

LEBANESE EXPATRIATES, THE SALVATION TO THE TOURISM SECTOR

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this research is to study the role that expatriate tourism can play in Lebanon and to assess its development potential. First, Lebanese tourism industry was evaluated through obtained information from secondary sources (i.e. bank reports, newspapers' articles, previous studies). Then, a questionnaire was conducted to understand expatriates' opinions. Findings showed that expatriate tourism can constitute a solution for the actual concentration of tourist activities around the Lebanese capital and the other major cities of the country. Findings also revealed that the expatriate tourism has a direct positive impact on other types of tourism (i.e. cultural tourism, religious tourism, health tourism). The study resulted in many recommendations at the strategic and tactical levels that should be taken into consideration in order to develop the expatriate tourism in Lebanon, and thus, to strengthen the relation between the Lebanese expatriates and their homeland through tourism.*

KEYWORDS: Expatriate tourism, Lebanon, Lebanese expatriates, Migration.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is, in general, a key source of export revenues and a vital economic sector. On the international level, tourism revenues reached 1159 billion dollars in 2013 and the number of tourists exceeded one billion and 87 million (UNWTO, 2013). The quarterly report issued by the said organization in April 2013 states interestingly that the growth in the numbers of tourists and the tourism revenues is mainly concentrated in the developing countries which constitute "promising" tourism destinations (South American countries, South and Southeast Asian countries, some Middle Eastern countries).

Lebanon's tourism sector is suffering from an unstable security situation that has been overshadowing the region since the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011. This has taken its toll on the numbers of tourists which decreased in the first half of 2014 by 9.1% compared to the same period of the year 2013 (Bank Audi, 2014) which had also seen a decline in the number of tourists by 10% compared to 2012 (Daily Star, 2013).

In the first half of 2014 as well, Iraqi, Egyptian and Jordanian arrivals accounted for 26% of the total number of tourists visiting Lebanon, knowing that the GDP per capita in these countries is

less than that of Lebanon at rates ranging between 30 and 70% (Schellen, 2014). That is to say, the economic benefit from these people's visit is very limited given their low purchasing power.

Expatriates contribute to Lebanon's revenues by a rate of almost 20%, according to the Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs (Kuwait News Agency, 2014), while the country's tourism sector accounts for about a quarter of the GDP (BankMed, 2013). These expatriates are widespread around the world and make up about four times the number of people residing in the country (table 1).

LITTERATURE REVIEW

The word migrant is defined as persons or groups settling down in a country other than their country of origin (Larousse, 2014). The International Organization for Migration (2014) defines the migrant as anyone who moved from his country with the intention of long term residency so as to improve his living conditions at different levels. For his part, the French writer Yves Montenay (2012) said the migrant is someone who moved from his homeland to other countries for at least one year. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2014), in turn, defines the migrant as someone who moved to a country other than his place of residency for at least one year, which thus becomes his new country.

Based on all these convergent definitions, we can say that the migrant is someone who decided to leave his homeland towards a new destination he opted for as it suits better his ambitions.

There are numerous reasons for people's immigration. Based on the few available statistics, large numbers of Lebanese citizens have left Lebanon since 1860 with the aim of living safely or looking for better work or investment opportunities (Younes et al., 2001). Let alone another key reason, i.e. the reunification of Lebanese families which some of their members live abroad. After early immigrants settled down in the countries they went to, their success stories in various work fields attracted their family members and relatives who were still in Lebanon.

As it is impossible to completely separate expatriate tourism from other kinds of tourism (such as cultural tourism, heritage tourism, etc.), a study into the special features of this tourism and the expats' potential role in this sector will be deemed as paramount.

Expatriate tourism is a specialized sector in the global tourism market having different features than other kinds of tourism (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2009). What the expatriate looks for by visiting his homeland differs from other tourists' needs. As well, his spending money pattern during his visit differs from that of the foreign tourist (Pearce, 2005); the expatriate feels that he belongs to the country he visits, which may prompt him to manage without the services provided by tourism agents who usually play a crucial role in facilitating the foreign tourist's visit.

