

Nine eleven step aside Muslim countries are popular with tourists

By Karen Dabrowska

Tour operators at this years Destinations 2004 travel show in London's Earls Court noticed that the dark cloud cast over tourism in Muslim countries by the 9/11 atrocity is no longer hindering travel.

Jules Verne Travel's trips to Egypt and Jordan are fully booked and Nile Cruises have sold out. Sixty of the hundred seats on a private charter train of the Silk Route have been booked and a private charter to Aqaba in Jordan is planned for next year. "Our clients are fairly resilient and well educated - they don't take too much notice of the media hype", Megan Kilvington told *Islamic Tourism*.

Cox and Kings have found the three most popular Arabian destinations are Jordan, Egypt and Morocco. The company scheduled additional trips to Libya due to popular demand. "It is not a well known destination - people have been to other Islamic countries and they are now interested in exploring Libya", said Samantha Ward. She pointed out that a trip to Uzbekistan went ahead on September 15th, 2001. The company, whose first trips were to India in 1758, has added Arabian destinations to its itineraries during the past ten years. "The numbers of tourists have been increasing even though bookings were down in the last couple of years".

Ian Newman from Elite Vacations has noticed an overwhelming interest in Oman. He believes that Dubai is becoming commercially over-exposed but there is still an ethnic mysticism about Oman. "People want to go back to the real roots of travel and they can do that in Jordan and Oman". After September 11 travellers only planned a few months ahead but now long term planning has returned and bookings are being made as far ahead as December.



Dubai Stand.

جناح دبي.

Andrew Hunt who is developing Audley Travel's Middle East - North Africa Division has ambitious plans: Mali, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Oman, the UAE, Jordan and Syria are all on the agenda. And trips to Yemen will start "as soon as the political situation allows". Iran and Uzbekistan are becoming extremely popular destinations. Hunt believes that the FCO's travel advise has become very harsh and very blanket and the public is paying less attention to it. "Travel to the region is still hostage to events but not as much as it used to be".

Tanya Evans, the director of Silk Road Tours has noticed an unprecedented demand for

tours to the former republics of Soviet Central Asia: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Travel to these areas was impossible when they were part of the Soviet Union. Today the Chinese are eager to attract visitors to their section of the Silk Road. "They think the Silk Road is a name which will attract visitors - not to mention the millions of Chinese tourists who also visit the region". While Silk Road Tours focuses on the cultural attractions of the region companies like Exodus and Explore promote overland, adventure travel.

In a triumph of hope over experience Geoff Hann of Hinterland Travel is promoting tours to Iraq - the first one is scheduled for ➔

Exhibitions



Tunisia always friendly and hospitable.

جناح تونس.

قسم أمريكا اللاتينية.
The Latin American
Section.

March this year but so far there is only one booking. Refusing to shy away from areas with a troubled past and an uncertain future, Hann is also organising trips to Kashmir and Afghanistan. His Kashmir trip begins with the Amarnath Cave Pilgrimage trek and focuses on Srinagar located in the heart of the Kashmir valley with the beautiful lakes of Dal and Nagin enhancing the mountain setting. Mongolia is jumping on the eco-tourism bandwagon. Explore Mongolia is specialising in "ecotravel" combining ecology and cultural interest with sophisticated adventure travel. There is a bird watching trip and an ecovolunteer programme to protect the Gobi Bear in Mazaalai. Tourism is still its infancy - only 200,000 people visited the country in 2003, many from neighbouring Russia and China. Olsod Bhum-Yalagch, the company's Managing Director welcomes generous Saudi financial support to ensure a steady supply of falcons to the kingdom but he insists that birds injured during capture must be cared for by those attempting to snare them.

Popular destinations like Tunisia and Malaysia are adding to their tourist attractions. Malaysia, the country with the world's oldest rainforest and tallest mountain in South-East Asia is diversifying into adventure tourism. Borneo is ideally suited to white water rafting and there are excellent diving areas waiting to be explored. Tunisia has become a popular venue for Telaso (seaweed) therapy: Silvio Berlusconi and Jacque Chirac have tried it!

North Cyprus, a small, sleepy, tranquil island is doing its best to develop tourism. The age of commercialism, mass tourism and wild nightlife is unknown but there are simpler pleasures such as a delightful choice of restaurants where cuisine ranges from traditional Cypriot with Turkish influence.

Over 400 travel companies, airlines and tourist boards took part in the tenth Destinations Travel Show. But it was not just a show of brochures and information. The Malaysian Cultural Troupe entertained with music and dance, the Tunisian National Tourist Office presented the art of jewellery design and the Turkish Tourist Office provided traditional dance instruction and a performance by the whirling dervishes. ■