

THE CONTINUING DECLINE IN PILGRIMS VISITING DJERBA'S GHRIBA SYNAGOGUE



There are tourist sites that will always be appealing because of their significance or beauty and religious sites of pilgrimages should consistently see a massive influx of visitors during key holidays and events. The Ghriba synagogue in Hara Sghira on the island of Djerba, Tunisia, is such a place: it is respected for its role in the coexistence of Muslims and Jews in Tunisia; it holds a sacred artefact, a stone brought from Jerusalem 2600 years ago by Jewish refugees; and it attracts thousands of visitors each year – a month after Passover – who wish to light candles, pray and leave their wishes via hard boiled eggs. Unfortunately, while this consistent influx should be expected, visitor numbers are incredibly low compared to fourteen years ago.

The site is sacred to many pilgrims but their numbers are in decline as safety fears and a lack of funding damage the island's reputation.

The importance of this sacred site cannot be overstated to the pilgrims that continue to make the journey each year and revere the temple; the problem is that the large decline in visitor numbers wrongly implies a lack of interest when they are really just concerned about their safety. Attendance levels were once incredibly high, with 10,000 visiting the temple in 2000, but in 2013 this had fallen to less than 2000. Two enormous influences on this figure are the bombing in 2001, which understandably made a lot of travellers reconsider the risks involved, and the arson attack of 2012, which meant over half of those attending in 2011 did not return in 2013. While safety is still in the minds of many prospective travellers, local agencies and officials, such as the founder of TunisUSA, are also keen to promote Tunisia's increasing tolerance of the Jewish community and their desire to aid the temple and island as a tourist spot. Funding for Ghriba synagogue has been inconsistent, with nothing received last year at all, but this year a sizeable sum was awarded with the aim of painting the interior and restoring the distinct aesthetic appeal.

This funding and hope for an influx of pilgrims is also partially due to the event's significance in the tourism calendar.

For residents of the island, the pilgrimage is the starting point of the season, not just a single religious observation, and the success of the local industry during this time is used as a measuring stick for the rest of Djerba's season. There may be a strong security presence to protect the pilgrims this year, with metal detectors and a ban on cars being enforced, but there will also be the notable presence of vendors selling, kosher food, bouka, photographs and traditional dress as they try to cash in on the event.

With this talk of funding, security and tolerance it seems that tourism ministers in Tunisia are understanding the importance of this annual event, both for the declining numbers of pilgrims that wish to visit and the businesses on the island of Djerba that wish to profit. Perhaps these encouraging signs will mean that 2014 is a better year for the pilgrimage to Ghriba synagogue.

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