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Portugal makes a tourism comeback

By Felicity Long / May 07, 2014

The last few years haven't been easy on Portugal.

Not only did the international economic crisis take a toll on tourism, but the destination also suffered from the lack of a clear brand message that included a focus on value and the variety of destinations beyond Lisbon.

What a difference a few years makes.

The latest figures show that tourism to Portugal is making a comeback, and travelers from North America are among those leading the charge.

"The U.S. was one of the fastest growing inbound tourism markets in Portugal in 2013," said Jayme Simoes of the Portuguese National Tourist Office. "In these uncertain times, American travelers are looking for two things: value for the dollar and the value of experience, [and] Portugal is strong on both counts."

In addition to low prices, Simoes touted the year-round mild climate, historical attractions, new and classic museums and a robust wine industry as being among the important factors drawing U.S. visitors.

2013 was a record year for overall travel to Portugal with more than 14 million visitors in 2013, a rise of 4.2% over 2012, according to Simoes. In addition, the National Statistics Institute (INE), in Portugal reported a 16.4% increase in overnight stays by American hotel guests, and revenues increased 21%.

A concerted effort on the part of the tourism office to woo travelers beyond Lisbon to Porto and other destinations was another reason for the turnaround, he said, and judging by the numbers, the tactic is paying off.

"Every region in Portugal saw an increase in guest stays [in 2013]," Simoes said. "Porto and the Alentejo regions had the biggest increases up to 29% and 14.6% more guests," although Lisbon remains the most popular city with a growth rate of 8.4% over 2012.

The interest in Porto, located in northern Portugal, is due to its growing reputation as a wine region, the revitalization of its river district, its cultural institutions and shopping districts. In fact, the city was named European Best Destination 2014 for the second time – the first was in 2012 -- according to a survey by the European Consumers Choice organization, based in Brussels.

Other inducements to visit the country include some 530 miles of beaches, 15 world heritage sites and dozens of championship golf courses, some of which are located on the ocean.

A key strategy in the continued growth of international tourism is improved air access from the U.S. This year, SATA Airlines expanded service from Boston to Lisbon with weekly non-stop flights through September, while US Airways added daily Charlotte-Lisbon service through September.

Existing non-stop transatlantic flights to Lisbon include Miami and Newark service via TAP and Lisbon-Philadelphia on US Airways. TAP also flies to Porto from Newark.

To accommodate the uptick in tourism arrivals, a number of new hotels are or have recently opened. In Lisbon, they include the 53-room Hotel Portugal in Lisbon, which opened in January; the 144-room Sana Evolution Saldanha, set to open this month, and the 42-room Alfama Memmo, which opened in October 2013.

In Porto, new properties include the 17-room Artist Porto Hotel & Bistro, which opened in April; the 18-room Ribeira do Porto Hotel, which opened in February, and the 95-room Hotel Bolsa do Pescado, set to debut in October.

For those heading to Portugal this summer, check out the 14 concerts being held during the 10-day Jazz in August festival in Lisbon, starting Aug. 6; watch the running of the bulls at the Colete Encarnado festival in Vila Franca de Xira the first week of July, or take in the five-day religious Festas da Senhora da Agonia the end of August in Viana do Castelo.

For more information go to www.visitportugal.com.