

# *U.S. sanctions are blessing in disguise for Iranian tourism*

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Tehran, September 9 (RHC)-- Tourism in Iran is on the rise, despite Washington's sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

Foreign tourist arrivals in Iran have grown exponentially in the last one year, according to tourism officials and travel agents, which is good news for the tourism industry; even though hotel rates have dropped drastically and travelling costs have declined.

According to the latest study by World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), Iran's travel and tourism sector grew by 1.9 percent in 2018 to contribute 1,158 trillion rials (\$8.83 billion) or 6.5 percent of overall GDP and 1,334 jobs (5.4 percent of total employment) to the country's economy. The report also stated that foreign visitors coming to Iran splurged 168,954 billion rials (\$1.28 billion) in 2018 and projected foreign arrivals to reach 6.5 million in 2019.

Another report by the Cultural Heritage, Handicraft and Tourism Organization (CHTO) of Iran also showed that the number of foreign arrivals in Iran surged by 40.66 percent during the spring this year compared to the same period last year.

A total of 2,030,523 million foreign nationals visited Iran this spring (three months starting March 21), while the figure stood at 1,443,551 in the same period last year, it added.

“The development of tourism infrastructure, the considerable volume of investments in the tourism sector, the issuance of electronic visa and visa waiver for select countries are the main reasons behind it,” said Ali Asghar Mounesan, the head of CHTO.

About 7.8 million tourists traveled to Iran in the last Iranian calendar year [ending March 20, 2019], marking a 52.5 percent growth compared to the previous year, he informed.

With the country’s economy sliding towards recession due to unprecedented U.S. economic sanctions and shrinking oil exports, Iranian authorities are now increasingly focusing on the tourism industry.

Iranian authorities have redoubled efforts to woo more foreign travelers to Iran by announcing last August that it would no longer stamp passports of foreign visitors to help them bypass a U.S. travel ban.

Most of the tourists come from Iraq, China, Azerbaijan, India, Afghanistan, Turkey, Pakistan, and some European countries. Iraqi travelers, according to government data, constitute Iran’s main source of tourism revenue.

Now Iranian tourism officials have set their sights on China, a lucrative market for tourism in the region and the country with the world’s most outbound tourists. The Iranian government has decided to waive the visa requirement for Chinese passport holders, hoping to draw around two million Chinese tourists per year, a significant leap from 52,000 that visited the country last year.

Pertinently, China is one of the countries that have openly defied the US sanctions against Iran and continues to do oil trade with Tehran. Turkish entrepreneurs, according to reports, have also shown interest in investing in Iran’s booming tourism industry.

Turkish entrepreneur and hotelier Tuncay Kilit, who owns a chain of Crystal Hotels across Turkey, is all set to make his foray into the Iranian hospitality sector with a 1,000-room hotel spread over 10 hectares in Kish, a resort island off the southern coast of Iran in the Persian Gulf.

Kilit Hospitality Group and Kish Free Trade Zone finalized the deal last month for the mega project. During the signing ceremony, Kish Free Trade Zone general manager Gholamhoseyn Mozaffari said a large number of investors from Qatar, Oman and Iraq have also shown interest in investing in the island.

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