

Book Review

Tourism in the Middle East: Continuity, Change and Transformation

Editor: Rami Farouk Daher
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The term Middle East remains enigmatic despite its frequent use in world politics, economy, culture, and of course tourism. There are several other terms that have regularly appeared in related literature to identify the geographic region spanning southwest Asia, northeast Africa and some parts of southeast Europe. Terms like West Asia and Near East have been used synonymously to denote the area which has great political and economic significance for the modern world while Bilad Al Sham, Mashreq or the Levant have had historical references to parts of the region. In the emerging world order Middle East holds the key for economic growth with its oil resources, and world peace with the conflict between Israel & Palestine. Tourism is often viewed as a harbinger of prosperity and peace and if, in the Middle East region, these are carefully handled we can have hope of a better future for planet Earth.

“The Middle East marks the point where Europe stops being Europe and gradually, untidily, and somewhat uneasily morphs into another place and culture. Here, globalization is a new phenomenon. Over the years a great imagining of difference relating to the Middle East has constantly veered from romanticized fascination and engagement, to that of suspicion and fear on both sides of the perceptual divide”. These few lines have been taken from the Preface written by Mike Robinson, of the book ‘Tourism in the Middle East: Continuity, Change and Transformation’ edited by Rami Farouk Daher. Tourism in the Middle East has a very long and enchanting history. Middle East is, not only the geo-political expanse that divides Europe from Asia, but as rightly pointed out by Robinson in the preface, “the very place that binds them together”.

Divided in eleven chapters this edited book ‘explores’ tourism in the Middle East. This claim of the Editor is quite relevant in the context of the book which covers a vast range of issues. Physical specifications of the book give an ordinary feel. The book is a paperback and small with unimpressive looks, though the small size provides a rather comfortable handling while reading. The book does not have a glossary of terms

and subjects, making it very difficult for the reader to search topics on a re-read. This surely is a flaw in the organization of the book. The paper quality and typesetting also fail to impress.

The first chapter, itself sets the tone for the scope of the book. The editor has contributed two chapters in the book the first and the tenth and the common term that appears in the title of both is ‘heritage’. Both these chapters reflect the deep interest and understanding of the author in regard to the significance of heritage and its causal relation with modern tourism. Being a trained architect and belonging to the core of Middle East gives Rami Farouk the sensitivity to comprehend the nuances of Middle Eastern culture and polity which is the high light of his contribution. Development of tourism in the Middle East has been traced from the ‘colonial encounters’ in search of ‘orientalism’ to the present geopolitical mosaic of nations. The first chapter traces the historical, geopolitical and cultural dimensions of the region which the author prefers to call a ‘multi discursive’ approach. This introductory chapter, in the process of describing in some details the area and heritage of the Middle East region, also includes an introduction to the rest of the chapters of the book. It is heartening to read the transformation of the Arab world which was primarily explored as a getaway for Europeans in search of some form of oriental culture into an amalgam of modernity and tradition. The lucid details of cities, heritage sites, mosques, souqs, and coffee joints and the tourist activities related to these take the reader on a trip or cultural voyage of the Arab world. The highlight of this first chapter is its continual explanation of current tourism trends in regard to the sites and cities dealt with. The tour operatives and their methodology in attracting and delivering the product has added value to the comprehensive discourse. Egypt, Jordan and Syria form the nucleus of the chapter for details with references to Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., and Oman along with specific mentions of important cities like Cairo, Luxor, Damascus, Amman and Dubai. The chapter also deals with government policies towards development of tourism and has been able to attract meaningful attention towards the anomaly of

global versus local. Investments in tourism projects by multinational companies are encouraged in many countries of the Middle East at the same time depriving the locals of any significant benefits. "The irony is that same planning and development ordinances that have prohibited one local community's development initiatives can swiftly be changed when the 'right' investor or global capital proposes their own development scheme." The chapter has drawn attention to a significant issue here.

'A Historiography of Tourism in Cairo: A Spatial Perspective', is the second chapter authored by Noha Nasser. The nature of tourism in Cairo and its main features from the Islamic era through the Imperialist period to the post-revolution period of about a thousand years is an interesting narrative. "The chapter has traced the way in which the changing nature of tourism has impacted on the evolution of Cairo' providing an insight into its position of being a 'commodity catering for European-colonialist leisure and taste'. It also touches upon the ramifications of the economic impacts ensuing due to tourism as it is practiced presently.

A chapter by Saba Al Mahadin and Peter Burns on Visitors, Vision and Veils critically examines the portrayal of the Arab world in western media. The inconsistency in perception of the worlds belonging to the host and that of the guests as advertised by promoters of tourism is the focus of discussion. The inconsistencies lead to misinterpretation of 'Orientalism' into backwardness, the authors argue. The chapter offers valuable suggestions in areas of international relations, public administration and policy studies in tourism to bridge the gap between reality and perception and improve the benefits of tourism politically, economically and socially.

Chapters seven and eight discuss tourism of two of the Gulf countries Oman and Saudi Arabia respectively. Oman is comparatively a progressive state with a 'Ministry of Tourism' in place and is in the process of attracting high spenders to its main tourism destinations. Brigit Mershen in this article though has focused on another important issue, that of 'community tourism' with the participation of the locals where the benefits too should accrue to the community. The article by Peter Burns on Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has its focus on 'the paradoxes and dilemmas facing Saudi Arabia as it embarks on a sustained program of tourism development'. It is a well researched article bringing out the predicaments of a

society which wants to keep its deep rooted traditions and at the same time reap the fruits of modernity.

Overall the book is a good collection of articles on the Middle East. It provides a deep insight into the psyche of the people, culture and governments of countries which have often been misunderstood. Tourism has provided the backdrop to the 'discourses' throughout the book while the conflicts and contradictions of the mid-eastern society have been beautifully brought forth for the reader to comprehend. The articles are analytical, critical and forthright in their approach, the credit of which should go to the editor. Upon casual browsing of the 'contents' the book seems just a collection of articles on the Middle East but when the reader absorbs the inference of the chapters one after the other the coherence of the compilation shores up. In fairness to the editor it can be accepted that it was not possible to cover all that is tourism in the Middle East in one volume. There still are several pertinent issues which are very relevant in the modern context of tourism which have not been touched upon. One of them is the issue of Tourism Organizational Structures, especially in the comparatively peaceful Gulf region, all of which are some sort of 'kingdoms'. Governance in general and tourism governance in particular depends upon the outlook of the ruling clan. On one hand Dubai has become a modern metropolis and on the other, cash rich Saudi's still run away to Bahrain for seeking pleasure. Issues related to Palestine and Israel too needed specific treatment in a book that covers so much in the Middle East. Not much light has been thrown on Iraq and probably Iran was never taken into consideration for the purpose of this collection.

The book fills a long awaited void on literature on tourism of the Middle East. It is probably the first collection of its kind. Efforts of all the contributors are praiseworthy. The book is an attempt to compile various facets of tourism in the Middle East and has heavily relied upon historical evidence. Middle East tourism certainly deserves a better treatise and this book may encourage other authors to follow up a well researched comprehensive book.

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