

MOROCCO PLANS TO ATTRACT MORE RUSSIAN TOURISTS



As tourists shy away from the nearby traditional markets in Europe because of instability, Moroccan tourism authorities are planning to attract more visitors from China, Russia and West Africa. In an interview following King Mohammed VI's visit to Russia, Lahcen Haddad, Morocco's Tourism Minister, said that the plans for opening new air routes have been set in motion.

The minister said that the opportunity offered by Russia is big and **the goal is to increase the visitor arrivals from the country by 400 percent to 200,000 a year over three years from the current level of 40,000 Russian tourists a year.**

Morocco, untouched by the 2011 uprisings in North Africa, wants to increase the tourist arrivals in to the country to ensure the growth of the key tourism sector. However, instability being experienced by countries such as Tunisia, Libya and Egypt following the Arab Spring is keeping the visitors away.

The contribution of Moroccan tourism towards GDP of \$105 billion is 10 percent. The industry which employs 400,000 people comes next to the agriculture sector. Last year, the biggest drop was in the French market, Morocco's largest, as tourist arrivals declined by about 7 percent. Visitor arrivals from Italy, Spain and Belgium were also smaller, but there was an increase in the amount of visitors from the UK and US. Overall, there was a one percent decline in tourist arrivals on year-over-year basis in 2015 and revenues slipped 1.3 percent to \$6.1 billion.

According to Minister Haddad, tourists are not differentiating Morocco, a secure and safe country, from Egypt or Tunisia and, therefore, a lot has to be done to send the message across to people.

During the course of the interview, he also added that talks are being held with airlines - Aeroflot and Royal Air Maroc - for opening new routes between Marrakesh and Agadir and Moscow and St. Petersburg though the plans for starting direct flights to Morocco from China, announced in 2014, have not yet materialized.

In February, Morocco reviewed its tourism strategy "Vision 2020", launched in 2010, in view of the mounting regional instability. The aim was to create 470,000 new jobs and 200,000 extra beds. The review results are to be published in May.

According to the minister, Morocco is the transit hub for West Africans who are travelling to other African destinations and Europe and, therefore, the goal is to get some of the transit passengers to spend a few extra nights in Morocco, visiting the medina and the Hassan II mosque. **He also noted that Morocco aims to attract 160,000 tourists every year from West Africa.**

The popularity of the new route - London to Sale and Rabat - operated thrice a week by Ryanair since 2015 has encouraged Morocco to open talks with other low-cost carriers as the plan is to add more direct flights between tourist centers like Errachidia and Quarazazate and European destinations.

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