

TOURISM IN MYANMAR HIT HARD BY POLITICAL CRISIS



The Rohingya crisis has dealt a serious blow to tourism in Myanmar which had been developing rapidly in the last few years.

Cancellations are affecting destinations across Myanmar and as the peak season is set to begin, reservations are at their lowest level in years. Myanmar remained closed off to the world for fifty years and has only recently opened up its borders to foreign tourism. The

sector developed in record time, but the Rohingya crisis seems to have quelled the country's tourism ambitions.

From just a few thousand - at the time of the junta - the number of tourists had increased to nearly one million annually by 2015. For a long time Myanmar was only served by two airplanes departing from Bangkok, **however, the country now receives hundreds of international flights on a daily basis.** Until recently, the government had been expecting to welcome 7.5 million tourists by 2020, twice the number currently visiting the country. At the beginning of the year, the Ministry of Tourism in Myanmar announced a 22% increase in tourist visitation relative to the previous year's performance.

However, at the end of August, the country entered into a terrible political crisis. After attacks by the Rohingya insurgency force - a Muslim minority - the Burmese army launched a crackdown which resulted in the flight of over 580 000 Rohingya civilians to Bangladesh. Images of their escape as well as of burned villages have gone around the world and have resulted in a massive number of cancellations by visitors who had intended to visit the country.

"Almost all of the trips planned for October and November have been canceled due to the instability in the country, specifically the situation in Rakhine State," Tun Tun Naing, Director of the New Fantastic Asia Travels and Tour agency lamented. "Most Japanese and Australian groups, as well as groups from other Asian countries, have cited security concerns, and some European groups have clearly stated that they are boycotting the Burmese destination due to humanitarian concerns," he added.

The government is also concerned about the impact of the Rohingya crisis on tourism in Myanmar and has announced the formation of a committee to deal with the issue of international tourism. In some tourist areas, the economic consequences were felt immediately. For example, in Mrauk-U, a major archaeological site a few dozen kilometers away from the area being fled by the Rohingyas, people who make their living from tourism no longer have any work, a guide said.

France's "Quai d'Orsay's" website - on the page containing Advice for travelers - recommends avoiding this area altogether. **"In the current context, it is recommended to avoid traveling within the center of the Rakhine State** (Arakan) - including the city of Sittwe and the archaeological site of Mrauk-U - until the situation has stabilized," it also reminding people that "The security situation has not changed in the rest of the country, namely within the main tourist areas. The recommendations and precautions which appear on the security tab are still valid". Travelers have formally been advised against visiting the northern area of the Rakhine State (Arakan), near the border with Bangladesh.

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