

# **CREATING NEW DIMENSION IN MARKETING NEW DESTINATION IN JORDAN: SUGGESTED STRATEGY FOR AQABA REGION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The main goal of this research is to improve marketing of tourism destinations in Aqaba region by including the well-known archaeological site in Madain Saleh north western Saudi Arabia. Recently Aqaba region witnessed major developments in tourism infrastructure by the construction of luxury hotels and resorts undertaken by Tala Bay, Saraya, Ayla, Marsa Zayed projects with upon completion will transform Aqaba into an important tourist destination in the region. These giant tourist projects will definitely require serious and innovative venues of marketing able to generate large numbers of tourists from around the world. Aqaba is marketed with Wadi Rum and Petra as the golden triangle of tourism. By including Madain Saleh the sister city of Petra the name will be the golden quadrangle of tourism. Joint marketing the four destinations with the cooperation of Saudi Arabia tourism authority will open the door for citizens and residents from the Gulf States to travel and see deferent destination. Cruiseship tourism will also be considered.

***Key words:*** *Jordan, Aqaba, Destination Marketing*

## **INTRODUCTION**

World tourism reached 970 billion tourists during 2011 and expected to climb to around 1.5 billion by the year 202. In over 150 countries, tourism is one of the top five export earners, and in 60 it is the number one. Tourism is the main source of foreign exchange for one third of the developing countries and one-half of the less developed countries.

According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) the Middle East received 60 million international tourist arrivals in 2010. The region experienced rapid growth (14.2%) (UNTWO 2010). Jordan receives tourists from around the World who are attracted to visit its diverse tourist sites, such as, historical places, like the worldwide famous Petra (UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1985, and one of the New Seven Wonders of the World), Jerash, Madaba, Baptism site on the east bank of the Jordan river, unspoiled natural locations such as Wadi Rum and the coastal city of Aqaba on the Red Sea which is known for its coral reefs. Jordan is known for being an “open museum” where all phases of civilizations are represented.

Jordan experienced a steady increase in tourism during the first decade of the 21st century. Over seven million travelers arrived in Jordan in 2010 and spent more than 2 billion Jordanian Dinars (\$ 2.4 billion), which contributed over 13.2% to national GDP. Direct employment reached 42,500 in 2010 and is estimated to support several hundred thousand full time-equivalent jobs economy-wide when the full multiplier impact is accounted for. It is expected that more than 25,000 workers will be needed by the tourism sector over the next five years.

Tourism will continue to be a long term driver of economic growth in Jordan, accounting for the largest slice of GDP in Jordan’s productive economy. This strategy builds on this solid foundation by improving Jordan’s overall competitiveness as a tourism destination and positioning the country as a distinctive and culturally enriching experience for visitors. Health tourism is a fast growing sector focused in the Dead Sea area where major health spas exist in

luxurious resorts using Dead Sea water and minerals from hot springs in Hammat Maeen. Medical tourism is in large demand from Arab and foreign nationals who come to seek medical services offered in many private hospitals which are equipped by up-to-date medical equipments and well trained physicians and nursing staff.

Tourism in Jordan is served by a wide range of hotel chains and budget hotels and motels, furnished suites and flats which meet the needs of tourists of all categories. Transport facilities by air and land connect Jordan with the World. Visas are granted at port of arrival for most world nationals (Wikipedia, 2012). Queen Alia International Airport is being rebuild to serve nine million passengers annually in the first phase; twelve million in the second phase.

Business men from Jordan and Gulf region are investing heavily in tourist infra-structure in the form of luxury hotels, spas, resorts and massive real estate projects in Amman, Dead Sea coastline and Aqaba. Tourism is one of Jordan's major industries and in 2010, eight million tourists from various countries visited Jordan, with tourist receipts amounting to about three and half billion dollars in addition to one billion earned through medical tourism. In Jordan tourism industry reached 10% - 12% sustained annual growth owing to several factors such as, Jordan's geographical locations, rich cultural heritage, holy places, stability and security.

