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Challenges Facing Hotels and Travel Agencies in Marsa Alam Destination: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract
This research aims to identify the challenges facing hotels and travel agencies in Marsa Alam as a remote destination. The field study was conducted using a qualitative in-depth face to face interview method with a random sample of different hotel departments' managers and travel agents. The study is based on the descriptive approach in literature review, the analytical approach in the field study and the explanatory approach in interpreting and analyzing preliminary data. The results showed that hotel sector in Marsa Alam suffers from many challenges with a total of 13 challenges and travel agencies also suffer from 5 challenges due to low interest in tourism development, sustainability, competitiveness and management of this remote destination. The study recommends to facilitate and promote tourist investment in Marsa Alam to establish recreational projects; to construct another airport and seaport; renew roads; establish an effective management board for Marsa Alam destination; encourage cooperation between public and private sectors to establish infrastructure and superstructure and implement the principles of competitiveness and sustainability.
Key Words: Destination Life Cycle, Remote Resorts; Sustainability; Competitiveness.
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Literature Review

Nowadays, many customers prefer remote resorts free from pollution sources, congestion of cities and routine of daily life to enjoy the natural environment. Therefore, new tourism patterns have emerged, such as ecotourism, therapeutic, safari and bird watching tourism. As a result, many tourist destinations around the world have developed their tourism product to meet the changing needs and desires of tourists (Tapper, 2006). Customers are no longer satisfied with just spending their vacation and relaxing inside the hotel. They have a strong desire for renewal and diversification through the practice of tourist activities during holidays, especially activities related to nature environment within the destination. Therefore, the remote tourist destinations are in need of tourism development more than other destinations in order to meet the needs of increasing tourist activity and overcome its challenges (Harwood, 2010; Bukenya and Luostari, 2013).

Marsa Alam is a remote tourist destination that has many natural attractions preferred by many customers around the world; however it does not enjoy the tourist status it deserves due to low interest in tourism development plans. The natural attractions of Marsa Alam which are not sufficiently exploited include natural reserves, marine islands, medical plants, rare animals and birds, vast desert and valleys, high mountains, ancient monuments from different eras, distinct climate and location (Mohamed Ibrahim, 2010 ; Ammar *et al*, 2011).

Therefore, the success of tourist destinations, especially remote ones, depends on the following factors: 1) Development; 2) Sustainability; 3) Competitiveness; 4) Management (Ortigueira and Selemeneva, 2011; Haugland *et al*., 2011; Zamfir and Corbos, 2015).

Development of tourist destinations includes providing all necessary services and facilities that satisfy the needs and desires of customers through the optimal use of natural, economic, social, cultural and urban resources. Therefore, there is a strong relationship between tourism development projects in tourist destinations and other sectors, especially the hotel sector. Hence, the natural resources within any tourist destination alone is not enough to create a tourist demand unless other parties cooperate such as public and private sectors to build infrastructure and superstructure facilities, accommodation facilities and promotional services (Henderson, 2017).

Development of tourist destinations also requires reliance on a tourism planning factor as a scientific method aiming at achieving the highest possible rate of tourism growth at the lowest possible cost and in the shortest possible time. Tourism planning is therefore a necessity for tourism development to face competition on the international tourism market (Marques and Santos, 2017). Again development of tourist destinations goes through several stages, which is called *Destination Life Cycle* as shown in Figure 1.

Figure (1): Destination Life Cycle
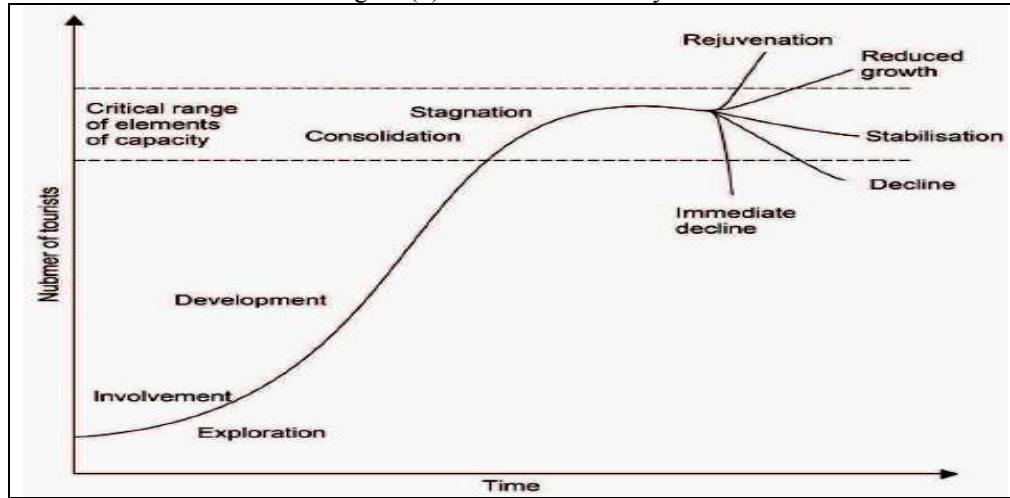
Source: Butler (1980)

