

Strong World Tourism Growth in 2007

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The year 2007 has started on a higher than expected note for global tourism. From January through April, international tourist arrivals worldwide rose by over 6% to 252 million, representing an additional 15 million arrivals as against the same period in 2006, according to the latest UNWTO World Tourism Barometer.

Asia and the Pacific (+9%) achieved the strongest growth, followed by Africa (+8%), the Middle East (+8%) and Europe (+6%). Although arrivals to the Americas (+4%), showed the slowest growth rate among the world regions during the first four months of 2007, this performance is nevertheless very positive as the region doubled the 2007 forecast growth (+2%).

Though these results are limited to the first months of the year, and growth generally tends to be slower in the upcoming traditional Northern Hemisphere high season, UNWTO is confident that worldwide growth in excess of 4% forecast for 2007 will be achieved, barring any unforeseen negative events over the remainder of the year.

UNWTO Secretary-General Francesco Frangialli said that 'the strong growth underscores the increasingly important relation between tourism, climate change and poverty alleviation. Responsible and sustainable growth of the tourism sector will provide exports and jobs for the world economy generally and the poorest countries specifically, but this must be balanced with firm action to reduce the industry's carbon footprint. With this in mind we have set in train a programme to explore ways and means to help the sector achieve the right balance in the years ahead. We expect the Davos Summit in October, with the United Nations Environment Programme and the support of the World Economic Forum to begin this process in earnest.'

Drivers of tourism growth

Several positive factors contributed to the growth registered in the first four months of this year, and are likely to help sustain it through the coming months.

Continuing world prosperity has clearly been a main driver. Emerging markets and developing economies in general, and especially those of Asia, maintained their extraordinary strength. Meanwhile, in continental Europe, and in Germany in particular, economic growth has picked up encouragingly. With increasing disposable income and factors such as the continued development of low cost airlines making travel available for larger shares of population, international tourism seems on track for another year of above average growth.

Frangialli pointed out that 'growing recognition of tourism's contribution to economic growth and job creation means that it is being given more and more attention by national governments, especially those in developing regions. Increased investment in infrastructure, marketing and promotion, development of domestic markets, liberalization of air transport, growing intraregional cooperation, and a growing number of public-private partnerships are key factors that have helped the tourism industry to expand'.

Regional outcome

Although Europe (+6%) is the world's most visited and most mature destination region, its arrivals growth rates in 2005 and 2006 were not far short of the worldwide average. And growth continued even more strongly through the first four months of 2007 supported by the sustained boom in the world economy - a boom in which Europe is now sharing more emphatically, with notably higher rates of GDP growth in the eurozone.

Asia and the Pacific (+9%) stands out as the best performing region in the world in the first four months of 2007, confirming its role as one of the motors of international tourism expansion. The highest increase in arrivals was recorded by South Asia (+12%), while South-East Asia and North-East Asia (both at +9%) sustained the healthy growth of 2006. Only Oceania (+2%), bucked the strong growth trend.

The Americas (+4%) started 2007 by doubling last year's overall results. The region benefited from star performers Central America (+7%) and South America (+9%), and particularly of those of North America (+4%), already far ahead of last year's 1% growth. This trend was not, however, widespread. The Caribbean (-2%) has been the only sub-region in the world to record a decline over the first four months of 2007, reflecting the impact of decreased arrivals from the USA in many of its destinations.

Preliminary results for the first four months of 2007 point to a stronger than expected increase in international tourist arrivals in the Middle East (+8% as against +6% for 2006), as destinations such as Egypt (+14%) posted extraordinary growth rates. Nevertheless this trend might still vary as available data is still limited.

Africa's continued its strong growth (+8%), though at a slightly lower rate than in 2006 overall when it reached +10%. Short-term prospects for the continent look very bullish. Particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa there is growing optimism, with increasing emphasis on human resources and product development to help tourism better contribute to poverty alleviation.

Outlook

Confidence in tourism's prospects as measured through the survey among UNWTO's Panel of Tourism Experts is higher than it has been since September 2004 - a year of peak growth. With economic growth expected at almost 5% for 2007 and again for 2008, which would be the fifth consecutive year of growth above the long-term average, increased economic prosperity is certainly one of the main reasons behind such high level of confidence.

Both Europe and North America are approaching their high season, which goes some way to explaining also part of this optimism. Given the current European and world economic prospects, not to mention consumers' enthusiasm for travel, there is no reason to expect a radical slowdown in the growth of international tourism to European destinations in the next few months. The Caribbean and parts of North America are, not surprisingly, anxious about the 2007 hurricane season as well as about the uncertainty of the developments in the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI). In Asia and the Pacific, the outlook for the next four months looks promising. Short-term prospects for Africa look also bullish, while in the Middle East they vary sharply across the region. Nevertheless, though the Middle East is under significant tension, the region has shown high resilience so far as proven by the good results achieved during 2006 and the first months of 2007 by destinations such as Egypt, Jordan or the Gulf countries.

Note: The regional and subregional estimates for the January-April 2007 international tourism results are compiled by the World Tourism Organization in the framework of the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer and based on data for the first months of the year from over 120 destination countries in the world among which all major tourism destinations.

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