Some governments of countries producing migrants endeavor to attract members of their Diasporas to visit their homeland (Elliott, 1997). If their efforts pay off, the goals cannot be limited to these governments' will to strengthen ties between migrants and their land but go further to make these tourist destinations benefit from new opportunities in the global tourism market. The image carried by expats to their immigration countries after their visit plays a vital role which not only encourages other Diaspora members but also motivates foreigners to make such visit (Morrison, 2013). As a result, new markets are created which increases the tourism sector's revenues and work opportunities for local residents and contributes in bridging the deficit in the balance of payments of these developing countries.

METHODOLOGY

The literature review shows clearly how important it is for Lebanon to attract expats and encourage them to visit their homeland as well as the subsequent positive results that could ensue on the economic and social levels.

The facts and figures mentioned previously show us the importance of working on reviving the tourism sector by focusing on the Lebanese expats' potential role in it.

Herein lies the importance of the main question in this research: What role could be played by expatriate tourism in Lebanon?

In order to give a clear answer to the main question, the following sub-questions should be asked in an attempt to find them answers throughout our study:

What are the features of expatriate tourism?

What are the expats' needs when visiting Lebanon?

How could the expatriate tourism be developed in Lebanon?

Rare are the studies that tackled the expatriates' key role in tourism in general. In spite of the growing awareness of several countries producing migrants over the need to address the topic of attracting expats as part of their tourism plans, most attempts are still lacking professionalism in dealing with the issue.

The shortage of figures and information relating to the Lebanese expats at ministries and competent authorities was a major obstacle to us in this study. Thus, we were compelled to conduct a poll to know the expatriates' opinion. In the sampling process, online sampling

calculation tool was used and the sample size determined based on the total number of expatriates (table 1).

Table 1: Numbers of Lebanese expatriates in the countries where they are spread out (Source: Sabbagh, 2009)

Country	Estimated number of Lebanese expatriates
Brazil	8 500 000
Argentina	3 250 000
The United States of America	3 650 000
Venezuela	1 050 000
Mexico	1 000 000
Colombia	812 500
Canada	457 000
Australia	460 500
France	375 000
The United Arab Emirates	150 000
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	120 000
Ecuador	100 000
Ivory Coast	100 000
Uruguay	80 000
Kuwait	80 000
Senegal	80 000
Germany	75 000
South Africa	50 000
New Zealand	45 300
Spain	39 810
Other countries	1 858 200
Total	18 682 810

In the calculation, confidence level was taken as 99% and confidence interval was taken as 5%. The questionnaire was distributed through emails and social media to the total of 666 persons of the Lebanese Diasporas while taking into account the different age categories and work fields. The forms were distributed in six countries topping the list of Lebanese Diaspora in the world which are Brazil, Argentina, the United States of America, Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia (table 1). 581 filled-in forms out of 666 were returned to the researcher. Questionnaires were provided in

Arabic, French, English, Spanish and Portuguese languages. Besides the questionnaire (our main source of primary data), we relied on several available references and similar cases in other countries to obtain the needed secondary information.

Analysis

We get to know the benefits of developing expatriate tourism in Lebanon only by studying the features of this kind of tourism and the Lebanese expatriate's characteristics as a tourist in parallel with current reality of the Lebanese tourism. One of the major features of the Lebanese tourism reality is the presence of "tourist pockets" in the capital and around the main tourist attractions. Such pockets benefit almost exclusively from the positive aspects of this industry while most of the rural areas remain deprived from this blessing for many reasons, the simplest not being the lack of infrastructure and ultrastructure which is essential to attract foreign tourists (Mason, 2003).

Expatriate tourism could be a solution to the tourist pockets issue; the results of the poll that we conducted have shown that 71.3% of Lebanese expats prefer to stay in Lebanese guest houses or small hotels in rural areas and 80% prefer to eat in local restaurants. These high rates imply that the bulk of expatriate tourism revenues – if developed – go directly to locals living in cities and rural areas alike. Most of the other tourism kinds fail to secure this outcome.

