuan Bajo based on the needs of Muslim tourists. Qualitative methods serve as tools used

to understand complex phenomena and gain deep insights. Qualitative research explores the depth of social phenomena so that researchers can connect with the subjective experiences of participants, thus, qualitative research typically involves the process of observing a population through in-depth interviews or Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Data in this study were collected through in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are the optimal method for collecting historical data, perspectives, and human experiences, especially on sensitive. In-depth interviews were conducted with informants selected through purposive sampling to ensure alignment with the research needs, specifically seven individuals who had traveled to Labuan Bajo. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the seven research informants who traveled to Labuan Bajo.

Table 1. Informant Profile

Informant	Gender	Occupation	Purpose
A Putri	Female	BTN Employee	Recreation
B Haura	Female	Government Employee	Work
C Ihsan	Male	Central Bank Employees	Work
D Rovi	Male	Privat Sector Employee	Recreation
E Hamdi	Male	Student	Recreation
F Hafizh	Male	Student	Recreation
G Afifah	Female	Student	Recreation

Source: Researches (2025)

In this study, an in-depth interview guide is used to ensure the reliability of the research, thereby creating consistency in the process. The interview guide contains topics taken from previous research relevant to this study. Here is a list of interview questions that have been adjusted to align with the objectives of this research:

1. What is the purpose of your visit?
2. What is the main thing you pay attention to when traveling to Labuan Bajo?
3. What are your expectations for Labuan Bajo?
4. What are the main preparations before departing for Labuan Bajo?
5. If the main preparations include gathering information, what specific information did you collect before the trip?
6. What activities did you do during the trip?
7. What do you like about Labuan Bajo?
8. What do you not like about Labuan Bajo?
9. Are you considering returning to Labuan Bajo in the future?

The results of the in-depth interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify emerging themes based on the research questions. Thematic analysis is the process of data reduction before the final interpretation. Thematic analysis serves as a descriptive strategy to determine themes within a collection of qualitative data. That more researcher involvement and interpretation are needed in the thematic analysis process. Thematic analysis describes and identifies explicit and implicit topics based on data transcription. Thus, the data analysis process in this study was conducted based on the information provided by the informants as well as the data interpreted from that information. The information obtained includes the purpose of the trip, main concerns, expectations, main preparations, actual experiences in Labuan Bajo, and the informants' reflections after the trip. From that information, research findings were obtained that can be used as a strategy for developing halal tourism in Labuan Bajo.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The research findings in this study, based on interviews with Muslim travelers, provide a comprehensive and clear picture of the halal tourism situation in the super-priority destination of Labuan Bajo. The results of the exploration will be presented in four main sections: the first section summarizes travel motivations, the second section covers travel preparations, the third section explores during the trip, and finally, post-trip and loyalty to the tourist destination.

Travel Motivation

In addition, although Labuan Bajo, which is located in East Nusa Tenggara, is a destination with a majority non-Muslim population, many Muslim travelers visit there with different motivations. Based on the in-depth interviews conducted with the informants, the main motivations of Muslim travelers visiting the Muslim-friendly destination of Labuan Bajo can be broadly divided into two categories: first, for recreation, and second, for work. However, both categories have different underlying motivations. As done by informant A, where the purpose of the trip to Labuan Bajo was for recreation, while accompanying their parents for work (Farisma et al., 2023).

Informant E has a unique motivation, where he chooses Labuan Bajo as a recreational place because it is a Super Priority Tourism Destination designated by the government, which is very famous for its natural beauty. The same informant also mentioned that by enjoying the natural beauty and contemplating nature while remembering Allah, it is also considered an act of worship. Meanwhile, Informant F, who is a student, was invited by a friend to vacation in Labuan Bajo, in contrast to Informant D, who instead invited a friend to vacation in Labuan Bajo. The informants who traveled to Labuan Bajo for work were Informants B and C, each with different work scopes.

In this case, informant C conducted a workshop at one of the hotels in Labuan Bajo and did not worry too much about the halal food and facilities because they were already prepared by the office. On the other hand, the business trip to Labuan Bajo undertaken by informant B pays great attention to halal aspects, both in terms of dining places and halal facilities. This is also based on the fact that the informant works at the Halal Product Assurance Organizing Agency (BPJPH) and the goal is to socialize with MSME actors, especially food business operators in the Labuan Bajo area.

An important aspect that shapes the motivation of Muslim travelers in visiting tourism is its natural beauty (Lada et al., 2024). Labuan Bajo is an exquisite tourist destination, as evidenced by its nomination by Time Out Travel, which named Labuan Bajo the most beautiful destination in 2025. This supports the potential of international tourists, allowing them to meet the set targets.

