

Tourism Industry of Sudan: History and Peculiarities of its Development in the 20th and 21st Centuries

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The article considers the history of the tourism industry of one of the oldest states in the world — Sudan. The first attempts to organize sightseeing trips for Europeans to the Nile Valley were recorded after Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in the early 19th century, but at that time Sudan was a little-known region. The military campaign of 1821 undertaken by the troops of Muhammad Ali resulted in the submission of Sudan and the establishment of the Egyptian-Turkish administration there. Since that time, the level of European intrusion into the country began to increase. The activities of travel companies only became notable in Sudan after the beginning of the colonial rule by England and Egypt in 1899. In the first decades of the twentieth century the first hotels were created, roads, including the railroad, were built, and cities were expanded as well as modernized. The hotel owners were predominantly foreigners. Tourism developed further after the country achieved independence in 1956. Since that time, national travel companies appeared, and travelers from Western countries and the Arab began to visit the country. Tourism has become an attractive sector for investment and capital raising, both local and international. At the same time, the economic and political problems observed in the period of 1980–2000 did not allow tourism to become a source of significant income for the state and prevented the sector from expanding. Currently, both high-level hotels and modest guesthouses, that mainly provide services for the domestic consumer, are built and operate in the capital of the country and in some cities of regional significance. The activity of travel companies remains at a low level and the number of foreign travelers is small. Local companies have attempted to cooperate with their Russian counterparts, but there are not enough prerequisites for initiating collaboration in this area. Sudanese researchers, economists, sociologists, historians, and marketing experts analyze the tourism sector and try to make recommendations for improving work in this area. This is reflected in a number of works in scientific journals that have been published in recent years.

Keywords: history, tourism, Sudan, Middle East, Khartoum.

The most important factor that defined the increasing interest for the Middle East and creation of travel companies in countries of the region was Napoleon Bonaparte's French campaign in Egypt and Syria (1798–1801). Map-makers, linguists, engineers, zoologists, geologists and other scientists, that were a part of the expedition, hired by the Bonaparte, recorded in their research and reports everything that fell within the scope of their scientific interests and was associated with the Nile Valley, where a lot of ancient monuments were situated. The records and items, brought home by members of the expedition, stimulated an

interest in history and culture of the ancient civilization of the Nile region among Europeans. That was the time when Egyptology as a science gained a massive boost. Since that time European intellectuals became interested in visiting the ancient lands, often trying to get as far south as possible — to the mysterious and little-known land of Sudan.

In 1821 — after the joint Egyptian-Turkish military expedition to take over Sudan — the Sublime Porte issued a firman that entitled Egyptian ruling circles headed by Muhammad Ali to govern Sudan. After that, aside from Egyptians and Albanian Turks, first European merchants arrived to the country. German ornithologist and traveler Alfred Brehm wrote: “Europeans in Khartoum unintentionally form some kind of big family. Almost every evening they come together in some place to chat, smoke, and drink. Every month they are provided with a pile of French newspapers” [1, p. 200]. As Europeans gathered in the residence of a native Frenchman, a therapist by profession — doctor Penney, they called his hospital household “Hôtel du Cartoum” [1, p. 201]. Even though the house was a private property and was never used as a hotel or even a temporary accommodation, thanks to kind temper of its owner travelers could always count on meeting “local” Sudanese Europeans and having a chance to exchange news there.

The only alternative to hotels for foreigners in Sudan were rental apartments or, more often, simple adobe huts of poor quality. Alfred Brehm, who lived in Sudan for several years and knew perfectly well the peculiarities that foreign travelers and businessmen staying there faced, noticed: “When it comes to finding an accommodation in Khartoum, this is where new-comers face the most problems. When a foreigner rents a flat for the first time, he inevitably gets the worst house, because better ones are already occupied by those who came earlier. Here he'd better fit this place up himself, because its owner does not give him anything except for the four walls” [1, p. 150]. It becomes clear that the hotel industry of Khartoum during the period of joint Egyptian-Turkish rule was in bad condition.

