

## **Middle East & North Africa Travel Association (MENATA) launched at World Travel Market**

By: Karen Dabrowska



Ashraf Gabag,  
promoting  
Rixos Tripoli's  
newest hotel

**The Middle East & North Africa Travel Association (MENATA) was launched at the World Travel Market (WTM) held in London's Excel Centre from November 8th – 11th.**

Nearly 50,000 people attended the four day event for the travel industry which attracts senior travel industry professionals, government ministers and the international press.

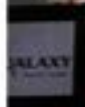
The MENTATA region covers Algeria, Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the UAE and Yemen. It

stretches 6,500 kms from the Atlantic coast to the Indian Ocean and, in the words of MENATA's Executive Director, Peter Lilley, "is one of the most exciting, distinctive and rewarding tourism areas anywhere in the world. Yet it's been conspicuous in not having an umbrella trade organization to wave the flag and help raise the profile of the region".

The region's top cultural sites include the Pyramids, the Lost City

Bahraini stand

## BAHRAIN THE PEARL OF ARABIA





Businessmen on the Iraqi stand

of Petra and the Roman Temple complex at Baalbeck in Lebanon. Nearly 90 sites appear on the UNESCOs' World Heritage List – 12 of them in Iran, including most recently the historic bazaar complex at Tabriz, one of the most important commercial centres on the old Silk Road.

"From idyllic sandy beaches and stunning cultural sights to futuristic museums and ultra-luxurious

hotels. From fabulous food and limitless shopping opportunities to just about every sporting activity on earth, the MENA region offer it all", MENATA said in a press release.

MENATA is especially keen to promote destinations which have been largely inaccessible to Western tourists in the past: Libya, Iraq and Yemen. All three countries had impressive stands at this

year's WTM showcasing unique sites and extending a sincere welcome from the heart to all visitors.

Libya offers the richest collection of Greek and Roman ruins in the Mediterranean including Leptis Magna, once the greatest Roman city in the whole of North Africa. It is the home of five UNESCO's World Heritage Sites: Cyrene, Leptis Magna, Sabratha, the rock-

art sites of Tadrart Acacus and the old town of Ghadames.

Following its rapprochement with the West during the past ten years, Libya began to develop its tourist industry with an eye on the Western market. Colonel Qadhafi described tourism as a sustainable resource which, unlike oil, would never run out. In September 2007 his son, Saif Al Islam, announced an ambitious project to turn the



Egyptian stand

Geoff Hann of Hinterland Travel discusses Iraqi tours



ancient city of Cyrene into a centre for eco-tourism and tourism is one of the key areas of diversification from oil-generated revenues.

Muhammed Ali, of the Libyan General Authority for Tourism & Handicrafts, said that the tourist industry was developing slowly, emphasizing that Libya was determined not to repeat the mistakes of other countries who have ignored environmental and

social considerations when developing tourism.

"We do not want mass tourism. Libya will be a specialist tourist market", he said pointing out that the oil industry had forced people to leave their homes to find jobs but the tourist industry would bring jobs to the local people.

"The infrastructure development associated with tourism will benefit

the local people”.

Libya takes a long-term view of its tourist industry with plans for five, ten and even twenty-five years.

The Libyan companies exhibiting at the WTM included Corinthia Bab Africa Hotel, Rixos Al Nasr Hotel (Tripoli's newest hotel), Arkno Tours, Al Balad Aamin, Fezzan Tourism, Germa Travel & Tourism, Jannat Tours, Safari Tourism Services, Taknes Co,

Zawia Travel & Tourism, Wings Travel and Wahat Tourism Development and Investment Company.

They predict a bright future for tourism which will develop slowly but surely, step by step.

While Libyan tourist companies are adopting the 'easy does it' philosophy, Iraqi tour operators are people in a hurry. The violence following the 2003 war made Iraq

Libya stands



Mohamed Salim promoting Corinthia Bab Africa Hotel Tripoli



a total 'no-go' area for Western tourists for almost seven years and now the Iraq Tourism Board is determined to make up for lost time.