Travel Preparation

Expectations of Muslim Travelers before departing to Labuan Bajo

The expectations of travel play an important role in Muslim travelers when visiting tourist destinations (Sholichah & Mardikaningsih, 2025). Informant D prioritizes beautiful island and beach views as well as comfortable accommodations near the beach. Meanwhile, Informant G, who is part of Generation Z, desires an impressive and memorable marine tourism experience away from the hustle and bustle of the city. As for informant C, who aims to perform work activities, they have low expectations due to the business trip, but still hope to enjoy the beauty of Labuan Bajo in between work activities.

Although informant B also has work-related goals, they still want to maximize their sightseeing. Informant B also hopes to have easily accessible worship facilities. Informants B and G pay attention to the environmental aspects and the friendliness of the local residents, while informant D places more emphasis on the beauty of the tourist destination. On the other hand, informant E prioritized the spiritual aspect. Among the informants, there was a commonality in appreciating natural beauty, including beaches, islands, unique flora, and the view of island clusters. Most informants considered halal food and worship facilities with varying levels of priority.

Preparations made before traveling to Labuan Bajo

During the journey, the Muslim traveler as an informant prepares the necessities for the trip. As done by Informant E, who from the beginning had a religious motivation, creating an itinerary that considers prayer times and avoids long boat trips to perform prayers comfortably. This contrasts with Informant F, who instead bought a full trip ticket on the

boat. As for performing prayers, the informant did not prepare much for it; as long as they covered their aura and could pray on the boat, it was not a major issue. In terms of prayer, each Muslim traveler has their own preferences.

During the preparation of the trip, the informants chose tourist destinations, as done by informant D, who used social media to select good tourist spots, such as beaches and islands. This informant also prepares clothes, content creation tools, prayer tools, and money. Unlike informant A, who focuses more on selecting a travel agency for convenience in tourism, other preparations are more geared toward clothing such as swimwear, snorkeling, and hiking gear. Based on the travel style, informant A chose a full sailing trip on a ship, while informant G preferred to avoid the ship to prevent the mixing of men and women.

In preparing halal food, informant B had thorough preparations by searching for information on the internet, while informant F did not prioritize food much because most of the food on the ship was seafood, and he assumed that seafood was halal. In preparing tickets, accommodations, and tour packages, most informants used the Traveloka and Google Maps applications. As for the itinerary, the Instagram and TikTok applications serve as the main references for viewing travel testimonials from the content provided by influencers. All informants also considered and prepared during the trip, and the average trip duration was three days to one week.

Dynamics of the Journey

Access to Worship Facilities and Halal Food

The informant faces challenges in practicing their faith in Labuan Bajo, where the Muslim population is a minority. Informant C feels that there is still a lack of attention to the needs of Muslims in terms of places of worship or adjustments to social norms. This makes the travel experience in Labuan Bajo feel like being abroad. On the contrary, informant G stated that although Muslims are a minority, the people of Labuan Bajo already have an understanding and readiness to welcome Muslim tourists, such as the availability of prayer facilities and halal food. Informant G compared Labuan Bajo, which has a Muslim minority, with non-Muslim countries like Japan. In Japan, informant G finds it more difficult due to the lack of knowledge and facilities that support Muslim needs.

In addition, informant F felt the lack of worship facilities for Muslim tourists, especially while on the tourist ship, which serves as the main place to stay and engage in activities. Facilities for prayer, such as a prayer room and a qibla indicator, are not available, so the informant has to pray in their room and determine the qibla direction themselves. Additionally, although the port city has mosques, their number is limited compared to the predominantly Muslim areas. Although limited,

informant D did not have difficulty finding large mosques in the harbor area, including for Friday prayers. Informant B also stated that places of worship are still relatively easy to find and the sound of the call to prayer can still be heard from the hotel where informant B is staying.

As for obtaining halal cuisine, informant D experienced difficulties because not all eateries explicitly label themselves as halal. Informant D feels quite helped because many migrants from Java have opened culinary businesses featuring their regional specialties, making halal food options quite available, especially around the Labuan Bajo harbor. Informant B also experienced difficulty in finding restaurants or hotels with halal certification, even though the hotel had provided transparent information regarding the separation of kitchens and cooking utensils. On the other hand, informant B acknowledged that halal food is relatively easy to find, especially in Kampung Ujung, which has halal-certified MSMEs, even though the presence of the Muslim community is not visually dominant.

The Role of Communication in Tourist Interactions

Informant G emphasized that although Labuan Bajo is quite Muslim-friendly, with facilities available for prayer, tourists still need to proactively inform the travel organizers of their worship needs. Thus, obligations as a Muslim, such as prayer, can still be fulfilled even with a packed travel schedule. The limited availability of facilities such as mosques makes communication with the travel organizers important to ensure that religious obligations are still fulfilled. Additionally, informant F stated that if the trip is conducted on a cruise ship, the need for halal food can be anticipated through initial communication with the ship's crew.

