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# TRAVTALK



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12 new chapters  
365 new chances

2021

Happy New Year!

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# Poised for recovery in 2021

While the pandemic has been a major disruptor, the travel industry is resilient and going all out to overcome challenges. Industry leaders have a very positive outlook for the upcoming year and share with **TRAVTALK** their views, expectations and insights for a more fruitful 2021.



HE Khalid Jasim Al Midfa  
Chairman, SCTDA

“The Sharjah Government, represented by the SCTDA and its partners, have carried on making tremendous efforts to develop the tourism sector in the emirate – even in these challenging times. The success of initiatives such as the Sharjah ‘Safety Assured’ stamp and the commitment of our hotels and tourism sites to precautionary measures, in addition to the opening of new, highly regarded attractions such as the House of Wisdom means that we can look forward to a positive outlook for the industry in 2021. As we roll out digital innovations and campaigns geared towards the domestic market while anticipating the opening of neighbouring markets, the emirate is sure of seeing increased visitor numbers and a bright recovery.”

“Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority has made remarkable strides towards the destination's recovery in 2020, which resulted in the emirate becoming the first city in the world to receive both the Bureau Veritas Safeguard Assurance Label and the WTTC Safe Travels Stamp. We are very optimistic about 2021, and since the emirate was named the Gulf Tourism Capital for 2021, the GCC region will be a key focus for us next year.”



Raki Phillips  
CEO, Ras Al Khaimah Tourism  
Development Authority

“The UAE economy is expected to begin recovery to pre-COVID levels in 2021, steady growth will continue and for the travel industry business recovery will be the top priority in the short-term, but long-term plans will be to make it more stable and diversified with Expo 2021 happening in Dubai we are all set to welcome tourists. While the pandemic may have put immediate ambitions on hold, it poses an opportunity for innovation and transformation.”



Nasir Jamal Khan  
CEO  
Al Naboodah Travel

“We remain confident in the long-term prospects of Singapore's tourism sectors – both for leisure and MICE & business travel – as the fundamentals that make Singapore an attractive place for unique, high quality travel and MICE experiences, and a key business hub remains unchanged. Travel will never be the same again. But you can expect Singapore to lead the way in defining the ‘new normal’ for tourism industry.”



Beverly Au Yong  
Area Director – Middle East,  
Singapore Tourism Board

Contd. on page 3 ▶

## Countdown starts for Expo

Dubai is getting ready to welcome 25 million visitors for Expo 2020 with the support of the travel trade from around the globe.

Shehara Rizly

By opening for international travellers with caution yet sustainable influx of tourists, Sumathi Ramanathan, Director Market Strategy and Sales – Expo 2020 shares their new strategies and plans for the biggest event.



Sumathi Ramanathan  
Director Market Strategy and Sales  
Expo 2020

We are very excited about opening doors in less than nine months.

We have more than 193 countries participating and we hope to make this one of the biggest events in recent history. The site looks fantastic and fabulous with its 4.38 square kilometres.

Contd. on page 5 ▶

## Build traveller trust

One of the key elements to restart travel is to build traveller confidence. Haitham Mattar, Senior Advisor Ministry of Tourism in the KSA shares his views with **TRAVTALK**.

TT Bureau

Emirates airlines is a great role model and I've traveled a couple of times between Dubai and Riyadh after the pandemic. I can tell you from this region, if we ensure that we enforce as safety, physical distancing



Haitham Mattar  
Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Tourism in  
the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

and, sensitization guidelines across every touch point of the customer journey from travel end to end, we will start to instill confidence. I travel and I'm confident. I feel safe when I travel. And, I think more and more people are starting to feel safer, once they experience the travel.

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# Positive booking trends

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“ There are signs of positive booking trends already emerging for 2021, and as the roll out of a vaccine continues globally, this will only stimulate further travel intentions, especially for GCC residents who are already benefitting. The German travel industry has continued to work to ensure Germany is as safe as possible, adapting to various travel demands to reassure travellers choosing to visit us. This has been a concerted effort from all stakeholders and supported the launch of our German Summer Cities 2021 campaign. Through the promotion of areas surrounding our popular cities, we are providing travellers with a variety of choices. ”



**Yamina Sofo**  
Director – Sales & Marketing,  
German National Tourist  
Office Gulf Countries

“ At Travelport, we're optimistic that 2021 will see continued recovery. We've consistently seen that there is a clear desire to travel as soon as people feel it is safe and in line with government regulations – in the Middle East and globally. Vaccines beginning to roll out and continued progress of travel bubbles are certainly encouraging signs. As the industry recovers, we're continuing to build our vision of the future. We see three foundational priorities – multi-source content, retailing excellence and maximising the value of every trip. We have an exciting next-generation platform on the way to enable all this, and we're looking forward to launching it soon. ”



**Kathryn Wallington**  
Head, Travelport Middle  
East and Africa

“ Recent news about vaccines are really positive and has given us hope that international travel will resume in a meaningful way in 2021. Tourism Ireland has a three-phase plan to restart, rebuild and ultimately redesign demand in 2021. We are planning a significant kick-start campaign, which will be launched, possibly around St Patrick's Day in 2021, to drive bookings and revenue for tourism businesses. It will deliver a very clear 'book now' message to create demand for summer holidays in Ireland. In our research, Northern Ireland and Ireland have consistently been among the destinations that holidaymakers say they would be most comfortable visiting. ”



**Siobhán Naughton**  
Marketing & Trade Executive  
– Middle East & Asia,  
Tourism Ireland



**Ernesto Sanchez  
Beaumont**  
Managing Director  
Amadeus Gulf

“ For 2021, healthy traveller appetites will lead to a strong demand ahead. The Amadeus Destination X study revealed that nearly 82% of respondents in MEA would consider international trips once restrictions are lifted. Additionally, travellers are now more mindful of the little details with nearly 84% of travellers in the MEA region saying information on COVID-19 precautions is 'very important' to know before booking a hotel, and 75% saying the same for air travel. It is imperative that we enable people to start travelling again. ”



**Laxman Gautam**  
Officiating Director –  
Tourism Marketing and  
Promotion Department,  
Nepal Tourism Board

“ Nepal is geared up with all necessary preparations and precautions to welcome international travellers to experience its rich treasury of nature, culture, adventure, festivals and cuisines in the new normal post-COVID scenario. For this, Government of Nepal, Nepal Tourism Board and the private sector are reaching out to international markets through digital marketing and promotion strategies. New competitive packages are being offered by the private sector keeping in view the growing interests of potential tourists to Nepal. ”



**Ravi Santiago**  
Cluster General Manager,  
Wyndham hotels Ajman

“ We are very optimistic about the revival of the tourism industry in 2021. Gradual increase in the first quarter, good performance during the summer period, and most likely a full recovery in the last quarter are on the horizon, given the developments of the COVID-19 vaccines in many places. This would boost the confidence of the travellers, and we expect a significant increase in inbound tourism, especially from our key markets. We are also on the lookout for new markets, including the entrant Israel. We hope 2021 is going to be an exciting year. ”

Contd. on page 4 ►

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# Working towards common goals

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**Jamal Abdulnazar**  
CEO  
Cozmo Travel

“ We have achieved 47 per cent of 2019 business if you take the last three months and it is increasing day by day. 2021 will see 60 per cent recovery in the first half and towards the second half we will achieve 90-95 per cent of 2019 business. I'm forecasting this as you have seen how not one, but several vaccines have been tested and are working very well. Also, vaccine manufacturers are stating that the new variant has already been handled. So it is something we need to push back and move on to business, not only in travel but also other industries. I'm very optimistic that tourism will pick up and business travel will pick up, more and more countries will open, it will be a very positive year. We started hiring the employees we had let go, during the last one and half months the first priority was to hire them back, if they were unavailable, we are seeking new staff from outside. We are looking at new investments in the travel business within the current spectrum which will complement the main business. Let's be cheerful and look at 2021 in a very positive and optimistic manner. ”



**Sanjiv Malhotra**  
Vice President  
Shaza Hotels

“ The need to meet and collaborate for a purpose is predominant in the human race. The manner in which we do it has evolved over time. The need to collaborate will remain. The need to explore will remain. The need to challenge oneself will remain. This is the time to dwell on the opportunities within that space and develop design and experiences intelligently, meaningfully and in a well-thought through manner. ”



**Omar Hamour**  
Head of Marketing and  
Exhibitions Department  
- Fujairah Tourism and  
Antiquities Authority

“ We have been promoting the emirate of Fujairah with all its offerings for the locals and expats, promoting domestic tourism. We will focus on other markets later on depending how the situation will be. Our aim is to create more awareness of the many activities in the destination which includes adventure tourism. We will be promoting this over the first quarter of 2021. ”



**Sumit Acharya**  
Vice President, DTTAG and  
Managing Director, BCD  
Travel LLC, Dubai

“ Under the direction of a newly appointed Executive Committee and leadership, DTTAG has seen renewed interest and commitment amongst its members to work towards common goals for the travel agency community. Our members supported the community during repatriation flights home, played a key role in helping workers returning to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia via UAE, and ensured smooth handling of a huge number of Israeli tourists that flocked to Dubai during Q4. Following some amount of 'right sizing' in 2020 by most of our members, the industry is now looking forward to a return towards normalcy in outbound travel during the first half of 2021. BCD Travel's priority has been to control costs in the face of plummeting travel demand amid the pandemic. We've taken steps to ensure our long-term sustainability which has required restructuring decisions as part of our drive to become a leaner organisation. Although demand for travel is far below pre-COVID levels for now, we remain optimistic about a quick rebound in 2021. ”



**Gary Chapman**  
President of Emirates Group  
Services and dhata

“ In 2021, there is reason for optimism with the roll out of vaccines. Remember that travel and tourism are an essential part of not only the global economy but also society, and both aren't going to go away. When we are in the eye of the storm it is easy to forget that things will get better, but I'm a firm believer that they will. We do however have to be cautious that this won't happen overnight, and it will be a slow, stuttered and patchy recovery with lots of uncertainty, like how we are currently seeing another wave of shutdowns and travel restrictions in light of new developments around the virus. But the trajectory is upwards and will continue to improve over time. ”



