

Arab Spring Countries At World Travel Market Optimistic About Tourism



Abu Dhabi stand

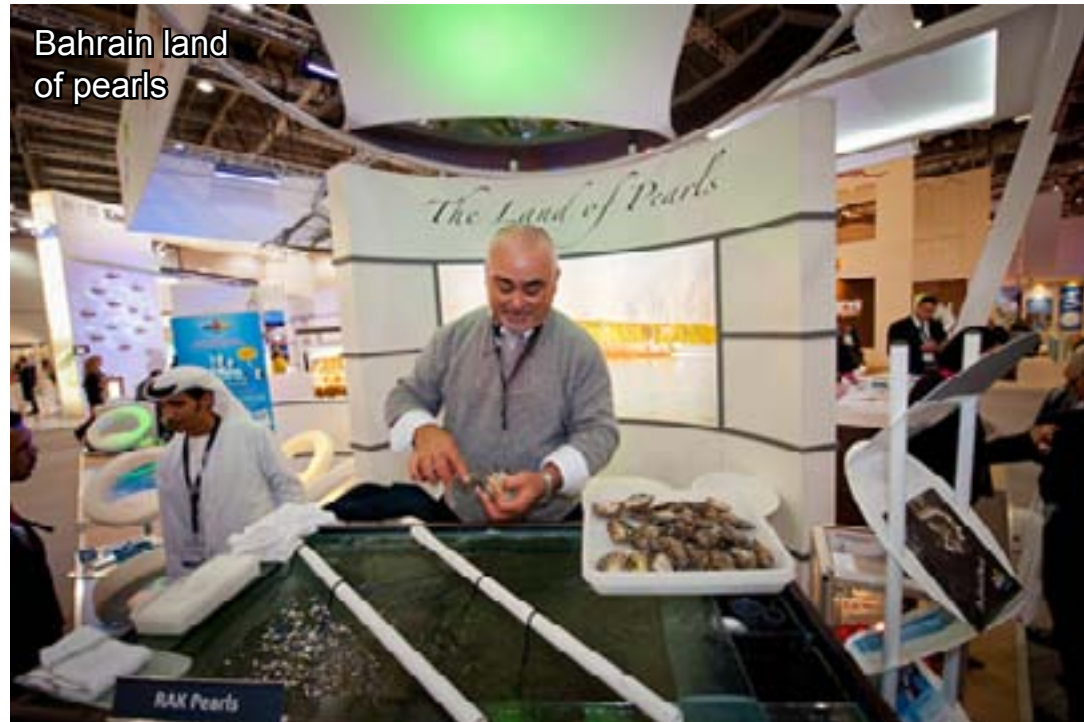
“The problems are on the BBC and on CNN – in the hearts of the people there is only love”. That was the message from Mubarak Hussain, the Chief Executive of Karakorum Explorers whose stand at this year’s World Travel Market in London was promoting the Hunza Valley in Pakistan famed for the longevity of its inhabitants who work until the age of 120 and have a rest between 120 – 140, or so Hussain claims.

Travel agents from both the countries of the Arab Spring and countries where visitors are concerned about their security were optimistic about the development of tourism and predicted a bright future for the industry.

In Egypt, the ruling military council has set 28 November as the date for general elections to begin. The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party is tipped by many to win the most seats, raising concerns that this could exacerbate

recent sectarian violence in a country where about nine million people or 10% of the population are Christian.

Mohamed Yousef, chief executive of Egyptian tour company Ramasside Travel, says talk of sectarian strife between the Muslim majority and Christian minority has been exaggerated by the Western media. "If two men in Egypt have a row about something, and it is discovered that one of them is a Christian, then suddenly it is wrongly reported as a religious



dispute that gets widespread coverage in the West," he says. "The reality is that visiting Egypt is very safe. For example, I feel far more unease walking around parts of London than I do in Cairo.

"And it is important to say that not one tourist in Egypt at the time of the revolution suffered even a scratch on his hand, and the main tourist resorts such as Sharm el-Sheikh were completely unaffected."

As well as Egypt being perfectly safe for Western tourists, he says they should return to see the new democracy. "People should come and see the new Egypt, we are free now, people should encourage us," he says. "And tourists are already returning. Egypt had 15 million overseas visitors last year, and will have at least 10 million in 2011."

