

GAZA CONFLICT TO AFFECT TOURISM INDUSTRY



The Middle East is a luring tourism destination but it is also a restless area. The recent Israeli military action in the Gaza strip has once more stirred up the problematic relations within the region. How will such a move impact the tourism industry?

Any conflict where people are dying means definitely a negative impact on the local tourism businesses. Not many tourists long to travel to warring countries. No matter that most of Israel was a safe destination even during the conflict - travelers naturally thought twice before venturing to the area.

The Gaza situation along with the global economic crisis will probably negatively affect tourism in Israel as well as in the Palestinian Territories. Also, the travel trade in Jordan and Egypt are likely to suffer from the conflict although they were not directly participating. On top of that the financial crisis is likely to change the region in a relatively expensive destination. Tourists are expected to change their preferences and go for safer, closer and therefore cheaper destinations.

The key issue for the tourism industry players in the region is time. Since the conflict already ended it could be quickly "forgotten" and the business may be renewed. It took Israeli tourism industry approximately six months to recover from the effects of the Lebanese war in summer 2006.

The recent conflict has actually erupted at time when the industry was doing exceptionally well. Approximately 3 million tourists visited Israel in 2008, which is the highest amount of visitors ever to come in here. The most important source market is the US followed by the UK, Russia and France. Palestine has attracted a record 1.3 million tourists, in 2007 it was only 700,000 and in 2006 some 400,000 visitors. Jordan was visited by 2.5 million travelers and Egypt by 13 million tourists. Among the main reasons for such a rise in tourism arrivals was undoubtedly the relative stability of the security situation. Even during this period of growth Israeli towns close to the Gaza border were often attacked by missiles fired by the Hamas soldiers. These attacks however did not threaten the overall security in the country.

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