

Pope doesn't pull in tourists

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Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the Holy Land did not have the expected impact on Israel's tourism industry as was originally thought. Figures published this week by the Israel Hotel Association reveal that May, the month of the pope's visit, saw a 31% decrease in the number of tourist lodgings in Israel.

Moreover, the sharpest declines were witnessed in sites that Christian pilgrims were most likely to stay in during the pontiff's visit. According to the IHA figures, there was a 42% decline in tourist lodgings in Jerusalem, a 44% drop in kibbutzim, a 22% decrease in Tiberius, and a 28% drop off in the Dead Sea.

Other areas in the country were also witness to this phenomenon of decreased tourism. Netanya saw 28% less tourist lodgings, Tel Aviv 22% less, and Eilat 15% less. The only place in the country that enjoyed an increase in tourism during the month of May was Nazareth, with a bump up of 2% in tourist lodgings in comparison with May 2008.

IHA Chairman Shmuel Zuriel warned this week of a continued landslide in hotel tourism, and pointed a finger at the government, saying it has an obligation to spur tourism by removing the threat of charging tourist sales tax from the agenda.

The number of tourists entering the country (a different index than the number of also dropped, seeing a decrease of 22% as compared to May last year. However, the Tourism Ministry is clutching to slightly more encouraging statistics showing an increase in tourists visiting Israel from specific countries, including Italy with 21%, Spain with 41%, and Russia with 10% as compared with May of 2008.

Tourism Minister Stas Misezhnikov (Yisrael Beiteinu) said that his party would vote against the budget if the item to impose sales tax on tourists passes in the second and third readings. The minister said that such a move is foolish and will result in the laying off of thousands of workers in the industry and may deal a fatal blow to Israel's tourism industry, a field that has already sustained serious setbacks due to the global financial crisis.

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3737393,00.html>