



## Assessment of Hotel Seasonality; Causes, Challenges & Marketing Strategies to Deal With: In case of Selected Hotels of Amhara National Regional State

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**Abstract:** *Hotel business is a seasonal sector because of many factors. This study is conducted with the objectives of identifying the factors of tourist hotels seasonality, challenges & marketing strategies to deal with seasonality, in selected Hotels of Amhara National Regional State tourist destination sites. Descriptive research design & a mixed research approach were used. Data were collected from hotel managers & hotel experts of the selected sites through questionnaire, interview, observation, and document review. Descriptive research analysis was used to describe the current situation of hotel business & seasonality of the hotel. Majority of the hotel manager & experts have said that the main cause for hotel business seasonality in the region is leisure/holiday; the institutional causes of seasonality. On the other hand, in the year 2016/17, because of the political instability in Amhara National Regional State, there was a very low tourist flow & hotel's occupancy rate. In the same year, many of foreign nations, to mention; USA, Germany, Canada & England, have warned their citizens not to go to the region specifically and Ethiopia in general. This situation explained how both local & international tourist's flow to the region were very low & all hotel managers have replied that political instability is one of the major cause of seasonality of the hotel business, especially in 2016/17.*

**Key Words:** - Hotel Investment, Seasonality, Room occupancy

### 1. Introduction

The hotel industry has a long colorful history beginning with inns, and lodges, and growing into the hospitality industry. An incredible change in the industry of tourism in the world brought many changes in the field of hotel business. This means, the expansion and development of travel has contributed a lot for the development of hotel industry (Michael and Richard, 2001).

Since 1990, international arrivals have increased by 4.3 % annually and the UNWTO expects them to rise by 4 per cent per annum over the next 20 years. Today's tourism represents 5% of the world GDP,

contributes 6%-7% of employment and it ranks 4th after fuels, chemicals and automotive products in global exports with industry value of US\$1 trillion a year that accounts for 30% of the world's exports of commercial services and even it added the rate of hospitality investment (UNWTO, 2014).

Currently Hotels are the most recognizable elements among all other in the accommodation sector. The hotel industry has bright visions for the growth of travel and tourism industry. It has important aspects of a country's infrastructure as well as it provides the largest total employment in global terms (Cooper, 2005). Even though, the

inbound tourist arrivals in Ethiopia continued to grow from 76,844 in 1989, to 184,078 in 2004, and reaching 523,438 in 2011, the GTP's target on the number of inbound tourist arrivals by the end of 2014/15 was set at 1 million (Ethiopia Minister of Culture and Tourism, 2012). Further the Ethiopian Investment Commission provides fiscal incentives such as exemption of customs duty, and exemption of income tax for Star designated hotel and resort, motel, lodges and restaurant investments (EIC, 2003). Tourists from across the world flock to Ethiopia in general & to Amhara region in specifically every year to enjoy cultural and natural heritage sites. Regardless of tourists visiting Ethiopia has increased every year since 1960s, the country still receives high number of visitors to Amhara National Regional State. However many factors affect the hotel investment, seasonality is a major challenge for the hotel industry, which affects either positively or negatively. Mostly seasonality affects the hotel industry negatively; consequential, it is difficult to earn access capital, low return on investment and inadequate utilization of resources occurred in hotel industries. In the same way, seasonality has positive aspects also, such as after using tourism resources during a peak season, it can be a long rest period, which can be better than continuous use, so there needs to be some strategies and policies for managing seasonality. The main causes of seasonality may divide into two basic kinds of factors, which are largely concerned with demand variations throughout the year: 'natural' and 'institutionalized seasonality' (Butler, 2001).

Seasonality does not refer to occasional irregularities within tourism, but instead is concerned with the seasonal patterns that are stable and well-established (Witt & Moutinho 1995). The causes, therefore, do not include those factors that are related to operations issues such as poor

management, for example; nor to short term fluctuations in visitation caused by tourism shocks; or crises such as increased fuel prices, unanticipated natural disasters, or incidents of terrorism (Christine Lee, Sue Bergin-Seers, Graeme Galloway, Barry O'Mahony & Adela McMurray 2008).

Thus the main objective of this study is to identify the causes of hotel seasonality, main factors that affect the hotels room occupancy rate & develop strategies to reduce the effect of seasonality in Amhara National Regional State tourist standard hotels.

## 2. Statement of the problem

In hotel business, there is an obvious high & low season caused by natural & institutional factors.

