



## So you think you can handle a successful homestay? Case Study: Kota Aur, Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

Malaysia is known as a country with rich cultural diversities. These diversities have brought up the variety of the tangible as well as the intangible elements. This uniqueness could be further explored by living with the local residents. Homestays are provided to accommodate the tourists who are willing to experience the traditional way of life by staying together with the host family in a reasonable price. In Malaysia, the emergence of homestay accommodation business is significant in bringing success to the tourism industry. Moreover, rural tourism business will revitalize the potential of local community as well as bringing additional revenue to the homestay owner. However, there are still some limitations in running a homestay business particularly when accommodating the foreign tourists. Lack of way finding signage and lacking of public facilities are some of the most common factors related with the infrastructure that need to be highlighted. Therefore, this paper reviews the significant factors that attract the foreign tourists in choosing homestay as their tourist destination in Malaysia. Kota Aur was selected in this study due to its rich historical significances. This traditional Malay village is located in the northern part of Malaysia and currently there are 15 families who participate in this homestay program. To obtain the primary data, interview was conducted with the foreign tourists as well as the homestay owners. The architectural styles and the activities conducted were documented as the secondary data. The issues and challenges that currently happened on Kota Aur homestays were also discussed. Hence, the finding of this study is expected to provide solutions for the improvement of the homestay owners in Kota Aur specifically and to all other homestay operators throughout the country in general.

**Key words :** Homestay, Kota Aur, Rural tourism, Local knowledge

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Homestay program is a program that provides accommodation packages to the visiting tourists. In general, homestay accommodation packages are normally located in the rural areas, as most of these areas do not have lodging facilities such as hotels, chalets and resorts (Shukor, Salleh, Othman, & Idris, 2014). As a result, this situation has triggered local residents to take advantage of homestay activities in their area by using their own house as a place to stay, a.k.a. a homestay. Homestay is one of the relatively new forms of tourism ideas and is still in the expanded phase with even more enthusiasm. According to Ahmad, Jabeen, and Khan (2014), the homestay accommodation business is significant in bringing success to the tourism industry. Due to the significance aspect of it, tourism industry is becoming more important for the development of Malaysia's rural economic sector. Unlike in the Europe, the homestay activities in Malaysia are one of the less long-established cultures. In Europe, homestay homes are managed by owners, which mostly located in the famous tourist destination and are known as the 'Bed & Breakfast', or abbreviated as the B & B service.

In Malaysia, homestay refers to the service that includes a complete accommodation with bathroom facility and staying overnight with the house owner as the host. Homestay packages in Malaysia are complemented by diverse tourism packages such as eco-tourism, semi-urban tourism, and cultural tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2017). This is in contrast with the 'Bed & Breakfast' concept, which is commonly found in the UK. In the 'Bed & Breakfast' concept, travelers are not staying with the host family but only staying in the chalet. In addition, based on Oskam et. al. (2016), the 'Bed & Breakfast' program does not provide local services or programs such as activities that introduce the culture and lifestyle of the locals but are simply a place for tourists to stay overnight before they travel to the next destinations.

The homestay program was first introduced in Malaysia as one of the initiatives in the tourism industry by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia to encourage the involvement

of rural people, especially in the country's economic development activities (Fallis, 2013; Sita & Nor, 2015) This program aims to provide a balanced and comprehensive benefit not only to the government but to the community, especially to those directly or indirectly involved in developing the homestay industry itself. There are several activities that have been implemented and could be further developed by the homestay operators themselves, especially those who are directly involved with the traditional culture and customs of the locals. It is important to introduce local culture and customs to the guests who come to stay in the homestay as well as to encourage communication between the locals residents and foreign tourists.