**Shahrin Mokhtar**  
Director  
Tourism Malaysia-Dubai

“ With the vaccines available in the market we are hoping that the borders will open faster. The recovery will be gradual until 2024, however currently we can see some changes in the market segments and we have taken advantage by focusing more on OTAs. We see that there will be a slowdown in the business segment because now people are doing their deals through online channels and MICE will be on a more hybrid level so leisure market will have its growth. There will be an emergence or an increase of solo travellers as they want to have their "me time" without their partners and we are also looking at promoting eco-tourism to ensure customers spend more time with nature away from the crowded cities. ”



**Arijit Munshi**  
General Manager  
Tune Protect

“ In 2020 we were in constant change and it will continue well into 2021; the reason I say this is there is no historical data or background, so the way to move forward in 2021 is we have to be prepared, no one can be absolutely prepared for every single eventuality but I think the most important thing is each one has to be mentally prepared that the world is changing and it is a dynamic environment. Going forward to 2021 and beyond, information is going to be key and educating the traveller, service provider, logistic provider is going to become a very important aspect. ”

“ 2021 is a year of expectation with all this 2020 wash out but then there is still a lot of uncertainty and ambiguity in how the business is going to be. When you look forward with IATA and other international organisations the travel segment or the tourism segment is expected to bounce back around 2023 or 2024 to pre-COVID time. Now with the roll out of the vaccines there has been a phenomenal voluntary uptake of people taking up the vaccine. So the general market itself is quite upbeat and the economy also is looking a little positive especially where Bahrain market is concerned. ”



**Ramsumesh Menon**  
CEO  
Go Gosaibi Travel Bahrain

“ While COVID-19 had a crippling impact on the entire travel & tourism industry – the promise of effective vaccine roll out is good news as the year comes to a close. Revenge travel is going to gain further momentum as we enter 2021. The massive pent-up demand is going to fuel that need to travel further with a lot of people yet to take their first flight or first real holiday. With international travel remaining largely inaccessible to leisure travellers, domestic travel will continue to grow strong as more and more people will look inwards to explore their own homeland. ”



**Deepak Rawat**  
Senior Vice President  
- International Markets,  
MakeMyTrip.com

“ As we all look ahead to 2021, Radisson Hotel Group remains prudently optimistic and determined to continue implementing the five-year development and growth plan in the coming three years. We are confident that travel will continue to rebound, and more capital will be invested in the industry from both the private and public sectors. The region remains one of the key focus markets for Radisson Hotel Group's global development strategy and we aim to continue expanding our brand architecture and strengthening our presence. ”



**Tim Cordon**  
Area Senior Vice President,  
Middle East and Africa

“ Over the last month we have seen many changes made across the Middle East and Africa market which have impacted regional and international travel. Borders opened, restrictions were lifted, and plans were put in place to drive economic recovery through the region's peak season. November and early December brought with it a lot of optimism across the entire region, with travel intent and confidence increasing substantially. In light of the recent announcements of the new variant of the virus, some borders across our region have since closed and it will be vital to keep an eye on travel trends, government regulations and ongoing preventive measures. ”



**Stewart Smith**  
Managing Director - Middle  
East and Africa, Sojern

“ Travel is a lifestyle, people want to travel around the world to discover, enjoy the scenery, explore culture and history. At present in Dubai more than 25% of people have already started travelling across the globe wherever the borders are open. Travellers will be interested in short haul leisure travel and we are now receiving travel budgets from corporates to organise their travel for 2021. Since November the Israel market has already increased and now the outflow to Israel will also begin soon. Dubai is a place that will never stop travelling we think 2021 will be great for Dubai. ”



**Sapna Aidasani**  
Marketing Manager  
Pluto Travels

Inputs by Shehara Rizly

# Travel partners pivotal for Expo

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For those of you who support football, or watch football, imagine 600 football stadiums of either Chelsea Stamford bridge or Barcelona's Camp Nou stadium – that's how big the site is. A majority of the infrastructure is ready. Some of our key unique thematic pavilions are also available for guests to come in and take a look, countries are completing their infrastructure. I think I'm not being biased, but it is possibly one of the most beautifully designed sites I have ever seen in recent history. For example, the Japanese pavilion is a combination of Japanese origami and Arabic geometry. Singapore is bringing the gardens of Singapore to the deserts of Dubai. Brazil is recreating the Amazon rain forest and the site looks phenomenal.

**Could you share an update about the infrastructure for Expo 2020?**

What we have at the expo

is the Metro line, which I think is really important, so route 2020 is the largest Metro station in Dubai and that is operational. One of the key themes of this expo is sustainability. We are delighted to be able to provide a sustainable mode of transportation for all visitors. We have also recently announced a partnership with the EMAAR Hospitality Group who are building a Rove hotel on site that will accommodate some of the visitors. In Dubai, we are really fortunate because there are many hotels around the vicinity of the expo and also transport connectivity to the Metro. Also, we will be deploying expo riders, which are shuttle buses that will bring visitors from the city centre, not only from Dubai, but across other emirates including Ras Al Khaimah, Fujairah and Abu Dhabi. Visitors do not have to stay close to the expo site. They can stay anywhere in the emirates, and there will be

transport for them to reach the expo site.

**What are the health and safety protocols employed for visitors?**

As you've rightly mentioned, Dubai is one of the first cities to open up to international tourism. Today we are at GITEX and the safety and security measures that have been put together by the UAE government and Dubai as a city has enabled us to be one of the first leaders in terms of opening up to international tourism. Some

ensure that we are providing the right kind of regulations, health, and safety sanitisation.

Expos are all about showcasing the latest technology. We have partnered with a number of technology partners, including SAP and Siemens and Cisco, Terminus, which is, artificial intelligence from China, who is providing robotics. We are in a very good place with all of the technology partners to be able to support us in terms of crowd control



restaurants. You can take a look at the latest technology, culture, heritage for 33 US\$. At this stage the pricing remains the same, but we are cognizant that

visits, that is what we are looking at. However, it is too premature for us to provide meaningful revisions to the numbers as travel in most of the countries is slowly starting to pick up. I think the great news is the vaccination due to which we are confident that travel will pick up, and we remain faithful to delivering those numbers. We might look at the composition of visitors, international versus domestic. We are also looking at business visitation. A number of businesses have been really been hit this year due to COVID. Next year we are giving them the opportunity with a single flight ticket and with relatively most countries being visa free, a business person from Czechoslovakia or a business woman from Mumbai can fly into Dubai and meet businesses from 190 countries with a single investment, which is a very compelling proposition for business visitors.

We will continue working on the visitation numbers and monitoring the trends and provide a meaningful revision when we have enough data to do so.



of you may be aware that Emirates airlines has been voted as the safest airline in the world. The DNA and ethos of safety is fundamental and pivotal in everything that the Dubai and the UAE government does. One of the key measures that we are taking is to redesign the visitor experience to

and management. We are able to use technology like heat mapping to disperse visitors, and we are able to create the right kind of spacing to enable visitors to go through the journey.

**Could you update us on the ticket prices? Are they the same as previous announcement?**

The pre-COVID pricing was actually the benchmark with global destinations and attractions and also local destinations to ensure that tickets are competitively priced. I think a lot of people are always surprised when I tell them that a one-day ticket is 120 dirhams, which is broadly around 33 US\$, that enables the visitor to come and visit 190 countries. You can go from Japan to Jamaica, from Aruba to Argentina. And you can explore 200 F&B res-

the demands of the consumers are changing. So we will continue reviewing the pricing. What is most important is that we want to ensure the expo is an event which is accessible to everyone. The price point and the entry point of the expo will always be competitive to encourage as many visitors to come. It is beyond coming to an event to witness and see just pavilions. The nearly 170-year-old event is really meant to get people to come there and see what is it that can be contributed to humanity and society. Therefore, the pricing will always remain very affordable for visitors.

**Do you have a new total expectation of guests/visitors planned for the expo?**

We are committed to delivering the 25 million

**“I think a lot of people are always surprised when I tell them that a one-day ticket is 120 dirhams, which is broadly around 33 US\$, that enables the visitor to come and visit 190 countries. You can go from Japan to Jamaica, from Aruba to Argentina.”**

— Sumathi Ramanathan



## FactFile

■ We will be deploying expo riders, which are shuttle buses that will bring visitors from the city centre, not only from Dubai, but across other emirates including Ras Al Khaimah, Fujairah and Abu Dhabi



# Maldives lures GCC travellers

Opening doors with all necessary protocols for international tourists earlier in summer, Maldives continues to attract travellers from the GCC mainly due to the measures taken by the destination. **Thoyyib Mohamed**, Managing Director of Maldives Marketing and PR Corporation, shares more with TTME.

**T** Shehara Rizly

**Could you please share the new protocols for international tourists to enter Maldives?**

Well, confirmed booking, definitely with the tourist establishment approved by the ministry of tourism should be made and all tourists are required to fill an online health declaration form within 24 hours prior

to departure. This can be done with the digital platform for Maldives immigration services. In addition to this, negative COVID-19 PCR test result is required, and it has to be taken 96 hours prior to departure from the first point of implication, children below one year of age are exempted from this on arrival. Tourists get a free 30-day visa and are encouraged to

wear masks. In addition to practicing social distancing and hand sanitisation, however, additional requirements and permissions are needed from the ministry of tourism, for instance, if you want to go from one resort to another resort or from one resort to live in a boat or another hotel or guest house, you have to get approval beforehand.

**Maldives opened quite early to international tourists, how has this supported the industry in terms of faster revival?**

The decision to open up our island nation for international travel was one of the first steps towards kick-starting the revival of tourism industry. Being

one of the first few destinations to reopen after COVID-19 lockdowns was an initiative which generated a lot of positive exposure towards the destination itself. It also proved to be a period for different properties to evaluate which methods work best in terms of budgeting for product packages. Overall, marketing did gain the upper hand in terms of understanding recovery. This decision was also backed by proper health and safety measures in accordance with the World Health Organization and the local health protection agency, which in turn made Maldives a haven to travel to and encouraged more visitors to travel to



**Thoyyib Mohamed**  
Managing Director of Maldives  
Marketing and PR Corporation

the destination without many worries.

