

Tensions take toll on tourism in Lebanon April 11, 2013 01:20 AM

The Daily Star



Downtown, Beirut. (The Daily Star)

BEIRUT: The World Travel & Tourism Council estimated the tourism industry's direct contribution to the Lebanese economy would decline by 2.1 percent this year, as industry sources said the hotel occupancy rate fell by 30 percent year-on-year in the first quarter of 2013.

Luxury hotels such as the Hilton, Le Gray and The Four Seasons told The Daily Star they had taken drastic measures to economize in 2012 and 2013, including laying off employees, putting projects on hold and shutting down complete hotel floors to save on energy costs.

The Tourism Ministry, however, has responded by launching a program to promote the country as a holiday destination in partnership with Taste Lebanon, a U.K.-based company that organizes culinary tours to Lebanon.

Currently, 10 hospitality and food writers from Great Britain and the United States are visiting to get a taste of the Lebanese food industry. Besides visiting HORECA and restaurants in Beirut, they will journey to rural Lebanon to learn to make saj and partake in other local culinary traditions.

“Especially in the U.S., news coverage about Lebanon is very negative,” said Taste Lebanon founder Bethany Kehdy. “Articles exaggerate the spillover from the Syrian war. This deters tourists from traveling [here].”

Caretaker Tourism Minister Fadi Abboud said in a statement that he hoped the program would generate “good coverage and articles in return” in order to change the country’s image in the West and attract tourists again.

Kehdy is aware the U.S. and Canada recently upped their travel restrictions to Lebanon but assured potential visitors that her tours avoided all danger zones. “All our trips are within the green zones, we do not take any unnecessary risk,” she said, adding that they had removed Tripoli from the itinerary in light of the risk.

David Lebovitz, a well-known food blogger from the U.S. who is participating in the program, was surprised to hear about the travel warnings. He said: “I did not even know about it. There is a risk in traveling anywhere, so why should I not come to Lebanon?”

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on April 11, 2013, on page 5.

Read more: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Lebanon/2013/Apr-11/213328-tensions-take-toll-on-tourism-in-lebanon.ashx#ixzz2Qk5xX9ae>

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