

Israel's Tourism Sees Record-Breaking Growth in 2017

Last year was a record breaking year for Israeli tourism with more than 3.6 million people descending on the country. That's 700,000 more visitors than 2016.

After easily breaking the 3-million-tourist threshold last year, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had even higher hopes for 2018. "I hope that in the coming year we will pass the 4 million mark."

Tourism Minister Yariv Levin attributed the increase in tourism to the Tourism Ministry's two largest initiatives: an innovative new marketing strategy and the incentivizing of airlines to open new routes to the country.

The revamped marketing strategy included three different initiatives such as the "Eilat Winter Campaign" or the "City Break Campaign" that sold Tel Aviv and Jerusalem as two different but complementary vacation experiences. The campaign was very popular in Europe, where it was advertised in 10 different countries and languages.

The third initiative was the "3 Millionth Tourist Campaign" in early November in which Netanyahu welcomed the 3 millionth tourist, a Romanian woman and her partner, and even personally guided them around the Tower of David Museum in Jerusalem's Old City.

Israeli tourism also opened its first markets in Poland and Romania as well as the first social network campaign to China. This among other outreaches to Chinese audiences led to an overall 46% increase in Chinese tourism to Israel from last year.

The government issued numerous grants and incentives to

airlines to encourage them to open flights to Israel. Chief among them, a 250,000-euro grant per weekly flight for each airline that opened a direct flight to Israel from a destination where there was no previous route.

This initiative alone resulted in 18 new flight routes to Israel's Ben Gurion International Airport from numerous different destinations such as Miami, Florida, in the U.S., Europe and Iceland.

Besides gaining new tourists, Israel has also increased its number of return visitors, with 41 percent of tourists last year being repeat travelers. This is no surprise considering 91 percent of tourists ranked their trip to Israel as very good or excellent.

Levin called these happy tourists "ambassadors of Israel around the world and our loyal representatives on social media."

Beyond the positive effect on Israel's image, the increase in tourism pumped 20 billion shekels (nearly \$6 billion U.S.) in revenue into the Israeli economy from incoming tourists alone. This in turn added 25,000 new jobs to an industry that already employs more than 200,000 Israelis.

Some 54 percent of last year's tourists to Israel were Christians. The most were from the United States and then Russia, France, Germany, and the U.K. {eoa}

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