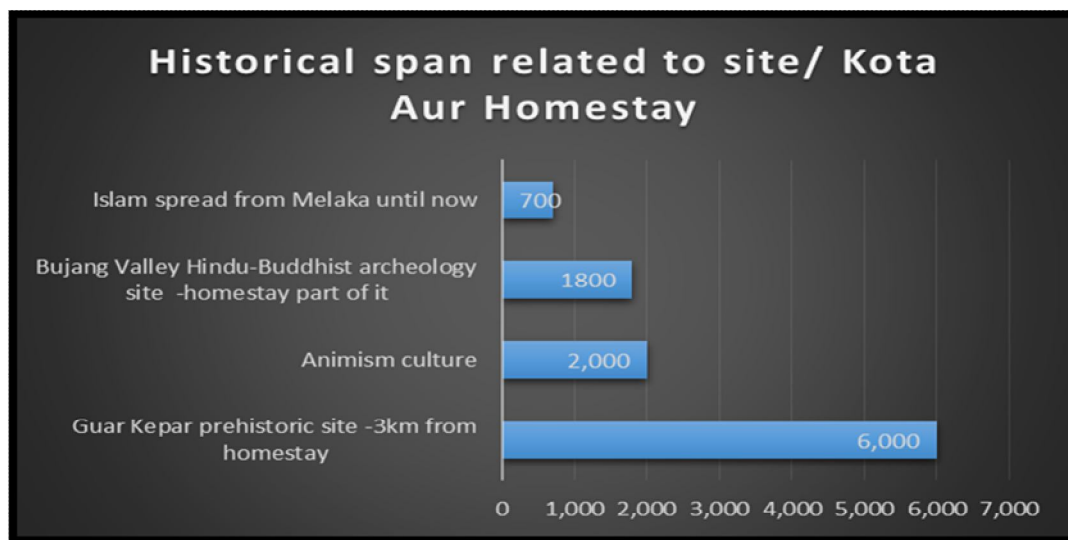
### 1.1 The History of Kota Aur

In this paper, Kota Aur has been selected as the case study due to its historical significances and still maintaining the authenticity of a Malay village. Literally, Kota Aur means Bamboo Castle or Bamboo Palace in English. This place is located in the Seberang Perai Utara district, under the Penang state in Malaysia (5.4874° N, 100.4781° E). According to Salleh (2016), the development of historical influences in Kota Aur began where the archaeologists discovered the Gua Kepar prehistoric site 6000 years ago. It was considered as the early Neolithic inhabitants, which is located very closely to

safety reasons. Thus, nowadays people hardly can trace back the historical temples site except finding couples of the porous red stones as an evidence. The same type of stones can be found as an exhibition object at the Bujang Valley Archaeology Museum. This museum is located at the foothill of Mount Jerai, which is only 30 minutes drive from Kota Aur.

### 1.2 Attractions and Activities at Kota Aur

As a part of the homestay program, the tourists are invited to see the local attractions as well as participating on the activities conducted by the community. In the vicinity of Kota Aur, the attractions are divided into landscape and architectural objects as illustrated in Figure 2. The landscape objects are paddy fields, Mount Jerai, archaeology site, Muda River, coconut grove, and the prehistoric settlement area that is located about 3 km away from Kota Aur. The architectural objects that considered as an attraction are the Malay timber traditional houses and the Hindu-Buddhist temple ruin site. The center for the Nipah palm (*Nypa fruticans*) products is located 4 km away to the West of Kota Aur. Apart from the landscape and architectural attractions, there are local cottage industries that worth to be visited. Those are the aluminum bake ware workshop and frozen food mini factory.



**Figure 1.** The historical span related to Kota Aur (Salleh, 2016)

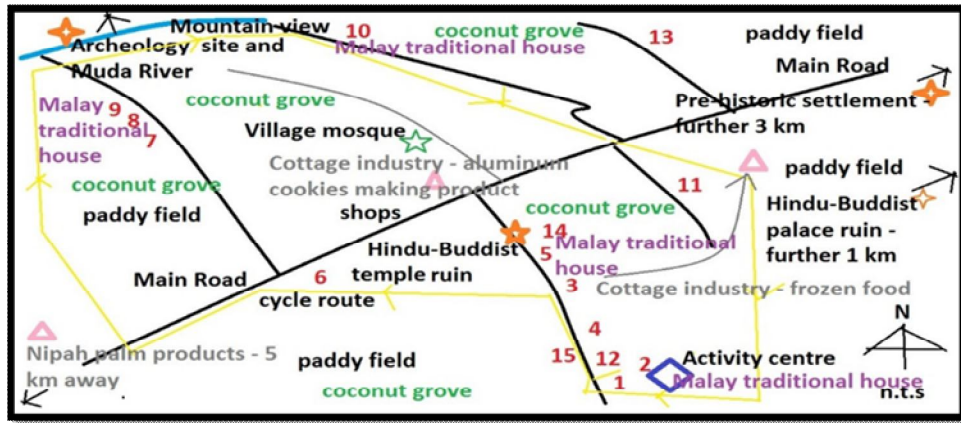
the homestay. The animism culture was occurred 2000 years ago before the arrival of Hindu and Buddha cultures. Around 1800 years ago, this Hindu-Buddhist civilization influence is associated with the discovery of the Bujang Valley archaeology site, and later Islam spread form Melaka to Kota Aur just nearly 700 years ago (refer to Figure 1).

