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Gold Coast tourism pumped by oil-rich Arabs

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THE first wave of Arab tourists on their annual winter pilgrimage to the Gold Coast has hit, propelled by new-found oil riches.

While the surging world oil price is a bane for most people worldwide, it's a boon for Gulf state citizens who are set to arrive on the Gold Coast in their thousands, cashed up and ready to spend.

Tourism operators are hoping for a bumper Arab visitor season to counter a softer domestic tourist market brought about by factors including high petrol prices.

Arab tourists have been flocking to the Gold Coast since the late 1990s to escape searing summer temperatures of up to 50C at home.

Their arrival created a lucrative new international tourist market for the Gold Coast, which had historically relied too heavily on the fickle Japanese trade.

Leading Arab tour operator Toufiq Lawand said higher world oil prices were expected to result in more visitors to the Gold Coast this year than last year, from the Gulf states of the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar.

At least 14,000 Arab tourists are expected over the next three months, up about 5 per cent on last year.

"The Arabs are obviously the major beneficiaries of high oil prices and there is a lot of money up there right now," Mr Lawand said.

"We were worried the high Australian dollar may have deterred them from coming, because the United Arab Emirates currency is tied to the US dollar, but that hasn't happened. The season is already under way and we're still getting good bookings coming through."

Mr Lawand said Arab families spent about \$15,000 on accommodation alone on a typical three-week holiday.

But Arab sheiks, who usually stayed with their entourages at the "six-star" Palazzo Versace hotel, could spend hundreds of thousands of dollars during their visit.

Mr Lawand said several Arab royals and government ministers had booked to come to the Gold Coast this year.

Some hotels have introduced Arabian buffets. The Courtyard by Marriott hotel in Surfers Paradise has even flown in a chef from Jordan.

Theme parks have opened Muslim prayer rooms and Lawand Tourism's Surfers Paradise office operates a tourism lounge, complete with Arabic coffee and television channels.

Kuwaiti lawyer Mohammed Al-Ansari, 27, and his wife Dalal, 22, are honeymooning on the Gold Coast.

"We heard about the Gold Coast from a friend and it is everything we expected and more," Mr Al-Ansari said. "The weather, the beaches, the people ... it is all beautiful."