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Wellness tourism thrives in UAE

Wellness tourism is fast becoming a part of the vacation calendar for many travellers around the world. As per reported statistics, the UAE witnessed an incredible growth in wellness trips between 2012 and 2015, from 800,000 to 1.7 million annually.

 SHEHARA RIZLY



Susie Ellis
Chairman and CEO
Global Wellness Institute

“Wellness and spa tourism is one of the fastest growing tourism sectors in the UAE. It has grown from a \$1.4 billion market in 2012 to \$2.72 billion in 2015, almost double in three years' time. We estimate that the \$2.7 billion UAE wellness and spa travel market (inbound and domestic trips combined) represents roughly 15 per cent of the total tourism market. There is a shift from generic, western luxury to indigenous, authentic Middle Eastern spa and

wellness experiences such as 'hammam', regional healthy cuisine, architecture principles and beauty traditions. Over-the-top luxury remains crucial to the UAE wellness and spa brand, but the next 'luxury wellness' chapter is going deeper than spectacular one-upmanship design and 'pure pampering' - with a bigger focus on everything from professionals trained in lifestyle change, stress reduction, mental wellness and indigenous traditions/medicines. Globally, wellness tourism is heavily dominated by domestic spend (67 per cent of the market), but in the UAE, domestic wellness tourism is worth \$1.2 billion annually with an inbound market of \$1.5 billion. However, catering to the domestic wellness tourists and their cultural and religious sensitivities is paramount.”



Paul Joseph
Co-founder
Health and Fitness Travel

“The wellness tourism industry offers huge opportunities for the UAE. This market grew by 27.5 per cent from 2013 to 2015, because more people desire wellness holidays to help them return home healthier. UAE consumers are becoming more aware of the risks of stress and chronic diseases, and are increasingly turning to sports clubs, spas and healthy foods to maintain good health and prevent diseases. I understand the Dubai

Government is looking at ways to address obesity crisis which continues to worsen, this is a good strategy to increase awareness about the cause. Our desires to be free of disease; to age well as we live longer; and to enable our minds, bodies, and spirits to fulfill their potential, will all help to develop wellness tourism more. New spas, hotels, and wellness focused resorts will continue to open and expand their services. More travellers will seek to incorporate wellness into their trips, choosing hotels that offer healthy rooms, healthy menus, spas, fitness facilities, and other wellness offering. The wellness travel industry is changing faster now than ever before and our current obsession with all things natural and healthy is here to stay; wellness is no longer just a trend.”



Maggie Derblay
Director-Spa Fitness &
Recreation-Spa, Atlantis The Palm

“There is definitely an increase in demand for spa experiences in the UAE, as people are investing in their health and wellbeing more and more. In a city like Dubai, where taking care of your mind and body has become a trend, luxurious hotels are now competing to offer unique yet effective and relaxing experiences. One of the specialised services in ShuiQi Spa & Fitness Centre is our

Morning Wellness Package, which is the perfect programme to wake up to, ensuring a refreshed and invigorated start to the day. This begins with a one hour personal training session and a recharging, well-being breakfast before relaxing in the wet facilities followed by an hour-long full body massage. We see a growing interest in anti-aging treatments, both natural and non-invasive, as well. However, the industry needs to begin to consider the option of mindfulness and youth fitness too. With this in mind, we have also introduced the only yoga class with a view in the UAE - located in our Lost Chambers Aquarium.”

“Wellness has moved beyond the niche markets of yoga retreat and fitness camp, which in-turn has redefined every aspect of the travel industry especially within the luxury hotels segment. Several recent studies show wellness tourism is growing twice as fast as any other sector. A research from the Global Wellness Institute (GWI) states that the UAE is witnessing double digit growth in wellness-focused trips between 2012 and 2017 with an estimated 993,352 trips added and 17.9 per cent annual growth. With this in mind, Fairmont The Palm is one step ahead by constantly upgrading and adapting its wellness strategy to ensure a fully-fledged 360 degree approach with bespoke initiatives, state-of-the-art technology, in-room active wear, interactive cooking expertise, plus rejuvenation and anti-ageing aesthetic treatments - all catering to the ever-growing demands of discerning guests in the region.”



Laura Brown
Spa Manager-Willow Stream Spa
Fairmont The Palm

“The number of wellness seekers has rapidly increased over the past few years. We have also witnessed an increase in solo travellers seeking for wellness and stillness which opens up great opportunities for spas to capitalise on these by offering special packages for them. Our aim is to offer our guests the experience of visiting a spa in Thailand without travelling. GCC, Europe (France, Germany, Russia), local market in the UAE are the strongest at present with an average spend per guest around AED 600 per visit. Both women and men are given the exact dedicated space and services, our male to female ratio is 50-50 per cent. Guests come for a short wellness escape, from both inbound and local market, and it represents 10 per cent of our total business. By building loyal customer base, we do our best every single time with each guest, and we add value their trip so that they go back and recommend us to their friends.”



Afrah Hamdy
Spa Director
Anantara The Palm

“Wellness in the Middle East has picked up rapidly over the last few years. Wellness programmes are encouraging people into a lifestyle. Wellness is nothing but a lifestyle and one should understand that until and unless you get connected to yourself you won't understand what you're doing. And these centres where the rejuvenation programmes are there, they connect you to know what you want. I had all the responsibility in my life where I keep continuously doing things for my family. Unfortunately the person who does things for the family is ignored and how long can you do it if you're not really going to invest into yourself? So health rejuvenation programmes are really like when you're giving your car for a service and you think that everything is in order and once you are then you are on the smooth road of driving yourself. Life is nothing but to know yourselves and wellness programmes are kinds of programmes where it is mental and physical connectivity. Once a man is connected to both aspects of life, he's fine, healthy and feels good and more happy.”



Syed Mohamed Aslam
Business Development Manager
Medicare Tourism

Amadeus Gulf takes customers to Bangkok for technology updates and luxury Accor experience

Amadeus, a leading provider of technology solutions, hosted a familiarization trip to Thailand for leading customers from Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, and Oman. The tour visited two of Thailand's most vibrant cities, with 3 days in Bangkok and 1 day in Pattaya, where guests experienced the luxurious hospitality of Amadeus Gulf's partner, the Accor Group.

Apart from tour of Accor properties in Bangkok and Pattaya, Amadeus Gulf treated its customers to an exclusive golf training session to put them on top of their game.

The trip also comprised a half day business and technology sessions organized by Jauhar Abdul Gafoor, Director of Sales – Abu Dhabi, Al Ain and Oman, Amadeus Gulf, and hosted by Amadeus Asia Pacific Bangkok office. Frédéric Barou, Vice President of Asia Pacific Distribution, Products and Operations and Karun Budhraj, Vice President Corporate Marketing and Communications, both from Amadeus Asia Pacific, provided an overview of Amadeus market trends in Asia Pacific, followed by a session on the company's latest innovative product – the Amadeus Selling Platform Connect. A roundtable ended the session, with discussions on topics that would enable Amadeus customers to better serve the travel community.

Jauhar Abdul Gafoor, Director of Sales – Abu Dhabi, Al Ain and Oman, Amadeus Gulf, said: "Our customers are at the heart of our business, and we would like to thank them for joining us on this familiarization trip. With Asia, and Thailand in particular, being a popular destination for Middle East tourists, it's important for our customers to have a full understanding of what they're able to offer holidaymakers. Thanks to our partner, Accor Group, this has been an especially successful trip and we look forward to the next one."

AccorHotels Middle East is one of the fastest growing hospitality groups in the Middle East. Currently, the Group's regional portfolio includes 97 operational hotels representing over 30,000 rooms in ten countries. AccorHotels' portfolio spans a wide range of world-class brands ranging from luxury and upscale Raffles, Fairmont, Sofitel, Pullman, Swissôtel and Majlis Grand Mercure, to midscale Novotel, Mercure, Adagio and economy ibis and ibis styles. With over 25 years of regional experience, AccorHotels Middle East was the first to establish a training academy. Dubbed as Tamheed – AccorHotels Académie Middle East, the training facility is dedicated to educating and preparing associates at all levels and ensuring optimal career development.



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UAE push to spa-cations

► Contd. from page 1

“In Thailand, we have a variety of health and wellness products and it's the strength of our country. Therefore, we focus on wellness and health tourism for inbound tourists. Our aim is to have high-quality tourists who will not just spend money but also indulge in wellness facilities in Thailand. We are a nation known for the 'Thai smile' and hospitality coupled with the excellent wellness facilities. Middle East is a very important market for us. Last year, the traffic ME increased around 13 per cent, with UAE leading with nearly 200,000 tourists. We work with a lot of airlines from ME as their connectivity is well received. This year, we are promoting Thailand as a destination of longevity to care for senior citizens. The Government has issued new visa rules to enable more tourists to the country.”