In the year 2000, a group of archaeologist from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia together with the Penang Historical Society members came to Hajjah Meryam’s homestay to conduct an archaeological survey to the three Hindu-Buddhist temples or *candi* that is located on the West side of the Hajjah Meryam’s homestay. However, after the survey has accomplished, the temples were buried back with the soil for

The activities organized by the local community are commonly related with their daily activities. These programs started on the second day by cycling around the village to see among other things are the Malay traditional houses, paddy fields, coconut grove, and the swiftlet farm. The participants stopped at the Muda River to enjoy the Mount Jerai scenery as the background. This area is where the archaeologist discovered the

Hindu-Buddhist

civilization started 2000 years ago (see Figure 3a). They also visited the Hj. Man / Long Pah beautiful traditional Malay timber house and followed by stopping at the local cottage industries that produce the Aluminum bake ware and frozen food before heading back to the activity center located at Pn. Siti’s house. On Figure 3b illustrates the guests were visiting Pak Man’s Nipah palm orchard to taste the fresh coconut and *Nipah* palm juice, which is located nearby the homestay. They also watch the unique fish bidding process in the Whispering Fish Market in Kota Kuala Muda, Kedah. The colorful fisherman’s boat is another attractions for the tourists to enjoy around the area (Figure 3c).



**Figure 2.** Graphical map of attraction elements in the Kota Aur in 2016

The homestay also serves the local Malay dishes such as rice with chicken or fish curry, the *sambal belacan*, raw vegetables (*ulam-ulaman*), noodles (*mee*), as well as the sweet delicacies. The host family also conducted a hands-on cooking class making traditional pancakes; *peknga* and *dangai*. The basic ingredients of the pancakes are coconut that is freshly picked on the day they cook (refer to Figure 3d, e). Although the guests mostly were non-Asian, they were satisfied with the food served. To add experience for them, the host family together with the local residents to hold a mock Malay traditional wedding, which was performed by the American and Japanese students during their stay. They dressed up the ‘couple’ with traditional Malay wedding attire and seen by hundreds of local villagers who came that night (refer to Figure 3f).

**Figure 3.** Activities as a part of homestay program in Kota Aur

## 2. ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES AND STYLES IN KOTA AUR



There are many unique architectural features founded around the vicinity of Kota Aur homestay as listed on Figure 4. The

used to be 3 Hindu and Buddhist temple relics (*candi*) that were discovered near the homestay village, however currently it has been buried back with earth due to safety reason. Another architectural elements are the Tsunami monument, old British primary school, and the Kota Kuala Muda historical arch.

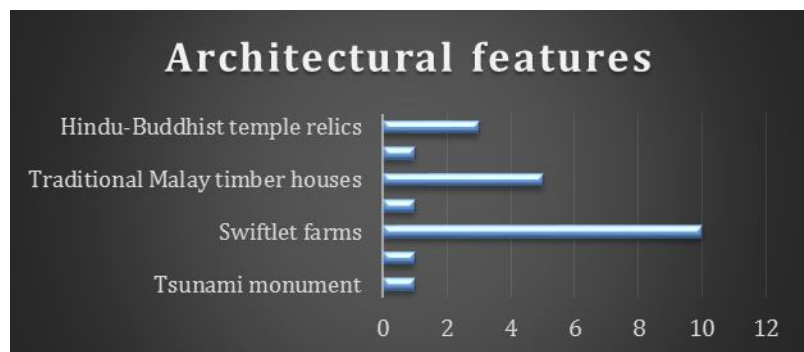
In this study, there are 15 homestays in total, which are located nearby one another. The homestay architectural features are tabulated in Table 1. These houses are mostly constructed from 100% brick (8 houses), 4 houses are made from 90% timber, and only 3 houses are made from 70% of timber as the main construction material. The biggest influence of the architectural style of these houses is the Malay culture. Those are traditional Malay (7 houses), modern Malay (6 houses), and modified traditional Malay (1 house). However, only one modern style bungalow among all homestays. The roof also has its own style. The Malay-influenced houses are commonly using the low pitch roof, *gajah menyusui*, *Pulau Pinang bumbung Belanda* style, *Pulau Pinang bumbung panjang* style, and *bumbung perabung lima* style. Only the modern bungalow house is using the resort-style slate roof type.