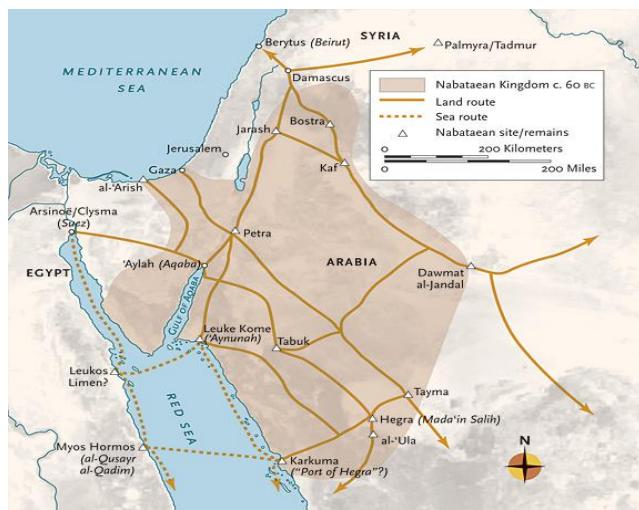


Figure 1: Map of Tourism sites in Jordan and Saudi Arabia

## STUDY PROBLEM

Tourism industry in Jordan still faces the problem of short stay of tourists compared with the wide range of touristic sites spread in various and distinguished locations. In the past tourism marketing was directed towards European countries, United States of America and some Asian countries. Incoming tourism to Jordan from these countries decreased in 2011 due the current political changes known as the "Arab Spring". It is estimated that Jordan lost 25% of its tourism market. The main motive of this study is the search for new and sustainable markets aimed at tourist generating countries such as the Arabian Gulf and Saudi Arabia in particular since it shares close by sites which can be marketed in a joint package. This will result in prolonging tourists stay. Aqaba can serve as the main destination with its mega tourism facilities which require an aggressive marketing strategy to increase numbers of potential tourists.

This paper proposes a new marketing strategy which will expand the current one called the golden triangle meaning Aqaba, Wadi Rum and Petra. These three destinations complement each

other by offering diverse element ranging from seaside tourism, adventure tourism and heritage tourism. The new proposed strategy aims to include Madain Saleh, a heritage site in the northwestern of Saudi Arabia known as Petra's sister, which will be called the golden quadruple. The vast and great richness of these tourist destinations require new direction of marketing. In order to understand that we will shed lights on the components of each destination.

### ***Components of Tourism Products in Aqaba Region:***

Aqaba is located on the Red Sea in the southern part of Jordan. It is the only seaport. Coastline is 27km (17 mi). The population of 100.000 people is set to double over the next ten years. Aqaba benefits from natural advantages by its location and closeness to Petra and Wadi Rum on one side and Sinai and Sharm al Sheikh on the Egyptian side, Madain Saleh on the Saudi Arabian side. (doing business 2012).

Aqaba Special Economic Zone (ASEZ) has been responsible for most of the city's development since it opened in 2001. It was launched as a duty-free, low tax multi-sectoral development zone encompassing the entire Jordanian coastline. According to the strategic plan 2001-2020 the zone targets 50% of investments in the tourism industry, 30% in a variety of services. (bouportal 2012) In addition to the existing hotels, resorts, shopping centers, water sports and diving centers, Aqaba is going through mega and touristic projects most of which will be completed by the year 2015. They include the following:

- a. Saraya Aqaba is a major tourist and real estate development projects. The project comprises of shopping, dining, entertainment, accommodations within the context of an authentically styled ancient city. Saraya Aqaba features six luxury five star hotels with more than 1200 rooms and a water park, convention center and residential developments such as beach front villas, town houses and apartments. The total project cost is estimated at over one billion U.S. dollars. (Aqaba Development Corporation, Jordan 2012)



Figure 2: Saraya Tourist projects, Aqaba

- b. Ayla project is one of the most successful investment projects in Aqaba. Located at the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba. 432 hectares of which 75 hectares of lagoons which will be filled by sea water. 1,550 luxury hotel rooms, the hotels are:

<b>Grand Hyatt Hotel</b>	<b>300 rooms</b>
<b>Ayla Spa Hotel</b>	<b>200 rooms</b>
<b>Ayla Beach Hotel</b>	<b>250 rooms</b>
<b>Ayla Palace Hotel</b>	<b>450 rooms</b>
<b>Regency Hyatt Hotel</b>	<b>350 rooms</b>
<b>Waterfront Villas</b>	<b>72 units</b>
<b>Waterfront Townhouses</b>	<b>866 units</b>
<b>Waterfront Apartments</b>	<b>730 units</b>
<b>Golf Villas</b>	<b>171 units</b>
<b>Golf Townhouses</b>	<b>235 units</b>
<b>Golf Apartments</b>	<b>610 units</b>
<b>Commercial Apartments</b>	<b>200 units</b>

and 100,000 sq.m of retail and commercial businesses and recreational amenities such as water parks, science museum, beach clubs, historical preservations and Jordan's first 18-hole golf course.