Pataraporn Sithivanich
Executive Director - Europe,
Africa and Middle East Region
Tourism Authority of Thailand



David Cumming
Regional Vice-President Operations,
Bangkok, Malaysia and
Laos ONYX Hospitality Group,
Amari Watergate Bangkok

“Thailand is known for wellness tourism. The Tourism Authority of Thailand is working on various programmes to promote it as a destination of longevity. The recent Wellness Tourism Forum in Thailand saw many visitors attend the conference from all over the world and we were very happy to be a part of this event to support the efforts of TAT. We have our own spa brand at Amari Watergate called 'Breeze Spa' where we design signature treatments depending on the guests' mood. Our aim is to ensure that guests get to relax and rejuvenate. We have many guests visiting us from all over the world and we offer them a good discount to use the spa facilities so that every guest will walk out of the hotel indulging in a traditional or relaxing Thai massage.”

“Berlin means adrenalin and chilling out, city lights and tranquil forests, wild nightlife and lazing in the park. One can relax, unwind and let loose in Berlin. There are many places where tourists can spend a day relaxing in the countryside or beside the water. Around 440,000 trees have been officially counted. More than a third of the nearly 900 sq km of the city is green space, half of which is forest. Wellness seekers will also find a great range of spas in Berlin that promote wellness and relaxation. Lots of venues accept discounts with the Berlin Welcome Card.”



Burkhard Kieker
Chief Executive Officer
Tourism Berlin

Abu Dhabi to host OTB '17

This September, high-end UAE outbound travel agents and buyers will come together at the InterContinental Hotel Abu Dhabi for Outbound Travel Bazaar (OTB).

TT BUREAU

The number of outbound trips from the UAE increased by 5 per cent to 3.5 million last year, with those travellers spending Dh71 billion, up 10 per cent in 2014. UAE residents travelled for longer and spent more in 2015, according to Euromonitor International.

Every year, agents are seeking new outbound destinations to promote for the many travellers, both local and expatriate, from all emirates. The planning for the next summer travel season begins at least a year in advance so that the logistics and special programmes can be arranged well in time to be included in the campaigns. Outbound Travel Bazaar, to be held on September 21, will provide an opportunity for all travel professionals to come together and explore the many opportunities to



Mario Anthony
Owner and Managing Director
Luxury Connections

work towards ensuring a steady growth of business.

Mario Anthony, Owner and Managing Director, Luxury Connections, organisers of the event, stated that they have already received a very good response for the event and expect strong participation. According to him, some of the sellers who'd be present at this year's event will be Thailand, Singapore, Finland, South Africa, Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Cambodia, Zanzibar, Georgia and Korea.

Some of the agents include dnata Holidays, Emirates Holidays, Al Rostamani Travels, Kanoo Travels, Al Futtaim Travels, SNTTA Emir Tour, Travco Group, GTA, MIKI Travels, Satguru, TBO, Nirvana Travel and Tourism, Omeir Travel Agency and top corporate travel accounts such as Pfizer, Arencos, ADNOC, NOC, Johnson & Johnson, Nestle, Unilever and EMAAR, DAMAC, and Abu Dhabi Police. They have extended an invitation to other major outbound agents in all emirates such as Sharjah, Al Ain and Ras Al Khaimah.

Anthony said, "After a successful event in Vietnam we decided to host it in Abu Dhabi this year to ensure more participation from all seven emirates. It will include special B2B sessions with all sellers and every buyer and seller will have enough time to talk business and ensure that it is lucrative."

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TRAVELTALK

EDITORIAL

UAE embraces wellness tourism

Wellness tourism is rapidly becoming a global trend earning billions of dollars in revenue. In the Middle East and North Africa region, UAE has taken pride of place as the leader in the spa market. According to reports shared by the Global Wellness Institute, the Middle East and North Africa region now has 4,465 spas, up from 3,889 in 2013 (7 per cent CAGR from 2013-2015).

Spa revenues have grown from \$1.7 billion to \$2.1 billion in those same two years, an incredible 10 per cent CAGR. MENA spa revenues have grown four times faster than the global average from 2013 to 2015: 10 per cent versus 2 per cent. The UAE has become a global spa powerhouse, ranking as one of the top 20 spa markets in the world for the first time in 2015. The UAE spa market is exponentially larger than any other across MENA: a \$742 million annual market vs. \$255 million for number two, Saudi Arabia and \$244 million for number three, Morocco and \$222 million for number four, Israel. So, the UAE's spa market is roughly three times larger than its three next closest regional competitors. The UAE drives 35 per cent of MENA's spa revenues with \$2.72 billion revenue vs. number two market, Morocco at \$1.55 billion. It added \$472 million in revenues from 2013-2015.

In order to cater to the need of the hour, there is an urgent need for specialised agents for wellness tourism. Some of the reputed universities and accredited colleges, even in the UAE, offer training programmes, workshops and certifications to ensure that agents are well versed in this segment.

This wellness tourism trend generated in the Asian region with Yoga and meditation. Canada and some of the western countries have very quickly adopted this tourism segment and are conducting various researches on its best practices. In the UAE, the support of the government is immense in these kind of tourism trends and the partners are working together to ensure the numbers of GCC wellness seekers rise in the UAE as it is one of the safest countries in the region.

Evolving role of the travel agent

In this time of growing popularity of OTAs and online booking mediums, a travel agent still holds ground owing to their efficient task management and personal touch to make sure travellers have a hassle-free experience.

The travel business, like any other, has witnessed drastic changes over the years, thanks to globalization and the dawn of the Internet. From issuing paper tickets to e-tickets, dealing in cash to online payments, a travel agent has also evolved from being a simple ticket serving agent to being a more sophisticated travel consultant. In recent years, the augmentation of smartphones has changed the way travel is booked, making many believe that the job of a travel agent has become redundant.

A travel agent is definitely faced with many grave challenges such as more on-line portals coming onboard, airlines promoting their fares online, people purchasing through credit cards; the cash flow does decrease and the retail business has reduced for every travel agency. The corporates go to three or four agencies at a time rather than just one, they go directly to the airline and do the deal on their own and then they give it to agents, so the business is segregated and the competition is very high.

However, the trust, advice and guidance from a seasoned travel agent plays a pivotal role. At the end of the day, a traveller wants to feel secure, safe and ensure that he or she will not be deceived. Business and leisure travellers still seek the advice and guidance of a travel agent

to avoid last minute hiccups. A traditional travel agent still holds great relevance because leisure and business travellers or corporates need their requirements to be taken care of without any error. A business or corporate traveller definitely needs his or her boarding passes and itinerary on time and get regular alerts. The Corporates by giving advice, telling them the

need the services of a human being who would be able to guide and assist.

I agree the retail business of ensuring that your ticket is confirmed / purchased in an easier process over the internet or online booking portal, but how far can they help in case of last minute emergency cancellations? We are approached at many

For leisure travellers or family groups, a traditional travel agent will make sure that besides regular air ticketing and hotels, all specific requirements in that destination such as transfers, sightseeing, meals, etc. needs are met

connecting time, the trans-fer change, terminal change. These things sometimes get hidden when you go through OTAs. For a leisure traveller or family group, a traditional travel agent will make sure that besides the regular air ticketing and hotels, all your specific requirements in that destination such as transfers, sightseeing, food, arrange for a translator or guide, etc. or any other special needs are met. Today's travel agent has to become a consultant to any type of traveller. For big destination weddings, MICE events, family vacations or business meetings; a traditional travel agent is the best choice.

Technology undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in our lives but for it to work better you

times by our customers / clients who have purchased the tickets online/direct websites, whereby they are helpless to such cases when the flights gets cancelled and left with no alternatives(rebooking's/ refunds) to resolve the same.

We do advise them in such incidents that if it was initially purchased with the traditional agent, we would always provide them with an alternative with refund/ re-issues etc..

Similarly, if a traveller cancels booking at the last moment due to an unavoidable situation and ends up losing money up on cancellation, but if the same thing comes to a traditional travel agent, we have the negotiating power with our suppliers to help

our travellers out by providing the genuinity and proof, for a waiver etc... No matter how serious the reason you have to cancel, with OTAs you have to pay a cancellation because you aren't able to convey to them that there is a genuine reason.

In the UAE, we are still dependent on the travel agents. When you go to the West, the culture is different things have changed, they don't exactly have time to sit and discuss with a travel agent, but this part of the world you still have your importance. A few traditional travel agents will remain and be the preferred agents in the region by "going the extra mile" and reaching out to the Customers which will definitely be our winning mantra!

(The views expressed are solely of the author. The publication may or may not subscribe to the same.)



Sindhu Shaji
Head of Business Operations, Nasser Air Travel and Shipping Agencies Dubai

ibis Styles Jumeira 'Loved by Guests'

ibis Styles Jumeira was recently awarded with a 'Loved by Guests' certificate from Hotels.com based on exceptional guest ratings and reviews received by the hotel. Hotel Manager for ibis Styles Jumeira **Muhammad Haider** received this accolade along with his team.



