

Winner Project 2002

TOURISTIC SITE OF JEÏTA

2nd Sustainable Development in Tourism Prize

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Description of the Project:

a- Jeïta Grotto represents a show cave touristic site in a huge panoramic setting offering the most relaxing and interesting place in Lebanon for tourists and Lebanese people. It is located at a distance of approx. 18 km northerly from Beirut in the valley of Nahr El-Kalb (Dog river) / Keserwan region – Lebanon. Its green scenery as well as its splendid flower cultivation distinguish the site. It accommodates **2 crystallized grottoes** with natural sculptural beauty dazzling the eyes of the tourist whilst discovering a marvelous nature's wonder:

❖ *A lower cave* where the visitor can take a short dreamy cruise in a rowboat for a distance of approx. 450 m from the 6200 m explored. He will be fascinated to discover extraordinary formations of stalactites and stalagmites shaped only by the hands of nature.

❖ *An upper cave* where he can marvel on foot at the view of imposing stone concretions in the form of cathedral vaults to a distance of approx. 750 m from the 2200 m explored.

The site is provided with a ropeway, a small train, a projection theater, a restaurant, snacks, souvenir shops, gardens and a small zoo.

Jeïta Grotto welcomes warmly its visitors and spares no effort for their comfort and security. The stability of stalactites and stalagmites is enormous and till now no accident has been registered in the caves.

The site offers a real comfort of visit as:

- An open space area to go for a walk and be relaxed.
- A parking where cars can be parked comfortably.
- An information-reception department at the entrance of the site for assisting visitors, orienting them and to provide explanatory brochures and location maps of the site.
- Informative billboards in the site for several instructions and regulations to be applied by the visitors.
- Guides speaking various foreign languages for accompanying tourists.
- Souvenir shops with traditional and oriental handicraft products satisfying fine taste of visitors.

Amenities

The “**Touristic Site of Jeïta**” boasts excellent tourist and recreational facilities and accommodation such as:

- Transportation of visitors inside the site with a **ropeway** and a relaxing lovely **train** shuttling up and down the upper and lower grottoes as well as the entrance.
- Hourly projection of a documentary film (21 min.) in several languages in a conditioned theater “**Sound and image**” giving information on stalactites and stalagmites’ formation and relating history of Jeïta Grotto discovery.
- Friendly traditional **restaurant** and **snack-terraces** where visitor can taste our delicious and appetizing meals and drink some refreshments at reasonable prices.
- Nice “**Souvenir shops**” where can be found handicrafts and artistic ceramics reflecting oriental influence and also postcards, documentary illustrated books and colored sand..
- A small **zoo** enabling to familiarize with pet animals well integrated into their own environment.
- A **simulator** that will make sensation with 3-dimensional films.
- A visit to our miniaturized “**group of mountain villages**” at the entry of the lower cave giving opportunity to see the obviousness of a remarkable Lebanese heritage of housing.

b- Project initiation and objectives:

The Minister of Tourism awarded **Mapas Co.** to rehabilitate the site after its infrastructure has been destroyed during 15 years of civil war; a contract was signed between them on BOT basis to restore, renovate and manage this touristic complex. Mapas Co. undertook an intensive restoration program in touristic, environmental & cultural fields for improving site condition.

Project begun with a strong desire to display the beauty of Lebanon to tourists and to return to this site its initial position of a major popular tourist destination as it was before its closure for approx. 20 years. Continuous project's development was achieved within 1 year and 4 months and this natural wonder was reopened to the public in 16 July 1995.

A great job was required to protect this natural heritage as well as to develop it with modern equipment installations that would be in harmony with nature.

The main objective is to show our wonderful cave to foreigners and to local people, but at the same time taking into consideration the fact that the grotto represents a very sensitive biotope, and to create jobs for local people.

c- The financing of the project:

The system applied in this project is the self-financing system without any means of financial contribution from abroad or from the government and also with no custom duties facilities or other taxes.

A- Economic considerations of the project and impact on local economy development.

The economic benefits of this project are as follows:

- Ministry of Tourism benefits gradually from 10 % to 20% from the general income.
- Ministry of Finance benefits 10% of the tickets' price + 10% VAT.
- Municipality of Jeïta 5% of entry fees.

As well as all kinds of governmental charges, taxes, etc.. are fully paid.

- Support to environmental activities and movements.

