

TOURISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST DOWN BUT WITH BRIGHT PERSPECTIVES



Global economy is ailing and so is the international tourism. The number of tourists has declined sharply around the world in year to year comparison. Middle East is among those hardly hit but the UNWTO is confident that the region will regain its popularity as a tourism destination and that it will even double the number of visitors coming here by 2020.

The Middle East has witnessed a considerable decline in the number of incoming tourists. According to the UN World Tourism Organization, **13 per cent less visitors arrived to the region in the first 7 months of this year** when compared with 2008. The majority of the Middle Eastern countries however did not report extreme decline but the overall statistics is drawn down by marked drop in the number of tourists coming to Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

This decline has been caused by the global economic downturn and also by the emerging swine flu. Nevertheless, experts argue that the data are a bit distorted because the last year's results of the tourism industry were very good. In 2008, the region witnessed an 18.2 per cent growth in tourism.

Abu Dhabi recently announced their plan to increase the number of hotel guests to 2,3 million annually by 2012 and Dubai plans to lure 15 million visitors a year by 2015. In the first half of this year Dubai's hotels hosted 3,85 million guests, which was an increase compared with the 3,68 million guests in the first half of 2008. Those guests were, however, staying only for shorter time, which resulted in lower revenues.

UNWTO experts expect the number of tourists traveling to the Middle East to more than double by 2020. Last year 54 million tourists visited the region, 136 million are expected to come by 2020. The recovery of the tourism is naturally connected with the recovery of the global economy, which is expected to improve in 2010. Nevertheless, this year will see a global decline of international tourism. According to UNWTO, the decline will range between 4 and 6 per cent.

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