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ATA returns to enthrall UAE

The Arabian Travel Awards will once again recognise the players making outstanding contribution to the industry's growth, in Dubai on 25 October 2023.

Dr. Shehara Rizly

Arabian Travel Awards is a platform for the Middle East market to appreciate the efforts of the travel, tourism and hospitality specialists, who have contributed to the booming travel, tourism and hospitality industry. It is an invitation only event to be held at the Sofitel Downtown Dubai on 25 October 2023. The aim is to encourage them to continue promoting travel, tourism and hospitality in the region.

The Arabian Travel Awards are fair and unbiased, following a systematic method of internet-based voting. These awards are supported by **Tourismbreaking-news.ae**, **TravelTVmiddleeast.news** and **TRAVTALK**, who are premier media partners for the event's coverage. The awards will be divided into four categories: Personal Awards, Business Awards, Trending Awards and Partner Awards. They will include awards for Best Business Hotel, Best Family Friendly Hotel, Best City Hotel, Best Green Hotel, Best Leisure Hotel, Best Destination Management Company, Best Hotel Apartments, Best B2B Travel Portal, and Best Luxury Hotel to name a few.

Sanjeet, Mentor, Arabian Travel Awards, shares, "Our awards have been evolving over the years to recognise the untiring efforts of the industry experts. This year will be the first time that we can finally say that we are

back on track, especially with the UAE recording numbers higher than the pre-pandemic era. In today's travel, tourism and hospitality landscape there are many changes and new trends that have emerged. As UAE declared



this year as the year of sustainability and carrying forward their legacy to become the host nation for COP28, this is indeed a time when responsible travel, tourism and hospitality also step in to make it a more conscious destination. Applications are still open to vote for those in the industry and



Contd. on page 8 ►

'The Travel File' evolves

'The File' stores traveller information to understand requirements of the travellers. However, after the pandemic, this information has undergone a drastic change. The travel trade shares insights.



Asim Arshad
Group CEO, Orient Travel and Tourism Agency

"The traveller file is important for TMCs and Travel Agencies, this document becomes the basis of our service delivery. It has personal details such as the traveller's full name, contact information, passport or identification details, and frequent flyer or loyalty program information. The file would also contain information related to the traveller's travel preferences, such as seat preferences, dietary restrictions, or special requests. On the corporate side, there are no major changes as the same information becomes important. Post-COVID, we have seen that collating such information for both retail and leisure business is beneficial. Additional information related to the traveller helps in ensuring a more personalised travel experience."

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Yanbu to get mega lifestyle hub

SEVEN's SAR1.1 billion worth entertainment destination, coming up along the seafront promenade on Al Nawras Island, is expected to play a pivotal role in Saudi Arabia's entertainment sector.

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Saudi Entertainment Ventures (SEVEN), a wholly owned subsidiary of the Public Investment Fund (PIF), has awarded the contract of building the new entertainment destination in Yanbu to a joint venture (JV) of Al Bawani Co. Ltd and UCC Saudi. The work

to develop the entertainment destination, spread over 36,000 square metres (with a built-up area of 62,000 square metres), is already underway.

Yanbu is designed by Gensler, a global architecture, design, and planning firm. The architectural form of SEVEN's entertainment destination is inspired by the

city's heritage, as a historic port is located on the Kingdom's western Red Sea coast. The design is a celebration of water, with elements of the beach and the sea threaded throughout.

Abdullah AlDawood, Chairman, SEVEN, said: "Our entertainment destination in Yanbu will

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Abu Dhabi airport to handle 45 mn pax/ yr

After Hollywood star Tom Cruise gave a sneak peak of the new terminal at Abu Dhabi International Airport in his movie, Abu Dhabi Airports has announced its impending opening. The state of the art terminal, known as Midfield Terminal Building during the construction phase—‘Terminal A’ will finally begin its operations in early November 2023.

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Adding a world-class facility to Abu Dhabi's rapidly evolving transportation infrastructure, the opening of new terminal at Abu Dhabi International Airport will mark a significant milestone for the emirate that has the potential to transform the local aviation ecosystem, strengthen Abu Dhabi's growing reputation as a destination of choice for travellers, and further boost its position as a global hub for trade and business.

