

UAE: DROP IN TRAVEL DEMAND DUE TO RAMADAN NOT THE CORONAVIRUS



Fears of the MERS-CoV, a SARS-like coronavirus, are not the reason behind travel cancellations to UAE, but more transparency is needed from UAE on the level of risk.

Tourism sector in Dubai is experiencing subdued demand in July, but this lack of demand is not due to the fear of MERS-CoV. **There has been no cancellation made on leisure or business travel to the UAE due to this SARS-like coronavirus.**

During the month of July the booking levels have been low and the occupancy rate is down by 30%, but according to booking agents this is due to Ramadan. During the fasting period and both the summer months decrease in the number of visitors is usually recorded in the UAE every year.

However, there is a consensus among the experts of the industry that more transparency and vigilance is needed from the UAE authorities on the degree of dangers due to the virus. Experts believe if the virus reaches epidemic proportions then it could seriously impact the tourism sector of the country.

So far there have been 45 cases of this virus all over the world. The countries where these cases have been reported include United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Tunisia, Qatar, Jordan, UAE and France. The spread of this virus started nearly one year ago. However, UAE has reported four new cases of coronavirus in July.

Economic repercussions are common due to epidemic breakouts. In 2002 when Asia experienced the breakout or SARS, the countries affected by it experienced decrease in tourism and reduced foreign investment.

When talking to Gulf News, Premjit Bangara, the General Manager of Sharaf Travels, said that there was no reduction in corporate travelers to Saudi Arabia and that inbound bookings to the region from Asia, Far East and Europe is unaffected, but he felt the clearer picture would emerge in a week's time. He said that during summer months travel to Middle East has historically been lower.

General Manager of Ramada Downtown Dubai, Wael All Behi, confirmed that occupancy rate in the hotel is down to 90% just like last year and lower occupancy levels in July were due to Ramadan. According to him there were no mass cancellations and the trend is moving as per the expectations of the season. **However, he believed that if the virus kept growing, then tourism would get affected in Haj season that is expected in mid-October.**

General Manager of Arabian Courtyard Hotel and Spa, Habib Khan, said that June wasn't bad, but 30% less demand is seen in July due to Ramadan. He further confirmed that there have been no cancellations due to virus scare, but the travelers in Saudi Arabia stayed in their hotels and restrained from travelling.

General Manager of Ramada Hotel and Suites in Ajman, Iftikhar Hamdani, said there was less

impact of the virus threat as there were less cases reported in the UAE. He further added that he was expecting 95% occupancy from mid-September. According to him the occupancy level of their hotel is better this June and July, when compared to last year.

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