

## Malta Govt open to more UAE airlines flying to island nation



By Parag Deulgaonkar on Sunday, April 05, 2009

Malta's government is open to the idea of more UAE-based airlines flying to the island nation in addition to Emirates, a top government official has revealed.

"We haven't got in touch with them [Etihad Airways and Air Arabia] yet but it will be interesting to talk to them. However, we are in constant contact with airlines to increase the number of flights," said Malta's Parliamentary Secretary for Tourism Dr Mario de Marco.

Etihad and Air Arabia are aggressively looking to expand their networks in the Middle East and Europe.

Currently, Emirates is the only carrier offering a daily service to Malta with a stopover in Larnaca, Cyprus, using Boeing 777-200 or 777-300, including belly-hold cargo services.

In 2008, the airline flew 25,000 one-way passengers to Malta.

"Dubai is the gateway to the region and that is why we definitely welcomed Emirates' decision to move to a daily flight."

Besides, the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) is considering appointing a public relations agency to promote and market the country in Dubai.

"The MTA is making inquiries about appointing a PR agent in the emirate," added De Marco. "We are also actively promoting our English language courses in the region."

He said 2008 was a record year with close to 1.3 million tourists, including 543,000 cruise liners passengers, visiting the country.

"It was great year for tourism. We also registered more than 11 million bed nights – a record."

Dr de Marco said the global economic crisis was causing problems for the tourism industry everywhere, including Malta.

"We are suffering like other countries – we started to see a downturn

in the last four months of 2008. However, we have still registered an increase of over four per cent on the 2007 figure despite seeing a downturn in the past few months."

He said the crisis had not affected people's wish to travel but had reduced their ability to afford it. A shift was being seen from long-haul to medium and short-haul travel. People would forfeit their second or third holiday – but not their annual vacation. Moreover, lead times for holiday bookings were getting shorter.

"Usually, we have people booking their holidays three to five months in advance, but now the lead time is getting as short as three weeks.

"But what tour operators are doing is offering heavy reductions if a customer books a holidays early. This is the way things are and so it is hard to predict what will happen in 2009."

Malta has adopted a two-pronged strategy based on accessibility and promotion. Air Malta is now using all its aircraft on scheduled services and new routes, which has the potential of yielding 69,000 more visitors.

In addition the MTA's marketing team is meeting every two weeks to review the situation. The government has allocated €20.9 million (Dh103.5m) to promote the country, including direct marketing and joint marketing with stakeholders. The MTA will also be helping hotels to arrange their own advertising. And 1,000 travel agents will be brought to Malta on familiarisation visits from April, according to The Times of Malta newspaper.

The Britons top the list of nationalities visiting Malta, followed by Germans and Italians in joint second place. The French, Russians, Scandinavians and Dutch came next. The country also attracted tourists from North African markets such as Libya, Tunisia and Egypt.

#### **The factfile**

Malta comprises an archipelago of seven islands situated in the southern European areas of the Mediterranean sea.

It has a population of 400,000 with tourism contributing almost 30 per cent to its gross domestic product.

It has recently privatised some state-controlled firms and liberalised markets in order to prepare for membership in the European Union, which it joined in 2004. The Maltese Government announced on January 8, 2007 that it is selling its 40 per cent stake in Maltapost, in order to complete a privatisation process, which has been ongoing for the past five years.