

EUROPEAN TOURISTS SHUN TURKEY FOR POLITICS



'Politics has nothing to do with tourism' - at least according to Egypt's tourism minister Yehia Rashed asked by a reporter whether the strict punishments of journalists would not deter Western tourists. He answered diplomatically: "Tourism is a social process, not a political one."

This is a phrase that has been repeated for years, even when it comes to European tourists' behavior. But is it really true?

Tourism experts often point out that terrorist attacks negatively affect the bookings. Safety is naturally important for the traveler - but what about politics? **Many tourists do not care about the political situation of the chosen destination.** However, one country is testing the assumptions of the travel industry: Turkey.

"Before the coup, people were worried mainly about the attacks. That has changed," says the travel agency owner Ralf Hieke. "At the moment, we see that the concerns of our customers are more and more related to the internal political situation in Turkey. Many European tourists say they do not want to support the regime."

The same applies to the clientele of classical sun-and-beach-holidays who were always considered as non-political. The decline of travelers in Turkey certainly has political reasons, according to Ralph Schiller, manager of Munich tour operator FTI.

In the cultural tourism field, the picture is even clearer: "Thanks to the political situation in Turkey, the demand for the country is currently at a standstill," says Peter- Mario Kubsch, managing director of the study tour provider Studiosus.

However, according to Professor Martin Lohmann, director of the Institute for Tourism and Recreational Research in Northern Europe, European tourists have not become political. "I do not support this thesis," says Lohmann. He says that the current antipathy towards Turkey is mainly the perception of the media. "It is rather hysterical and sensitive."

"If the issue was really a political one, the European tourists would also be riled by Iran", argues Lohmann. But the country is doing extremely well according to Studiosus. It seems that the standards applied on the rulers in Tehran are somewhat different from Erdogan's Turkey.

"The situation in Turkey is special because it is also felt in Western Europe," says Hieke. For example, Erdogan was not allowed to speak via a live broadcast in Cologne, which created a giant political issue. "For long-haul destinations such as Thailand, the political situation hardly plays a role for travelers." In short, the news from Turkey awakened passion. What happens there has connection to the Europeans as well.

Studiosus are convinced that tourists look differently at countries nowadays. In the past, it was especially about summer, sun and beaches. "Today I would rather say: security, sympathy and social media," says Kubsch.

Ever since the Arab Spring all trouble spots were broadcasted live around the world. To a wide extent the media shape the impression of people about a country.

Strictly speaking, Turkey is not the first travel destination which is shunned for political reasons. Kubsch lists Russia as another example. "After the Crimean occupation we have seen declines in bookings of more than 50 percent among European tourists." No one felt threatened in Russia itself. "It was only the sympathy factor."

A more complex example is the Islamic countries. "This year, the entire Arab - Islamic space was affected," reports Kubsch. "We are seeing strong decline now in Morocco and also in the Gulf states. It has quite a lot to do with the image." One specific event has particularly changed the demand among German tourists - the Cologne New Year's Eve affair has led many women to an aversion to travel to Arab countries.

Security, culture, politics - in the Arab countries everything is mixed. Taking all this in consideration, the feeling is to rather not visit these countries.

This is especially true for Egypt. The proud land of the Nile has been experiencing persistent stagnation. The tourism minister Yehia is yet to find a recipe to solve the situation.

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