

## AN ANALYSIS OF EVENT TOURISM IN MALAYSIA

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*Event tourism is becoming popular in Malaysia. Hence, it can be viewed as a significant segment of the Malaysian tourism industry. Yet, there are no adequate data that can help analyze and understand the development of the event tourism for further tourism destination planning and marketing. Basically, each festivals and special events has its own role and purpose to play. Traditionally celebrated by local communities as rituals of traditions, beliefs and religion, the events are now being used and marketed as tourism attractions. There were certain trends that can be observed from 1990 till 2000. The Malaysian event tourism is analyzed according to certain episodes that happened since then. Essentially, the event tourism in Malaysia was going through a considerable growth in numbers, size and attendance, diversity, and professionalism.*

*Event tourism, special event, festival*

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### INTRODUCTION

There are strong evidences on the increasing popularity and diversity of festivals and special events in Malaysia over the years. Every year there are major and minor events being planned and staged for public community and tourists alike. Thus, they have just become a significant component in the Malaysian tourism industry. As implied by Getz (1991), general reasons for the increasing growth of this festival and special event phenomenon is because of economic prosperity, a more leisure-oriented lifestyle, and ever-improving global communication.

Unfortunately, there are not enough systematic data entries or inventories collecting the number, types, distribution or popularity of festival or special events in Malaysia. Consequently, the growth and evolution of the Malaysian festivals and special events could not be analyzed and documented. Yet, these basic supply-side data are very important for tourism planning and marketing, and policy-making.

Thus, it is the objective of this paper to analyze the event tourism in Malaysia from 1990 till 2000. This preliminary study is based primarily on its collection of secondary data. Most of the secondary data is in the form of historical documentation, directories, brochures, publications and news on major tourism festivals or special events or celebrations in Malaysia from January 1990 until December 2000.

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## EVENT TOURISM

The Malaysian government is increasingly organizing festivals and special events as an important part of its tourism destination planning and development. Generally, according to McDonnell et al. (1999), event tourism can help destinations to attract more tourists, create attractive profile for destinations, position in the tourism market and provide a competitive marketing advantage. Event tourism was defined by Getz (1997) as:

1. The systematic planning, development and marketing of events as tourist attractions, catalysts for other developments, image builders, and animators of attractions and destination areas; event tourism strategies should also cover the management of news and negative events.
2. A market segment consisting of those people who travel to attend events, or who can be motivated to attend events while away from home.

Additionally, Getz also stated that the most basic goal of event tourism is “the creation of tourist attractions, capable of generating travel demand or satisfying visitor needs” (1991). In addition, Appendix 1 summarizes the possible benefits and costs of events on host community and also tourism destination planning.

Nevertheless, special events are usually organized and staged once or infrequently. This means, a special event usually happens outside normal programs and activities (Getz, 1991). Jago & Shaw (1998) also stated “one-off or infrequent occurrence” as one of the important special event attributes. Similarly, Goldblatt (1990) recognized special event with its “unique moment in time”. In addition, these special occasions can be called or categorized into fiesta, carnival, hallmark event, mega-event, holiday, rally or even agricultural show. However, whether an event is called a festival or a special/mega/hallmark event, “a definition for it depends on one’s perspectives” (Getz, 1991).

The term “festival” is said to be developed from the word “feast”, and indicating “a time of celebration” (Derrett, 1999). Festivals are often used as a meeting point for societies to enjoy and celebrate. Thus, a generic definition for festival is “a public, themed celebration” (Getz, 1991). Additionally, in a book titled “Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival”, Falassi explains that “festivals is an event, a social phenomenon, encountered in virtually all human cultures” (cited in Getz, 1991). In short, the base of most festivals is on public feasting and celebration, and shared cultural value.

## ROLES OF EVENTS

Festivals and special events can be found in all kind of societies in Malaysia. Traditionally, most of the celebrations started as rituals of traditions, beliefs and religions. There are special ceremonies to celebrate the end of harvesting season, and specific rituals to appease the spirits of sea, land and forest, such as Gawai Harvesting Festival, Sarawak and Keamaatan Harvesting Festival, Sabah. There are also special days that marked phases of the moon and key moments of people’s lives. Examples are the Chinese New Year and Muslim Eid Celebration.

