

Aussie oasis is tres sheik

by Marshall Hall, business editor

ARAB tourists are pouring tens of millions of dollars into the Gold Coast economy as the region enjoys a return to the glory days of tourism from the Middle East.

They are flocking to the Coast, which is the number one Australian destination for the wealthy travellers, to escape the heat during the summer school holidays in the Gulf states.

The visitors include at least two princes from Saudi Arabia and Sheikh Mishaal bin Hamad al-Thani, the son of Qatar ruler Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa al Thani.

Lawand Tourism managing director Toufic Lawand said between 11,500 and 11,800 Arab tourists would have visited the Coast during July and August, with each spending about \$2500 on flights and accommodation alone.

He said Sunfers Paradise retailers were enjoying a bumper period as the tourists went on a spending spree.

He said in 2001, the last time so many Arabs were here, Lawand Tourism, which organises packages for 40 per cent to 45 per cent of the inbound Gulf market, exported 20,000kg of goods to the Middle East during the eight-week holiday period.



The operators of luxury, serviced apartments have been among the big winners, with hotels capturing only 11 per cent of accommodation dollars.

The top five properties, Palazzo Versace, Chevron, Renaissance,



Crown Plaza, Sun City and The Moroccan, have earned 71 per cent of the business in dollar terms. The top 10 accommodated 90 per cent of the value.

Sobeil Ahedian, the joint managing director

of Sunland Group, the owner of Palazzo Versace, said the Gulf tourists were a blessing.

"Everybody knows that August is traditionally a very poor month for domestic tourism," he said.

"The level of tourists coming from the Gulf states is the best blessing

we could wish for. They are very big spenders and they tend to go to the better establishments. We are very fortunate to have the cream of the cream staying with us."

Mr Lawand said Chevron Renaissance alone had 100-150 apartments booked solid with tourists from five

Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar.

He said finding suitable accommodation for the tourists had been a difficult exercise.

"At the end we were running out of stock," he said.

If more accommo-



Above: Toufic Lawand

Left: Arab tourists from left, brothers Nasser and Mohamed Al Jonsabi, Fayssal Al Salam and their guide Rami Anton

Inset: Welcome visitors fit the shops

dation had been available, the number of tourists visiting would have been at least 15 per cent higher.

Mr Lawand said that barring any bad international events that affected the Gulf states and Australia, he expected the number of tourists visiting next year would increase 25-30 per cent.

Rami Anton said he had been on a permanent holiday since moving to the Coast from Lebanon, four years ago and had loved nothing more than showing his mates, Fayssal Al Salam and brothers Mohamed and Nasser Al Jonsabi around his "paradise".

"Regardless of the good weather, it's the people they love because of the way they are treated, especially being from a different climate and religion," he said.