**How have the arrivals been from the GCC? From which countries in GCC did you receive more guests?**

In 2019, 6,003 visitors from the Middle East travelled to

the Maldives and in 2020, prior to the COVID-19 lockdown up until March 3, 13,436, visitors travelled to the Maldives from the Middle East, continuing to be one of the leading regions in terms of arrivals. In both cases, Saudi Arabia held the majority of the arrivals with 25,865 visitors in 2019 and 7,359 visitors in pre-lockdown period in this year. However, with the reopening of borders from July 15 till the end of October this year, the UAE has taken the lead in the Middle East with a total of 3,596 visitors in terms of post lockdown arrivals. This might also be a direct result of the UAE being one of the first countries to open for leisure travel from the GCC region. 🇲🇻

**“In 2019, 6,003 visitors from the Middle East travelled to the Maldives and in 2020, prior to the COVID-19 lockdown up until March 3, 13,436, visitors travelled to the Maldives from the Middle East, continuing to be one of the leading regions in terms of arrivals”**

## Breaking News

- Dur Hospitality inaugurates the Holiday Inn & Suites Al Jubail Hotel
- KLM adds Riyadh as a new destination starting in January 2021
- Dubai Airshow to take place from 14 – 18th November 2021
- Hotelbeds signs deal with Flight Centre to increase global distribution reach
- 800 roomed all inclusive Riu Dubai resort and splash park opens at Nakheel's Deira Islands
- 197 roomed Courtyard by Marriott to opens in Riyadh
- ITB China from 24 – 26 November 2021 in Shanghai
- UAE & KSA top global for intent to travel abroad in 2021
- Emirates to resume flights to Istanbul

## Future of hospitality

Countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are already setting examples for other Middle Eastern countries where KSA is planning to invest \$810 billion to transform the tourism industry, says **Dr. Sanjay Batheja**, Co-Founder & Director of Capital College.

While industries like Big Data, health-care and pharmaceutical thrived during the pandemic, sectors like hospitality, marketing and tourism witnessed some backlash. However, as the famous saying goes, 'Change is Constant', many industries have seen a positive shift in their business; especially tourism and hospitality division. Additionally, with UAE and Bahrain normalizing agreement with Israel, there is an expectation of a sharp rise

in tourists from Israel as compared to a whopping 8.9 million outbound travellers as recorded in 2019.

### Vaccine accelerates tourism

The tourism industry will be one of the top sectors that will reap the benefits of the vaccine. Travellers may still have to take precaution, yet tourism and hospitality expects a swift recovery with the 'new normal' form of travelling. With the United Arab Emirates approving the vaccine Sinopharm,

and successful allocation of millions of doses to its frontline workers, it can be safe to say how the industry can anticipate an economic recovery while taking the highest precautionary measures. UAE's campaign late last year to encourage local tourism and promote desert winters with 'The Most Beautiful Winter in the World' programme will further boost domestic tourism.

### Events Back in Business

While many European countries including the UK, France and Germany witnessed a lockdown in the last quarter of 2020, the UAE and other Middle Eastern regions saw a rise in events while en-

forcing and abiding by the highest safety measures. With GITEX, technology week in Dubai and G-20 in KSA, I am certain this is only a stepping stone for the events and hospitality sector to be back in business. Arabian Travel Market announced its 2021 edition in May which only fosters hope for a grander comeback of the industry; ATM is expected to have a great footfall, especially considering Israel's participation in a major travel event in the region.

### Expo 2020 - A New Ray of Hope

Expo 2020's aim to connect, network, build and nurture relations with cross countries and its corporations, I believe

has become more relevant than ever. Additionally, reports from the Central Bank claims UAE's GDP is expected to grow by 3.6% which will only create further job opportunities and keep the hospitality and tourism industry thriving to welcome nations to the world's biggest expo.



**Dr. Sanjay Batheja**  
Co-Founder and Director  
Capital College

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

**“With the UAE and Bahrain normalising agreement with Israel, the countries are expecting a sharp rise in tourists from Israel as compared to a whopping 8.9 million outbound travellers as recorded in 2019”**

# Innovation key to revival

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**T**he destinations need to spend more time in communicating. The nations and authorities are working together with the ministry of health, ministry of tourism collaborating and letting the public know that there's a joint venture and a joint effort in bringing safety, to everyone who is traveling to these destinations. This region has a great opportunity and it is already leading into recovery. It has a great opportunity to be the first region in the world to recover, by simply focusing on hygiene, physical distancing, sanitization processes, and ensuring that those are audited in every hotel and every airline and in every retail shop.

**SanJeet**, CEO, DDPPL, said, "We have with us a very inspirational leader with a global vision. He has headed hotel chains as well as tourism boards and knows both sides of the coin, which are really important at the moment for the tourism industry to know where it is going. Today we are going to discuss with him what's happening in the industry and where it is headed."

**Haitham Mattar**, Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Tourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, replied, "I would really refer back to a lot of research and studies that have been conducted recently. The forecast that we see from STR in the research that's recently been done by Inmarsat in terms of the travel is that if we look at what has occurred from the start of the pandemic until now, we know up to 50 per cent of the hotels

across the Middle East were closed. Now that's down to about 10 per cent of the hotels closed across the Middle East. However, if you look at the trends, and surges and drops and occupancies, it's changing every time we have news about the pandemic. Occupancies across the region in the GCC forecasted by STR has been nudging 50 per cent. So the Middle East has been performing a lot stronger than Europe Asia-Pacific or even the United States. Trends show that cities are becoming less desirable because people don't necessarily want to go to crowded areas. Some destinations that are offering nature, outdoor adventure experiences are becoming popular. We've seen also a big shift now for trends from both investors, as well as consumers looking more for what we call glamping or the luxury camp accommodation, which is becoming very popular across the world."

**So what you're saying is the new learning for the industry is that they prefer areas with spaces as compared to the busy cities?**

**Haitham Mattar:** The learning for the industry is and this is a question again, do we really contin-



**Haitham Mattar**  
Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Tourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

ue to constrain ourselves as an industry until the vaccine is out there and not think about innovative ways of how we can live with this pandemic. It's for industry experts to start thinking about innovative ways to restart MICE, to restart business travel, to restart leisure.

**Everybody's talking about the new normal. When it comes to hotels, what does the new normal mean? Is it just going to be about hygiene or are there going to be more changes in this so-called new normal?**

**Haitham Mattar:** The pandemic has taken the life out of hotels and has taken the life and joy out of travel in general. When you arrive at hotel lobbies that do not have any

artifacts on the tables, it looks like, sorry to say, well, you're walking into a hospital, right? Everything is disinfected. Everything is so, so clean, which is great, but it's that sense of walking into a hospital, it is not any more the same as walking into a grandiose hotel lobby. The warmth of hospitality is taken away.

You'd think all this, hygiene and cleanliness, it should be the normal standard, and not something that we introduce because of a pandemic. Now of course, there's a high cost of operations too. Before check-in and after check-out, hotels probably will have to raise their prices in order to cope with operational costs involved in maintaining cleanliness, hygiene and implementing

safety protocols. Also, human interaction is minimal, you have waiters wearing gloves. At the same time, you have people in an open kitchen wearing masks & gloves. It's comforting that things are becoming more and more hygienic, but I feel that human touch is missing from the experience of travel and leisure and hospitality.

**Let's move on from the hotels and talk about the tourism boards. At this juncture, what do you think they need to focus on?**

**Haitham Mattar:** If we go back to Google searches, people are continuing to search for holiday destinations. They

with destinations sending such messages and have thought about visiting these destinations as soon as borders open. I think a destination strategy that was built prior to the pandemic will certainly need to be reviewed. Also, targets need to be revisited for them to be more realistic. The communications and marketing strategy should focus on sending the right message about the destination and informing travellers about the exciting offers that await them, as soon as the borders are open.

I feel that constant communication is what's going to make a destination a potential choice for consumers. We've seen those who have gone complete-

**“Targets need to be revisited for them to be more realistic. The communications and marketing strategy should focus on sending the right message about the destination and informing travellers about the exciting offers that await them, as soon as the borders are open.”**

— Haitham Mattar

searched for holidays that they're familiar with, and they yearned for it. As of now, destinations in some countries have decided to continue to spend on marketing. Telling people, we're waiting for you to come back when this is over, telling people that look, it is important that we have to stop today. It is important that we are away from each other today. We're always we're stronger together, but today we're stronger being apart, right? These are great messages that went out and people have continued to resonate

ly quiet, just waiting for things to improve. We've also seen those who have been extremely innovative, creative and are keeping in touch, right? Continuing to talk to consumers about the destinations and reminding them about the great offerings that they have, whether it's outdoor, whether it's nature, whether it's culture or heritage, these are the touch points, right? And today the emotional touch points are destinations who have been very creative and have continued to be in touch with consumers. 🍷





# Exploring Truly Asia

# MALAYSIA

One of the most sought-after family destinations by the GCC, Malaysia with its slogan “Truly Asia” brings in the best of the continent. Malaysia has something to offer every traveller who embarks on the destination. We look at five of the most interesting getaways in Malaysia.

Langkawi

## Penang

Penang is a delightful fusion of nature, culture and history. Home to a UNESCO World Heritage City, Penang leaves an indelible mark on each visitor. There's something about Penang's pockets of sea, hills, jungle and outdoor adventures that leaves you wanting more. At 830 m above sea level and a short distance away from George Town, Penang Hill attracts visitors looking for a getaway from the bustling city. With its pleasantly cool climate and fantastic views, it's a great spot for hikers. While the heritage city of George Town is famed for its unique blend of old and new, Teluk Bahang and Balik Pulau offer eco-friendly

experiences for visitors to explore. Cycle through the countryside of Balik Pulau and reward yourself with stunning sights of traditional kampung houses, plantations, fishing villages, paddy fields and remote beaches.

## Langkawi

Langkawi is both the name of the main island and its surrounding archipelago of 99 islands located in the Andaman Sea. Part of the Malaysian state of Kedah, Langkawi has long been one of South East Asia's best-kept secrets as a tropical eco-adventure destination. Today more and more nature lovers and eco-enthusiasts are discovering its many charms and enchantments.