On a large stand with a formal reception and Iraqi flag women in traditional costumes welcomed visitors. There were many intense discussions among tour operators and their Iraqi counterparts and there was no shortage of glossy

publications promoting Iraq's tourist sites.

MENATA's Executive Director Peter Lilley is equally optimistic: "Look what's happened to places like Vietnam, Cambodia and Rwanda. Countries once ravaged by war or genocide are now re-emerging as some of the trendiest travel destinations around. And the remnants of those tragedies even become tourist attractions –

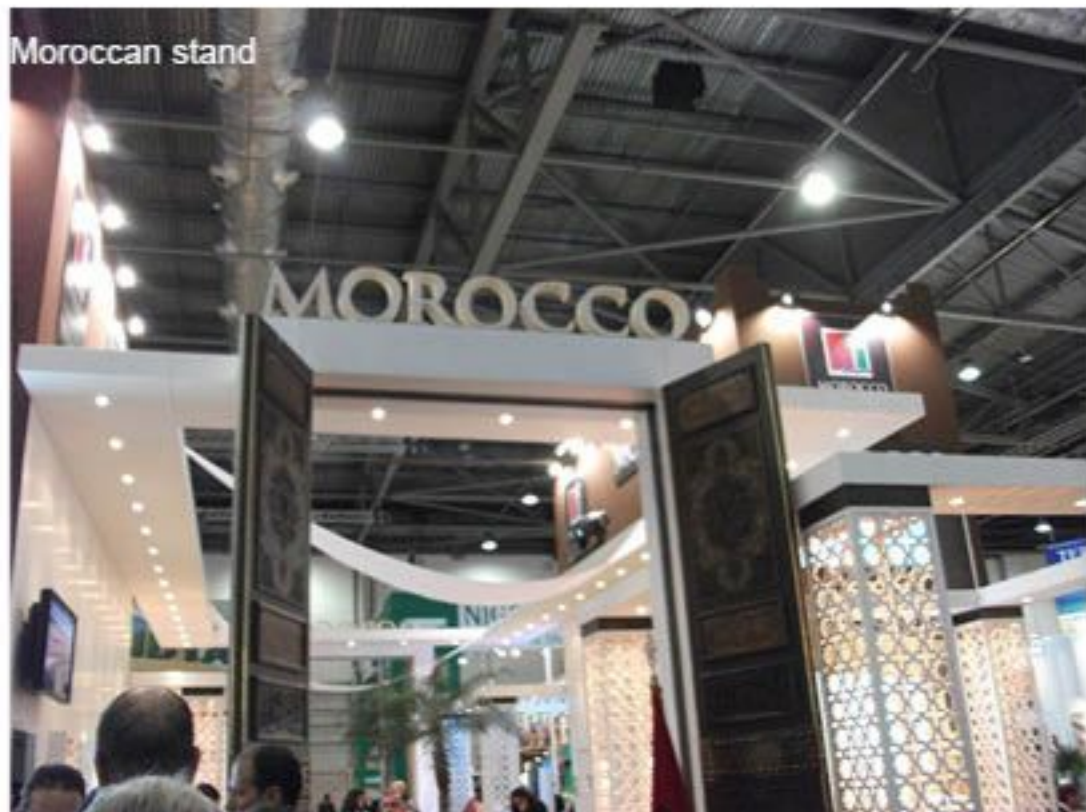
such as the Cu Chi Tunnels near Saigon or the Killing fields on the outskirts of Phnom Penh”.

He suggested the same thing could happen in Iraq. “It might seem unthinkable to some people that, given the enormity of the challenges it faces, Iraq should still be supporting a Ministry of Tourism & Antiquities. But it could play a valuable role in helping to rebuild the country and boost its battered economy”.

