

Travel



The old port and souk of Byblos, with the crusader citadel in the background.



Photos: Samar Kadi

Lebanon’s ancient city of Byblos, a wary capital of Arab tourism

Samar Kadi

Byblos

On almost the same day that Syria’s ancient city of Palmyra fell to Islamic State (ISIS) fighters, the Arab League’s Council of Tourism selected another equally old city in neighbouring Lebanon as the Capital of Arab Tourism for 2016.

While the designation was warmly received in Lebanon, it took little account of the country’s political instability and security threats.

“It makes us proud to have the title of Arab capital of tourism,” said Alexi Karim, an entrepreneur and owner of the city’s main hotel, Byblos sur Mer. “Let’s hope it would be translated concretely on the ground.”

But with civil war raging in neighbouring Syria and threatening to spill over into Lebanon, Karim was not hopeful that the prize would woo more visitors to the ancient Phoenician city.

Byblos is one of the world’s most ancient, still-inhabited cities

“We know that Byblos is a pretty city that has culture and history but the whole ambiance (in the region) is not attractive. I cannot invite people to my house and tell them there is fire all around it but my house did not catch fire yet,” Karim commented in an interview with The Arab Weekly.

He said tourism has been badly hit for several years now and is largely limited to internal visitors or foreigners who visit Lebanon for reasons other than tourism. “This is what we call ‘forced tourism,’ in the sense that you see foreigners or Arabs coming to Lebanon for business or for social events and while they are here they would visit Byblos,” Karim said.

Byblos restaurateur Tony Sfeir was more optimistic.

“We need anything that can shed light on our city. It’s true that we are part of Lebanon, and we cannot separate ourselves from it, but we have here the most quiet place in the country,” Sfeir told The Arab Weekly. “Being the capital of Arab tourism will bring some attention and media coverage to Byblos, which we definitely need in these difficult times.”

He did not think the title would trigger an influx of tourists to the Mediterranean coastal city, but said it would stimulate internal tourism. “At least the Lebanese will be happy and

proud of their city and would want to visit it... This would bring in visitors on a smaller scale but it does not matter we need it regardless of how small it is,” Sfeir said.

Byblos is one of the world’s most ancient, still-inhabited cities. It is the cradle of the contemporary alphabet and has vestiges dating to the Bronze Age. It also boasts ruins of Persian fortifications, the Roman road, Byzantine churches, a Crusader citadel and a Medieval and Ottoman town.

Since the end of Lebanon’s 1975-90 civil war, the city’s infrastructure has been significantly developed by successive municipal councils, attracting investors in hospitality and tourism. Hotels, restaurants, beach resorts and pubs flourished and the city’s old souk, displaying artisans’ and souvenirs shops, was turned into a pedestrian area.

A main summer attraction of Byblos is its international festival, occurring in July and August in the magnificent setting of the old port. Since it was launched in 2000, showcasing international singers and bands, including Scorpions, Lana del Rey, BB King and Vaya Con Dios, to name a few, the festival has attracted thousands of visitors.

“The festival has surely helped in making Byblos an attractive destination and was a key incentive for upgrading the infrastructure in the city,” said Latife Lakkis, president of the committee of Byblos International Festival. She said the festival attracts some 50,000 visitors who spend time at the city’s restaurants and hotels and stroll in the old souk or shop at modern shopping outlets.



“Byblos has all the requirements and services of a prime tourist destination. Visitors can spend a whole month here, not just days. It’s got everything, including a hospital and a university,” Lakkis told The Arab Weekly.

She pointed out that the spectre of security problems remains a big challenge for festival organisers. “We face great difficulties to convince international artists to participate in the festival because all what they hear about on international media is war, insecurity and political problems,” she said. “However, once they come here and spend time in Byblos they want to come back.”

Lebanon has been plagued by political instability since the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, which accentuated the sectarian schism in the country. The conflict in Syria and spillover violence coupled with an

influx of some 1.5 million Syrian refugees, further challenges internal security.

Director-General of the Ministry of Tourism Nada Sardouk acknowledged the issues facing Byblos as a result of national instability.

Byblos has all the requirements and services of a prime tourist destination

“The country is full of ups and downs, however, we still do look ahead positively,” she said, referring to the ministry’s campaign “Live, Love Lebanon.”

Sardouk argued that Byblos successfully fulfilled all the criteria for earning the title of Arab capital of tourism, including diversity of tourism attraction, relevance of infrastructure and good services and administration.

“Byblos deserves the title. It is a pretty and hospitable city where you feel happy and relaxed at any-time, be it at day or night,” she said.

Despite his concerns, Karim said he is eager to welcome tourists in his seaside hotel, sitting on a small hill overlooking Byblos port. “In Lebanon, you can never know what tomorrow hides for you,” he said, referring to the whims of rival politicians and political developments.

“If tomorrow, (Shia Hezbollah chief) Hassan Nasrallah kisses (Sunni Future Movement leader) Saad Hariri, and (rival Christian leaders) Samir Geagea kisses Michel Aoun, and then we could elect a president, I can assure you that my hotel will be fully booked for four months,” Karim added.

Samar Kadi is editor of The Arab Weekly’s Society and Travel sections.

Agenda

Ghar El Melh, Tunisia: June 7th-13th

Ghar El Melh, a coastal town in north-eastern Tunisia, hosts the Ninth International Photography Encounters Ghar el Melh, an event that brings together photography professionals and amateurs from Tunisia and all over the world to exhibit and share experiences.

Constantine, Algeria: June 9th-11th

As part of Constantine Capital of Arab Culture 2015 celebrations, the cultural centre M’hamed El Yazid, El Khroub in Constantine will host an event dedicated to the popular resistance history of Algeria.

Constantine, Algeria: June 18th-20th

As part of Constantine Capital of Arab Culture 2015 celebrations, Ali Mendjel University in Constantine organises an international symposium on Anthropology and Music.

Amman, Jordan: June and July

Starting on the third night of Ramadan, Amman celebrates traditional Arab culture with its Citadel Nights Festival. As the city comes to life each night during Ramadan, guests will be able to enjoy traditional Arab dishes, authentic souks and classical Arab music.

El-Haouaria, Tunisia: July 14th-16th

The Falconry Festival in the picturesque rocky shores of El-Haouaria celebrates falconry with demonstrations alongside live music, food stalls and a large market. Sparrowhawks are trained for the festival before being released.

Beiteddine, Lebanon: July and August

The Beiteddine Art Festival in the picturesque Chouf mountains, showcases a variety of performances, from operas and concerts to theatre and art exhibitions. The festival welcomes more than 50,000 visitors, as well as numerous international performers.

Tangier, Morocco: September 9th-13th

The 16th Tangier’s Jazz Festival hosts renowned international and local jazz artists in one of Morocco’s premier cultural events. For five days visitors will have the opportunity to attend free street performances, free dance courses and jazz concerts.

We welcome submissions of calendar items related to cultural events of interest to travellers in the Middle East and North Africa.

Please send tips to: editor@the arabweekly.com