The objectives of this project are to:

- i. create a world-class destination for tourism.
- ii. attract residential communities from Jordan, Gulf states and others, and

iii. increase Aqaba's shorelines.

The distinguished aspect of this project is that it extends 2 km from the waterfront, increasing appearance of the beach by 17 km. Keeping in mind that its original access to the coastline is 235 m. The total cost of this project is expected to reach 2.1 billion U.S. dollars. The first phase will be completed by the end of 2015 with the cost of 600 million U.S. dollars.

- c. Marsa Zayed is one of the largest real estate projects and tourism in Jordan. The project extends over an area of 2.3 sq kilometers and includes 2 kilometers of waterfront. It overlooks the Red Sea with the aim of establishing one of the finest resorts, centers and tourist destinations. The project will turn the waterfront into an environment for the use of multi-purpose spread by residential towers and areas reserved for recreational facilities, tourism and the custom business and world-class hotels to more than three million square meters of land. The project will include 3,000 hotel rooms, luxury marinas, a cruise ship terminal, 30,000 villas, town houses and apartments, as well as shopping districts. No doubt that Marsa Zayed's project will transform the city of Aqaba to become one of Jordan's touristic landmarks. The total cost of this mega project will reach 10 billion U.S. dollars when completed in 2017. It will be implemented in several phases; the first phase will be finished in 2014.
- c. Tala Bay, this resort is located 14 km south of the city of Aqaba. It stretches over two kilometers private sandy beach on the Red Sea. In the center of Tala Bay is the Marina Town which embraces the picturesque private marina. The town consists of villas, apartments, duplexes, swimming pools, commercial centers, restaurants and more. Over three hundred apartments have been sold. Another Tala Bay feature is the Private Beach Club which includes four international-brand hotels (1,400 rooms) and an 18-hole golf course. Tala Bay is now one of Jordan's most spectacular attractions. The total cost of this project is 680 million U.S. dollars. (Wikipedia 2012).

- d. Besides the above mentioned touristic projects Aqaba enjoys other attractions such as shopping centers, souvenir shops, ethnic restaurants, marine life and archaeological museums. Aqaba is served by King Hussein International Airport which receives direct flights from various parts of the world. It is well connected with Amman by a major highway. The population of Aqaba is 100,000 people. It is expected to double in the next ten years. Certainly, the town benefits from some natural advantages. Its close proximity with Wadi Rum, Petra, Sharm al Sheikh in Egypt and Suez Canal, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Aqaba is aiming to increase its hotel supply room from just 4,000 to 20,000 over the next ten years. (atlastours 2012).

### **Petra:**

Petra is a great tourist attraction and most valuable treasure among many other heritage sites in Jordan. It is located in Wadi Musa in southern Jordan, 250 km from Amman and 100 km from Aqaba and Wadi Rum. Capital of the Nabataeans who ruled from the 4th c. BC to 106 AD when Petra fell under the domain of the Roman Empire. (Browning, 1973).

Petra is a city carved into the sheer rock face by the Nabataeans. The Greeks gave it the name “Petra” which means “rock”. It is well known for its “rose-red color”. The city spreads over giant red mountains decorated by vast mausoleums which are well known for sculpted architectural facades such as the famous Al-Khazneh (treasury) with its well preserved columns and sculpted figures, 30 m. wide and 43 m. high. A major feature of Petra is the entrance through the Siq, a narrow passage, wide enough for a car, over 1 km. in length bordered on either side by swinging 80 m. high cliffs.

There are hundreds of elaborate rock-cut tombs with intricate carvings and a Roman-style theatre which could seat 3,000 people. Petra flourished as a result of being an important junction for the silk, spice and other trade routes that linked China, India and

Southern Arabia with Egypt, Syria, Greece and Rome. Petra was rediscovered for the western world by a Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burkhhardt in 1812. (McKenzie, 1990).

Petra is recognized as one of the World heritage sites in Jordan by UNESCO. It came second in the new Seven Wonders of the World competition in 2007 which gave it a great publicity as a tourist destination. There are several five star hotels, restaurants and gift shops which facilitates the tourist's stay. The number of visitors to Petra reached 975.285 in 2010. Petra offers jobs to many of the local people.

### ***Wadi Rum:***

Is situated 70 km, to the north of Aqaba and 120 km south of Petra and is one of Jordan's important tourist destinations. It attracts large numbers of local and foreign tourists who look for adventures in a mountainous desert area. Jabal Rum (1,734 meters above sea level) is the highest peak in Jordan. The main attractions of Wadi Rum are trekking, mountain climbing, camel and horse safari, day trippers from Aqaba or Petra. (Escort 1994).



