



Opportunities and Challenges of Reopening Tourism for International Markets Amidst Pandemic: Evidence from Bintan Resorts

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Abstract. The reopening of tourism to international markets during the pandemic requires caution while prioritizing the safety and health of the public and visiting tourists. Using a qualitative descriptive method with documentation study and interviews to collect the data, this study aims to identify the opportunities and challenges of reopening tourism for international market. This is important in order to provide input to stakeholders in making appropriate policies. Bintan Resorts is a tourism closed area in Indonesia that makes it easier to determine and manage access to and from the territory. Based on geographical and potential demand, Singapore has great potential as a strategic partner in the early stage of the bilateral travel bubble. Efforts to achieve opening preconditions are carried out by protecting employees and their families through vaccination and quarantine facilities plan. The traffic management schemes for people and goods are equipped with BluePass tokens and barcode technology for tracking and tracing systems. All properties within the resorts have received an Indonesian health protocol, and refer to the standards set by Singapore. Routinely, management coordinates with local, central government, and Indonesian representatives in Singapore. However, the reopening is still obstructed by the increasing number of cases in Indonesia and Singapore, the inactivity of visas for tourist purposes, and the absence of a bilateral cooperation agreement between the Indonesian government and the Singapore government. Both governments need to establish Bintan resorts as a special bubble for the trial opening program which will be evaluated periodically.

Keywords: Reopening Tourism · Travel Bubble · Tourist · Pandemic

1 Introduction

Nowadays, the world is in the midst of a health crisis, namely the spread of the coronavirus since March 11, 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) set a pandemic

under Covid-19 [1]. As a dynamic zone, influenced by many factors and cannot be predicted [2–4], tourism has been one of the hardest hit by the Covid-19 outbreak, with impacts on travel supply and demand [5].

Indonesia that places tourism as one of the driving forces of its economy [6, 7] feels the significant impact of this crisis. The tourism economic depression began to occur in 2020. This was seen from several economic indicators reported by the Statistics Agency (BPS), among others: (1) the number of foreign tourist arrivals (tourists) to Indonesia reached 4.05 million visits, a decrease by 74.84% compared to the previous period. (2) The number of domestic passengers for rail and airplane transportation modes has undergone depression since March 2020 [8].

There are two kinds of tourist markets: the international market and the domestic market. In the case of the current pandemic, UNWTO predicts that the domestic market will be the first to level up compared to the international market [9]. The reasons are: the domestic market is not sensitive to economic, natural, health, or political crises [10], and as well as the existence of social commitment to visit relatives [11]. However, it is deemed necessary to pay attention to international demand originating from foreign tourists visiting Indonesia because of its contribution to state revenue, namely foreign exchange.

Tourism foreign exchange revenue certainly gives impacts to the economy of Indonesia and provides significant added value. This can be observed from the added value obtained through the right touch of science, technology, and information, starting from the Indonesian tourism market analysis. The decrease in the visit of a number of foreign tourists gives impacts to the decline in the tourism foreign exchange earnings as reflected in travel services in the publication of the Indonesian Balance of Payments (BOP) of Bank Indonesia. Tourism foreign exchange fell drastically to -80.00% in 2020 (from 16.91 billion USD in 2019) [12].

With the rapid development of the world flights, the risk of a global pandemic also increases along with passenger traffic [13]. International travel and tourism can pose various health risks, depending on the characteristics of the travelers and the trips, thus humans can easily carry person-to-person infections to any part of the world, from any part of the world [14]. Many infectious epidemics spread through tourist travel [15]. Consequently, the emergence of health problems to recur in the future is still possible.

Amid the current pandemic, there is mounting pressure to lift cross-border restrictions in most countries, as ‘international travel restrictions’ cannot be considered a permanent solution to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic [16]. This also occurs in Indonesia, where the international market is an essential factor in the sustainability of the tourism sector. Besides, with the diversity of tourism potential that currently exists, there will also be a variety of treatments in handling the ongoing pandemic. Thus, it is important that the success of an area in handling the pandemic be not hampered by other regions in presenting tourism as part of the solution for its economic revival. Fortunate regions will later become motivations for others. Currently, Indonesia is preparing to open two of its destinations to the international market after Bali, namely Batam and Bintan Resorts.