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Zarya: One-stop shop for wellness in UAE

Zarya Wellness is a fully equipped wellness management company supported by Suneer Holdings. Over the past few years, Zarya has steadily made their mark in the UAE by providing the much-needed arm of spa or wellness solutions to most of the leading hotel chains in the UAE.

TT BUREAU

The ultimate purpose of Zarya is to render complete wellness, with an innovative blend of ancient oriental treatments and modern techniques that will benefit the body, the mind and the soul equally. They aim to deliver an unparalleled spa experience, with treatments created by combining the best ancient techniques and herbal secrets with advanced discoveries in beauty and wellness at each of their sites. They have a strong and dedicated team of management and operations, who have created a complete spa operating solution for a successful spa sourcing; a trained and sustained manpower support by creating a unique brand impact for spa as a profit-making centre.



Suneer Kayam Poyil
Managing Director
Suneer Holdings

The brain behind the entire operation is **Suneer Kayam Poyil**. An Ayurveda expert with a Master's degree in traditional Ayurveda, Poyil chose this line of business following in the footsteps of his father—a well-known *Marma Chikitsa* in Kerala, India and the UAE. He started his venture as Suneer Holdings, which is a 25-year young business conglomerate, with a global presence and with multiple

ventures spanning Ayurveda, wellness, automobile and trading.

Within the Zarya name they have three different spa brands catering to three, four, and five star hotels. The Elegance Spa brand is for three-star hotel properties, whereas the Experience Spa brand is for the four star branded properties and the Eminence Spa brand for the five-star properties. They have a blend of Ayurveda

and natural treatment concepts such as the 'Nayana Spa' brand. Each of these brands provide a rejuvenating and relaxing spa treatment for different clientele. Zarya Wellness operates in some of the most prestigious property brands in the UAE, such as Wyndham Garden Ajman, Ramada Hotel and Suites Ajman, Ramada Beach Hotel Ajman, Golden Tulip Ras Al Khaimah, Coral Beach Resort Sharjah and Ewan Ajman Suites.



The main aim of Zarya Wellness is the well-being of people and so its ultimate mission is to give its guests an unforgettable experience with themselves whilst indulging them in an exotic spa experience. Zarya ensures that at the end of it all, their guests walk out feeling rejuvenated and at peace.

Suneer concludes, "At Zarya Wellness, value lies in the happiness of our employ-

ees and appreciation from our guest and partners! As one of most important driving forces in developing wellness tourism, our organisation has become the backbone of the communities they belong to. We strive to fully undertake our responsibility of building a profitable and sustainable wellness business, leading as an example of a pleasant business which ultimately achieves the shared vision of wellness."



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Business & leisure @Roda Beach Resort

Roda Beach Resort Jumeirah is the first resort and 6th property under the umbrella of Roda Hotels and Resorts. Located in a picturesque setting, 30 minutes from the Dubai International Airport and close to downtown area, Roda Beach Resort Jumeirah promises to be a haven for leisure and business travellers.

 SHEHARA RIZLY

The Roda Beach Resort Jumeirah consist of 68 villas and chalets with contemporary seaside living in an exclusive, private and unique boutique-styled service residences, suitable for families, couples or individuals. It is strategically located just a few steps away from the pristine beaches and breathtaking aquamarine seas, surrounded by vibrant

restaurants and 10 minutes away from the downtown area, it offers the perfect stay for leisure and business travellers alike.

Unmatched spaces

Located in a picturesque setting, Roda offers unique comfort and elegant contemporary accommodation from enchanting One -Bedroom City Chalet to a De-luxe Villa with five bedrooms and a large private garden.



Roda's unmatched spaces have already established a unique mark in their presence in Dubai as they attract many discerning guests from around the world.

Set over two floors connected by an elegant marble staircase, the five-bedroom apartments are fully de-

tached and landscaped with a well-kept lawn and surrounded by trees and flowers. The electronic gates with 24 hour security is an assurance of total privacy and peace of mind to all the guests. Offering a generous living space of 615 sqm with complimentary Wi-Fi throughout, each of these 10 villas are perfect for families on a short visit or longer stay. Bedrooms and balconies enjoy calming views of Kite Beach and the sparkling Arabian Golf and a gentle coastal breeze gives these properties a cool, refreshing feel.

Each five-bedroom villa comes with a living room with sitting and dining area,

visual intercom and 24-hour security and maintenance.

The Superior City Chalets are comfortable chalets offering couples or single visitors contemporary seaside living in the heart of Dubai. With sizes ranging between 42 to 48 sqm,

bedroom with king-size bed, en suite bathroom, stunning city views, complimentary Wi-Fi throughout, satellite television, laundry and valet services, housekeeping services, air conditioning, private parking and 24-hour security and maintenance.


The charming One-bed City Chalets boast of views of the iconic Dubai skyline. Set over 75 sqm, each comes with a light and airy living room, generous sized bedroom, en suite and kitchen as well as a spacious balcony.

Recreational offerings

In terms of recreation for guests yearning to spend time relaxing and soaking up the sun, there are plenty of facilities to enjoy at Roda Beach Resort. There's a large swimming pool to



plunge into with sun loungers around the edge. Light snacks and drinks are available from their comfortable pool lounge and they also provide a fully-equipped gym with free weights, a stretching area and changing rooms. There is a wide range of watersports on offer from local operators on the beach.

The resort is located in a unique geographical area known for its natural beauty, and is surrounded by the famous public beach in Jumeriah area and Sunset shopping mall. It is surrounded by a wide choice of entertainment, dining, shopping options. It is less than 10 minutes' drive to Dubai's most iconic business and leisure centers. 

fully-equipped kitchen, laundry room, maid/driver room, guest washroom, complimentary Wi-Fi throughout, satellite television, outdoor terrace on the ground level. The first floor will consist of five bedrooms with walk-in wardrobes and sea views, three bathrooms, upstairs living room, balconies with sea views, outdoor terrace, and laundry room. They also have two parking spaces with electronic gates and

these exceptional apartments enjoy stunning city views with direct access to Jumeirah Beach and the relaxing haven of Kite Beach. Each chalet has a sunny living room, a fully-fitted kitchen and luxurious bedroom with a king-size bed, high ceilings, and a gentle sea breeze makes these properties both light and airy. Each Superior Chalet comes with generous living space, fully-fitted semi-open kitchen,



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Sabre

Sabre's AI chatbot to service agents

Travel technology leader, Sabre Corporation, is in the process of developing an artificial intelligence (AI) powered chatbot that would help travel agencies serve travellers better and faster by fulfilling their most common service and support requests with smart technology.



Sabre Corporation recently announced that it is working towards developing an artificial intelligence (AI) powered chatbot which will help the travel professionals to let all their customers' simple queries and requests be answered by technology and keep the bigger and complex issues of their customers for themselves. Sabre will initially test the chatbot with two travel agencies and the travellers they serve.

Mark McSpadden, Vice President – Emerging Technology and Products, Sabre Corporation, says, "Travellers want technology to deliver a more seamless experience, especially when managing on-the-go changes and disruptions. So, together with Microsoft and our agency partners, we are exploring

how AI and chatbots can provide travellers with the self-service solutions they want for routine requests while helping travel agencies provide personal service to customers for more complex needs."

One of the key challenges in human-computer interactions is the ability of computers to understand what people want and find relevant information that connects to their intent. On top of that, travel applications must recognise a plethora of unique terms and phrases that add complexity for industry applications. While developing this chatbot, Sabre is leveraging Microsoft Bot Framework and a selection of Microsoft Cognitive Services, including Language Understanding Intelligent Service (LUIS), which provides simple tools to build conversational language models that allow any application or bot to



Mark McSpadden demonstrating Sabre AI agency chatbot at Microsoft event

understand user commands and act accordingly.

"Intelligent technologies, like chatbots, are augmenting the way companies are able to interact with their customers," says **Lili Cheng**, Corporate Vice President,

AI and Research, Microsoft. "Sabre's chatbot is another great example of how AI can be applied to help extend business capabilities and improve satisfaction of travellers."

Two Sabre-connected travel agencies – Dallas-

based Travel Solutions International USA and San Francisco-based Casto Travel – will test a white-label version of the chatbot with their travellers, who will access the chatbot via Facebook Messenger. Travellers will use the chatbot for common service and support requests, such as changing an existing flight reservation. The chatbot will divert to a live travel agent if it is unable to fulfil a request. "Travellers are eager to find ways to save time when handling travel logistics," noted **Claire LeBuhn**, Vice President, Support Services, TSI USA.