Equipped with the latest technologies, Terminal A boasts a range of interconnected biometric systems that will invite passengers to enjoy the speed and comfort of a seamless, digitised journey from pre-travel to boarding gate, facilitated by self-service kiosks, streamlined security checkpoints and state of the art baggage handling systems. Covering 742,000 square metres of built-up area,



Terminal A is among the largest airport terminals in the world and will significantly increase Abu Dhabi International Airport's passenger and cargo capacity. Once operational, the new terminal will accommodate up to 45 million passengers per year, be able to process 11,000 travellers per hour and operate 79 aircraft at any given time.

The imposing and memorable architecture of Terminal A has won international design awards and

adds an architectural landmark to Abu Dhabi's cityscape. Blending modern, lightweight aesthetics with functional brilliance, the building's glass exterior maximises natural light while creating a monumental civic space inside the terminal. In line with the UAE's sustainability aspirations and targets, the building features energy-efficient lighting, advanced Heating, Ventilation and Air-Conditioning (HVAC) systems and has incorporated sustainable materials in its construction. A

fully integrated solar photovoltaic system has been installed on

The terminal will also feature an array of world-class amenities, including luxurious lounges, relaxation zones, and spa facilities where travellers can rest and rejuvenate before or after their flights.

His Excellency Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan, Chairman, Abu Dhabi Airports, said: "As Abu Dhabi's new gateway to the world, Terminal A is an embodiment of Abu Dhabi Airports' commitment to support the emirate's

and grandest on our planet, turns over a new page in Abu Dhabi's 55-year aviation history. A beacon of modernity and sophistication, it will be a pivotal driver for our emirate's growth by spurring tourism and trade."

Elena Sorlini, Managing Director & Interim CEO, Abu Dhabi Airports, said: "Terminal A underscores our dedication to providing our international passengers and partners with a premium airport experience. The terminal exemplifies our commitment to excellence and offering exceptional services that meet the evolving priorities of today's travellers. Through leveraging the latest technologies, Abu Dhabi's reimagined airport experience will offer a seamless passenger journey, fostering connectivity, interactions, business, trade and tourism, all of which are essential elements in strengthening Abu Dhabi's position on the world stage."

The new terminal will accommodate up to 45 mn pax per year, be able to process 11,000 travellers per hour and operate 79 aircraft at any given time

the roof of Terminal A's car park, which powers a 3-MW plant saving 5,300t of CO₂ annually.

sustainable economic development. The opening of the facility, which is on par with the largest

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UAE packs new immersive experiences

Renowned for its iconic tourist spots and diverse range of activities, the United Arab Emirates has strengthened its position as one of the most desirable global tourist destinations. For example, Dubai has retained its position as the world's most popular destination for the second consecutive year in Tripadvisor's 2023 Travellers' Choice Awards.

Cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi are renowned for their impressive cityscapes, luxurious resorts, and shopping experiences, while Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah offer an impressive range of heritage and adventure experiences. This diverse combination of tourism experiences is pivotal in driving the UAE's tourism growth. An important aspect of this growth is providing tourists with an immersive experience of the UAE's rich culture and heritage.

Across the UAE, tourists are spoilt for choice when it comes to accommodation, ranging between luxurious and budget-friendly hotels. In recent years, the rise of heritage-focused accommodation has provided tourists with the opportunity to have a more culturally driven visit. Examples include the Ahmedia Heritage Guest House, Al Seef Heritage Hotel Dubai, and the Chedi Al Bait in Sharjah. Many of these hotels are also strategically situ-



ated in areas where cultural experiences are easily accessible. For example, the Chedi Al Bait in Sharjah is near the Sharjah Heritage Museum, Souk Al Arsah and the Sharjah Fort. Situated on the banks of Dubai Creek, The Al Seef Heritage Hotel Dubai is located across from the renowned spice and gold souks. Beyond centrally based accommodation, tourists can also enjoy the UAE culture by staying in more remote areas, such as the Mysk Al Badayer Retreat in Sharjah. The

An important aspect of growth in UAE's tourism is providing tourists with an immersive experience of its rich culture and heritage

rise of holiday homes and villas has also offered a new dimension to tourism, providing travellers with a unique opportunity to delve deeper and live in areas of the local communities.

Platforms like TripAdvisor and Airbnb also provide opportunities for visitors to access immersive and personalised travel experiences. This includes engaging in activities, ranging from tours

to local ranches to cultural journeys. Such activities not only help enhance the tourism product but provide an educational insight into the country's historical and cultural nature.