The economy of Lebanon is heavily dependent on tourism. As Jeïta Touristic complex is the most visited site in our country, the government makes remarkable benefits through it as shown here above. The village of Jeïta being small and not having flourishing economy as all the other regions of Lebanon which have an economic regression, the 5% earned from entry fees represents a considerable amount for the municipality; they can use this money in several projects such as fitting out gardens, parks, or assistance to regional charitable organizations. This proves that this project is productive and profitable for the country.

B- Social aspects of sustainable development in tourism:

- Staff is recruited from all regions of Lebanon without any discrimination of religion, origin, sex or age. We train them to respect culture diversity of everyone and to be tolerant with others. We explain them permanently the natural wealth that represents such cave and how to take care of it as well as of all nature elements: animals, trees, earth, rock, air, water, etc..
- The manager motivates and stimulates the staff under supervision trying to develop a successful teamwork and to implement a cultural eco-tourism in the site respecting all nature; and this to contribute to save the ecological patrimony of Lebanon and in parallel to try to give a cultural seal to the site by the organization of cultural activities.

- We always provide our employees with more intimate knowledge of the fragile aspect of caves and karst environment by informative lectures held in the site as understanding cave climate processes help us all to better manage and to protect the natural cave environment.
 - Assistance as well as human as technical to employees allows viability of the project.
- All employees are registered to the social security and are insured against work accidents.

C- The defense of the culture and the local identity:

New links between Tourism and Culture:

The touristic site of Jeïta represents a harmonious natural and cultural paradise with a mixture of tourism and culture. To every step, the visitor can discover through the tourism an impact of the local heritage inserted in a picturesque natural setting. The visit to our site allows tourists to discover traditional values of our country and tourism offers a means to make the foreigners know the different faces of local culture. The touristic valorization of patrimony shows our local identity and vows to contribute to the people's culture. Here below, some aspects of our site that aims to express to the tourists the wealth of our oriental heritage and to bring out our attachment to our cultural and traditional values.

❖ “Souvenir shops” displaying hand-made articles with oriental designs as artistic ceramics, oriental style cloths, souvenir objects with traditional motives relating the history of Lebanon, etc... Our rich cultural heritage is visible in the ceramic articles decorated with oriental art and preserving the artisanal seal.

❖ Outdoor local craftsmen attracting visitors with their skilful work in painting glasses and ceramics and in filling colorful sand into glass vases in which tourist's name is written.

❖ A miniaturized “group of Lebanese village houses” at the entry of the lower cave symbolizing our national architectural heritage. Houses are built with red roofs to preserve the village's look. The recent urbanism changes modified the integrity of our built heritage and that's why we want to show the integral style and aspect of ancient houses of our ancestors to the tourists. Each house embraces the old Lebanese look and feel through its color and its classic design. The village design maintains its unique and individual character. It is an outstanding example of traditional Lebanese architecture and visitors can admire originality and diversity of national village houses and appreciate the values of our past.

❖ A statue called “guardian of time” has been inaugurated at the entrance of lower grotto. This is a cultural event since it represents the original artwork of a Lebanese sculptor who worked with local stones and it is one of the most enormous statues found in Lebanon. This statue transmits a message: the time. It makes us revive the spirit of the past and reminds us that we must valorize the influence of the time especially that a cave is a part of the nature that took millions of years to develop. This statue is represented as a protector of the cave, which is a natural reserve, and gather all natural resources: earth, stone, water, air, etc.. that must be preserved and protected. It is a link between past and present.

Cultural activities:

- Some artistic, cultural and educational events are held in our grottoes as musical concerts, lyrical poetic evenings, literary gatherings or painting exhibitions where we can see that an artistic work of great beauty can result from the harmony between human beings and nature.

- Painting and writing contests (whose topics are nature, caves, etc..) also take place where talented young pupils and university students are revealed as we give them a chance to express their talents. In these cases, the jury is composed of university and schools' professors who decide between the candidates of which the best are rewarded either with scholarships or valuable prizes or books; appreciation certificates are awarded to the winners.

- In July of 2002, an opera singer of Armenia enchanted the public with her cordial voice at the time of a concert that took place in the upper grotto. The magical splendour of nature offered a delightful background to this impressive concert where beauty of nature and perfectionism of art were combined.

- On 8, 9 and 10 August 2002, two piano virtuosos charmed the attentive public with improvisations to 2 pianos; they played jazz, traditional and other pieces on original notes.

- On 27/09/2002, a "National day of Eco-tourism" was held in our touristic site under the patronage of Ministries of Tourism and Environment and the United Nations Organization considering especially the fact that the United Nations declared year 2002 "Year of Eco-tourism all over the world". Various associations and ecological movements, speleological clubs as well as touristic guides took part in this educational demonstration where instructive lectures, debates and exchange of ideas took place on pollution and other ecological topics enhancing the conscience and the importance of environment especially that a healthy environment remains a vital condition for a brilliant and prosperous economy. The accent has been put to contribute to protect the ecological heritage of Lebanon.