"TSI is committed to evaluating new touchpoints and communication channels to better serve our corporate customers and their busy employees. We are also interested to explore emerging technologies that can help us improve the efficiency and sat-

isfaction of our travel agents. By handling frequently asked basic support requests, the bot will free up our agents to focus on more complex, value-added interactions with travellers. We look forward to testing the chatbot and gaining a better understanding of how it can drive value for our corporate customers and for TSI."

Throughout the test, Sabre and its partner travel agencies will evaluate travellers' preferences pertaining to how frequently they engage the chatbot and when they divert to a live agent. This is not Sabre's first foray into chatbots. Sabre Hospitality Solutions is also building a chatbot that would allow travellers to shop, book and engage with hoteliers through the most common messaging platforms, such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Twitter and SMS. 📱



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Wyndham Garden set for its UAE debut

As the countdown begins for the opening of the first upper mid-scale Wyndham Garden property in the UAE, Cluster General Manager **Iftikhar Hamdani** tells **TRAVTALK** that the hotel group is already tapping new markets for the property along with the Ajman tourism board.

SHEHARA RIZLY

When the upper mid-scale property Wyndham Garden opens later this year in Ajman, it will be the only property with all 179 rooms offering sea view. It will consist of state-of-the-art facilities with a special recreation floor which will cater to wellness or health conscious travellers; the outdoor pool, spa, Jacuzzi, separate male and female sauna, steam and Jacuzzi room and health club are just a few of the many facilities.

Cluster General Manager **Iftikhar Hamdani** states, "Since we acquired Ramada Beach Hotel four years ago and Ramada Ajman, the occupancy has continued to be 93 per cent year to date. We realised the need for a third property which will provide our loyal customers another indulgence with a view of the sea. It is located adjacent to Ramada Beach and we are very confident of ensuring an all year round successful performance. We are already

tapping new markets for the property along with the Ajman tourism board. We have already signed up with the German market and look forward to working with new markets such as Scandinavian countries; Denmark, Sweden and Norway and Baltic, Balkans, Central Asia and Turkish markets."

This property will be very different from other properties as Hamdani and his team has ensured that there are facilities to accommodate the needs of the increasing sports tourism sector. "We understand that sports teams need to be on one floor with sharing facilities for two or three persons and a different room type for the coach and other officials. We have taken all these into account and created a floor plan and space accordingly. It is also more family oriented as we have many inter-connecting rooms which can be used by larger families for their regular staycations or long stay vacations," said Hamdani.

Already the bookings have been made towards the opening of the property. According to Hamdani, the German market is secured and their participation at Leisure Moscow and the roadshow in September with Ajman tourism board in CIS countries in October with a visit to Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Armenia as well would definitely boost their numbers. They have made aggressive sales plans for the property the same way as they have been doing for both Ramada Ajman and Ramada Beach hotel over the past five years which made them the leading hotel chain with best occupancy in the northern emirates.

"We will be hosting the blind cricket world cup in first quarter of 2018 and in the two properties we hosted various football and cricket teams over the past years, hence we do understand better the requirements of the sports tourism sector. This will be an edge over the other players



Iftikhar Hamdani
Cluster General Manager, Wyndham Garden Ajman, Ramada Ajman, and Ramada Beach Hotel

in the market and we are very confident of obtaining a full hotel from the time we open in a few months," continued Hamdani.

Ramada Ajman and Ramada Beach were the creators of aggressively marketing their CSR activities to ensure a better environ-

We have already signed up with the German market and look forward to working with new markets such as Scandinavian countries; Denmark, Sweden and Norway and Baltic, Balkans, Central Asia and Turkish markets

ment for everyone. Once the new property opens they will be continuing with Wyndham Green initiatives as well as to use new sustainable technologies in terms of waste management and energy conservation.

Making a sustainable profit is the requirement at the end of the day from every property. With a person like Iftikhar Hamdani, he is a captain that could steer the ship in any course with a high return within a very short period of time. Five years ago, when he took over

the leadership of Ramada Beach Hotel, the first thing he ensured was profitability year-on-year within a short period. Hamdani's marketing research and strategies are very welcome at any given period of time. The more challengers he is faced with the more strategies he finds with his team to overcome and ensure the best performance. 🏆



ME hears Amadeus' Voice

1500 travel agents have subscribed to Amadeus Voice, which enables users to manage their daily tasks and stay updated with the latest industry news.

TT BUREAU

Celebrating its 30-year relationship with travel industry professionals, Amadeus Gulf launched, sometime back, a desktop-based app named Amadeus Voice that is meant to make business a lot easier for them. It includes features that are designed to cater to the daily needs of travel trade professionals. Also, it uses push technology to send relevant data updates as needed, in real time, to the users' computers, and give them access to daily industry news, including product updates and announcements, such as Dynamic travel documents tips and availability of content. Further,



Graham Nichols
Managing Director
Amadeus Gulf

ther, the app allows the travel industry experts to track all the major events through its in-built calendar and provides them with instant notifications on any critical issues. Some of the other features on the app are access to 24/7 Amadeus

support hub and its company news and updates. Owing to the self-sufficiency that it provides to the members of the travel industry, Amadeus has already found more than about 1500 subscribers and is still counting.

Graham Nichols, Managing Director, Amadeus Gulf, said, "We are delighted to see such an overwhelming response from the industry for our new product. Amadeus Voice is a highly interactive tool that we designed not only to be unique, but to align with the needs and requirements of the travel industry professionals. Having worked closely with the travel industry in the region, Amadeus Gulf understands what the experts need to make their day-to-day job easier, and so, here is Amadeus Voice, the ideal addition to the suite of solutions we offer to the travel sector."

An impressive growth story

Leading global travel management company Satguru Travel is driven by the sole aim of offering the best travel experience to their customers.

TT BUREAU

Established in 1989 in Kigali, Rwanda, Satguru Travel has its presence in 58 countries across the world. Customers using the services of Satguru Travels have access to the latest booking technology, smart analytics, worldwide partnerships and best latest online services through its travel portal.

They cater to all aspects of travel including hotels and accommodation, corporate travel, car rentals, visa and insurance, among others. "Creating exclusive tailor-made packages catering to individual needs is our strength and success. We strive to inculcate comprehensive and extensive range of all services that suit each and every customer," says **JVR Fernando**, General Manager, Satguru Travel and Tourism.



JVR Fernando
General Manager
Satguru Travel and Tourism

Our strong foothold in Africa has helped us in promoting the continent, through our unique wildlife safaris planned by the travel industry's connoisseurs at Satguru Travel

They are the leading travel company in Africa as

well as the leading airline representation company across Central, West and East Africa. We have been successfully managing 14 airline GSA in 30 locations across the world. With a turnover of over \$600 million, and scores of satisfied customers and its headquarters in Dubai, Satguru Travels is the first travel service provider in Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire), Togo, Burundi and Niger. "This strong foothold in Africa has assisted us in promoting the continent, through our unique wildlife safaris planned by the travel industry's connoisseurs at Satguru Travel," he adds.

"Keeping up with the digital revolution in travel industry has been our success. We are aiming to become the leading global TMC, after having established ourselves in over 60 countries under a single management and still growing at a rapid pace," Fernando concludes.

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Personality of the month

Flying with RwandAir wings

An astute marketer, an aviation professional, a travel management expert and a strategist is how **Timothy Njihia**, Country Manager – UAE, RwandAir describes himself. He is driven by his sense of responsibility and has also imbibed an attitude of confronting challenges head-on and providing solutions.



Timothy Njihia comes with a vast experience in his portfolio that comes from airline commercial management, general management, travel operations management, and jobs related to sales, marketing and strategising in the airline industry and the world's leading global travel management companies (TMCs). Owing to his superior intellect, numerous achievements and rich experience, he is also a member of various premier associations, including Chartered Institute of Marketing - United Kingdom (MCIM), American Academy of Project Management (AAPM), designated as a Fellow of the American Academy of Project Management (FAAPM), and Marketing Society of Kenya (MSK). In addition, he is also the Vice-Chairman, Training and Finance, in the Governance Board of Chartered Institute of Marketing - Kenya.

Travel Management to Aviation

Njihia's role as the Country Manager of RwandAir for the UAE demands dynamic and effective leadership to ensure that RwandAir is positioned as a professional airline, with the highest levels of customer service, while ensuring that all stakeholders' (industry, corporate, local, international, legal and governmental) requirements and regulations are met. Prior to this role, Njihia oversaw the Marketing, Sales and Operations divisions of two leading glo-

bal travel management companies, Carlson Wagonlit Travel (CWT) and FCM Travel Solutions, both with operations in well over 100 countries across the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia Pacific, etc.

This was quite a good exposure and one that proved to be quite useful in Njihia's current role, which seems to have taken a 180-degree turn—from a travel professional being served by various airlines to an airline professional, serving travel professionals. His interactions with travel professionals are value-laden and he is able to engage at all levels, be it about the C-suite or the shop-floor, from commercial to technical to operational viewpoints. Njihia has also been instrumental in the start-up of leisure and MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Events) divisions, where he has overseen them from their conceptual stage to their growth.