The island is also famous for its intriguing heritage of myths and legends, which also figure prominently in many of its physical features. Culture and tradition also play an important part in this 'Isle of Legends', long considered a 'living museum', adding a deeper, human dimension to its natural beauty. Langkawi has tropical weather and is warm all year round. The dry season between January to March has virtually no rain. The wettest months are October and November when storms are frequent, but it rains only for a few hours in the late afternoons to the nights. All other months have typical tropical weather where you can expect short bursts of rainfall. It has miles of idyl-

lic beaches, from secluded coves and crescents to long languorous stretches, from deserted white sand beaches only accessible by speed boats and with public conveniences and amenities such as food stalls and beachfront restaurants.

## Melaka

Strategically located along the Straits of Melaka, Melaka was the epicentre of an important trading empire over 700 years old, which attracted thousands of traders from all over the world. Whether it's your first time or you've been there countless times, Melaka will make you fall in love all over again with its unique blend of ancient buildings and modern living alongside breath-

taking sights. From its historical heritage sites, declared as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 to its cultural richness, Melaka has definitely a lot to offer to tourists. Although Melaka is a small state, it still has a range of nature adventures to offer. Choose from rainforest recreation parks to beautiful beaches that have some of the scenic sunsets facing the Straits of Melaka. Bukit Batu Lebah, Tanjung Tuan, Bukit Gapis and Bukit Sedanan are ideal places for those who love adrenaline pumping activities and want to escape from the hustle and bustle of a busy city. Even if you only have enough time for a day's trip or your entire family holiday at Melaka, you will not re-

gret it. Melaka is an ideal family holiday destination and also a home to the best outdoor activities.

## Sabah

Situated on the northern part of Borneo, Sabah is a destination filled with excitement, diversity, unique cultures, beaches and food for the adventurous taste buds. It is the complete destination for business and leisure, for everyone from families, FITs to honeymooners. Sabah is gifted with a long coastline with stretches of white sandy beaches and turquoise crystal clear water and hundreds of islands. These islands are well-known for scuba diving, water sports, snorkelling or just for relaxing. You will soon realise that much of

Melaka





Home to a UNESCO World Heritage City, Penang leaves an indelible mark on each visitor. There's something about Penang's pockets of sea, hills, jungle and outdoor adventures that leaves you wanting more

Penang

your holiday here will be spent on water. Diving is big in Sabah, where the jewel Sipadan Island, being one of the top-rated dive spots in the world is located. At nearby islands to Sipadan such as Mabul, Kapalai, Matakang and Pom Pom, large marine life and tiny sea creatures and colourful corals and reef are guaranteed sightings. At the islands, high to medium range resort facilities await. Sabah takes pride in the mystical Mount Kinabalu, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000. Mount Kinabalu is one of the youngest mountains in the world (between 7-8 million years) and this granite mountain still grows.

Climbing Mount Kinabalu is a popular activity here. Adventure seekers can opt for the via ferrata (or iron road) at Mount Kinabalu. The via ferrata here is the world's highest at 3776 m.

## Selangor

The State of Selangor is a land filled with cultures and traditions, making it multi-racial and multi-lingual, historical and home to a gastro-tourism site. Selangor offers a wide selection of activities ranging from sports, arts & cultural events. Adventure awaits in the tropical lush forests of Selangor and be ready to unwind in a walk through heritage to experience the local culture

while indulging in sumptuous meals prepared by only the best. Be captivated by the wondering lights of the firefly in Kuala Selangor and step it up at Batu Caves, the limestone cave temple climbing up to 272 steps, making way for a great cardio while on tour. Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM), Kepong occupies an area of 600 hectares and is surrounded by the Lagong Hill Forest Reserve. One of its latest attractions is the Sky Walk. Kanching Eco Forest Park is a must-visit eco-tourism destination in Selangor. This eco forest park has seven layers of 208-metre high beautiful waterfalls and a challenging hiking trail with

different levels of difficulties. You also can explore the city of Kuala Kubu Bharu and witness the beautiful natural scenery from the skies by participating in paragliding activity at Batu Pahat Hill, Hulu Selangor with approximate heights of 400 feet in the air. White water rafting at Kuala Kubu Bharu is also a lot of fun for those who want to try out the rugged water activity at the river which is 8 km long.



Selangor, Paragliding

Mount Kinabalu, Sabah



# Seychelles remains a favourite

The mystical Seychelles Islands remains a fantasy escape for travellers across the globe and, although the vicious pandemic has dwindled travel, the destination maintains its allure. On the path to a slow yet steady recovery, the tropical paradise has seen the arrival of 98,894 visitors up to November 15, 2020.

**Shehara Rizly**

**B**ased on data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics, since re-opening to commercial flights on August 1, 2020, the Seychelles International Airport has seen the arrival of 9,272 visitors. Since then, up to date, the local tourism industry's traditional markets have remained steadfast with the UAE as the top visiting region with 3,065 visitors, followed by Germany with 2,328, Switzerland with 1,495, the UK with 662 and France with 298. In week 46, the airport has seen 1,154 arrivals with the same markets remaining strong during this time

hailing 628 visitors from Germany, 218 from Switzerland, 83 from the UAE, 72 from South Africa and 55 from Austria. Additionally, since the resumption of Air Seychelles flights to South Africa, there has been an increase in the number of visitors from the region from 11 in week 45 to 72 in week 46.

Reviewing the recent tourism arrival numbers, the Seychelles Tourism Board (STB) Chief Executive **Sherin Francis** stated that the current situation leaves little room for trends as travellers are booking very close to their travel date. "In the last quarter of 2019 alone, Seychelles received 104,079 visitors;



**Sherin Francis**  
Chief Executive  
Seychelles Tourism Board (STB)

therefore, the numbers presented this year may seem dull in comparison. However, looking at the bigger picture, these same figures are monumental for the local tourism industry. Currently, our marketing approach is flexible and in constant

**“In the last quarter of 2019 alone, Seychelles received 104,079 visitors; therefore, the numbers presented this year may seem dull in comparison. However, looking at the bigger picture, these same figures are monumental for the local tourism industry”**

evolution. We are doing so without deviating from the very crucial goal of keeping our people safe," said Francis.

Keeping abreast of client's sentiments regarding the safety of visitors in the destination, a small-scale pilot study was conducted by STB's Strategic Planning and Market Intelligence Team in collaboration with Hilton Northolme, and the

data collected comes as a beacon of hope for the local tourism industry.

The findings revealed several key information as 100 per cent of respondents stated that they felt safe being in Seychelles during this time, with 81 per cent claiming to feel very safe. Furthermore, 100 per cent of respondents claimed that they would

recommend travelling to Seychelles during this time and 17 per cent responded that they came to Seychelles to seek refuge from the pandemic. The data collected conveys growing confidence in the travel industry especially in the Seychelles where the local authorities have united to implement extensive safety measures whereby the low infection numbers have created a sense of security in the minds of travellers.

Our commitments for safe tourism have been ably supported by the various partners on the tourism task force," said the STB Chief Executive. 🇨🇪

# Israel's focus on leisure, MICE

Israel's Tourism Minister **HE Orit Farkash-Hacohen** addressed the audience at the first virtual UAE-Israel Tourism Forum hosted by the officials from Israel's Ministry of Tourism recently. She stated that Israel is preparing to welcome tourists from the UAE and will be adhering to the advice of health experts to ensure it remains a safe destination in terms of COVID-19 exposure.

**TT Bureau**

**T**he key aim of the forum was to build the foundation for a long-term tourism relationship between Israel and the UAE. The online event highlighted Israel's position as an important historical and cultural destination. It focused on the two urban gems of Israel – Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, featured its sandy beaches, a sprawling metropolis and breathtaking natural beauty. Jerusalem's unique sites, holy to Christianity, Judaism and Islam, are also on the list of the country's must-see locations. With great weather virtually all year round, tourists can enjoy

the great outdoors, take in colourful markets, cutting-edge culture and entertainment and an exciting culinary scene. The forum

a lasting peace between countries, and Israel looks forward to welcoming travellers from the UAE. I am certain visitors from the emirates

**“Israel's unique religious sites are holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims, with Jerusalem at their centre. Alongside the sites, visitors will enjoy the people, culture, art, music and culinary delights”**

— Her Excellency Orit Farkash-Hacohen

witnessed an attendance of over 300 trade partners from the UAE and 100 partners from Israel.

**Her Excellency Orit Farkash-Hacohen**, Israel's Tourism Minister said, "Tourism is key to building

and other countries will enjoy the unique blend of this new, and near, destination. Israel is where thousands of years of history meet modern day life. It is the home of Tel Aviv and the StartUp Nation and of ancient Caesarea and the magnificent Dead Sea. Isra-



**HE Orit Farkash-Hacohen**  
Tourism Minister  
Israel

el's unique religious sites are holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims, with Jerusalem at their centre. Alongside the sites, visitors will enjoy the people, culture, art, music and culinary delights."

Visitors can also benefit from the healing powers of

the Dead Sea, a shortlist candidate for the world's 7 natural wonders and the lowest place on the planet (434 metres approx below sea level). The Dead Sea area features several attractions including natural healing spas, hiking trails and restaurants. The North of Israel also has hidden treasures of natural beauty from Haifa to the Sea of Galilee, in a region filled with historical significance. Israel's Ministry of Tourism, as part of its wider promotional activities in this region, is all set to participate at the Arabian Travel Mart and Expo Dubai in 2021. The strategy is to focus Israel as a leisure and a MICE destination through

various B2B and B2C activities. The UAE and Israel signed a mutual visa waiver agreement following the normalisation of ties between the two countries, enabling travellers to obtain visas on arrival.

flydubai has already started operating 14 flights a week offering a double daily service between Dubai International and Tel Aviv Ben Gurion airports. Airlines like Emirates and Etihad have also announced direct flights to Israel in 2021. Israel and UAE have signed an aviation agreement which will allow up to 112 weekly flights between the two countries. 🇨🇪



# Ireland's offerings for GCC

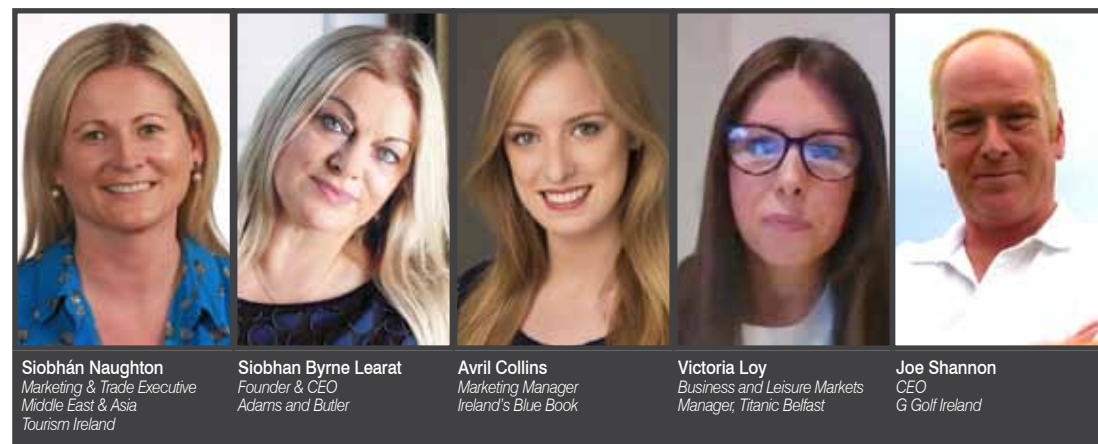
With a record number of agents attending from all across GCC, the second in a series of two webinars to showcase the luxury destination of Ireland was held last month. There were five speakers who participated along with **Siobhan Naughton**, Marketing and Trade Executive, Tourism Ireland.

