

British Travel Trade Fair

Bosses predict 'best-ever' year for UK tourism

Birmingham - Karen Dabrowska

Most Muslim tourists arrive in the south-east of Britain, concentrate on the cities and do not often venture past York, according to exhibitors at the British Travel Trade Fair held in Birmingham at the beginning of March.

Karen Donaldson of Hadrian's Wall Country said the Middle Eastern market was not a market the ancient Roman wall tends to attract. "There is a fantastic amount for them to see but we don't know how to tap into this market. People from the Middle East tend to go to the cities".

"I've never seen an Arab face", said Rebecca Hamilton Head of Marketing and Business Development for Shetland Islands Tourism".

Ian Fox of Caledonian MacBrayne (Hebridean & Clyde Ferries) which travel to Scotland's outer islands believes marketing the West of Scotland is more cost effective in Britain. "We hardly ever see anyone from the Middle East on the West Coast but that may change with Emirates Airlines new flight from Dubai to Glasgow which will start in April".

The Welsh Tourist Board takes a completely different view. There will be a Welsh stand at the Arabian Travel Market and the board has taken part in travel shows in the Middle East.

The Hilton chain has a special programme for the Middle East: stay for ten nights, pay for seven, stay for seven pay for five, stay for four and pay for three. Around 50 Hilton hotels will take part in the promotion aimed at people from the Middle East travelling to Europe on business or for shopping. The London Metropole Hotel in Edgware Road is a favourite with Middle Eastern visitors who come to London in August to escape the heat.

"There are a lot of Arab shops in Edgware Road. They feel it is their area in London and like to stay at the Metropole because of its location", Carolien van Loon, the Hilton's Assistant Director of Sales told *Islamic Tourism*.

Everybody who was somebody in British tourism was at the fair: representatives from hotel chains (Group UK and Grand UK Hotels, Travel GBI) individual hotels (Seabank Hotel)



Visit Britain.

زوروا بريطانيا.

tour and package holiday companies (Cavern City Tours, Discover Travel and Tours), tourists boards from all over Britain (Blackpool Tourism, Cornwall Tourist Board, Norfolk Tourism) museums (Canterbury Museums & Galleries Service, Imperial War Museum, Museum for England etc) castles (Leeds Castle, Warwick Castle) spas, ferry, rail and coach companies (Coach Link, Isle of Wight Steam Railway) - a total of 417 exhibitors.

The UK's multi-billion pound tourism industry is heading for its best year ever in 2004, according to tourist board chiefs who attended the fair. Speaking at a special conference on the opening day of the show, leading figures from VisitBritain, VisitScotland, Wales Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland all gave very upbeat predictions for the year ahead.

Lesley Sawers, Director of Strategic Communications at VisitScotland, said Scottish tourism was on a high. "There is confidence,

energy and enthusiasm that has never been there before".

Jonathan Jones, chief executive of VisitBritain and Tourism Ireland Director John Jones were in equally bullish mood, predicting substantial growth for both Britain and Ireland in terms of visitor numbers and spending.

Graeme Barnett, Group Event Manager at the British Travel Trade Fair said: "The pessimists have had a serious reality check - the UK's travel and tourism industry looks to be embarking on one of its best years ever. Exhibitors and visitors alike are oozing confidence. It's at times like this that an event such as BTTF really comes into its own - it is a unique forum for industry professionals to get together and plan for a positive future".

Domestic and international tourists make more than 200 million visits to the UK and Ireland every year, spending more than 40 billion pounds in the process. ■