The participatory level from the house owner in running the homestay model is high. It can be seen that 87% from the total homestay owner are fully participating in this homestay business. Only 13% from the total homestays are participating as much as 70% and 20% respectively. This is may due to the number of rooms available as well as the amenities provided in each homestay. The rooms provided for the homestay differs on each house, ranging from 1 to maximum 5 bedrooms. The view from the house also adds as a selling point in promoting the homestay. These homestays are mostly facing the paddy fields,

tropical garden, and to other traditional Malay houses. Only Hajjah Meryam’s house is located next to the Hindu-Buddha



temples site. Beside its view and location, a unique sustainable feature also founded in one of the homestays. In En.Roslan’s house, the house is equipped with rainwater harvesting system that helps to recycle and



**Figure 4.** Notable architectural features around the homestay in Kota Aur

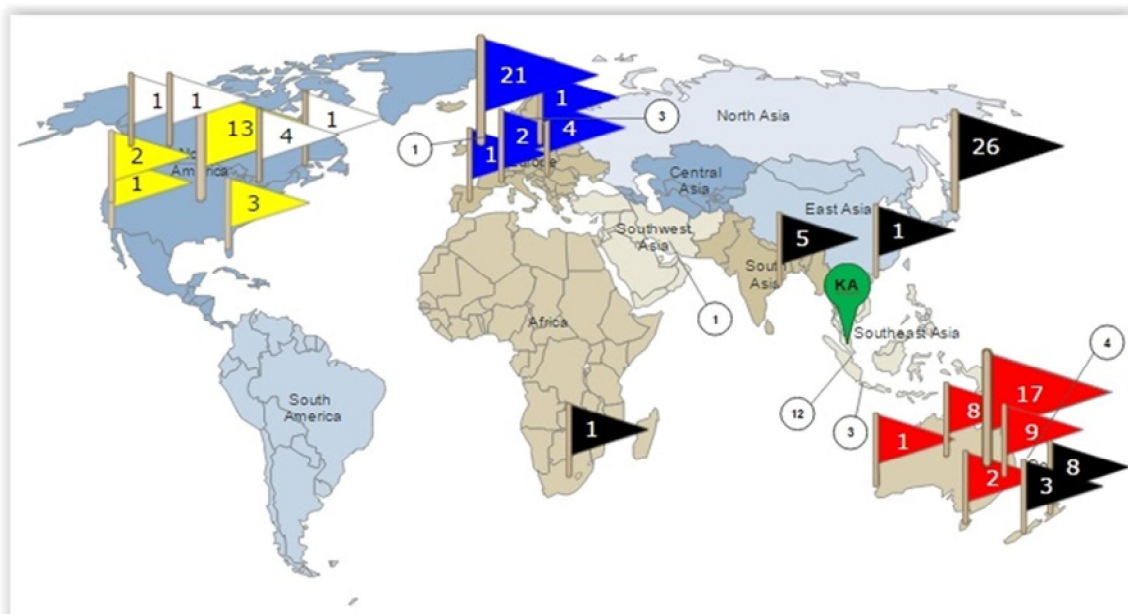
reuse the rainwater for domestic purpose. Although most homestays are built to be adaptable with the tropical climate, mechanical ventilation such as air conditioner and fan are also important to keep the guests thermally comfortable. Moreover, Malaysia has a high rainfall and hot humid climate throughout the year. In Kota Aur, not all homestay are equipped with air conditioning system; however, fan is available in most of the houses. Water heater is also available in several houses to comfort the guests.

in Kota Aur homestay, only 1 person during the year 2016. There are also local universities students coming from all other states in Malaysia as well as USM students from the P. R. of China did came as a local tourist visiting Kota Aur. In fact in 2016, there were 1 Iranian and 3 Indonesian local university students came to stay at the homestay. Another group of students consist of 13 participants from the Minnesota College in the US were also visiting Kota Aur. They were participating a language course in USM, a local university nearby. Besides, there were also 7 Canadians who are residing in Montreal, Calgary, Vancouver and Toronto visit the homestay in 2016. In the previous three years, there were a group of family from Sydney and 3 tourists from Finland were also visiting Kota Aur homestay. Lastly, there were also 12 tourists from Singapore and 1 from Walsall in the UK came, on 2014 and 2015 respectively.