Scene of Wadi Rum

Wadi Rum shaped massive mountains rise vertically out of the pink desert sand which separate one dark mass from another in a breathtaking scene cliffs eroded by wind look like faces of men,

animals and monsters. Wadi Rum has been inhabited since prehistoric times with many cultures including the Nabataeans. A famous Nabatean temple is Allat dates to the 1st century BC. Inscriptions and ancient rock drawings are found in many locations in Wadi Rum.

Movie makers saw in Wadi Rum a great location shooting films such as Lawrence of Arabia, Red Planet and Passion in the Desert and more. Wadi Rum joined UNESCO World Heritage list in 2011. This win is considered as a recognition for Jordan and its heritage and will have a great impact on the country's tourism sector. It is the fourth UNESCO World Heritage listed site. 300,000 visited Wadi Rum in 2010 mostly foreigner, activities include guided four wheel drive (4WD) tours, horse and camel trekking, hiking and individual camping, 28 desert campsites are run by local Bedouin with the Wadi Rum management. Today the village of Wadi Rum is inhabited by few hundred Bedouin who depend on tourism to improve their income. (Amyan, Jawabreh, Alsaryreh, Malkawi, 2011).

### ***Madain Saleh (Al Hijr):***

Is one of the best known archaeological sites in Saudi Arabia. It is located in northwest Saudi Arabia, some 400 km north of Madina. A sister city of Petra and the southern capital of the Nabataens. Inhabited some 2000 years ago. (Babelli, 2009). The city flourished because of the Nabataeans activities in the trade of incense and spice in particular between the East and the Roman Greek and Egyptian empires. (Ansary, Al-Hassan, 2001) Madain Saleh resembles Petra in many ways. It has about 130 tomb and dwelling hewed out of the rock formation extending over some 13 km. The facades of the tombs are decorated by columns, lions, eagles and snakes and some inscriptions.



Architectural Façade, Madain Saleh

Madain Saleh is the first site in Saudi Arabia to join the list of World Heritage sites (2008) is a recognition of its cultural value. The site dates back to between 3rd BC and 1st century AD which represents one of the earliest examples of pre-Islamic society in Saudi Arabia. Near Madain Saleh is the Madain Saleh Train Station and a Turkish fort, that used to make a town of the Hejaz Railway. The line was built by the Turks during the Ottoman Empire to connect Constantinople, Madina and Mecca to ease the Haj pilgrimage for Muslims. It was operational between 1908-1917, when it was destroyed by Arabs fighting Turkish rule. The station has been well-preserved as a museum and features numerous buildings and several train parts.

## **MARKETING STRATEGY**

In light of the major touristic projects constructed or awaiting completion in Aqaba as has been described, this will transform Aqaba into a major tourist destination on the Red Sea. The billions of dollars being invested in touristic projects definitely require a new thinking of how to market Aqaba as a destination for tourists. The suggested marketing strategy of tourism destinations in southern region of Jordan will concentrate on the following:

1. Marketing the golden triangle (Petra, Wadi Rum and Aqaba) to include Madain Saleh, northwest of Saudi Arabia under the title the golden quadruple. Choosing Madain Saleh as a fourth tourist destination in the region is based on the similarities with Petra and Wadi Rum. They can be summarized as such:
  - a. Petra is the capital of the Nabataeans in the north and Madain Saleh, sister city and capital in the south.
  - b. Architectural monuments in both sites reflect the ingenuity of Nabataeans which intrigues tourists.
  - c. Though rock colours and formations in both sites are different, in Petra rocks are red-rose and cream colour in Madain Saleh. Weathering effects shaped mountains in both sites in two styles alike.
  - d. Distance between Petra and Wadi Rum is 100 km. and Madain Saleh is close to 400 km. A major road connects them which makes them accessible for tourists.
  - e. Wadi Rum shares with Madain Saleh mountain climbing sports and hiking in desert areas. Riding balloons and free jumping endurance horse racing, meditation tourism, new to Wadi Rum, can be also practiced in Madain Saleh which will attract more tourists to both sites.
  - f. Madain Saleh attracts large numbers of local tourists, Saudis and foreign residents will be able to extend their trips to include Wadi Rum, Petra and Aqaba. Around 70 thousand tourists visited Madain Saleh in the past nine months, in 2011, it is interesting to say that Malaysians were among them. Recently, the Higher Commission for tourism in Saudi Arabia launched a program called, "Discover the Touristic World of Saudia" in cooperation with Saudi Arabian Airlines and local travel agencies. This campaign is directed towards foreign tourists from the world and to locals and residents. (Alriyadh, 2010).