In the first half of the 19th century Europeans did not see Sudan as a place for tourism. During the 20th century the country was off-limits for mass visiting, only a small number of tourists came to it. A French traveler's guidebook of 1908–1909 provides just a single chapter about Sudan, offering a few variants of routes from Egypt to it [2, p. 105–106]. The same book says: “Sudan, as seen by many, is a pristine and drought-ridden country, hard to travel around, far from any civilization” [2, p. 112].

In 1899 Great Britain and Egypt signed an agreement on establishing joint rule over Sudan (a condominium). This decision had a positive outcome in improving Sudanese transportation infrastructure. Both contracting countries had to set communication lines, build roads, and develop means of transportation.

At the end of the 19th century there were almost no good earth-roads in Sudan, not to mention asphalt ones. Transportation was conducted either by Nile, or overland by caravans. Pack animals, such as camels, mules, donkeys, and horses, still were the most wide-spread mean of transportation. For travelling by water sailboats and, quite rarely, steam vessels were used. First attempts to introduce motor transportation did not succeed. Russian geographer Yu. D. Dmitrievskiy wrote: “First experiments of introduction of automobiles (1906) failed because of extremely bad quality of Sudanese roads. Only after the World War I the Sudanese automotive fleet began growing...” [3, p. 184]. Increase in number of cars did not mean that the problem of lack of public roads and highways had been solved. There were roads suitable for driving — in cities, such as Khartoum. But in other places, especially in rural areas, it was next to impossible to go by car. A traveler's

guidebook for Sudan of 1999 states that during the entire colonial period no asphalt roads have been built in Sudan [4, p.85]. The first paved road between Khartoum and Wad Madani — a city on the banks of the Blue Nile — was built in 1957–1964, i. e. after the country gained independence in 1956.

Railway turned out to be the most reliable and convenient mean of transportation for the colonialists. Its construction began in 1897.

For British military planners and policymakers it was obvious that railway would let them cover the English-Egyptian army requirements of fast and broadscale transportation of supplies, troops, and machinery to required places. It was no coincidence that the first kilometers of tracks were laid during the war against the Mahdists¹. At the construction of the first railway section between Wadi Halfa and Abu Hamad, 370 km long, the British used labor of captive Sudanese. In 1899, this long branch line was connected to Khartoum. From 1929 to 1956, due to political reasons, construction of railways almost stopped. In 1959, the cities of El Obeid and Nyala were connected by rail. Speaking about the use of the railway for transporting tourists and travelers, it should be noted that the branch line from Wadi Halfa — a city located in the north on the border with Egypt — to Khartoum was in the most demand.

Sea transport was being developed, first of all, in the field of cargo transportation. However we also know about passenger voyages from Sudan, a significant share of which was performed by Egyptian ship companies. Passenger voyages from Sudan to Saudi Arabia were not systematic and were performed mostly during the period of Hajj to Mecca. Pilgrimage in this context can be seen as a touristic activity, though quite specific.

Air transport is considered to be the most recent mean of transportation in Sudan. Civil aviation flights began after the foundation of the Khartoum airport in 1947 [5]. A little later, air harbors were created in other cities: in Port Sudan and the current capital of South Sudan, Juba. At present, El Obeid and El Fasher airports also accommodate flights carrying visitors.

As for the development of the Sudanese hotel sector, after establishing of the condominium hotels emerged in settlements, where important transportation hubs were situated, such as Atbara — a major railway hub, or Kosti — the country's main river port. The close connection between tourism and large transport companies has led to the establishment of a department for tourism and hotels in the railway administration. The Triasis hotel in Suakin, belonging to a man of Greek descent, is considered to be the first hotel in Sudan. Sudanese researcher of tourism Yassir Abd al-Habib wrote in his book: "In 1902, at the beginning of the period of the British-Egyptian rule, a big first-class hotel was opened in Khartoum. In 1904 this fact was mentioned in a newspaper published by "some Syrian", and it was noted in a report to Lord Cromer that 498 tourists visited Khartoum during the winter of 1904. Later, in 1910, a big hotel and a hotel on the al-Qasr street were mentioned in the report aside from notes about small organizations opened" [6, p.50]. The Greek newspaper XPONIKA TOY ΣΟΥΔΑΝ, published in Sudan between 1928 and 1935, contains advertisements for hotels, situated in the Sudanese capital city, such as the Gordon Hotel and the Gloria Hotel [7, p.601].

