

TUNISIAN TOURISM: GOVERNMENT REJOICES, EXPERTS ARE SKEPTICAL



Tunisian tourism board announced positive results of the sector for 2016, describing the year as a return to normality for the industry. At the Spanish trade fair FITUR, the officials emphasized the arrivals of 5.7 million foreign visitors, after a few years marked by political instability and security concerns. Tunisian tourism stakeholders, however, see the situation as critical.

For the Director General of the Tunisian National Tourist Office, Abdellatif Hamam, **"2016 was the year that saw the return to normality in Tunisia."** Tunisian tourism represents 7 percent of GDP and employs 400,000 people.

According to him, Europe is the main source of foreign visitors for the country, although 620,000 tourists came from Russia alone. The growth of arrivals from Spain is according to him also positive, reaching 50 percent over the current winter season.

However, for Mohamed Ali Toumi, president of the Tunisian Federation of Travel Agencies (FTAV), the situation in the sector is quite different than the tourist board suggests. Among the 5.7 million tourists who visited Tunisian hotels in 2016, 1.5 million are of Algerian nationality and 1 million of Libyan nationality.

"Apart from the domestic market, the Russian market, and the Algerian market, all indicators of Tunisian tourism are in the red," he said.

Moreover, the revenues of the sector were \$ 874 million for the first 10 months of 2016, which is 7.1% less than in the same period in 2015. The regression is even higher (36.2%) when comparing the current data with those of 2014.

These figures confirm the negative trend that the Tunisian tourism has been fighting over the recent years. The sector was harshly hit after the Arab Spring and even more shaken by the violent attacks at the Bardo National Museum and on the Sousse beach in 2015.

However, the tourism officials remain optimistic aiming at new markets in 2017. Brazil, China, and African countries are part of the marketing plan of the Tunisian tourism office. According to the officials, the campaigns will also focus on young travelers.

According to the tourism minister, Salma Elloumi Rekik, this year Tunisia will be also extensively promoted among Saudi tourists. **The entry visas for Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are to be canceled which is expected to attract more visitors from this region.**

The minister emphasized the role of Saudi investors in the country: "The Saudi investments in Tunisia are estimated at about \$ 277 million and have created over 6,100 jobs. The Kingdom is among the first countries that decided to invest in Tunisia," said the minister adding that all the tourism projects launched by the government in Sousse are entirely financed by Saudi investors.

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