Provisional agenda item 6

Thematic discussion:

“Exploring the potential of developing Tourism routes in the region”

1. At its 98th session, held at Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in June 2014, the Executive Council recognized the role of Tourism routes in fostering regional development and integration at national and international levels and encouraged the Secretary-General “to expand the action of the existing UNWTO Special Field Programme (Silk Road) to tourism routes in a broader sense with the aim of defining recommendations, exchange experiences and exploring the potential of working on new international or regional tourism routes”. (Decision 18 (XCVIII))

2. The wealth and diversity of the Middle East’s and North Africa’s heritage, both tangible and intangible, provides extensive opportunities for the development of sustainable tourism along legendary cultural, religious and commercial routes, similar to the well-established Silk Road, which already counts upon the very active participation of Iraq and Egypt. Taking into consideration the numerous collaborative opportunities specified in the Silk Road Action Plan 2014/2015, countries with interest in developing the collaborative initiatives along the Silk Road are encouraged to engage with the 31 Member States actively cooperating within a unified platform under the aegis of the UNWTO Silk Road Programme.

3. UNWTO has gained significant experience in enhancing cooperation among Member States through its Silk Road Programme, as well as through other initiatives such as the collaboration with the European Institute for Cultural Routes, the Amber Route and the Spice Route. Therefore, Member States are kindly asked to consider some future activities listed below.

4. The present document contains preliminary proposals for the staged development and promotion of nine tourism routes in the region, for which brief notes on their historical background and development potential are provided below:

   (a) **The Incense Route**: The Incense Route was created 3,500 years ago, when Indian traders began to send incense to Arabian and Egyptian ports, through Aden and Muza in Yemen, Aila on the Red Sea, or ports in the Persian Gulf such as Basra. Subsequently,
the Route was carried out by caravan to Petra, Gaza, Alexandria and Damascus, and crossed the Mediterranean to reach Cordoba and Seville. Many goods flowed through this channel: ebony and rare woods, feathers and spices, gold, herbs and animal skins.

It should be pointed out in this respect that the Sultanate of Oman has already included the incense route on its heritage list and that the geographical coverage of the project could span over four UNWTO regions (viz. Europe, Africa, Middle East and South Asia).

(b) **The Amber Route**: Lithuania, under the umbrella of UNWTO, is actively working towards establishing a World Amber Route open to all countries with a similar heritage and interest in developing amber themed tourism routes and products. Called “sea gold” or “tears of the gods”, amber was believed by the ancients to have magical properties. Objects and jewellery made of amber have been found in the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs, as well as of sovereigns and lords in Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Greece. All have the same chemical fingerprint: this amber comes from the Baltic Sea. An Amber Road, more than three thousand kilometres long, existed for four thousand years starting from the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea and going through Poland, Germany and Bavaria with the Celts, Austria, Romania and the Bulgaria of the Varna and Thracian civilization.

The Amber Road is a unique project that can connect the northern countries of Europe to those in the Middle East, reaching as far as Egypt. A large number of amber objects and jewellery are now on display in museums in Europe and in Egypt. The idea is to take an inventory of tourism destinations where they were found and build routes that go through them.

(c) **The Pearl Route**: Pearl fishing was for thousands of years the main activity of the Persian Gulf and South Asian coasts. The Phoenicians propagated the custom of using pearl jewellery throughout the Mediterranean, Central Asia and Europe. The Greeks came to know about pearls after the conquests of Alexander the Great. The Ptolemies of Egypt generalized their use and members of all the courts of Europe in the Middle Ages would adorn themselves with pearls. Pearl fishing has also been the source of proverbs and popular expressions commonly used in Europe and the Middle East and inspired the creation of many works of art, including opera. Until the late 19th century, it was the main resource of the people of the Persian Gulf. Competition from pearl producers in East Asia has reduced the activity’s importance, but its influence can still be seen in traditional and folk practices. The Pearl Route has now been included by the Kingdom of Bahrain on the World Heritage List on the basis not only of the monuments located in the town of Muharraq, but also thanks to the music and folk customs of local people related to this activity.

The initiative would consist of showing the routes related to pearling and the pearl trade, which had a cultural impact from ranging from Japan to Western Europe, in and around the Gulf countries, and especially Bahrain.
(d) **The Holy Family Path:** The Flight into Egypt of the Holy Family is one of the key passages in the New Testament, whose primary source is the Gospel of St. Matthew. It is a theme that recurs thousands of times in art and literature both religious and secular. The Holy Family, composed of Jesus, his mother the Virgin Mary and Joseph fled from the Holy Land to Egypt in order to escape the persecution of King Herod I. A route from Palestine and passing through Jordan and Lebanon could provide major economic and promotional opportunities to develop tourism based on the tradition of hospitality that is deeply rooted among the inhabitants of these regions, following the example of the Way of St. James, inscribed as a World Heritage site by UNESCO and declared as European Cultural Route by the Council of Europe.