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Commonly initiated by local residents, these festivals and events have developed their characteristics and reputations over a number of years. Certain rituals or common practices have also been established by the years from generation to generation. Consequently, these ceremonies are affirmed and shared, and continuously treated as important occasions in the life of the community (McDonnell et al., 1999).

Festivals and special events have gained in popularity and used increasingly and effectively by both profit and non-profit institutions. There are many kinds of special events that organizers can stage for different purposes and to satisfy different motivations such as physical, culture, interpersonal, business, and status and prestige. Events can be excellent opportunities to educate, build friendship and foster a sense of community. Moreover, events can provide opportunity to visitors or consumers to gain unique experience of leisure, social or cultural outside the range of choices or beyond everyday event.

In short, as stated by Getz (1991), events are “created, manipulated, marketed, and sold” for various reasons. In addition, festivals and special events have become a key role in international, national and regional tourism marketing strategies. Increasingly, themed and unique “tourism” festivals and events are being held in most countries to attract tourists.

### PROBLEMS OF CLASSIFICATIONS

Defining “event” or “special event” is easier and straightforward to clarify. Yet, determining what makes one event special is the tricky part. It is the context of the events that make them special to the organizer and also to the customer or visitor (Getz, 1991). And as Getz (1991) points out, it is possible that the organizers, sponsors and visitors may not agree on the “specialness” of the event.

Moreover, it is a bit difficult to define and classify the events. This is due to the various definitions and interpretations of event related terms. In other words, the theme and characteristic of the events are not clearly differentiated from each other. Moreover, a wide variety of special new titles of festival created by the organizers made it harder to make a correct classification. Examples are “Rumbia Fest” and “Kenyer Eco Fest”. In contrast, examples of newly created jargons that are easy to understand are “climbathon” and “tanggathon” (*tangga* means stairs in Malay). As Getz (1991) mentions, the terms were created so that the event would be unique and different from other events. In short, the distinctions between the events documented are apparently vague and difficult to be understood. Thus, the interpretations are very subjective, and may be different from time to time.

There are a number of ways to classify events. Yet, the task of classifying is very difficult and confusing because, there are huge number of event-related terms being created by event organizers. Most of the terms are only jargons and not fully understood by all. Moreover, Getz had noticed that more and more new terms are being created in order to “stand out of the crowd” (1991). Most of the time, the name or title of the events are modified, commercialized and abused by the organizers, for example: “Riverfest” instead of “River Festival”. In addition, the differences between the terms is also vague and hard to distinguish (McDonnell et al., 1999), and subjective (Getz,

1991), for example: contest and competition; festival and carnival; games and tournament.

#### **EVENT SECTOR IN MALAYSIA**

Event as a special field of tourism in Malaysia is not yet developed like other countries such as Australia. Even though the festivals and special events are reportedly increasing, there are still much to be done in order to organize the industry better. Malaysia should develop a specific policy or strategy that directly caters the event tourism. For, it is the aim of the government and Malaysia's Prime Minister to use major events like the KL 98 Games and F1 Grand Prix as a tool to project the national image to the world (SIC, 2000).

In supporting the event tourism, the Malaysian government and organizers have spent great amount of money in building and preparing expensive modern event facilities and infrastructure, such as the RM561 million sport facilities for the KL 98 Games and RM286 beautiful Grand Prix circuit in Sepang. In addition, there have been more initiatives from the Malaysian government to bid for major international events.

Additionally, keen attitudes toward event tourism are also seemed to be growing and developing among the Malaysians. More people have realized the various benefits of event tourism, especially the economics advantageous. Consequently, more local private companies have started to involve in production and sponsoring of festivals and special events in Malaysia. Meanwhile, for the general community, participation has increased through the concept of community involvement and voluntarism.

The Malaysian tourism authorities (both the government and private sectors) are now starting to emphasize more on festivals and special events as additional products to promote tourist into Malaysia. More states are now interested to organize themed year together with a prepared list of events. Thus, the events are considered as "value-added products" to the Malaysian's tourism industry. Malaysia's multi-racial and culture, and multi-religious communities have very much contributed to the richness and diversification of the events. Though, majority of the events is small and localized to its specific community or area.

