

ARMENIA: NUMBERS OF VISITORS RISE, CHALLENGES STILL HOLD



One of the goals the Armenian government is seeking to achieve within the next two years is a vibrant tourism industry. Several measures are being put in place to ensure the goal becomes a reality, soon. However, despite the several promising measures resulting in greater tourist numbers, the Armenian travel sector is still aching from several challenges.

The major challenge is insufficient accommodation service. According to Armen Poghosyan, who is the Consumers Association Chairman, **many hotels in Armenia do not provide its customers sufficient nor satisfactory service.** Poghosyan argued that the association has been receiving complaints from sound customers about most hotels in Armenia not providing a wide range of hotel service.

The problem of insufficient accommodation not only faces hotels. Actually, more challenges are hitting rural tourism. According to Aharon Adibekyan, a sociologist, the accommodation services in the villages are simply poor. Numerous village guesthouses in Armenia do not have bathrooms, nor running water, nor washing machines, etc.

According to him, in order to achieve significant results in the country's tourism industry, foreign visitors ought to be treated to unique food and programs that are only available in Armenia. He further goes on to mention that despite there being an idea for the development of religious tourism, little effort has been employed into its realization.

Despite the challenges, statistics prove that local and foreign holidaymakers in Armenia are constantly rising. **In 2014, there was an increase of foreign visits of 11.3% while the local visits rose by 28.4%.** The local increase translated to about 859,000 people out of the country's 3 million people.

A major cause for the increased inbound tourism is the growth of Russian tourist visits. This diversion of Russian tourists to Armenia has been born out of the Western sanctions that have been imposed on Russia. Actually, the interest of Russian visitors in Armenia is so high that Yerevan has been included, by travel.ru, in the top three holiday destinations for Russian tourists for 2015 summer. Travel.ru is an online tourist service in Russia.

To achieve growth in the tourism industry, Tigran Karapetyan said that the tact being employed by the Russian government is to diversify tourism types based on the resources available in Armenia. Tigran Karapetyan is the director for the tourism department of the Armenia Development Fund.

Based on a report by Tert.am, Karapetyan argued that the system of tourism that has been in place since the Soviet Union years has been more of a display of the country's resources without significant economic nor social development for the people. This according to him is being reviewed to ensure that tourists' preferences in Armenia match profitability for the Armenian tourism industry.

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