

TOURISM IN CRIMEA LIKELY TO SLUMP



The opening of Turkey as a destination for Russians could lead to a considerable fall in inbound tourism in Crimea by 15 to 25%, according to experts.

Earlier this year, Crimean authorities stated that they expect about 6 million tourists this year. Last year 5.6 million people visited the peninsula. Experts say that arrivals may fall by 15 to 25%. **The main reason for the decrease in tourism in Crimea is the opening of Turkey to Russians, as well as the strengthening of the ruble against other major currencies.**

During the holiday season Crimean hotels are full of Russians who travel on social vouchers. "Generally, this does not allow development of the market. It is not a very good factor. 'Budget' tourists do not strengthen the economy of Crimea, because they are limited in the means. Thus, the small business segment, which is essential for Crimea, is not functioning," a Russian tourism expert noted.

Hotel Prices Unlikely to Fall

As a part of the tourism forum "Open Crimea" in Yalta the head of the Federal Tourism Agency Oleg Safonov said that the authorities plan to convince tour operators and hoteliers in Crimea to reduce vacation prices in the upcoming tourist season. Experts are not observing lower prices at the moment, but it is possible that in April-May they will start to go down.

However, as of now, prices rise on average by 5-10%. The reason is for hoteliers to cover the cost of maintaining business and their facilities in the low season.

Some hotels increased prices by as much as 12%. "High-quality service cannot be cheap. We have a highly-qualified staff, from managers and maids to children entertainers, singers and musicians. In addition, the cost of proper maintenance is now much more expensive than ever before. Other aspects leading to higher prices are modernization and improvement of logistics, for example improvement of beaches. On the other hand, prices of food and utilities increased. These factors all together cannot lead to a decrease in prices," a representative of a hotel group Continent said.

Russian tour operators commenting on tourism in Crimea say that the number of early reservations to Crimea has decreased by 10% compared to last year. Some even have worse figures, such as a 20-25% fall compared to 2016. A representative of Funky Tour complains that higher flight ticket prices have also led to a decrease in sales of trips to the peninsula.

"Crimea is losing in terms of the price-quality ratio to Turkey, but people will still travel there. There is a demand, Crimea will never be empty, but an adequate pricing policy of hotels is needed," Arbuzov, a Russian tourism expert said. He also believes that during the top season, the private sector will be highly loaded, due to the fact that it has kept prices at last year's levels.

A Centre of Religious Tourism?

As a response to competition from Turkey, Crimea could embark on a different path. The peninsula

could become the center of pilgrimage and religious tourism. The concept of development in this area of the peninsula was presented at a press conference.

According to the Ministry of resorts and tourism in Crimea, in the region there are more than 600 objects of pilgrimage. For centuries people arriving at the peninsula left their cultural heritage here, including the religious sites. In Crimea one can find traces of practically all major religions. From the Trinity Cathedral in Simferopol to the mosque of Khan Uzbek.

The major advantage of religious tourism is the fact that it can take place all year round.

This point is very important for the authorities in the region, according to the Minister of Resorts and Tourism Olga Burov.

To attract visitors, pilgrimage infrastructure in Crimea needs to be developed. In addition, certificated guides and translators are necessary in order to achieve accurate and correct presentation of information.

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