Natural seasonality refers to regular temporal variations in natural phenomena, particularly those associated with climate and the true season of the year. Differences in temperature, sunlight or rainfall are common variables, which are influenced and directed by this type of seasonality. It is important to differentiate natural seasonality from the daily variations of the weather since natural seasonality follows regular and recurring patterns. While the natural seasons are traditionally been considered as permanent features, the climate change is making these low certain and low predictable. The Tourism business and the destinations at which they operate are directly affected by climate variability and change. Climate defines the length and quality of tourism seasons and plays a major role in the destination choice. The climate affects a wide range of environmental resources that are serious to tourism like snow depth, biodiversity and stocks of fresh water, which influences various facets of the tourism operation (Butler, 2001).

The second form of seasonality is caused by human actions and policies. Human activities can be seen as a result of different factors, like culture, religion or society affecting patterns of demand variations. Typical examples of institutionalized seasonality are legislated school, industrial, public or religious holidays. While some of these factors are, connected to climate conditions, and others arise from long traditions and old patterns of preferences. Public holidays thus appearance the most common form of institutionalized seasonality (Butler, 2001).

The returns to hotel investment are inextricably linked to tourist demand (local and foreign). Therefore, the relationship between the hotel industry and the wider tourism industry is two directional. Without tourists, there can be no hotel industry and without hotels there can be no tourism industry. This symbiotic relationship is reflected on the supply side as well. Local and foreign investment in the hotel sector can be stimulated by public incentives for construction, expansion etc. (Ixigo, 2013).

With low season, there are certain symptoms affecting your hotel. The most common ones include: Drastic price reductions, the most common response to low season, whether weekly or monthly. Another practice is offering all-inclusive or special packages (rooms, restaurant, and amenities) along with the booking. The danger with lower prices is going too far and render you hotel's deal as unprofitable.

Fierce competition- When demand falls short but the competitor market stays the same, you need to stand out in order to direct travelers to your hotel. This means more budget to distributors and promotion. The challenge here is to find an online marketing strategy that is dedicated to solving the

difficulties brought by low season. At the same time, you need to correlate the offline marketing strategy with the online one. Many people claim their holiday was more relaxed, thanks to quieter hotels and less people. (This is why so many expatriates prefer low season)Easier scheduling i.e. hotels are very likely to have rooms when you want them and it'll be much easier to get tickets on buses and book seats on domestic airlines. A number of annual festivals and events occur during low season.

Thus this research is conducted to identify the current tourist standard hotel occupancy rate, main causes of hotel seasonality& the strategies to tackle the negative sides of seasonality.

## 2.1 Research questions

The following were the major research questions of this paper.

- ✓ What are the main factors that affect hotels room occupancy rate in Amhara region?
- ✓ What are the main causes of hotel seasonality in Amhara region?
- ✓ What marketing strategies should be designed to reduce the effect of seasonality?

## 2.2 Research objectives

Based on the above research questions, the following research objective were designed

- ✓ To identify the main factors that affect hotels room occupancy rate in Amhara region.

- ✓ To identify the main causes of hotel seasonality in Amhara region
- ✓ To explore marketing strategies that reduces the effect of hotel seasonality in Amhara region.

### 3. Literature Review

As Omar A., Rami M. & Mustafa N. J. Ahmed (2015) cited from (Beldona&Cobanoglu, 2007), Hotels, as part of the tourism industry, are one of the biggest industries around the world. However, it has been recognized as one of the most lucrative industry. This accommodation sector is affected negatively and positively by low and high. The idea of accommodation emerged long time ago when people travel around on animals in search of water, food, or trade. Therefore, the origin of lodging emerged when travelers were looking for shelters to keep their animals and to rest their bodies. The first accommodation provided for travelers was just a mere roof to stay under. Consequently, this industry has been developing because of the extensive human needs for travelling. Therefore, this necessitates providing them with comfortable rooms and food. Today, hotels are a “Home away from home” (Omar A., Rami M. & Mustafa N. J. Ahmed 2015). Hotel services are defined by the heterogeneity of the products and services offered. This product is intangible, which makes clients’ perception of its quality and its distinction more difficult. These characteristics, among others, make the hotel product extremely complex. One of the consequences of all this is seasonality, the great enemy of many hoteliers.