The exploration phase involves exploring the attractions of a new area that receives a small number of customers. The involvement stage begins when the area becomes well known and the local community becomes involved in the development of tourism activity by providing some services. The development stage is characterized by a large expansion of foreign investment in tourism development projects such as building hotels, infrastructure and superstructures facilities. The consolidation stage begins when some problems arise and the destination does not meet the needs of market as before; therefore the region in this case needs support through marketing campaigns. The stagnation stage begins when tourism facilities become tired and the number of customers declines and turns to competing destinations, in addition to the emergence of negative effects of tourism activity and increase of the opposition of local community. After stagnation, a critical stage of destination life cycle begins. This critical stage is either rejuvenation or reduced growth or stabilisation or decline or immediate decline (Muangasama, 2014; Apollo, 2015).

Sustainability is also an important factor to the success of tourist destinations. Sustainable tourism development aims at preserving the environment through the optimal utilization of natural attractions without waste and preserving for future generations. In other words, sustainability means balancing the needs of present with the hopes of future in various environmental, cultural, social and economic aspects (Zamfir and Corbos, 2015).

Sustainable tourism can be achieved through prevention of environmentally harmful tourism activities, modification of customer behavior towards the environment, use of environmentally friendly energy sources, promotion of environmental tourism awareness through various means of advertising, implementation of green marketing policies for tourist destinations, go to green hotels, preserving biological diversity through protection of plants, animals and birds, preserving the cultural heritage in its various forms of customs and traditions, reducing the percentage of pollution in its various forms (Luo, 2018).

Destination competitiveness is also one of the most important factors to the success of any tourist destination, especially remote ones. A competitive destination means the continuous ability of the destination to provide a high quality tourist product meeting the changing needs and requirements on international markets in excess of what the competing destinations offer. Competitiveness ensures a continuous flow of tourists and thereby increases the market share. Thus, if natural resources are available without man-made resources, such as infrastructure, superstructure and recreational services, the destination will not have the appropriate market share (Novais, 2017).

Ritchie and Crouch (2000) developed a model to evaluate the competitiveness and sustainability indicators of tourist destinations as shown in Figure (2).

Figure (2): Competitiveness and Sustainability of a Tourism Destination
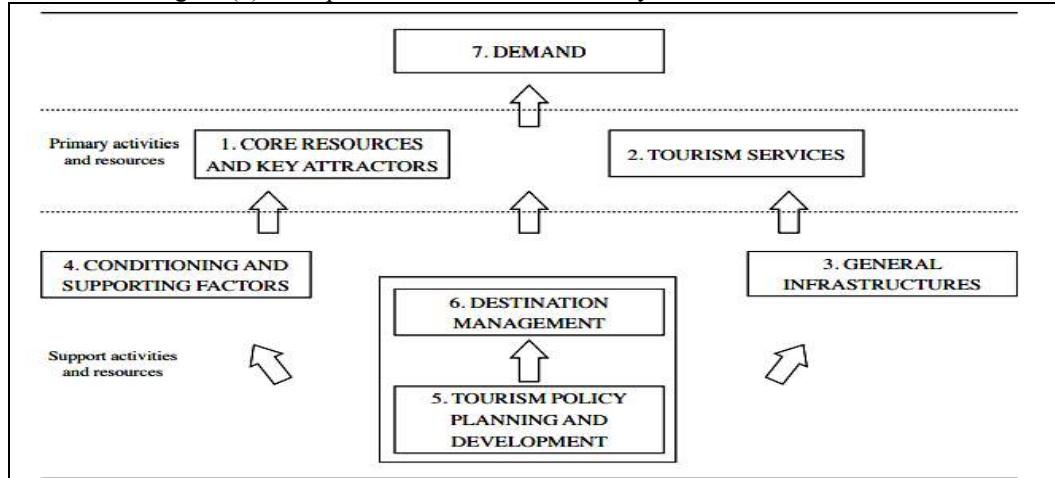
Source: Ritchie and Crouch (2000)

