

Fears of Insecurity Cause a Crash in Lebanese Tourism

Lebanon's tourism has been hit by one of the most devastating crashes in its recent history as a result of security concerns in the region. While Lebanon has historic sceneries and splendid beaches to warrant the arrival of multitudes of tourists every year, the ongoing war in Syria that has led to over 100,000 deaths is having a toll on Lebanese tourism.



The travel restrictions slapped on the country by Gulf Arab states and the spill-over of the Syrian war into major Lebanese cities have aggravated the situation resulting in a fall in tourist arrivals into Lebanon by 27%, at a time when arrivals should be peaking.

Historically placed as Syrian neighbor, Lebanon has had to feel the effect of the two-year conflict between President Al-Assad Bashar and Syrian rebels. While hunting the fleeing and hiding rebels, Syrian helicopters attacked various areas within Lebanese territory. Moreover, the big Lebanese cities of Sidon, Tripoli and Beirut hosted military clashes between militants supporting antagonistic sides of the conflict in Syria.

Tourism in Lebanon did not just take a sudden fall. By last year's peak season, the figures had dropped to only 1.5 million from 2 million arrivals in 2010, prior to the conflict in Syria. The first half of 2013 also saw a drop of 6.5% compared to the arrivals in 2012. However, July came with a terribly bleak picture, presenting a huge drop of 27% in tourism arrivals.



“This is sadly catastrophic. We are losing hugely on our expected revenue,” said Fadi Abboud, Lebanon's caretaker at the ministry of tourism. For a country that draws about a fifth of its GDP from tourism, such a crash is truly calamitous.

The picture of Lebanese tourism is presently miserable, with a huge number of hotels recording occupancy rates below 10% during the summer months, a really unusual scenario. For instance, the world-famed Lebanese summer festivals had to be moved from the Bekaa Valley's Roman ruins to Beirut because of rocket attacks and clashes in the area. The festival was poorly attended, achieving only 10% foreign attendance.



While remaining optimistic about the sector's ability to recover, Abboud proposed a number of urgent solutions, including the promotion of Lebanese tourism abroad. "We need to reduce our reliance on tourist arrivals from Gulf Arab states and turn elsewhere. We need to start attracting middle-income tourists to replace the dwindling numbers of Gulf Arab multi-millionaires. Our mindset has to change if this sector is to recover," he says with evident hopefulness.

The Gulf Arab states banned travel to Lebanon after several incidents of kidnappings were reported last year. Without Arabian multi-millionaires, Lebanon's tourism relies on middle-income Egyptians, Jordanians, Iraqis and Syrians, who are staying in the suites and hotels, with Syrians contributing up to 20% of the current revenue in the tourism sector.

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