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Category: Culture  

Project Title: 2021 Virtual Rainforest World Music Festival  

Organisation: Sarawak Tourism Board
About Sarawak Tourism Board

Sarawak Tourism Board (STB) is the statutory body of Sarawak’s Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture responsible for the promotion and marketing of tourism activities in the largest state of Malaysia.

It aims to create awareness among industry players, media and members of the public on the diversity of Sarawak in terms of tourism products – both on the regional and international stage. STB also looks to position Sarawak as a prime destination for its five pillars of tourism – Culture, Adventure, Nature, Food and Festivals.

With this in mind, the statutory body is dedicated towards ensuring the sustainability of the tourism industry. It hopes to achieve this by the continuous promotion of Responsible Tourism, in accordance with the state’s goal of becoming a top-of-mind eco-tourism destination.

STB also seeks to provide networking and improve synergy among official agencies and tourism partners. It looks to increase awareness among Sarawakians on the benefits and importance of the tourism industry while enhancing performance through channelled motivation and teamwork.

Figure 1.0: Sarawak Tourism Board office
Project Synopsis

The world is moving at an incredible pace. Rapid advancement of technology has resulted in the development and adaptation of modern conveniences which have led to lifestyle changes.

Many of these changes threaten traditional methods of living, including the blurring and extinction of different elements of culture and heritage.

Traditional medicine is being replaced by modern medicine, ancient farming methods are being replaced by heavy machineries while Hollywood blockbusters have replaced traditional legends and folklores that were previously handed down from one generation to another via word of mouth.

The same can be said for “World Music”. World Music is defined as music from non-Western and countries. These include quasi-traditional, intercultural and traditional music.

Sarawak is home to 28 different ethnic groups, each with their own unique languages, cultures, food and heritage. These include music and music instruments that are distinct to the respective ethnic groups.

Many of these music and instruments are becoming lost with the onset of modern pop music. The traditional sape (boat lute) is being replaced by modern guitars, the Dumbak is being replaced by modern drums and the selingut (nose flute) replaced by modern wind instruments, among others.

Figure 2.0: At Adau playing Selingut (nose flute)
Sarawak Tourism Board (STB) recognised this as a growing concern and introduced the Rainforest World Music Festival in 1997 to preserve the traditional music and instruments of Sarawak while providing local performers a stage to showcase their art and talent to international audiences.

In 2021, the festival continued to evolve. The Covid-19 pandemic saw the cancellation of the event in 2020 but STB capitalised and made the best of the situation by adopting digital technology to put on a virtual festival.

The festival merged the best elements of traditional music and modern digital edge technology to provide an interactive virtual festival that was free for all to watch, helping to extend the reach of the festival.

Upon completion of the three-day festival – held from June 18 to 20th, 2021 - a total of 402,865 viewers from 79 countries had tuned in to the virtual show, allowing STB to successful showcase the beauty and allure of World Music to the world.

Figure 2.1: RWMF Virtual Platform – Live Performances
History

The Rainforest World Music Festival was first introduced in 1997 as a means to preserve and showcase Sarawakian traditional music and its instruments – as well as the different ethnic groups of Sarawak – to the world.

The first festival hosted a crowd of only 300 and was held at the Sarawak Cultural Village, located at Mount Santubong, approximately 35km north of Kuching. The festival was free of charge with daytime workshops held on the festival grounds.

Festival goers can meet and interact with the musicians before and after their performances. The concept has stuck throughout the years, with the exception of a fee now being charged for those attending the festival.

The festival has grown exponentially since its first inception. In 2019, the festival attracted a total of 23,650 festival goers, of which 40 percent were international travellers (non-Malaysian). This translated to an economic spinoff of approximately RM49 Million.

The festival was cancelled in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic but it was reintroduced in a virtual format in 2021. The three-day virtual festival – held from June 18 to 20th, 2021 - was made free for all audiences to watch and received an overwhelming response.

This has prompted STB to organise the 2022 edition of the festival – marking its 25th anniversary – with a first-of-its-kind hybrid version of the festival.

Figure 3.1: RWMF in 1998
Technical Details
Covid-19 pandemic has been catastrophic for the tourism, travel and hospitality sector. International travel has come to an abrupt halt with many hotels and businesses in the travel and service industry forced to cease operations.

This has also seen the postponement and cancellation of many international events. One such event held in Malaysia’s state of Sarawak is the Rainforest World Music.

The ongoing pandemic was also taking a toll on the mental disposition of people all over the world. Depression had become major issue as a result of the pandemic due to people being urged by governments all over the world to stay home and to avoid participating in social activities.