According to Ritchie and Crouch (2000) core resources and key attractions include natural resources, historical sites, cultural attractors and shopping opportunities. Tourism services include quality and quantity of accommodations, food service quality, and environmental friendliness of accommodations. General infrastructure refers to environmental friendliness and quality of transportation, quality of road system, medical care facilities, sewage and waste disposal. Conditions and supporting factors are accessibility to the destination, destination links with major markets, value for money in destination tourism experience and in accommodation, level of professional skills in tourism, safety, hospitality of residents towards tourists.

Tourism policy, planning and development involve political commitment to tourism, public sector commitment to minimizing negative environmental and social impacts of tourism, public sector commitment to maximizing economic impacts of tourism on local community, cooperation between public and private sector for local tourism development. Destination management such as effectiveness of destination positioning, effective market segmentation, visitor satisfaction management, tourist guidance and information, tourism impacts management and monitoring, promotion of partnerships between public and private stakeholders. The demand factor such as tourist's interests in natural and cultural local heritage, tourists respect for local traditions and values, tourist's environmental awareness (Goffi, 2013).

The tourist destination is not created by itself, but it must first be discovered and then searched for its development means which is not done without good destination management. Tourist destination management is one of the most important elements of controlling the impact of tourism on environment by controlling the sources of pollution or providing elements to improve the environmental situation or treating the environmental pollution existing. Responsibilities of destination management include providing drinking water, a sewage network, an electricity network and good roads, planning the use of land or place element to prevent any pollution, issuing or blocking licenses, following-up of the extent to which tourist establishments comply with rules and regulations, daily supervision of tourist activity within the destination and ensuring its safety and not being a threat to the environmental health of the destination (Alkhudairy, 2005).

Research Objective
This study aims to identify the challenges facing hotels and travel agencies in Marsa Alam destination.

Methodology
This study is based on the descriptive approach in literature review related to the most important factors for the success of remote tourist destinations. The analytical approach was also adopted in the field study, which aimed to collect preliminary data about challenges facing hotels and travel agencies in Marsa Alam destination. Finally, the explanatory approach was used to interpret and analyze preliminary data. A qualitative in-depth face to face interview was adopted. The field study was applied to a 15-hotel sample randomly selected and to the most important 5 travel agencies in Marsa Alam (Travco, Flash Tour, Meeting Point, Blue sky and Cairo Express). Interviews were conducted with a random sample of different hotel departments' managers and travel agents.

Results and Discussion
1. **Challenges Facing Hotels in Marsa Alam Destination:**
   The following are the main challenges facing hotels sector in Marsa Alam destination, as enumerated through the field study and interviews with hotel departments' managers (table 1):

Table (1): Challenges Facing Hotels in Marsa Alam Destination

No	Challenges
1	Natural Gas
2	Electricity
3	Drinking Water
4	Sewage
5	Medical Service
6	Security
7	Natural Hazards and Disasters
8	Qualified Employment
9	Construction and Expansions
10	Supply Services
11	Banking Services
12	Communications
13	Service Quality

1.1. Challenges Related to Infrastructures

1.1.1 Natural gas

Hotel managers pointed out that there is no a source of natural gas, so hotels use gas cylinders. These cylinders are very expensive compared to natural gas, besides transport costs. At crisis times, hotels suffer from the difficulty of getting gas supplies as happened in the January 25 revolution. These cylinders also need a big effort in installation and change. Moreover gas cylinders may explode suddenly, damage floors and shelter insects. In addition, there is no central locking device such as natural gas and therefore there is difficulty controlling during disasters.

