



IRFAN ONAL – Turkish Tourism Director

### **Interview: Turkish Tourism Director on Simpler Brand Messaging - Samantha Shankman, Skift**

Istanbul seems to appear towards the top of most aspiring travelers' bucket lists today.

Drawn by colorful images of architecture, stories of souks, and the possibility of tasting local cuisine, visitors to Turkey have increased significantly in recent years.

An estimated 42 million tourists arrived in Turkey in 2014, contributing up to \$36 billion into the economy, according to estimates.

It is difficult, however, to pinpoint exactly what led to Turkey's, and especially its capital's, status as a trendy international destination. We recently spoke with Irfan Onal, the director at the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, about the organization's marketing efforts, social media strategy and on-the-ground relationships.

An edited version of our interview can be read below:

*Editor's Note: Skift is publishing a series of interviews with CEOs of destination marketing organizations where we discuss the future of their organizations and the evolving strategies for attracting visitors.*

*This continues our series of CEO interviews that began with online travel CEOs in Future of Travel Booking (now an e-book), and continued with hotel CEOs in the Future of the Guest Experience series (which is also an e-book).*

**Skift:** Turkey has become a hugely popular destination in recent years. What do you think contributed to its growth?

**Irfan Onal:** Turkey's tourism sector has grown very quickly in the last decade because it is a continent-like country with huge diversity in terms of culture, geography and

climate. Thanks to investments and subsidies in the '80s and '90s, Turkey's tourism growth has been in the double digits making it one of the most popular destinations in the Mediterranean area with more than 37 million visitors a year.

We are the sixth most visited country in the world. Mass tourism started with the sea and sand, but we've started to invest in cultural and city tourism because we have huge opportunities.

**Skift:** What role has social media played in branding Turkey as a trendy destination?

**Onal:** Digital and social media is the reality of the world today. We invest in it a lot because it's the best way to create a connection between Turkey as a destination and an individual.

**Skift:** Turkey has hosted several high-profile press trips. How do you measure the impact of these campaigns and whether or not they result in increased visitation?

**Onal:** These are very important – especially when we host social media groups. For example, we hosted Instagrammers focused on fashion, food, and culture and gained followers to our own social media channels. That's a very direct impact.

**Skift:** What your biggest challenge today as the leader of Turkey Tourism?

**Onal:** Our biggest challenge is creating the right connection with potential visitors. From a marketing point of view, it's very easy to share one message. When you have many things to say about a place like Turkey then you need to be very careful and clever to talk about all of the diversities and realities of the destination.

It's a challenge, which is why we created the Turkey Home concept. We think about Turkey as a home of civilizations, hospitality, harmony, and many cultural and geographic values. We use very simple marketing elements and try to create a simple connection between people and Turkey — otherwise you cannot inform people about all of the different things in Turkey. Our policy is simplicity. We would like to be very simple, but also very powerful.

**Skift:** Is funding an issue when it comes to marketing Turkey?

**Onal:** Like every country, funding is always problematic. We receive funding directly from the government and have no other sources of money. We try to use the budget effectively, which is why we invest on digital and social media. It gives us a more intelligent way of using that amount of money.

**Skift:** Let's touch on Turkish Airlines for a moment. The airline has done so much to raise awareness of Turkey as a destination and obviously played a critical role in getting people there. What's your relationship with Turkish airlines and what role do you think that they've had in increasing tourism?

**Onal:** We share our plans with Turkish Airlines throughout the year and help one another. It's a very reciprocal and fruitful relationship. The challenge now is to make the relationship even more fruitful through marketing.

We have a strong relationship with the private tourism sector. We share our plans with them, get their opinions, and have very close relationships.

**Skift:** How do political issues in the region impact tourism?

**Onal:** Tourism is so closely related to human beings that it is impacted by everything in politics, the economy and social life. But we've seen the private tourism sector excel despite political issues. Otherwise, Turkey wouldn't be in the position that it is in now.