

A New Vision of Tourism

Dr. Saadallah Aqa Al-Qala (Syrian Minister for Tourism)

Tourism is regarded by the Government of Syria as a strategic industry and one of the four pillars of the national economy. It is considered as an industry that has an economic impact and an important role in increasing employment opportunities and not merely as a direct form of financial revenue to the state. It is an action of human dialogue between peoples and civilizations, highlighting the real image of Syria, and a contributor to the social development of the local communities that live around the historical places and archaeological sites. It is also a contributor to the preservation of the historical and cultural heritage in Syria.

Why is Syria is so attractive to tourism?

- 1- Syria is a grand museum containing archaeological and historical sites related to more than twenty different epochs of civilization which describe the history of humanity, and it enjoys an incomparable variation at international level.
- 2- Nature in Syria is distinctive in its variety. It forms a wonderful panorama of natural colours and images: coastal sea, mountains, forests, grottoes, natural and artificial lakes, fertile valleys, plains and steppes. All these in addition to the diversity of old and ancient cities with their souks, *khans*, traditional houses, handicrafts and traditional industries, provide an attractive and unique compound tourist product, where tourists can combine the pleasure of visiting archaeological sites with a living, breathing display of historical lifestyles and cultural traditions.
- 3- Syria is considered to be a very safe and secure country.
- 4- Because of its geographical position, Syria was the hub of the old world where East and

West used to meet with their respective civilizations: the country provided a unique meeting point for the Silk Road caravans along East Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

- 5- Due to its unique geographical position, hospitality and friendship, and because of its own innate traditions, the Syrian peoples acquired a delicious cuisine.
- 6- Syria is not far off from other tourism generating countries.

Investment incentives:

- Availability of a network of highways and railways covering all parts of Syria.
- Availability of communications: water and electricity networks in all parts of the country.
- 16 vocational schools and 7 intermediate for hoteliers, and a specialist main centre for tourism training in Damascus.

Other incentives:

- Syria is hardly affected by inter-

national economic and other changes because she enjoys stable tourism markets.

- Local and expatriates tourism (16 million Syria expatriates), tourism from the Arab and Islamic states (2.8 million arrivals in 2001), and promising markets from pre-Islamic religious tourism (Syria is the cradle of Christianity) as well as cultural tourism.
- All these factors have increased the number of arrivals to Syria in spite of the events of September 11th, 2001. (3.2 million arrivals in 2001, 4.3 million estimated arrivals in 2002). ➔





Syrian Perspective

- Bed capacity in Syria has reached 36,000, which means that the percentage of beds for arrivals requires an increase in the tourist infrastructure, especially in hotels.

Objectives

Transforming tourism in Syria into a strategic industry, putting at its disposal all the available potentialities of cultural heritage, natural environment, legislation, capitals, modern technologies, human resources, not to mention the deep rooted generosity and hospitality of the Syrian peoples. All these factors will no doubt help in generating an integrated tourist product containing activities that recall the history and ancient lifestyles pertinent to the historical sites, deserts or countryside, in addition to nature preservations, sports, shopping, theatres, cinema, cabaret and artistic performances.

Increasing direct revenues of tourism from US\$475m in 2000, to a projected \$860m in 2005, with an annual average rate of GDP increase of 6% from 2.6% in the year 2000 to 4% in 2005, without comprising an indirect impact on other economic activities.

Creating 28,500 new job opportunities within three years and ensuring a high level of tourist services (one bed provides 1.5 direct jobs, and indirect employment).

Developing new investment in the tourism sector in order to reach US\$1.7110b by the year 2005; the most important scope of these investments is to raise lodging capacity from 36,000 beds in 2002 to 65,000 beds in 2005. Promoting tourism to Syria via all international markets in order to increase the number of tourists to 12 million in the year 2020.

Procedures taken to encourage investments:

1. Issuing special legislation and regulations for encouraging investment in tourism:

- Exemption of tourism projects from all taxes and duties during the period of their construction.

- Allowing the import of building materials, tools, equipment, working vehicles and furniture.

- Exemption of tourism projects from all taxes and duties for seven years from the date of operation, then 50% of these taxes and duties starting from the eighth year of operation.

- Allowing the transfer of the foreign investor's portion in hard currency abroad after five years from the beginning of operation.

