

# CONFERENCE: TOURISM PROTECTS RELIGIOUS HERITAGE



The sustainable development of tourism at religious heritage sites was the main theme of the International Conference on Religious Heritage and Tourism: Types, Trends and Challenges.

The event was organized jointly by the World Tourism Organization, Spain's Ministry of Industry Energy and Tourism and the Municipality of Elche, November 27 and 28, 2014 in Elche, Spain.

According to WTO estimates, **each year between 300 and 330 million tourists visit the most important religious sites in the world, totaling approximately 600 million national and international religious tours, 40% of which occur in Europe.** As key tourist destinations, religious heritage sites not only boost international tourism and economic growth, but they provide a meeting place for visitors and the host communities and they make a vital contribution to tolerance, respect and understanding between different cultures.

The International Conference was held against this background in Elche (Spain), the site of the last living testimony of European religious theatre of the Middle Ages, the Mystery of Elche, which was declared a Masterpiece of the Oral Heritage and Intangible Heritage by UNESCO. The conference analyzed the main challenges and best practices for sustainable tourism development at religious sites.

"Among the reasons for travelling, many tourists put the desire to visit cultural or religious sites among those at the top of their list. Exploiting the growing interest in religious tourism worldwide not only benefits the tourism sector, but is crucial for the promotion of cultural dialogue and peace," said WTO Secretary General, Taleb Rifai, on opening the Conference.

"Religious tourism can also be a valuable means of raising awareness of the importance of protecting the country's heritage and the heritage of humanity, and can help preserve these important sites for future generations," he added.

Spain's Secretary of Tourism, Isabel Borrego, highlighted the successful cooperation between the WTO and Spain to promote awareness of the value of the country's historical, cultural and artistic heritage, and she underlined the importance to Spain of this tourism sector in particular. "There's no town or city in our country where we cannot find traditions, religious festivals, celebrations, religious tours, monasteries, cathedrals or pilgrimages. Religious tourism can boost economic activity and preserve all the rich heritage of our cities, and it must play an essential role in the future of this sector."

The Mayor of Elche, Mercedes Alonso García, explained: "Tourists, in fact, are looking for not only the gifts of nature, but also the most deeply rooted creations of the human spirit. In this regard, as shown by this conference, a quality tourism product consists of the huge, tangible items that are full of material content, as well as intangible items and cultural events fostered by them."

During the conference, **participants emphasized the role of religious heritage sites and**

**religious traditions in the education of future generations and in the creation of a sense of belonging in the host communities.** They also pointed to the need to maintain the integrity and authenticity of these sites and of the importance of local communities benefitting from tourism development.

Participants also noted that tourism has become a driving force in the preservation of numerous religious sites, due to the increasing secularization of society, and that being able to make contact with other religions is a unique experience for tourists, which can only occur within the context of utmost respect for the host communities.

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