

TUNISIAN TOURISM IN AGONY AFTER TWO PANDEMIC YEARS



From travel agencies to tour guides, not a single sector of the Tunisian tourism industry, which represents 14% of the country's GDP, has been spared by the health crisis. But the signs of a recovery are already there.

If the tourism sector was for two years a collateral victim of the pandemic, it should recover in 2022. However, the summer of 2021 was going to be difficult: in June, the authorities recorded some 200 deaths per day and nearly 10,000 cases of daily contamination in **a fourth wave of the pandemic which highlighted the failings of the health system: saturated hospitals, lack of hospital equipment, insufficient vaccines...**

To make matters worse, Russia and Algeria, two of the country's most important tourist source markets, have closed their borders with Tunisia. And France has classified Tunisia among the countries of the "red list", subjecting travelers to severe restrictions (now somewhat lightened since the country has been put on the "orange list").

Nearly 400,000 Jobs

In addition to curfews, any travel between cities has been banned except for emergencies and those with travel permits or hotel reservations.

According to a recent figure from the National Tourism Office, the pandemic would have caused nearly 1.5 billion euros in losses to Tunisian tourism. Indeed, the industry accounts for 14% of the country's GDP and provides nearly 400,000 direct and indirect jobs, according to 2018 and 2019 figures.

Tourism Minister Habib Ammar said in early October that "local tourism and Tunisians living abroad" had "saved the season".

In September, the ministry had announced an 8.2% increase in overnight stays in the first eight months of 2021 "thanks to domestic tourism". Compared to 2020, tourism revenues were up 6% but down 60% from those generated during the same period in 2019.

Second Consecutive Blank Year

According to the IACE, of the 100 hotels surveyed, only 5% have not downsized.

"This is the second consecutive blank year," notes Jabeur Ben Attouch, president of the Tunisian Federation of Travel Agencies (FTAV). "The COVID crisis explains the economic collapse of the Tunisian tourism sector in 2020. In 2021, it explains the collapse of economic institutions."

Also according to the IACE study, 58% of travel agencies experienced a 75% or greater decline in revenue in the last six months of 2020.

Jabeur Ben Attouch noted that travel agencies working with foreigners have suspended their

activities. "They are the ones who employ the most staff. They are the basis of the travel agencies' economy. Only the agencies that work in local tourism are still operating."

The president of the FTAV assures that all tourist activities are almost at a standstill: "There is no more umra, nor hadj, nor even congresses."

The FTAV has recorded more than 915 million euros in dry losses over the past 18 months, says Jabeur Ben Attouch. "More than 47% of our travel agency staff has been laid off and agencies are in danger of bankruptcy."

"This is the longest and most difficult crisis for the profession. It's even worse than the revolution or the attacks," Mehdi Hachani, emphasized the president of the Tunisian Federation of Tourist Guides.

It must be said that the sector has been suffering since the 2011 revolution. The series of attacks in 2015 (at the Bardo and Sousse) has only accentuated the crisis, which has worsened since 2020 under the effect of the pandemic.

Mehdi Hachani assures that out of 1,100 guides approved by the state, only 400 are "in the field". "Most of them have started a professional reconversion, especially in call centers, since they master languages. Many have gone abroad, especially to the Gulf countries. The United Arab Emirates and Oman are massively recruiting, as is for example Qatar for the 2022 World Cup."

Not Enough Support from the State

According to Mehdi Hachani, in the face of all these difficulties, the profession of a tour guide is no longer attractive. "It's a dying profession. There were 3,000 guides in 2010. Even the Higher Institute of Tourism did not open a section for guides last year. There was no demand, that's a first!"

To address the crisis in the sector, the state has assumed the employer's social security contribution for the fourth quarter of 2020 and the first two quarters of 2021, provided that jobs are preserved.

In addition, **a monthly bonus of approximately 60 euros was granted to employees in the tourism sector who are on short-time working for a period of six months.**

Mehdi Hachani hopes for the Francophonie summit, which was supposed to be held in Djerba at the end of November but was postponed. "Nearly 10,000 foreign visitors were going to revive the island of Djerba and the profession of tour guides in particular. We had already sent the organizers the list of guides who would participate in the event," he regrets.

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