Seasonality is, according to Butler (1994) “a temporal imbalance in the phenomenon of tourism”. It can be expressed in the number of visitors, the expenditure of the visitors, the traffic

on highways and other forms of transportation, the employment or in the number of admissions to attractions. Causes of seasonality may be natural or institutional. Natural causes can be variations in the weather like temperature, rainfall, snowfall, daylight and sunlight, but also the characteristics of the location such as latitude, altitude and distance from the equator or accessibility. Institutional causes on the other side are man-made, as for example actions and policies regarding culture, religion or social life as well as public holidays or specific events. The most important institutionalized factors are school holidays and industrial holidays. Apart from that, also social pressure or fashion, inertia and tradition or even sporting seasons may cause seasonality. Some of the causes are stable over a long period like Christmas holidays, some change at certain intervals such as school holidays, some vary predictably like the timing of Easter and others are unpredictable as for example the weather (Hylleberg, 1992). It is the systematic movement of tourists in a selected period of time (Koenig & Bischoff, 2004). Seasonality is connected with the reduction in business revenue (Scott and McBoyle, 2007).

According to Butler and Mao (1996) there are four different patterns in which seasonality can occur:

- Single peak seasonality - the most common and characterized by a single, clearly identifiable and relatively fixed, time-span of peak demand,
- Two peak seasonality, characterized by two clearly identifiable and fixed time-spans of peak demand
- Non peak seasonality, where no time-span of peak demand can be identified

- Dynamic seasonality, characterized by a single or multiple time-spans of demands, which are, however, not fixed.

Seasonality is the temporal imbalance which is mainly caused by a higher concentration of the tourist flow during certain periods of the year, implying both supply and demand.

Seasonality is one of the most prominent features of tourism, yet, paradoxically, it is also one of the least understood. The vast majority of tourism destinations are characterized by systematic fluctuations in tourism phenomena throughout the year. In particular, seasonality generally exhibits a dramatic tourism peak during the summer months. Such fluctuations in visitors and revenues are almost universally viewed as a problem by the tourist industry, which spends considerable time, money, and effort to modify these patterns through the development and implementation of strategies designed to extend the “shoulder seasons,” or to create “all season” destinations. Most of the literature describes seasonal variations

Seasonality affects the number of tourists to a region and therefore can threaten the viability of businesses in a region (Christine Lee, Sue Bergin-Seers, Graeme Galloway, Barry O'Mahony & Adela McMurray (2008).

As James Higham & Tom Hinch (2001) cited from Allcock & Butler it is generally accepted that tourism seasonality can be attributed to two basic groups of factors, natural and institutional (BarOn, 1975; Hartman, 1986). Natural seasonality refers to regular temporal variations in natural phenomena, particularly those associated with cyclical climatic changes throughout the year, such as temperature, precipitation, wind, and daylight (Allcock, 1989; Butler, 1994).

Institutional factors reflect the social norms and practices of society (Hinch & Hickey, 1997). These factors are typically based on religious, cultural, ethnic, social, and economic considerations, epitomized by religious, school, and industrial holidays. As per Butler, social pressure or fashion, sporting season and inertia on the part of travellers, who continue to travel at a specific time of the year even though they are no longer restricted to this particular period are additional causes of seasonality (Butler, 1994). The expansion and development of travel has contributed a lot for the development of hotel industry (Michael and Richard, 2001). The importance of service quality and customer satisfaction has been proven relevant to help improve the overall performance of organizations, for instance, hotel is directly or indirectly linked with the number of nights spent by visitors in the country, quality of service is the key factor to maintain the length of stay. As service quality is becoming a major part of business practice, it is important to be able to measure and research its effectiveness (Magi & Julander, 1996). The private sector has a key role to play in addressing these challenges by supporting inclusive growth, poverty reduction, job creation, and access to critical goods and basic services and by providing tax revenues (Christian et al, 2011). Hotel business is also provider of income, jobs, goods, and services to enhance people's lives.

Seasonality can be measured in different ways. Firstly, it is necessary to decide for a category of figures. Usually, it is measured in number of visitors. Other units could be the number of arrivals or departures, the number of overnight stays, the length of stay or the expenditures of the visitors. This derived variable is calculated by dividing stay unit nights occupied by stay unit nights available.

Normally, seasonality is associated with two basic factors: climatological changes that affect the activities on offer at tourist destinations (sunshine and beaches, skiing etc) and certain social factors that are mainly attributable to policies on paid leave and school holidays. As Antoni F., Aina M. & Catalina N. cited from (Ashworth and Thomas, 1999; Krakover, 2000), & (Sutcliffe and Sinclair, 1980) for the supply, seasonality represents a problem, not just because of low returns on investment and problems finding and hiring full-time staff but also because of the temporal effects in terms of efficiency and the capacity of tourist facilities.

