DEVELOPING RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN EGYPT, CASE STUDY ON SHARJAH, UAE.

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Abstract - Religious tourism is concerned with visiting significant religious sightseeing. The key stimulus for this type is to visit the divine and spiritual needs of individuals interested in this tourism type of travel. Nevertheless, the incentive for tourism could be discovering the culture of further countries, or other religion, sightseeing holy matters. This research first examines relevant literature on possibility to develop this tourism type in Egypt and make it one of the tourist attractions by comparing it to Sharjah, UAE as a religious destination. The study explores the objectives, and factors affecting the progress of that type in Egypt and the improvements made in Sharjah. The research then investigates potentialities of developing that type in Egypt and its effects on improving the tourist experience in Egypt and increasing the tourist flow into Egypt. Results indicated that religious tourism could face several obstacles in practical performance, but it could be very helpful in supporting the tourism industry in Egypt especially at the time of deterioration. However, religious tourism can also offer incentives to the tourism employees who have almost lost their jobs and may change their career. Benefits are not only confined to this, but also extended to cover enhancing existing tourism types and introducing new ones as well as enhancing the tourist numbers and their average expenditure. The Research provides recommendations for actions that could encourage more tourists to visit Egypt as a religious destination.

Key words: Religious, Sharjah, Pilgrimage, biblical, Trends.

I. Introduction

Religions are so vital to the existence of people on earth and have a great influence on the everyday activities of many individuals and groups. There are various beliefs that exist in the world today, which are depending on a group of philosophies and perceptions. Many of these faiths still have significant links to their primary past and original habitation. Each religion leaves behind some of ruins and tradition that could be so attractive to current tourists. (Rinschede, 1992).

Most of the religious tourism destinations coordinate with religious organizations around the world to encourage more tourists and increase the number of tourism nights. The type of religious tourism is considered as a universal business of about $ 18 billion including a figure of 300 million tourists. In 2008, North America achieved around $ 10 billion value of religious tourism as stated by the Religious Society of Travel. Palestinian territories are a vital region that is considered to be accomplishing progress in the number of religious tourists with estimations fluctuating from 1.8 million to 2.4 million travelers in 2006 (Levit, 2008).

Religious tourism plays a vital role in tourist destinations’ economy. Religious tourists are accommodated in various hotel categories regardless of whether these hotels are expensive or cheap. Some religious tourists prefer budget hotels, hostels, or private homes such as those of disabled Christians. The average expenses on lodging in hotels ranged about 34 percent of the overall tourist expenditure that is corresponding to
about 350 Euros. Nevertheless, tourists occasionally expend double this sum (Fleischer, 2000).

UNWTO distributed religious tourists according to their purpose of travel into two groups: the first type is aiming to visit the sacred sites of holiness and veneration to complete their pilgrimage such as Hajj and Umrah. The second trend is targeting the traditional and archaeological sightseeing of sacred edifices, or for educational purpose. Table 1 demonstrates the religious tourists’ figure in some well-known religious destinations.

Table 1 Religious Tourists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Visitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pilgrimage for the Hajj</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>2.5 million annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits to the holy shrines of Najaf and Karbala</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>5 million (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilgrimage to Kumbha Mela</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>75 million (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilgrimage to Lourdes</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>6 million (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tours of Vatican sites</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>220,000 – 250,000 annually</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNWTO, 2013

II. Religious Tourism in Egypt

Egypt encompasses various features of a flourishing tourism industry due to its moderate climate, attractive natural surroundings, architectural sightseeing and sacred sites. Egypt became a religious tourist attraction since the time of its rulers of Mohammed Ali’s family who influenced the way of life and the religious views of the Egyptians leaving behind them a great collection of holy monuments like mosques and citadels. Many momentous and ancient mosques, such as the House Mosques- like Mohammed Ali Mosque, El-Hussein Mosque, and Al-Sayed Zeinab Mosque are of the most attractive attractions for the religious oriented tourists. Some of the mosques encompass their owners’ tombs like the Mosque of Al- Rifai where members of Mohamed Ali’s family are also buried (Gaballa, 2012).

Several Christian Holy Family’s monuments are reflecting their divine route in Egyptian land to run away from the persecution of the Roman Empire. The Holy Family left behind it tombs, churches, and monasteries of significant antique reputation as it links Pharaonic and Greco-Roman arts on one side and Islamic period on other side (El-Beltagui, 2011). Such monuments are so attractive to tourists who are interested in religious sightseeing regardless of their own religion.

Moreover, there are so many famous Jewish synagogues all around Egypt. The Temple of Heaven's Gate in Cairo is an amazing Jewish temple, which is preserved and well maintained by renovation procedures run by Egyptian Government (Romney, 1971). This temple was renovated in 1980 by the Supreme Council of Antiquities with the contribution of Israel Cultural Center in Cairo and the Jewish community in Egypt.