Festivals and special events help to add diversity to the Malaysian's current tourism products. They can serve as unique activities for the tourists during their tour in Malaysia, and also as an excellence tool attracting visitors to visit Malaysia. Hence, the events are included in most of the tourism travel packages in Malaysia. Moreover, event tourism can also benefit the Malaysian people and culture. The experts have implied that events can promote unique Malaysian diverse culture to foreign visitors, create more job opportunities and income for the locals, and preserve and sustain various local cultures and heritage.

In short, there is a clear potential for the event tourism to flourish in Malaysia. This may due to the wide variety and unique cultures and heritages of the various ethnic groups exist in Malaysia. These "special" events can potentially attract foreign visitors. Thus, this can truly be an exceptional competitive advantage for Malaysia over other countries. This may be one of the many reasons why culture-based and sports events are viewed by the experts as promising types of events in the future.

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### TRENDS OF SPECIAL EVENTS IN MALAYSIA 1990-2000

Malaysians have been celebrating religious festivals since long time ago. These festivals are the most important major events among the Malaysian community. Another major event in Malaysia is the Hari Kebangsaan (Independence Day). It has been celebrated joyfully by the Malaysians since 31st of August 1957. It was in fact the first major formal public celebration recorded in Malaysia. There is usually wide variety number of events held as part of the celebration.

Conventionally, most events in Malaysia were based on the local culture, resources, and activities. Examples of popular local events are bird singing, long boat regatta, flower or food festival, drum festival, top spinning festival and kite competition. These activities are also examples of favorite traditional past time activities for the local community. In general, these events were targeted mainly for the locals. Thus, the size of the events was mostly small. The purpose of the events may be to provide entertainment and activity for the community. The events may also serve as important places for the Malaysians to get together with their kampung (village) mate. Knowing that they belong to a certain group or society is very essential for the Malaysians.

Today, it seems that there were more events with sporting as their main theme are held in Malaysia. Increasingly, there was a trend to organize major golf and bowling tournament in Malaysia. This may because of the economic benefits and the availability of new, modern and expensive facilities. International events for other sports like badminton, motor vehicle, and cycling were also starting to increase in numbers. It may involve both the local and international markets. Additionally, athletic events such as marathon, triathlon, and bridge run were also major type of events during the ten years. In addition, the XVI Commonwealth Games was recently held in Malaysia. It was the first biggest event ever staged in Malaysia, thus it was a mega-event by standard by the Malaysians. Another “mega” sporting event available yearly in Malaysia is the Malaysian F1 Grand Prix. It is still a brand new event starting in 1999. This major prestigious motor racing event is reported to bring more visitors and more money into Malaysia.

Noticeably, the most popular events among the locals are events or festivals that have element of competition or contest. In addition, there were many “water” events held from 1990 until 2000. These include the competition events that involve water, such as river safari, regatta, dragon boat competition or festival, fishing or squid festival and beach or water festival.

There were also a number of hallmark events that are unique to certain ethnic groups in Malaysia. There are the Kaamatan Harvesting Festival for the Kadazan-Dusun of Sabah, Gawai Harvesting Festival for the indigenous Ibans and Bidayus of Sarawak, Feast of San Pedro for the Portuguese community of Malacca and Lun Bawang Festival for the Lun Bawang community of Sarawak.

In 1990, Malaysia has taken the initiative to organize its first themed year, the Visit Malaysia Year '90. Many festivals and special events were introduced and organized for the visitors in that year. Generally, it turned out to be a big success. As shown in table 1, the number of tourist arrivals has increased rapidly to 7,445,908 in that year

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compared to a smaller number of 486,320 in 1989. Still, the event industry in Malaysia at that time is observed as at its “infancy stage”.

The Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board has tried to repeat the success by organizing another themed year in 1994. Increased number of events were staged and established (11% of total events 1990-2000). As a result, the number of tourist arrivals to Malaysia has once again increased reaching 7,197,229, and highest total tourist expenditure was reported in 1994 (RM 8,298 million) since 1989.

