

London's International Travel Shows Attract Muslim Countries

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Arab and Muslim countries were eager to participate in London's two major international travel shows: the Adventure Travel & Sports Show (13th-15th January) and Destinations (2nd – 5th February). Countries featured at both events included the UAE, Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Iran and Iraq.



At both shows one of the most popular destinations for tour operators was Central Asia where the Silk Road stole the show. Sundowners offered various combinations of the Silk Road and Mongolia which it described as 'an adventure you will never forget rather than a holiday'. Dostuck Trekking, set up 14

years ago, specializes in customer tailored trips to Kyrgyzstan. "We get varied inquiries from people who want to go climbing and riding. One woman and her Russian friend saw the country 20 years ago and would like to go again. We also had an inquiry about Kyrgyz music", John Ducker told Islamic Tourism.

Perhaps the only serious competition to Central Asia's magnificent mountains came from north Pakistan, the meeting point of the five highest mountains in the world. A road to the remotest villages took twelve years to build. Karakorum Jeep Treks International organises a 21-day trip covering four thousand kms across the ➤



Karakourm, Himalaya and Hindu Kush of North Pakistan: the highest ranges on earth.

An awareness of travel and tourism with a conscience was evident at both events. Many tour operators emphasised the need to respect local culture and customs and the importance for visitors to "put something back". According to Tourism Concern, tourism often causes or exacerbates poverty. The message from the Third World is loud and clear: "We want tourists, but at the moment we don't benefit from them." Communities often find they have tourism imposed on them by governments, foreign developers and tourism businesses, there is little linkage between tourism especially on a mass scale - and local industry, such as agriculture and natural resources are frequently co-opted, often illegally. Cultural traditions are often appropriated and commercialised. All-inclusive tourism, under the control of multi-national companies excludes

local people and businesses and could prove disastrous for them.

Many of the 'destinations' were brought to life through music, dance and exhibitors in national costumes. The adventurous put on climbing boots and showed their skills on an indoor climbing frame while the less adventurous were content to feast on a variety of exotic delicacies which are starting to compete with the standard lunch-time fare and in-house restaurants, especially at Destinations.

Muslim countries introduced unique activities and attractions at the Adventure Travel & Sports Show: Turkey highlighted the solar eclipse. Egypt provided the Nile Cycle Challenge. Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan focused on trekking in spectacular mountains. Oman introduced specialist activities such as bird watching. Adventures with nature was the theme of Malaysia's stand, which provided information about challenging jungle treks, cave exploring,

white water rafting, scuba diving mountain climbing as well as explorative nature trails and bird watching. Ras Al Khaimah marketed its attractions as 'pure Arabian culture'. And trips to Iraqi Kurdistan were on offer for the first time. Geoff Hann of Hinterland Travel, who specializes in trips to Afghanistan, Iraq and Kashmir, is always optimistic about the future. Travel to Iraq is not possible at present but the Mesopotamian brochures have been produced in anticipation of a bright future and Hann has organised the first tour of the Kurdish areas of Turkey, Iran and Iraq.

According to Nasrin Harris of Persian Voyages International recent negative publicity about Iran is not having an adverse effect on travelers. "The people, who want to go, go". North Cyprus continues to suffer because no direct flights are permitted to the Turkish part of the island. But developers remain undeterred.

Libya's tourist industry has grown from strength to strength. In the words of Craig Baguley, the London information officer of Arkno Tours it is becoming "a very hot destination". Sixty percent of tourists want to see the archaeological sites while forty percent are interested in archaeological and desert tourism.

In 1997 Phil Haines of Live Travel became the youngest person to have visited all 193 sovereign countries in the world. His tours include the Yemeni Island of Soqatra, known for its unique biodiversity and large numbers of species.

The tour operators at Destinations showed that 'impossible' does not exist in their vocabulary. One British company specializing in China travel rose to the challenge of organising a trip for 60 Bangladeshi doctors based in the UK to China. The vegetarian food was the biggest problem, but the doctors were determined to see the country. ■