III. Case Study: Religious Tourism in Sharjah, UAE.

UAE originates its cultural heritages from Islamic and Arabic instructions and customs. The formal religion of the country is Islam and is worshipped by its population. It commands everyday rituals to touch the divine and spiritual borders. Islam rules the life style and customs, like fashion, diet and beverage, comprising habits and traditions, spiritual and divine performs. Arabs and Emiratis’ culture begins with generosity, hospitality,
and greeting others, and ends with recognition of diverse varieties of societies, tourists, inhabitants and travellers.

Islam sacraments are practiced regularly and visibly in UAE. The call to prayer is broadcasted through bullhorns five times in a day at the time of each five Muslim prayers in mosques all over the Emirates. The people of UAE also admire other beliefs. Tourists can recognize the fundamentals and instructions of Islam, and non-Muslims visitors can pay a visit to any mosque by previous planning with a travel agency or hotel.

In UAE, during the holy month of Ramadan due to its holy reflections and its unique activities, Non-Muslims are not allowed to eat and drink in public during the fasting period from dawn to dusk. It is common for shops to adjust their working times during that particular month according to fasting duration. Eateries stay closed in common; they merely offer home-delivery throughout the day, and open again at the Eftar (breakfast) at sunset.

Islamic hotels contain such features as traditional uniforms for hotel staff, dress code for female staff, markers indicating the direction of Mecca, female and male prayer rooms, prayer mats and prayer beds, halal food with no pork, conservative television channels, art that does not depict the human form, and beds and plumbing placed away from facing Mecca. Furthermore, finance used to operate the hotel should be compliant to Shari'ah regulations and the hotel owner must contribute a proportion of revenue to Zakat (charitable acts). The conceptual significance of Zakat emphasizes the importance of the sharing of equal benefits and helping others, where financial transactions should not involve the charging Riba, i.e. "predetermined interest".

- It is firmly forbidden to make any action that upsets community politeness.
- It is firmly forbidden to drink alcohols in public or when driving.
- It is firmly forbidden to smoke in public and formal offices, and commercial centers, which have the sign "no smoking".
- UAE implements firm rules containing detention for drug dealing or consuming.

Sharjah is the third largest of the seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and is the only one to have land on both the Arabian Gulf Coast and Gulf of Oman. In addition to Sharjah City, which lies on shores of the Arabian Gulf, the emirate has three regions on the Scenic east coast; Dibba Al Hisn, Khorfakkan and Kalba.

Sharjah is a unique city that embodies the essence of Islamic culture with over 20 museums, 500 mosques and a diverse arabesque atmosphere through the emirate. The emirates admiration for custom and culture is obvious the minute you step foot in. Sharjah has incorporated the best existing preserved culture though conserving its customs and traditions. This exclusive mixture of the ethics of history and current living has gotten the city many traditional awards over the years. In 1998, UNESCO titled it the Cultural Capital of the Arab World. Sharjah has been named the Islamic Culture Capital of the Arab Region for 2014 by ISESCO (Islamic Organization for Education, Science and Culture).

At present, a distinctive cultural project is in progress in emirates. The largest of its kind in the region to date, the heart of Sharjah initiative aims to restore the traditional heritage areas of the emirate, preserve national historic landmarks, and link them together. Schedule for
completion in 20125, it will reflect what Sharjah was like over half a century ago, creating an attractive environment where contemporary art will merge with the ambience of the 1950s. Led by the visionary leadership of His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, Member of the Supreme Council and Council and Ruler of Sharjah, the project will cement Sharjah’s reputation as the beacon of Arabic and Islamic Culture.

IV. Recommendations

Based on the literature review, it is important for Egypt to promote the concept of Religious Tourism specially the Islamic Tourism through several ways such as:-

- Participating in festivals such as The Festival of the Capital of Islamic Culture and in competitions like the Top Ten Tourist Destinations.
- Spreading the awareness of religious tourism as a very useful pattern of tourism patterns through media and mass communications like TV, Radio and newspapers. In addition to social media like Facebook, twitter and Instagram.
- Designing a specific website focusing on religious tourism.
- Tourists who visit Egypt during holy months like Ramadan should be made aware of the true meaning of this holy month, not focus on temporary rules such as not eating and drinking in public, and to give visitors and non-Muslim residents a better understanding of Ramadan by explaining why fasting, prayers, showing courtesy, and respect are so important.
- Keeping pace with changing trends and needs of religious tourists and being able to respond quickly to these changes.
- Providing the museums employees with the suitable training and knowledge to be updated with all enhancement requirements.
- The ministry of Tourism has to prepare tourist guides promoting Egypt as a “Muslim friendly destination”.
- A hotel must have signs pointing towards Mecca (Direction of qibla available in the room), copies of the Koran in its rooms,
- Prayer room available in hotel
- A kitchen where halal food can be prepared.
- The prohibition of alcohol, non-halal foods
- Bidet available in toilet and the position of toilet bowl should not face the qibla.
- Hotels needs to have segregated facilities for male and female guests like Separate floors for single man, single woman and families.
- Male staff serve male customer only and vice versa
- Staff members of hotels should wear Muslim dress code like Women’s Hijab.
- Separate event hall for man & women guests.
- Separate Swimming pool for men and women.
- Separate gym for men and women.
- Hotel financed through Islamic financial arrangement, and follow zakat principles (giving back the community).

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