



MOROCCO LOOKS TO RUSSIA, CHINA AND LOW-COST CARRIERS TO INCREASE TOURISM NUMBERS

News / Airports / Routes



Morocco is seeking to attract more visitors from Russia, China and West Africa, as instability in nearby countries deters tourists from traditional European markets.

Plans to open new air routes are in motion, Minister of Tourism Lahcen Haddad said in an interview in Rabat following a visit by King Mohammed VI to Russia.

“Russia offers us a big opportunity,” he said. “We want to increase the number of arrivals from Russia by 400 percent, from 40,000 per year to 200,000 per year over three years.”

Morocco was relatively untouched by the uprisings that swept through the region in 2011 and authorities had hoped to increase arrivals to guarantee future growth of a key industry. But instability in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya since the Arab Spring is keeping visitors from Europe away.

Tourism accounts for about 10 percent of Morocco's \$105 billion economy, second to the agricultural sector, and employs 400,000 people.

The biggest drop has been in the French market — Morocco's largest — which decreased 7 percent last year. Visitors from Belgium, Italy and Spain have also stayed away, but arrivals from the U.S. and U.K. have risen, according to Haddad. Overall, the number of travelers fell 1 percent last year from 2014, with tourism revenue slipping 1.3 percent to 59.3 billion dirhams (\$6.1 billion).

Direct Flights

"Tourists don't seem to be distinguishing Morocco from, say, Tunisia or Egypt," Haddad said. "We know that Morocco remains a very safe and secure country, but we need to do more to get that message across."

Talks are underway with airlines, such as Royal Air Maroc and Aeroflot, to open new routes between Moscow and St. Petersburg and Marrakesh and Agadir, according to the minister. Plans announced in 2014 to start direct flights from China to Morocco have yet to materialize.

In the light of mounting regional instability, Morocco announced in February a review of its Vision 2020 tourism strategy. The plan, launched in 2010, aimed to create 200,000 extra beds and 470,000 new jobs.

"We have to revise our projections in the light of what's happened," said Haddad. Results of the review are expected in May.

The minister said Morocco is "the No. 1 hub" for West Africans travelling to Europe and other African destinations.

"We would like to get some of those transit passengers to stay a couple of nights — get out of Casablanca airport and visit the Hassan II mosque and the medina," he said. "We aim to attract 160,000 visitors from West Africa every year."

To attract more tourists from Europe, Morocco has opened talks with low-cost carriers. A new route started by Ryanair in 2015 from London Stansted to Rabat and Sale three times weekly has proved popular with travelers, the minister said.

"We'd also like to see more direct flights between European destinations and tourist centers such as Ouarzazate and Errachidia," he added.

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