

# IS LEBANON THE SAFEST PLACE ON EARTH?



Not many people want to travel to war zones or similarly dangerous places. That is the reason why the number of tourists coming to Lebanon has dropped. After the Israel Invasion many people reconsidered their opinion about Lebanon as a good spot for holiday. It is naturally quite difficult to convince tourists, that the country is safe if even Joseph Sarkis the tourism minister is so afraid of assassination that he leaves his home only rarely. He gives interviews in his heavily guarded home in the Christian village of Roumieh in the hills near Beirut. "It's amazing that still people continue to come, they take the challenge," the minister commented.

These times even the Lebanese expatriates, many of whom hold foreign passports, are not that eager to come here as they used to before the invasion. There are Tourism Ministry sponsored spots on the TV that want to restore confidence of visitors. The commercial's slogan is "Lebanon is the safest place on earth". "The message is that Lebanon is a country known for the hospitality of its people. We like to receive foreigners, give them a kiss and make them feel at home," Sarkis said.

The fact is that, according to an Ernst & Young survey, the occupancy rate at hotels in Beirut was 38 percent in the first 8 months of 2007, down by 19 percentage points from 57 percent in the same period last year. The authorities hope that with a new president the situation will calm down and the tourism industry will rise again. "We cannot foresee exactly, but if we have a new president for all Lebanese, accepted by the majority and the minority, I think Lebanon will resume tourist activity," Sarkis predicted. The country has plenty to offer to the tourists. There is lively nightlife, fine cuisine, beaches, ski-slopes and ancient ruins.

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