1.1.2 Electricity

There is no a source of electricity and therefore hotels use diesel generators. These generators are used heavily in hotels due to the lack of natural gas. Each hotel requires approximately 6 generators, 4 of them in service and 2 as a spare. For example, a 200-room hotel needs about 3 tons of diesels per day in case of low occupancy at a cost of about 12,000 EGP (3000 liters × 4 pounds per liter), but in case of high occupancy this consumption increases to 6 tons of diesel per day. In the case of sudden breakdowns of generators, especially at peak times, all hotel services are stopped due to the lack of a guaranteed stable alternative source of energy. In addition, there are no heavy equipment repair centers in Marsa Alam Therefore; the hotels transfer the malfunctioned generators to Cairo using winches, where it takes a lot of time and effort. Maintenance of generators is very expensive, as one generator needs approximately 800,000 EGP per year for maintenance, repair and retrofitting. Moreover generators are very noisy and cause audio pollution. In addition, these generators negatively affect the environment and thus contradict The Principles of sustainable tourism development. These challenges make it difficult to switch to green hotels. Switching generators disturbs the stability of the electric current, thus burning many lamps, motors refrigerators and computers.

1.1.3 Drinking water

There is no settled source of fresh water and hotels rely on seawater desalination companies, despite the nearness of Marsa Alam to the River Nile compared to other destinations. This raises the cost of fresh water. Nevertheless hotel may lose fresh water source at any time for many reasons such as sudden breakdowns of company, bankruptcy, disputes with the company, electrical and technical faults. In addition, the waste of desalination plants adversely affects the environment

1.1.4 Sewage

There is no sewage network. Hotels recycle sewage water and use it to irrigate trees and green areas, but for solid waste, the hotels dispose of them in the desert. This leads to the spread of flies and insects. Insecticides are then used extensively and consequently adversely affect the environment.

1.2. Challenges Related to Medical Service

The hospital is far from most of hotels; the nearest one is about 30 km from most of hotels; so in case of calling ambulance, it takes about 60 km back and forth. There are also no flying ambulance services. This is a challenge that jeopardizes the lives of customers and employees، especially those suffering from chronic diseases, and emergencies cases. Also poor is the medical service inside the hospital, bad medical devices, and lack of experienced physicians. Private hospitals are very expensive and are also far from most of hotels.

1.3. Challenges Related to Security

The police station is far from most of hotels; the nearest one is about 30 km from most of hotels. This is a major challenge for hotels because they are easily vulnerable to terrorist attack.

1.4. Challenges Related to Natural Hazards and Disasters

These areas are open and face many natural hazards such as reptiles, scorpions, mosquitoes and other insects. One of the most common natural hazards was the spread of dengue mosquito in September 2017 due to the storage of potable water. Hotel managers explained that if any natural disasters occur in Marsa Alam, such as earthquakes and floods, this area will be a disastrous region.

1.5. Challenges Related to Qualified Employment

Skilled labor usually avoids working in Marsa Alam because of the challenges facing this region, such as remoteness and low salaries.

1.6. Challenges Related to Constructions And Expansions

Construction and expansions works in any hotel require many procedures and licenses which require long time such as construction of industrial lakes in hotels (Lagoon).

1.7. Challenges Related to Supply Services

Hotels face special supply challenges such as food supplies, especially fresh vegetables which are available only once a week because the central markets are held once a week. Therefore, any hotel must have a large storage capacity, which leads to large consumption of electrical energy, as well as low food quality. There are other supply challenges related to public services such as maintenance of electrical equipments and devices as mentioned before.

1.8. Challenges Related to Banking Services

The banks or ATMs are far from most of hotels; many hotels do not have ATMs. The nearest banks are located about 30 km from most of hotels. This is a major challenge to the whole hotel sector and the tourism movement.

1.9. Challenges Related to Communications

There are no telecommunication infrastructures, and all communications are Aerial. Aerial communications has many problems such as slow and bad internet, and mobile phones services that even stop in case of interruption of electrical service.

1.10. Challenges Related to Service Quality

All previous challenges in Marsa Alam affect the quality of hotel services, satisfaction and loyalty of employees and customers.