### 3 ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF HOMESTAY OPERATORS IN KOTA AUR

According to Pusiran and Xiao (2017), there are many challenges affecting the effectiveness of the homestay program and each one could be different from one community to another. Moreover, homestay program involves the participation of the community as one of the criteria set by the Ministry of Culture, Art, and Tourism. The success of a homestay depends on the operators themselves, leadership of

the community and holistic involvement of the community, infrastructures, and many others. Based on the survey conducted among the homestay operators in Kota Aur, there are 6 major issues that need to be highlighted (refer to Figure 6). The biggest issue is the lack of way finding signage. Although seems simple, but the importance of a signage is very



**Figure 5.** Distribution of homestay guests to Kota Aur in the year 2013-2016

A survey has been conducted to determine the origin of the tourists who are visiting Kota Aur in the year 2016 only. From the graphical image in Figure 5, it shows that the tourists come from many countries in the world. There are 37 people from Australia, 29 people from the European continent, and 26 Japanese people. Africa has the least tourist coming to stay

crucial for guiding the guests into the location. The second issues are lack of public facilities for cultural activities to support the homestay program conducted by the host family as well as the local community. Based on the survey conducted, there are less promotion regarding the homestay and the programs offered are also considered as an issue. This is also agreed by Pusiran and Xiao (2017). They stated that lack of good promotion and under-developed marketing strategies are considered for causing poor dissemination of

information regarding the uniqueness of tourists experiencing the traditional life with the host family.

communication between the host and the guest is considered to be an important aspect in achieving a good homestay experience. The drawback by the host is the lack of communication skills or mastering an internationally

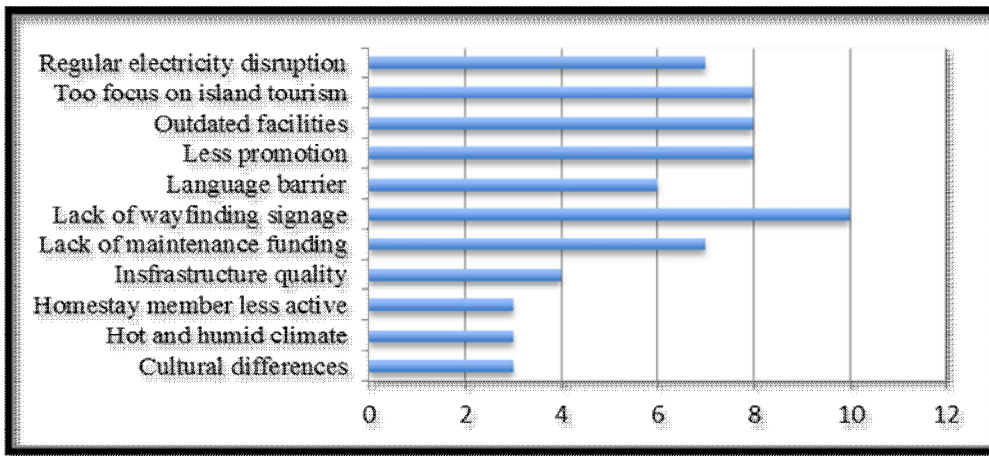
**Table 1.** Architectural Feature Analysis