**Table 1**  
**Tourist Receipts: Year 1989-2001**

Year	Tourist Arrivals	Total Tourist Expenditure (RM Million)
1989	486,320	2,803.0
1990	7,445,908	4,500.0
1991	5,847,213	4,283.0
1992	6,016,209	4,595.0
1993	6,503,860	5,066.0
1994	7,197,229	8,298.0
1995	7,468,749	9,175.0
1996	7,138,452	10,354.0
1997	6,210,921	9,699.6
1998	5,550,748	8,580.4
1999	7,931,149	12,321.3
2000	10,221,682	17,335.4
2001	12,775,073	24,221.5
2002	9,960,894	-

Source: Tourism Malaysia, 2001

The staged-events were at its highest peak in 1998 with a total of 218 special events (20% of total events 1990-2000). Unfortunately, Malaysia was troubled by a few problems starting from mid of 1997. At first, Malaysia was affected by thick haze resulting from “open burnings” in Indonesia. Then, a disastrous 1997-98 currency breakdown and some internal political conflict have also impacted heavily on Malaysia. Consequently, tourist arrivals statistic in 1997 and 1998 had gone down (minus) 12.9% and (minus) 10.6% respectively.

Because of these uncontrollable factors, number of events was at its lowest (down by minus 94%) in 1999, which majority are only major and international events. A number of other planned-events may have been cancelled or postponed because of the crisis. Yet, the reason why the numbers were still reported high in 1998, may because of the extensive “lead-time” development and planning made ahead the actual event.

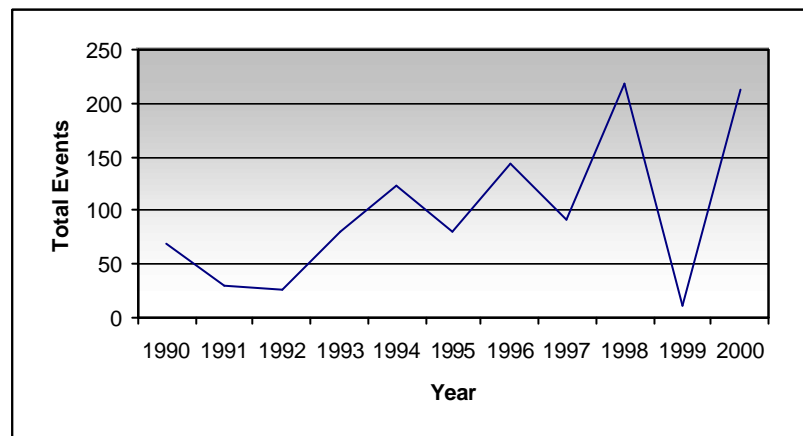
Even though the Malaysian economy is still recovering from the financial crisis 1997, it seems that tourism activities have continued to expand since then. Various festivals and

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special event have been planned and organized to attract more tourists coming to Malaysia. Additionally, a number of tourism themed year was arranged by states government for their strategic destination marketing. Yet, another worry is troubling the tourism industry. Threat of terrorism is very heavily discussed and alarmed all over the world since the 11th September of 2001. Eventually, this “war” may also affect the Malaysian’s tourism sector. Number of international visitors is expected to decline until the confidence to travel is reinstated. Thus, it would be very interesting to see its impact on the event sector.

### Growth in the Number of Events

A few researchers agreed that there is a significant growth in the number of events (Getz & Frisby, 1988; Getz, 1991; Hall, 1992). However, it is very difficult to determine the exact growth; because, the statistic of events – in terms of the number, types, distribution or popularity - have not been systematically documented and collected (Getz, 1991). The reason is because tourism and leisure, specifically the event tourism are still recently viewed as an industry, and the term festivals and special events may be confusing by some people and not be considered to be put under the same category (Getz, 1991). Thus, the supply-side statistics of the event tourism are seldom developed and completed compared to the demand-side.



**Figure 1**  
**Growth of Events: Year 1990-2000**  
(Source: Tourism Malaysia, 1990-2000)

It seems that festivals and special events in Malaysia have also grown in numbers over the thirteen-year period. Number of events reported in 2000 has increased 207% since the beginning of 1990 (Figure 1). In 1990, a total of 69 (6%) events were staged compared to 212 (20%) events in 2000. The number of events is considered high in 1994 and 1996, and among highest in 1998 and 2000. An exception is given to the year 1999. Only a small number of events were held during that year, after Malaysia’s economy was badly affected by a number of crises.

### Growth in Size and Attendance

Getz (1991) has suggested that size of production and attendance of events have appeared to be increasing; even though no systematic evidence can be supplied to

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confirm this statement, due to the attendance of events is not being counted and estimated correctly by many of the organizers (Getz, 1991). Yet, the tendency to overstate the estimation of the attendance is very high. Moreover, Getz (1991) has also mentioned about the “relative newness of many events”, thus making a trend analysis for the events is still quite impossible.

