

Damascus hosts UFTAA World congress

Damascus-Islamic Tourism

The Monaco based United Federation of Travel Agents Associations (UFTAA) is one of the most important international non-profitable associations in the field of tourism and travel because its members include most of the world's travel associations and organisations. The UFTAA is trying to co-ordinate between its members and international organizations and unions working in the field of tourism and travel such as IATA (International Air Travel Association) and other international associations in the hotel, rail, restaurant and other sectors.

The decision to hold the thirty seven session of the UFTAA in Syria shows the high regard in which the country is held and the position it occupies on the world map of tourism due largely to its ancient history and rich cultural heritage.

The congress was held at the end of last October until the fourth of November. It started with the meeting of the Board council, which was followed by a meeting of the secretaries on the second day. The official opening then followed at al-Cham Hotel. Among the speakers were Dr. Saadallah Agha al-Qalaa, the Syrian Minister of Tourism, Othman Aaidy, the head of the Union of Hotel Associations, Saib Nahas, head of the Syrian Association for Tourism and Travel and the head of UFTAA Mr. Udaya Nanay Akkara. All speakers welcomed the participants and said that holding the congress in Syria was a dream come true. They also explained why Syria was a magnet for tourists. The head of the UFTAA thanked the Syrian Ministry of Tourism for hosting the congress and said that travelling to Syria was well worth the effort. He was happy to be on Syrian soil.

The Minister of Tourism welcomed the participants and drew their attention to the potential of Syria's tourist sector.



The second day session.

جلسة اليوم الثاني.

On the second day, several advisors and VIPs in the tourism sector addressed the congress. Among them was the Australian Mr Mike Hatton who talked about the future of the relationship between tourism, travel agents and air lines. Mr. Chris Gilby talked about life with and without the IATA.

IATA and UFTAA have been holding meetings for several years to resolve their differences about the commissions that travel and tourism agents take from the sale of tickets. The IATA always complained about the high commissions taken by the agents while the UFTAA argued that it is the agents who provide the air lines with bookings. It is worth mentioning that some of the air lines have reduced the commission rates that were given to the agents while others have restricted selling tickets to the air lines offices themselves, i.e. they have done away with the agents. Several speakers talked about how the agents have been negatively affected through ticket sales using credit cards or via the internet.

Dr. Othman Aaidy talked about the environment generally, with special emphasis on environmental tourism, and called for the protection of the environment from pollution to preserve tourist sites. He explained that the first things that capture the attention of the tourist when he visits any country are cleanliness, hygiene and the environment.

The following day, many speakers raised topics relevant to tourism in general and travel agents in particular. Among these topics are the large expansion of the EU and the way travel agents could benefit from the ability to organize travel to several countries simultaneously since visa requirements have been resolved and the Euro is now an international currency. Tourists can travel in Europe on a single visa and use a single currency.

At the end of these sessions the Ministry of Tourism invited all participants to a lavish dinner at the Khan Assaad Pasha where Chami dishes of different types were served. ■