- On November 7, 2002, an oriental musical evening was held in the lower grotto where public was carried away to a fairyland-like through the significant words of a Lebanese poet; he pronounced majestically his poem in Arabic language accompanied with the sensible music of "flute de Pan" played also by a Lebanese flutist. The tranquil river of the lower cave reflecting delicate formations of the grotto gave a romantic air to this musical event where melodies of poetry and music glowed against the magnificence of the nature. Poetry was intersected by interventions with the soft harmony of "flute de Pan" and the words of the poet vibrated the music-loving audience.

- We organize "touristic guides day" where we invite the touristic guides for making them aware about nature and environment in the context of their touristic mission.

These non-profitable cultural activities gave a touch of charm to the village of Jeïta that was not very advanced from the cultural point of view. The inhabitants of the region started to take part in these activities and to be interested either by their presence or by their support and to appreciate the diversity of these cultural activities.

Our vocation is to make discover the creativity of the Lebanese artists to a large public and to provide them the opportunity to express themselves and to show their talents through given concerts or through literary gatherings in our grottoes that represent the ideal setting to this kind of activities.

D- The preservation and the valorization of the environment:

a) Contribution to the conservation of natural areas :

- Only cooled white light is used in the caves for not influencing negatively climate change (temperature must be constant the whole year) and to prevent harmful mosses.
- Rocks inside grottoes are been washed with cold water (non-chemical products are used) and awareness billboards are put in the caves as well as controllers for avoiding visitors to touch or destroy a part of nature that took thousands of years to develop.
- For sewage treatment, we use an active biologic microorganism having a complete effect on the traditional purification's system.
- Impeccable cleanliness. Garbage is sorted and separated (cardboards, plastic glasses, etc..).
- Plantation of trees and flowers in the site.
- Pet animals savor the pure air of the complex. Some special nests are installed for the pigeons allowing them to feel comfortable and to return in their house. As well as specific places are reserved for rabbits, peacocks, geese, ducks, goats, hens, turkeys, the monkey, the donkey, etc.. The attention shown to these animals encourages visitors to like animals and respect them especially that they are a part of the nature and add beauty to the nature..

This is a vanguard project and unique in Lebanon.

b) The environmental practices:

To reduce waste:

- In principle, we don't sell in our site beverages bottled in cans or 1 way glass but only in glass bottles that we put in consignment near the supplier and that can be filled again.
- Strict instructions are given to employees to save energy and water consumption and we use economic energizing lamps.
- We begin to illuminate the caves only at the arrival of visitors to protect the formation of caves from light and to reduce electricity consumption.
- When we buy articles for our restaurant or snacks, we pay attention for not being them harmful to environment and with the least possible packing.
- In the caves, it's prohibited strictly from smoking, eating or touching the limestone formations.
- We organize in our complex "environment days" for public with the involvement of environmental Lebanese associations and where debates take place on pollution problems.

E- The sustainability with the setting in evidence of the relation between the economic development and the social, cultural and environmental aspects touched by the project:

1) Community involvement and benefits (the tourism employs a large part of its inhabitants) :

- More than 70 families (in high season the number increases) make their living direct from this project and local enterprises benefit from our site as: printing houses, supermarkets, bakeries, gas stations, laundries, flower shops, etc.. as well as manual workers who profit from this project as we have a considerable consumption of various articles (booklets, stationeries, foodstuffs for our restaurant and snacks, etc..) and a lot of carpentry works.

- Local constructors and engineers have been hired.
 - Local material has been used for the complex. On walls, local stones are put in different places.
 - Installations of cable car, theater room, lighting and ticketing system are put in place from abroad companies but foreign engineers and technicians trained local employees and initiated them in machine operating and self-maintenance works. The instructions given from foreigners for the ropeway, computerized ticketing system or others perfected the technique of the work
 - Materials and shapes of buildings are well integrated in the region and all stern conditions of the authorities fully respected.
- A considerable number of employees come from the local region of Keserwan.

We bring all our assistance to charity institutions, to disabled and needy people granting them some facilities for the visit of our site and sometimes offering them free entry tickets to our grotto.