¹ The Mahdist uprising — the largest uprising, which had an anti-colonial orientation under the leadership of Imam Mahdi and his successor Caliph Abdallah, took place in Sudan from 1881 to 1899. It ended with the defeat of the Mahdists and the establishment of Anglo-Egyptian rule over Sudan.

Due to the fact that researches considering the history of tourism and hotel business in Sudan are few in numbers, as well as works published in press and papers, little is known about the tourism sector of Sudan. Tourist's guidebooks, that the Ministry of tourism and communications used to publish in an irregular manner, are valuable sources of information about the development of tourism. For example, a 1967 English-language guidebook provides names and addresses of state-run and private hotels of Khartoum: the Sudan Hotel and the Grand Hotel (the state-run ones), and twelve private — the Hotel de Paris, Acropole Hotel, Qasr el-Zahraa Hotel, El Montazah Hotel, Metro Hotel, Lido Hotel, Nader Hotel, Tirhaka Hotel, Victoria Hotel, Albert Hotel, El Sharq Hotel, and the Nile Cottage [8, p.24]. 27 travel agencies, which also arranged flight tickets, functioned in Sudan [8, p. 42–45].

A 1999 travel guide, in addition to some of the aforementioned Khartoum hotels, such as the Acropole Hotel (two stars), names a number of new ones. Among them are the Falcon (2 stars), Grand Holiday Villa (5 stars), Green Village (3 stars), Hilton International (5 stars), Hotel Palace (5 stars), Khartoum Plaza (3 stars), Meridian (4 stars), Mogran Green (2 stars), and the Shahrazad (3 stars). As we can see, hotel data comes with star rating and, accordingly, we can make conclusions about the level of service offered in each hotel.

As noted, due to scantiness of information on the hotel sector generally and on ownership of many Sudanese hotels in particular it is almost impossible to draw conclusions about their owners and type of property. Only a detailed 2008 study by Salah Omar as-Sadiq makes it possible for us to get to know that the Grand Holiday Villa hotel management had been transferred to a Malaysian company and a Malaysian team ran it after that. In 2007 the Rotana hotel, belonging to foreign funds as well, was built. The 5 star, 148 upscale suite Qasr al-Sadaqa (Friendship Palace) hotel was owned by the Ministry of finance of Sudan, that held 40 percent of its shares, and by a Korean company, that held 60 percent. Data for the same year says that there were 23 hotels situated in Khartoum — rated from 1 to 3 stars.

At present several well-known and popular major hotels function in Khartoum. The top five Sudanese capital city hotels are: the Corinthia (a few years ago it was known as the Burj al-Fateh, built with money of the Libyan leader Muammar Kaddafi), the Coral (previously named the Hilton), the Qasr al-Sadaqa (Friendship Palace), the Al Salam Rotana, and the Grand Holiday. Less significant: the Meridian (currently known as the Regency), the Shahrazad, Acropole Hotel, Al Sahara, Plaza, Al-Bahrain, Central, Al Hijaz, Al Taka, Ifriqiya, Al Riyadh, German Guesthouse [9, p. 40].

The situation in the countryside is as follows: there are 12 hotels in Kassala, 10 hotels in White Nile, 5 hotels in North Kordufan, 6 hotels in Northern province, 1 hotel and 6 campsites in River Nile, a hotel and a campsite in Blue Nile. The situation in other Sudanese regions, e. g. Red Sea state, is very similar. As for the distribution of hotels and travel agencies across the country, we can state that most of them are situated in the capital — 48 % of the total number of Sudanese hotels and 65 % of travel agencies [10, p. 67].