 Shehara Rizly

**T**he webinar was kicked off by **Siobhan Naughton**, Marketing and Trade Executive, Tourism Ireland, who shared an overview about the destination, the flight access and the latest updates about the

COVID-centric practices and safety charters which still include the quarantine period of 14 days. She mentioned about the British Irish Visa Scheme, the visa requirements for other GCC countries and shared that they were very busy preparing for visitors to travel to Ireland soon.

She then opened the floor for industry speakers starting off with **Siobhan Byrne Learat**, Founder & CEO, Adams and Butler. She gave an in-depth presentation on the various programmes and itineraries that can be tailor-made for the guests. She shared that they remit part of the commission to the agents that book the clients especially at this period of time so that it will help both parties to continue in their business. She mentioned that Ireland is known as an 'island of horses' and as a DMC they do prepare itineraries to accommodate the requests of the



**Siobhán Naughton**  
Marketing & Trade Executive  
Middle East & Asia  
Tourism Ireland

**Siobhan Byrne Learat**  
Founder & CEO  
Adams and Butler

**Avril Collins**  
Marketing Manager  
Ireland's Blue Book

**Victoria Loy**  
Business and Leisure Markets  
Manager, Titanic Belfast

**Joe Shannon**  
CEO  
G Golf Ireland

clients. She stated that especially travellers from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia prefer to self-drive and discover the destination, hence this is the ideal destination. She gave a detailed description of all the different possibilities to visit the destination, various different accommodation facilities from hotels, to boutique hotels, castles etc., how they can even arrange for an Earl or Lord to have tea with the guests; and all the different experiences one can enjoy in this destination and the way they can help the agents.

**Avril Collins**, Marketing Manager of Ireland's Blue Book which includes a romantic collection of over 50 Irish Country House Hotels, Manor Houses, Castles and Restaurants shared many interesting details about the different properties under their

belt. From five-star elegant properties to Michelin star restaurants that can really add a lot more to the itinerary of the discerning traveller, she gave an update about the stunning properties in Ireland.

The next in line was **Victoria Loy**, Business and Leisure Markets Manager, Titanic Belfast. The historical voyage is one of the most looked forward to experiences by people from across the world. The largest ship has so many stories that have been made into several movies. Loy walked the audience through each one of the galleries and explained in detail what each experience entails. There were nine main galleries where one could actually take a trip at the port of call many eons ago. Apart from



**The historical voyage is one of the most looked forward to experiences by people from across the world. The largest ship has so many stories that have been made into several movies.**

the guided discovery tour in the Titanic, they also have another attraction – the SS Nomadic which also has a story to be unraveled.

**Joe Shannon**, CEO, G Golf Ireland took us on a very exciting golfing trip for VIPs. He shared that they have large number of

golf courses – almost 400 for a population of 5 million people and 11 of the courses are among the top 100 golf courses in the world list. He mentioned the tailor-made services offered by them for the golf enthusiasts and how they can really enjoy and play in any of the courses that they prefer. He mentioned that all procedures are being taken to welcome

international tourists next year and they are hopeful 2021 will be a much better year. It is an authentic Irish elite golf experience that one can truly experience if they are golf enthusiasts but even if they are not, they can tailor make an experience that would make the non-golfer too enjoy during their stay. 🇮🇪





# UAE sees spike in inbound tourists

Over the past few weeks UAE has been recording a greater volume of tourists travelling into the destination with the mutual visa agreement between UAE and Israel and hosting of the first full physical event GITEX 2020 for five days amidst strict regulations. Also, flydubai began direct flights to Israel, with twice daily services between Dubai and Tel Aviv.

## Key Market Updates

This last month has seen good news for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain with regards to tourism, as they have been added to the UK travel corridor list which means a 14-day quarantine for travellers on arrival is no longer required. The UAE has also activated tourist entry visas for Israeli passport holders

which aim to facilitate inbound travel until a mutual visa waiver agreement between the two states is implemented. In addition, on the 26th November flydubai began direct flights to Israel, with twice daily services between Dubai and Tel Aviv. This advancement came as a result of the UAE signing an agreement to formalise relations with Israel, the

first of its type agreed by an Arab state in the Gulf. This deal is expected to boost economic recovery from the impact of the pandemic by increasing the volume of tourists as Dubai enters peak season. Other airlines are planning to follow suit opening up services between the two destinations to increase regional travel demand.

While some countries across the region are lifting travel restrictions, and introducing new opportunities for international and regional travel, others are still implementing restrictions. For example, South Africa scrapped its list of banned nations in November meaning international borders are now open to all nations. Meanwhile,

Abu Dhabi updated its COVID-19 testing protocol, requiring a negative Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) or Diffractive Phase Interferometry (DPI) test for entry, with further testing on the fourth and eighth day of your stay. With the remaining uncertainty in travel, the region continues to focus resources and budget on fast-tracking

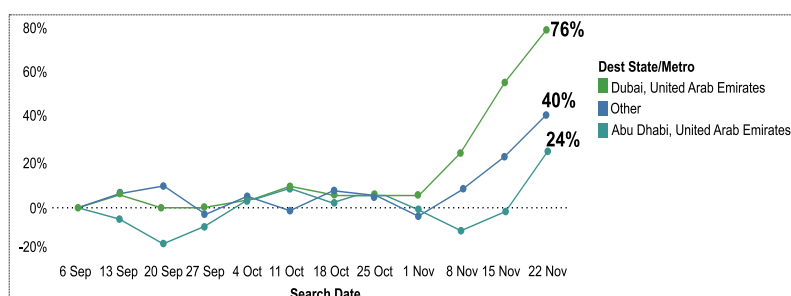
economic recovery and boosting tourism for the coming years. An example of such effort is the \$3.7bn loan for a megaproject that Saudi tourism is near to closing. They plan to complete construction by 2030, and use the development to target one million visitors a year, including domestic and international travellers.

## Travel Intent and Confidence in the UAE Grows Considerably

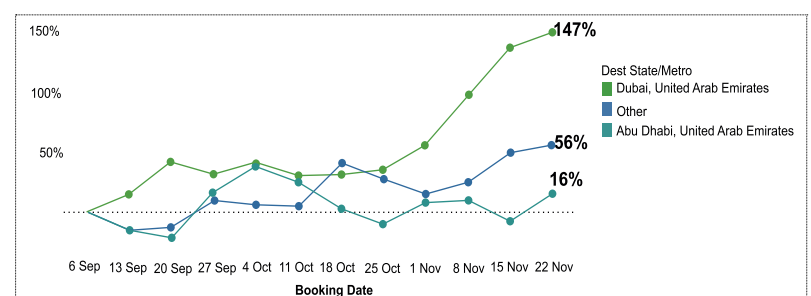
November has brought with it a lot of optimism across the entire region, with travel intent and confidence increasing substantially in light of the recent announcements. Looking more specifically at the UAE, travel intent and confidence have increased dramatically over the last month. In efforts to improve legislation, enhance the investment climate, and to make the country more expat friendly, the

UAE federal government introduced a number of legal reforms in personal, family, and business law. This has been further fueled by Abu Dhabi Health Services Company (Seha) announcing a decrease in the price of PCR swab tests in the UAE making testing more accessible, especially for those who require frequent testing.

**Current Year % Change in Global Hotel Searches to the United Arab Emirates Split by Metro - indexed to w/c 6th September**



**Current Year % Change in Global Hotel Bookings in the United Arab Emirates Split by Metro - indexed to w/c 6th September**

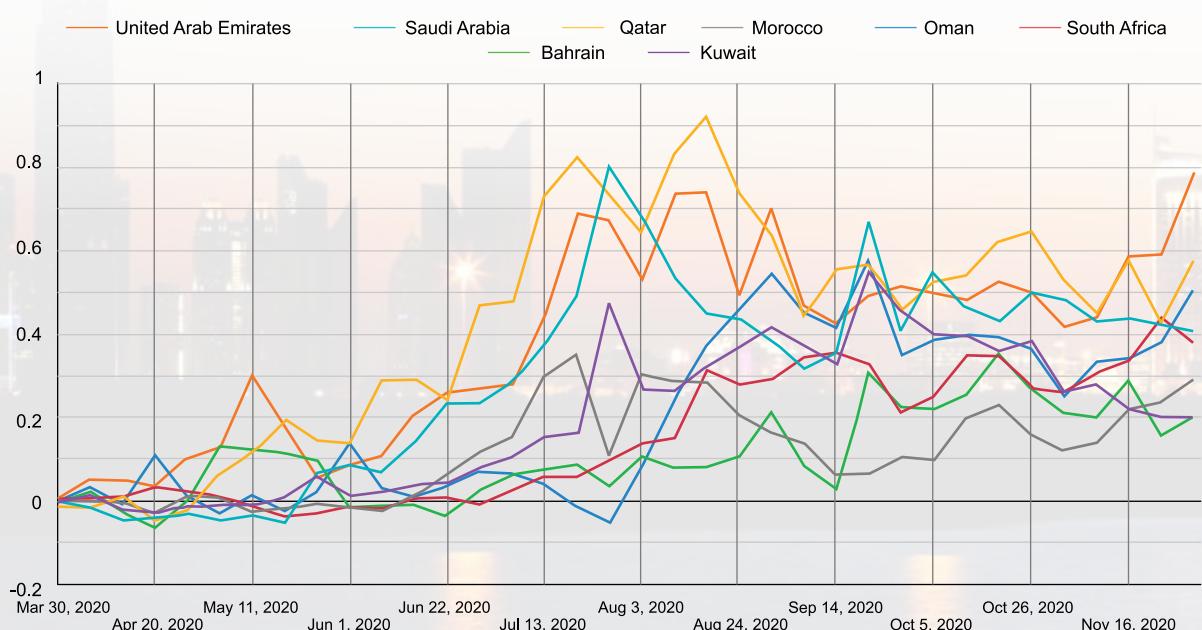


As seen in the above charts, since the week commencing 6th September 2020 the current year percentage change in hotel searches to the UAE from all origins is 76% for Dubai and 24% for Abu Dhabi. Hotel bookings for Dubai and other Emirates have seen an even higher increase at 147% and 56% respectively. This growth in travel confidence is a huge step in the right direction towards recovery for the country.