No.	Homestay owner	Room #	Building material	Main Material %	Architectural Type	Style	Homestay participation %	Features 1	Features 2
1	Pn Siti	5	Timber	90%	Traditional Malay	Gaya Pulau Pinang bumbung Belanda	100	Paddy field view -front and back. Malay traditional house	A/C and fan. Water heater.
2	Roslan	1	Plastered brick	100%	Traditional Malay	Gajah menyusu	100	Paddy field view -front and back. Rain water harvesting feature	A/C
3	Nizam/Pn. Liza	4	Plastered brick	100%	Modern Malay	Low pitch roof	100	Tropical garden	Fan
4	Che Zaini	2	Timber	70%	Modified traditional Malay	Low pitch roof	10	Tropical garden	Fan
5	Hjh Meryam	3	Timber	90%	Traditional Malay	Gaya Pulau Pinang bumbung panjang	10	Tropical garden. 3 Hindu-Buddha 'chandi' temples. Malay traditional house	Fan
6	Pn Nora	3	Plastered brick	100%	Modern Malay	Low pitch roof	10	Tropical garden	A/C and fan
7	Pn Sakila	3	Plastered brick	100%	Modern Malay	Low pitch roof	100	Paddy field view -front and back	A/C and fan. Water heater.
8	Mokhtar	2	Plastered brick	100%	Modern Malay	Low pitch roof	100	Paddy field view -front and back	A/C and fan
9	Pn Marwiah	2	Timber	90%	Traditional Malay	Gaya Pulau Pinang bumbung Belanda	100	Paddy field view -front and back. Malay traditional house	A/C and fan. Water heater.
10	Hj Man/Hjh Kak Pah	3	Timber	90%	Traditional Malay	Gaya Pulau Pinang bumbung Belanda	100	Tropical garden	A/C and fan. Water heater.
11	Hjh Zainab	3	Plastered brick	100%	Modern bungalow	Resort style slate roof	100	Tropical garden	A/C and fan. Water heater.
12	Hj Safiee	2	Plastered brick	100%	Modern Malay	Low pitch roof	100	back. Training room facilities	A/C and fan
13	Azli/Pn Sofia	3	Timber	70%	Traditional Malay	Bumbung perabung lima	100	Paddy field view -on east side	A/C and fan
14	Awang/Pn Siti	3	Timber	70%	Traditional Malay	Bumbung perabung lima	70	Tropical garden	A/C and fan
15	Hashim	2	Plastered brick	100%	Modern Malay	Low pitch roof	20	Paddy field view- on west side	Fan

Another issue is regarding the lack of support from the local government to the Kota Aur. The local government and NGOs is currently focusing more on the island tourism since George Town, Penang is listed as the UNESCO World Heritage Site. The third issue is lack of funding to repair and upgrade the homestay. The homestays in Kota Aur are private properties; hence the funding for maintenance is very limited. Another issue is regarding the electricity disruption that occurs regularly. This could cause inconveniences to the guests as well as the host family, especially when they are from the temperate climate country. They will feel very discomfort due to high heat and humidity level. The fourth issue is regarding the language barrier from the guests, host family, and including from the local community in Kota Aur. Language enables the person to express emotions, share feelings, tell stories, and convey complex messages and knowledge. Moreover, it is considered as a greatest mediator that allows us to relate and understand each other (Kim & Mattila, 2011). Pusiran and Xiao (2017) also agreed that

accepted language especially English as the medium of conversation with the tourists. The inability of the host as well as the locals to master some basic English is usually a hindrance to the experience of the guest in interacting with the hosts.

Furthermore, the infrastructure quality, mainly on the road quality is not up to the standard. Most of the roads in Kota Aur are narrow country road; some parts uncovered with asphalt, and certain stretch most of the time with potholes. According to Pusiran and Xiao, (2017), the quality of facilities and infrastructure has been identified as sub-standard for conducting a homestay. Good infrastructure such as proper roads, clean water supplies, availability of electricity, and effective set-up of telecommunications, public facilities and amenities needs to be in place at a satisfactory level. Typically, international tourists fully consider on the availability of good infrastructure, facilities and amenities to make their experience more enjoyable and comfortable. There are three last issues in running the homestay program, those are: the participatory level of the homestay member, climatic factor in Kota Aur that is hot and humid, and cultural differences between the guests and the local community, including the host family.



### 3.1. Strengths and Future Targets in Homestay Business

The strengths as well as the future targeting point for the Kota Aur homestay program need to be addressed in order to ensure the sustainability and success of the Homestay programs. In this research, the strength and the future target is tabulated on Table 2. The strength of the Kota Aur homestay is consists of four points:

a. Targeted to be listed as the first UNESCO traditional village in this region or in Malaysia.

