

AUGUST 27, 2007

Marketing Middle East to Gay Tourists

Creativity, Discretion Are Keys to Promotions By Lebanese Advertiser

By FARNAZ FASSIHI

BEIRUT, Lebanon -- How do you market a conservative Middle Eastern country as a gay-friendly tourist destination?

"It can be done," says Bertho Makso, a 26-year-old Lebanese archaeology student and perhaps the Arab world's best-known gay travel-services advertiser. "You just have to be creative, and sometimes discreet."

Homosexuality is against the law in every Muslim country in the Middle East. In countries such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, gays and lesbians are often persecuted, imprisoned or deported. So Mr. Makso stands out. The U.S.-based International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association named him their sole representative in the Arab Middle East. (Israel has a robust gay community.)

"Bertho is very daring to have an openly gay business in the Arab world," says Carlos Kytka, the association's marketing manager for Europe and the Middle East. "The Middle East is not a big market for us at the moment, but we have to start somewhere, and he is taking those first steps."

Bertho Makso took a tour group to visit the Roman ruins at Baalbek, in Lebanon.

Marketing to gay consumers is on the rise elsewhere. During 2006, ad spending targeting gay consumers in the U.S. hit \$223.3 million, a record, according to a survey from advertising agency Prime Access Inc. and gay-media specialist Rivendell Media. Ad spending in the U.S. gay-and-lesbian press has grown at almost three times the rate of spending in consumer magazines as a whole over the past 10 years, the report says. Among gay consumers, travel is at the top of the list for expenditures, says Ian Johnson, chief executive of Out Now Consulting, an Amsterdam-based gay-marketing firm with offices world-wide.

But in the Middle East, gay advertising is uncharted territory, and so far, Mr. Makso appears to be the only one doing any of it.

The gay-tourism market in the Middle East is limited and likely to remain so for a long time. Because homosexuality is still considered taboo, the biggest challenge for gay business owners such as Mr. Makso is that there is always a risk of discrimination or of being shunned.

Still, Out Now's Mr. Johnson says recent focus groups have shown a rising interest among gay travelers in the Mideast, particularly Lebanon.

It helps that Lebanon is the most tolerant Arab and Muslim country in the region. An article in Lebanese law calls for punishment of "abnormal" sexual behavior, but it generally isn't enforced. It doesn't specifically single out gays, and a gay-rights group here called Helem pushes the envelope, publicly lobbying to modify the law. A popular nightclub called Acid caters to gay clients, and there are scores of gay-friendly cafés and bars.

Mr. Makso says the travel industry is beginning to recognize the potential value of the market. Last month, officials for Beirut's annual Arab Tourism and Transportation Fair invited him to set up a stall.

"The market [for gay tourism] is there....We won't promote it in a shocking, provocative way, but it doesn't make financial sense to simply ignore or neglect it either," says Maya Shehayeb, project manager for the fair.

"They realize that the gay travel sector is very lucrative, and why shouldn't we tap into it and bring money to our country?" says Mr. Makso, sipping fresh orange juice at Columbus Cafe, one of the many gay-friendly businesses he recommends to clients.

Much of Mr. Makso's advertising pitch is aimed at the online community, with ads posted on international gay sites and local travel-industry Web pages. His services include adventure hiking, tours of historical sites and organizing parties.

Mr. Makso, who started business in 2003, says overseas clients always ask questions about whether they will be welcomed and about sensitive social norms. He hands out a printed list to clients advising them against public shows of affection like holding hands or kissing.

He also targets the Middle East's regional and mostly underground gay scene -- for instance, he organizes a Monday night gathering at a local Turkish bathhouse in Beirut with music and dancing. He advertises these events by sending instant messages and emails to about 10,000 people in his database, and he posts fliers in gay-friendly bars and restaurants.

Mr. Makso, who is fluent in English, French, Arabic and Italian, started off as a tour guide for foreign visitors. A German tourist encouraged him to set up a travel service for gays interested in the region.

Mr. Makso started a Web site and began populating other online gay and tourist sites with ad banners linking to his homepage. He places openly gay ads on international gay-dating sites, chat rooms and online magazines. He tones them down for mainstream tourism sites in Lebanon and the rest of the Middle East.

His ads never use the word gay. But across the bottom of all his ads is a strip of rainbow colors, a symbol for the gay community.

Write to Farnaz Fassihi at farnaz.fassihi@wsj.com