Such experiences are strongly supported by the government. For example, The Department of Culture and Tourism, Abu Dhabi, collaborated with Emirati tour guides to develop authentic cultural experiences tailored for visitors. These curated experiences, now available on Airbnb, include food tours, visiting local markets, and exploring local neighbourhoods. Such activities also provide entrepreneurial opportunities for UAE locals and residents. For example, Abdulrahman AlZaabi provides a 'Emirati Homemade Breakfast Experience' where people can try Emirati food and 'interact with Emiratis on a more personal level' and are given an insight into local customs and perfumery. The UAE also boasts a rich calendar of festivals and

celebrations, each rooted in its diverse cultural heritage. As the World Tourism Association for Culture and Heritage states, 'The unique Cultural Heritage of the World tells the story of humanity itself'. Whether through different forms of accommodation or immersive experience, the UAE provides a unique opportunity for travellers to uncover and engage in the genuine essence of this charismatic country's culture, heritage and people.



Dr. Sean Lochrie
Assistant Professor at Edinburgh Business School
at Heriot-Watt University Dubai
(The views expressed
are solely of the author.)



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'Bleisure' to grow @20% in next 10 years

As the corporate travel industry regains its foothold after the challenges posed by the pandemic globally, the concept of 'bleisure' tourism, a blend of business and leisure travel, is quickly positioning itself as not only popular but also economically prudent, reveals **Sachin Gadoya**, CEO and Co-Founder of musafir.com and Musafir Business, an all-in-one corporate travel management platform.

TT Bureau

'Bleisure' tourism accounts for 30-35 per cent of the global tourism business and boasts a staggering worth of \$500 billion (Dh2 trillion) in 2022. Its upward trajectory is likely to continue, with a projected growth rate of 20 per cent over the ensuing decade.

Sachin Gadoya, CEO and Co-Founder of musafir.com and Musafir Business, offers insights, "Following the pandemic, the sphere of 'bleisure' travel is witnessing a significant upswing in the region, with nearly 20 per cent of corporate travellers thoughtfully weaving leisure experiences into their business journeys. Projections indicate that this number is destined to rise further by 15 per cent in the times ahead."

This dynamic shift is evident as individuals extending their business trips by 1-2 days for lei-



Sachin Gadoya
CEO and Co-Founder of musafir.com
and Musafir Business

sure, and vice versa, becomes increasingly common. Forecasts predict these trips will span more destinations, boasting longer durations. Larger international companies are quick to adopt this trend, while smaller-scale and local firms, which are not multinational corporations, may take more time to embrace it. The average ticket price for corporate travel within the GCC ranges between AED 3,500 and 4,000, and this trend is expected to continue through 2024. Amid

the scorching summer heat, corporate travel primarily entails outbound trips from the UAE. Prominent business travel destinations like Europe, the USA, and South East Asia proficiently address the diverse demands of corporate globetrotters, with ticket prices ranging between AED 5,500 and 6,000 for these regions. Additionally, there is also a marked rise in preference for business and first-class travel in the evolving landscape of business travel.



'Bleisure' travel is witnessing an upswing in the region, with nearly 20% of corporate travellers weaving leisure experiences into business journeys

As Q4 draws near, the UAE's travel landscape is poised for a transformation. A convergence of factors, including pleasant

weather and a vibrant event calendar, is expected to ignite a surge in inbound travel. From the thrilling Formula 1 Etihad

Airways Abu Dhabi Grand Prix to captivating art exhibitions, and lively beach festivals, the region is gearing up to offer a diverse range of experiences. This bustling scenario, combined with the UAE's status as a hub for international companies, promises a unique fusion of business and leisure, making it an enticing destination for travellers seeking a dynamic blend of activities. The industry's value

in the UAE, GCC, and MENA regions is substantial, with the UAE alone having a flight spend of over AED 10 billion. "Musafir Business has also observed a remarkable 25 per cent increase in average corporate transaction value. This growth underscores our commitment to elevating customer experiences, embracing digital innovation, and gaining invaluable insights into our customers' preferences," he concludes. ➔

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► Contd. from page 1

“I believe that traveller profiles, commonly known as traveller files, play a pivotal role in empowering travel agents and other stakeholders within the tourism industry. They serve as the foundation for delivering personalized services and efficiently addressing customer inquiries. In today's digital age, technological advancements have revolutionized the way these files are stored and updated online, greatly enhancing the convenience of the travel booking process for both travellers and agents. Post-COVID, traveller files have evolved significantly, becoming more dynamic. They now encompass vital health-related documents, embrace contactless check-ins, and facilitate digital payments. These adaptations place paramount importance on safety, convenience, and building trust among travellers. Looking ahead, the tourism industry is inherently dynamic, influenced by shifting market trends, unforeseen circumstances, and changing consumer behaviours. Yet, the traveller file stands as a beacon for the future, enabling travel agents to swiftly adapt to evolving travel norms and trends. It equips them with the tools needed to provide exceptional service within this ever-changing landscape.”



