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## **PAKISTAN'S TOURISM. IS OUR HOUSE IN ORDER?**

Pakistan is a country of unparalleled beauty, rich history, and cultural diversity. From the majestic peaks of the Karakoram Range to the serene valleys of Swat and Hunza, and the ancient heritage sites like Mohenjo-daro and Taxila, it is a land that holds immense potential as a global tourist destination. Despite these natural and historical gifts, the country's tourism sector faces critical challenges that hinder its growth and ability to provide a pleasurable experience for visitors. We cannot depend on natural beauty and historical assets without looking at the back-end services. We need to get our house in order.

While there has been progress in promoting tourism, fundamental issues need immediate attention if Pakistan is to realize its true potential as a holiday destination. Here are some of the key areas requiring improvement:

### **1. Lack of Clean Bathrooms and Service Areas**

One of the most glaring issues for travelers in Pakistan is the scarcity of clean bathrooms and well-maintained service areas along highways, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). Tourists often find themselves searching desperately for basic amenities, only to be met with unhygienic or non-existent facilities. For a country aiming to attract both local and international tourists, such shortcomings are a significant deterrent. Establishing clean, accessible rest stops with proper sanitation facilities should be a top priority. A typical mistake any government can make is attempt to do this itself. Local communities will need to be encouraged to manage these facilities, maintain them and earn money along the way. Until then we will just need to develop exemplary bladder control. If you need to go to the bathroom in a hurry it really doesn't matter if K2 is 8,611 meters high!!

### **2. Cumbersome Online Applications**

In today's digital age, efficient online services are essential for the tourism industry. Unfortunately, Pakistan's online systems, including visa applications and permits for restricted areas, remain cumbersome and frustrating for users. Navigating these applications often involves bureaucratic delays and confusing requirements, discouraging potential visitors. Simplifying these processes and ensuring user-friendly platforms is critical to enhancing the travel experience.

### **3. Lack of Medical Facilities in Mountainous Areas**

The breathtaking landscapes of Pakistan's northern regions attract adventurers and nature enthusiasts from around the world. However, medical facilities in these remote areas are virtually non-existent. In emergencies, tourists are often left stranded without access to basic healthcare. Establishing functional medical centers and emergency response units in key tourist spots is imperative for ensuring the safety and well-being of visitors.

### **4. Inadequate Car Maintenance Facilities**

For those embarking on road trips through Pakistan's scenic routes, the lack of car maintenance and repair facilities along major motorways is a significant concern. Breakdowns can leave travelers stranded for hours or even days in isolated areas. To address this, the government and private sector must invest in establishing reliable service stations at regular intervals along these routes.

### **5. Poor Inspection of Lodging Facilities and Restaurants**

Tourists' experiences are heavily influenced by the quality of lodging and dining options. Unfortunately, inspection and regulation of hotels, guesthouses, and restaurants in many parts of Pakistan are either non-existent or poorly enforced. This often results in subpar hygiene, overpriced services, and unsafe food practices. Regular inspections and strict enforcement of quality standards are necessary to improve the hospitality sector. I have always said cynically, though truthfully that 2 kgs of Karahi Chicken or Gulab Jamman will help you pass most inspections.

### **6. Inadequate Training of Hospitality Staff**

I have been involved with hospitality training, the better part of my adult life. Hospitality is at the heart of any successful tourism industry. While Pakistan is known for its warmth and generosity, professional training for hospitality staff is largely inadequate. Many employees lack the skills required to meet international service standards, leaving tourists feeling underserved. Implementing comprehensive training programs for staff in hotels, restaurants, and tour operations can significantly enhance the visitor experience. On the positive side, many hospitality schools have come up in recent years (two of them I have had the privilege of setting up) Our compass is aligned, and the North Star is clearly in sight.

### **7. Where are the stories?**

For a country boasting 5000 years of history, we find ourselves woefully short of our "stories". The Lahore Fort is an amazing structure. What happened within its walls is what tourism is. A cruise down the Nile demonstrates this most effectively. Bring on the gossip!! People need to hear more than they want to see.

### **8. Our phobia with security**

With every possible information available to the entire globe online, it is difficult to understand our belief that people are out to harm us. In some of our tourist areas, the camera is a bigger weapon than a firearm.

I had a foreign friend's camera confiscated when we are sailing in the Karachi harbor. We were strictly reprimanded that taking pictures of the port was strictly forbidden. A few months later the Karachi Port Trust released its calendar with 12 stunning pictures of the port taken from helicopters that no tourist could ever dream of. I sent the calendar to my friend. 10 years on, he awaits the return of his camera!!

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan's potential as a top-tier tourist destination is undeniable. However, the challenges outlined above highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms and investments in infrastructure, services, and human resources. By addressing these shortcomings, the country can ensure that its natural beauty and rich heritage are complemented by world-class facilities and experiences.

This article is not to crack the proverbial whip. It is time to ask ourselves: is our house in order? Only when we can confidently answer in the affirmative will Pakistan truly shine as a global tourism hub. Until then, the journey to fulfilling our potential remains an uphill climb.

As someone who has been at the helm of the Country's tourism effort, I know these challenges are difficult to overcome but overcome them we must.

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