- Allowing foreigners to transfer the profits and capital interests in hard currencies abroad.

- Implementation of the principle of 'One Window' in the Ministry of Tourism for tourist investment projects.

- Allowing direct dealing with those investors who wish to invest in the developing tourism areas or the historical buildings and adopting special conditions for them to encourage

investments in these areas.

- Allowing Arab and foreign investors to possess the lands where tourism projects are being developed.

2. Adopting the principle of tourist free zones.

Procedures undertaken in promotion:

1. Inviting television teams from more than 15 countries, in addition to more than 200 Arabic and foreign journalists specializing in tourism, to visit the tourism and archaeological sites this year.

2. Launching the Silk Road festivals which celebrate the role of Syria as a unique crossroads between east and west.

3. Supervising and sponsoring cultural and international activities, and offering exemptions and facilities for these activities.

4. Developing the website of the Ministry of Tourism in Arabic. Its translation into English and French is under consideration already.

5. Establishing a pole on the internet to monitor the image of Syria abroad, and tracking what is written about Syria in all fields of tourism, economy, culture, information and politics in order to from a vision of the image of Syria as it is seen by others, in order to:

- establish a club on the Internet comprising those tourists who have visited Syria and reflected, in their written remarks, a true image of the country; quoting these remarks on the site so that anyone who wishes to visit Syria may read them. These remarks, being written by non-Syrians, will help in convincing others to visit.

- take constructive remarks into consideration to be rectified through cooperation with the competent authorities.

- identify types of action to be taken in promoting and advertising those things that can give the real image of Syria through the mass media.

6. Organizing tourist 'weeks' in Arab and other countries.

7. Participating in international tourism exhibitions.

8. Concluding agreements with states that have a common history with Syria (Spain, Italy, Greece and Turkey) in order to produce a common tourist product, each targeting the other country.

Current procedures in the framework of tourist promotion and marketing:

1- Creating a board for tourism promotion and marketing entrusted to promote Syria abroad.

2- Establishing promotion of tourism bureaus in five cities: London, Paris, Rome, Madrid and Berlin.

3- Setting up tourist programmes for Syrian expatriates, especially for those of the second and third generation, including Arabic language learning, and tours to ancient sites at reasonable prices.

4- Arranging special programmes for Islamic and Christian religious groups, and reviving routes that have signified Syria as a cradle of Christian as well as Islamic civilization, including an appreciation of the cultural periods of Syria's history.

5- Establishing a special type of tourism, relating to development and culture, in order to transform the liaison between tourism, development and culture via ordinary visits to the historical sites, into a new concept through discovering patrimony in all its revelation: daily life, popular culture (visual or non-visual) such as habits, traditions and the rituals of every day life.

6- Diversifying the tourist product, and developing now tourist patterns to cope with the diversity of archaeological sites and nature in Syria:

-Beach and recreation tourism

-Eco-tourism.

-Health tourism.

-Adventure tourism.

-Conference and incentive tourism.

-Sport tourism.

7- Publishing the site of the Ministry on the Internet in foreign languages.

8- Starting to implement the Syria tourism portal on the Internet, including: tourist information, sites and providing booking services at hotels and airports.

9- Reducing the cost of packages to be more competitive in the market.

Procedures undertaken in the framework of the tourism industry:

1- Restructuring the private sector through establishing a 'chambers of tourism' in Syria.

2- Facilitating the arrival of tourists to Syria:

- The Arab tourist does not need a visa to Syria.

- Decisions were issued allowing foreign tourists to obtain a visa within some hours by contacting Syrian or foreign travel agents - the visa will be available at the airport.

3- Reducing entrance fees to archaeological sites by 50%.

4- Undertaking inspection missions to hotels and restaurants.

Current procedures in the tourism industry:

1- Improving the education of tourist guides in order to enable them to answer all questions asked by the tourist, even if they are not necessarily part of the subject of the visit.

2- Increasing the role of the private sector in organizing various tourist activities.

Procedures undertaken in the field of training and formation:

1- Allowing the private sector to open teaching institutions in the field of tourism and hotels.

2- Arranging practical steps to set up faculties specializing in tourism and hotel management, and in teaching traditional handicrafts. ■