2) Results achieved:

- a- Creation of many good jobs: administrative, public relations, technique (maintenance of cable-car and train, electricity, generator, etc.), marines, responsables and employees of restaurant – snacks – “souvenir shops”, reception, touristic guides, security, cleanliness, etc.. and strengthening ties between different categories of civil society.
- b- Formation of young responsible people who can assure the necessary follow-up of the project that represents one of the conditions for a sustainable development.
- c- Training employees to various technical works (cable-car and train), electric, equipment maintenance, machine operators, rowboat and train drivers, restaurant, artisan works, etc..
- d- Considerable incomes for Ministries of Tourism and Finance, Jeïta Municipality, etc... The sustainability of this project offers an economic growth to our country and especially to the region of Keserwan while assuring fix salaries to the residents of this locality as having occupation makes them more integrated in the society and allows them to feel needed through contributing to the survival of their families.
- e- Lunching employees with the assessment team was positive giving them a sense of collective involvement in the long-term project development and helping them to ameliorate relations between different social groups and to improve their standard of living. They work together in a friendly atmosphere and revealing total respect to every colleague or to every visitor.
- f- Cleanliness and green space conservation.
- g- Healthy food in the restaurant and the snacks.
- h- Conservation of safe water provision since Jeïta Grotto’s source of water provides the capital Beirut with drinking water.
- i- The well-organized system operated in the site represents a symbol in Lebanon in all viewpoints and shows how to manage a company perfectly in touristic, cultural, environmental and social fields.

We are going to continue the educative system adopted in the site inducing employees (as well as visitors) to respect and love nature and to accept to live together in a friendly atmosphere improving mentality of local community that began to evaluate the importance of environmental consideration and the tolerance to each other.

F- The problems and their solutions:

a- The local municipality of Jeïta fails to take following measures on the road leading to the complex:

- To plant trees and flowers.
- To collect the garbage let by the walkers.
- To protect against possible forest fires in the surroundings of the project.
- To improve road condition that remains poor and dangerous for buses and walkers.

b- Some bureaucratic problems exist as the non-existence of procedure facilities for improvement of infrastructure; also, there is no cooperation between official institutions for topics concerning us.

c- The Lebanese people is very individualist and it takes time to educate employees to work in team with a common goal and to motivate them to think positively and in a constructive way for developing a project permanently. A lot of patience and courage is necessary to succeed in this optic.

d- Governmental and municipal taxes, expenses and fees are relatively too high.

e- The official authorities must protect, support and bring assistance to the investors especially in a sensitive sector as the tourism and help them to solve the problems as quickly as possible. Always precise instructions must be given to act accordingly.

f- Solutions are difficult to find since there are historic and social factors.

G- Conclusion: Project has been achieved with a notable success (under hard conditions approx. 280.000 visitors p.a.) and shows benefits of tourism impact on local economy. Good management and development strategies, available resources as the natural reserve of Jeïta, can continue to sustain population.

The relation between a human being and a society counts a lot and we succeeded in putting our employees (especially of the local community of Keserwan) in contact with the outside since the residents of this region are not very communicative with people of other agglomerations and are not open mind. It's not easy to work to modify their temperament.

As the image of Lebanon remains always in the mind of people a place of conflicts and perpetual wars, we work regularly to change the negative aspect of our country's face and to try to present a beautiful image of Lebanon in order to recover the tourists since tourism is the pillar of the national economy. The role of the private sector is very essential that's why we are trying to do our utmost to satisfy the visitors and to attract more and more tourists. As our site offers multiple attractions, it becomes an interesting place to visitors who valorize at the same time the cultural resources of our country.

A successful management of an important eco-touristic project in a small country as Lebanon creates always unfavorable echoes. Several local factors (security, politic, economic, etc..) affect greatly the processes of our work. But as Jeïta Grotto, the wonder of nature in Lebanon, is the most important site visited in whole of the Middle East, we shall always try to protect and preserve this site to transmit it intact to the future generations to come.

Please find hereafter some indicators of our project:

Various international and local awards won:

- “International environment appreciation award” between 4 best companies in 1997 from “German Travel Agency Association DRV”.
 - “Best touristic project” from the Ministry of Tourism in Lebanon on 30/09/1998.
 - Appreciation from the “Arab Musical Association” in 2000.
 - “Certificate of acknowledgment” from “Sukleen” – recycling (a cleaning services Co/ Lebanon) on 20th of February 2000 for “sorting out recyclable campaign”.
 - A certificate from “Doppelmayr” – Austria- dated 14/02/2001 favour Jeïta Grotto ropeway for keeping the installation in an immaculate condition both technically and optically.
 - Appreciation and thanks from “Syndicat des guides touristiques du Liban” on 5/09/2001.
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