

TUNISIA TOURISM NEEDS TO RESTRUCTURE



Following the attacks on the museum of Bardo last March, and at the Riu Marhaba hotel in Sousse in June, Tunisia tourism experts discuss the need of reforming or restructuring the industry.

Another attack that only aggravated the tourism crisis in the country took place in the city centre of Tunis on the 24th of November. This event further blurred the unfortunate image of Tunisia as a tourist destination, clearing it from the dashboard of international tourism operators.

The attacks, responsible for dozens of deaths and injuries (most of them were tourists) have gravely impacted Tunisia tourism industry since the clients had to be sent home and hotels recorded numerous cancellations of reservations.

In fact, all the signs are in red: a decrease in overnight bookings (-50%), in revenues (-45%), habitant taxes (-30%)... which has added to the closure of many hotels (234 totalling 100.000 beds) and a significant loss for the 350,000 of artisan workers, of which many have faced unemployment and debt accumulated up to 4 billion dinars and a decrease in the average share of the sector in the GDP that has lowered from 8 to 4 per cent.

Despite measures taken by the government to come to the aid of tourism operators after the attack in Sousse to help them better face the bad tourism season; the sector has not got its break back. Above all, the measures have not been put in place mainly because of conditions that have stripped them of everything.

The Tunisia tourism industry's crisis also encumbers operators themselves who must realise that the market has changed; the client has new demands and the ways of distribution and commercialisation have evolved significantly. Foreign operators who have made Tunisia the least expensive destination in the world by slashing prices to a level that have never been reached before own a large part of the market.

Additionally, despite the touristic advantages that Tunisia has - geographical proximity to the European market, diverse natural landscapes, mild climate, a rich history and heritage - the country continues to be poorly sold because of a marketing strategy that is badly adapted to the realities of the market.

The Tunisian tourism situation is therefore alarming. All these negative factors have intensified the crisis particularly after the terrorist attack against the presidential security bus on the 24th of April last year in Tunis in which 12 people were killed and dozens injured.

According to Ahmed Smaoui, the ex-minister of tourism, the relaunch of the industry can be achieved if the efforts are concentrated on investment by putting in place the existing structures that are over 35 years old, and the re-establishment of enterprises in difficulty. **It is also necessary to further develop the seaside section, improve reception facilities, and create activity centres in regions.** Supply should also be diversified especially in accommodation, a segment in which regulation must be revised to ensure more rigorous control for new types of accommodation

(B&Bs, holiday homes etc.)

Europe remains Tunisia's first tourist market but the Old Continent is in crisis. This should encourage the tourism stakeholders to search for new markets particularly in Asia, mostly in China that has more than 1.5 billion habitants of which a little under 100 million travel each year.

This avenue has already been explored by Tunisia, that signed a framework agreement with China at the beginning of 2000 to make the country a privileged tourist destination for a potential of 100.000 Chinese tourists each year.

The minister for tourism and artisans, Selma Elloumi-Rekik is among those who are reconsidering this avenue. She has not announced at the 4th International Conference for World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) held recently in Tunisia the establishment of specialised centres for the training of qualified workers in services for Chinese tourists.

Date: 2015-12-14

Article link:

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