

# MIN HOUSE CAMP: Developing A Successful Green Resort Start Up In Kelantan

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## Prologue

On the evening, December 1st 2019, Noriah and her husband were having a conversation over the prospect of their small resorts business. It was a busy week for the resort. Taking a rest at the camp restaurant by the river after a big group has checked out from his eco-resort, the Min House Camp at Kampung Pulau, Kubang Kerian, Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Noriah was completely exhausted. Her husband was always assisting her to operate the eco-resort business and they had big plan for further eco-resort expansion. In Kelantan, Malaysia, Noriyah had run a very successful eco-resort property and the property received the ASEAN Tourism Awards for ASEAN'S Best Sustainable Tourism Products recognition for both rural and urban areas. The property also has achieved an ASEAN Community Based Tourism Standard (2019-2021) and this is quite an achievement for a small resort operator like her. Of lately, Noriyah had a feeling that something was not going well with the river passing through the property. The drainage nearby which connected to the river contributed to the river pollution. A sediment of sludge entered the river and the accumulated amount of sludge had contaminated the river banks and choked the water flows. Eventually, the river would be polluted beyond control and this would definitely hurt her eco-resort that rely on clean environment. She already contacted relevant agencies to clear up the drainage but until now no further action was taken.

Noriyah was interested in expanding her eco-resort by adding more rooms and facilities to cater for an increasing number of visitors. Protecting the resort natural environment was her main priority. With the threat of river pollution that could jeopardize her eco-resort business, she realized that she needed urgent plan to address the issue. Noriah was not sure the best plan to stop or minimize the potential impact of the river pollution to her property. However, she was aware that water resources such as the river are one of the main attractions of her eco-resort. Visitors come to the resort to enjoy the river scenic view as well as tranquillity of the village environment. She also noticed that some of the local kampung people would also pollute the river by throwing out trash and garbage into the river. This hurt her much about the lackadaisical attitude among villagers towards protecting the natural environment.

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Nevertheless, she received multiple booking from different agencies and several schools around Kelantan to visit the property and learn about protecting the natural environment. She also received a number of inquiries from the universities, ministry of tourism and several agencies asking her about the eco-resort, organic food and how to promote the property to attract international visitors to Kelantan. There were many groups coming to stay at Noriah's property to experience her eco resort. The camp is started to make money. She wanted to transform her modest camp property as a popular attraction among tourists not for local people but also among domestic and international. She received many queries from overseas tourists. Many foreigners came to her place to experience the natural environment that they can never experience anywhere else. Noriah also receives many volunteers from different countries such as France, Spain and Germany just to experience living in a natural environment. The property is quite secluded and located by the Pengkalan Datu river banks. Noriah and her family stay inside the resort. They live a simple life but with a big dream.

As she looked down the river and sipped a cup of tea with her husband, she thought what would be the best way to expand the property as a green resort property. They wanted to open the camp for a new market for people with disabilities. Currently, not many resorts offer or welcome people with disabilities-senior citizens, children with down syndrome or simply for this special group. She wanted to operate enabling village to serve the community especially those individuals with disabilities. They wanted to train and recruit people with disabilities (PwDs) to work at the camp. These were the legacy they would leave behind to the society and his children and her grandchildren. Noriah and her husband are approaching golden age. They are on the early 60s but there was so much to do with so little time. Could they achieve the dream and expand the property with such concept in mind? Could they maintain the ASEAN's award as best sustainable tourism products? Could she protect the property from this incoming danger of environmental degradation?

### **The Min House Camp- How does it begin?**

Wenkt Vacation Sdn Bhd (891404-D) is a private limited company that runs tourism related business ranging from camp houses to travel agency business. Min House Camp (MHC) is part of a business entity operates under Wenkt Vacation situated just 6 kilometres from Kota Bharu, Kelantan. The MHC provides dormitory style accommodation with attached bathroom and kitchenette with fan and air-conditioning. The camp is a best place for visitors seeking experience in the natural setting and learn about local food, culture and traditions. The camp offers peaceful and relaxing village lifestyle environment where the guests have the opportunity to visit nearby local village. The camps also produces and markets agriculture products especially honey from stingless bees that produced within the camp's vicinity The company was established in 2010 with a paid-up capital of RM500,000. Begin with only a few guest houses, accepting a number of guests for a short-term stay, the company currently run a very successful resort property name Min House Camp providing tourism related products and services ranging from short training, camping activities to agricultural products. The Min House Camp also is a breeding ground for stingless bee, the first of its kind in Malaysia and perhaps in the world. There is an area of 160 square meter that house hundreds of bee products from different species and also a gallery that provide relevant information about stingless bees to those visitors who are interested to learn. Visitors may also have the opportunity to learn about stingless bee conservation. According to the Malaysian Agricultural Research