This research is aimed at answering the following questions: To what extent is Bintan Resorts prepared to reopen to the international market? What are the prospects for the market reopening? What are the current and future obstacles? This study will

identify the questions to be useful for stakeholders in Indonesia and serves as a lesson for any destination in the world concerning the reopening of their tourism sites to the international market. One of the novelties of this research is that a discussion of the opportunities and challenges for opening tourism in Bintan during the pandemic is associated with existing theories.

1.1 Tourism and the Pandemic

Reflecting on the previous pandemic, namely SARS, various countries carried out travel restrictions and quarantine measures [17]. Hence, isolation is the most effective way and has proven its success in suppressing the spread of the virus [13]. In tourism, human travel/movement is an important element. Travel restrictions certainly have an enormous impact on tourism, as they make many people cancel or change their travel plans [17, 18], resulting from the perception of risk [19].

Every crisis has a different impact [20]. Several studies related to the pandemic's impact on tourism have been carried out for cases such as SARS, MERS, Ebola, Bird Flu, Swine Flu, and others. SARS had a significant impact on world tourism [2, 21, 22]. MERS-CoV pandemic in Korea [23] and H1N1 in Mexico [24] cause a decrease in the number of tourists and tourism sector revenues. In addition, the outbreaks of dengue fever, yellow fever, malaria, and Ebola; resulted as well a significant impact on affected areas such as America, Asia, and Africa [25]. Likewise, Covid-19, where the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) recorded 2020 as the worst year in tourism brought about a decline in foreign tourist arrivals by 74% during that year [26].

However, not all global disease outbreaks directly affect the decrease in tourist visits. The impact of handling and disappearing outbreaks has a positive effect on increasing the number of visits and on generating tourism-foreign exchange [15, 25].

In general, to ensure domestic security concerning human traffic, the policy steps taken by the government are to impose restrictions [27]. According to a global survey conducted by UNWTO, Travel Restriction is the main factor contributing to international demand [28]. Restrictions on travel abroad that apply to its citizens generally arise in conditions where there are potentially serious safety and health threats during the trips and at the destinations, in form of Travel Warnings or Travel Bans [29]. Restrictions on travel to enter the country are known as visa policies. It is a screening mechanism for entrants [30]. Furthermore, it also serves as a means of early detection of who enters their territory even before that person arrives at the border [31]. These two types of restrictions must adapt to the latest conditions and constitute a dynamic policy to be ready to provide practical and implementable solutions.

The tourism business process is closely related to two things, firstly, tourists seek experiences and need supporting facilities and services; secondly, the spectrum of diverse resources provide experiences, services, and facilities, so both need to be analyzed to create a better tourism system [32]. From a tourist perspective, safety is an internal factor that can cause a decrease in the number of tourist visits [33] because it is the main factor that tourists consider when planning a trip [20].

The pandemic has also caused changes in the tourists' behavior when choosing destinations. The most important critical factors are the number of outdoor attractions and the number of confirmed cases. Therefore, the least suitable destinations of interest are

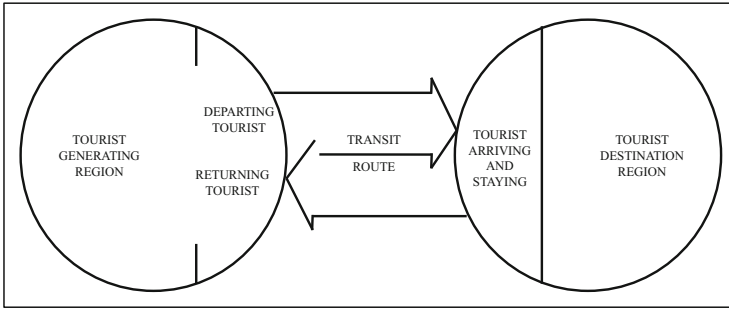


Fig. 1. The Geographical Elements of Tourism [32]

destinations with few outdoor attractions or the ones having a high population density because they bear a greater risk of transmission [34]. The perception of risk emergence due to respiratory disease also causes tourists to switch the destinations to the mountains rather than the seaside because the former is considered safer, in which an open space, natural social distancing, as well as clean and fresh air become inseparable parts [35]. In addition, tourists tend to choose fewer trips but spend more time at selected destinations that provide more experiences than mass destinations [36] and avoid using public transportation [37].

