**We Own The Leisure Bliss**

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Traversing the length and breadth of Pakistan one wonders how much this country has been blessed by nature. Beautiful mountains of variety, plains, jungles, rivers, sea, a vast coastline, glaciers and all four seasons. There must not be many countries which have this variety of terrain, flora and fauna. Some places are still untouched and tourism potential therein has not been tapped yet. So, there is great potential in the tourism sector that can be nurtured to contribute to the country’s economy.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) publishes The World Tourism Barometer which provides a comprehensive analysis of international trends, sustainable potential and accessibility for global tourism. According to the UNWTO report, Pakistan made a remarkable 92 per cent recovery to pre-pandemic levels in the year 2023 and witnessed an impressive 115 percent growth in foreign tourism in the year 2023, resulting in the national earning of $1.3 billion as foreign exchange revenue which is expected to reach up to $3bn in year 2024. It recognized Pakistan’s rich cultural legacy and an impressive natural attraction by placing it in the top position in global tourism.

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A well-thought-out strategy to promote tourism has been followed by the Government of Pakistan which resulted in such a significant development. Pakistan actively participated in six major global events related to tourism during the year 2023. The government’s digital outreach through the launch of the “Salam Pakistan” tourism brand in August 2023, made a significant contribution to attracting a vast range of visitors from across the world.

A collaborative mechanism between the government and private tour operators has built up a massive capacity for creating a more welcoming environment for international tourists. The tourism potential of Pakistan can serve as a paradigm shift in not only transforming the country’s economy but also highlighting its soft colourful image which is much needed by any other country of the world.

As per estimates, nearly 9000 foreign tourists visited Gilgit Baltistan in the summer of the year 2023 and that included 2050 mountain climbers. These are the highest number of foreign tourists visiting Pakistan in two decades. It resulted in a collection of around Rs.40 million from trekkers and climbers in the form of permit fees. Swat alone received 449,000 tourists during the year 2023; among those, around 4000 were foreign tourists. As per the World Bank, Pakistan attracted $16 billion in visitor spending in the year 2022-2023 which has been projected to touch approximately $30bn in the next ten years. The total contribution of the travel and tourism sector to GDP remained at 5.9% during the year 2022-23 while it created jobs for 4.2 million people.

The tourism industry has a unique feature; it is primarily based on God gifted potential that a country can have. The only need is to exploit it with the ways and means so that not only the domestic population but more importantly people from different parts of the world are attracted. Tourism in a country can be made irresistible by bringing ease in visa, travelling, boarding and lodging, ultimately extracting the maximum out of it for the contribution to the economy. While we have a few of the best tourism sites in Pakistan, there is a need to further exploit this potential via pragmatic steps that we still have to take.

It is interesting to note that Pakistan’s north-central and southern regions all afford very attractive tourist sites. The four seasons that we have in our country are ideal for exploiting the potential of different places at different times. There is thus a need to crystallize our tourism strategy in a way that every time of the year we have an attractive source for tourists around the world. It is a blessing that we have some of the highest mountain peaks in our country and climbers wish to throng for these, yet we have desert and sea also which merit our attention and publicity for the tourists both domestic as well as foreign. In parallel, we need to devise a media campaign for marketing these sites. For that local media ought to be encouraged and facilitated so that they present effective marketing tools.

Secure and assisted travelling as well as respectful lodging facilities are the hallmarks of the tourism industry. We need to focus on such facilities and the government’s approach of including the private sector in such ventures can be the best solution. Similarly, cellular network coverage to the remotest areas is a necessity. The government can mandate cellular companies in the country to extend their coverage to such areas while they can be granted some suitable waivers by the government. Medical and health facilities in the areas which are away from urban localities are binding for tourism. Tourism has a promising future for the locals of the area who can be employed in various facilities as well as become guides for incoming tourists.

Now that Pakistan is globally acknowledged as one of the promising tourist sites for its rich culture, traditions, scenic beauty, cuisine etc. there is a need to continue this journey unabated and convert into the real potential that it possesses. With all the bounties that we have been blessed with, Pakistan is truly a leisure bliss that we must cherish.

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