

Government Wants Syrians to Holiday at Home

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The Syrian government is hoping the domestic tourist industry will grow substantially in future years and help reinvigorate the sagging economy. But many people say domestic travel is too expensive and tourism needs to be better promoted.

Syrian officials said recently that domestic tourism had significant potential for growth. They argued that it was a more stable area than foreign tourism, which slumped in 2005 in parallel with the industry in Lebanon, following the assassination of that country's prime minister Rafik al-Hariri.

The number of foreigners visiting in Syria has climbed again since then, as the government has invested in developing and promoting the tourist trade, primarily targeting visitors from Arab and European countries.

Despite that, receipts from domestic tourism last year stood at 1.1 billion US dollars, one-quarter of all revenue from the trade, tourism minister Saadallah Agha Qalaa announced ahead of a conference promoting domestic tourism in Damascus last month. Qalaa said this figure should be increased to 35 per cent.

Syrians accounted for 27 per cent of all tourists in 2007. But Qalaa noted that this meant only three per cent of the population took holidays in Syria, calling this "a very small percentage".

"The ministry of tourism is currently working on promoting local tourism in Syria, and focuses each year on new ways to develop, support and improve the tourism sector," he said.

Industry experts and analysts say domestic travel must become more affordable before numbers increase..

According to Nidhal Mashfij, director-general of the Syrian Tourism Company, about a dozen affordable travel packages are to be promoted ranging from ten US dollar day-trips to 80 dollar overnight excursions.

Burdened by declining oil reserves and mounting debt, Syria is developing tourism and other industries in an attempt to diversify its economy.

There are several new projects designed to attract both foreign and domestic travellers, such as a 437 million dollar development in the seaside province of Tartus. Expected to open in 2009, it will cater to business, leisure and domestic tourists, according to a report on Syrian tourism released last year by the global market research firm Euromonitor International.

But Syrians say that only the wealthy can afford hotels and other luxuries, and the new tourism developments are geared mainly towards international travellers.

A Damascus-based analyst and writer said people rarely travel because they can barely afford basic expenses. People go on trips for their honeymoon, but otherwise stay at home.

“It was very expensive even before prices started to rise,” he added.

“I don’t see much promotion for local tourism,” said Mahasin Salman, a 33-year-old public servant from Damascus. “We used to go to the seaside every year, but companies began investing in those areas. They are ripping people off by driving up prices to the point that it’s not affordable for the average [person earning] 200 to 300 dollars a month.”

The government is putting most of its efforts into attracting foreign visitors and expects to have ten million tourists in 2015. The industry is creating substantial job opportunities that are expected to increase over the next ten years, according to the International Council for Tourism and Travel.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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