1.2 Safe Travel Corridor

Leiper put forward a theory related to the geographical elements of tourism. He stated that there are three elements, namely (1) the area of origin or tourism producer, the place where tourism starts and ends (origin); (2) the tourist destination or host locality, where the tourist resides temporarily; and (3) the area or transit route that connects the two and through which tourists pass [32].

Referring to Leiper's theory, in order to create a safe corridor for traveling, what to prepare are (1) safe zones, tourist origin areas, and tourist destinations, and (2) safe routes, which take tourists from their origin areas to their destinations. The reopening of the destinations focuses not only on restoring tourist arrivals but also on paying attention to the tourists' experiences: (1) destinations not merely taking steps to prevent and control the pandemic.

In addition, designing tourist attractions to improve the tourists' experiences is as important; (2) destinations can be an introduction to new programs such as interactive shows to create extrasensory experiences; (3) compensation strategies such as discounts or exclusive gifts to compensate for negative tourism experiences due to the pandemic [38]. Extensive media coverage through marketing programs and transparent crisis communication related to the pandemic to restore and improve the destination's reputation, increase tourist trust, and shape future travel intentions, especially for tourists who have no visiting experiences [39].

Tourism has always proven to rise from various crises [40]. To recover international demand through foreign tourist visits, currently, several countries in the world are carrying out a program known as the Travel Bubble. It appeared in 1950 under the name

“Tourist Bubble”. It is a term for tourists who travel for one reason; to escape for a moment from the social reality and living conditions of industrial cities [41]. Travel Bubble, also known as “Travel Bridges” or “Travel Corridors”, is considered a solution to the current pandemic, considering that the pandemic is estimated to last a long time [42].

It is an opportunity taken by many countries to recover their tourism from international demand. Another study also found that there was no relationship between the fear of Covid-19 and the desire to travel [42]. It further strengthens that tourism demand will rise as soon as the pandemic conditions are under control. As restrictions are lifted slowly, some countries are starting to set up temporary travel arrangements between neighboring countries to stimulate trade and economic recovery [43].

The Travel Bubble or Travel Corridor is one of the gradual solutions taken to revive the tourism sector [44, 45]. The spread of the term travel bubble was launched by three Baltic countries: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. By forming a trilateral partnership that gives citizens of these countries’ entry into the territory of member countries that allows and facilitates limited travel between these countries, one of which is by not required to self-quarantine [41, 42].

Travel Bubble is formed between two or more countries [45]. The opportunities to begin tourism activities completed in countries with high pandemic preparedness and the number of new cases tends to fall [45]. Although there is currently no harmonized methodology for risk measurement, some of these indicators are important to consider, including the current infection rate, future trends in infection rates, and the effectiveness of the public health response [46].

2 Methodology

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach using documentation study and unstructured interviews. The document used is the Bintan Resorts Safe Strategy Guidebook, compiled by PT. Bintan Resorts Cakrawala (BRC), International Visitor Arrivals Statistics published by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS-Statistics Indonesia), and online news portals.

Interviews were conducted with two representatives from the management of PT. BRC and one from the Bintan Area Covid-19 Handling Task Force. Data collection was carried out from October 2021 to December 2021. Data obtained from interviews and document studies were analyzed descriptively. Then the results of the analysis are such connected to the existing theories in order to answer research questions.

3 Results and Discussion

From the result of data collection through documentation studies and interviews with the Bintan Resorts Manager and the Bintan Covid-19 Task Force, the authors managed to identify the following findings.

