Tourist Resorts

By CHARLOTTE PARDEY

Arriving at a Tunisian tourist resort in early spring this year feels a little like being too early (or too late) for a party: there are hardly any guests but plenty of free space everywhere, from the dining room to outdoor areas. Some services are permanently cancelled and one has the impression of disturbing the employees in their boredom.

Tourist resorts both in Tunisia and in Egypt used to be sources of foreign currency and employment and traditionally formed cornerstones of the countries' economies. Low occupancy gives reason to worry—also because it indicates that, from abroad, the countries are perceived as insecure [[↗Security vs. Fear](#)].

Travel and tourism directly contribute around 6.5 percent to Tunisia's gross domestic product (GDP) this year while in the past the percentage was considerably higher (more than 10% in 2007, still close to 9% in 2014). In Egypt, statistics register an all-time low of less than 3.5 percent (as compared to ca. 8% in 2010) (WTTC-TN, WTTC-EG). Tourism and tourism-related sectors used to provide work opportunities for several hundred thousand people. Now, however, tourism is at a low—in Tunisia due to the terrorist attacks last year that targeted tourists in the Bardo Museum and at the beach of Sousse; in Egypt, the downing of a Russian airliner through IS last October made thousands of Russians cancel their flights to the country, and the disappearance and murder of Italian doctoral student Giulio Regeni in February also has a negative impact on tourism [[↗Disappearances](#), [↗Security = Fear \(Police State\)](#)]. Tourists are waiting for security standards to return to a reassuring level. Until then, tourist resorts remain half empty, staff are few, and those still in work are depressed, given the low number of visitors.

In August, i.e., at the height of summer vacations in Germany, German ambassador to Tunisia, Andreas Reinicke, expresses yet another concern: not only the fear of violence may keep tourists away from the country but also a lack of cleanliness [[↗Garbage](#)] and the poor state of the resorts (BEN TAIEB a).

A further consequence of the decrease in tourism is that traffic at the airports goes down. In the first six months of the year the decrease is about 9.4 percent in Tunisia. In August, this leads state-owned Tunisair to announce the need to make 1000 of its staff redundant, amounting to 12 percent of its permanent employees (BEN TAIEB d).

Moreover, due to the lack of visitors, tensions increase between the workers' union UGTT and the association of hotel owners who refuse to grant their employees a pay raise in September. There are also many redundancies, and seasonal contracts are discontinued (BEN SALAH).

What is more, the absence of tourists also means a lack of foreign currency, which makes the value of the local currency against the US dollar drop considerably [[↗Dollar Crisis](#)]. In Egypt, authorities embark on an IMF-backed economic reform that is meant to meet the challenges and restore the stability of the country's finances by liberalizing the foreign exchange market and adopting flexible exchange rates—with little success. The Tunisian central bank, too, proves unable to stabilize the dinar against the dollar. In both countries, the

government's failure to deal with the crisis not only makes all kinds of imports more expensive, it is also the cause of aggravated living conditions for a majority of the population because prices are constantly increasing (AFIFY).

No wonder then that the tourism sector desperately attempts to attract visitors to the empty resorts. In Tunisia, the main strategy is to approach new customer groups—tourists from countries that had previously not played a major role, as well as domestic tourists—in an effort to outbalance the loss in visitors from traditional countries of origin like France or the UK. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office actually advises their citizens against all but essential travel to Tunisia, and warns especially against visiting the border regions (in response to last year's terrorist attack in Sousse, the Tunisian government has imposed a State of Emergency). In addition to these governmental warnings, travel companies, such as the British Thomas Cook, discourage tourists from traveling to Tunisia, for reasons of security. As a result, the number of British tourists decreases significantly: the Tunisian National Institute of Statistics observes a reduction from over 424 000 in 2014 to 207 900 in 2015 and only 23 400 in 2016 (INS 142). For those who travel nevertheless, the experience must be somewhat spoilt—the atmosphere at the resorts does in no way resemble that of the past [↗**Past vs. Present**].

New customers for Tunisia's resorts are found, among other countries, in Russia and Algeria. Russians are no longer willing to travel to Egypt since the destruction of the airplane with Russian tourists last year. Thus, the number of Russian guests more than doubles in Tunisia (as compared to 2012: *ibid.*). To encourage them even more, Tunisair opens its first direct flight Moscow–Tunis in June. In a similar vein, Air Algérie in November considers opening a direct flight Annaba–Tunis. There are also efforts to facilitate border-crossing between Tunisia and Algeria (al-RIZQĪ, Nessma TV).

However, the increasing number of Russian and Algerian tourists notwithstanding, they cannot make up for the loss of European customers. To uphold the country's appeal for Russians and Algerians, prices have to be kept down to meet the new groups' low purchasing power—which makes life again harder for hotel owners and the tourism-related branches.

In addition to foreign tourists, domestic tourism creates some buzz in Tunisia. In June and July, a story about tourism in Mahdia makes the round: it seems that the coastal city has reached 100 percent occupancy thanks to domestic tourism (Ben Taieb b). If this is true, it must be the result of marketing strategies that attracted more visitors than usual.

