

Russian Tourists Help Hungarian Spa Town Flourish

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A former Soviet military airport in western Hungary where MIG fighter jets landed for decades when Hungary was under Soviet rule is now receiving a different type of Russian visitor - tourists arriving on charter flights.

Locals have welcomed the new Russian "invasion" of tourists who fly into Sarmellek to head to the spa town Heviz, saying they have brought money, new jobs, and even boosted the moribund real estate market during a deep, economic downturn.

While some former eastern bloc countries still resent the former overlord of ex-communist eastern Europe, residents of Heviz say the ill feelings towards Russia are long gone.

"How could we have a problem? We welcome all foreigners... I once learned Russian but unfortunately I have forgotten most of it," said Eva Virt, who works in a clothes shop in the town.

Alongside regular flights from Germany, every Sunday two charter flights come from Moscow to Sarmellek where the derelict Soviet air base has been converted into a small commercial airport.

The huge concrete buildings that once housed Soviet troops are empty and overgrown with weeds, with only a few Russian schoolbooks scattered in the former school reminiscent of a past era. Russian troops left Hungary in 1991.

Tourist Lyudmilla Ilyina, who used to live in Hungary under the communist regime, said she had come to try the lake in Heviz, Europe's largest thermal lake whose waters are known for healing powers and attract German, Dutch and Austrian tourists.

"A long time ago, in my youth, I lived in Hungary for three years and it is very nice to fly back to see what's changed," she said after stepping off the plane.

Gabor Papp, the mayor of Heviz, said the surge in Russian visitors had helped boost tourism revenue despite the economic crisis. The municipality is the official operator of the airport which it wants to develop.

"In that period, 20 to 30 to 35 years ago, this airport had a different function and we lived in a different world. Since then the world has changed... and our goal is to make this airport serve the western region of Hungary," he said.

THE RETURN OF THE RUSSIANS

The influx of Russian tourists to Heviz got a boost in 2010 when the 'Arab Spring' protests scared tourists away from destinations such as Egypt, said Laszlo Konnyid, manager of a four-star hotel, which operates with room occupancy rates at 75 percent all year around, well above the national average.

"We like the Russians for many reasons but why we value them especially is that they cherish the traditional medical treatment... in Heviz that was developed after 1769 by local doctors," he said.

The spa town, with a population of 5,000, recorded more than one million guest nights last year which made it the second most visited destination in Hungary after the capital Budapest.

Nikolai Azorsky, 50, from Kharkiv in Ukraine, has returned to Heviz for a second time after a visit in October which he said helped to heal his shoulders and knees.

"The lake is very unique, the water is warm and it has some kind of magic," he said.

In ex-communist eastern Europe, Russian tourists have also rediscovered Bulgaria with the number of visitors there rising 31 percent last year to almost 600,000.

In the last quarter of 2012, the number of Russian tourists to the Czech Republic jumped by 24 percent to 173,000 and they are now the second biggest group behind the Germans.

Heviz businesses have welcomed Russians, many of whom are willing and able to spend, with the town now home to some luxury shops.

"It has happened many times that we dressed up (a lady) and we wanted to put beautiful... jewels on her neck and she

said she would only wear diamonds," said Agnes Kanizsai, who opened a clothes shop last year and plans to sell diamonds as well.

(Reuters)