In Tunisia the tourism sector is a key component of the country's economy, employing 400,000 people and worth about \$2.5bn

(£1.5bn) to the country's GDP in a normal year.

Moncef Battikh, a senior executive at the Tunisian National Tourist Office, admits that the number of overseas tourists visiting the country has fallen 45% this year. He says: "It has been a difficult year, but we are very proud to say that over 150,000 tourists were in the country at the time of the revolution, and not one was harmed." "In our culture, a visitor is a guest first of all, and if paying even better, so no tourist was ever

going to be harmed. "Now we are a democratic country that had held free, peaceful elections, and a coalition government is being formed."

Mr Battikh adds that visitor numbers have already started to recover, and more importantly that the UK's largest two travel companies, TUI and Thomas Cook, have both increased their Tunisian capacity for 2012.

"Tunisia is a peaceful, welcoming country, and now we are a



Flacon on Abu Dhabi stand



Emirates palace stand

democracy." He says there is no issue that the Islamic political party Ennahda won the most seats in the recent election, highlighting that it is a moderate organisation, and reiterating that the forthcoming government will be a coalition.

According to the WTM Global Trends report 2011 released when WTM opened on November 7th, Arab countries that experienced the Arab Spring are using the social and political revolution to reinvent their destinations.

The rebranding is being led by Egypt and Tunisia. Tourism is vital to the economies of both these countries which have established themselves as popular winter sun destinations with major European tour operators thanks to their climate and value of their currencies. Improvement in their tourism infrastructure as a result led to their establishment as year-round destinations.

The report, in association with Euromonitor International, says the Ministries of Tourism for both

countries quickly launched campaigns after the change of power. In April, Egypt launched campaigns in Europe and GCC destinations including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. New taglines for Egypt included 'welcome to the country of peaceful revolution' and 'Tahir – a square that rocks the world' – a reference to the focal point of the protests.

Tunisia concentrated its post-Arab Spring campaigns on its key markets of the UK and France. It launched a new logo and tagline

'I Love Tunisia' only one month after the change of power.

In Bahrain where demonstrations are still continuing the tourist industry showed signs of recovery with the Summer Festival attracting 83,000 visitors and efforts are now turned to winning back Formula One.

Hussain Ebrahim Al Mudaweb of Mashtan Hotel in Bahrain said the island is concentrating on family and heritage tourism. The online visa



Iraq stand



Heena on Arab stands

provision has helped to boost tourist numbers.

"Bahrain is an island of peace, we respect all religions, more hotels are opening. We have a long experience in extending hospitality. A lot of the negative pictures are fabricated and our problems are caused by other countries interfering in Bahrain's affairs".

Post-Gaddafi, Libya offers untapped potential, but much of the country's tourism infrastructure was destroyed during the war.

Julie Flaskett of Arkno Tours which specializes in travel to Libya commented that Libyan people want democracy and freedom which will bring about a better working environment. "The Libyans are naturally welcoming, that is part of the culture, but it has not been easy for them under the dictatorship".

She predicts the tourists will come back in spring. Tourist visas are not being issued at present and the hotels are just starting to open up. After elections for a

democratic government things will be much easier for tourists.

Syria and Yemen where the protests and loss of life is continuing on an almost daily basis were not represented at this year's WTM but Iraq, once plagued by

violence, is experiencing a tourism boom.

"Lots of tourists are coming from Europe and Asia", said Meitham Mosawi who works with a travel company called Rafideen. "There is no problem with security,

Middle East stands



Jordanian stand





Oman stand

and people can walk safely in the street. The media highlights the problems but people come to Iraq and enjoy themselves. As many as 6,000 pilgrims a day are visiting the holy sites”.

According to Adel Ali the CEO of Air Arabia people forget bad news and the travel industry in the Middle East can bounce back very fast as seen in the past.

Reed Travel Exhibitions Chairman World Travel Market Fiona Jeffery said: “The speed at which the marketing campaigns have been launched demonstrates the importance the new democracies in Egypt and Tunisia

have put on inbound tourism for their long-term economic future.

“Tourism can help build up these countries’ new democracies and has the potential to do so across all the Arab Spring countries.”

Caroline Bremner, Head of Travel and Tourism Research Euromonitor International said: “After the Arab Spring, a renewed sense of democracy will help drive a tourism recovery in the Middle East next year, after experiencing a decline in inbound demand in 2011, however, it will be a challenging road ahead.”