From the very beginning, the tourism sector of Sudan catered mostly to the needs of European travelers. They played an important role in the development of tourism in Sudan: by creating demand for touristic services they also created supply. A European traveler, with rare exceptions, sought for a certain level of living and relaxation — a level higher than the Sudanese tourism industry could provide at that time. Consequently, a demand for specialists with experience in organizing tourism activities in Europe and on other continents arose rather early. With their help, hotels, travel agencies and other organizations could approach European standards of service. Indeed, in the book of the

Sudanese tourism researcher Yassir Ahmad Abd al-Habib “Tarih al-siyyaha fi al-Sudan 1959–1989” some experts from the West are mentioned who have contributed to the development of the tourism industry in Sudan: both at the level of small or medium-sized businesses and at state level.

One of the first such experts was Mr. Fuchs. He was invited by a major Sudanese businessman of Greek origin G. Kontomihalos to research and evaluate the capability of Sudan to receive tourists. Together with a group of Sudanese engineers he studied sights of the country, prepared plans, reports, etc. In 1970, he presented the results of his activities to the Committee on Tourism and Hotels. Thus, Sudan had an information base on tourism resources — an important element for drawing up plans and strategies for further development.

On January 19, 1966 an Englishman named Stephen Streeter signed a contract with Ahmad Abu Bakr, head of the Sudanese tourism authority, on elaborating a development strategy for tourism in Sudan. Streeter made recommendations on such aspects of the tourism industry as the establishment of an official administrative apparatus dealing with tourism, methods of work of travel agencies, instructions on the procedure for tourists to enter Sudan, etc. The Sudanese party paid due attention to the recommendations, and it only took 5 years to complete the plan — instead of the estimated ten.

Another tourism business professional, John Hawks, being a representative of one of foreign travel companies, carried out a number of studies on Sudan’s infrastructure and outlined recommendations for improving the situation in the tourism sector [6, p. 76–78].

On February 6, 1974, governments of Sudan and Italy signed an agreement on economic cooperation, according to which Italy pledged to assist Sudan in the development of tourism. A specialized Italian agency “MFT” was created to elaborate, together with experts from various Sudanese ministries and committees, a ten-year plan for the development of the tourism industry [6, p. 78].

Currently, Sudanese themselves take efforts to study and develop the tourism sector of Sudan. Results of their work were reflected in “Tarih al-Siyyaha fi al-Sudan 1959–1989” (A History of tourism in Sudan 1959–1989) by Yassir Ahmad Abd al-Habib, published in Khartoum in 2009, and in a monograph by Ali Muhammad Othman al-Iraqi “Iktisadiyat al-siyaha fi al-Sudan. Madhal mafahimi wa dirasa li kita’ al-siyaha al-thakafiya” (The economic side of Sudanese tourism. An introduction to definitions and a study of the sphere of cultural tourism) that focused mostly on the economic aspect and was published in Khartoum in 2014.

The first research considers the management of the Sudanese tourism and its evolution, and the second one focuses on economical definitions that cover issues of tourism economics in Sudan. The author focuses on studying Bagrawiyah as an important object, that a lot of local and foreign tourists come to see. Studies of this kind pave a way for active research in the tourism sector of Sudan and, as it seems, contribute to its gradual improvement and development.

Speaking about the state that the tourism in Sudan is currently in, it is necessary to note that tensions in Darfur, South Kordofan, and the secession of South Sudan affected tourists’ willingness to visit Sudan negatively. Tables 1 and 2 below show the statistics of international visits of Sudan by foreigners during the period of 2005–2014, and also show the country’s income from tourism for the same period. The data is taken from annual reports of the World Tourism Organization — the Tourism Highlights [11–20].

