




RUSAYL RISING

Industrialists in Rusayl take stock of the financial implications of the recent protests and debate the way ahead

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REVIVING THE AURA

The Ministry of Tourism has formed a new working committee to come up with initiatives to regain the confidence of travellers, but it remains to be seen whether the effects will be visible in the upcoming tourist season. Ramya Dilipkumar reports

Battling the perceptions of an outsider is always a difficult task, especially when the judgment is clouded by a regional perspective arrived at clubbing various non-related events. Recent protests not only disrupted business in the hospitality industry, but also saw a marked rise in cancellations for inbound travel after the region, including Oman, garnered enough negative publicity from reports across the globe.

In an effort to counteract any damage to Oman's reputation as a tourist destination, Ministry of Tourism has formed a new Tourism Industry Working Group (TIWG) in March comprising ten members from various sectors. Some of the members of TIWG include Oman Air, Omran and Bahwan Travel Agency. "The aim and objective of this working group is to come up with ideas and solutions on how to clear the misconceptions of the people around the globe about the recent events in Oman and also to communicate that it is business as usual here," says Salim al Mamari, director general, Tourism Promotions, Ministry of Tourism. The current working committee is a temporary initiative and once confidence is restored among tourists, a permanent committee would be formed to deal with any future contingencies.

A slew of initiatives ranging from the appointment of an international PR agency to arranging familiarisation trips for travel journalists and tour operators along with campaigns promoting Oman as a destination on BBC World are being undertaken. The ministry is banking on its global network and strong international ties to set things right by September, when the tourist season kicks in. While executives across sectors applaud the ministry's initiatives as a swift and prompt response, some point out that altering perceptions of the international tourist could take a slightly longer time. But all agree that constant communication with the outside world is a must and would be crucial for the success of this group in the long run.

The antidote

With visitor arrivals at Muscat International Airport registering a 13 per cent rise in 2010 reaching 2.08mn passengers, Oman was just congratulating itself when protests took off February end. In just one month since then there has been a marked decline in the influx of tourists. While no figures were available



The working group will communicate to outsiders that business is as usual in Oman, says al Mamari

from the Ministry of Tourism, Shankar Bose, general manager, Bahwan Travel Agency says his company witnessed a 30 per cent drop in business between late February and end of March, as inbound tour cancellations rose. As for the hospitality industry, a rise in cancellations of rooms and events alone is estimated to have cost just six of the 64 mid-to-top range hotels around RO4.1mn. Occupancy rates at most high end hotels are down by about 30 per cent compared to the same time last year. Heightened travel advisories issued by several countries against visiting the sultanate also had a toll on tourist arrivals. "What happened in Oman was due to internal issues in several private sector companies. But that was perceived and portrayed in the wrong light by the international media," points out al Mamari.

Many feel that the appointment of an international PR firm for damage control will be effective in alleviating the negative sentiments. The PR firm, Four Communications, has been given the responsibility of generating periodical press releases about Oman as a safe destination for tourists. The agency is



Collaborations among destination management companies can help promote the group's initiatives, says Bose



The initiatives of the committee are very good, but the timing may not be right, says Brandes



Tourists are used to similar industrial strikes in their own home countries, says al Shikely

also collating the reports about Oman from international news agencies to help it assess the right tone of message to be incorporated in communicating to the masses to that region. Christoph K Franzen, general manager, Grand Hyatt, Muscat says, "Industries don't have all the channels to reach a global audience at their disposal. Appointing a PR agency that drives the correct message through the Ministry of Tourism representatives in various parts of the world is the right way to go about it."

The working group is organising 26 familiarisation trips from end April bringing in tour operators and journalists from around the world to convey the message about the actual scenario in Oman, an initiative that tour operators like Bahwan Travel Agency are aiding with. "Over the years there has been an ongoing effort undertaken by Oman

Air and the Ministry of Tourism to help bring in journalists and major tour operators and this has helped build fantastic relationships with both the media and tour operators around the world. Today we can talk to and tap into those sectors using the relationship we have established over the years," says Mohammed al-Shikely, general manager, marketing, Oman Air.

Nine-month long marketing campaigns on BBC World to promote the destination, and a collaboration with lastminute.com, an online travel agency, to target travellers from the UK and GCC by offering deals have already been set in motion. Beginning June, the ministry will organise road shows in Rome, Milan and Paris to promote Oman as a tourist destination. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Tourism has urged hotels and tour operators to collaborate and come up

attractive packages to motivate tourists. Other initiatives by the working group include plans to introduce a 96-hour visa-free stay in Oman for passengers in transit to other destinations.

York Brandes, general manager, The Chedi Muscat, says while these initiatives are very good and effective, this may not be the right timing. "We are going into the traditional low season – the summer – so a lot of money is being invested in a period where nobody want to come. At the moment our bookings are three to four weeks in advance. It could be much more effective to go out in September, before the next high season and make some noise to showcase the destination and drive the point across that what happened in February and March is history. If you do the campaigns now, after five months of quiet season people may forget



Industries don't have all channels to reach a global audience, so a dedicated PR agency helps, says Franzen



Even though the tourism industry will enter a low season, perceptions remain, says al Lawati

the positive message and their enthusiasm.”

Wael al Lawati, CEO, Omran, has a different view. “Even though the industry is about to enter the low season perceptions remain. It takes a long time to restore confidence in travelers and that is something that needs to be undertaken in both the short and medium term in 2011.”

Shikely also points out that while these protests are a new phenomenon in Oman, tourists around the world are used to witnessing similar industrial strikes in their own home countries and such events may not have shaken confidence enough to deter tourists from coming back into Oman for the next season.

Future trends

Al Mamari is confident that these initiatives will bring tourism back to normal levels as

seen in the previous years by the time the tourist season kicks in, but those in the industry point out much will depend on what is happening in the region – negative press about regions near Oman can also have a negative impact.

Bose says collaboration among destination management companies in Oman could go a long way in promoting the initiatives by the working group. He says additionally that there can be promotional tie-ups between souks, restaurants and museums to attract tourists.

Even as they applaud the appointment of a public relations firm to communicate the right information to an international audience, some executives point out that battling out the analysis drawn by international press reports may not be an easy task. “The challenge we face is with the foreign media

channels over whom we have little or no control. But I am hoping that their position will soften considerably,” says Bose.

Hotel executives and tour operators point out that slashing room rates or offering discounted tour packages may not help much as the target audience for tourism for Oman has always been the high-end segment. Instead, value added services in packages while keeping the room rates and airfares intact may go a long way in tapping this segment, says Brandes.

It remains to be seen whether these initiatives can bring back the international tourists' confidence in time for the next season. But the tourism industry's best bet is collaboration among the different sectors in the tourism industry to effectively communicate to the international audience that Oman remains a safe and beautiful destination. ■