



Religious Tourism

The pivot of tourism between Islamic countries and the attraction of Muslims world-wide

Throughout history, Hajj and Umrah, visits to the sites and tombs of prophets, imams and holy men, as well as religious festivals, have inspired Muslims to abandon their daily routine and leave their cities and countries for relaxation and entertainment.

After performing prayers or pilgrimages people found their spiritual peace and enjoyed the amenities of life within the limits of respect for Islamic and human values. It is essential to give examples and facts which are not known to non-Muslims.

First there is the Kaaba in Mecca, visited during Hajj and Umrah, and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, which houses the tomb of our great prophet Mohammed. Then, the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and the holy sites of prophets such as Adam, Sheith, Gourges, Noah, Hud, Salih and Al Thul Kifl, all located in Iraq, and Abraham in Jordan. Then there are the tombs of the Imams of Ahl Al Bayt in Najaf, Karbala, Khadimayah, Samarra and Mashhad, as well as those imams of different Islamic sects, such as the mosque and tomb of Imam Abu Hanifa Al-Noaman, in Al-Adhamiyah in Baghdad, the tombs of the companions of the Prophet, and those of the saints who carried the message of Islam to the four corners of the earth. These sites are distributed throughout the Muslim world, from the Atlantic Ocean to Asia, Africa and the rest of the world.

The mosques and mausoleums of imams, the Companions of the Prophet and saints are spiritually inspired and radiate faith and sacrifice in the service of Islam.

On the other hand, the Holy Koran states that God wanted the homes where the prophets and saints lived sustained through the centuries, so they are a guide to the right path. Thus, he said as a tribute to the People of the Cave (Ahl al

Kahf): "Thus did We make their case known to the people, that they might know that the promise of Allah is true, and that there can be no doubt about the Hour of Judgment. Behold, they dispute among themselves as to their affair. (Some) said, "Construct a building over them": Their Lord knows best about them: those who prevailed over their affair said, "Let us surely build a place of worship over them." (The Cave (Ahl Kahf) 21).

The importance of relics and historical heritage is revealed through stories about Al Isra Wa Al-Mia'rage. During this trip the Prophet visited the holy sites of past prophets. According to these stories, he went to Al Medina, Mount Sinai and Bethlehem, where he said his prayers. Gabriel said to him: "Messenger of God, do you know where you prayed? You did your prayer in Tiba, where you made your migration (Hijra), Mount Sinai where God spoke to Moses and Bethlehem where Jesus was born."

Thus, generations of believers accorded importance and respect to the tombs and places of residence of the prophets and saints, inspired to do so by their instincts, but also by religion and reason, with a view to preserving this history and heritage. The concepts of religious tourism began to develop after the issuing of Islamic Tourism Magazine (ITM) and its website (ITW). It was through ITM & ITW that this strange new concept was promulgated. There were lots of questions about it at first, but it soon became the theme of exhibitions, tourism activities were organised around it and universities began a study and analysis of the meanings of Islamic Tourism, and its human dimension, and to evaluate every aspect of its meanings and prospects. This included research on religious tourism and its historical aspects and an assessment of its activity and economic performance. There was a consensus among

interested persons, and experts on this issue, given its importance and priority and the multiplicity of its profits at all levels.

The question is why have Arab or Muslim countries not given priority to religious tourism in their tourism development plans, especially when they are very serious about developing their tourist industries. Religious tourism is one of the most important resources particularly in Muslim countries which have a rich and diverse heritage. This permanent wealth and treasure exceeds oil, has attracted millions of Muslim visitors throughout history and will attract hundreds of millions of Muslims and non-Muslims, in future. While lifestyles change, faith remains unchanged.

Mankind has spent centuries researching his origins. During the last two centuries, universities and research centres have begun scientific, social, human and religious research, unearthing the slightest evidence attesting to the lives of those who lived in a particular region and in a particular historical epoch. Currently, there is more passion and desire for research and countries have now entered a race to spend millions of dollars in search of any historical landmark or artefact to promote tourism.

The World Tourism Organization has estimated that 300-350 million tourists visit places for religious reasons. The 1st Religious Tourism World Congress, held in October 2006, estimated that this market is worth \$18 billion annually.

We note promising experiments in our Islamic world. Thus, Saudi Arabia spends hundreds of millions of dollars to showcase its cultural heritage, such as the tombs of Mada'ine Saleh, the capital of the southern Nabataean civilization and twin city of Petra in Jordan. There is also interest in the historic region of Ad-Dar'iyah the origin of the Saudi State and its

historic alliance with Sheikh Mohamed Bin Abdel-Wahab, 1157 H/1744. Hundreds of millions of dollars will be spent rebuilding this city, which was made of mud, in three phases. Officials have also begun constructing the infrastructure necessary for tourism.

There are still many sites and types of tourism which are talked about by the authorities responsible for tourism. But the question is for whom do these sites get prepared? How many foreign tourists are they expected to attract? What is the cost of managing these sites and ensuring the safety and welfare of tourists? What impressions will they carry to their countries? What would be the economic performance and cultural benefits? And, most important of all, what is the spiritual and intellectual benefit to Muslims wherever they are?