Roots of preparation

Njihia started off at Egerton University to study IT, then joined Kenya Utalii College, Africa's leading hospitality and tourism training institution at the time, to study Travel Operations Management, and then earned IATA/UFTAA certifications as well. Njihia says, "I have always been ambitious and this led me to venture into marketing and sales locally at the Kenya Institute of Management (KIM) and

then internationally at the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), where at one point I emerged as the best student countrywide in Marketing Research and Information. At the time of taking up my current position, I was half way through with my MBA, from the University of Sunderland, Faculty of Business, Law and Tourism."

Achievements under his watchful leadership

RwandAir under Njihia has had some tough times as well as some interesting times. Njihia took over his charge during a rather turbulent time for RwandAir

RwandAir's market share, customer share, new market segments and geographical (offline) markets.

Njihia quips, "You may recall that in 2016, RwandAir acquired two brand new A330s, equipped with fully flat beds in business class, inflight connectivity and entertainment across the entire cabin. These aircraft were deployed to key markets and Dubai too received one of these, which was a really big boost. Together with my team, we embarked on aggressive marketing and sales within the travel trade and I must appreciate the support from the travel trade within the entire UAE as without them, we would not have achieved any growth. In



You may recall that in 2016, RwandAir acquired two brand new A330s, equipped with fully flat beds in business class, inflight connectivity and entertainment across the entire cabin. These aircraft were deployed to key markets and Dubai too received one of these, which was a really big boost

Timothy Njihia
Country Manager–UAE, RwandAir



and it was quite a challenge turning around the situation and realizing growth. However, under his leadership and with the support from his team in Dubai and the management, Rwanda's flagship carrier realised some growth in the areas of passenger revenue and uplift, cargo tonnage and revenue. Njihia is now focused on growing

addition to this, we refocused our efforts on cargo, especially with the new A330s, and this saw us engaging a lot with the market, i.e., cargo agents, freight forwarders, traders etc. With that, and a number of other stakeholder events, our cargo operations picked up steadily, closing at a 300% growth in our last financial year."

Growth plan for the year

To ensure sustainable growth for RwandAir, Njihia has already charted out some plans which will be put into action during the year. Topping the list is entry into new geographical markets—they have just ventured into the Gulf Co-operation Countries (GCC) and Pakistan (although offline). This will give them the opportunity to tap into at least six new markets in conjunction with other partners, through interline/SPAs with other carriers out of Dubai and/or the GCC countries. Next plan is diversifying his distribution strategies through new-generation distribution channels; RwandAir under Njihia plans to partner strategically with online travel agents (OTAs), B2B online platforms and consolidators as they are the ones currently in maximum demand. Njihia reveals,

"The end game is to grow the market share sustainably and profitably, cumulatively increasing stakeholder value." When asked if he would ever choose a different career path if given an option, his reply was "No way! As a matter of fact, my entry into the aviation industry was long overdue and now all I want is to keep progressing in this line until I become the CEO of a leading airline."

Among his many hobbies, travelling takes pride of place, whether it is local or international, followed by reading, watching legal drama series, socialising, mentoring and team sports. Njihia is an ambitious and aggressive go-getter who relishes a challenge and often wants to try out new experiences in life but at the same time help as many people as possible, especially through mentorship. 🇷🇼

Personal highlights in his career

(a) Transition from a Travel & Tours Consultant into Sales and Marketing

As soon as Njihia graduated from CIM - UK, he desired a change and since he understood the travel industry inside out, it was easy for him to transition from heading the Implant operations of a leading petroleum marketing company to

becoming Group Sales and Marketing Manager.

(b) Transition into General Management

Within a year and a half as Group Sales and Marketing Manager, at the age of 31, Njihia was appointed as the General Manager, a position he held for about five years prior to moving on to a

different company into a different yet similar role, consequently honing his sales and marketing skills.

(c) Transition from the travel industry to the aviation industry

Owing to his deep interest in the aviation industry, Njihia kept trying to get that big break and in the

process, tried his hands at a number of roles, starting from cabin crew to sales, marketing and even Country Manager. Finally, in 2015, when he was appointed as the Country Manager of RwandAir for UAE, he struck the exact chord and here he is learning, mentoring others and growing.

UAE tourism gears up for VAT

Following an announcement that Value Added Tax (VAT) will be implemented in the UAE from 2018, several tourism organisations have been hosting workshops to educate all travel segments about it.

 SHEHARA RIZLY

According to the Ministry of Economics, the tourism trade will come under the ambit of Value Added Tax (VAT). Tourists are a significant part for the UAE and will have to pay VAT at the point of sale. However, they have set the VAT rate very low so that it will be a limited burden on all consumers. Rakesh Pardasani, Partner, RSM, world's sixth largest network of independent audit, tax and consulting firms in over 70 countries, speaks about how the implementation of VAT will affect the tourism and hospitality sector.

"VAT will have a major impact on the hospitality sector in the UAE. Since the last few years, supply has been increasing which is putting pressure on the room rates. In addition, the Tourism Dirham was levied and now there will

be an additional 5 per cent VAT. Major hotel chains are already debating as to how much of the 5 per cent can they actually charge to the customers without impacting the buying decision. But all these charges and taxes are now slowly adding up to the end cost of rooms," says Pardasani.

Most of the hospitality chains are preparing themselves for VAT in fact their rates starting next year include the VAT percentage so that the guests are made aware of the new changes which will make it more transparent. In terms of the travel agents, there will be a different work format for VAT and in our next issue we will give you a more up-to-date information from different partners.

"On the travel agents side, however, the concerns are a little different as they



Rakesh Pardasani
Partner
RSM

Travel agents need to have adequate systems to capture VAT inputs and outputs and calculate their VAT liability accurately

need to have adequate systems to capture VAT inputs and outputs and calculate their VAT liability accurately. The large organisations, hotels etc. have already be-

gun preparations on VAT implementation as it needs major changes in their IT systems. But a large number of smaller travel agents will face some difficulty in clearly understanding their liabilities and complying with it," states Pardasani.

According to experts, the end result will bring forth more revenue to be utilised for all the planned tourism infrastructure facilities. Pardasani concludes, "In the end, we can expect the increased revenue from VAT (which is estimated to be AED 12 billion in the first year) to be re-invested in the country, in infrastructure, in tourism projects and so on. The only silver lining that I can see in this new regime is that the VAT rate has been kept at a low level of 5 per cent. This rate is not very high to significantly have an adverse impact on the economy."

La Ville Hotel introduces Eco-Green food composter



La Ville Hotel & Suites City Walk, Dubai, has kicked off a 'green' initiative with the introduction of an environment friendly food waste composting machine. The Eco-Green™ Organic Food Composter will help the hotel to reduce food wastage by creating an organic compost (odourless) of the unusable food which would then be used to nourish the plants in the courtyard garden. Up to 100 kilogram of waste can be treated at a time in this machine, over a 12-hour cycle, and not only does the American-engineered Eco-Green™ reduce waste, it also reduces harmful emissions caused by garbage transportation. To advocate creation of an ecofriendly community in Dubai, the La Ville management team also supports Earth Hour, Earth Day and World Environment Day, and has driven a Beach Clean-up initiative.



WYNDHAM GARDEN

Ajman Corniche



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Wyndham Garden Ajman Corniche is operated by R Hotels under a franchise agreement from Wyndham Hotel Group.

Thailand's health & wellness showcase

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) organised a health and wellness tourism event which gathered over 130 buyers from around the globe with 44 sellers from Thailand. It was a very fruitful B2B event which was well received by international and local buyers and sellers alike especially due to the fact that each buyer and seller had ample time to network and interact for business.



Leisure Moscow welcomes the world

The 23rd edition of OTDYKH International Russian Travel Market will take place from September 19-21, 2017, at Expocentre Fairgrounds in Moscow. Expecting to be a huge success once again, the exhibition is expected to feature well over 700 exhibitors and 30 tourism boards.

 TT BUREAU

OTDYKH, Russia's leading annual travel and tourism event, is just round the corner, in Moscow, and is the perfect start to the upcoming winter season for the Russian inbound and outbound markets. A number of newcomers will join the upcoming edition of the exhibition. The tourism authorities of Greece, Armenia, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka will participate in the exhibition for the first time ever.

With a new marketing campaign to win over Russian holidaymakers and with a prominent national stand, Greece promises to become a highlight of the show. Greece's participation in OTDYKH will give a start to the recently announced Year of Tourism between the two countries, which will commence in October 2017.

