

World Travel Market:

Arabs optimistic despite Middle East's negative image

By Karen Dabrowska

Despite the negative image of the Middle East caused by recent political developments, Arab and Muslim countries with stands at this year's World Travel Market in London were optimistic about the future of tourism. Major plans are being made to develop the industry and the focus on eco tourism is increasing.



According to Hani Shukrian of Jordan's Cardo Tours, the major challenge for Arab countries is to promote their individual identities and not allow themselves to be lumped together as part of the troubled, unsafe Middle East. Two years ago the king himself made a promotional film about the country to dispel the image of danger. The focus is now on adventure and eco tourism and on the Iranian market. Political differences between the two countries have been resolved and at the end of November this year Iranians will be able to get a visa on arrival. The Jordanian Tourist Board is hoping to attract 50,000 Iranians in the first year. It is also concentrating on the Chinese market – China is a third of the world, Shukrian pointed out.

Shukri Abu Hamdan a tour operator based in Jerusalem has trouble showing potential



tourists Palestine on a map. "Some people think it is Israel". His solution is simple – he promotes the Holy Land, where pilgrimages have been made since the time of Jesus. No pilgrimage can be complete without visiting Bethlehem, Hebron, Jericho and Gaza.

Attracting UK tourists to Lebanon is major problem as the tourist office in London has closed, to the chagrin of Mitchell Hawes the Acting Manager UK & Ireland of Middle East Airlines. Ironically the anti-Muslim sentiment in the West, fuelled by September 11, resulted in a tourist boom from Gulf Arabs. "It's an easy sell, there is a common language and all our emphasis is now on Arab based tourism", Hawes explained. In 2000 a government commission was set up in Saudi Arabia to promote tourism. "We have the infrastructure, the historical sites, possibilities for eco tourism, wild life reserves, mountains and colourful marine life – now its just a matter of developing the services that support tourism", Abdulaziz Shaheen the Manager for Tour Programmes at Saudi Arabian Airlines believes. Two specialised tourist training colleges have opened in the kingdom. ➔

Exhibitions



The European Council's decision to prepare regulations aimed at ending the isolation of North Cyprus will have a profound effect on the development of tourism as direct flights are likely to resume in 2005. Dervis Deniz, the Minister of Economy and Tourism is convinced that after 30 years on the sidelines the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is poised to take its place in the international community. He held a press conference at the WTM to emphasise that the island will be promoting quality tourism in accordance with a master plan which should be completed by the end of 2004. North Cyprus houses 90 percent of the history of Cyprus and will be developed as a centre for historic-heritage tourism rather than a mass tourist market for people who only see the beach and the hotel. Like North Cyprus, Turkey is insisting on being part of Europe. The Turks have been coming en masse to the WTM during the past 16 years and each major tourist

region had its own stand at this year's WTM. The focus is on numbers and on EU membership. In 2003, 12 million tourists came to Turkey – the target of 14 million for 2004 is close to being reached and the goal for 2010 is 25 million tourists and \$30bn in tourist revenues. Reconciliation with the West resulted in a boon for Libya's tourist industry. "We have the history, we have the sea, we have the desert and we have ancient heritage sites- the tourist industry in Libya has a bright future – it will grow from strength to strength". This optimistic message from Mustafa Shibani of the General Peoples Committee for Tourism was echoed by the eight Libyan tourist companies who spread their brochures and giant colour posters across a spacious stand which had the air of the expanse of the desert. The WTM, which celebrated its 25th anniversary with this year's exhibition at the Excel Exhibition Centre from November 8th - 11th is the international

travel industry's premier business-to-business forum at which over 5,000 leading suppliers and 44,000 industry professionals from over 190 countries were represented. One of the policies that has stood the test of time is the non-political nature of the event. Regardless of pressures from many quarters over the years to ban a country from participating the organisers have stood firm. They believe that travel and tourism can be a powerful force for good in helping nations to understand cultural and religious differences. The Quranic injunction We have created you tribes and nations that you may come to know one another seems to have been written for the WTM. The participation of Arab and Muslim nations is increasing and they are reaching out to other cultures. Saudi Arabia, for example, is very popular with Japanese tourists and Jordan is focusing on the Chinese market - after all China makes up one third of the world! ■