

Burkini Ban at the Marriott Hotel – Sousse, Tunisia

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Abstract. This case study explores a single Marriott hotel's decision to align with a growing number of other premium hotels in Sousse, Tunisia with the implementation and enforcement of a controversial burkini ban. The implications of this decision from a contextualized business ethics perspective and within a broader discourse on modesty and free choice are to be considered. The case study draws comparisons to ongoing debates elsewhere and explores the historical influence of France on Tunisia and its impact on societal attitudes towards Islamic clothing. The historical backdrop presents nuances of Tunisian life and the balance between traditional Islamic values and modern, business-oriented secularism. The threat of boycott and negative reviews on platforms such as Tripadvisor emphasize the impact of business strategy on consumer behavior and the importance and downside of responding to societal pressures. The dilemma also highlights how societal values change and the necessity of examining categories of clients.

Keywords: hospitality and tourism, corporate social responsibility (CSR), cultural intelligence and sensitivity, local vs. global corporate strategy.

1. Introduction

In 2022, the Sousse Pearl Marriott Resort & Spa in Tunisia told a guest to get out of the hotel swimming pool because she was wearing a burkini. She was then instructed to use the more secluded children's pool for the remainder of her stay. The incident sparked a social media uproar and triggered calls for a boycott of the hotel. While other high-end hotels in Sousse, Tunisia were also enforcing the ban on the burkini, (a modest, full-body swimsuit), Marriott's corporate headquarters in the United States knew a response to the incident was needed before there was wider impact. Things were quite simply a mess: local tourists that could afford to stay at a 5-star resort agreed with or were indifferent to the burkini ban, Muslims visiting from other countries likely did not appreciate the ban, and hotel guests from Europe likely had mixed views which were often quite strong. In short, there was no way to please everyone, but an examination of the issue should allow the Sousse Pearl Marriott Resort & Spa and the multinational Marriott corporation to arrive at a decision that addressed the backlash and kept operations profitable. A

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nuanced examination needed to consider cultural sensitivity, disparate consumers, ethical relativism, the interconnectedness of markets, as well as business unit and corporate strategic decision making in a global context.

In the Sousse Pearl Marriott Resort & Spa (Marriott Pearl) lobby one could hear German, English, Russian, Danish, Italian, and a few other languages spoken, but predominantly Arabic and French, Tunisia's primary languages. Sousse, with a population of 300,000, was a mix of historic buildings, restaurants, shops, museums, and night clubs situated on the Mediterranean Sea. Tunisia, population 10 million, had consistently welcomed tourists from France (14%), Libya (22%), Algeria (30%), Germany and Russia (3% each), as well as from a variety of other countries (28%). Although tourists from neighboring Libya and Algeria represented more than half of visitors, they tended not to stay at 5-star hotels or beach-front hotels, as they had plenty of coastline themselves. Similarly, although European travelers were a smaller segment of the overall market, such tourists tended to stay at higher-end hotels and resorts.

Exhibit 1: Map of Tunisia and Vicinity



Source: Google Maps

2. Cultural and Religious Dynamics

Every day, millions of Muslim women chose to adopt varying degrees of modesty when out in public. It was considered a Muslim woman's human and Islamic right to determine what was suitable for her (Bullock 2023). Some chose to dress conservatively and wore the burkini while in a mixed-gender swimming area. The burkini was considered revolutionary for Muslim women in 2004. Prior to this, Muslim women often had to come up with their own swimwear (often a baggy shirt and leggings). Since its conception, the burkini had been adopted by Muslim