Aga Pytlík
General Manager
Pan World Travel

“In the travel industry, the traveller file is essential for delivering personalized service. Pre-COVID, it housed basic details like personal information, travel itineraries, and preferences. Its role has only intensified post-COVID, with the inclusion of vaccination records, real-time health advisories, and updated quarantine guidelines. One key evolution is the standardization of Advance Passenger Information Systems (APIS). APIS has become a norm, making the file not just a convenience but a requirement for regulatory compliance. Digital elements like QR codes for touchless transactions have also been integrated, simplifying the travel experience while enhancing safety measures. In summary, a modern traveller file is a vital tool for both risk management and customer satisfaction. It aids travel agents in delivering a seamless, safe, and compliant travel experience. Now more than ever, the traveller file isn't just about facilitating a single trip; it's an instrument for building long-term, trustworthy relationships with travellers, guiding us toward a more resilient and customer-centric future.”



Jamal Abdulnazar
CEO
Cozmo Travel

“Travel documents or files are important because they allow you to enter a foreign country as well as return to your country of origin. It is also useful for flight arrangements, hotel accommodations, or car rentals. The pandemic has created a whole new checklist of what you should bring on your trip, with a Vaccination Certificate and a PCR test, required and mandatory for entry into any country before you can start arranging your itinerary. Therefore, travellers who roam around the world freely will once again find a unique experience in form and content that the pandemic played a major role in changing, such as wearing masks, social distancing, and promoting hygiene, which has become our greatest concern in our daily lives. With life gradually returning to the travel, tourism, and hospitality sector after more than three turbulent years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional travel agents breathed a sigh of relief. This unique situation confirmed a very important fact. In the world of dynamic and electronic travel after the pandemic, the need for them has become urgent. Trust is required, as is a partial guarantee.”



Ayman Al Qudwa
General Manager
Falcon Travel



Meerah Ketait
Head of Retail and Leisure UAE
dnata Travel

“Recording travel experiences, and overall tastes, preferences and requirements is an essential aspect of our customer service model. A more personalized approach is important to support the planning process for loyal customers who return to dnata Travel to book multiple holiday experiences each year. This element of relationship building enables our travel experts to tailor-make itineraries to suit a traveller's specific interests, offer new experiences and products, and share invites to events

and activations of interest. Gathering and maintaining customer data and feedback is a key part of enabling us to offer this unique, bespoke service to our customers. We are witnessing an increased demand for bookings within our travel stores, as UAE travellers seek to enhance the booking process with the insider knowledge and inspiration from our travel experts. At our outlets across the UAE, we can book all aspects of a customer's journey in one, convenient place. We can tailor-make a journey to their needs and ensure they are up to date with our latest, exclusive offers and value adds across a range of incredible resorts, worldwide.”



Suresh Ahuja
Managing Director
Lufthansa City Center - Trans Arabian

“The traveller file, often referred to as the client file, is a fundamental tool for travel agents, facilitating efficient and personalized travel experiences. The client file is important as it serves as a comprehensive information required by airlines and travel agents to ensure a seamless journey for passengers. This file contains vital details, including passport information, seating preferences, meal choices, frequent flyer numbers, preferred cabin class, and contact addresses for services

like limousine requests. The elements of the client file have remained unchanged post COVID since the elementary needs of the passenger, as well as the airline, have not changed and remained the same without any additional requirements from the airline. The only additional requirement from the airline was during the pandemic when almost all the countries would only allow the vaccinated passengers. The client file plays a pivotal role in the travel agent's efficiency and ability to provide top-notch service. By maintaining a well-organised client file, travel agents can seamlessly transfer client preferences to booking files.”



