

# South Lebanon opens for tourism



The lifting of British advice against travel to south Lebanon is fuelling new hope for the development of the region, explains managing director, Dunira Strategy, Benjamin Carey

The British government's official travel advice, which is followed by British tour operators and independent travellers, and closely monitored by the governments and leading travel companies of other countries, has reflected a new policy since 2004.

The British government had previously been criticised for undermining tourism in some countries by applying a precautionary principle and advising against travel at the first hint of unrest. But, as Britain's foreign secretary Jack Straw said last year, "we must make sure we do not do the terrorists' work for them by causing too much of the very disruption which terrorists want".

The policy is now to only advise against travel to a particular destination "in cases of non-terrorist threats (coups, civil wars, natural disasters)" and "in the case of intelligence-based threats of extreme and imminent danger" to the safety of British travellers and interests. This has had very positive results for tourism in the Middle East and North Africa, which can be an important source of revenue and a tool of development.

In the past, the British government was sometimes accused of double standards. Advice against travel to whole countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen, was inconsistent with the treatment of cities in Spain and the US, where hundreds of civilians had been killed. This all changed radically during 2004. Saudi Arabia and Yemen officially ceased to be treated as dangerous terrorist strongholds, where British travellers risked death, but exciting new tourist destinations just waiting to be explored.

Tourism is not simply about global trade and economic activity. In a world that suffers from mistrust and long memories, it represents a democratic opportunity for cultural exchange between nations and personal dialogue between responsible individuals.

One of the few remnants of the old precautionary policy was advice "against all but essential travel" to south Lebanon, which in fact had been peaceful for five years and where no tourist had been harmed or targeted by a terrorist. As Lebanon's tourism minister Joseph Sarkis said in October, "terrorism has spread all over the world. Lebanon is not an isolated case. We have the will to go on and not live in a culture of fear. The message of terror will neither prevail nor deter us."

More than five years after the end of the occupation, the British government on September 19 lifted its travel advice "against all but essential travel", following an assessment by international consultants Dunira Strategy, which is helping to establish a regional tourism network to develop sustainable tourism in the south.

Building on its experience in both established and emerging destinations, Dunira works with a wide range of stakeholders in destinations in crisis and recovering from conflict, to establish sustainable opportunities in tourism and related sectors, through participatory techniques and capacity building activities.

Despite its tremendous potential, south Lebanon had continued to suffer from serious economic underachievement because it had been unable to realise its extraordinary tourism assets and has had difficulty persuading foreign buyers to come and sample its amazing olive oil and other organic produce. The lifting of this travel advice will help to end the area's economic isolation.

South Lebanon is now gearing up to welcome visitors again, after many years of absence from the international tourism scene, and will be promoting its new GoSouth brand at World Travel Market (WTM) in London, with the support of the Lebanese ministry of tourism.

The disadvantage of the region's recent history is that visitor infrastructure is not yet well developed, although new

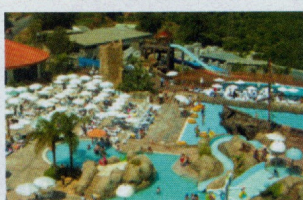
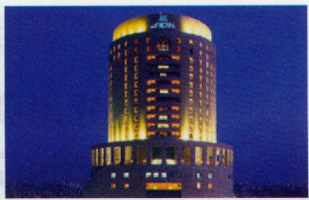
bed and breakfasts and restaurants are appearing every month. Famous for its warm hospitality, and with a pool of highly educated, often tri-lingual, young people, there is an increasing number of opportunities for investors that want to support the region's growing confidence.

Khiyam Hills, an exciting new resort with great sunset views, opens in January 2006, whilst three boutique hotels are being developed near the Hasbani River, and two international conference centres for the region will soon be taking bookings for 2007. The benefit of the lack of tourism activity is that the region is unspoilt and possesses an authentic rural character that is now all too rare in many tourism destinations. Bread, pottery and soap are all being made with techniques that were being used here more than 2,000 years ago.

The opportunities for tour operators reflect the diversity of natural and cultural heritage in the cazas of Hasbaya and Jdeydet Marjeyoun. The source of the River Jordan makes the area extremely fertile, producing some of the finest olive oil in the Middle East and other organic ingredients for some fine traditional feasts.

The restaurants at Hasbani Springs are a must for gourmets. The tomb of the prophet Rubin and nearby Khalwat el Bayada, the most important Druze sanctuary in the world, makes the area attractive to a wide range of visitors, who in previous millennia included Crusaders who left sensational castles perched on ridges, such as Chateau Beaufort.

A host of kings and prophets has given the region a rich fabric of history and folklore. Walking or snowshoeing with mules on Mount Hermon, climbing or caving above Chebaa, enjoying a fresh fruit juice by the Wazani River or rafting the Litani River are other options, all of which can be organised with a growing number of highly trained and knowledgeable local guides.



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