(e) **The Ancient Trade Roads of Arabia:** Since 4,500 years ago and until the last century, the Arabian Peninsula and the Near East, as Arabia Petraea, were traversed by routes where traders and pilgrims exchanged ideas and goods. Between Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the United Arab Emirates, bartering activities were intense and cultural wealth was accumulated over the centuries. Nabataeans, Babylonians, Gerrhans, Radhanites and then Muslim merchants and pilgrims transported goods that came from Greece and the West, as well as spices, incense and silk from India and China. Oases such as Tayma, Mada'in Saleh, Qaryat al-Faw were extremely important trading centres until the 12th and 13th centuries AD. There is a growing number of exhibits around the world featuring the cultural treasures found in the Arabian Peninsula. However, there is still a lack of cultural itineraries and tourism circuits, which a coordinated effort between the countries in the region could create in partnership with the tourism industry for an international clientele.

(f) **The Hajj and Umrah Routes:** There are numerous routes taken by Muslims for the Hajj and the Umrah pilgrimages. Up until the construction of the Hejaz Railway in the early 20th century, a single caravan could consist of hundreds or thousands of mounts. These caravans were formed from Scutari in Turkey, on the Asian side of the Bosphorus, up to Anatolia and Syria. One caravan started from Iran, another from Iraq and another from the south of the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen. In the 9th century, a route from Andalusia and the Maghreb was created, as well as a trans-Saharan route from West Africa and an oceanic route from East Asia setting out from Indonesia. Monuments, caravanserais, fortresses and gathering points attest to the attention given to these caravans. These pilgrimage routes intersected with Arab trade routes, which allowed the development of remarkable cartography unmatched in the Middle Ages.

An international programme of Muslim pilgrimage routes would make it possible to increase awareness of the routes taken by Muslim pilgrims since the 7th century, as well as of the monuments and sites that dot such routes. It would also include museological and musical components (sacred music sung by pilgrims along these roads).
This project may cover a significant number of countries in five UNWTO regions (viz. Africa, Asia - South and East -, Europe and the Middle East).

(g) **The Journeys of Ibn Battuta:** Ibn Battuta was a native of Tangier who in the 14th century undertook a series of journeys that took him as far as China. In every place he visited, he enumerated the pious men who lived there or whom he met, religious institutions and the tombs of saints and sages, noting many places of pilgrimage, but he also added many legends and tales making his *Rihla* a book of wonders. The *rihla*, an Arabic literary genre consisting of travel chronicles, had numerous practitioners such as the authors Ibn Juzayy or Ibn Jubayr. Westerners subsequently adopted this type of tradition in the form of travel guides and journals. Ibn Battuta’s journey through Islam expanded the dimensions of cultural tourism, going beyond Andalusia, North Africa and the Middle East to reach East Asia.

This project may cover a significant number of countries in five UNWTO regions (viz. Africa, Asia - South and East -, Europe and the Middle East).

(h) **The Andalusian Legacy:** The “Legado Andalusi” foundation has developed a series of international routes between Spain, the Mediterranean and the Middle East based on the rise of the Andalusian civilization that lasted nearly eight centuries and left major works in the arts and sciences. A coordinated effort among the countries of the Mediterranean and the Middle East would promote the proliferation of routes that would form part of a process of cultural cooperation involving the collaboration of all, that is to say, a veritable coming together among the different public and private stakeholders and civil society. There is already a Cultural Route of the Almoravids and Almohads, who formed an empire that stretched from Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, and North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula. There is also the cultural itinerary of the Umayyads linking two peninsulas—the Iberian and Arabian Peninsulas—and spanning three continents: Asia, Africa and Europe. Other themes could be explored to strengthen cooperation between the three continents with the support of the Autonomous Community of Andalusia in Spain and the World Tourism Organization.

(i) **The Maritime Journeys of Sinbad the Sailor:** The legend of Sinbad the Sailor has inspired films, stories and even poems. Sinbad is a sailor from Basra, hailing from a line of Arab-Persian seafarers and merchants, who travelled to India, China, Malaysia, Indonesia and the African coast beyond Somalia, Tanzania and Mozambique, Zanzibar, and Socotra. Vast commercial traffic existed there for almost three millennia. Beginning in the 8th century, Yemeni or Omani sailors would travel far to Madagascar and the islands of the Indian Ocean such as the Comoros. Ibn Battuta of Tangier would confirm the existence of these routes in the early 14th century.

The routes of Arab-Persian seafarers stretch from China to the Mozambique coast. An international programme could promote such routes in order to develop tourism
cooperation between all the countries on the Indian Ocean. The development of cruises from South Asia to the Middle East could help support this project.

This project may cover a significant number of countries in four UNWTO regions (viz. Middle East, Africa, South and East Asia).

5. The Commission is invited to consider the above preliminary proposals and select two priority projects for development during the period 2015-2016, by means of the following steps:

   (a) Definition of project’s scope, content, feasibility, implementation plan and framework for governance
   (b) Market analysis and data collection
   (c) Inventory of infrastructure and services
   (d) Assessment of stakeholders engagement
   (e) Product development and marketing strategies
   (f) Project launching at a major international tourism fair

6. Furthermore, the Commission is invited to:

   (a) Decide on the creation of a Trust Fund for the implementation of these projects;
   (b) Entrust its Members with designating Liaison Officers to ensure the necessary coordination and follow-up action with the Secretariat.

**Paragraphs for decision: 4 and 5**