



Egypt's cultural tourism on a path to recovery

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After years of turmoil following the ouster of Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and the collapse in the numbers of tourists visiting the country, Egypt's cultural tourism is back on a fast track for growth. In an effort to rebuild the country's reputation as a safe destination and win back international tourists, the government has introduced measures to restore security infrastructure, upgrade visitor experience and develop new attractions, such as the Grand Egyptian Museum. Although numbers still remain well behind 2010, this recent rebound makes a strong case for the potential that tourism can offer towards the revival of affected destinations.

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Largely built on the area's diversified history and rich, world-renowned cultural heritage, tourism has been a vital component and a major source of income for the Egyptian economy. From the mid-1990s, the country asserted its place as a global tourism destination. Before 2011, tourism in Egypt accounted for over 11% of the country's GDP, holding a place as the third largest source of foreign currency and the second largest employer after the government.¹ But the upheavals that started in 2011 and overthrew President Hosni Mubarak brought years of political instability and challenges for the economy, including a high unemployment and poverty rate, rising international prices of food and fuel and currency depreciation. Tourism suffered no less: foreign visitor arrivals in 2011 declined by one third and post-revolution tourism revenues dropped by up to 53% in 2014 compared to 2010.²

The country's cultural attractions also suffered a downturn in visitor numbers: revenue from ticket sales to ancient monuments and museums dropped down to just 10.5 million dollars compared to 2010's impressive 250 million dollar figure. In the years following the political uprising, attractions and sites such as the Giza Pyramids, the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and Luxor were literally emptied. Furthermore, the lack of policing resulted in a state of lawlessness which left many archaeological sites open to looting, vandalism and illegal building activities.³ The government's financial support to the country's antiquities, monuments, museums and institutions was non-existent: major museum projects were put to a halt and many provincial museums were shut down.

But in this discouraging climate, hopeful signs of recovery appeared, implying fresh enthusiasm for promoting the country's infamous heritage. Institutions like the Egyptian Museum were forced to get creative in order to stay afloat and make up for the lack of money by extending their opening hours and offering annual passes to encourage local visitors. In another example, in Luxor, the Ministry of Antiquities opened the tombs of Nefertari and Seti I to private groups for a price of around 1100 dollars a tour. International funding has also stepped in to help with the recovery. After a suicide car bomb explosion in 2014 outside police headquarters near the Museum of Islamic Art in downtown Cairo which damaged its façade and 179 objects, a multi-million dollar foreign funding was received by the US, UAE and UNESCO to support its restoration and the renovation of its galleries. The museum reopened in 2017 with new gallery walls, marble flooring, modern lighting and new display cases.⁴

Attractions have also been equipped with improved security such as heavy policing and multiple checks and searches, the lack of which was a major source of discouragement for incoming visitors. These measures managed to refill historical sites to a great extent. But an aggressive marketing strategy and a series of reforms also helped with the recovery. The Tourist Reform Program which was launched by the Ministry of Tourism in November 2018 by Minister Rania Al Mashat introduced a strategy focusing on institutional and legislative reforms, promotional campaigns, infrastructure and the alignment of Egypt's tourism with global standards. This came together with government investments in new cultural heritage projects as well as efforts to develop and modernize the cultural visitor experience. In this context, the two largest attractions, the Giza pyramids and the new Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), scheduled to open in 2020, were set to be linked in order to complement each other and boost tourism.⁵

Branded as the largest archaeological museum in the world dedicated to a single civilization, the new museum was announced in 1992 to partially deal with the unsatisfying selection of institutions showcasing the Egyptian heritage, to address traffic issues in central Cairo due to the moving masses of tourists and to deal with overcrowding, poor acoustics and conservation issues. On a prime location outside central Cairo, on the Giza plateau, two kilometres west of the pyramids, the museum will be offering easy access, as it is constructed near the ring road that encircles the cities of Giza and Cairo.⁶

The GEM has already received many of the displays previously showcased in the iconic Egyptian Museum of Cairo, a storehouse of treasures which has been attracting visitors since its opening in 1902, but provides a rather disorientating experience with its lack of signage, little information, bad lighting and lack of storage, research and conservation facilities. Unlike the old-fashioned galleries of the old museum, some of which have not changed since its opening, the galleries of the GEM will be chronologically split into the pre-dynastic, Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom and Greco-

Roman eras with an emphasis on the social, religious and political contexts in which objects were made. It is expected to be displaying a total of 100.000 objects, out of which 20.000 have never been shown before. These will include the star attraction of Egypt, the tomb of King Tutankhamun, with all 5400 objects recovered by British archaeologist Howard Carter in 1922 (the old museum displayed only about 1500 objects). It will also incorporate a separate children's museum, 28 shops, ten restaurants, a conference centre and a 3D cinema. The facilities will be complemented by a large restoration centre with 19 laboratories specialized in the preservation and restoration of heavy monuments, wood, stone, organic and non-organic materials as well as laboratories for tests, analyses and damage assessment.⁷

Year 2017 marked a significant and steady growth for tourism. Although figures do not illustrate full recovery to pre-crisis levels, 2018 was the healthiest year for Egypt's travel economy since 2010 with revenues increasing by 28 per cent, bringing in 12.6 billion dollars for 2018/19.

In a climate of post-revolution instability, Egypt has managed to take serious steps towards rebranding itself as a modern world destination. The new mega project of the Grand Egyptian Museum and the reform of the country's cultural approach and program are promising to build an image of national confidence. The case of Egypt's struggle for reasserting its place in the industry of global tourism makes a case for how cultural attractions can be a key instrument in the recovery process after a period of political instability. It also illustrates that times of crisis and conflict can trigger creativity and reignite interest for reutilizing and redeveloping available resources in order to enhance the economy.

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