We see successful experiences of countries such as Egypt, Syria and Jordan, who have managed to exploit their Islamic heritage and historic sites, turning them into dreams that everyone wants to see. We include among others, Al Hussein Mosque, one of the main sites of Cairo, and near by the tomb of Sayida Zainab, as well as the tombs of Mohamed Ibn Abi Bakr and Malek Al Ashtar. In Syria, there are the tombs of Sayida Zainab, Roqaya Bent Al Hussein, Prophet Johanna, in the Mosque of Damascus, as well as those of many companions of the Prophet, such as Ammar Ibn Yasser. In Jordan, there are the tombs of Jaafar Ibn Abi Taleb Attayar and Abdullah Ibn Rawaha and Zaid Ibn Haretah, may God bless them all.

It is important that religious tourism and other tourism respectful of Islamic values and human beings are in the forefront of tourism. The alternative is widespread corruption that is spreading like an epidemic, which we see in certain countries. Sometimes, due to a lack of awareness and necessary preventative measures, the epidemic reaches countries and regions that were previously immune. The police in a Gulf Arab state uncovered a network of hundreds of people of various nationalities in 22 sites, who were engaged in practices transgressing morality, religious and human values, under the guise of tourism. In fact, it was a trade in human beings, illegal gain and a degradation of man whom God has honoured.

The question is what kind of tourism do we aim for?

We have inexhaustible tourist resources. It is religious tourism that springs from our faith, and other types of tourism not contradicting our faith and culture, which usually coexist and thrive side by side with religious tourism, such as nature

tourism, heritage tourism, linked to the culture of the country, rural tourism, and many other types that can be included in the general term cultural tourism. Would it not be time to give this type of tourism and our peoples, the attention they deserve, so we can be proud to announce it to other nations, and to make it a source of prosperity for our country and show consideration and respect for our history?

We call for using tourism to serve the country and people through the revenue it generates. There is the value of relaxation and entertainment. Human beings can be affected by depression, or a misfortune and travel may be the best remedy. There are also other benefits, as in the case of commercial tourism, or to acquire knowledge. The Prophet said, "Search for knowledge even in China", or knowledge of the manners of other people. When one travels he will discover the traditions and cultures of other countries.

Saudi Arabia is the country best placed to carry the banner of Islamic Tourism and chart the course, because of the privilege that God gave it with the Kaaba towards which all Muslims turn for prayers. It is the land that received the message of Muhammad. There is also history, the tombs of the elite of Ahl Al Bayt (family of the prophet), his companions, and those who followed them across generations. Saudi Arabia has a precious treasure such as the region of Al Baqia and other sites, if only they were restored, and if it tourism programmes were developed which involve religious tourism side by side with other types of tourism desired by visitors?

The restoration of Al Baqia, could have another wide-ranging benefit: rebuilding the unity of Muslims. For example, Saudi Arabia is not only sheltering the Kaaba and the tomb of the Prophet but also preserving the history of Muslims with their various faiths and doctrines, rejecting any call for excommunication which incites killing, the destruction of mosques, mausoleums, tombs of saints, and anything that incites discord. We should learn from the lessons of Iraq, and the wanton destruction in Samarra. This does not only affect a particular country and a particular sect: it is a negation of Islamic values and a huge loss for all.

I appeal to His Majesty, King Abdullah Bin-Abd-al-Aziz Al Saud, as well as theologians of the Saudi Kingdom and to all members of the government, particularly those bodies working night and day to highlight the attractions of the kingdom, to ensure that they broadcast the culture of Islamic Tourism, with all its dimensions: religious, and historical and to give an example of the distinction of tourism that follows Islamic and human values.

Similarly, I call upon those responsible to create theological research centres for all faiths in order to help remove the obstacles and differences in terms of ijthihad that prevent rapprochement between Muslim peoples. We hope that the issue of the restoration of the tombs of Al Baqia and the preservation of the sanctity of the graves of Muslims will receive attention and priority. Our respect for our history and the history of the protectors of our faith and good Muslims, will force the world to respect us, and vice versa. This is not in contradiction with our faith in one God, who honoured man by giving him reason and faith and made martyrs as living beings in life and death. Allah said: "Think not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord" (Al-Imran/169). The commemoration of their memory and the restoration of their graves are acts of charity for the sake of God and to get closer to the Almighty.

Finally, I would not have addressed this subject, if it was not for my deep faith in God, and if I had not been honoured by the leaders of the Kingdom, headed by Crown Prince Khaled Ibn Abdul-Aziz, Prince of Assir region, who presented the Assir Shield to Islamic Tourism Magazine, in recognition of its efforts in the service of tourism in the Assir region and its cooperation with the Tourism Commission of the Abha Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Also, I wouldn't have raised this topic if I had not been invited by the High Commission for Tourism, through the Saudi Embassy in London to visit the Kingdom as part of a British delegation. During the eight-day visit, we received a warm welcome and exemplary hospitality. This proves that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has followed the progress of ITM magazine and its website since the beginning of its publication, which has enjoyed the respect and consideration for its Islamic message and humanist ethics, knowing that the magazine and its website have nothing to do with greed and unguided currents. The main goal of ITM is to enjoy the blessings of God.

Let us all work towards the spread of the culture of Islamic Tourism, with its various genres, and to put religious tourism at the centre of all other types of tourism, so that present and future generations will know the heritage and the history of their country and other countries in the world. Thus, will spread the flags and songs of peace and love among Muslims and among all nations.

May God guide us to success

A. S. Shakiry