and Development, stingless bee honey is twice as nutritious as ordinary honey and therefore the honey product is of high value. The best thing about the Min House Camp (MHC) is its location which is remotely located at secluded village Kampung Pulau, Kubang Kerian about 30 minutes from Kota Bahru airport.

The story behind the Min House camp is very touchy indeed. Min House Camp was developed for her special kid names Abdul Muhaimin or as he usually addressed as Min. In 2002, the area was nothing, only trees and some old graves that not many people wanted to go let alone to stay there. She vividly recalled the day where she thought she never find her special son. During her time working as an officer at USM Kubang Kerian, she always receives a visit by her special son at the office. Time passed by and Min was left alone at home to play by himself. Min is a smart kid and he like to play with other kids. Due to his look, not all kids can accept him. Some of them start calling him names that Min not so happy about it. One day, when Noriah came home from work, Min was found missing. The couple search around the neighbourhood but still could not locate where he has been. It almost dark and they started to get worried. Min was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly Noriah recalled the place where Min like to hang out. It was not far from the house they lived but the area was dark and deep inside the forest. Min could not go there alone by himself. They made a search there and Min was found rested in one of the huts made to wait for durian. Min did not want to go home. He wanted to stay there and he was adamant. At last, Noriyah decided to stay there and with her husband, they decided to build a simple house with few rooms to accommodate his other growing children. Noriah decided to name the resort after her special Min. That was how the Min House Camp got its name from.

In the early days, she received number of visitors from other states to temporarily stay at his property while visiting sick relatives getting treatment at HUSM. Over time, the number of guests has increased due to word-of-mouth campaign and many were fascinated with the beauty of the scenery and the resort's natural environment.

"I feel that the society need to do more with people with disabilities particularly among the children", this is her driving forces to start and operate the camp. Noriah and her husband planted multiple organic plants, local vegetables and also raised stingless bees around the resort vicinity area. Over time, there were many organic plants and vegetable growing around the resort ready to pluck and serve to the visitors. They also constructed various facilities from the recycled items such old woods, bottles and other thrown away materials as part of the resort decoration. They also work closely with the local community to get resort supplies such as rice, cooking gas and local dishes. They also took responsibility to clean the nearby river by boats and such exemplary conduct really meaningful to the local community to take care of the river as well.

Noriah has little experience in running a camp let alone on how to breed stingless bees. She managed to work with local researcher from the USM about the nutritional aspects of honey bees and made contact with one professor from Indonesia about how to breed stingless honey bees. The professor came to the camp and stayed there for sometimes teaching her about different species of stingless bees and their breeding ground. Noriah was a quick learner and she started doing that by herself. She also wanted to set up a green eco-resort and to learn what were the facilities needed. She talked to Anthony Wee about his resort in Langkawi and Gombak on how to operate a green resort and attended the relevant workshops.

As a result, the camp was awarded ASEAN Green Hotel Standard during the ASEAN Tourism Awards in 2018. The ASEAN Tourism Awards is a fine recognition of ASEAN's best sustainable rural or urban products proposed and implemented by public and private stakeholders. Noriah is very proud of the achievement and she hoped the state would recognize their efforts in promoting Kelantan as one of the tourism attractions.