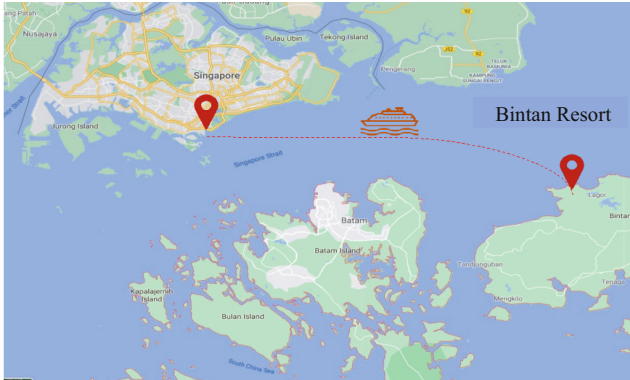


Fig. 2. Map of Singapore and Bintan Resorts (Google map, reworked by the author)

3.1 Bintan Resorts Readiness

If you look at the geographical conditions, this area is located in the proximity of Singapore. The areas are connected by Tanah Merah Port in Singapore and Bandar Bentan Telani Port (BBT) in Bintan. The distance is of ± 20 km with a travel time of about 40 min by ferry (Fig. 2). The travel time is approximately similar to the area of the downtown of Tanjung Pinang.

There are five things to prepare by the area manager to reopen tourism to the international market. **The first is** the creation of preconditions for opening. This condition ensures that the area to be opened is safe to visit. By compiling implementation guidelines in the form of documents as a guide; administering vaccinations for all workers and their families living in the dormitory; providing isolation/quarantine rooms for them who have mild symptoms or require respiratory support or further treatment.

The management of Bintan Resorts has composed the Bintan Resorts Safe Strategy Guidebook document since March 2021 in preparing for the opening to take place. Based on the documents and interviews conducted with the representatives of PT. BRC as the manager of the area, several findings were obtained. The purpose of the opening is to create a Covid-19-free destination model, supported by the implementation of a vaccination program, an efficient monitoring and tracking system, as well as a high level of security and health assurance for both workers and visiting tourists.

The manager has divided the area into three zones shown in Fig. 3. This zone division is carried out to completely separate the types of visitors first coming to the destination. The manager intends to do this opening in stages with strict protocols.

There are 1,100 rooms in Zone A for the initial stage, the rooms to be operated cover only 275 rooms or a maximum of 550 guests. It refers to the implementation of a 50% restriction on ferry passengers so that the social distancing health protocol can be implemented properly. All properties in the area have received a Cleanliness, Health, Safety, and Environmental Sustainability (CHSE) certificate from the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (MoTCE) Indonesia. The health protocol standards applied have also adopted the standards used in Singapore (SG Clean).

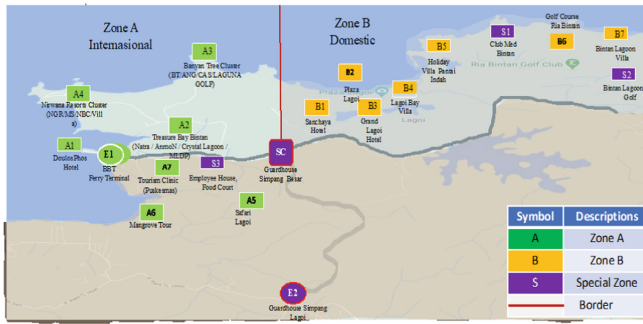


Fig. 3. Bintan Resorts. Zone Zoning

The second is creating a well-integrated human journey path. In this case, for employees working in the area; the manager establishes a 14-day transition system, starting and ending with a PCR test for employees working in the area, as well as for those starting to work later in the area. 300 dormitory is provided for each employee to keep the bubble managed optimally. Including the ferry, the fleet crew rotates every two weeks.

Every employee uses BluePass to monitor his whereabouts according to the designated zone and track with patients if needed. All workers must stay in the specified bubble and are not allowed to leave the location or interact with parties outside the bubble, such as vendors, suppliers, or contractors. No positive cases have been detected until the last data collection was carried out. It shows that the management in monitoring the flow of the employees is effective to suppress the entry of the virus into the region.

As for guests/tourists, it is recommended that they reserve rooms and ferry tickets prior to the arrival. This will ensure the availability and adjustment of quota restrictions. They show proof of a negative PCR test 72 h before departure and are validated by the Tanah Merah crossing service manager. When arriving in the area, tourists will undergo a PCR test and wait for the PCR results on personal properties. The area manager will then prepare and fulfill the quarantine requirements set by the Indonesian government. After the negative results are released, the tourists can carry out their agenda activities in the Bintan Resorts Area. Tourists cannot do activities outside the area to keep the bubble sterile. They are provided with special transportation from the entrance to the hotel or to the other areas, and to the exit when returning home, so as to create a safe route corridor within the area.

