

TUNISIAN TOURISM PLANS TO ATTRACT MORE VISITORS



Before the revolution, Tunisia was a destination of choice: close to Europe, cheap and unchanging. At that time, Tunisian tourism authorities announced seven million visitors every year. After the 2011 popular uprising and its upheavals, it was not until 2014 that the recovery began, then serial attacks tarnished the postcard and agencies deprogrammed the destination.

Today, the country has returned to its best times, having already welcomed some 6.24 million visitors since the beginning of the year, according to figures from the relevant ministry - almost 17% more than last year. **Europeans and Russians lead the ranking, followed by North Africans.**

Djerba, a flowery island located to the east, torn between a wild coast and a coastline invaded by "all you can drink" hotels (offering all-inclusive full board packages), benefits the most from this improvement. The increase would be more than 50%.

But these figures are to be put into perspective, according to Mohamed Ali Toumi, former president of the Federation of Travel Agencies (FTAV). According to him, they would take into account all the arrivals at the borders, including those of Tunisians from abroad who come to spend a few days with their families.

This upturn is vital for Tunisian tourism, since the sector represents more than 7% of GDP, as well as 50,000 direct permanent jobs, at least 300,000 contract workers and many indirect jobs. While the revenues increased by 28% in one year, approaching €1 billion, this is still less than in 2014 (€1.59 billion). The number of nights is certainly not as high as it was at the time, but that does not explain everything.

Inflation plays a major role and fixed costs are increasing. Although it is used as an argument to attract tourists, the depreciation of the dinar is also to the detriment of the country because the economic benefits are smaller. Several voices call for transfers to be made in foreign currencies, especially since the State's reserves remain low. Some also warn against supposed "black money".

"This revival is encouraging. We hope to start paying back what we owe," says Farhat Ben Tanfous, deputy general manager of the Jardins de Toumana, a residence in the tourist area of Midoun (northeast of Djerba). The sector needs to be cleaned up, as many structures are in debt and their gross operating results are no longer sufficient to push them up the slope. This also weighs on the banks.

Loans were consolidated in 2015, which enabled several institutions to hold on despite the still very high debt. Others had to close down and let the brambles invade their gardens. "Many reopened in 2018, others are reportedly in negotiations to relaunch next year. We see facades being repainted, we are delighted," he continues.

How can the Tunisian tourism do better? By improving quality, says Jalel Henchiri, president of the Tunisian Hotel Federation (FTH) in the Djerba-Zarzis region. This would involve training, with the upgrading of personnel who tend to desert this affected sector.

He estimates that 240,000 beds have to be replaced since 2010, and that more than 50% of the structures need to be renovated. **"We are seeing a new generation of customers who are not satisfied with hotels built for their fathers and grandfathers,"** he says. We should focus on "family economic" tourism, not "low-end" tourism, he argues.

The professional is calling for a break from mass tourism, through better promotion by the Ministry. "Our prices are still very low. We could attract a new clientele that pays better, by developing as yet unknown cultural destinations, events and luxury. It takes a whole strategy, but nothing has been done," he sighs.

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