The same was stated by informant B, that it is important for tourists to communicate from the beginning with the travel provider, especially if using a ship or speedboat, so that the food prepared adheres to halal principles. If not communicated beforehand, non-halal food, including ham or alcoholic beverages, will usually still be provided as part of the travel package. This shows that the readiness of facilities and good communication are key to ensuring comfort for Muslim travelers, allowing them to enjoy a trip that meets their worship needs.

Adaptation to the Local Environment

Informant B felt very helped because the local community was friendly and informative, especially when asked for assistance or directions. Informant G also believes that the hospitality and respectful attitude of the local community toward tourists are important factors that make tourists feel comfortable. On the other hand, informant D noted the lack of hospitality from some local residents and the prominent presence of alcohol in the tourist area. As a Muslim tourist, informant D felt the need to initiate interactions so that the locals would respond warmly.

Informant C explained that the open tourism culture in Labuan Bajo, especially from foreign tourists, is not in line with the dress norms and etiquette upheld in Islam. Informant C feels uncomfortable with some things that contradict Islamic views, such as the open dressing style of some tourists. This is considered morally and spiritually disturbing, and it raises concerns because it can cause sin. Additionally, informant D feels that the easy availability of alcohol is somewhat uncomfortable for Muslim tourists, even though it is considered a common occurrence in tourist areas like Labuan Bajo.

On the other hand, informant G felt uncomfortable walking while sightseeing in Labuan Bajo because there are many stray dogs that cause fear of being bitten. However, informant F feels that it is not a significant issue. In terms of safety and environmental cleanliness, including the presence of impure animals, Labuan Bajo is considered safe and comfortable for Muslim tourists.

Physical Readiness in performing Tourism Activities

Informant G felt a physical challenge to enjoy the natural beauty of Labuan Bajo. Although reaching the beauty of Labuan Bajo requires exhausting effort, the experience feels very satisfying and memorable. Informant E also greatly enjoyed the natural beauty, the uniqueness of the local culture, and the hospitality of the people of Labuan Bajo. Informant A explained that during the sailing trip, phone signals were limited. However, Informant A found this beneficial because it allowed for a more meaningful travel experience and a stronger connection with nature and fellow travelers. The inter-island journey, which takes a long time, and the full activity schedule from morning to night, can be quite exhausting for tourists. This indicates the need for good time and energy management, as well as the importance of physical readiness for tourists, especially those choosing a sailing trip. Similarly, as stated by informant E, several tourist locations in Labuan Bajo have quite challenging terrains such as steep hills and full-day sea trips that are less suitable for young children. Although the tour was conducted efficiently by visiting various popular destinations in one day. This causes rest time and the performance of worship to be limited.

Cost Challenges during Travel

According to informant A, the prices of seafood, which should be affordable because Labuan Bajo is a coastal area, are actually considered high, and hotel rates are also quite expensive. Informant D also felt that food prices in Labuan Bajo tended to be high, especially for local cuisine and seafood sold on the roadside. As for informant G, they felt that the limited shopping options contributed to the high prices of basic necessities in Labuan Bajo. Informant G explained that in Labuan Bajo, there are no major supermarket chains, so tourists have to buy goods at small convenience stores with relatively high prices. However,

informant G did not highlight this issue as something too bothersome, but rather as an additional note regarding the condition of the facilities in Labuan Bajo.

Additionally, informant A considers the high cost of living less in line with expectations regarding accessibility and local affordability. Informant A felt the absence of online transportation services, so they had to rely on local taxis with quite expensive fares even for short distances. Informant B also considers the absence of online car taxi services to be an obstacle, especially when traveling in a group, as transportation options are only available through online motorcycles or offers from local residents.

Post-Trip Reflection

Almost all informants expressed a desire to visit Labuan Bajo again. Informant B explained that information about destinations, facilities, and special needs, such as halal food and places of worship, is easily accessible through the internet. This makes the journey feel more comfortable and practical, and it makes Labuan Bajo a destination worth recommending and revisiting for Muslim tourists. According to informant G, the effort to enjoy the natural beauty of Labuan Bajo and the warm social interactions became the main memorable experiences during the trip. Labuan Bajo is very vast and holds many natural beauty that are not widely known, which adds to the interest in returning to visit Labuan Bajo.

Informant E found the trip enjoyable and memorable, especially due to the well-organized travel arrangements and supporting facilities such as rest stops. Although there were some technical issues such as slow vehicles, informant E did not consider them a significant drawback. The time constraints that prevented some destinations from being visited, especially those requiring a long land journey, were the reasons for informant E to plan a return visit. Informant F also expressed a strong desire to revisit Labuan Bajo due to its natural beauty and unforgettable travel experiences. In addition, informant F is concerned about the potential decline in the quality of the destination if it is not well-maintained.