STB recognised the need to maintain the presence of the festival, not only to continue building on the brand and marketing of the iconic event moving forwards, but also to continue raising awareness on Sarawak’s traditional music scene and their instruments but also to provide motivation for the local communities and tourism players.

With this in mind, the tourism board introduced the first ever virtual experience for the festival. The virtual show was streamed live - free of charge - on June 18 to 20th, 2021.

This was done in the hopes of extending the reach of the festival to raise awareness and educate both the local and international community of what Sarawak has to offer with regards to traditional music and the instruments used.

The virtual festival also introduces festival goers on the different cultures, heritage and lifestyle of the ethnic groups that call Sarawak home.
The traditional music was accompanied by modern instruments and compositions, allowing a natural evolution of the traditional music scene, expanding the creativity of the musicians while cementing the roles and presence of traditional music and instruments in the contemporary and modern music scene.

Different digital components and tools – such as virtual and augmented reality components - were incorporated into the virtual festival to provide those in attendance with a more interactive and complete experience.

STB would also leverage on its various media partners to help promote the events on their respective social media platforms to amplify the effects of the promotional activities. These include web articles, social media posts, television broadcasts as well as other means of online communication with the public.

It also engaged E-commerce giants Shopee and Grab to raise awareness of the festivals while providing local entrepreneurs an avenue to market and sell their products during the festival.

Figure 4.0: Shopee and Grab as E-commerce platform for local entrepreneurs
Cultural impact

One of the main objective of the Rainforest World Music Festival was to expose festival goers to the traditional music and instruments used by Sarawakians.

The virtual format of the 2021 festival further achieved this by extending the reach of the event.

Comments received via surveys and on our social media platform reinforced the objective with many of the audiences stating that they were delighted to learn more about “World Music” and the instruments used.

The performances also carried with them tid-bits on the stories behind the different pieces and instruments – as well as the people and ethnic groups who played them. This allowed STB to use the festival as a platform to engage the audiences and educate them on the cultures and heritage of the 38 different ethnic groups that call Sarawak home.

The festival also looked to showcase the potential of traditional World Music in today’s music scene. The traditional instrument and pieces were accompanied by modern instruments, blurring the lines of World and Contemporary music, allowing us to reinforce the status of Sarawak’s traditional music and its instruments as timeless pieces.

All of these lend themselves to the preservation of Sarawak’s traditional music, along with the culture and heritage, and the virtual component of the show enabled STB to extend the reach of the festival to new audiences, spreading awareness on the existence and the need and importance to preserve Sarawak’s World Music.
Uniqueness of the project

The virtual festival was a first-of-its-kind that was organised in the region. The virtual concept broke barriers on how an online show can be organised, in addition to raising awareness on World Music.

In addition to livestreaming the show on multiple platforms, the festival also included a 3D interactive map where those in attendance can move from one stage of the show to another by clicking on specific ‘houses’ on a virtual map of Sarawak’s Cultural Village – another icon of the Malaysian state.

One house would house the main stage while another would house workshops where you can get a up-close and personal experience of how the instruments are played and how they sound. Houses hosting E-commerce platforms were also prepared. Those looking for a more immersive experience can participate in an augmented reality walk around the Cultural Village.

STB took to its different social media platforms – three separate accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WeChat and Weibo – to promote the festival. The statutory body also reached out to media partners – Tourism Malaysia, WindMusic Taiwan, Malaysia Airlines, Royal Brunei Airlines, among others - to help promote the event via their respective websites, online publications and respective social media platforms.

Audiences were encouraged to share their experiences during the 2021 virtual festivals – as well as previous editions of the festivals – on their social media to stand a chance at winning prizes. This helped to further push and amplify our marketing push for the festival.

The campaign also engaged the services of TVS, a television channel owned by Sarawak Media Group. TVS helped amplify the advertising and marketing efforts by cross posting the creatives and content from the STB social media pages. They also live streamed the event on their television channel and Facebook page.

STB, meanwhile, engaged E-commerce giants Shopee and Grab to raise awareness of the festival. Shopee would live stream the event and provide Shopee coins for those viewing the streams. They also provided a marketplace to help local entrepreneurs market and sell Sarawakian products during the festivals. These provided exposure of Sarawakian cultural products such as arts and handicrafts to an international audience.

Figure 6.0: RWMF Virtual Platform
Awareness generated by the project

The 2021 Rainforest World Music Festival garnered significantly higher than expected viewership over the duration of the live streams. It amassed a total 402,865 viewers from 79 countries during the three-day event.

