

Maghreb region competing with Egypt to woo tourists

It is perfectly clear why countries around the world are ever anxious to develop their tourism sectors. Visitors bring in valuable foreign currencies and the resultant job creation within that sector can provide an important boost to struggling economies, providing valuable stimulus to adjacent economic segments such as transportation or construction, as well as providing a magnet for direct foreign investment.

So, although tourism remains somewhat low key throughout much of northern Africa, with the exception of Egypt and Morocco, the governments of the Maghreb region — Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Morocco — have been keen in recent years to develop their tourism sectors to compete with the well developed attractions of Egypt in wooing foreign visitors.

According to recent figures from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTTC), the North African Travel & Tourism economy is ranked twelfth in absolute size worldwide, but second in its relative contribution to its local economies. It is also second in the world in its spurt for long term (10 year) growth.

The contribution of travel and tourism to regional GDP is expected to rise from 13.3 per cent (\$62.1 billion) in 2008 to 14.6 per cent (\$107.8 billion) by 2018, with real GDP growth for travel and tourism expected to be 6.3 per cent in 2008 and to average 5.7 per cent per year over the coming decade.

In employment terms, its contribution is expected to rise from 5.8 million jobs in 2008, (1 in every 7.8 jobs) to 7.9 million jobs, or one in every 7.3 jobs by 2018, whilst export earnings from international visitors and tourism goods are expected to generate 16.6 per cent of total exports (\$38.4 billion) in 2008, growing to \$62.3 billion cent in 2018.

Not all the countries have tackled this initiative (openings) in the 1970s was its marked contrast to Morocco's pursuit of high end tourists in the 80s and 90s, with both countries extending their efforts yet further in the current decade.

More recently, oil producers Algeria and Libya have also begun to develop tourism. Although the Algerian civil war hindered efforts in the last decade, the Bouferika regime has recently pursued an aggressive strategy to attract adventure trekkers as well as tourists seeking to explore the country's extraordinary historical legacies. Similarly, Qaddafi's regime has turned to tourism as a potential source of foreign exchange earnings since Libya's public renunciation of the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction five years ago. It has even done so touting environmental sustainability.

By any measure, the countries of the Maghreb possess an enviable array of tourist appeal. Warm, sunny climates combine with breathtaking Mediterranean and Atlantic beaches. Mountain, desert, and coastal terrains provide for an array of diverse adventure opportunities. An extraordinary cornucopia of Greek, Punic, Roman, Berber, and Islamic historical sites offer worlds of exploration for "educational tours". And its cities provide ample opportunities for exploration.

Yet, despite this abundance, Maghreb tourism has been stymied by internal instability. Algeria and Libya's long-standing instabilities have rendered tourist sectors underdeveloped and insecure, whilst Tunisia and Morocco have also experienced uncertainties in their markets which resulted in the cancellation of many trips to the region for several years.

But things are changing. There are now a number of important factors supporting investment in northern Africa, particularly political and economic reforms; and recently the World Bank has upgraded its annual ranking of ease of doing business with the entire region. These countries have managed to diversify

their economies, with manufacturing and especially tourism, now accounting for a larger share of GDP; whilst the commodity boom has also boosted growth dramatically.

Libya, Algeria and Egypt together possess 51 per cent of Africa's proven oil reserves, making northern Africa very wealthy.

It has been a bumpy ride; but by anyone's reckoning the next decade should see northern Africa high on the wish list of many tourists looking for something a little different from the traditional sun, sea and sand destinations of the past half century.

This is definitely an area that is destined to make a dramatic impact on tourism world wide for many years to come. ■

By Brian Sartor



The Khan of Khoulis, Morocco, is popular with tourists.

