

Egypt sees tourism rebound ahead of vote

Egypt is seeing a promising rebound in tourism following devastating jihadist attacks, in welcome news to the government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as he seeks re-election this month.

In the eastern Red Sea city of Hurghada, tourists lounge on sunbeds on the beach or play volleyball as boats carrying divers pass by. Among them is Bent Skovboe from Denmark, a 77-year-old who says he has visited Egypt more than 75 times.



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"If there was only Red Sea for snorkelling, I will come, but they also have pyramids in Cairo, temples in Luxor, the Nile and Aswan, and the people are very friendly," says Skovboe, decked in a swimsuit with a cold drink in hand.

Already in decline after the toppling of longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak in 2011, Egypt's tourism industry was dealt a devastating blow in 2015 when jihadists bombed a Russian airliner carrying holidaymakers from the Red Sea resort of Sharm El-Sheikh, killing all 224 on board. The Islamic State group, which has killed hundreds of policemen and soldiers in an insurgency based mainly in North Sinai, claimed responsibility for the airline attack.

Sisi, who is running virtually unopposed in the March 26-28 election, has pledged to wipe out the jihadists, saying such attacks pose an existential threat to the state.

Attacks on tourism

Talking about attacks on tourism earlier this year, Sisi said: "When I say the goal is to bring down the state, you have to know how that is done. When a certain sector is targeted, he (an attacker) knows what he's doing."

IS, now encircled in its Sinai strongholds, has pledged to redouble efforts to attack tourists and the industry is a barometer of the stability Sisi has promised to restore.

The year after the attack on the Russian airliner was "one of the worst years for tourism," says Hisham El Demery, the chairman of the Egyptian Tourism Promotion Board. That year, Egypt received 5.4 million tourists, down from 14.7 million in 2010. Tourism revenue, a primary source of foreign income, fell to \$3.8bn in the fiscal year ending June 2016, down from \$11.6bn in the year ending June 2010, according to the central bank.

Last year, the number of visitors was up to 8.3 million people, according to official figures.

Robust demand for Egypt

Travel agencies, hotel managers, and diving centres told AFP that reservations are rising, especially in Red Sea destinations such as Hurghada and Marsa Alam. "There's a very large increase in reservations this year and the demand for Egypt is very robust, especially in the German market," says Ali Okda, CEO of Travco Travel Company of Egypt, a leading local agency.

Mohamed Aboustate, general manager of Mahmya, one of Hurghada's top attractions, said this rebound took place mainly after "tourism companies and hotels made a big effort... spending a lot on compelling advertising campaigns."

Mahmya is a 10,000-square-metre day-resort project on Giftun island. Visitors take a boat to the island, spend the day on its beach, snorkel along its coast or scuba dive, and head back to mainland Hurghada by night.

Increasing stability has been a factor in the rebound, says Marc Zafra, head of destination management at LuxairTours, the tour operator of Luxembourg's national carrier. As demand rises, LuxairTours plans to double flights to Hurghada - currently, one per week - by the end of March, while they already "have an increase of 250% compared to last year," in bookings, says Zafra.

More than 70% of Egypt's tourists arrive on charter flights, run by operators such as LuxairTours, according to Demery. "Tourism's revival will probably continue as long as there are no large-scale terrorist incidents," says Mostafa Kamel al-Sayed, a political science professor at Cairo University.



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In Hurghada, the Grand Plaza hotel's occupancy rose to about 80% in February, up from around 50% a year earlier, said manager Taher El Sayed.

The German Steigenberger Beach Hotel expects an 85% occupancy this year, said general manager Thomas Huth.

Sisi, a former army chief elected in 2014 a year after ousting his Islamist predecessor following mass protests, has not stressed this revival in his election campaign. But he often suggests his government's counter-terrorism strategy is making headway in restoring stability.

Russia resumes flights

The rebound, however, has yet to reach Sharm El-Sheikh and the wider South Sinai region as authorities battle IS in North Sinai.

"The destinations that are most (negatively) affected are Sharm El-Sheikh city, or South Sinai, and this is, of course, a result of the absence of two very important markets which represent more than 50 to 60% of the business mix, which is the English and Russian markets," says Demery.

Russian flights to Egypt were suspended after the 2015 plane bombing. Aeroflot, Russia's flagship carrier, announced on Tuesday that flights would resume between Moscow and Cairo starting April 11. But no specific date has been set for flights to resume to Sharm El-Sheikh.

Tourism Minister Rania al-Mashat told AFP that "all issues around the airports' security have already been resolved" and aviation officials are to meet in the coming weeks.

Source: AFP