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Qatar's Tourism Strategy vis-à-vis World Cup 2022

Interview with Acting Qatar Tourism Authority Chairman

Mr. Hassan Abdulrahman al-Ibrahim



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Q: How did tourist travel to Qatar develop during the first eight months of this year? Due to the conflict with the boycotting nations (KSA & others), there was a decline by over 20 % in 2017.

A: Unfortunately, the blockading countries have weaponized tourism, something which other countries have not done in similar situations. You do not weaponize tourism!

What we have done is to use this situation as an opportunity. We jumped as a country from position 177 as it pertains to visa openness to position 8 in the world and the first place in the Middle East. So we opened our doors for tourists and travelers from around the world to come and enjoy the beautiful experience they can have in Qatar. We also changed certain aspects of governance in the tourism sector to increase in the hospitality sector our capacity in the tourism sector. We were able to open new markets with Russia, China and India within the first eight months of the blockade. We thus managed to triple the numbers from Russia, to double the numbers growth from India and China and from Germany as well. We did this by partnering with major cruise lines and by doubling the number of transit passengers. We are also partnering with tour operators from around the world. Today, for example, we are signing an agreement with DER TOUR. We were able to also sign

with TUI and MSC Cruises, which are supposed to land their first ships in Qatar this year, opening a totally new segment in the market.

Between June 2017 and June this year, we were able to increase our volume by 26 %, yet we are not back to the levels of 2016. We expect to be back at those levels by 2019, by partnering with tour operators.

Q: *What are the specific related number from Europe and Germany?*

A: As for Europe, we do have an 8 percent increase, by the end of August, while we do have a 42 percent increase from Germany comparing the first 8 months of both years. If you compare 2016 to 2017, we do have a 22 per cent increase from the German market alone. We also do expect increase from our partnership with DER TOUR. We did have a great start with DER TOUR and the numbers are quite promising.

Q. *What kind of tourists / travelers are those coming in from Germany?*

Cruise line passengers are playing a mayor role and then it is transit passengers. With the best airport and the best airline in the region, Qatar Airways and Hamad Airport, we were able to attract many more transit passengers. We achieved this by doing a number of things; first of all, we changed the policy on transit visas, making them free of charge. Qatar Airways also changed its ticket policies, so that people do not have to pay, if they do want to leave the airport.

Together with them we launched two new products. We launched with them the city tour program and the Plus Qatar program, where visitors can enjoy a 5 star experience where they can get special discounts if they book hotels and other services through Qatar Airways. We also created the point-to-point travel opportunities with boutique operators but also with those like DER TOUR: All this will help us to maintain the growth momentum which we have experienced during the last couple of years.

Q: *It has been the declared Goal of Qatar to attract more visitors from the Western hemisphere, as well as from Australia and South Africa. That portion was to increase to 31 % by 2023. What is the current status on this?*

A: For China, Russia and India, we have doubled the growth, from India we have 34 percent growth, from China we have 42 per cent growth and from Russia we have tripled our growth. For Australia we have single digit growth and from South Africa we double digit growth, yet I do not have the actual numbers available right now. For Australia specifically, Qatar Airways has started more long-haul flights and the transit numbers from Australia are amazing. When we started with our e-visa and transit visa program, we were able to capture double digit growth from South Africa. With the free visa program, we were able to sustain the growth from the South Africa market. Those markets a very strategic for us and you can expect to hear more great

news from these markets in the next years. Together with Russia, China and India, these are our key markets and we do not have yet reached our potential from these markets. Our focus is not just on FITs, but also on the tour operators from these markets.

Q: *How important is the Germany originating market for Qatar?*

Germany is one of the best outbound market in Europe, the second rated in terms of volume and spending, and we want to make sure that we are approaching it the right way. We now do have a commercial presence here. We are now in the business of curating experiences that will meet these expectations. We have been monitoring the customer experience, as growth is not our main factor. For us, the main factors are customer experiences. And when we talk about experiences, we are talking about the end-to-end experience. We know that the German traveler is an avid traveler and very sophisticated, and to provide them with an experience like any other would not be appealing to them. What we are doing is to pilot experiences through cruise passengers, and to develop experiences for them that are unique to the Qatari market.

We were successful to reach a satisfaction rate of 94 % with these experiences and we are now looking to replicate these experiences with other tour operators to have tourists to spend more time in Qatar. We did not just deliver on the visa, the airline, and the airport experience, which are now seamless. We also want to make sure that our hospitality sector is ready, which is already very mature. Based on the online feedback that we have, we are on top of the hospitality experience in the region. We also want to make sure that the Destination Management Companies are ready, that the hospitality services are ready to provide the best experience possible to the German travelers.

As I said, growth is important but so is the experience and we are now in the process to make sure that they are up to the level of expectation of the German travelers.

Q: *Qatar strongly positions itself through international sporting events. The climax will certainly be the Football World Cup 2022. How important are these events actually for tourism?*

A: Qatar has been the capital of mega events for the last two decades. We were able to leverage on the success of these mega sports events ever since we hosted the Asian Games (in 2006) and the Asian Cup which helped us to position Qatar as a destination as well. We were able to capitalize on MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Events) events as well to promote Qatar as a leisure destination. Now it is the time to diversify away from just sports and MICE and to push more the leisure agenda.