## Global Travel Intent to MEA Begins to Rise

### Change in Global Hotel Search Volume for the Middle East and Africa - indexed to w/c 30th March

As we take a look at our Sojern Real Time COVID-19 Travel Dashboard, indexing volumes to zero in the week commencing 30th March (the beginning of the recovery from the pandemic), we have seen a notable spike in hotel searches in recent weeks. The UAE has experienced the largest increase in global searches with a current year-to-date (YTD) index of 0.8, followed by Qatar with a 0.56 YTD index, and Oman with a 0.49 YTD index. The increase in travel intent to Oman can likely be attributed to the recent announcements on 30th November by the Supreme Committee to allow tourist visas to be issued to enter the Sultanate, coupled with seasonality.

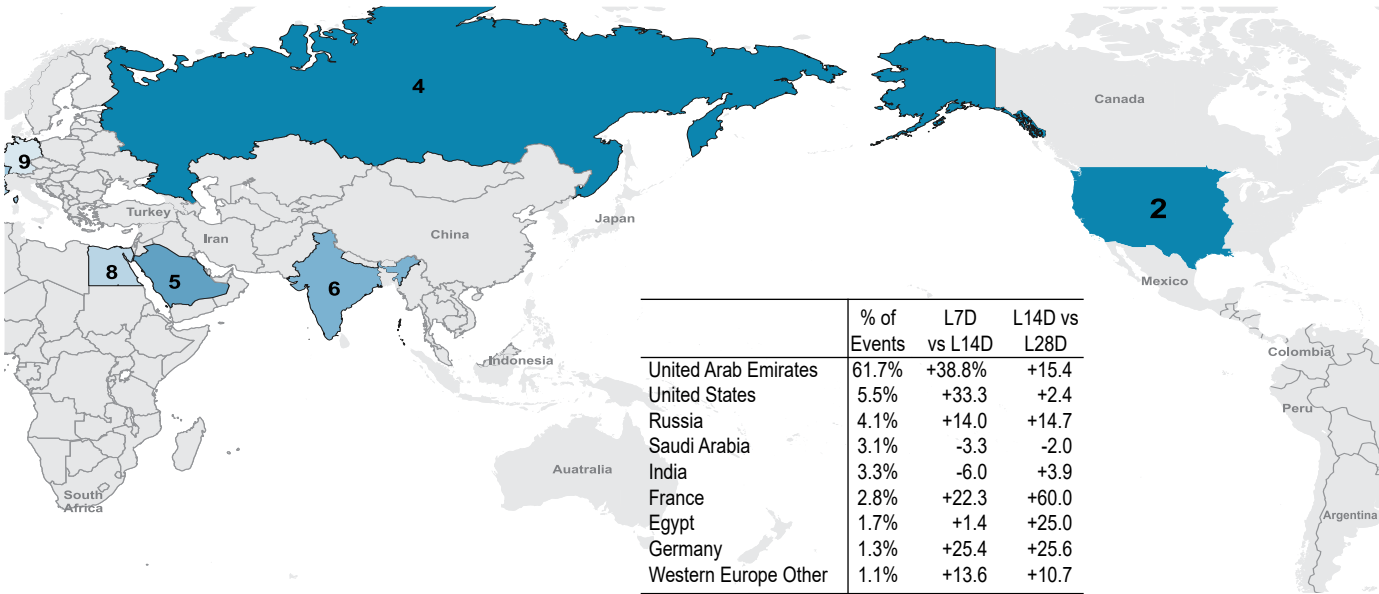




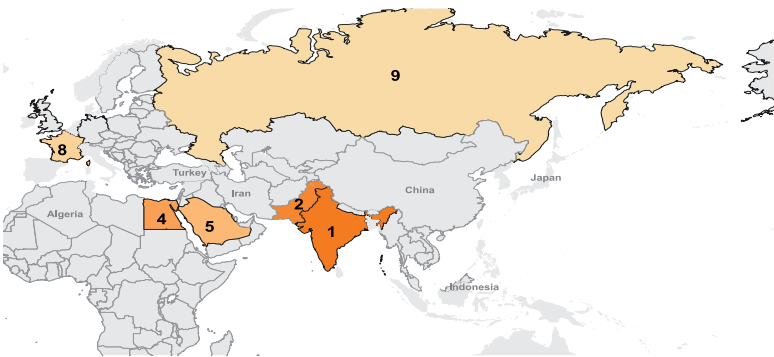
Where is Travel Demand for the UAE Coming From?

Top Origins to the United Arab Emirates by Hotel Search Volume

When we compare which origin markets are driving travel intent into the UAE we are beginning to see more international markets taking the share of search events. Although domestic travel within the UAE continues to lead the way accounting for 62% of total hotel searches, we've observed a notable shift with the United Kingdom (UK) now accounting for 5.1% of total hotel searches. This is potentially related to the recent introduction of a travel corridor between the two countries. The United States (USA), Russia, and Saudia also account for 12.7% of travel intent collectively.



Top Origins to United Arab Emirates by Flight Search Volume



Flight searches also highlight an interest in regional and international travel, with 19.6% coming from India, 14.3% from Pakistan, and France featuring again accounting for 4.4% of flight searches globally. As international demand picks up it is important to tailor your message to the new markets and traveller behaviour, adapting your strategy on a regular basis in line with the data.

	Percentage of Events
India	19.6%
Pakistan	14.3%
Eastern Europe Other	7.8%
Egypt	6.8%
South Asia Other	6.2%
Saudi Arabia	4.6%
Middle East Other	4.4%
France	4.4%
Russia	4.3%
Central Asia	4.0%

Hotel Bookings in the UAE - next 30 days from 7th December 2020

Destination country	Origin Country	Percentage of Events
1. United Arab Emirates	United Arab Emirates	36.11%
2. United Arab Emirates	United States	11.36%
3. United Arab Emirates	United Kingdom	10.22%
4. United Arab Emirates	India	5.57%
5. United Arab Emirates	Israel	3.73%
6. United Arab Emirates	France	3.62%
7. United Arab Emirates	Germany	3.37%
8. United Arab Emirates	Saudi Arabia	2.3%
9. United Arab Emirates	Nigeria	1.96%
10. United Arab Emirates	Switzerland	1.85%

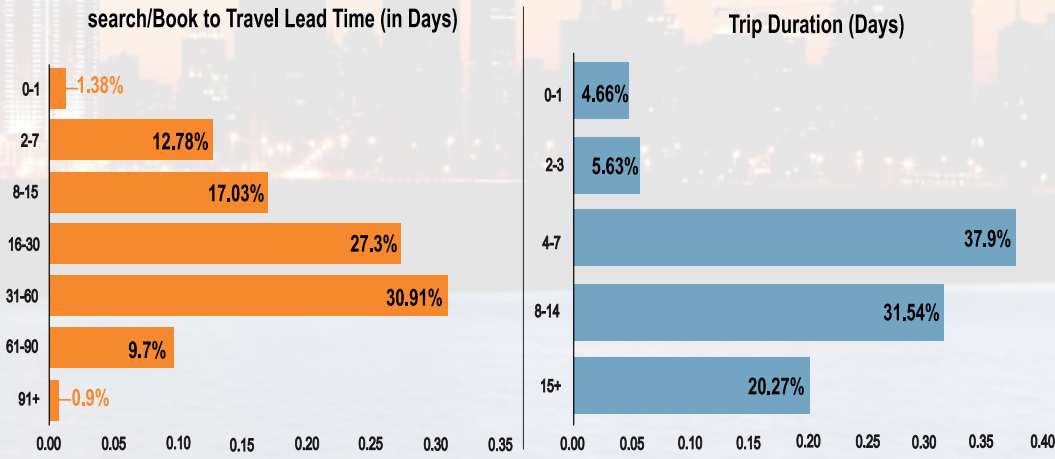
Looking at hotel bookings for people travelling within the next 30 days, newcomers such as Israel occupy the top 10 origin markets that are looking to visit the UAE.

As regional and international inbound travel continues to increase, more user-generated content will be shared, globally, alongside reviews, media coverage, and blogs. This activity will likely see the demand for hotels and flights increase as we get into 2021.

Travellers Lean Towards Longer Stays

Flight Searches/Bookings to the UAE - last 60 days

When looking deeper into travel behaviour over the last 60 days for the coming months, roughly 58% of search events have been for 16-60 days into the future. Of those who have been planning their trips, about 52% are looking to spend over a week in the UAE. Over the last month lots of changes have been made across the MEA market which have impacted regional and international travel. Borders have opened, restrictions have been lifted, and plans have been put in place to drive economic recovery. With this, there has been an increase in demand for travel to the UAE, and to MEA as a whole. Regional and international travel demand are now both showing signs of growth. As predicted when the pandemic first hit, domestic returned first, but there are now positive signs across the board. People are also planning longer trips and lead times are beginning to increase again. We will continue to share more insights as we monitor the situation. These forward looking insights will hopefully help travel market-ers shape their strategies as the industry recovers.