Third, creating a flow of goods in and out of the area. Suppliers, vendors, and contractors only interact with parties who are in a predetermined facility. They have been appointed to serve the flow of goods receiving logistics needs (Fig. 2 – SC). The entry and exit of the area on land must go through one door/corridor with the SC code as seen in Fig. 2. It is where passenger checks are carried out. There is also a loading dock for the handover of goods. Goods received/originated from outside must be duly sterilized before being transported into the area.

Fourth, creating mitigation procedures in the event of positive cases for both guests and employees. All hotels and employee dormitories are equipped with ready-to-use

isolation rooms, in which if a case of Covid-19 infection occurs, it is based on observing the symptoms that occur. This facility is equipped with breathing apparatus and is well maintained and ready to use if any patient requires initial treatment before being referred to a hospital or evacuated to Singapore if necessary, once the patient is stable. The doctor's readiness on duty at the BRC health clinic is guaranteed to always be ready to work 24 h on a rotational basis.

Bintan Resorts has also obtained official permission from the local government regarding the necessary evacuation measures to Singapore, including appointing Hope Medical Service as the party to carry out further treatment actions in the health facilities of Singapore. Bintan Resorts has a fully equipped speedboat; to be used in an emergency for medical evacuation purposes.

Fifth, the implementation of monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring capacity is monitored weekly; the total number of visitors can be increased if there are no records of positive cases of Covid-19 during the monitoring time, but still within the limit of not exceeding the 50% capacity. When there are more than five cases of infection within the area (1% of the 550 guests) travel corridor must be suspended for later evaluation. All guests are obliged to stay in the hotel room until they depart for Singapore, if necessary. It is the same threshold imposed by Singapore in its travel bubble cooperation agreement with Hong Kong [47].

Referring to Leiper's theory of tourism geographical elements, the management of Bintan Resorts Area has made efforts to provide safe destinations and travel routes for tourists from Singapore through the BBT entrance. Thus, the provision of safe zones and safe routes that must exist in the implementation of the safe travel corridor program has been fulfilled.

3.2 Bintan Resorts Opening Prospect

Bintan Resorts covers nature-based areas, such as beaches, golf courses, safaris, and mangroves (see Fig. 2). It will be an attraction for tourists, especially from Singapore. The management revealed that the main habit of Singaporeans when they were in resorts was having a staycation and or playing golf. It is in line with the results of research conducted by Osti et al. [35], Wen et al. [36], Chen et al., [34], where the type of outdoor tourism activity is the type that is in great demand due to the perception of the risk of tourists to health. Additionally, integrated transportation, where Li et al. [37] stated that tourists tend to avoid mass public transportation.

Referring to the statistical document of foreign tourist visits, the level of foreign tourist arrivals through BBT is as follows. Before the pandemic in 2019, foreign tourist visits via BBT were recorded at 634,735 visits, an increase of 21.50% compared to the previous year [48]. A total of 38.11% or 241,941 are Singaporeans [48]. Meanwhile, in 2020 before the policies implementation to restrict foreigners from entering Indonesia, foreign tourists who came through BBT Port were 64,896 visits; and 32.56% were Singaporeans [49]. It means that potentially, Bintan Resorts can attract as many foreign tourists as $\pm 1,700$ visits per day, and if calculated from nationality, Singaporean tourists are as potential, with ± 660 visits per day.

Within this area, there are 2,587 employees, of which 2,535 are Indonesian citizens while 52 are foreigners. Based on the information from the manager, for the past two

years since the pandemic occurred, no contract terminations have been carried out for employees. While waiting for the reopening, employees work alternately according to the existing workload.

3.3 Bintan Resorts Opening Challenge

The opening of the Bintan Resorts area in the Travel Bubble scheme face a number of challenges. The first is related to the regulations applied in Indonesia. There are two regulations related to the traffic of foreigners entering Indonesia. Number one is the Regulation of the Minister of Law and Human Rights of the Republic of Indonesia Number 34 of 2021 on the Granting of Immigration Visas and Stay Permits in the Period of Handling the Spread of Corona Virus Disease 2019 and National Economic Recovery which has been in effect since 15 September 2021 [50]. Number two is the end Circular Letter of the Head of the Covid-19 Handling Task Force Number 26 of 2021 on International Travel Health Protocols during the 2019 Corona Virus Disease Pandemic which is effective from 25 December 2021 [51]. In both regulations, visits to tourist destinations are not active. The management of the Bintan Resorts Area as a safe travel bubble requires fair legalization of the law regarding the scope and role of each stakeholder. As stated by UNWTO [28] in his survey, regulations related to travel restrictions were a major factor in the opening and recovery of international markets.

