

Be enthusiastic about your country, and maybe others will be too

Sara Al-Zawqari (author)



They say that we are one of the poorest countries in the world, they say our people live below the poverty line. But we cannot keep using “poverty” as an excuse, I refuse to accept that we are a poor country. Yemen is rich with culture, history and beautiful scenery.

God created Yemen with magnificent, diverse landscapes that include valleys, bays, shorelines, mountains, deserts, waterfalls, islands and our beautiful sky. Whoever hears of all this diverse landscape available in one country would be forgiven for believing that Yemen must have a booming tourism industry.

Countries are now creating artificial beaches, mountains and deserts. We, on the other hand, have everything ready-made—we don’t need to build anything, we just need to take advantage of what we have. In addition to all of Yemen’s natural wonders and beauty, we have human-built wonders like Zabid city, Sana’a’s old city, Aden’s Sahareej, Shibam, the throne of the Queen Sheeba, the

Cairo fortress and many more historical marvels. Our simple ancestors left us an incredible history.

Many countries around the world depend heavily on tourism, and all they have to show for it are some recently built buildings or “historical” sites a few decades old. And in Yemen, history is everywhere—in every inch of the country there is something interesting to see. Just look at the Maldives, Dubai or Turkey and see how many billions they make a year from tourism alone. That’s money Yemen could make good use of. Instead, we neglect and ruin our historical sites, leaving them dirty and risking Zabid and Sana’a’s old city’s statuses on UNESCO’s World Heritage List.

Consider the millions and billions of dollars that have come into the country over the years—look around and see if you can see the results of all that money. I don’t know where it went! Well, I have an idea.

Should anyone consider visiting Yemen, a quick google search will expose them to hundreds of warnings and articles about terrorism, kidnappings and bombings.

As if murders and kidnappings don’t happen in other parts of the world. When you type Yemen into a search engine, it is difficult to find anything that isn’t negative. You’re led to believe that you’re insane and on a suicide-mission if you visit the country. If you choose to ignore all the hype and visit anyway, you will face a lot of visa troubles. Even the Yemeni government, represented by its embassies abroad, will tell you not to come and try to convince you it doesn’t issue tourism visas. I’ve never seen an embassy encourage people not to visit its country. It’s true that bad things happen, but there is more to Yemen than that.

Dear Ministry of Tourism,

Can you please let me know what you are doing? The least you can do is start building a positive image of Yemen.

Stop blaming the security and safety situation for the lack of tourism. Brazil, South Africa, the Congo and Nigeria—all dangerous places—have better images than Yemen. You need to start thinking about Yemen as a brand that needs to be well-marketed.

At the very least, if we start thinking about Yemen as a tourist destination, those of us already inside the country can begin thinking about touring Yemen. It’s difficult enough for Yemenis to get visas to travel abroad. There are places in Yemen that, if marketed properly, would discourage us from spending all of our holidays abroad. Money would stay in the country, the economy would grow, and if we start enjoying our country, maybe others will to.

So many people crave adventure, and Yemen could be marketed as a place for diving,

rock climbing and hiking. Stop blaming the security situation. Let the security forces do their jobs and you, Ministry of Tourism, do yours—or shut down, at least until the security situation improves.

Instead of preserving and taking good care of our ancient ruins, statues, sculptures and moments, we neglect them and allow them to be smuggled out of the country. Some spread stories about demons and genies that haunt these ancient places, frightening people away and leaving these areas vulnerable to theft. It gives them a green light to steal what they like and take it out of the country, selling our culture and history in the process. Many people have been caught at airports, seaports and checkpoints, but those who have not been caught are many. Even museums get robbed, and everything valuable trickles through the borders. Everything we'd rather do without makes its way to us through the borders as well.

If you wanted to go to a tourist location, you would not find proper roads or accommodation—all you would find is trash. Sometimes you reach your destination tired from the journey just to find that there is no water. All I know is that the government has neglected these places for years, instead of investing in them. If you go to Kawkaban and Shibam, home to the world's first skyscrapers, you'll have a rough time. There will be a small sign “welcoming” you, followed by no one to explain anything to you. You'll have to knock on people's doors to get the story.

When you enter any museum, you simply hand over your ticket and enter. There is no guide, book, brochure or pre-recorded tape to explain anything to you.

Stop blaming other countries for our failures, implying that they don't want us to move forward and develop. These countries care about their borders and as long as there is conflict here, they are invested in our future.

People don't understand the value of things we have, they don't see the potential in them. It's OKAY to throw our trash out wherever we happen to be or doodle on walls and buildings. This is our civilization, or history, we should learn to appreciate what we have and to take care of it. As for our government, it has a lot of responsibilities, but most importantly, it is obligated to stop the smuggling of our heritage through the borders. We have a gem, there is nothing inherently wrong with our country. What's wrong is the people who are running it.