



AQABA'S HIDDEN DEPTHS

With a multi-million dollar beachfront project and the launch of its very own airline, the Jordanian city is hoping to lure tourists back after a troubled period

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For many people around the world, the Arab Spring is already being consigned to the history books.

Starting in late 2010 in Tunisia in North Africa and spreading across the Middle East, the impact of the political uprising, which led to unrest in some countries and war in others, is ongoing and still being understood.

While many in the world have moved on to deal with new and other problems, countries in the region are still feeling the effects, even if they weren't directly impacted by it.

Jordan is one such country, says Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA) chief commissioner Nasser Shraideh, who points out the country was untouched by the movement, remaining peaceful and stable throughout.

While he describes 2010 as a "golden year" for Jordan's tourism, he adds the country's reputation for safety was impacted by the Arab Spring, causing tourists to desert the country.

Shraideh says the Red Sea port city and resort of Aqaba felt the pinch too, losing 65% of all international visitors between 2010 and 2015. He adds only now are they making up the lost ground, with a 68% increase in international travellers in 2017 and a boost of 55% in the first six months of this year to 477,322.

Shraideh says: "Between 2011 and 2016 we were severely affected by what was going on in the region and we witnessed a significant decrease in many tourist flows from different markets."

"Over the last two years we have been working aggressively to re-establish our networks, and reach out to our traditional markets as well as new ones."

To ensure Aqaba's growth is well managed, Shraideh says ASEZA, which is responsible for the management, regulation and development of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone, has developed a three-tiered strategy lasting until 2025. The strategy includes pushing Aqaba as a major Red Sea tourist destination,

establishing it as a business centre and logistics hub in the region while also using the port as a gateway for trade to Jordan and beyond.

He added that as travellers return so the Russian market is proving to be considerable, with 120,000 visitors received in the first six months this year – the same amount as in the whole of 2017.

Meanwhile Germany, the UK and Scandinavia remain key markets, with the promise of winter sun proving particularly popular, and this has helped Aqaba outpace Jordan in its recovery, with the former seeing an 8.7% increase in visitor numbers, from 4.78 million in 2016 to 5.19 million in 2017.

Shraideh said both the German and the UK markets are expected to get a boost from easyJet's new weekly flights, following the launch from Berlin's Schoenefeld Airport and London Gatwick Airport in November.

Time to incentivise

Once it starts operating to Aqaba, easyJet will become the fourth major international airline to offer connections to Aqaba's King Hussein International Airport. Royal Jordanian offers a double daily service from Amman; Turkish Airlines operates three times a week out of Istanbul; while Ryanair offers twice weekly services to the city from Sofia, Rome, Cologne and Athens.

Shraideh says while the airlines currently receive support from the Jordan Tourism Board, this will be switched off in March 2019 when Fly Aqaba launches, with the focus on tour operators alone. He added the destination offers them a \$5 per person per night incentive and that "this subsidy can increase if tour operators can significantly develop the numbers we receive from certain markets".

Nor is the subsidy the only financial incentive available. Tourists arriving via the airport or port are exempted from the JOD40 (\$56) visa, even if they are transiting via the capital of Amman on their way there. ▽



Further afield, Shraideh admitted the Far East is a target for the future. He adds: "We are taking it very seriously but we will be focusing on nearby markets. Maybe after 2020 we will pay more attention to the Far East."

"That doesn't mean we will not be preparing ourselves for the Far East markets, as we need to be ready to attract them."

Shraideh says with this in mind conversations are already under way with certain partners about building a resort targeted at the Chinese market in order to help drive business in that region.

He adds while ASEZA will continue to market its traditional 'Golden Triangle' attractions of Petra, Wadi Rum and Red Sea diving, the city is

Aqaba has extended its waterfront real estate from 28km to 46km



undergoing major works to attract tourists.

The partially completed Ayla project is a real point of pride in Aqaba, largely for the fact that, thanks to its marina, salt water lakes and beaches, it has extended the destination's waterfront real estate by 18km from the 28km it currently has.

The development is still under construction but already boasts Jordan's first golf course, five beach clubs and the marina, while a Hyatt hotel was due to soft open in October, the first of five properties planned for the development.

Setting itself apart

Other attractions planned for Aqaba include a new cultural centre, which will open its doors in 2019, alongside cinemas, restaurants and a waterpark.

In doing so, Shraideh said he planned to maintain what makes Aqaba so special. He added: "We are not a cheap destination... we would like to see Jordan as a quality destination, one that can provide visitors with a unique experience."

He also argues this gives the destination a unique selling point when compared with both neighbouring Eilat in Israel and Taba in Egypt, which are both on the same stretch of coastline.

Moreover, Shraideh argues two of region's three key attractions are far more accessible from Aqaba, with Petra about two hours' drive away and Wadi Rum just 45 minutes away by car.

He says that this compares favourably to Eilat and Taba, even though both are within sight of the Jordanian city. Shraideh explains that despite being next door, going from Eilat to Aqaba involves crossing the Israeli-Jordanian border and completing the accompanying bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, tourists staying in Taba must factor in a Red Sea crossing of up to 75 minutes, depending on the type of ferry taken.

Plus a programme that has seen various vessels, from ships to a Hercules aircraft, deliberately sunk off the Jordan coast, has created a number of wrecks for divers around the world to visit.

Shraideh said: "We see ourselves as a different product from Taba and Sharm el Sheikh and even Eilat. Aqaba is a living Jordanian city with its own culture, as opposed to a man-made resort focused on holidaymakers."

He is confident that once the word gets out about Aqaba's many attractions, as well as the returning message that it is a safe destination, the ASEZA master plan will be completed as envisaged. □

Its very own airline

A desire to make Aqaba a year-round destination is behind the launch of the city's own airline in March next year.

Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA) chief commissioner Nasser Shraideh says Fly Aqaba will launch with an initial fleet consisting of two Airbus A320 aircraft and an Embraer with capacity for about 72 seats in 2019.

He adds the airline will operate regular, year-round scheduled services with aircraft also available for charter bookings.

And in doing so, he is hoping to break a pattern that has seen many airlines come in for the high seasons in the spring and autumn, before the port heats up in the summer.

Shraideh says: "We've been working with various airlines but were never able to convince them to maintain their operations to Aqaba."

"They've been coming and going based on the month and that affected us very badly because we could not really maintain in the long-term the momentum that we created."

"We also feel that they were seasonal in their operations, which made us lose some of the potential for tourism growth that can come in other interesting months of the year."

Although routes are yet to be finalised, Shraideh hopes to offer initial services to Beirut, Cairo and Dubai within the region, while further afield, Germany, the UK, Russia and Scandinavia are key destinations.

He adds Fly Aqaba will be majority owned by ASEZA, with the Ayla project – a new leisure development being built in the city – taking a 10% stake of the company that is predicted to be worth about Jordan Dinar 30 million (\$42.3 million).

Shraideh says: "We hope that other private sector operators pitch in, as this is a key issue not only for tourism but also for investment too."



ASEZA chief commissioner Nasser Shraideh