Sushant Pilankar
Manager Leisure
Uranus Travel

“Pandemic, in a short period, generated enormous socio-cultural, political, and psychological impacts on various tourist actors, causing an unusual global crisis. This event has also hugely impacted every traveller's file, which is an important element in our business. To elaborate more, in the pre-pandemic times, travellers were hugely trade dependent and buying decisions were made based on the recommendations coming from the consultants. Post-pandemic, travellers'

research to acquire knowledge not only about the destination but also about the hotels they wish to stay in, location, and tours to take, and gather reviews from their social circle who have already travelled to that destination earlier. Hence, they are well informed already. As we observe, some of the elements changed in the traveller's file are: travel insurance with COVID cover is a must have, resulting in significant year on year growth, the prevailing trend is to have shorter holidays with just one or two destinations on a trip as compared to the pre-pandemic, hence lower value per file, and clients making their own flight arrangements.”

“This digital document holds essential information about a traveller, including identification, passport details, visa status, and contact information. It plays a crucial role in ensuring a smooth journey, from check-in at the airport to border crossings and hotel check-ins. In case of emergencies or lost documents, having a digital backup can be a lifesaver. Moreover, it facilitates efficient communication with authorities and embassy services if needed. Therefore, maintaining an up-to-date and secure traveller file is paramount for hassle-free and safe international travel. Prior to COVID-19, a traveller's file typically comprised essential elements such as a valid passport with visa stamps if necessary, flight itineraries, hotel reservations, travel insurance details, and a printed copy of the travel itinerary. Additionally, travellers might include local currency, credit cards, a travel guidebook, and emergency contact information. In the post-COVID era, traveller file elements have undergone significant changes. The traveller file now encompasses a more diverse range of information to ensure safe and smooth travel experiences.”



Nasir Jamal Khan
CEO
Al Naboodah Travel

“The traveller file continues to be very important at Desert Adventures. As a customer centric organisation, this allows our teams across all touch points to be aware of our clients' entire program and assist them with any additional requirements, not merely related to their pre-booked services but also with supplementary experiences. In addition to our team, our overseas trade partners who have booked the clients also have access to the file from our B2B system, allowing them to easily add services. Desert Adventures' most popular program prior to the pandemic revolved primarily around a 3-4 night stopover stay in Dubai. Stays in five-star city hotels, airport transfers, the essential Dubai city tour, and the Desert Safari were the main components of these programs. For our luxury partners, the programs were customized and tailor-made to suit each client's unique preferences. To facilitate the success of each tour program, we ensured our response rate to queries was one of the fastest in the region, we invested in technologies to make the transactional process easier, and stayed highly competitive.”



Samir Mehta
Chief Operating Officer
Desert Adventures

“Business or leisure travel is all about a journey with experiences, which can be managed better through a KYC of the customer, which is the file of a customer. It comprises vital elements in ensuring happy, smooth and safe travel experiences meeting the expectations by securing essential information and documents. A file may be maintained for a corporate customer as well as for a FIT traveller and may be maintained in a physical or digital form. Pre-COVID, the file comprised copies of passports and visas, itineraries and reservations, emergency contacts, health and travel insurance, local currency and payment methods. The pandemic reshaped the travel landscape, introducing new elements to the traveller's file like vaccination records, COVID-19 test results and travel restrictions. A notable change that we experience today is health and safety measures where travel insurance has emerged as a mandate and digital tools and contactless experiences in travel, such as mobile check-ins, e-tickets, and virtual tours. A well-prepared traveller's file continues to be an asset for a travel agent.”



Dinkar Dasaur
General Manager UAE
Satguru

City Walk vows to be Dubai's next hotspot

The newest bleisure hotspot in Dubai, City Walk boasts of a destination of its own with retail, entertainment and accommodation provisions. Among the accommodations, La Ville Hotel and Suites has become one of the most visited hotels. **TRAVEL** speaks to **Anke Glassing**, General Manager, La Ville Hotel & Suites City Walk, Dubai, Autograph Collection, to know about their offerings.

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Location of the property must be a key element for leisure and business travellers, or bleisure travellers. So, how has it been over the past few years?

City Walk as a destination has established itself as a hotspot in the city for residents and tourists alike. The increase in consumer spending has attracted hospitality brands from across the city to consider City Walk as a business opportunity and it's been great to see the progression. This year in Q4, we will see many new launches and openings of various brands in the neighbourhood. The increase in footfall in the area provides an invaluable opportunity for La Ville Dubai now and beyond – in raising awareness of the property as City Walk's go-to location for business travellers, consumers, leisure travellers, and residents.