A distinction should be made between two categories of expatriates (Cohen, 2008): The first one includes the first-generation. A large part of those no longer have relatives in Lebanon. Thus, they have no choice but to stay in hotels and go to restaurants to eat throughout their visit to Lebanon. The second category, however, consists of the Lebanese who have recently immigrated. They still have relatives living in Lebanon and they often use, during their visit, the services and facilitations used by local residents.

It was revealed to us that 69% of those surveyed consider the main objective of their visit to Lebanon to be spending time with their families and relatives while 27% (the majority of whom are retirees) voiced their willingness to visit Lebanon at any time of the year, which indicates that their decision is not affected by climatic factors. Here, it was revealed to us that while most of tourism types in Lebanon are suffering from severe seasonality, expatriate tourism development may contribute in alleviating the impact of this problem by ensuring job opportunities all year round in hotel and tourism institutions.

Furthermore, the Lebanese immigrants have a clear idea about the reality of the security situation in Lebanon; they may distinguish between safe areas and areas that are grappling with security problems. This differentiates them from foreign tourists who often rush to cancel their visit to Lebanon and change it to another destination upon the outbreak of any security problem.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The World Tourism Organization defined tourists as people traveling to places outside their usual environment for not less than 24 hours and not more than one year for leisure, business and other purposes (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2009). This definition is not exempted from confusion if applied to the expatriate tourism, especially that it was revealed to us that 43% of the immigrants enter Lebanon carrying their Lebanese passport, creating thus an obstacle to calculating the numbers of people contributing actually in the expatriate tourism. However, there is no doubt that many types of tourism may attract Lebanese expats and for this reason, we have mentioned in our study that it is almost impossible to separate expatriate tourism from other types of tourism; the heritage tourism is for instance one of the main types of tourism, which benefits directly from the expatriate tourism.

During the expatriates' visit to their regions, they often combine between family visits and activities that are usually carried out by tourists such as leisure and attending festivals (Hall, 2008). This puts expatriate tourism in medial position between international tourism and domestic tourism, thus the expatriate tourism has a direct positive impact on other types of tourism.

Based on Lebanon's features and resources, we can enumerate various types of tourism, which can play a key role in attracting tourists in general and expatriates in particular, such as leisure, religious, cultural, business, health, conference, sports, adventure-related tourism ... We will tackle in our study the different types that were deemed as priorities for expatriates, according to the survey, namely the following:

a- Health tourism

The promotional campaigns for health tourism in Lebanon should reach out to the Lebanese expatriate who may benefit during his visit to his homeland from medical sector development therein. The health tourism may constitute, in some cases, a key reason to the expatriates' visit. Many countries such as India, Taiwan and Philippines started to market the health tourism as part of their plans to develop expatriate tourism.

b- Business tourism

The conferences and business tourism might be one of the most beneficiaries of any plan aiming to make expatriates attracted to Lebanon, especially that 62 out of 94 Lebanese businessmen included in the survey, showed their willingness to hold some of their companies' conferences in Lebanon. As well, 44 businessmen also confirmed their primary

interest in investing in the Lebanese economy sectors and called on the Lebanese state to encourage the expatriates' investment.

c- Elderly tourism

The elderly expatriates' visit may have an exceptional economic importance as their stay lasts often much longer than that of other tourists and might be associated with investments that are beneficial to Lebanon's economy. Based on this, we must seriously consider the importance of marketing Lebanon as a second place of residence for the expatriates who have reached the retirement age in immigration countries.

d- Heritage tourism

This type of tourism is of an exceptional importance for expats, especially that it is based on two basic elements, namely the culture and the history. In this context, the genealogy tourism constitutes one of the main modern and innovative forms of the heritage tourism which is exclusively addressed to "the tourism market of expats". Many of the old expatriates are interested in searching for their roots in Lebanon. Such interest in attracting this category of expatriates contributes thus to the development of several Lebanese rural areas.

