

Safety and Security – Good reasons to visit Portugal



There is no doubt that there is a feeling of great optimism in the tourists industry and all forecasts are that 2016 could be a record year. Tourism is vital for the Portuguese economy and accounts for about 10% of our gross domestic product (GDP).

A record number of foreign tourists stayed in hotels last year, with the number surpassing 10 million visitors for the first time and boosting hotel revenues to nearly 2.5 billion euros (\$2.8 billion), according to official data released recently.

The National Statistics Institute (INE) shows that the number of foreign tourists reached 10.18 million in 2015, a rise of 10 percent on the previous year. As economic growth accelerated to 1.5 percent last year from 0.9 percent in 2014, the number of local travellers rose by 7 percent to 7.3 million.

Hotel revenues rose by more than 13 percent, outpacing the tourist arrivals growth, as hotels were able to increase prices thanks to strong demand.

Portugal opened more than 50 new hotels, practically all of them four- and five-star establishments, last year.

A study released by the Portuguese Tourism Institute (IPDT) states that the overwhelming majority of tourism operators here expect better results in 2016 than they did last year, which was the best to date.

The Tourism Barometer revealed that more than two-thirds (67.8 percent) of operators said this year would top 2015, while a quarter said that they believed results in 2016 would match those of last year.

Importance of Safety and Security

ABTA, the UK's travel trade association for tour operators and travel agents, states that the safety and wellbeing of consumers is an integral part of the holiday experience. In a recent ABTA consumer survey, the

results showed that safety and security was the number one priority with 89% of consumers highlighting this as important or very important.

However it is also a fact that tourists are less likely to pay attention to security issues while on vacation, and more willing to take risks, or to visit unfamiliar environments. Tourists seek to rest and enjoy their leisure time; holidays are generally associated with tranquillity and a break from the negative aspects and events of everyday life.

Indicators of how Portugal stands

We unfortunately live in a troubled world with a high risk of terrorism in a number of European countries. Viewing a European terrorism map based on information provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), shows Portugal as a low risk country - an "oasis", surrounded by European and North African countries where the risk is high/very high. Of course one could argue the case that nowhere is safe, but it is a fact that the risk here is much lower than most places.

The Global Peace Index 2016, produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) shows Portugal at 11th position out of 162 countries in terms of "peace". The index gauges global peace using three broad themes: the level of safety and security in society, the extent of domestic and international conflict and the degree of militarisation. The recent report states that "Portugal was the greatest improver in Europe, jumping five places in the both the global and European rankings. Portugal's score was boosted by a reduction in political instability following its exit from the EU/IMF economic and financial adjustment programme. Like neighbouring Spain, Portugal also benefitted from a reduction in the likelihood of violent demonstrations at anti-austerity marches".

In terms of crime, latest statistics show an overall crime rate of 34.3 crimes per 1000 of population, the lowest in Europe compared to 39.4 just 5 years ago. Crime has been steadily decreasing since 2008 although there was a small 1% increase in 2015. Violent crime has decreased significantly over the last 5 years with the largest decreases being in the Algarve, including the main holiday destinations.

In terms of visitors perceptions, survey's undertaken by the University of Algarve and by Safe Communities Algarve, echo this with findings showing that the overwhelming number of tourists considering the Algarve a very safe place to visit.

Maintaining Portugal as a Safe Destination

The current situation in Portugal does not come about by accident. Portugal may not be a rich country – but I have found in my experience in working closely with the police and other entities, that it is "rich" in terms of developing initiatives aimed at ensuring it is a safe and secure destination for tourists.

There are some excellent projects in place especially designed to give support to tourists.

One of these is the "Estou Aqui – I am Here" Project run by the PSP police. Basically this is a simple bracelet for children aged between 2 – 9 years of age which can be ordered in advanced and collected or obtained from any PSP station. The bracelet is registered and should the child go missing and is found the police can locate the parents through the details they have on record. Last year some 51,000 children were registered. It is also available for vulnerable adults.

During the last few years both the GNR and PSP have invested in foreign language training and more recently the GNR, developed an excellent initiative by introducing training in "sign language" for some of its front line staff. The language training is available in both English and in German.

Given the very high number of tourists visiting places such as Lisbon and the Algarve both the GNR and PSP have invested in tourism support, through increased deployments during the summer months (in the Algarve), as well as dedicated beach patrols. Such patrols are undertaken by quad bikes and by bicycle. These help in ensuring both visibility, a deterrence to crime and support to tourists who are in need.

In certain areas the PSP have Police Tourism posts. I have visited these in Lisbon, Cascais and Praia da Rocha, and they are well equipped to deal with all sorts of matters involving tourists. The staff have been especially trained for this work and usually speak several languages.

To help with dealing with tourists from Spain, it is now the practice that the police and Spanish police patrol together in a number of holiday resort areas in Portugal at peak holiday periods.

Inner cities can often become places where due to the high concentration of people, this gives rise to crimes such as pickpocketing. Although this occurs in Lisbon, the figures are low in comparison with cities in countries close to Portugal. The police have developed a number of initiatives aimed at tackling this problem including holding an international seminar aimed at exchanging information and good practices with their overseas counterparts.

Recently the Secretary of State of Home Affairs, Jorge Gomes outlined a number of initiatives to add to those mentioned above including creating “efficient coordination and fiscalization instruments” in terms of border controls increasingly important in the European context in dealing with the increasing terror threat. Included in the announcements is a smartphone app to help tourists, and “tourism teams” to deal with tourists should they require assistance.

However maintaining a safe destination is not only a police responsibility but rather a collective responsibility by taking simple day to day measures to reduce further the risk of opportunist crime.

The Role of Safe Communities Portugal

We have a vital role to play in this and this is recognized by the Secretary of State for Tourism, when I met with her recently. During the meeting we discussed a number of initiatives, which we have already been involved in as well as ideas for the future. Safe Communities Portugal is part of the “Algarve - Safe Destination” project and in our website www.safecommunitiesportugal.com we have crime prevention advice available to tourists in 10 different languages. We have links to eight different Embassies and have worked with both the PSP, GNR and ANPC (Civil Protection) in developing initiatives to help ensure that visiting Portugal is a safe and enjoyable experience for tourists.

Portugal is indeed a safe destination but with more work it could become the world’s safest – something we should all aspire to.

David Thomas

President

Safe Communities Portugal

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