

Preface

For the ancient Greeks, the world was essentially divided into an East and a West. This notion of a world of two halves was largely continued by the Romans, despite their forays into the North of Europe, and remains embedded in 'Western' public consciousness to this moment. The area we commonly refer to as the Middle East (and formerly, within a less expansive world, as the Near East) is thus at the very point of cross-over between these two 'halves' of the world; a wonderfully permeable, fluid, real and imagined expanse of lands, landscapes and peoples. In the European tradition, the Middle East marks the point where Europe stops being Europe and gradually, untidily, and somewhat uneasily, morphs into another place and culture. Here, globalization is not a new phenomenon.

Over the years a great imagining of difference relating to the Middle East has constantly veered from romanticized fascination and engagement, to that of suspicion and fear on both sides of this perceptual divide. Travelers, traders, and pilgrims to, and through, the region have long been an outcome and an expression of the region's strategic position, religious significance, and imagined mystique. Thus, the region is well-versed in providing the essential structures and cultures of hospitality, fed as they are through the religious and cultural values that intrinsically pervade all aspects of everyday life.

But within the modern world it would be wrong to portray the Middle East solely as a focus for the Orientalist explorer or spiritual traveler. Through Thomas Cook's Tours, the region was one of the first in the world to experience organized tourism and over the past 50 years or so substantive parts of the region have been engaged with the essentially modernist project of leisure tourism. A drive along the coastal highway of Lebanon, for instance, reveals a plethora of sites and facilities dedicated to domestic tourism and to an international tourism that flourished during the 1950s and 1960s.

It would be true to say, certainly from a European perspective, that when we think of tourism in the Middle East, we generally conceptualize it as a number of destinations: places where international/Western visitors go. In this process, we have been all too happy to reduce the complexity and richness of histories and cultures to a relatively small number of images and signs. Thus Jordan *is* Petra and the Dead Sea, Syria *is* Palmyra, and Egypt *is* Luxor and the Pyramids at Giza. Of course these are the very centres where international visitors do congregate; such is international tourism. But this view neglects three important dimensions. The first is the diversity of landscapes, sites, and locations, which also attract international tourists and have done for many years, such as the Syrian coastline for instance, and particularly the sea-port of Latakia, which is still a call for Mediterranean cruise ships, stopping for excursions to nearby Qalaat Saladin. The second is the incidence of regionalized or domestic tourism in the Middle East, which remains largely poorly understood. Over recent years, the internal patterns and flows of tourists within the region have increased due to significant levels of Arabs preferring not to venture out to European and American destinations. The third dimension relates to the tremendous changes that are taking place regarding the provision for tourism driven by high levels of external investment, particularly from, and in, the Gulf States. The levels of investment and development in tourism are, of course, tremendously uneven across the Middle East, ranging from the hyper-modern, capital intensive, high-rise hotels of Dubai to the development of small eco-tourism projects in Mount Lebanon.

It is these processes and dynamics of change that have long marked out the Middle East region as one of the most significant and indeed, sensitive regions of the world. But change is always set within the contexts of continuity and tradition to produce dialectics of complex engagement and encounter at a variety of levels. Tourism and travel are acts of transformation at the individual and institutional level. Throughout the Middle East region landscapes and lives are being transformed through the provision of infrastructure to support tourism and leisure, and in the process identities and local/global relations are being challenged and re-defined.

Sadly, in common discourse, discussion of tourism in the Middle East continues to fall between a number of extremes: persistent and pervasive Orientalist conceptions or peoples and places, somewhat disjunctive notions of massive post-modernist spatial transformations, and configurations of the region as a series of 'no-go' areas due to military and political instability. All such narratives are accurate to a degree, but between

these all too familiar focal points there is a much more complex, deeper and richer set of understandings about tourism and tourists. While aware of the meta-narratives relating to tourism, this volume is a fine attempt to get between the extremes and into the intricacies of tourism in the region. Through its insightful and varied chapters the book sets out to uncover and unravel the multifaceted nature of tourism in the Middle East from a variety of perspectives. Understanding tourism in the Middle East, as a form of social encounter and exchange, as well as in a context of spatial and historical transformation, is critical in helping to understand the region not as a boundary between two notional world halves, but as the very place that as binds them together.

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