The second is related to the Bilateral Cooperation Agreement between Indonesia and Singapore. Based on the results of the data collection, a discussion for the draft bilateral travel bubble cooperation involves the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the MoTCE, the Regional Government of the Riau Islands Province, and the Regional Government of Bintan Regency. Thus, it is necessary to reach an agreement with the bilateral travel bubble between Singapore and Indonesia regarding how this program scheme can be carried out reciprocally.

Third, the implementation of the travel bubble with Singapore is also hampered by the increase in positive cases along with the entry of the Omicron variant in Singapore until the end of 2021. Singapore has suspended the Vaccinated Travel Lane (VTL) program without quarantine from 23rd December 2021 to 20th January 2022 [52]. This increase in the number of cases exceeding the threshold that serves as a reference for the Singapore and Hong Kong travel bubbles, namely the moving average of no more than five cases in 7 (seven) days [47].

Fourth, Indonesia is also trying to block the third wave faced with the momentum of the 2021/2022 Christmas and New Year holidays. So, the government is still implementing activity restrictions in several areas. Even in November 2021, the government expects to do level three of the Enforcement of Restrictions on Community Activities (PPKM)¹ throughout Indonesia [53] from December 24, 2021, to January 2, 2022. However, the policy was canceled in early December 2021. The government believes that the handling of the pandemic in Indonesia is very dynamic because there are various levels

¹ PPKM is a regulation limiting community activities which are divided into 4 levels, the higher the level, the stricter the regulations for movement/travel and activities that can be carried out by the community.

of vulnerability in Indonesia so the PPKM level will be adjusted to the conditions in each area [54].

The above conditions will affect the policy for tourism reopening in Bintan. As stated by Page [18], Mao et al. [17], and Leggat et al. [19], the restrictions will affect travelers' perception of risk so enabling them to change or cancel their travel plans. In addition, the non-active return of visas for tourist purposes, especially at the BBT entrance, is also a challenge for Bintan to reopen. The bilateral cooperation agreement between Indonesia and Singapore is a key for the implementation of Bintan opening.

4 Closing

Policy making to reopen tourism amid a pandemic requires caution. Bringing tourism to be present as one of the solutions for economic revival is an important issue. It needs to be conducted in the areas that have been able to ensure that the safety and health of local communities and tourists visiting their areas are well maintained. Thus, to reactivate tourism as a solution for economic revival, the prevention from the virus to spread wider both to local communities and tourists must be well-guaranteed.

The reopening of tourism through the Bilateral Travel Bubble scheme for Bintan Resorts requires cooperation between all related parties. This re-opening ecosystem must later be built in such a way and ensure a synergy between existing stakeholders. The opening should be done in stages and must be evaluated periodically for further policy making. As a pilot project, it is necessary to determine the Bintan Resorts Area as an appropriate bubble area, which means the future cooperation with Singapore in determining the threshold will adhere to the geographical coverage of the Bintan Region. Hence, the government can focus on creating preconditions in the area.

It is also crucial to reactivate visas for tourist purposes, including the application scheme, which ensures administrative order for both health and immigration. The reopening of Bintan is expected to be a model for other destinations having been successful in overcoming the pandemic and bearing considerable tourism potential to develop.

The theoretical benefit of this study is to enrich knowledge and reference related to the implementation of the safe travel corridor. Moreover, from a practical point of view, this study will provide an empirical description for the implementation of tourism reopening to the international market through the safe travel corridor scheme.

The authors realize that there might be shortcomings to the study. The need to conduct further research shall be taken into account, looking into the readiness from the perspective of destination managers, and other possible factors. For this reason, the authors support other research with different perspectives to look together at the potential opportunities and challenges faced in the tourism reopening in the international market, particularly in other destinations with different characteristics from the Bintan Resorts area.

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