# Gitex 2020: 1<sup>st</sup> physical event in Dubai


In many forums, Dubai has become the example for safe opening for tourists and now for the first time, they conducted the first MICE event after lockdown as 60 exhibitors from various countries attended GITEX 2020 amidst strict regulations, such as social distancing and wearing masks at all times.





# Rebuilding confidence in travel

In a session moderated by **Kathryn Wallington**, Head of Middle East and Africa, Travelport at the maiden Gulf Travel Show, eminent panellists shared insights on how vital it is to rebuild consumer confidence in travel, amid one of the biggest crises in the travel industry.

 TT Bureau

Kathryn Wallington, Head of Middle East and Africa, Travelport moderated an interesting session during the maiden Gulf Travel Show with panellists Srilatha Reddy, Senior General Manager of CWT/Orient Travel; Deepak Rawat, Senior Vice President – International Markets, MakeMyTrip (India); and Dayana Persan, General Manager, Business Travel and Atlantis Holidays and Wellness.



At the outset, Kathryn Wallington, Head of Middle East and Africa, Travelport, asked, "What have you'll been doing to

do the GDRFA and ICA approvals."

Dayana Persan, General Manager, Business Travel and Atlantis Holidays and

**“Travelport data shows that the Middle East and the UAE and Saudi in particular are right in terms of dealing with the crisis. It indicates that the confidence level has come back, rebounded quicker than some of the other markets”**

— Kathryn Wallington

rebuild confidence in the travel industry?

Srilatha Reddy, Senior General Manager of CWT / Orient Travel, responded, "We have been really active ever since the crisis. We have facilitated our customers with PCR testing, we give them information about all the requirements which are needed to travel to a country, trying to assist as much as we can. As a global TMC, we provide information on the transit time and transit regulations. We also

Wellness, said, "First of all, this difficult time has given us an opportunity to improve our processes, work on our channels of communication and build strong relationships. Also, the pandemic has made us realise that it is vital to ensure the safety and well-being of our customers. We are doing all we can in this regard."

Deepak Rawat, Senior Vice President – International Markets, MakeMyTrip (India), said, "Our plans to launch and expand into the GCC

**“We do see a lot of queries for leisure travel, particularly for staycations in safe destinations, for instance, a lot of TMCs consider Maldives to be a safe place”**

— Srilatha Reddy



**Kathryn Wallington**  
Head of Middle East and Africa, Travelport



**Srilatha Reddy**  
Senior General Manager of CWT Orient Travel



**Deepak Rawat**  
Senior Vice President – International Markets, MakeMyTrip (India)



**Dayana Persan**  
General Manager, Business Travel and Atlantis Holidays and Wellness

market were stalled for a bit due to COVID-19, but we eventually decided to go ahead with them. It was a great learning for us. We gave customers every possible information regarding repatriation flights and quarantine rules. I think that helped us build customer confidence. We saw traffic grow week on week in spite of travel being

among people wanting to go on staycations."

**Kathryn Wallington:** Travelport data shows that the Middle East and the UAE and Saudi in particular are right in terms of dealing with the crisis. It indicates that the confidence level has come back, rebounded quicker than some of the other markets. Do

**“We worked very closely with partners and government authorities to ensure that the consumers were getting the right information, the bookings were done, and they were assisted through our hotlines 24/7”**

— Deepak Rawat

halted. As travel started, it obviously helped us and our brand build confidence as people started transacting immediately, both on flights and hotels. We worked very closely with partners and government authorities to ensure that the consumers were getting the right information, the bookings were done, and they were assisted through our hotlines 24/7. Eventually when things started opening and travel did bounce back, we saw a huge amount of interest

you'll think leisure travel will be the first to recover, followed by corporate travel?

Rawat replied, "We are seeing more demand for the short-haul travel staycations. When I say short-haul, it means the destination should be at a drivable distance, which is the trend right now. Though leisure travel has picked up with all the precautions in place, corporate travel will take a while to bounce back."

"I think leisure travel will be the first to pick up because it's an individual decision and it doesn't depend on the company policy. We do see a lot of queries for leisure travel, particularly for staycations in safe destinations, for instance, a lot of TMCs consider Maldives to be a safe place. As for business travel, it will happen gradually, added Reddy.

Persan stated, "I think customers will prefer those destinations which offer ample clarity about their tourism offerings amid the pandemic. Such places will do well when it comes to leisure travel."

**“I think customers will prefer those destinations which offer ample clarity about their tourism offerings amid the pandemic. Such places will do well when it comes to leisure travel”**

— Dayana Persan

**Kathryn Wallington:** Do you think that the AR or VR or any other technology is going to help in rebuilding confidence?

Rawat responded, "I think technology will play a critical role going ahead


in terms of information content and the motivation, which customer will see and get inspired to travel to a destination, to a theme park, to a hotel, everything most probably will be decided by technology. The check-ins to rooms in the hotel, or even the cruise cabins eventually will all be available at the click of a button. I believe that is something which will decide the way ahead in the future of travel."

"Technology is very essential. It is really important to progress and to be able to provide a customer with a touchless, advanced technology where

they can see everything before they even book," added Reddy. Persan pointed out, "Technology companies need to come up with more innovative solutions to simplify processes in the travel industry."

# Restoring aviation in the Gulf

Among the sessions conducted by leaders of the industry, **Dr. Mario Hardy**, CEO of PATA, had a very interesting conversation with **Kashif Khalid**, Regional Director – Africa and Middle East, IATA at the Gulf Travel Show. We share excerpts from the conversation.

 TT Bureau

**N**early all international associations and organisations are in agreement that we will not see a full recovery to the pre-COVID level until either 2023 or 2024, possibly even beyond that, especially in the aviation sector. How has the sector in the Gulf region adapted to this situation?

**Kashif Khalid:** Gulf airlines are no different from airlines in Europe or North America. They have the same operational challenges, from the fallout of COVID-19, even though most of the airlines that we have in the region are either directly owned by governments or government holding entities. It was easier, I would say for some of them to get the necessary support very quickly from the governments in terms of financial relief, tax breaks, government administered fees, specifically in the Gulf region. I mean, the airlines are an extension of the government, which was a bit of a double-edged sword for them in previous years. I think one of the advantages their ownership had was that throughout the pandemic, the governments provided them with liquidity, tremendous support in terms of financial and regulatory relief, and

helped them restore their network to help traffic in the region.

Unfortunately for the Middle East region, traffic in 2020 is only going to be 30 per cent of what it was in 2019. That relates to an approximately 60 million passengers this year compared with 203 million last year. What that means is the longer the pandemic stretches, the road to recovery becomes longer. Just in July we were saying that we're probably going to have 45 per cent of traffic compared to 2019 levels and in September, we had to revise it down to 30 per cent. In terms of the Middle East and the Gulf region, we're forecasting, a return to 2019 levels, perhaps towards the end of 2024.

**Do you think the situation will lead to consolidation of airlines within the region?**

**Kashif Khalid:** Currently the airlines are focused on creating efficiencies and supporting their shareholders with the strategy that has been put in place. Given the dynamics of the Gulf region and the shareholding structure of the airlines, it's a little difficult to say whether we'll see consolidation, but perhaps for some of the airline groups



**Dr. Mario Hardy**  
CEO of  
PATA

that have a shared ownership such as Emirates and flydubai, we'll probably see a lot more integration and cooperation, code shares amongst the network, but a full consolidation of two different categories within the region is difficult in my opinion.

**Have you seen new business models being developed in the Gulf region amid the crisis?**

**Kashif Khalid:** One of the advantages the Gulf carriers had was given that they were government-owned, they had a lot of subsidiaries as well as investments in hospitality businesses, such as hotels and entertainment, which obviously were also impacted, but many of the airlines in the region started branching out and looking at new business models and innovating, using their existing asset base. Many of the airlines tapped into the domestic leisure market and looked at selling or bundling local holiday packages for domestic travel and tourism, as opposed to the international traffic that they had previously. Also, many airlines in the region have taken advantage of the public



**Kashif Khalid**  
Regional Director – Africa and Middle East, IATA at the Gulf Travel Show

health measures that the governments have brought in, whether it's PCR, rapid testing, and are offering them not only to passengers, but also the general population on their premises as well.

**Is there an effective way of moving forward in terms of the protocols, what are your recommendations to the industry?**

**Kashif Khalid:** Our recommendations to the industry are that we would like governments and stakeholders to safely restore aviation. What we mean by safely is following the recommendations programme as well as the joint biosafety programme, but more importantly, using testing as a means to open up aviation rather than administering coding team or fragmented policies. We know that the risk of infection onboard an aircraft is next to low or extremely negligible. We know that there is demand for passengers to travel across borders. We've had travel suspended for many countries since the end of March up until recently. There is pent up demand. So the IATA mantra or

recommendation is to have an effective testing mechanism to safely restore aviation, whether it's through PCR or looking at newer, evolving modes

things that we've done is partnering with the likes of the World Health Organization, various different UN agencies such as UNICEF and the World

**“We're starting to see traffic recover. In the Middle East and the Gulf region, I'm hopeful as our forecast indicates that we'll have approximately 45 per cent of 2019 levels next year. That's something to look forward to, and hopefully we'll be opening up major source markets”**

— Kashif Khalid

of testing, such as rapid antigen testing which can hopefully safely open up aviation.

**What are the logistical challenges involved in the distribution of the vaccines?**

**Kashif Khalid:** The logistical challenge of distributing vaccines to countries all around the world presents not only a challenge to airlines, but cargo operators as well. We saw, in the early days of COVID-19, the logistical challenges of getting PPE and ventilators to far parts of the world. One of the estimates that I had just to put things into perspective was it would take approximately 8,000 plus 747 or wide body aircraft to manage just the first phase of the vaccine distribution across the world. Despite having integrated infrastructure, intermodal nodes of cargo, hubs, airlines, distribution channels, it is going to be a challenge for not only the aviation industry but others too. And one of the

Food Program to look at various mechanisms of safely distributing the vaccine, and also creating the awareness within the industry for airlines, airports and, freight forwarders on the handling requirements of pharmaceutical products.

**Is there some positive news for us, moving forward?**

**Kashif Khalid:** We're starting to see traffic recover. In the Middle East and the Gulf region, I'm hopeful as our forecast indicates that we'll have approximately 45 per cent of 2019 levels next year. That's something to look forward to, and hopefully we'll be opening up major source markets.