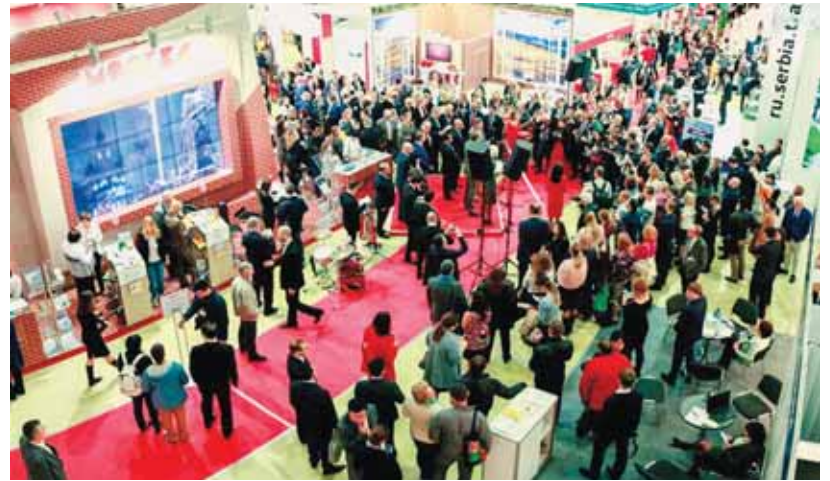
After skipping the previous edition, Kerala Tourism, Finland and Slovak Republic will be back to OTDYKH 2017, each with an exclusive national stand. Kerala's stall will show off the famous backwaters, beach and Ayurveda. Kerala Tourism will focus on strategies of intervening in the Russian travel market so as to increase tourist arrivals to their state from Russia.

The Ministry of Tourism of the Dominican Republic has become an official Sponsor of OTDYKH International Russian Travel Market 2017. For 14 years, the Ministry of Tourism of the Dominican Republic has been successfully exhibiting in OTDYKH, choosing this event as an annual platform to introduce and promote its tourist destinations to the lucrative Russian outbound travel market. Russia is already the second most

important source market for the Dominican Republic from the European continent.

Emirates will also show a noticeable participation with an intensive advertising campaign and exclusive stands of Dubai, Sharjah and Fujairah. Russia and the UAE have always had a strong partnership in the fields of economy, politics, culture and tourism. Having received more than 600,000 Russian tourists in the past two years, UAE offers the right ingredients for leisure and business alike. This number is expected to increase due to the recently introduced visa-free regulations for Russian citizens. It would help the Russians to make travelling plans to the country even if it is sudden and last minute.

With a national stand comprising 25 companies



from the country, Georgia promises to become another highlight of the show. Famous for its tasty cuisine, Georgia is going to present a cooking master class as well as various culture-, wine- and food-related tours.

A wide and diverse business programme will in-

clude around 150 co-located events, including workshops, master classes, country presentations and diverse conferences, with the focus on all relevant sectors of the travel industry.

After the Russian recession of 2014-15, the world is seeing an increase in tourist

flow from Russia again. Industry experts forecast a return of Russian travellers to their usual holiday destinations throughout the world. Don't miss out the opportunity to increase your market share in Russia. Become a part of OTDYKH 2017—where the world of travel is at home. 🌍



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REGISTRATION FOR WTM LONDON IS NOW OPEN

WTM London, the leading global event for the travel industry, has opened registration for its 2017 edition.

WTM London 2017, which takes place between Monday 6 – Wednesday 8 November, is poised to be the most successful yet.

Exhibitors will be able to conduct even more business than last year's record £2.8 billion, due the introduction of a second buyers' speed networking session on the Tuesday morning. This means every morning will have a speed networking session taking place at 9am – before the exhibition floor opens at 10am. Monday sees buyers split by geography, the new Tuesday session sees buyers split by sector they purchase, with the Wednesday session being the Digital Influencers' Speed Networking (formerly called the Bloggers' Speed Networking).

A taste of ILTM at WTM returns across all three days of the event and is joined by a new Wellness & Spa section on the exhibition floor.

More than 80 conference seminars will take place throughout the three days covering all the key sectors including aviation, hotels, sports

tourism, responsible tourism, digital influencers, social media and travel technology.

Monday 6 November will remain an exhibitor invite-only day, allowing exhibitors to conduct business meetings with key suppliers. Tuesday 8 November will host the UNWTO & WTM Ministers' Summit.

Wednesday 9 November will host World Responsible Tourism Day – the largest day of responsible tourism action in the world. WTM London 2017 will conclude with the WTM Festivals, which will see a number of exhibitors hosting parties showcasing their culture, music and cuisine.

WTM London 2016 saw more than 51,000 participants, including 9,900 buyers conducting business worth more than £2.8 billion with almost 5,000 exhibitors from 182 countries and regions.

To book discounted hotels through HotelMap visit: **london.wtm.com/discounts**



To register visit
www.london.wtm.com/register



NEW EXHIBITORS SIGN UP FOR WTM LONDON 2017

Sixty new exhibitors have already signed up to do business at this year's WTM London – Sixty new exhibitors have already signed up to do business at this year's WTM London, with ENIT – The Italian National Tourist Board – as its Premier Partner.

First-time exhibitors hail from countries as diverse as the Balkan country of Bosnia and Herzegovina; the Islamic Republic of Iran; the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan; and Vietnam in South East Asia. Others come from as far afield as Australia, Bahrain, Ghana, Iceland, Lithuania and Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile, many exhibitors have decided to upgrade and take a main stand, instead of sharing

exhibition space with others, in order to raise their profile during the event.

They include international attractions giant Merlin Entertainments – which runs brands such as Legoland and Madame Tussauds – and the tourist boards of Grenada and Moscow.

English Lakes Hotels Resorts & Venues is also new as a main stand-holder and will be celebrating the Lake District recently attaining the status of a World Heritage Site.

The Grenada Tourism Authority had been a main stand-holder in previous years, then shared with the Caribbean Tourism Organisation in 2015 and 2016.

WTM LONDON TO HOST AVIATION HEAVYWEIGHTS

WTM London, the leading global event for the travel industry, will host one of the most senior CEOs in the aviation industry – British Airways boss Alex Cruz

Cruz will speak as part of WTM's Aviation Programme on the afternoon of Monday 6 November in the WTM Inspire Theatre.

BA has experienced severe turbulence this year – a disastrous computer crash in May cost an estimated £100 million, and cabin crew went on strike during the peak

holiday months of July and August. Called 'British Airways: A year of mixed fortunes', the title of his session at WTM London reflects the bumpy ride he has been on during 2017.

Cruz will also talk about his radical plan to "split" the airline into two – a budget airline and an upmarket one – to compete with no-frills rivals and premium competitors at the same time. Cruz will be interviewed by WTM aviation expert, John Strickland, Director of JLS Consulting and himself a former BA employee.



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Al Wasl anchor to ME for cruises

Al Wasl Dhow recently bagged the Best Dhow Cruise Company award at the maiden Arabian Travel Awards held recently at JW Marriott Dubai. **Ishrat Ali Khan**, MD, talks about the win.

TT BUREAU

Al Wasl Dhow is an ISO 9001:2008 certified company and a leader of Dhow Cruise in Dubai Marina, with over 10 years of experience in the hospitality trade. Al Wasl Dhow owns two of the biggest Dhows at Dubai Marina. Al Wasl Dhow is the first ever custom-built traditional Dhow, crafted from base up, with

a capacity of more than 200 guests. Al Wasl Dhow is part of a group of companies: Al Wasl Yachts, Oasis Palm Tourism and Asia Pacific Travel & Tourism.

Durga Das Publications is the publisher of one of the Middle East's leading travel trade publications - TravTalk Middle East. The recipients of its initiative, the Arabian Travel Awards, were decided

by a highly intellectual and experienced jury and internet voting, giving the awards utmost credibility.

Managing Director of Al Wasl Dhow, **Ishrat Ali Khan**, said, "It is an honor for me to receive the Best Dhow Cruise Company award. I am most appreciative of Arabian Travel Awards to have recognised our contribution and poten-



Ishrat Ali Khan
Managing Director
Al Wasl Dhow

tial. My happiness is doubled receiving the award today because Al Wasl Dhow completed its first year today and has got an exceptional start to the upcoming year. Thanks to the many brilliant minds (my team) who have helped our company to become the winner. Their dedication and excellence earned this honour for us. I hope we will continue to do our best for our company and experience a huge success in the future as well."