Surveys carried out during and following the conclusion of the festival indicated that 54.8 percent were first time festival-goers for the Rainforest World Music Festival. This was also the first exposure of World Music and traditional music instruments for many of them.

The virtual component made it possible for both local and international viewers to experience World Music for the first time, exposing them to the existence of not only this genre of music but also the different cultures and heritage that play such music.

The survey also showed that 81.1 per cent of the respondents had a positive experience with the RWMF and that 80 per cent participated in the event for relaxation and enjoyment purposes.

76.6 per cent of the respondents found out about the Rainforest World Music Festival via social media marketing and promotions and 75.1 per cent of them had shared the experience via their own social media pages, further amplifying the reach of the campaign.

The organising and hosting of both virtual festivals were lauded by the local community. Different organisations and governing bodies have informed the Sarawak Tourism Board on multiple occasions that these virtual festivals would be the measuring stick and examples for other events moving forwards.

Figure 7.0: RWMF 2021 poster
Roles and Responsibilities

The Rainforest World Music Festival is wholly owned by Sarawak Tourism Board. As such, the running of the festival. This includes behind the scene roles such as marketing, promotions, ticketing, operation matters and event planning, among others.

For the 2021 virtual Rainforest World Music Festival, the staff all the different departments of the Sarawak Tourism Board continued to fulfil their roles to ensure the smooth running and success of the festival.
Local Community Involvement

The Covid-19 pandemic saw the crash of many industries but none has been more affected than the tourism, travel and hospitality sector.

The closing of borders saw the cessation of many tourism activities while social distancing rules put an end to the hosting of events and festivals. One such festival was the Rainforest World Music Festival which was put on hold in 2020.

The festival has always attracted participation of both domestic and international festival-goers. This leads to the generation of income for all those involved in the tourism industry from Restaurateurs to hoteliers and also the food and beverages industry.

The 2019 edition of the festival drew a total of 23,650 festival goers, 40 percent of which were international tourists. This resulted in a spinoff economy of approximately RM49 million.

The cancellation of the 2020 event was a big hit for tourism players in Sarawak and Sarawak Tourism Board recognised the negative effect on this and set out to provide a solution in the form of a virtual festival.

The virtual event provided local performers with income, as well as a platform to showcase their talents to international audiences.

STB also engaged e-commerce platform Shopee to create a marketplace for the sale of festival merchandise and other Sarawakian products such as traditional handicrafts and produce. This enabled local vendors to market and sell their wares internationally.

STB also partnered with Grab which is the top ride-hailing service in Sarawak. The partnership saw Grab provide promotions and incentives for those watching the festival to encourage the buying of food and drinks in support of our local food and drink vendors.

More importantly, the festivals served as a means of distraction, motivation and stress relief for festival goers who, at the time, had to observe social distancing rules with many still undergoing lockdowns in their respective locations.

Figure 8.0: RWMF 2018 Pre-Covid
Impact and results of the project

The three-day virtual Rainforest World Music Festival was watched by 402,865 viewers from 79 countries. This meant that at least 402,865 people were exposed to World Music, particularly the traditional music and instruments originating from Sarawak.

The show managed to pique the interest of many of the viewers with some directly emailing or contacting Sarawak Tourism Board to learn more about the performers, their instruments and future editions of the festivals.

These included not only international audiences but also local Sarawakians who had never been exposed to the traditional music, instruments and musicians of the state. Their curiosity and education on the topic enabled them to become ambassadors for not only Sarawakian music and instruments – as well as the culture and heritage of the performers – but also the festival and Sarawak itself.

The festival also represented the first point of contact with many of the audiences with World music and Sarawakian music. Surveys carried out showed that 54.8 percent of the respondents had never attended previous editions of the Rainforest World Music Festival.

The virtual festival – free of charge for everyone to partake in – was the first experience for many of the viewers, helping them better understand that different cultures have their own respective music, instrument and songs.

The festival goers were also keen to share their experiences and traditional Sarawakian music and performances with 75.1 per cent of them sharing their experiences via their own social media pages.

Sarawak Tourism Board believes education and awareness is key in helping preserve a culture and its heritage and we believe the Rainforest World Music Festival is an initiative that will not only help World Music and Sarawakian Music grow but also establish and cement itself in the contemporary and modern music scene.

Figure 9.0: RWMF 2018 Workshop; Sharing sessions with attendees
Link
RWMF Virtual Experience
Day 1 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9ysdpf0FcE
Day 2 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEiiqM0iDA8&t=2216s
Day 3 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnfO4vFpcsY&t=20s