As Albert Saló, Anna G., Ricard Rigall-I-T, Mar V & Josep M. S. (2012) cited from Butler (2001) different strategies have been deployed in the tourism and hospitality industries to smooth the common seasonal patterns observed in these sectors. The ultimate goal of such strategies has been to maintain tourist demand constant throughout the year in areas where climate plays a key role and creates a strong limitation to.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

Descriptive research design has been used to describe the hotels occupancy rate & causes of seasonality. Thus, in this research, a descriptive research design is used. A mixed used research approach has been applied in this paper, since both qualitative & quantitative data & the analysis methods are employed.

### 4.2 Population, Sampling Technique and Size

The population of the study was Tourist Hotels in Amhara Region's selected tourist sites, experts of Culture and Tourism office of Amhara regional state, hotel investment office of Amhara regional state & Hotel Associations. Judgmental sampling technique was used to approach respondents from Bahir Dar, Lalibela, Gondar and Debarq; which are selected because of higher number of tourists' period of stay & tourists flow. Out of 102 tourist hotels, as per the region's report of 2016, the researcher has taken 50% of them, 51 hotel managers.

### 4.3 Data collection Instruments

Questionnaire, Interview & personal observation were used to collect data from the sample. Agreement level, significance level & hotel occupation were the scales used. Focus group discussion has also been used

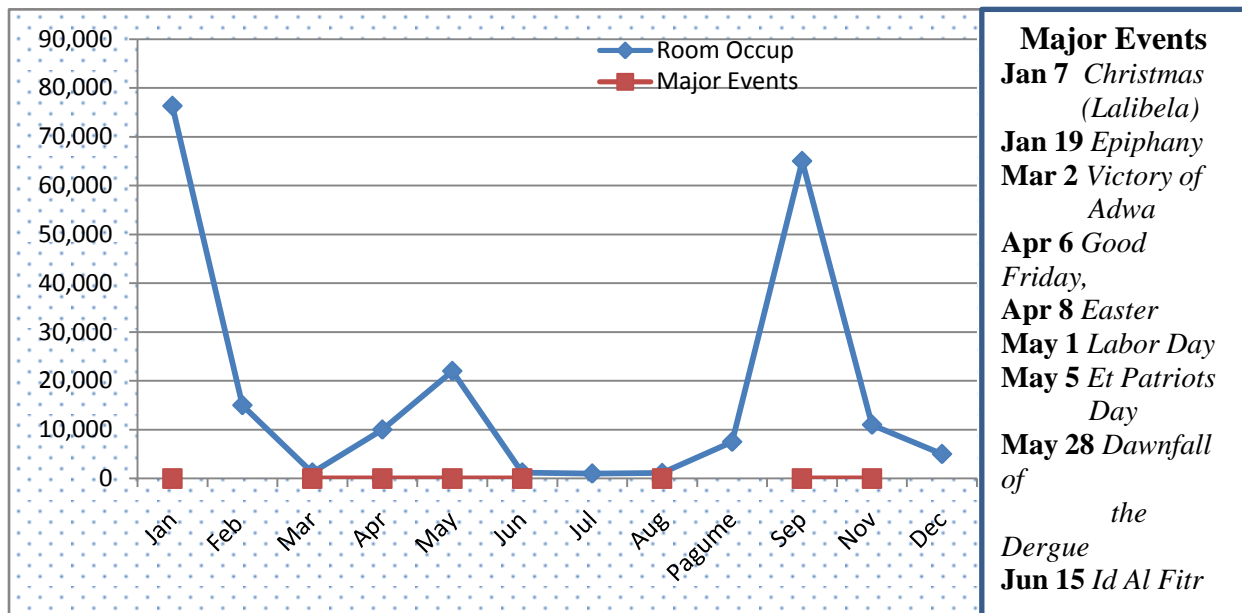
### 4.4 Methods of Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis method is used to analyze the data which were collected from the sample of the study.

## 5. Analysis & Discussion

This part of the paper presents you the analysis & discussion of the data collected from the samples. 49 hotel managers' have completely filled the questionnaire & used for the analysis.