Informant A explained that there are still places that have not been visited yet. A different travel experience when going with family, which tends to be more relaxed, makes the informant want to return with friends to experience a more active and challenging adventure. Similarly, informant D, who has visited Labuan Bajo twice, feels it is sufficient to do it alone. However, informant D has a desire to return, especially with a partner, so that the next trip can be more meaningful. This shows that the aspects of novelty and companionship during the trip are important factors in determining the desire to return to the same destination. On the other hand, informant C felt that the high costs incurred for

personal travel made them reluctant to return to Labuan Bajo, except in the context of mandatory business trips funded by the institution.

Aspects that Need Development

Based on the research findings, several development initiatives are needed to help Muslim tourists plan more comfortable and peaceful trips, as well as to encourage the overall improvement of halal service standards in the Labuan Bajo tourist area (Sugandi, 2024). Thus, Labuan Bajo can become a halal tourism destination that not only highlights natural beauty but also provides spiritual comfort for Muslim travelers. Here are some aspects that need to be developed in Labuan Bajo:

Availability of Halal Certified Food

To develop halal tourism in Labuan Bajo, the availability of halal-certified food is a crucial aspect. This is based on Labuan Bajo being a destination with a Muslim minority, which can create doubts among Muslim tourists regarding the food preparations (Syaifuddin & Hakim, 2024). Even if the food is ensured to be made from halal ingredients and processed in a halal manner, halal certification is still important for culinary entrepreneurs to validate the halal status of their products, not just as a claim. Halal certification becomes crucial because halal is not only free from alcohol, pork, and their derivatives, but also ensures the halal status of the entire process and food ingredients comprehensively (Arsudin et al., 2024). Research Mannaa (2020) concluded that the availability of halal food influences tourists' intention to revisit, the duration of their stay, and their choice of accommodation. Therefore, destination managers need to enhance the promotion and presentation of products that are friendly to Muslim tourists while also expanding non-Muslims' understanding of halal principles.

Then, food stalls or restaurants that are already halal-certified also need to display their halal certification in a large and clearly visible manner, making it easier for Muslim tourists looking for halal cuisine. This aims to ensure that Muslim tourists feel safe and comfortable. Thus, the aspect of providing halal-certified food needs to be further developed to support Labuan Bajo as a halal tourism destination. In addition, it is also recommended to have an integrated information map or roadmap that includes the locations of halal food stalls or restaurants, as well as hotels that have halal certification.

Adequate Worship Facilities

In addition to the availability of halal-certified food, it is also necessary to increase the number of worship facilities for Muslim tourists in Labuan Bajo. The availability of prayer facilities specifically for Muslim tourists can be a motivating factor for them to revisit a destination (Syaifuddin & Hakim, 2024). It is not necessary to have a large mosque; providing prayer rooms or small prayer spaces at strategic tourist points in Labuan

Bajo is essential so that Muslim tourists can worship comfortably. Thus, Muslim tourists can receive prayer time reminders through the call to prayer (azan). In addition, worship facilities are also important to provide in hotels and ships where Muslim tourists stay, including the availability of prayer tools, information on the direction of the Qibla, and prayer schedules. For travel organizers, it is important to create a travel itinerary that considers the prayer times for Muslims.

CONCLUSION

This research provides an overview of the situation of Muslim-friendly tourism in Labuan Bajo, designated as a super-priority destination by the government. In this study, the motivations of Muslim travelers in visiting Labuan Bajo are categorized into two: recreation and work, with various underlying motivations ranging from contemplating nature to simply enjoying the natural beauty. Although Labuan Bajo is predominantly a non-Muslim area, Muslim travelers do not mind making it their primary destination due to its natural beauty, as stated by several informants. In addition, the designation of priority destinations by the government also plays an important role for Muslim travelers in choosing Labuan Bajo as a tourist destination.

In preparing their trips, Muslim travelers have unique preferences, such as choosing itineraries that consider prayer times, access to halal food, and travel comfort. Technology plays an important role in the planning process, with many travelers using platforms such as Traveloka, Gmaps, Instagram, and TikTok to seek travel reviews. However, there are still challenges that need to be addressed, especially regarding worship facilities and halal food. Some informants complained about the lack of places of worship, particularly at tourist destinations on the island, and finding restaurants with halal certification. Although there have been efforts from business operators to provide halal menus, the presence of halal certification is still lacking. This indicates the need for further development to enhance the Muslim-friendly tourism experience, including optimizing worship facilities and clearer promotion of halal food in the Labuan Bajo destination.

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