

ISRAEL: TOURISM AT AN ALL TIME HIGH DESPITE POLITICAL STORMS IN ARAB COUNTRIES



While the neighboring Arab countries are experiencing serious political turmoil, Israeli tourism, which has vital importance for the national economy, demonstrates an amazing resistance to the situation around Israel.

Figures released by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics for the 2010 incoming tourism sector show an impressive increase in the number of incoming tourists to Israel, making it a record year with a total of 3.45 million tourists, a 26% annual growth compared to 2009.

"Booking statistics provided by tour operators suggest a very good outlook for season 2011," said Israeli Minister of Tourism Stas Misezhnikov. "Holy places and Mediterranean beaches never cease to attract tourists."

According to the statistics, last year, foreign travelers "pumped" into the national economy about 4.4 billion dollars. For comparison: in 2009 the figure was \$ 3.3 billion. **It is expected that in the current year the number of visitors could approach 4 million tourists.**

Mr. Ami Etgar, the Director Executive of the Incoming Tourism Operators of Israel, emphasized that even if the inbound numbers don't reach such a high level by the end of 2011, the figures remain excellent. "In case of the most pessimistic scenario, the tourist numbers this year will be not bellow the mark of 3.2 million tourists," said Etgar.

According to Ami Federmann, who heads the Association of Israeli Hoteliers, the turbulent political situation that gripped the Arab world does not affect Israel in a significant way. The tourism industry of Egypt and Jordan on the other hand has been hit considerably. "The number of tourists declined sharply as a result of the political instability, and the return of visitors might take quite a long time."

The political storms affected only specific segments of Israel's travel trade. For example, the number of tourists visiting Jerusalem as a part of a one-day trip from Egypt declined sharply. Last year around 400,000 visitors came to Israel for one-day trip from Sharm el-Sheikh and other resorts. Today this market is stalled since the occupancy rate in Sharm el-Sheikh's hotels is very low. The loss is partly compensated by visitors coming on international cruise ships that now often prefer Israeli ports over the Egyptian ones.

Government officials attribute the positive results of the inbound tourism to a number of promotional campaigns aimed specifically at attracting Ukrainian and Russian visitors. These campaigns have started last year. The growing numbers of tourists from these countries were also boosted by abolishing entry visas for Russian and Ukrainian citizens in the 2010.

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