As suggested by Getz (1991), the actual size of production and attendance of events for past events in Malaysia are very difficult to obtain. However, the size can be estimated indefinitely. Thus in general, sizes of the events since the early 90s have increased to include huge and bigger events, although majority of the events in Malaysia was only for a short one or two days. Additionally, August and May are the two popular months to hold events in Malaysia, or commonly known as the “festive months”.

Community and special-sized events were the major events in the early 90s. Yet, sizes of the events have increased to include huge and bigger events. Mega-size events, such as KL Commonwealth Games and F1 racing started to make a debut in Malaysia in 1998. Originally, majority of special events in Malaysia is targeted to the local community.

<u>Environment</u>		<u>Major Special Events</u>
	1990	First Visit Malaysia Year 1990
	1991	First Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA)
Malaysian's economic flourished	1992	Second Visit Malaysia Year '94
	1993	
	1994	
	1995	
	1996	
Haze resulted from 'open burning' in Indonesia 1997	1997	
Economic Crisis 1997-1998	1998	Sport and Recreation Year '98 Commonwealth Games, KL 98 Games
Internal political crisis 1998-1999	1999	First Petronas Malaysian F1 Grand Prix
	2000	
	2001	
Threat of terrorism	2002	

**Figure 2**  
**Malaysian Event Time Line**  
 (Source: Tourism Malaysia, 1990-2002)

### Diversity of Events

There are also a wider variety of festivals and special events reported by the literature. More and more new and unique events have been created and marketed by the organizers, in order to be different from others to attract the visitors. According to Hall (1992), rationales for the wider variety of events are because of changing in leisure preferences and work patterns. Further evident for the diversity of themes, and range of events and attractions can be found in the survey done by Getz & Frisby (1988) on the community-run festivals in Ontario.



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There are huge varieties of themed festivals and special events documented in Malaysia since 1990, refer to figure 2. More and more new and unique events have been created and marketed by the organizers, in order to be different from others to attract the visitors. The various events are held for various different purposes and objectives. Popular main themes of events are competition, recreation, sporting and cultural. Still, many new events are being created and established every year.

### Increase in Professionalism

Because of many events are growing fast in size and complexity, professions related to events have also increased in demand. Number of staff and volunteers for variety of events are growing (Getz, 1991). Additionally, regulatory and professional associations, published literature, formal college and university-level education, and training program opportunities have also expanding together with the industry.

While the event industry in Malaysia is still new and developing, number of professions related to the industry is also still at the introductory stage. Only a small number of organizations offering event related services exist in Malaysia. In addition, the Malaysian community is now getting familiar with the idea of voluntarism. It was reported that thousands of Malaysians of all ages took advantage offering themselves as volunteers and helpers during the KL 98 Games.

## IMPACTS OF EVENTS IN MALAYSIA

Festivals and special events can contribute to Malaysia's attractiveness as a tourist destination. The attractiveness of the festivals and special events can successfully pulled great numbers of visitors to Malaysia, and provided physical settings for "tourist experiences" (Getz, 1991). Hence, event tourism can provide an excellence booster in securing higher prominence in the global tourism marketplace. As mentions by Jago & Shaw (1998), major events like the F1 Grand Prix has the "ability to act as a catalyst for development".

Another important impact of hosting festivals and special events such as the KL 98 Games is the increased community pride. Essentially through the festivals and special events, the Malaysians have the opportunity to show off their unique and interesting heritage, history and places to the world's participants, spectators and visitors. Moreover, the events can help Malaysia to increase and boost its image and status in the eyes of the world. Thus, this will lead to increase of community's spirit among the Malaysians.

Yet, there are several negative impacts of the event tourism that need to be equally considered. These impacts may play a vital role in affecting the environment, thus reducing the efficiency of the concept of sustainable tourism development. Hence, unwanted effects like increased noise and pollution, clearing of large land and forest areas for constructions, and huge potential of mass tourism could be disastrous to Malaysia's tourism development, especially in the long run.