(L-R): Ali Bin Masood, Sales Executive; Umar Khan, Sales Manager; Dr. Tanushree Pandey, Gladrags Mrs. India 2015; Sumeera Bahl, Director, Durga Das Publications Middle East; Shaeena Patel, Corporate Sales Manager and Aamir Basheer, Sales Manager

M Hotel Downtown hosts a special day for kids



M Hotel Downtown by Millennium organised a visit at Senses Residential and Day Care for Special Needs to bond with and entertain the children there. The hotel team distributed well-balanced meals in accordance to children's nutritional needs and showed them a day of fun. Senses is a non-profit, specialised residential centre in Dubai for supporting children with special needs. The centre provides 24-hour care to over 127 students with different disabilities, such as Down syndrome and cerebral palsy. "We believe that we all have a responsibility to the community, regardless of how big or small it is. We can only hope that this initiative will encourage not just other hotels but also a normal UAE resident to spare some time to volunteer and try to raise awareness about children with special needs in the society," **Daniel Mathew**, General Manager, M Hotel Downtown by Millennium, stated.



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13th International Travel Expo in Vietnam

With international inbound traveller numbers increasing by almost 30 per cent in the first five months of 2017, Vietnam's premier global tourism event, the International Travel Expo, returns to Ho Chi Minh City for the 13th year, from September 7-9, 2017, at the Saigon Exhibition & Convention Centre.



The theme for 2017's International Travel Expo in Ho Chi Minh City (ITE HCMC) is 'Your Gateway to Tourism in Asia', as it celebrates ASEAN's 50th anniversary and embraces ASEAN as a single and united tourism destination.

The annual International Travel Expo is a key international tourism event in Vietnam and the largest event of its kind in the Mekong sub-region for both inbound and outbound markets. Recognised as Vietnam's one and only national tourism event by Vietnam's Ministry of Culture, Sports & Tourism, it is also the only travel event endorsed by the tourism alliance of all five countries in the Mekong region. ITE HCMC is organised by the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism

(VNAT); HCMC Department of Tourism; Vietnam Trade Fair & Advertising Joint Stock (VINEXAD); and Informa Exhibitions, and supported by the Ministry of Tourism, Cambodia; Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, Lao PDR; Ministry of Hotels & Tourism, Myanmar; and Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Kingdom of Thailand.

The first two days of the event cater to trade professionals while the third day to trade visitors as well as the public; special promotions, travel packages, stage activities and performances are the highlights of this event. Following the success of last year's edition and the positive positioning of Vietnam as the tourism hotspot currently, the organisers of ITE HCMC 2017 are expecting an overall increase of 20 per cent in participation over the last year.

This year, ITE HCMC will host a multitude of national pavilions and the current confirmed participation includes members from Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Thailand (more to be announced soon). Further, exhibitors sure to participate include airlines, hotels and resorts, tour companies and travel representatives from countries like Australia, Cambodia, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, and Maldives. The event has also invited 300 international and regional travel buyers from 50 major markets.

At ITE HCMC, the networking events include a series of high-powered seminars on topics relating to emerging travel and tourism, sustainability, travel technology, social media for tourism and hospitality, investment tourism development etc. Over 3600



Jack Wei
General Manager, Informa Exhibitions,
and Co-organiser, ITE HCMC

ITE HCMC's stellar performance record is further strengthened by the success of the 2016 edition, and this has resulted in more exhibitors and buyers participating in this year's event



meetings were conducted between buyers and sellers last year, and the organisers expect the number to grow by 15 per cent this year. The Hosted Buyer Programme allows buyers, from leisure, corporate, MICE, luxury, and special interest travel companies to enjoy pre-show and post-show tours to explore Vietnam. Jack Wei, General Manager, Informa Exhibitions, and Co-Organiser of ITE HCMC, adds, "ITE HCMC's stellar performance record throughout the decade is further strengthened by the

success of the 2016 edition, and this has resulted in more exhibitors and buyers participating in this year's event. In addition, Vietnam's booming tourism industry is reaching even greater heights. According to a recent announcement by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, Vietnam was ranked 7th in the list of the world's top 20 fastest growing travel destinations. Also, there was a 24.6 per cent surge in the number of foreign visitors arriving in the country in 2016 compared to the previous year."

ITE HCMC 2017

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Travelport empowers Lebanese agency

In order to strengthen its presence in the Middle East, Lebanon-based First Diana Travel recently partnered with Arabian Travel Award-winner Travelport to access its unrivalled choice of travel content.

TT BUREAU

By connecting to the Travelport platform, First Diana Travel now benefits from intelligent, fast, and accurate searching and booking to offer its customers content from more than 400 airlines, including low cost and network carriers, more than 650,000 hotel properties and more than 37,000 car rental locations around the world. Bookers at the leisure and full

service corporate agency can use Travelport Smartpoint as their desktop tool to search beyond rate and availability to purchase more personalised and tailored travel, to drive performance and increase revenues.

Elcheikh Mohamed Ghouzayel, President and Owner, First Diana Travel, commented, "This is an exciting time for First Diana Travel and we're thrilled to sign our debut deal with Travelport. Having recently extended our operation out-

side the Lebanese borders, into the Gulf region and Asia, we look forward to differentiating our offerings by utilising Travelport's technology to provide our customers with a more person-

alised booking experience."

Rabih Saab, Travelport's President & Managing Director for Europe, Middle East, Africa and South Asia, added, "The

Middle East travel industry is incredibly competitive and travel agents need to work extremely hard to meet the changing demands of travellers. With 195 million tourists expected to visit the

ted to supporting First Diana Travel as they embrace new technology to accelerate success and drive their performance through customer-driven solutions that lead to more efficient

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(L-R): Elcheikh Mohamed Ghouzayel and Rabih Saab

Middle East by 2030, the stakes are high, and we're commit-

ways of working, allowing the agents to focus on what they do best, selling."

Wego upbeat about Dubai HQ

Wego's recent partnerships and new innovative travel technology tools serve travellers around the globe. **Mamoun Hmedan**, Managing Director, Wego Middle East, North Africa and India enlists their plans.

SHEHARA RIZLY

Why did Wego chose Dubai as its second headquarter?

Wego was founded in Singapore but is now dual-headquartered in Dubai and Singapore - it made sense to establish Dubai as the centre of our commercial operations and we have placed our Business Development, Commercial Flights & Hotels Partnerships and Marketing in Dubai to reflect our market growth. Singapore remains headquarters for the APAC market, and home to our talented Product, Design, Engineering and Data Science teams which continues taking

the lead in product innovation and development.

How will this help MENA travellers?

Wego's strength has always been to ensure that travellers have access to the greatest choice of both local and international travel suppliers. We continue to build partnerships with local and global suppliers to deliver a dedicated service to MENA travellers. Also, as the largest travel marketplace in the region, we know MENA travellers best. Our relationships locally only delivers greater benefit to our users because we understand their unique needs when it comes to travel.

How did Wego bring travellers closer to travel booking sites?

Wego partners with both airlines and hotels directly, and also to online travel agents (OTAs). OTAs are growing in the region, while big global players are also partners of Wego. Each has a different set of commercials and deals on offer,

which is why travellers need a comprehensive snapshot of, for instance, one hotel room which can sometimes be up to \$40 per night for the same booking dates. Once a traveller finds the best airfare or hotel rate to suit their budget they are directed to the travel supplier to make their purchase. With travel costs changing consistently online,

it's reassuring that you've done your homework and got the best possible deal.

What are the new partnerships undertaken by Wego?

We're in active discussion with new airlines in the region to ensure their presence on Wego which will give users the opportunity to compare direct airline fares with the OTAs, and provide greater choice for travellers. We're also working closely with regional and global NTOs to deliver a greater depth of destination information along with promotional offers, especially new destinations they may not



Mamoun Hmedan
Managing Director
Wego MENA and India

have previously considered. In addition, our strategic partnership with MBC will support our ability to reach a greater number of travellers in the region with activities designed to inform, educate and inspire."



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Roamer: One-stop solution for agents

Technology has changed everything, even travel experiences. Travellers' needs are changing and increasing with every passing day and in the industry's constant efforts to keep meeting these needs, here comes a new tool – Roamer.

The introduction of smartphones and apps has indeed transformed travel experiences and the way people carry out their expeditions. From checking room availability to locating the untouched spots at a destination, everything can now be done through a simple app installed on a smartphone. In fact, smartphones and apps have become a necessity for modern-day travellers as they move faster and have a lot of information to keep a track of through their trips. Be it the timing of their flight or the hotel address, package itinerary or transfers; they want everything to be easily accessible. Such changes in the travel trends are making the business extremely challenging for the tour and activity providers.

Being a market leader in the B2B travel sector, we

at TBO Group, thrive to offer the best to both our agents and end users and make the business of travelling fun, not stressful for them. Thus came the idea of developing an app that can help the travel agents in offering an unparalleled experience to their customers.

Named as Roamer, this app is the one-stop solution for travel agents as well as travellers around the world. Acting as a joint platform between the agents and their customers, this app makes it possible for the agents to keep a track of all the travel bookings and alterations. Roamer makes it possible for the customers to access all the essential information about their upcoming and ongoing trips with a single touch. Also, they can connect and speak with their agents even when there is no cellular network. All that



is needed is Wi-Fi connectivity and the app will get them connected to whoever they want. Now isn't that

something amazing? Let's have a look at the startling features this app comes with and how it can provide a

more engaging experience to the travellers.