*"We are very proud to receive the awards and we hope to it can inspire other tourists attractions in Kelantan to get such awards."*

The resort well connected with the local community and the green tourism practices has helped them to achieve ASEAN Community Based Tourism Standard (2019-2021) and also recognition from the Ministry of Art, Culture and Tourism Malaysia. They did not formulate any vision nor has a plan to further expand. When asking about his vision for the resort, she simply mentioned as follows:

*We are comfortable with this go back to nature concept. No need to develop a high class facilities like the five star hotel or resort. We want to keep it simple with a nice and clean natural environment. We want to go back like the good old days where people live with a simple life. They grow their own vegetables and live a healthy life.*

They are one thing that trouble Noriah's mind though. She wanted to set up an enabling village where they can serve and provide services to people with disabilities. She prepared a paperwork asking for fund about the idea of setting up such facilities similar to the concept practiced by the Enabling Village in Singapore but she was yet to convince relevant agencies or investors. She was quite frustrated as the proposal has not well received by the relevant agencies and the state government. Her recent trip Enabling Village at Singapore with a group of children with disabilities helped her to get clear idea what kind of facilities needed that can accommodate people with disabilities. She needs a sum of money to develop such facilities. Currently, the MHC has received a lot publicities and media attention since the property been awarded as community-based tourism (CBT) for the ASEAN Standard. There were many groups coming to experience the resort especially with its natural attractions and get involved with some of the activities planned such as river kayaking, organic food planting and get to know about stingless bees.

### **Accepting international visitors**

The MHC also received number of volunteers from different countries such as France, Germany, Netherlands and Spain staying a for a few weeks learning about the Malay language and the Malay culture. The volunteers also helped to promote the property through personal blogs and also travel portal Tripadvisor. While they are staying there, the volunteers also assisted the owner to plan for resort activities such as kayaking, gardening and serving food the visitors. With such volunteers from multiple countries, the MHC indirectly gained some international exposure and therefore can be promoted as an ideal place for international visitors to learn about Malaysian culture and local traditions. Noriah welcome and accepted volunteers to be part of camp's family.

*“We received many inquiries from different individuals from European countries especially asking to stay and do volunteer works at the camp. We welcome them as part of our family”.*

### **Succession planning**

Noriah hope that the resort would be fully run by his children in the near future. Currently, she handed over a few tasks to her son and her daughter in-law to handle the camp. For example, visitors who have inquiry about the packages can communicate with her son directly by phone or email address. Her daughter in law responsible for the sales and resort promotion through the social media. The MHC’s organizational structure is shown in chart 1. Her son also took charge of the resort operation and marketed the resort through social media such as Facebook. Her son Aiman also responded to the comment received from visitors through Tripadvisor and addressed their concerns about staying at the property.

### **The organization structure at Wan Vacation**

The organizational structure of Wan Vacation is relatively simple as the company has no plan to upgrade or enlarge the facilities. Noriah herself together with her husband run the camp with assistance from their children. Generally, the property is run as a family business with no intention yet to grow big accommodating a large number of guests.

### **Future expansion**

Noriah has vision to transform his property into a well-known eco-resort property. She is passionate about working with the people with disabilities and she wants to recruit more Pwd to work for her resort. Recently, she organised a tour to Singapore to learn about PWDs village and how can she work out the model with its property. She met with different state authorities to convince about the ideas of setting village for PWDs and the facilities needed to accommodate with the needs of PWDs. Unfortunately, the ideas were not well taken up by the relevant authorities.

### **Epilogue**

Recently, Wenkt Vacation Sdn Bhd has gone through a restructuring process by splitting into two entity- Wenkt Vacation Sdn Bhd and Min House Camp (MHC) Sdn Bhd in 2019. The two entities operate independently with different business focus. The former concentrates on the outbound market and the latter focuses on inbound market. The restructuring process shows that the company is going to expand and therefore requires new strategies and upgrading in terms of the facilities to accommodate a large

number of visitors particularly on the inbound market. Hoping to let go the company eventually to her children completely, Noriah had a few important works to do before settling into full retirement with her husband. She will stay at the property entertaining visitors from time to time but the resort operation will be handed over to her children completely. Despite the need to let the business go under her son's control completely, she had to make sure that the camp's operation is aligned with the natural concept that had be in place for almost a decade now.

Noriah had his concern about the resort readiness in welcoming more guests in the near future. She also concerns about the resort's natural environment. There are more to be done and she has no idea what to prioritize. Operating a resort is very challenging especially for those who have no backgrounds in hospitality businesses. The resort's present in social media is high due to several viral photos of the resort activities done by the netizen. There are more inquiries received about the resort by phone and online channel. In the meantime, at the MHC business is running as usual and more and more groups checked in to experience natural environment with riverside setting. She has to find ways to protect the resort's natural environment.

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