And even without promoting questionable war-related tourist attractions, Iraq still has much to offer culturally-minded visitors. Often referred to as the “Cradle of Western Civilization” its home to around 12,000 archaeological sites, including the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon.

“Tourism in Iraq is about to boom”, said veteran tour operator Geoff Hann of Hinterland Travel who took the first Western tourists to

Moroccan stand





Palestinian stand



The image shows a white exhibition stand for the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. At the top, there is a stylized logo consisting of a circle with a purple dot, a green dot, and a yellow line that forms a map of Palestine. Below the logo, the word "Palestine" is written in a large, green, sans-serif font. Underneath that, "Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities" is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font. Two bright spotlights are positioned above the stand, casting light on the wall.

Palestine  
Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities



The image shows a dark, illuminated exhibition stand for "ZAKHISTAN". The word "ZAKHISTAN" is written in large, gold, serif letters. To the right of the text is a small, white, geometric logo. The stand is lit from above, and there are some other items visible in the background, including a wheelchair accessibility sign.

ZAKHISTAN

Iraq after the 2003 war and has just returned from another tour of the country.

"I am looking forward to a full programme of tours and introducing Iraq to many people who want to see it".

Hayder Al Khafaji of Al Minar Tourist Company said religious tourism was dominant with people from Iran, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Qatar and Bahrain converging on the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala.

"I hope Western tourists will start coming next year. Let's hope the government is stable".

The message from Yemen was 'tourism not terrorism'. The Secretary General of the World Tourism Organization Taleb Rifai, joined Yemen's deputy ambassador to the UK and the Executive Director of the Tourism Promotion Board Fatima Al-Huraibi, for a press conference where the warnings against travel

to Yemen issued by the British and other governments were criticized. "A bomb went off in Istanbul but tourists were not advised not to travel to Turkey", Al-Huraibi said. She described her recent visit to Hadramaut ten days ago. "Shibam is like a ghost town, all the shops are closed. It is a pity that the Europeans are taking this action against Yemen by issuing travel warnings and stopping Yemeni flights from coming to London

"Terrorism is preventing tourists from coming to Yemen", the deputy ambassador said. "There were several incidents with tourists in Egypt and Jordan but the international community did not deal with them as they dealt with Yemen. He appealed to the international community to support Yemen by allowing the resumption of flights.

Taleb Rifai said he had visited Yemen many times. "The last time



Promoting tourism in Yemen (from left, Secretary General of the World Tourism Organization Taleb Rifai, Executive Director of the Tourism Promotion Board Fatima Al-Huraibi, Yemen



The Iraq stand

was a couple of months ago when we held our commission for the Middle East in Yemen. We should acknowledge the difficulties that Yemen is passing through but more important than acknowledging the difficulties is deciding how to deal with them. We don't deal with them by submitting to what the terrorists want us to submit to. While terrorism destroys everything that is beautiful in life tourism celebrates everything that

is beautiful in life. We have to be realistic, we have to acknowledge what is there on the ground but we cannot stop the flow of visitors to Yemen as the terrorists want us to. By stopping the flow of visitors we are depriving the country of very important economic benefits and jobs that are lost. This is not the time to shun Yemen or to turn our backs on this beautiful country and its beautiful people". The last few years have been

difficult for Yemen with escalating tensions in both the north and the south and the highly mediatised presence of al-Qaeda in certain regions of the country. Yet despite all these setbacks, in 2009 tourism arrivals from Europe rose by 23%, and the numbers from UK exceeded even the most optimistic of expectations, last year achieving 52% growth with an increase of almost 5,000 visitors.

According to Peter Lilley Yemen is one of Arabia's undiscovered

gems and has the potential to be one of the great tourist destinations of the future.

Most MENA countries were represented at this year's WTM which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2009. WTM is owned by the world's leading events organiser Reed Exhibitions (RE), which organises a portfolio of other travel industry events including the Arabian Travel Market and the International Luxury Travel Market.

Traditional costumes from southern Iraq