Occupancy rate of 2016/17 of hotels & major events in the region is depicted below



Source: survey result 2017

**Figure1. Average room occupancy of selected hotels**

A total of 2543 tourist standard hotel rooms are available in Bahir Dar, Gondar & Lalibela where this paper is conducted & in the peak season, all of these rooms are occupied. Tourist period of stay in one destination is from 3 to 5 days, & if they stay one day in either of the places, the monthly occupancy rate is calculated as days multiplied by the number of rooms which is 76,290 rooms. Apart from those major events printed in Ethiopian calendar for international tourists which are known & celebrated internationally, there are lots of cultural & religious holidays & celebration in each month which are not listed in the calendar, but celebrated in the region in a good way such as; Gishen Debre Kerbe (the Holy place where the True Cross found), Aksum Tsion (where the Arc of Tsion is located), Ashenda (cultural festivity celebrated in the region in September) & daily tourists flow to Lalibela rock hewn churches, Blue Nile (Tiss Abay)

falls, Tana Monasteries, Gondar Fasil castle & Semien Mountain, plays a great role in reducing seasonality & to have higher sustainable tourist flow & moderate room occupancy in the region. These events are some of the opportunities to be exploited by hotel managers to reduce the effect of seasonality.

From September to January, a peak season is obvious, due to the finding of the True Cross & Epiphany, which are mainly celebrated in Amhara Region's Tourist destinations that have an impact on hotels' occupancy rate. In these time, the price of hotel offering increase as rocket. In addition to that, there are some national & regional conferences held in Bahir Dar & Gondar. The festivity of Nation nationality & people's day, Cities day, Tana Forum & other different forums which can reduce the effect of seasonality in hotel business in the region.

**Table 1: Causes of seasonality**

<b>Causes of Hotel Business Seasonality</b>		Mean	Standard deviation
<b>Natural Causes</b> ✓ Weather ✓ Sunlight ✓ Rainfall ✓ Geographic Location	The distance between the destination and hotels	4.24	0.94
	Whether changes	3.79	1.26
	Infrastructure (accessibility of the hotel)	4.32	0.86
	Preferable for sunny season	3.12	1.98
	Preferable for rainy season	4.01	0.89
	Proximity to capital city	4.05	0.90
<b>Total</b>		3.92	1.13
<b>Institutional Causes</b> ✓ Social norms ✓ Social practices ✓ Sporting ✓ Holidays ✓ Economic consideration	Social events	4.13	0.95
	Cultural celebration	4.63	0.81
	Religious Holidays	4.82	0.52
	High inflation in the country	4.37	0.82
	Income of the tourists	3.13	1.65
	Public Holidays	4.55	0.87
	Ethnic holidays	4.67	0.74
	National & regional sport festivals	3.45	1.98
	National & regional conference	4.33	0.86
<b>Total</b>		4.23	1.02
<b>Politics</b>	Political instability	4.11	0.82
<b>Total</b>		4.11	0.82

Source: Survey 2017

As per the above table, of the categories of the causes of seasonality, institutional causes found to be the main causes of seasonality that affect hotel business, room occupancy, price of offering & sustainability of the business operation with the total mean value of. Religious holidays are the basic outliers in which peak season is observed with the mean of 4.82. Income of the tourists found to be in a moderate level. The second main cause of seasonality is the political instability of the region, especially in the year 2016/17, that has contributed a lot for low hotel season, low occupancy, and low profit in general.

The minimum comparative mean score has been registered in Natural causes of seasonality, 3.92, actually it's a good cause for seasonality but compared to the other, listed above, and it's not a priority to work on.

Managing the above causes will insure sustainable hotel customers though out the year and they can manage their business in either way, peak or off season.



**Table 2: Strategies Used to Address the Effect of Seasonality**

<b>Descriptive Statistics</b>				
Strategies	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Government support to tourism&hotel industry	2.00	5.00	4.4915	.95363
2. Promoting diverse tourist attractions in the country	1.00	5.00	4.5254	.89743
3. Promoting different holidays internationality	1.00	5.00	4.5424	.83711
4. Make other destinations registered in UNESCO	1.00	5.00	4.5763	.87501
5. Promoting regional universities' graduation event	1.00	5.00	4.3220	1.07384
6. Arranging tourist packages	2.00	5.00	4.4576	.70275
7. Improving hotels product assortments & quality	1.00	5.00	4.3390	.75681
8. Don't increase price too much	1.00	5.00	4.3390	.90230
9. Promoting new tourist destination	1.00	5.00	4.4915	.83816
Valid N (both hotel managers & experts)	59			

Source: Survey 2017

As per the above table, all strategies are excellent tactics to be applied by hoteliers & hotel stakeholders to reduce the seasonality of the business in the region sustainably. According to Poolnar, the Mean scores 4.51-5.00 shows an excellent or very good strategy, 3.51-4.50 a good tactic, 2.51-3.50 average or moderate, 1.51-2.50 fair and 1.00-1.50 is a poor strategy for the managers to reduce the effect of seasonality in their business (Poolnar, 1987).

