

Egypt's incredible archaeological sites and gorgeous beaches are expected to lure tourists back

By: Ian Stalker

The Pyramids are a dramatic reminder of the brilliance of ancient Egypt



A turbulent year in both North Africa and the Middle East has led to a steep decline in the number of tourists visiting Egypt this year but those involved in the country's tourist trade are predicting a rebound, confident that the world is full of people eager to enter the tomb of a teen who may have become the world's most famous king thousands of years after his death or hit sun-soaked beaches on the country's long Red Sea coast.

The Sphinx has fascinated visitors to the Cairo area for thousands of years



The number of foreign tourists visiting Egypt in the first six months of this year was 40% lower than it was in the corresponding period in 2010, with the drop blamed on

anti-government unrest in early 2011 that toppled the country's long-time ruler Hosni Mubarak, and violent upheaval elsewhere in the region.

However, August's decline was only 20%, leaving the Egyptian Tourist Authority – which is quick to point out that no foreign tourists were harmed during massive demonstrations in Cairo in early 2011 -- hopeful that the decline is slowing. Officials also note that hotel occupancy in the hugely popular Red Sea resort of Sharm El Sheikh was 70% in September, raising expectations that tourists are returning to Egypt's beaches, which are now a greater draw than the country's famous archeological sites.

Magdi Selim of the Egyptian Tourist Authority's head office in Cairo, insists tourists needn't feel nervous about visiting Egypt now. "Everywhere in Egypt is very safe and easy to visit," he told visiting journalists in September. "There's a change for the better. All the people feel comfortable and it's a democratic atmosphere now."

Indeed, tours of Cairo during the September visit showed surprisingly few security officials and no signs of unrest in recent months, with even Tahrir Square – which became a rallying point for those wanting to oust Mubarak – being free of both demonstrators

and security officials during a day tour and seemingly no different than other downtown locales.

However, Selim acknowledges that many are still uneasy about visiting a country that this past winter was frequently in the news following clashes between pro- and anti-government supporters. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for later this year and will be followed by presidential ones in 2012, which tourism authorities hope will present an image of a stable Egypt that will help lure visitors back to a country in which tourism plays a crucial role in the economy.

Ghada Abdel Khalek, director of marketing communications for the Marriott Cairo Hotel, said the Egyptian capital is "now very calm. It's a media problem," she said of the current Egyptian tourism situation. "The people are really keen on seeing tourists coming back."

Marriott's Egyptian properties have launched guest incentives that play on the number 25, which has taken on great significance as Jan. 25 was a crucial date in efforts to force Mubarak from power.

Magdi Edward of Sylvia Tours also

said visitors have nothing to fear. “During the whole revolution, not one single foreigner was hurt and the people who kept bookings in March and April all left [Egypt] happy.”

Tourism authorities are suggesting that this is an attractive time to visit Egypt, as hotels have discounted rates and attractions that would normally be crowded are now free of large groups of tourists that can lead to long lines. Indeed, the only attraction on the September media fam that seemed to have large numbers of foreigners was Cairo’s Egyptian Museum, always popular with visitors as it is home to Pharaonic artifacts, including those of Tutankhamen, arguably

the most famous king the world has ever known.

The tourist authority’s Selim reports that Egypt now has 215,000 hotel rooms, 200,000 more are being built, and Egypt expects to have 500,000 within five years. The country hopes to see 25 million visitors in the year 2020. Last year it hosted 15 million. Despite the current slowdown in tourism, Selim is confident that Egyptian tourism will rebound, citing in part the legacy of Tutankhamen and other ancient Egyptian rulers, reminders of whom can easily be visited. “A lot of countries have history,” he says. “Only we have the Pharaonic history.”



Those visiting the ancient Egyptian capital of Luxor will see towering reminders of the Pharaohs