

TURKISH INBOUND TOURISM GAINS AS UNRESTS HIT ARAB COUNTRIES



Since the Arab Springs erupted more than a year ago, Arab Tourism Organization president Bandar Al-Fuhaid has estimated that affected Arab states have lost more than \$17 Billion in tourism revenues. These citizen uprisings have had both positive and negative impact on Arab states not embroiled in controversy, notably Turkey, where all inclusive holidays are still very much in demand.

2011 saw Turkey welcome 31.46 Million visitors to the country, almost a 10 percent increase from the year before; the first two months of 2012 barely witnessed a 3.7 percent drop from the earlier year, attesting to its resilience, considering Turkey's proximity to a Syria engulfed in what some are already considering near civil war.

No longer having to compete against once popular tourist destinations such as Syria, Egypt, or Tunisia, Turkey has emerged as the tourist haven of choice for visitors, especially Arab tourists, with its relative stability when viewed in the light of the social unrest gripping other Arab states.

With the turmoil and unrest in Syria seemingly on an increasingly unsettling path almost on a daily basis, this neighbouring state of Turkey is no longer considered by any tourist looking for relaxation and recreation.

Egypt, long famous for its world-known pyramids, is also facing tourist resistance, due to the uncertain political situation produced by the upcoming presidential elections.

Only one cloud seemingly mars the famous Turkish all-inclusive holidays. That is the sharp drop off of Israeli tourists who used to flock to this comparatively nearby state. Relations between the two previously rather friendly states soured in 2010 after the incident involving Israeli security forces and nine Turkish activists attempting to reach Gaza. Barely 62,000 Israelis visited Turkey in the first eight months of 2011, a decrease of 27 percent from the previous year, and a drastic drop of 60 percent from 2009. The fact that Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey walked off during a heated debate with President Shimon Peres of Israel at the 2009 World Economic Forum furthermore was not inductive to reconciliation between the two countries. A negative Israeli tourist advisory was also issued.

Fortunately, the significant increase in Arab tourists more than offset the Israeli loss. An estimated 1.7 Million visited Turkey in 2011, an astounding increase from 912,000 in 2009.

Peace and security derived from political stability are keys to luring tourists of all stripes, and Turkey is garnering its fair share of first time Arab tourists, such as Muhammad Al-Menhali, who came from Abu Dhabi.

Arab tourists report feeling a sense of familiarity with Turkish society, although language barriers can still be an issue. To remedy this situation, learning Arabic, which was not considered necessary by the Turkish population, is now becoming progressively popular. Shops are now seeking Arabic speakers for sales positions.

Turkey's cordiality with other Arab nations has also been cited as a major factor in its choice as a

highly desirable mass tourism destination. However, this image is being enhanced to attract more higher value tourists.

An Arab-Turkish forum is to be held this year to further promote Turkey as the ideal place to visit, just as western European countries are becoming less appealing.

Of course, all inclusive holidays in Turkey can still include beloved attractions such as the Ottoman palaces or ancient sites that are popularized by the Turkish soap opera industry, which earned \$67 Million in 2010 just from exports of TV series.

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