And now with the World Cup coming, we are trying to use this opportunity to promote Qatar as a destination, not just towards the markets that will qualify for the World Cup, but also to the other markets. The World Cup pushes our capabilities to make

sure that Qatar is up to the standard. We do not want to sacrifice the level of the services, as we are attracting large numbers to such an event. And we need to make sure that we have individualized experiences, even when we host mega events such as the World Cup. We want to make sure that visitors do not feel as part of the mass, but that they are finding experiences that are curated for them.

We do this by building the capacities of the destination management companies that already exist in Qatar. At the same time we are laying the ground for international destination management companies to have a presence in Qatar. We are assuring for those a safe landing and a good experience when they start their business and a good development even before the World Cup.

Q: At this time, there are about 22.300 hotel rooms in Qatar and 2.500 serviced apartments. At the World Cup, there will be up to 150.000 additional guests, media and officials in the country on any given day. What is Qatar doing to accommodate these numbers in just 4 years' time? This particularly, if the current crisis persists and transfers of World Cup visitors will thus be made impossible from the nearby Gulf States.

A: What we are doing in terms of accommodation, Qatar has been very smart not to build White Elephants. This is not just in hospitality, but in everything else as well. We want to make sure that this infra-structure can also be used beyond the World Cup. We are increasing our air-lifting capabilities. Everything we have planned for has also been for the long-term sustainability of the country, as part of the National Vision 2030.

As for accommodation, we are trying to push these numbers up by 2022 in terms of hotel and hotel apartments, but we are also trying to have temporary accommodation available, and this will be provided by cruise ships. We are also working closely with the Supreme Committee for 2022 on fan villages which will be available to the World Cup fans. We are also working to turn a number of apartments into serviced apartments to answer to this demand as well. The temporary structures will be dismantled after the World Cup and the serviced apartments will find other use. This way, our industry will not be hit by an oversupply in the market post 2022.

We are looking for 6.000 accommodations units with the cruise ships, which breaks down to about 12.000 beds on the cruise ships. We will also not just cater to the up market, but also to the lower budget travelers, who will be provided for through the other options (Fan Villages). We will leave no option untouched. Even if they will come to Qatar they will find these options and they will find an experience unlike any other in the world.

Q: Qatar intends to increase the contribution of tourism to the GDP from 3 to 6 percent in the coming years. How is this duplication to be accomplished?

A: By increasing our visitor numbers by 2022 and the longer term perspective through 2030, this contribution to the GDP is going to increase. The second aspect

beyond the numbers will be investment in the tourism sector itself. We are developing a number of investment opportunities in the offers and services provided and this will also help to achieve our GDP contribution target. Beyond increasing the number of arrivals, we are also pushing forward to expand the length of stay in Qatar and we are trying to do this by increasing the awareness about the destination.

This is achieved by building more museums, by building more entertainment options, and by providing more experiences that do not require construction. Qatar already has the largest gathering of Whale Sharks in the world. You can come and enjoy an amazing swim among 300 Whale Sharks at the same time. You can come and also enjoy a gathering of over 100 Dugongs in the sea off Qatar. So far, we have not made this available for tourists, as we wanted to make sure that we are first able to protect these species and the environment. You can come here and find experiences unlike anywhere in the world. This is how we intent to deliver economic growth by delivering amazing experiences.

Q: In the region, Qatar is competing with other countries, such as Dubai or Abu Dhabi, for tourists. What is Qatar's USP to differentiate itself from these other destinations?

A: I have to disagree when it comes to competition in the region. We need to grow the pie overall. Our region needs to grow its market share when it comes to travelers who are coming to the region. Qatar has been growing in the last decade with amazing growth rates and we are trying to focus on our USP. What we are trying to achieve is to curate amazing experiences and these experiences will be available only in Qatar and no other place. Those are the Whale Sharks, the Dugongs and White Truffle hunting. The more we focus on authenticity, the more we focus on our assets and how we are different in our region, the better we will be in attracting more travelers.

We are starting with a white slate, and yes, we started late compared to other countries in the region. But we are starting with the right steps and by forging the right partnerships.

Q: Which are the most important tourist projects in the country at this time? And one of these project is certainly the new National Museum in Doha. Is there already an opening date for it?

A: The most important project for us in the next four years is the World Cup. We are trying to curate experience for the different segments that will visit Qatar. The National Museum of Qatar is one of the most important projects here, which will open in early 2019. This is in the downtown of Doha, the Mushereib district, and we are looking forward to open its doors to the tourists. We already started by having four museums in Mushereib, which are not that big, yet which cater to the human being and about the local experience and history of Qatar. They talk about Qatar's history, they talk about the regions' history, yet they also talk about slavery which is a very sensitive

topic, no one else in the region has tackled so far. They talk about how open, we are, how transparent we are, how tolerant we are when it comes to issues in our region.

Lusail City is another project, which is important for the growth of our destination. Above these major projects, we are looking forward to have 14 major experiences that will curate to the desert and the coastal experience available in Qatar and we are trying to attract investments into both categories: desert and coastal resorts, desert and coastal experiences as it come to diving, truffle hunting – very unique cultural experiences as they are.

Qatar also has the best traditional Souq [Waquif] in the Middle East. You can fully enjoy the experience without any guides trying to steer you a specific direction and you can enjoy the authenticity of the experience. And we will have a second Souq in Al-Wakrah, which will be amazing to visit by travelers from all over the world.

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