

Another Record Year for World Tourism

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With 842 million arrivals and a 4.5% growth rate, 2006 exceeded expectations as the tourism sector continued to enjoy above average results, making it a new record year for the industry.

The latest UNWTO World Tourism Barometer figures suggest that 2007 will consolidate this performance and turn into the fourth year of sustained growth.

"Despite downside risks facing global tourism twelve months ago - in particular terrorism, health scares due to avian flu and rising oil prices - 2006 was another year of good growth above the long-term forecast rate of 4.1%, backed up by one of the longest periods of sustained economic expansion", according to UNWTO Secretary General Francesco Frangialli.

One of the features of 2006 has been the continued positive results of emerging destinations, underscoring the links to economic progress. As one of the most dynamic economic sectors, Tourism has a key role among the instruments to fight against poverty, thus becoming a primary tool for sustainable development.

"By integrating sustainable tourism in the international development agenda, our sector can make a significant contribution to advance the Millennium Development Goals through a more moderate, solid and responsible type of growth. Three years ago world tourism began a historically new phase of growth, as it broke the barrier of 800 million international arrivals, growing more than 20% since then. Tourism continues to transform itself under pressure from its environment. We are now responsible for making this new phase of growth more economical in its use of energy and natural resources, more sustainable, and lastly, more in keeping with the spirit of solidarity", Frangialli said.

Focus on Africa

Africa has outpaced all other regions with almost twice the rate of global growth reaching 8.1% in 2006, following an already strong 2005. This star performance was led by Subsaharan Africa (+9.4%), while North Africa (+5.8%) also ended the year above average. Major destinations such as South Africa, Kenya and Morocco all continued to post excellent results.

Asia and the Pacific (+7.6%) was able to maintain its extraordinary growth level, both due to the recovery of Thailand and the Maldives from the impact of the December 2004 tsunami, as well as remarkable performances from emerging destinations in the region - international tourist arrivals in South Asia grew by 10%, boosted by India, the destination responsible for half the arrivals to the sub-region.

Europe performed on target last year (+4%). Germany took advantage of the Football World Cup 2006, while Italy had a strong comeback. Spain's solid results also contributed to the generally positive outcome.

In the Middle East, international tourist arrivals are estimated to have risen by 4% in 2006, after the bumper years of 2004 and 2005, and in spite of the overall geopolitical situation, the Israel-Lebanon crisis in particular.

Although the Americas 2% growth might seem disappointing at first, regional results vary considerably. The rise in the USA was not sufficient to compensate for the weak development in Canada and Mexico. On the other hand, the results from Central (+6.1%) and South America (+7.2%) show how Latin America is on track to consolidating the positive outcome of recent years: Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay and Peru all grew at double-digit-rates.

Forecast 2007

The increase in international tourist arrivals is projected to be around 4%, much in line with the forecast long-term annual growth rate of 4.1% through 2020. Growth is expected to be more solid as businesses, consumers, governments and international institutions such as the UNWTO are now better able to anticipate shocks and to respond more effectively to crises.

Travellers are better informed and have become more adept at weighing their options and now include security factors as just another consideration among others when choosing their destinations.

As a whole, the global economy is expected to maintain last year's growth level. Oil prices have shown a tendency to remain less volatile and do not pose the risk to economic stability they did a year ago.

Nevertheless, some uncertainties remain on the global economic front and they could impact the tourism forecasts. Increasing interest rates in some countries and regions could diminish available income. A weaker US dollar might affect foreign travel demand by Americans. On the other hand, a stronger euro could stimulate European international travel.

Against the good tourism results of the past three years and given the still overall favourable economic outlook, this positive trend in the sector looks likely to consolidate in 2007.

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