



Domestic tourism figures too low



Nada Alameddine, regional director of sales and marketing at hodema takes a look at why Lebanon's domestic tourism doesn't spend the night

Lebanon has been known as a touristic destination for centuries. While Beirut has been branded 'the Paris of the Middle East' by foreign visitors since the last century, the rest of the country has a history of cultural and leisure tourism that goes far back. Romans and Phoenicians reportedly used to spend summer months in Afqa and Beit Mery. Then, during the Ottoman period, Broumana and Aley came into the

spotlight. In the early 20th century, four high-end hotels were located in Baalbek and the mountain resorts of Bcharre, Aley and Jezzine. The French mandate brought European tourists to the area that also became a trendy destination for wealthy Egyptians and Syrians. After the Second World War, which halted tourism, Lebanon became the top regional destination until the civil war and repeated unrest prevented the

industry to reach its former peak. In 2010, a more stable situation brought 2 million tourists into the country, mostly to Beirut where 75% of the inbound travelers stayed.

Natural treasures

With its 200 km of seashore and around 300 days of sunshine a year, Lebanon is a sought after summer destination with most visitors coming between May and September. For history aficionados, the country is home to many archeological sites, with five of them (Byblos, Baalbek, Anjar, Qadisha Valley and Tyre) listed on the UNESCO list of protected sites (listed in the historical sites table on the following page). The Baalbek Citadel is the most popular one,

with a record of 171,146 visitors in 2009 (source ministry of tourism). The Deir el Qamar palace, the Cedars and the Jeita Grotto are on top of the visitors' list as well. The grotto was recently in the run for a selection of New Seven Wonders organized by a Swiss organization. Even though it was not awarded, the media buzz made it even more popular than before. For culture amateurs, summer events such as international music festivals are also focal points. And for fun lovers, sunbathing, shopping, and a wild nightlife are other options. The food and beverage heritage, with several wineries and typical restaurants, also attracts many travelers. While there is an important flow of people towards the sites all year round, the small size of the country enables most of

them to return to their homes and hotels at night. This day excursion format does not really support the hotel business near the visited areas, as it is normally the case in most touristic countries.

Tourism outside Beirut represents 55% of the industry, and generated an estimated 2 billion dollars in 2010 according to the World Trade Organization.

More than 400 lodgings

Business related visits account for part of the tourism development outside Beirut: many corporate travelers do not want to remain in the city due to higher prices or lack of availability. Their alternative is to stay in the Metn area instead, which is closer to the capital. About 400 lodging establishments are registered throughout the country, excluding Beirut; they are quite eclectic, ranging from high-end hotels to monasteries or camping sites. 2,500 restaurants and snacks are also spread outside the capital.

Seasonal tourism also encourages tourism outside Beirut; locals rent

chalets on the Northern and Southern coasts of the capital as well as in the mountains where the weather is milder in the summer. In the winter, locals and Lebanese living abroad favor the ski resorts with hotels such as Terre Brune in Faraya and St Bernard in the Cedars, which are full in the high season. And all year round, landmarks such as the Casino du Liban and the cable cars to Harissa remain key attractions outside Beirut.

Non traditional types of tourism also appear: Arab nationals are particularly fond of the medical services, which the Lebanese hospitals provide, both for health problems and plastic surgery. The trend of ecotourism is also emerging in the country; with its geographic contrasts and varied wildlife, Lebanon attracts more and more nature lovers with its wide range of outdoor activities, from hiking to rafting and mountain biking in one of the eight natural protected areas such as the Shouf national park. Local organizations such as Beyond Beirut, promote alternative



tourism, which enhances local craft and rural communities. The network 'Dhiafee', which means hospitality in Arabic, provides details of local guesthouses and hostels all over the country. Religious communities also welcome people for the night.

Tapping into the Diaspora

Inbound visitors, mostly from neighboring countries and Europe, drive around two-thirds of the tourism activity. While the Europeans favor culture, visitors from the region are more interested in the social and nightlife. Lebanese nationals living abroad also represent a large part of incoming visitors, but few of them stay in hotels as they are hosted by relatives. Domestic travelers account for the rest: the Lebanese often spend the day at the beach or in the mountains on the weekends.

Although there is a demand from visitors for the supply of varied types of activities, domestic tourism is facing numerous challenges. First, there are no official local bodies to promote the regions, both for foreigners and the Lebanese, like in most

touristic countries. Traffic congestion, the decay of the railway system and a lack of public buses also affect domestic transportation, and thus the tourists' ability to travel around. Another challenge is the lack of hospitality infrastructure in larger towns. Tripoli for instance is the second biggest city in the country, but has a rather small lodging capacity, especially when it comes to hotels abiding by recent health and security standards. The Bekaa area faces the same problem, with the Chtoura Park Hotel and Baalbek's Palmyra being the only landmark addresses. An alternative to the lack of lodging in these towns has started to emerge with small hotels «de charme» and guesthouses, such as the Yacoub Hotel in Sidon, hidden in the historical souk.

However, these issues do not discourage investors: nine new hotels are set to open outside the capital before 2015 among them the first thermal spa, located in Naas. A four-star project overlooking Tyre's beach is underway and the owners of Le Royal in Dbayeh are considering a new hotel in the Cedars as well.

Lebanon's main historical sites

Site	Location	Description
Jeita Grotto	Mount Lebanon	Cavern in limestone rock
Baalbek	Bekaa Valley	Roman temples
Beiteddine	Chouf	19th century palace
Jbeil	Mount Lebanon	12th century Crusader castle
National Museum	Beirut	Museum
Anjar	Bekaa Valley	Umayyad city circa 705 AD
Saida	South Lebanon	13th century Crusader castle
Tyre	South Lebanon	Roman hippodrome
Tripoli	North Lebanon	Crusader castle circa 1100
Faqr	Mount Lebanon	Roman temples
Niha	Bekaa Valley	Roman temples
Tibneen	South Lebanon	Crusader castle circa 1104
Majdel Anjar	Bekaa Valley	Roman temple remains

Source: Ministry of Tourism

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