**Figure 6.** The issues and challenges occurred among the homestay operators in Kota Aur

**Table 2.** The Strength and Future Target of Kota Aur Homestay

Strength	<p><b>Listed as the first UNESCO traditional village</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hindu-Buddhist ruins</li> <li>• Pre-historic and archeology site</li> <li>• Mount Jerai</li> <li>• Muda River</li> <li>• Paddy field</li> <li>• Coconut tree grove</li> <li>• Whispering (<i>Bisik-bisik</i>) fish market</li> <li>• Traditional foods and snacks</li> <li>• Walkable Nipah palm (<i>Nypa fruticans</i>) orchard</li> <li>• Tsunami gallery</li> <li>• Dual-stated visit: Kedah and Penang</li> <li>• Only 30 minutes' drive from George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Most received foreign tourist destination in Malaysia</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listed as one of the popular tourist destinations in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and North America</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Sustainable homestay</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using rain harvesting system</li> <li>• Local food source</li> <li>• Naturally ventilated</li> <li>• Natural warm weather climate</li> <li>• Cycling activities</li> <li>• Natural floor mat from local Sengkuang (<i>Pachyrhizus erosus</i>) leaves</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Successful Cooperative/ 'koperasi' listed homestay</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selling pickled local fruits</li> </ul>
Future Target	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Chinese and Indian tourists</li> <li>• Participate in foreign tourism expo, i.e. in China, Japan, India, Europe, USA</li> <li>• To be popular for the local and regional tourists, particularly from the East Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand</li> <li>• Receive the best quality service and high standard of internal and external condition</li> </ul>

Kota Aur has many tangible and intangible values, both historical and non-historical from the pre-historic era to the modern tsunami gallery structure. There are also natural landscape elements such as Mount Jerai, Muda River, paddy fields, coconut tree grove, the one of a kind's whispering fish market, and the only walkable Nipah palm orchard. Another uniqueness's are the traditional foods and snacks, dual state trip; Penang and Kedah, and it is located nearby the Penang Island.

b. Kota Aur has the most foreign tourists among all areas. According to the survey, Kota Aur is listed as one of the popular tourist destinations in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and North America

c. Sustainable homestay concept.

The criteria is set by Talib and Sulieman (2011). They mentioned that a sustainable homestay should provide local food sources, using natural material on the buildings, and naturally ventilated tourist accommodations. The homestays in Kota Aur have already met the requirement as a sustainable homestay concept, however there is only one house with green homestay concept having rainwater harvesting as a form of water recycling system.

d. Successful 'koperasi' listed homestay. The local community is engaged with the pickled fruit making made from the local fruits that are available. This activity could be as a source of revenue for them.

The future targets for the homestays in Kota Aur are to be popular for the local and regional tourists, particularly from the East Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand. Moreover, the homestay operators are encouraged to participate in foreign tourism expo, i.e. in China, Japan, India, Europe, or in USA. In order to increase the guests' satisfaction, the homestay operators should improve the standard for the homestay physical condition. It is expected to receive the best quality service and high standard, internal and externally, as far as the accommodation concern.

### 4. CONCLUSION

The homestay program offers a variety of packages for tourists who are participating in the program according to



their choice. The homestay program is among the country's development agenda and it is possible to transform and make positive economic progress of a village as well as to achieve rural development project objectives. It is Penang Regional Redevelopment Authority (PERDA)'s target to transform the village communities in the peninsular land strip of Penang aiming to reduce poverty in rural areas. Every constraints and problems in the program may create better future strength and encouragement to the homestay participant's spirit to create the program much better.

Hence, attitude with high leadership and motivation is important for every homestay entrepreneurs for achieving the goals and objectives of setting up a program in their village development. A homestay program development seen here as a case study at homestay Kota Aur-in terms of village infrastructure, community socio-economics, leadership organizations, entrepreneurship and homestay attractions as well as homestay privileges is to pave the way making the homestay prospects and challenges in homestay programs in the Northern Territory of Peninsular Malaysia in the future is seem to compete with the developed countries and others developing countries.

Stable political, social and economic conditions and future plans meticulous in the Northern Region of Peninsular Malaysia gives confidence to the Government tourism programs especially this homestay program particularly can be maintained on its credibility as a main driving economic program in the Northern Territory of Peninsular Malaysia. In other words, the homestay concept implemented by the government and the list of activities with the involvement of villagers particularly in this part of Peninsular Malaysia benefiting and adding positive economic value to villagers, homestay participants and the surrounding villages, particularly and for rural Malaysia generally.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We extend our gratitude to PERDA and MOTAC, Penang office as well as Seberang Perai Utara's District and Land offices for the continuing support on the homestay program. The publication of this paper is made possible also through numerous support from the local and foreign travel offices on providing the foreign tourists thus making the statistic much more interesting. The author also would like to thank all the individuals; specifically Mr. Ambran Bin Sailudin @ Sainuddin for his major involvement in this study as well as to all Kota Aur homestay program participants and well as the Kota Aur villagers generally. Lastly, to those personnel directly or indirectly involved making this homestay programs a success.

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