In addition to what Petra, Wadi Rum and Madain Saleh have to offer to tourists we find Aqaba a resort city equipped to meet the tourist needs in terms of hotels of different classes and furnished dwellings, sporting activities, shopping centers, entertainment and many more. The golden quadruple should be marketed as a full package which opens the window to tourism from Jordan to

Saudi Arabia and vice versa. This strategy will prolong the stay of tourists which is translated to increase the tourism receipts.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is opening its doors to tourists from around the World. New legislations are issued to control and organize incoming tours to visit a new destination which has so much to offer to tourists in terms of heritage sites, religious places, desert adventure, eco-tourism, geological tourism and many more. At this early stage of tourism in Saudi Arabia the suggested strategy of marketing the above mentioned golden quadruple will very much pave the road for creating new tourist destinations. It is to the benefit of the tourism industry in Jordan both on the government and private sector to adopt such marketing strategy which will enhance coming tourists who will have the chance to see a wide variety of tourist sites in both countries. In light of this a joint marketing campaign from Jordan and Saudi Arabia should be launched aiming at various countries exporting tourists, such as, Europe, North and South America, the Arab World, Africa and Asia. Starting from the window of Madain Saleh and with the help of tourism experts in Jordan, tourism in Saudi Arabia will very soon be on the world's tourist map. No doubt that great and various tourist projects being built in Aqaba do need an aggressive marketing strategy which will attract large numbers of tourists who will find all what they hope and expect in such a region whose tourist sites are unique and spread in geographical area accessible in a very short time.

## 2. Introducing Air-Cruise Tourism in the Region:

The location of Aqaba is the right place to make it a base or starting point for tourists who prefer to combine cultural and adventure tourism in Jordan and Saudi Arabia with beach and sea resorts tourism not only in Aqaba but along the shores of the Red Sea, in particular Taba and Sharm el Sheikh. This will enable cruise tourism in the region catch up with the fastest grown sector of tourism in the World. In the meantime, cruising around the Mediterranean is becoming very popular.

Tourists from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region can be transported to Madain Saleh by air and after visiting the site and neighboring

attractions such as, Al Hijaz Railway Station and archaeological site of Dedan (Al Ula) 22 km., away they can continue their journey to Aqaba. Here the tourists have many choices to make and combine various elements in their programs by visiting Wadi Rum, Petra or other sites in Jordan. Those who desire to take cruise ships to Taba and Sharm el Sheik where they can enjoy beach tourism and water sports can be flown back instead of returning by sea to Aqaba. Such programs will no doubt give the prospected tourist a multi facet types of tourism experiences.

When such marketing strategy is implemented the number of night stays will be extended which increases the rate of occupancies in hotels and other types of accommodations. (Vellas & Becherel, ed. 1999) The mega tourist facilities built in Aqaba as described before will meet the future demand of tourists. Aqaba will be the center of the golden quadruple where one expects to see a great flow of tourists coming from all directions.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Jordan has iconic tourist attractions spread all over the country and the southern region in particular which is being transformed to house quality accommodations exemplified in Aqaba, Petra and Wadi Rum. Partnership in planning and development, mobilized support from private and public sector will bear fruits when they develop a comprehensive marketing strategy with a clear vision leading to implementation. The mega tourist projects in Aqaba require from state holders and public sector a unified strategy based on worldwide marketing and promotion of the quadruple triangle in a new approach using E-tourism marketing and familiarization tours to various sectors in such as travel agencies, all media channels, airlines and others. Constant work on product development and upgrade skills of human resources through periodic high standard training.

Jordan and Saudi Arabia's co-strategy in planning and marketing is very much needed to make the flow of tourists, both ways, a real and beneficial business. This will result in the growth of

domestic and international visitors. Increase tourist expenditure and creation of new jobs. Ultimately it will raise industry competitiveness and business performance to facilitate long-term growth.

The strategy should include the cruise market between Aqaba and Sharm El Sheikh, which has not been marketed at the regional and global levels. This segment of tourism will serve millions of expatriots living and working in the Gulf countries with high incomes who look for new tourist destinations where they can spend their short holidays. Aqaba region with its diverse tourism products will be the right choice for visitors because of its proximity and security.

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