But domestic tourism also is problematic: it does not bring the foreign currency that the countries need to finance their commercial operations and pay their supply bills from abroad. It also means that another type of tourists frequent the resorts: women who wish to swim in a burkini, for instance (BEN TAIEB c). Most Tunisian hotels accept this. Others follow the example of French coastal towns where full-body swimsuits are prohibited in the swimming pools—for alleged health reasons. In Egypt, domestic tourism is not advertised to the same extent as it is in Tunisia and plays an even lesser role than there... also because society is more conservative: The one tourism-related issue that is discussed in the media relates to the difficulties unmarried or unaccompanied women face when they try to check in at hotels alone. In many cases they are refused accommodation for fear of illicit relations they might have with men during their stay [↗**In Islam, ...**]. The hotel owners fear to be made responsible for allowing and encouraging prostitution.

The situation in the tourist sector and the lack of visitors is so prominent in public discourse in Tunisia that it finds entrance into cultural production, for example in Mohammed Ben Attia's feature film *Nhibbik, Hādī* ("Hédi," literally: I love you, Hedi). The movie follows the young car salesman Hédi around the country and to a holiday resort in Mahdia where he can forget about his impending wedding arranged by his all-influential mother. In Mahdia, Hédi meets Rim, an independent, liberally-minded woman who works in the resort as an entertainer. The two begin a passionate love affair which would not have been possible outside this domain of freedom [↗**Freedom vs. Constraint**]. The resort appears as a melancholic place outside of time, not the bustling tourist attraction it might have been several years ago. However, it allows the lovers to dream about the lives they would like to but cannot lead inside the country due to the constraints prevailing in a conservative society [↗**Male vs. Female**]. The prize-winning film captures the simultaneity of hope and despair that is not only characteristic of the half-deserted holiday resorts and the tourist sector but also of the entire country [↗**Hope vs. Hell**].

Yet, in the midst of a generally pessimistic climate, there are also instances of hope. In October, Hapag Lloyd-owned *Europa* lands in La Goulette—the first cruise ship to return to Tunisia since March 2015 and the Bardo attacks, after which international lines suspended their visits. Tunisian officials express the hope that this return is symbolic and will be followed by more of its kind (AFP).

Egypt, in its turn, is happy that the United Nations' World Tourism Organization names the Upper Egyptian city of Luxor the current year's "Capital of International Tourism" (UNWTO). The nomination seems to be the fruit of the country's heightened efforts to sell its assets by highlighting its famous cultural heritage. Compared to Egypt's ancient history, Tunisia's is much less advertised and, hence, also much less known [↗**Commemoration / Memorial Days**].

Moreover, in the *Sinai Trail* project, a walking route between the Gulf of Aqaba and St. Catherine, Egypt also promotes its wilderness and the traditional knowledge of its Bedouin population. The country's first long-distance hiking trail is the result of the union of three different Bedouin tribes, each taking care of a part of the land; it provides jobs in the area and raises interest in the local Bedouins' way of life. The project is awarded the British Guild and Travel Writers' (BGTW) Award in November as "Best Wider World project" (Cairo Scene).

All in all, however, the state of affairs in Egyptian tourism is still rather depressing. As in Tunisia, this is reflected also in cultural expression. Khālid Mar'ī's comedy *Laff wa-dawarān* ("Back and forth"), for example—a box office hit—puts the blame for the deplorable situation within the sector not only on the precarious security situation in the country, but mainly on "nepotism and near-sightedness in the industry itself" (AYSHA). By a mistake, two unmarried Egyptians—tour guide Nūr and businesswoman Laylā—are booked on the same apartment in a hotel in Sharm El Sheikh. To prevent trouble, they have to pretend that they are husband and wife [↗**Male vs. Female**]. The situation becomes still more complicated when Nūr sets his eyes on an Italian girl, and his family (who is also present) urges Laylā to distract him from the foreigner. A certain Ḥamāda is assigned by the hotel management to make sure that Laylā and Nūr are happy customers, but in fact he pesters them constantly. The reviewer's verdict is that this is "[h]ardly a recipe for a healthy tourist sector" (AYSHA).

Clearly, there is a stark difference between the melancholic mood of *Nḥibbik*, *Hādī* and the slapstick din of *Laff wa-dawarān*, a difference that is telling of the general climate in the two countries: While melancholy is still allowed in Tunisia, there is only black humour left in the Egyptian case [*↗Inferiority = Superiority (Satire)*].

Related Entries

ARRAYS – Commemoration / Memorial Days ♦ Disappearances ♦ Dollar Crisis ♦ Garbage ♦ In Islam, ...

CODES – Freedom vs. Constraint ♦ Hope vs. Hell ♦ Male vs. Female ♦ Past vs. Present ♦ Security vs. Fear

CODES COLLAPSED – Inferiority = Superiority (Satire) ♦ Security = Fear (Police State)

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