2. **Challenges Facing Travel Agencies in Marsa Alam Destination:**

The following are the main challenges facing travel agencies in Marsa Alam destination, which were gathered through field study and interviews with travel agents (table 2):

Table (2): Challenges Facing Travel Agencies in Marsa Alam Destination

No	Challenges
1	Airports
2	Roads
3	Railways
4	Recreation and Shopping
5	Cruises
6	Environmental Legislations
7	Tourism Investment

2.1 Challenges related to Transportation

2.1.1 Airports

There is only one airport north of Marsa Alam. It's a private airport. This airport follows monopolistic and exploitative practices. It raised the plane's landing fees in 1/2018 to 1200 Euros per plane. So, it was one of the highest landing fees around the world. These landing fees are considered as doubles the fee at Hurghada airport. Many travel agents have stopped their charter flights to Marsa Alam because of the high fees imposed by the private airport administration, in the

absence of the role of Civil Aviation Ministry. For this reason, most companies have converted their flights to Hurghada Airport and then moved their customers by bus to Marsa Alam; thus prolonging the trip and increasing the suffering and hardship of travel.

Moreover, Marsa Alam Airport has a limited capacity and receives only 20 flights a day. Therefore, if there is a significant increase of incoming tourism to Marsa Alam, there will be major problems because this airport is not eligible to receive large numbers of customers. Travel agents suffer from organizational problems inside the airport, especially the slow procedures related to customers' entry visas, where there is only one policeman responsible for the seals of entry visas. This status quo to congestion, queues and waiting for hours, beside poor airport services and lack of attention to customer needs and complaints.

Among the challenges facing travel agents is also the long distance between the airport and hotels. This distance takes 1-2 hrs from most hotels especially hotels located in Wadi Al-Jamal Reserve, because this airport is located in the north and there is no other one in the south. For example, a German tourist stays in the plane for about 4 hours until arriving in Egypt, waits 2 hours to finish the airport procedures, and waits for other 2 hours to arrive to the hotel. This causing the fatigue of customers and affects the image of Egypt. Last but not lease Marsa Alam Airport lies at a distance of about 280 km from Hurghada to Marsa Alam, although international transport standards recommend an airport every 100 kilometers to approximate the distances between hotels and the airport.

2.1.2 Roads

Travel agents suffer from bad roads. The roads are very old and have been destroyed by floods and have not been renewed for many years, thereby increase road accidents are frequent. This is a major challenge to travel agents when organizing trips, especially to Luxor and Aswan, which takes more than 5 hours. Buses are also behind the time. There are also no services on these roads such as light poles, fuel stations, cafeterias, public baths, motels, mobile networks and security centers. In addition, there is only one public station for buses and taxis in Marsa Alam and only one in Al-Qusair city with a distance of about 135 km.

2.1.3 Railways

There are no railway lines that help to plan various tourist programs and link Marsa Alam with other tourist cities such as Luxor and Aswan (cultural tourism) and Safaga (therapeutic tourism).

2.2 Challenges Related to Recreation and Shopping

By evening, the customer becomes a hostage in the hotel because there are no recreation centers or services near by the hotels, like the ones in Hurghada and Sharm El Sheikh such as bazaars, cinemas, restaurants, parks, or even a tourist walkway. Besides, there are no shopping opportunities in Marsa Alam.

2.3 Challenges Related to Cruises

There is no competition between tour operators, whether cruise or safari, therefore organizing trips in Marsa Alam is very bad. The boats used in cruises are old and bad and are dangerous to tourists. The lack of seaports is a major challenge when organizing cruises. For example, one of the most famous cruises in Marsa Alam is the Dolphin trip. This trip takes 2 hours from the hotel to Hamata port and then 2 hours from Hamata port by boat to the Dolphin area in Satayah region. The length of this trip by sea (4 hours) is burdensome to customers and exposes them to many risks, especially with no coverage of mobile networks. This challenge can be overcome by erecting a port near the Dolphin area in Satayah.

In addition to the above, there are other challenges related to cruises, such as the lack of medical services for diving trips. There is only one specialist in deep-sea medicine to deal with the risk of imbalance that threatens the lives of customers and actually there were cases ended with the death of customers as a result of unavailability of this medical service. This challenge can be overcome by increasing the number of specialist in deep-sea medicine.

2.4 Challenges Related to Environmental Legislation

Environmental legislations are contradictory to the needs of tourism in Marsa Alam. For example, travel agencies require many licenses to organize some trips such as safaris, diving, yachts and bird watching.

2.5 Challenges Related to Tourism Investment

There is no tourism investment in infrastructure, roads, recreations and shopping projects due to lack of plans, promotion and facilities. In addition, there is a difficulty in obtaining land with ownership contracts for establishing tourism projects.