## FactFile

■ For the Middle East region, traffic in 2020 is only going to be 30 per cent of what it was in 2019.

■ That relates to an approximately 60 million passengers this year compared with 203 million last year.





# Redesigning hospitality in ME

Director DDPPL **SanJeet** conducted an insightful discussion on redesigning hospitality with a world renowned expert from HVS, **Hala Matar Choufany**, President HVS Middle East, Africa and South Asia and Managing Partner HVS Dubai at the Gulf Travel Show.

 TT Bureau

**Q** Could you tell us what's happening around in the industry?

**Hala Matar Choufany**

– I guess at the moment we are trying to understand timing, the impact, not necessarily current impact, but the prolonged impact and what is it that ultimately we could do in order to save that industry.



**Hala Matar Choufany**  
President of HVS Middle East, Africa and South Asia & Managing Partner, HVS Dubai

**Q** What are the current hospitality trends in the region?

**Hala Matar Choufany**

– I personally think when we start, perhaps at the global level, what we are currently facing in terms of trends or impact is very much on par when I speak to my counterparts, whether in the Americas or Europe or elsewhere in Asia. When we start looking at the regional differences, one thing is definite, I wouldn't call it a trend, but a segment that has emerged really strong

is domestic tourism. This is a very important trend that perhaps in this part of the world, we never looked after sufficiently, specifically in the GCC, the focus has always been on the international market. In the Middle East, we have seen suddenly domestic tourism really provide a lot of room nights in Saudi Arabia.

The extent of room nights, where they didn't actually have sufficient supply to provide for these room nights, and that is home-grown, reliable source of business. My personal view also is that Saudi in general, they realized that this is a market. It's a substantial market. People couldn't travel out but they did travel within the country and that has supported their tourism. In this part of the word, I personally think there's going to be in the future, more focus on how to create domestic tourism

that may not necessarily mean just within the country, but more so within that region specifically, how can we package it? So that is leisure related predominantly, but more so from the domestic standpoint. That's one of the trends that

can decide on the terminology, the idea been that it's more exclusive, much smaller. You're not in your traditional hotel with a thousand check-ins and out, but rather you are somewhere remote; resorts are able to offer these

Another trend we've seen in the last five years is the incorporation of the culture into that experience. We have seen the rise in people taking trips where they really want to experience and be part of the country.

**“Going by predictions, there seems to be an agreement at the moment that 2024, 2025 is where we could potentially look at the recovery. As investors, as developers, we can plan accordingly”**

— Hala Matar Choufany

I would see becoming more important and we'll definitely also have to call on government support. So it's not really down to hotels. It is a trend that I definitely think should be capitalised.

The second trend that we've observed is those resort hotels, whether it be called adventure, remote or exclusive; we

facilities and are still running to date with 90% occupancy. Actually they have naturally been transformed into people, just checking in for two weeks and getting away. That is also a trend that personally, I think will continue because this is what the new generation also would look to actually book and stay.

**Q** What's happening in the business hotels in cities? What's going to happen in terms of pricing? If costs come down will the profitability come down or how does the system work?

**Hala Matar Choufany**

– In the GCC specifically, we have seen that despite the ability of the governments and the major airline to induce additional travel segments and bring in the business that rate generally speaking has been declining one on account of over-supply, but also because there is much more affordable accommodation. Gone are the days when the hotels could dictate any rate.

## Boosting tourism in the Middle East

**T**he GCC and Egypt understand tourism's important role in economic diversification, growth, and job creation. In recent years, they have focused on enhancing their tourism infrastructure and offerings, and marketing their destinations far and wide.

**Karim Abdallah**, partner with Strategy& Middle East said: “This vision

should build on the competitive advantages of the country, and highlight target outcomes, including the anticipated number of tourists, the tourism sector's contribution to GDP, and job creation statistics. Saudi Vision 2030 is an excellent example of this: it clearly delineates plans to offer multiple tourism products and experiences, with a clear goal of increasing the number



**Karim Abdallah**  
partner with Strategy& Middle East



**Marwan Bejjani**  
partner with Strategy& Middle East



**Dima Sayess**  
Partner with Strategy& ME and the Director of the Ideation Center

of domestic and international tourists to 100 million per year by 2030 and boosting tourism's contribution to GDP from 3 percent in 2018 to 10 percent.”

**Marwan Bejjani**, partner with Strategy& Middle East added: “Data analytics and data sharing between tourism sector stakeholders is likely to play an increasingly im-

portant role in supporting governments in making informed decisions that allow them to tailor offerings. The UAE and Egypt, for example, have diversified offerings that attract visitors from a diverse set of countries.”

**Dima Sayess**, a partner with Strategy& Middle East and the director of the Ideation Center, said: “Countries in the GCC and Egypt are at differ-

ent levels of destination readiness in many areas, which can give an indication of where efforts need to be directed. When it comes to tour services, for example, well-established tourism destinations such as Egypt and the UAE have a large number of heritage and cultural offerings. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, have the opportunity to intensify their offerings in this aspect.”



## IATA

## Africa and Middle East

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) announced that **Kamil H. Al-Awadhi** will be appointed IATA's Regional Vice President for Africa and Middle East (AME), effective March 1, 2021. Al-Awadhi will lead the Association's activities across AME from its regional office in Amman, Jordan. Most recently, Al-Awadhi was CEO of Kuwait Airways, a responsibility he held from November 2018 through August 2020. That capped a 31-year career at Kuwait Airways during which his positions included Deputy CEO and Chief Operating Officer.



## SINGAPORE AIRLINES

## Dubai

Singapore Airlines has appointed **Ryan Yeoh** as General Manager Gulf & Middle East, based in Dubai. Yeoh succeeds Christian Stenkewitz, who has been posted to Amsterdam as the SIA General Manager for the Benelux region. In his new role, Yeoh will be responsible for all aspects of SIA's commercial and operational activities across the Gulf & Middle East. Yeoh joined Singapore Airlines in 2011 and has held various leadership roles, positioning him well to lead SIA in the challenging and exciting Gulf and Middle East region.



## TOURISM OFFICE OF SPAIN IN UAE

## Abu Dhabi

**Namratha Rose** has recently joined the Tourism Office of Spain in UAE as Manager - Marketing & Trade Relations and will be actively involved in implementing online marketing plans, social media, press management and B2B & B2C engagement for promoting Spain as a tourist destination for the Gulf regions (UAE, KSA, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and Iran). She has over 10 years of experience as a travel specialist, specialised in VIP-luxury travel, product designing, contracting, supplier relations, hotel representation, and trade.



## FAIRMONT BAB AL BAHR

## Abu Dhabi

Fairmont Bab Al Bahr has appointed **Mohamed Abdallah** as the Director of Food and Beverage. In his new role, Abdallah will provide strategic leadership and oversee the operation of the hotel's diverse F&B outlets as well as its banqueting and catering services. Abdallah has 16 years of experience in Abu Dhabi where he brings a wealth of knowledge in enhancing revenue for conference and banqueting operations. With his expertise and fresh insights, Abdallah will ensure the Fairmont Bab Al Bahr continues to provide guests with the best culinary experiences and service in Beijing.



## BEST WESTERN HOTELS &amp; RESORTS

## USA

Best Western Hotels & Resorts announced that its Board of Directors has elected **Ishwar Naran** as Board Chairman for 2021. Naran, who previously served as Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors, brings more than three decades of hospitality experience and 17 years of Best Western ownership to his role as Chairman. His deep knowledge of the brand coupled with his extensive industry experience make Naran the ideal candidate to drive Best Western Hotels & Resorts forward in 2021. Naran has managed over 30 hotels throughout his career.



## RADISSON BLU HOTEL,

## DUBAI MEDIA CITY

## Dubai

Radisson Blu Hotel, Dubai Media City has appointed **Phil Roberts** as its new Director of F&B. He will oversee the operations of the Media City hotel, including its F&B outlets, outside catering, 12 meeting rooms and 246 keys, leading the culinary teams in all of the hotels dining venues, including Italian restaurant Certo, media city hangout Icon Bar and rooftop Tamanya Terrace.



## BCD Travel opens their new location

Adhering to all precautions during the COVID period BCD Travel moved to their new premises at M Square, right next to Spinneys (Bur Dubai) on Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Street, Al Mankhool. The move was planned much before the pandemic hit the world. Despite all difficulties, with their proactive and positive attitude, they carried on to new beginnings. There were restricted invitees under the present protocol as explained by Managing Director BCD Travel **Sumit Acharya**. "We had plans for the office to move in the pre-COVID times yet continued with it despite the difficulties created by the crisis, thanks to the commitment and positive outlook of our main shareholders AWR group and our JV partners BCD Travel BV."



(L-R): Shaz Peshimam, Senior Manager Dxb and NE, UAE Sales, Emirates; Khalid Bel Jallah, Divisional VP UAE and Oman, Commercial Operations of Emirates; Hans Sandee, Consul General for the Netherlands in Dxb and NE; Adil Al Ghaith, SVP Commercial Operations Gulf, ME, Iran, UAE and Oman of Emirates; Khalid Al Rostamani, Chairman and CEO, AWR group; Dr. Amina Al Rostamani, COO, AWR group; Khamis AlBlooshi, GM Dubai and NE of Etihad and Sumit Acharya, MD BCD Travel UAE.

## Sharjah opens a new cultural hub in Khorfakkan

Sharjah adds a new amphitheatre in the city's eastern region enclave Khorfakkan. Built on a total area of 190,000 sq.ft., this stunning Roman-style attraction is Sharjah's latest cultural and architectural landmark.



Sheikh Sultan bin Ahmed Al Qasimi, HE Tariq Saeed Allay, Director of Sharjah Government Media Bureau (SGMB), and several members from local media houses outlets also attended the tour to explore the venue and learn about its state-of-the-art facilities. Strategically located on an elevated hillock, at the foot of the Al Sayed mountain, the amphitheatre offers sweeping views of the Khorfakkan Corniche. This open-air semi-circular space boasts an imposing stone façade made up of 235 arches and 295 columns.



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Design  
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is printed on behalf of  
Durga Das Publications (Middle East) FZE  
at Modest Print Pack Pvt. Ltd.,  
C-52, DDA Sheds Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I,  
New Delhi-110020

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# The show must go Online



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