

Chinese tour groups vanish from Israel amid virus scare

Rina Rosenberg Kandel

Tourists who enter Jerusalem's Old City are typically greeted by the loud cries of local vendors using hard-sell techniques to draw business. But a group of Chinese tourists who strolled through the Old City last week received a vastly different reception, recalls tour guide Yuval Ben Ari.

"The vendors yelled at us, 'go, 'go,'" says Ben Ari, who specializes in tour groups from China. "It was like walking around with lepers."

Two of the group members were indeed from Wuhan, the central Chinese city that has made headlines as the hub of the coronavirus outbreak; however, they had left China three weeks ago, which means they were unlikely to have been infected.

Ben Ari, for his part, will be staying home for the next few months, and not because he's under quarantine: All the Chinese groups that had booked his services have canceled due to the outbreak.

"I admit that I was happy to finish working with that group. It's true they left China three weeks ago, so they wouldn't have been at risk of being infected, but Israelis who saw us didn't know this," he says. "The restaurants we reserved called and said explicitly not to come with the group; we walked around with masks and there was a constant feeling that people were trying to get away from them. We traveled by bus with the windows open, and at some point I started thinking that working with this group was high-risk."

In 2019, Israel had some 156,000 incoming tourists from China, a 49% increase from 2018. Some came on work trips, but the vast majority came on organized tours. These are the tourists who form the basis of the work of Chinese-speaking tour guides.

"They generally book us months in advance, but currently my calendar is empty. It's not just me – there are some 100 tour guides in Israel specializing in the Chinese market, and they'll all be at home without income. It's a big problem for us, since we're all freelancers

and we can't collect unemployment," says Ben Ari.

"Some 1.5 billion Chinese are sitting at home right now, so I can't really complain – but it's major lost income," says Eran Cohen, who also works as a tour guide for Chinese groups. "Everything that was booked for the next few months has been canceled."

Cohen, who is also working with a group that left China three weeks ago, describes an experience similar to that of Ben Ari, with locals shrinking away from his tourists. "People even ask me, 'How can you guide them?' It's an unpleasant feeling for the Chinese as well. I feel bad for them," he says.

Cohen says he's trying to stay optimistic. "I hope that it'll pass within two months. It's all part of the risks of this career."

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Ben Ari says the virus struck at what would have been the peak of the Chinese tourism season, right after the Chinese New Year.

"Guides know that a missile could hit Tel Aviv and they'd find themselves out of work, so they put money aside," he notes.

China is ranked eighth among countries sending incoming tourists to Israel. Last year, Israel saw a total of 4.5 million incoming tourists.

Dr. Eran Ketter, a tourism lecturer at Kinneret Academic College, says the disappearance of Chinese visitors won't be too much of a blow on the local industry, because a wide range of places account for Israel's incoming tourism.

One-third of incoming tourists come to visit family and are unlikely to cancel travel plans hastily despite the coronavirus scare; business tourism and religious tourism are also likely to continue unabated, notes Ketter.



A sign greeting Chinese tourists in Jaffa's Old City. Eyal Toueg