Table 1. Statistics of international visits of Sudan by foreigners during the period of 2005–2014 [11–20]

Characteristics of tourist flow in Sudan (2005–2014)				
Year	Series	Number of foreign tourists who visited the country		
		1000 pax	Change (%)	Regional market share (%)
2005	TF	246	305.8	0.6
2006	TF	328	33.4	0.8
2007	TF	436	32.9	0.9
2008	TF	441	1.1	1.0
2009	TF	420	–4.6	0.9
2010	TF	495	17.8	1.0
2011	TF	536	8.3	1.1
2012	TF	575	7.1	1.1
2013	TF	591	2.9	1.1
2014	TF	684	15.7	1.2
2015	TF	–	–	–

Note: TF — international tourist arrivals at frontiers (overnight visitors, i. e. excluding same-day visitors).

Table 2. Income from international tourists received by Sudan during the period of 2005–2014 [11–20]

Sudan revenue from international tourism (2005–2015)			
Year	(million USD)	Change (%)	Regional market share (%)
2005	89	–	–
2006	126	41.6	0.5
2007	262	107.9	0.9
2008	331	26.3	1.1
2009	299	–10.7	1.0
2010	94	–68.6	0.3
2011	185	50.8	0.6
2012	772	317.3	2.2
2013	773	0.1	2.2
2014	967	25.1	2.7

The figures shown in the tables are small and do not match the country's capabilities. This confirms that there is a need for transformations in the tourism sphere of Sudan. Given a similar cultural and natural potential, Egypt was visited by 30 (!) times more tourists (approx. 14 051 000 pax) in 2010, than Sudan.

We must admit that from the moment the first travel agencies and hotels were created and to the present, tourism in Sudan has been developing slowly. Despite the fact that hotels have appeared in the country, even in provincial cities, offices and branches of travel agencies have been opened, interaction with foreign partners remains extremely weak. Tours focused on visiting ancient monuments, landscape parks and reserves are still the most popular ones. Red Sea diving centers are popular, but their number is limited and they belong mainly to Italian companies.

The outlines of a possible future cooperation of Sudanese travel companies with Russia are gradually emerging. Over the past few years, the Sudanese agency Shiri Travel and several others² have been taking the most active part in establishing ties between tourism authorities of Russia and Sudan. The embassy of Sudan in Moscow initiated a dialogue in this area, and the Ministry of Tourism, Antiquities and Wildlife of Sudan (Wizarat al-siyaha wa al-asar wa al-hayat al-barriya) coordinated the efforts of all Sudanese companies to exchange information with the Russian Federation.

The tourism industry itself is an important aspect of the Sudanese economy — public and private. Changes in employment have affected the service sector as a whole. Some local Sudanese who are capable to work began to focus on jobs in the hotel business, some hold small souvenir shops or participate in folklore ensembles, etc. These types of activity cater specifically to the needs of foreigners. According to the CIA World Factbook website, in 2007, 35.2 % of Sudan's GDP was in the service sector, which includes tourism [12].

With the development of transport and communications, formally there are no obstacles for promoting the country in the travel market. If Sudan maintains a foreign policy aimed at enhancing interaction with the outside world, then its position as a tourist destination can be seriously strengthened, and it will attract thousands of travelers from around the world.

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² Among them, we can specify the Masharanti travel agencies.

нальные туристские фирмы, страну начали посещать путешественники из западных стран и арабского мира. Путешествия стали перспективной отраслью для инвестиций и привлечения капитала, как местного, так и международного. Вместе с тем проблемы экономического и политического характера, наблюдавшиеся в период 1980–2000-х годов, не позволили превратить туризм в источник большого дохода для государства и не способствовали расширению деятельности этого сектора. В настоящее время в столице страны и в некоторых городах регионального значения построены и действуют как отели самого высокого уровня, так и более скромные гостиницы, ориентирующиеся в основном на местного потребителя услуг. Деятельность туристских компаний остается на низком уровне, количество путешественников-иностранцев невелико. Местные фирмы делали попытки кооперации с российскими коллегами, но предпосылок для активизации в этой области недостаточно. Суданские исследователи — экономисты, социологи, историки, маркетологи — занимаются изучением сектора туризма и предлагают рекомендации по улучшению работы в этой сфере. Это нашло отражение в ряде публикаций в научных изданиях, увидевших свет за последние годы.

Ключевые слова: история, туризм, Судан, Ближний Восток, Хартум.

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