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Tour ops and tourism officials see better days ahead for Egypt

By Michelle Baran



A packed Tahrir Square this week in Cairo.

Photo by Farah Abouseif

Egypt's tourism industry remained hopeful on Friday as it braced for the fallout from the military ouster of president Mohamed Morsi on Wednesday and from the resulting clashes between pro- and anti-Morsi factions.

"The Egyptian people are celebrating. This is a continuation of our revolution. The military responded to our demands, to help us not to rule us. This is not a coup. This is a

day to celebrate. We're all ecstatic. We feel a sense of liberation," Farah Abouseif, the daughter of Big Five Tours & Expedition's Egypt country manager, wrote in an email update to Big Five.

Abouseif has been spending time in Cairo's Tahrir Square this week, where mass demonstrations have been taking place.

The country's tourism industry seems to believe that Morsi's ouster, just more than one year after the Muslim Brotherhood member was democratically elected into office, signals better times to come.

"This is a relief for the majority," said Mohamed Hegazy, tourism attaché with the Egyptian Tourist Authority in New York. "The minority supporters [of Morsi] might not be so happy." But, he added, "The new presidential election should come quickly."

Hegazy noted that summer is traditionally the low season for American and European travelers to Egypt, and he is "pretty optimistic that this transitional political era is going to be relatively short," perhaps short enough to see things normalize in time for the start of the high season in September.

Abercrombie & Kent earlier this week canceled all its scheduled small-group departures to Egypt for July, August and September. Big Five and Ya'lla Tours are taking a wait-and-see approach for departures in July and August.

"There is a large sign of relief in Egypt, which will be very helpful for tourism," Ronen Paldi, president of Ya'lla Tours USA, wrote in an email from the Arabian Peninsula. "We need for the immediate shock effect to be over, let the Islamists [release] some steam and allow for the

order to return.”

Ya'lla Tours has had one cancellation for a group that was going to be leaving to Egypt at the end of July. But Paldi said that all other bookings for 2013 and 2014 are “holding firm.”

“This is what the people wanted. So we’re expecting them to move expeditiously to announce when the new election is going to be. We expect things to start settling down over the next few weeks. If it doesn’t, we’ll address those departures then,” said Ashish Sanghrajka, president of Big Five.

He is waiting to make the call on whether the company’s next departure to Egypt, scheduled for later this month, will go ahead as planned.

As for the situation in Tahrir Square on Friday evening, according to the most recent update from Abouseif, “The Muslim Brotherhood and pro-Morsi protestors are trying to clash with the army in order to create as much chaos in the streets as possible. ... They're trying to show the world that the people are against the army’s decisions by clashing with the army.”

Abouseif added, “The streets are relatively safe. The army is spread everywhere and any clashes are, thankfully, maintained.”

The U.S. State Department last Friday issued a travel warning for Egypt, advising U.S. citizens to defer all nonessential travel to the country.

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