

# LEBANON HOPEFUL AFTER GULF NATIONS LIFT UNOFFICIAL BANS



In recent years, tourism figures for Lebanon have not been all that favourable. As the ripples from the Syrian conflict have spread out across the region, concerns have understandably grown over political stability and security - a factor that was not helped by a recent series of kidnappings. The effect on tourism has been a massive drop in visitor numbers since 2012; to put the loss into perspective, 2.3 million visitors came to Lebanon in 2010 but this fell to just 1.3 in 2013, a decline that is also reflected in last year's poor hotel occupancy levels of just 30-35%. Thankfully, improvements are already being seen in the current reports for 2014, with more visitors arriving at the country's airports and hotel occupancy rates improving to the extent that they are now in the region of 60-70%. These encouraging statistics can only be enhanced by the recent good news from Lebanon's neighbours in the Gulf.

Lebanese officials are cautiously optimistic about future growth following agreements from Gulf nations to lift unofficial travel bans.

As a result of this local and regional turmoil, a number of citizens wishing to visit Lebanon from nearby countries, such as Beirut and Saudi Arabia, had been warned against travelling because of the security risk, with so-called bans being imposed. Now these limitations have been lifted, there are high hopes for the prospects of Lebanese tourism. Officials from the country's tourism ministry have played down the scale of the past "bans" somewhat, as they were never entirely official, but they undoubtedly welcome this encouraging sign from other nations that these restrictions, under whichever term their governments wished to use, have now been lifted and travel and tourism between the countries can return to normal. Lebanon ministers say they are not getting carried away with the news but they see it as a positive step for potential gains in the coming season.

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