Automatic Trip Organisation

All the travel reservations are automatically organised based on the bookings made, and the details of the trip(s) are available in a user-friendly way.

Stay Updated

Instant push notifications help keep the customers updated about their bookings. Be it about the delay in the departure of their booked flight or any alteration in the itinerary, instant push notifications are there to keep them informed and make changes to their plans, if required, in time, without any hassle.

Cancellations

Untimely cancellations can be a spoiler for anyone. With Roamer, agents can

easily keep their customers updated about any cancellations and alterations in the itinerary. Surprised much?

Offline Access

No Internet? No problem! Roamer is available offline, which means easy access to all the information all the time. Trip details once synced with the app, will be available on the phone always!

Prompt Customer Support

Agents can deliver their customers instant support from any part of the world with a single tap on the screen. They can directly chat with the travellers for any support required. So, if you have already fallen in love with the amazing features presented in this app, download it right away and present it to your customers as their new travel buddy.

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Plush Omega hotel opens in Bur Dubai

RC Hospitality added another property to their portfolio as they opened the new four star deluxe Omega hotel just 20 minute drive from the airport within the famous shopping precinct in Bur Dubai area. The state-of-the-art property with plush interiors, 238 very spacious rooms comprising over four different categories of rooms and suites will satisfy the much needed four-star deluxe brand in the area.



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Jazeera Airways soars higher

Rohit Ramachandran, CEO, Jazeera Airways shares the airline's growth plan. The airline bags the number two position in the world for OTP.

 SHEHARA RIZLY

Jazeera Airways has grown exponentially thanks to their innovative spirit, customer-centricity and operational excellence. According to a new accreditation programme launched by world's leading air travel intelligence company, OAG, Jazeera Airways is the number one airline in the region and number two in the world for On-Time-Performance besides being the first ones to have introduced on-line booking and many other innovative products and services in the region. They also recently introduced their new brand identity, reiterating their commitment to their customers to reach greater heights.

Rohit Ramachandran, CEO, Jazeera Airways shares, "We take pride in being the first low cost airline in the region and remain true to our beginnings. Whilst ensuring we remain competitive



Rohit Ramachandran
CEO
Jazeera Airways

and cost-efficient, we strive to provide higher value and an elevated travel experience through our unique benefits. In addition to unmatched on time performance, Jazeera Airways provides a refined business lounge, high frequency of flights and a 'Park and Fly' facility that enables smart travel on the ground and in the air. In 2018, we will also reveal our own terminal for enhanced convenience." They operate a reliable fleet of Airbus A320 aircraft. Talking about the USPs of

the airline, Ramachandran stated, "Innovation is what sets us apart, as well as an unmatched commitment to exceed customer expectations. We are the only low-cost airline to provide on-board meals and business lounges. We take pride also in our internationally recognised operational excellence, being the first airline in the region with record breaking on-time performance!"

This year marks an important milestone in the journey of Jazeera Airways. They recently unveiled their new logo and website, and are currently working on a brand new mobile app, an improved Jazeeraati Loyalty program, new staff uniforms and refurbished airplanes. "Jazeera Airways is a strategic partner of Kuwait and the region. We are also a facilitator of Kuwait's 2035 Vision aiming to transform Kuwaiti into a regional hub," concluded Ramachandran. 

Jood Palace for excellence

Jood Palace Hotel Dubai upholds Arabian traditions through inspired interpretations of hospitality. The destination invites guests to explore the property.

 TT BUREAU

Situated in the heart of Deira's commercial and business district, Jood Palace Hotel Dubai has added a new dimension to hospitality. You can experience sophistication complemented by warm Arabian hospitality here. Just for you is the most luxurious selection of five-star accommodation, culinary venues, spa, recreation and fitness facilities as well as conference and event spaces.

The guests can immerse themselves in the unparalleled comfort of any of Jood's 147 deluxe and premium rooms, 10 ambassador suites and 2 royal suites, as well as 90 deluxe, fully-furnished serviced residences. In terms of food and beverage, you can enjoy here the finest dishes from all over the world, created with care and presented with flair. Each of their dining venues has been designed to appeal



Ahmed Badawy
General Manager
Jood Palace Hotel Dubai

to modern gourmands, offering the perfect balance of flavour and finesse. Jood Palace Hotel Dubai also offers a wide array of leisure services that cater to all types of people. There is an ultra-modern Health Club—for the health of your body, then there is Jood Spa—for the health of your mind and soul, and then there is the exotic rooftop swimming pool—for unwinding both your body and mind.

Jood Palace Hotel Dubai has been awarded the pres-

tigious Best Family Friendly Hotel at the Arabian Travel Awards 2017. This incredible recognition is reflective of the hotel's unwavering commitment, tremendous efforts and hard work of turning the hotel to a fully family friendly environment, especially after the separation of the management from the old operator and creating an own hospitality brand "JOOD Hospitality" which happened end of 2015.

Ahmed Badawy, General Manager, said, "It was a great challenge and a big task to create a new hospitality brand in a competitive and dynamic market as Dubai. We were able to position the newly born brand on its well-deserved place through our commitment to excellence. Such acknowledgment by our valued guests gives us the much needed motivation to enhance our services. We aim to create a higher level of excellence for every guest." 







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Singapore Airlines

Dubai

Christian Stenkewitz has been elevated to the post of General Manager-Gulf at Singapore Airlines. He will be responsible for managing the airlines' commercial activities and operations throughout the Gulf region and overseeing the offline market strategy in the MENA region. Prior to this post, he was in charge of SIA's commercial development and growth as Manager South Central India, based in Bengaluru, India. During his decade long association with SIA, Stenkewitz has built a wealth of experience through working in various commercial roles and markets including corporate and leisure sales in Northern and Southern Germany as well as looking after Offline Sales in Central and Eastern Europe.



Sheraton Sharjah Beach Resort & Spa and Four Points by Sheraton Sharjah

Sharjah

Dany Dagher has been appointed as the Complex General Manager of two of Sheraton Sharjah Beach Resort & Spa and Four Points by Sheraton Sharjah. During his over two decades of experience in the hospitality industry, Dagher has worked with The Westin Prince, Toronto, after obtaining his Culinary Management Diploma from George Brown College. He then moved to Aerostar Hotel, Moscow before moving to Sheraton Lisbon Hotel & Towers as Director of F&B. In 2004, Dagher joined Sheraton Jumeira Beach Resort, Dubai, as Director of F&B, and in 2009, became its GM.



Mövenpick Hotel Jumeirah Lakes Towers

Dubai

Mövenpick Hotel Jumeirah Lakes Towers has appointed **Daniel Kaan** as their new General Manager. With over 16 years of experience, Kaan's association with Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts started with Mövenpick Hotel Amsterdam in 2010. In 2014, he became the General Manager of Mövenpick Hotel Bahrain. Previously, he has worked with the InterContinental Hotels Group in Dubai, Nairobi and Shenzhen, and with the Grand Hyatt in Beijing. Kaan is a graduate in International Hospitality Management from the Southern Cross University, Australia, and also studied at Stenden University.



Sabre Corporation

Dallas

Sabre Corporation has named **Clinton Anderson** as the President of Sabre Hospitality Solutions (SHS). Anderson joined Sabre in 2014 and currently serves as the Senior Vice President of Strategy. Prior to joining Sabre, he co-founded Emerson/Anderson, a private investment fund focused on small cap business. He was also a partner at Bain and Company where he served as a leader of consumer products and performance improvement practices and led consulting engagements across many industries to drive profitable growth, operational efficiency and strategic differentiation.



Al Habtoor City Hotel Collection

Dubai

Al Habtoor City Hotel Collection has appointed **John Farrelly** as the Multi-Property Director of Sales & Marketing for The St. Regis Dubai, W Dubai Al Habtoor City and The Westin Dubai Al Habtoor City. He first joined Marriott UK in 1999 and held various on-property sales leadership positions before being promoted to Cluster Director of Sales & Marketing for nine hotels in Northern England in 2003. In 2011, he joined the pre-opening team at the JW Marriott Marquis Dubai and in 2015, Farrelly took on the role of Country Director of Sales & Marketing for UAE, as well as the management of the UAE Market Organisation.



Marriott International

Dubai

Paul Dalglish is the new Vice President of Sales & Distribution, Marriott International. He will be responsible for Property, Market, and Area as well as Global Sales Organisations, whilst leading the Middle East and Africa Distribution Strategy. Previously Vice President of Sales for Marriott International, Dalglish has played a key role in the rapid expansion of the group in the Middle East and Africa region, deploying new and innovative sales strategies, whilst ensuring talent development lives as a discipline priority.



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