

POST-COVID TOURISM IN TUNISIA: REINVENT OR PERISH...



While a relative wind of optimism had blown on tourism during the three summer months, the violence of the second wave of the Covid-19 threatens to bring everything down; bad figures follow day after day, without public authorities coming to the rescue of this sector, which is a real provider of jobs.

The professionals of the tourist sector do not hide their concern about the resurgence of the Covid-19 in Tunisia and the repercussions that this pandemic may have on both the economic and social levels.

Until the end of October, the tourism revenues dropped by 62% compared to the same period last year. Currently, tourism in Tunisia is plunging further into the crisis, at a time **when its direct contribution to GDP is falling by more than 2 points (from 17%) and unemployment is undergoing an unprecedented surge which is likely to continue over time.** Faced with such a situation, public authorities are not yet in a position to provide a response commensurate with the present and future challenges.

No Sign of Recovery

Since mid-March 2020, the tourism sector has come to a complete standstill in Tunisia and in most countries of the world. Everything suggests that tourism will be durably impacted by the pandemic, to the point of becoming the sector most affected by the health crisis. With this second wave, the situation is becoming more and more serious with significant drop in activity and a lack of visibility on the future which is a cause for concern for the professionals of the sector on a national as well as on an international scale.

According to the latest figures published by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), travel restrictions imposed in response to the health crisis are hitting global tourism hard. During the first eight months of 2020, international tourist arrivals have fallen by 70% worldwide, compared to the same period last year. The summer months, which are usually synonymous with the high tourist season in the northern hemisphere, are proving catastrophic. In July, over one year, the drop in tourism was 81% and in August it was 79%. This translates into a fall of 700 million tourist arrivals, a loss of 730 billion dollars for the world tourism sector. This is 8 times more than the loss recorded after the global financial crisis of 2009. Faced with such a situation, the WHO panel of experts estimates a possible rebound from April 2021, but the performance of 2019 will only be recovered at the end of 2023, i.e. 35% (or 2024, i.e. 35%).

A Disguised Closure

In Tunisia, the situation is no different from that in other countries. Recently announced figures present a disturbing situation and a gloomy but predictable picture. To this should be added the return to curfew, which is equivalent to the closure of restaurants, bars, hotels... A decision which will have heavy consequences for the hotel and catering sector, already hard hit by this crisis.

But even before the decision to declare a curfew, the Covid-19 pandemic and the collapse of tourism

have caused the closure of several hotels. Other establishments had not even bothered to reopen their doors after the end of the first lockdown at the end of June.

According to figures announced by the Tunisian Federation of Hotels (FTH), as of October 9, 2020, more than 41% of hotels, some 230 units, have closed their doors since the beginning of the pandemic, while the other establishments will not be able to resist the crisis for much longer, given that their treasuries are experiencing a severe liquidity crisis, especially since the banks refuse to grant them credit. While the CEO of the tour operator Voyage 2000, Karim Kamoun, has estimated that due to the absence of local tourism, about 85% of the hotels in Tunisia will close their doors in the next few days.

Reconstruction in a Covid Context

According to Jalel Henchiri, President of the South-East Regional Hotel Federation, the tourism and hotel sectors will be profoundly transformed in the coming months and years and it will therefore be essential to adapt to the new requirements of post-Covid tourism in Tunisia.

As things stand at present, the situation continues to deteriorate, perhaps irreversibly, for several reasons. To do so, the sector needs solutions that must be equally functional in both the very short and long term. In this respect, in this period of the health crisis, exceptional measures must be appropriate to this exceptional context.

"All these elements show the scale and exceptional nature of this health and global crisis, which requires exceptional measures and responses," said Mr. Henchiri. "To do so, priorities and forecasts must change in order to release the energies and have the courage and determination to save tourism. Faced with such a situation, the country must resort to non-traditional policies in an exceptional context, given that **this crisis will have major social effects with the rise in unemployment, with a high degree of uncertainty characterizing the future, which requires a great capacity for forecasting and reading the main trends of future growth,**" he emphasized.

Therefore, the future of post-covid tourism in Tunisia is still complicated at a time when it is more than ever a time for change.

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