e- Religious tourism

On a global scale, religious tourism is one of the fastest-growing types of tourism in recent years. Thus, the unique religious legacy which characterizes Lebanon may constitute a key element of attraction for the Lebanese expatriates of different doctrines.

f- Obstacles to development of expatriate tourism

The survey revealed to us the striking differences in expatriates' needs and expectations from their visit to Lebanon amongst different age groups within the same Diaspora as well as amongst different Diasporas in some cases. For instance, just to name a few, 82% of elderly who were born in Lebanon and immigrated at an early age, have nostalgia to the roots and interest in visiting villages and places that remind them of their childhood. They also voice willingness to purchase rural products. However, 71% of those who are not over 40 prefer to visit the capital and some of the main historical sites. This difference in interests imposes a serious challenge i.e. understanding the various expatriate groups and their needs in order to satisfy them by ensuring the appropriate tourism product for each category.

The Lebanese State has undertaken some measures with regards to the Lebanese expatriation but they remain insignificant as they are limited to some seminars, conferences and visits to some Diasporas by political officials.

Based on all the above, it became clear that the Lebanese expatriates can play influential roles (direct and indirect) in tourism development. As we have already mentioned that in addition to being tourists, they can be, at the same time, investors, promoters of the Lebanese tourism abroad, informal ambassadors to Lebanon in immigration countries.

The activities that are suggested by the Lebanese expatriates included in this study are as follows:

- Organizing festivals across the Lebanese regions and marketing them in immigration countries. In Lebanon, for instance, Dhour El Choueir Festival has currently a unique expatriate feature.
- Organizing conferences and business meetings bringing together the Lebanese expatriates from various immigration countries.
- Organizing trips for the retired expatriates.
- Marketing health tourism.

At the strategic level, the Lebanese State shall put the following key recommendations at the core of its priorities, should it seriously decide to give the expatriate tourism the attention it deserves:

- Granting the Lebanese nationality to the Lebanese expatriates with the aim of strengthening their sense of belonging to the nation.
- Drawing up a detailed plan for the expatriate tourism development.
- Supporting heritage and sports activities held with the participation of expatriates.
- Ensuring an active presence of expatriate tourism through internet and social media platforms.
- Facilitating the entry of Lebanese expatriates and people of Lebanese descent to Lebanon.
- Securing flights between Lebanon and immigration countries at affordable prices.
- Building bridges of communication between Lebanese residents and expats through tourism, culture, trade, etc.
- Encouraging the investment of Lebanese expatriates in various sectors of the Lebanese economy.

At the tactical level and based on our study, we suggest the following procedures that are essential for a right development of the expatriate tourism:

- A hard work by the various municipalities of Lebanese cities and villages through having recourse to experts specialized in tourism.
- A close cooperation between the Ministry of Tourism, specialized experts and municipalities with the aim of activating expatriate tourism.

- A serious cooperation between the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to communicate effectively with the Lebanese in countries of immigration.

Although tourism has turned into a key economic sector for most of the developing countries, a random process of developing tourism remains risky as the environmental, social and cultural damages that could be caused by some irresponsible types of tourism far outweigh their economic benefits. Therefore, with the beginning of the last quarter of past century, the tourism industry has started to realize the importance of going beyond the resource-depleting traditional tourism. This study revealed to us that we could label the expatriate tourism as a form of sustainable tourism given the fact that it is linked to rural development, it preserves the cultural heritage and it plays a role in making rural areas reach out to the international tourism market.

The relation between the Lebanese expatriates and their homeland may be strengthened through tourism - making thus the Lebanese economy more engaged in the international economic system - by motivating them to invest in the tourism sector which develops these areas on the economic and social levels. All the above highlights the need to give expatriate tourism the attention it deserves and to make it an integral part of the strategic plan for tourism development.

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