Conclusion

Marsa Alam has many natural attractions which if exploited well in tourism; it will increase in the state's proceeds from hard currency; improve quality of life for local population; increase employment opportunities for young people; attract many customers willing to eco-tourism; improve the quality of tourism and hotel services. The numerous challenges facing Marsa Alam necessitate the need to issue some laws to facilitate tourist investment in remote destinations in Egypt. Despite the many challenges facing Marsa Alam, the qualified employment is considered the major challenge because the success of tourism industry is based mainly on the human factor. Development of Marsa Alam requires integration of all sectors and ministries, private, public or community. It also requires rethinking on tourism development plans and programs.

Recommendations

Marsa Alam destination should be developed through:

- Encouraging tourist investment;
- Constructing another airport and a seaport;
- Establishing recreational cities and centers like Sharm El Sheikh;
- Establishing shopping centers;
- Establishing a number of colleges that serve the tourism sector such as tourism and tongues;
- Providing incentives to attract qualified workers;
- Improving the medical services by establishing a number of hospitals equipped with modern devices and experienced doctors;
- Improving security services by increasing the number of police stations;
- Renovating, repairing of old roads and developing new ones with some services such as cafeterias, fuel stations, motels, lighting, mobile services and police stations;
- Organizing an effective management board from the Ministry of Tourism, Environment, Investment, Electricity and Civil Aviation to plan, direct, control, monitor and organize tourism activities and various development plans and programs;
- Constructing a railway line linking Marsa Alam with other destinations such as Luxor, Aswan and Hurghada to save time and the possibility of planning various tourism programs;
- Encouraging cooperation between public and private sectors to establish infrastructure and superstructure projects required such as electricity, natural gas, telecommunications, water and sewage networks;
- Marketing Marsa Alam internationally and regionally through the Ministry of Tourism and Tourism Promotion Authority, with interest in achieving the principles of competitiveness;
- Following-up the activities harmful to environment through the Ministry of Environment to achieve the sustainability.

الملخص العربي

يهدف هذا البحث إلى التعرف على أهم التحديات التي تواجه الفنادق ووكالات السياحة والسفر في مدينة مرسى علم . أجريت الدراسة الميدانية باستخدام طريقة المقابلات الشخصية المطولة a qualitative in-depth face to face interview method مع مجموعة من مدراء الأقسام الفندقية ووكلاء السفر في مرسى علم . اعتمدت الدراسة على المنهج الوصفي في الاستعراض المرجعي لموضوع البحث ، والمنهج التحليلي في الدراسة الميدانية ، وأخيراً المنهج التفسري لتفسير وتحليل البيانات الأولية. أظهرت النتائج أن القطاع الفندقي في مرسى علم يعاني من تحديات عديدة بلغت في مجملها 13 تحدياً ، كما تعاني وكالات السياحة والسفر هناك من 5 تحديات رئيسية ؛ نتيجة ضعف الاهتمام بعمليات التنمية السياحية ، وتطبيق مبادئ الاستدامة ، والتنافسية ، وطريقة إدارة هذا المقصد النائي . توصي الدراسة بضرورة الترويج والتسهيل للاستثمار السياحي في مرسى علم لإقامة مشروعات ومراكز خدمية وترفيهية ، إنشاء مطار وميناء بحري آخر لتنشيط الحركة السياحية والتنموية والقضاء على الممارسات الاحتكارية ، إنشاء عدد من الكليات التي تخدم القطاع السياحي مثل كليات السياحة والألسن ، تكوين مجلس إدارة فعال لمقصد مرسى علم مكون من وزارة السياحة والبيئة والاستثمار والكهرباء والطيران المدني لتخطيط وتوجيه ومراقبة وتنظيم الأنشطة السياحية وبرامج التنمية المختلفة ؛ تشجيع التعاون بين القطاعين العام والخاص لتنفيذ مشروعات البنية التحتية والفوقية التي تحتاجها مرسى علم ، الاهتمام بتحقيق مبادئ التنافسية والاستدامة العالمية ، إنشاء خط سكة حديد لربط مرسى علم بالمقاصد السياحية الأخرى ومن ثم إمكانية تخطيط برامج سياحية متنوعة مثل الأقصر (سياحة ثقافية) وسفاجا (سياحة علاجية) .

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