## REASONS OF GROWTH

This apparent growth of festivals and special events might be because of several factors. Getz (1991) presents a few of reasons of the events growth. He rationalized that the possible reasons for this phenomenon are increased income, increased leisure time,

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more leisure interest, changes in socio-demographic trends, more urban life-styles, changes in travel and tourism trends, and greater global communication.

In addition, many governmental agencies support the development and increase of festivals and events. Increasingly, festivals and special events are viewed as an important part of tourism development and marketing plans. Moreover, the 1997-1998 economic crisis has forced Malaysia to expand and diversify its economy to other sectors including tourism. Thus, greater emphasis has been placed on the tourism industry as a revenue earner for Malaysia. Even though historically the majority of events have started because of non-touristic reasons, there is clearly a trend to exploit these events for tourism and also to create new and unique events for the purpose of tourist attractions. Thus, Malaysia is seeking for a share in the growing trend of global tourism market.

Other than the government agencies, business organizations are increasingly capitalizing the popularity of festivals and special events. A once lucrative idea, organizing events is now regarded as an excellent business opportunity by private sectors. In other words, special events have developed into an easy mean to generate money for some organizations. Hence, they have become big business and often involving large amount of money, such as fundraising and sponsorship. Similarly, exhibitions, trade fairs and conventions may also show the close-relatedness of events today with business reasons.

## CONCLUSION

Globally, festivals and special events are now treated as a part of tourism products. More and more events are initiated and established by countries as an added value to their tourism industry. Thus, events are now increasingly perceived as an industry of its own.

Similar to other countries, Malaysia is also starting to concentrate more on producing festivals and special events in order to assist its tourism development. the government and private sectors seem to take various initiatives related to events. However, in order to achieve maximum potential of the event tourism, various aspects of the industry in Malaysia need first to be studied and understood. In this paper, a basic but essential analysis of the supply side of the Malaysian events has been produced to assist the initial study of growth and trends of event tourism in Malaysia.

Basically, festivals and special events in Malaysia are going through a considerable growth in numbers, size and attendance, diversity, and professionalism. It is evidence now that there is an apparent growth in the event tourism in Malaysia. The Malaysian government is aiming to offer the festivals and special events as a unique and genuine attraction or product, to expand its tourism development.

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### Appendix 1 Possible impacts of events on host communities

Type of Impact	Positive	Negative
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased expenditures</li> <li>increase of employment</li> <li>increase in labor supply</li> <li>increase in standard of living</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>price increases during event</li> <li>real estate speculation</li> <li>failure to attract tourists</li> <li>better alternative investments</li> <li>inadequate capital</li> <li>inadequate estimation of costs of event</li> </ul>
Tourism/ commercial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased awareness of the region as a travel/tourism destination</li> <li>increased knowledge concerning the potential for investment and commercial activity in the region</li> <li>creation of new accommodation and tourist attractions</li> <li>increase in accessibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>acquisition of a poor reputation as a result of inadequate facilities, improper practices or inflated prices</li> <li>negative reactions from existing enterprises due to the possibility of new competition for local manpower and governmental assistance</li> </ul>
Physical/ environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>construction of new facilities</li> <li>improvement of local infrastructure</li> <li>preservation of heritage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ecological damage</li> <li>changes in natural processes</li> <li>architectural pollution</li> <li>destruction of heritage</li> <li>overcrowding</li> </ul>
Social/ cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increase in permanent level of local interest and participation in types of activity associated with event</li> <li>strengthening of regional values and traditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>commercialization of activities which may be of a personal or private nature</li> <li>modification of nature of event or activity to accommodate tourism</li> <li>potential increase in crime</li> <li>changes in community structure</li> <li>social dislocation</li> </ul>
Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased local pride and community spirit</li> <li>increased awareness of non-local perceptions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>tendency toward defensive attitudes concerning host region</li> <li>culture shock</li> <li>misunderstandings leading to varying degrees of host/visitor hostility</li> </ul>
Political/ administrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>enhanced international recognition of region and values</li> <li>development of skills among planners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>economic exploitation of local population to satisfy ambitions of political elite</li> <li>distortion of true nature of event to reflect elite values</li> <li>failure to cope</li> <li>inability to achieve aims</li> <li>increase in administrative costs</li> <li>use of event to legitimate unpopular decisions</li> <li>legitimation of ideology and socio-cultural reality</li> </ul>

Source: Hall, 1992, pp.8.

