

JERUSALEM CANCELLED TOURS TO THE CITY UNTIL DECEMBER 2020



Jerusalem's tourism industry has been badly hit by the coronavirus pandemic - similar to other countries with the developed travel trade. The local authorities banned any tours to the city until December 2020 leaving the industry players and owners with no hope - at least not for a long time.

Without a functional government, and with no funds to fall back on, local authorities have to fight hard to survive the crisis that has affected Jerusalem in a manner never experienced before.

With over 1,700 residents testing positive to the COVID-19, Jerusalem takes the lead in the number of persons infected in Israel; amidst warnings from the health ministry that the city of over 1 million inhabitants is expected to record an increasing number of cases.

In the wake of government directives imposing a total lockdown on Israel, the streets are deserted and tourists cannot be found in the city no matter how hard you look.

For a city that was dubbed one of the world's top travel destinations and welcomed nearly 5 million tourists in 2018, it is hard to imagine that tourism has been brought to a standstill.

With similarly high numbers of tourists registered in 2019 and the wide range of tourist attractions, authorities had hoped that 2020 would be a year of record numbers. However, as experienced in other countries, Jerusalem's tourism has been brought to an abrupt pause and will remain this way until it all passes.

According to the head of tourism at the Jerusalem Development Authority, Ilanit Melchior, the damage caused by the pandemic is so great it can be seen with the naked eye. However, it is still difficult to put a cap on how much loss has been incurred because the city is still recording more damages.

For an industry that represents about 20,000 jobs, supports over 2,000 businesses and contributes well over \$360 million to the economy annually, a new reality has dawned and it is a bleak one.

In spite of current realities, Melchior says it is nothing too much for the authorities to handle as they have been put in a similar situation during the Second Uprising in the early 2000s that saw a large drop in the number of tourists, as well as a loss of over 900 lives to Palestinian terrorist activities.

Jerusalem's tourism industry led by Melchior has launched a project tagged 'Jerusalem is Traveling to U'; this project offers people all over the world a virtual city tour from the comfort of their homes and brings the beauty of the city to them.

From virtually putting a note in the City's western wall, getting a video tour of major museums and being able to light a candle in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the idea is to keep Jerusalem constantly on the minds of travelers.

The objective of this project according to Melchior is not to generate funds immediately, but to

ensure that people will remember Jerusalem in the midst of the crisis and come here soon after the pandemic is over.

The tourism industry is making plans to keep Israelis touring within its borders when it is possible. To build domestic tourism after the crisis, Melchior explains that Jerusalem plans to offer discounted and attractive tourism packages to prevent Israelis from jetting off to other countries, thereby keeping the funds within the nation. She also added that millions of investments in sports and cultural events are generated from the municipality.

In spite of predictions and expectations, one major problem that will continue to put a strain on the nation is the absence of a government even after expending as much as \$2.5 billion on campaigns.

With Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his new ally Benny Gantz engaging in coalition talks, there might be hopes to get a government soon. However, the tourism industry needs to find a way to survive right now.

In March, the Prime Minister approved over \$22 billion to keep the economy afloat in the midst of the pandemic but when compared to measures other countries have taken, it is far from efficient

While the government structure is trying to take a stand amidst the pandemic, Melchior is optimistic that the government will make things work, and things will begin to improve at the end of this year for the tourism industry.

According to her, things will start looking up after the Passover holidays, but Israel is expecting its first set of tourists between October and November.

In her predictions for 2021, Melchior believes that after spending months on video communication platforms such as Zoom, people will miss seeing other people and the world will experience a renewed hunger for tourism.

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