

OMANI TOURISM CONTINUES TO INCREASE



Year after year, Oman is opening itself to international tourism. The country's goal is to diversify its economy and with its rich history and impressive variety of landscapes, the sultanate hopes to quickly become a popular destination among Western tourists, without losing its soul at the same time.

For the past ten years, Omani tourism industry has taken a serious turn in the economy and has gradually become embedded in local attitudes. Omanis are slowly becoming more aware of the potential attractiveness of their country. **The revenues generated by tourism in the country's GDP have been growing steadily since 2010.**

In 2017, they amounted to 2.2 billion dollars or 3.2% of the GDP. The sultanate has become a new destination for Western tourist agencies for a clientele mainly from the upper and upper middle classes. The growth is evident from the official statistics. In 2017, 20% more French and 41% more Germans arrived compared to 2016. Officials indicate that the annual growth rate of the number of visitors to the sultanate grows by more than 5% every year.

The industry has been changing in the past years. In the 1990s and until the early 2000s, obtaining a tourist visa without going to a tour operator was almost impossible. In June 2004, the door opened when Oman became the first Gulf country to have a ministry exclusively associated with the sector. Today, a large majority of Western nationals easily obtain a visa upon arrival without any reservation.

Omani tourism sector accounts for more than 150 thousand jobs, or 3.4 % of the economic activity. By 2027, the Omani government hopes that the tourism industry will reach 10%, while by 2040, the ministry hopes to develop about 500 thousand more jobs without opening up the country to mass tourism. The Sultan's aim is also to diversify the hard-hit economy since the fall of the price of a barrel of oil in 2014 and to reduce unemployment among young people in the age of 18–24. But for now, oil is still the dominant industry compared to tourism.

However, Omani officials and leaders are aware of the possibility of massive and uncontrollable arrivals to the country, unwilling to comply with the discretion and Islamic morals that a Gulf country like Oman implies.

“We know that tourism can destroy the identity of a country. We take care of it, our environment, and our culture. We want to be different. Our slogan is ‘beauty has address’,” Salim Aday Al-Mamari, the country's director of tourism promotion said.

“By trying to reconcile openness to tourism and the legitimate desire to protect the environment and society, the government has not yet found the right balance that would allow the country to take

advantage of its enormous potential,” an expert on the matter said.

Despite the caution, Oman wants to take advantage of what it can offer but also wants to expand and improve the possibilities. In Duqm, where hundreds of kilometers of beaches and deserts are still pristine, huge sites are to be built over 2,000 square kilometers. It is the country’s biggest economic project for the next twenty years.

The Sultanate aspires to create a port on the Arabian Sea, connected to the other countries of the Gulf, creating an economic and tourist megalopolis by 2040. In this sense, however, there could be some resistance, though the country plans to develop the sector even despite the effects it could have on the small fishing villages or nomadic populations.

“Our population is very welcoming because they understand the importance of the tourism sector and are starting to participate. Omanis are now asking the government to spend more money on its development. We educate people who are reluctant to accept tourism on a daily basis. We intend to inform the population of the importance of tourism. Tell them that it will not hurt their lives but benefit them,” Al-Mamari insisted.

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