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Crimea Tourism Improves 34 Percent, Still Below Pre-Annexation Levels

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More than 3.9 million people have visited Crimea so far this year, a 34 percent increase from 2014, according to regional authorities, but the number still marks a tourism decline on the peninsula since Russia annexed it from Ukraine.

Crimea's hotels, on average, have filled about a third of available rooms this year — an increase from 2014, when all but 18 percent of rooms remained vacant, the region's Resort and Tourism Minister Sergei Strelbitsky said in a statement Monday on the ministry's website.

The increase comes at a time when Russia's government agencies and law-enforcement services have effectively banned their employees from vacationing abroad amid Moscow's deteriorating relations with the West over Russia's annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014.

Russia's President Vladimir Putin has denounced the state of Crimea's resort facilities under the Ukrainian administration, saying they were in dire condition, fit only for inebriated miners, but that Russians deserved better accommodations. The remark prompted an outpouring of indignation from Ukraine's miners.

“Our specialists, who visited Crimea, have inspected those facilities, holiday sites, hotels, and have reached the decision that under Russia's sanitary and epidemiological norms they cannot be used today for housing people,” Putin said. “[When] asked how people vacationed there ... they said: 'No big deal, miners arrived there, they couldn't care less, they gulp down half a glass [of vodka] and head for the beach.”

“You understand that we cannot approach the organization of holidays for Russians that way,” Putin said.

Chairman of Ukraine's Independent Trade Union of Miners Mikhail Volynets, denounced Putin's remarks as the “cynical view of a bully,” Ukraine's TSN television reported.

“Miners are noble people and they simply despise such a man,” Volynets said, adding that heavy drinking is rare among miners.

In 2013 — the year preceding the annexation — some 5.9 million people visited Crimea, according to figures cited at that time by Ukraine's resort and tourism minister to the region, Oleksandr Liev.

This compares to 6.1 million visitors to Crimea in 2012, and 5.7 million in 2011, Liev said, Ukrainian media has reported.

After Moscow annexed Crimea, it increased ferry routes to and from the peninsula — which has no land connection with Russia — up to 50 a day from the previous 18, according to figures cited by the Transportation Ministry at that time.

But bad weather frequently disrupts ferry service across the Kerch Strait, forcing travelers to wait for hours in their cars. Moods often sour, and at least one woman was beaten by fellow travelers who accused her of trying to jump the line, while another man died from a heart attack in a separate incident.

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