

LEBANESE TOURISM SEEKS ALTERNATIVES TO THE GULF VISITORS



Although Riyadh and its allies' economic sanctions are hitting Lebanese tourism professionals full force, they are planning to increase their independence and seek alternative sources of tourists.

While all economic agents in Lebanon fear an escalation of Saudi sanctions, the most recent ones have impacted one sector in particular: tourism. **Five countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council - Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain -asked their citizens to leave Lebanon and advised against all travel to that country.**

This could lead to a serious relapse in Lebanese tourism numbers after its 12.1% growth in 2015, with 1.52 million visitors.

"This case concerns us and affects us on an economic, political and identity level," said Tourism Minister Michel Pharaon. "Since 2012 there have already been five or six calls from these countries urging people to leave Lebanon for security reasons, but this time the crisis seems to be taking on a larger role, because it was accompanied by the freezing of aid from Saudi Arabia of four billion dollars to the Lebanese army, " noted Nicolas Chammas, President of the Association of Traders of Beirut (ACB).

However, in 2012, the loss of Gulf tourists had resulted in an overall fall of 17.5% year on year, to 1.37 million visitors. Since then, things have changed significantly.

"The impact on the Lebanese tourism sector will depend on the duration of this crisis, but for several years now the number of Gulf tourists visiting Lebanon has been decreasing for security reasons, so the impact will be minimal at this level, "observed Mr. Pharaoh. "These tourists had decreased by 60% compared to 2011. Although some continued to come because they are very attached to this country and have a second home here, they did not boost the tourism sector directly but rather the commercial sector," recalled Imad Wehbe, head of human resources at Sun Holiday Tours travel agency.

If Iraqi, Jordanian and European tourists have compensated for the loss in Gulf tourists, many professionals still consider these as irreplaceable: "The Gulf tourists accounted for 60% of tax-free sales per year in 2011, 25% for Saudi Arabia alone. In addition, a Gulf tourist spends on average five times more than other tourists. So we cannot do without them or abandon luxury tourism, "said Mr. Chammas." We cannot give up on these tourists, we must remain optimistic," said Rita Saad, director of public relations at the Le Gray.

Unable to control the events, Lebanese tourism professionals are still forced to consider alternatives. "Chinese tourists would be a great asset for Lebanon, because they have significant purchasing power. Moreover, this market is huge, "says Chammas. According to a report by Global Blue agency in 2015, the Chinese tourists are those who spend the most world-wide for the past four years, more than the Russians. These are the same reasons that pushed Sun Holiday Tours travel agency to offer packages for Chinese tourists: "For now there still aren't many of them coming, but the project is

proceeding step by step," said Imad Wehbe.

Many companies would like to apply a new method - subsidized air tickets from Jordan, Egypt and Iraq to help lower the price of the ticket to \$100, compared to \$ 270 today. The request was submitted to the Ministry of Tourism and the Prime Minister in January; she has so far remained unresponsive.

For its part, the Lebanese tourism ministry has been working, for several years now, on the development of more targeted markets aiming to attract other types of tourists. "We launched several initiatives for sustainable tourism - rural tourism, expatriate, medical and religious - and although these new segments take time to develop, they have the benefit of being resilient to minicrises," explained Mr. Pharaoh. Nevertheless, there remains the problem of size to solve:

"The current crisis will contribute to internationally tarnishing Lebanon's image," said the president of the union of tourist establishments, Jean Beyrouthi. For Mr. Pharaon, "the waste crisis has been more damaging for the tourism sector than the political crisis or the current crisis with Saudi Arabia ..."

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