Even if all of the strategies are very essential/excellent for the sustainability of the hotel business, the largest mean is scored on making tourists destination of the region registered under UNESCO. That makes the destination known and makes it among the top destination to be visited by tourists. As per literatures, tourists choose the destination based on UNESCO's list & Word of mouth communication, once different tourist sites are registered under that universal organization, tourists flow will not be seasonal & sustainable hotel business will be in the region. University's graduation ceremony is considered as the least strategy among the excellent tactics, since the

ceremony is only once in a year, & local tourists/customers only stays for a maximum of two days.

The second most important strategy is promoting different holiday's internationality. Promotional mix elements are in the market for hoteliers & tourism stakeholders to promote hotels service, tourist destination & reposition the country as a new destination for visitors.

At country level, the tourist arrival peak season of the country falls during November to January, and July to August. The number one reason people travel to Ethiopia is for leisure and holiday accounting 35% of the total travels to Ethiopia.

### **Conclusion**

From the collected data & the result of the study, the following have been concluded.

To reduce the effect of seasonality, caused mainly by institutional factors, hotel managers should apply different pricing strategies in different season of the business as its business is highly depend on tourism industry.

The hotel & tourism stakeholders should promote the diversified tourist attraction of the region for international tourists & seek assistance from the government and industry bodies. Increasing the length of the tourist season and modifying the timing to events are other strategies for the sector participants.

During peak season, hoteliers need to recruitment of temporary staff. For accommodation providers the relatively high fixed costs, of course, make seasonality a particularly important economic factor and low variability, an extended main season and a high occupancy level are generally regarded as very desirable goals.

Seasonality manifests differently, depending on a number of factors. The most important ones include location, type of business and targeted segments.

The occupancy rate fluctuates visibly based on the low & peak hours & the role of hotel managers relies on marketing strategy; segmenting the main customers group, concentrate on the profitable target group & position the hotel's strategic advantage to the customers; both local & international tourists.

Urban hotels, however, are more dependent on a weekly seasonality since leisure travelers fluctuate significantly in weekends booking regional cities hotels registers an guest occupancy even if their location is good & destinations are there for visiting and events opportunities.

The government has to attract more conference so that tourist for this segment will come to the city that the current number; thus the city can be known for conference tourism segment as a comparative advantage....sport tourism & medical tourism has to be promoted, as per the experts.

As tourism & hotel industry are interrelated, there should be a close relationship & cooperation amongst the stakeholders to secure a consistent tourist flows to the region that in turn contribute a lion share of hotels business.

As per the experts who were interviewed and the response of the questionnaire, gov't involvement in the sector, packages, are some of the ways they can apply to increase tourist flows.

Assigning stars & implementing as per the standard, continuous inspection about the quality of the offering, creating a unions/ or cooperative agreement between hotels with the initiation of the government, experience sharing between hotels, designing the appropriate strategy for the hotels, providing some incentives, promoting local tourism, working with other sectors in cooperation are some of the recommendations of the expert of hotel & tourism sector to reduce the effect of seasonality of the sector. Preparing a regional & zonal sport festivals, trade fairs/bazars & different conference are also additional activates to be done by the responsible part of the industry.

On the other hand, hoteliers have to apply different marketing strategy to reduce the effect such as modifying the price of their offering when there is low season & they have to increase their hotel amenities, staff & hotel tangibles to meet a huge demand in the peak season which is in January.

Thus hoteliers can apply the above strategies to tackle the problem of seasonality.

Finally the region's hotel & investment office should solve such a devastating issues in collaborating with the people of the region, in addition the regional government office should expand conference tourism, provide incentives to hotels so that they can reduce the effect of

seasonality of hotel business & arrange regional sport festivals. Finally both the regional & national government should support to tourism & hotel industry through promoting diverse tourist attractions, holidays, make other destinations registered under UNESCO, improving hotels product assortments & quality and promoting new tourist destination.

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