Anke Glassing
General Manager
La Ville Hotel & Suites City Walk, Dubai

attending events at the Dubai World Trade Centre, meeting clients, or taking in the sights, you will find everything you wish for nearby. Within our hotel, you will discover 156 contemporary rooms and apartments, with a host of pampering amenities to cater to everyone. Enjoy incredible views of Burj Khalifa and Dubai's skyline from our rooftop bar Lookup, sample excellent wines at Grapeskin, dine

The increase in consumer spending has attracted hospitality brands from across the city to consider City Walk as a business opportunity

Could you share an inventory of the hotel?

Our 5-star UAE hotel is situated in the urban neighbourhood of City Walk and is just 1.3 km from the Coca-Cola Arena. Whether

on freshly prepared cuisine at Chival & Graze, or retreat to our rooftop infinity pool, La Ville Spa Relaxation Suites and fitness centre. If a meeting or social gathering brings you to the



property, you will find our stylish venues and outstanding services are the perfect choice for any bespoke event.

Which are the key source markets that you have received recently? Are you looking at new source markets this year?

We have a large mix of sources and are still popular within the GCC market, as well as in countries like France, Italy, and

Germany. We are always looking into new markets.

How do you work with travel agents and corporate bookers? What is their contribution to the revenue of the hotel?

As part of Marriott, most of our Travel Agent Bookings are dynamic whilst corporate bookers work slightly differently. We are fortunate to have a good base of local companies which support

us all throughout the year. They are contributing a significant amount to the overall revenue.

What will you say your USP is for the hotel?

Being a part of the Autograph Collection and a real unique boutique property in the heart of the city with a lush green garden is definitely a USP. It's an oasis in the middle of a busy bustling city that caters to everyone. ➔



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Unveiling Britain's best to the GCC

VisitBritain has been repositioning itself in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as one of the key destinations. The recent visa rule change, along with many attractive offerings for the GCC travellers such as new accommodations and restaurants, can be a game changer in the upcoming year, says **Carol Maddison**, Deputy Director, APMEA CNEA, VisitBritain.

 Dr. Shehara Rizly

What is new that would interest GCC clientele?

We know that travellers from the GCC region enjoy dining in our wonderful restaurants and staying in our world-class hotels, all of which Britain offers in abundance. So, as we look ahead to 2024, VisitBritain is excited to showcase a wave of new accommodations, eateries and entertainment venues.

London's luxury hotel scene is expanding rapidly, with exciting additions on the horizon. In the winter of 2024, The Other House Covent Garden will introduce 200 Club flats, accompanied by a public restaurant and a rooftop vista offering breathtaking views. In spring, the Hyatt will open their new Park Hyatt London River Thames, conveniently

situated within walking distance of London's major tourist attractions. Additionally, Six Senses, renowned worldwide for its authentic, personal, and sustainable five-star hotels, is scheduled to unveil a new property in London in 2024.

However, it's not just London that is witnessing a surge in luxury accommodation. Along the scenic shores of northern Cornwall, Una St Ives is set to greet guests in their upscale villas complete with private hot tubs from late 2023. Inspired by the adventures and tales of Scottish explorers, 100 Princes Street nestled in the cultural heart of Edinburgh will offer deluxe comfort starting from November 2023. The first Soho House members club in the North of England is set to open in spring 2024 in vibrant city of Manchester. Wildes Ches-



Carol Maddison
Deputy Director
APMEA CNEA, VisitBritain

ter is planning to introduce an exquisite blend of boutique hotel meets luxury spa, and fine dining experience to the ancient city. Moving to food and foodie experiences, Britain's food hall scene is booming with more and more venues popping up all over the country. There is no better place to immerse yourself in a variety of cuisines crafted by independent restaurants, all within a lively and vibrant ambiance.

The latest gems across the country include the brand-new Arcade Food Hall at London's new leisure destination Battersea Power Station to Sheffield's Cambridge Street Collective and Manchester's Shipyard, which are both due to open later this year. In 2024, the modern dining concept, Boxhall, will open new venues in Bristol and London Liverpool Street. A similar venue, Boxpark will also open its doors in Liverpool, while the city of Bradford sees the opening of Darley Street Market. Also, 2024 will see new additions to Britain's already diverse museum scene.

Are there any mega events and upcoming exhibitions?

Absolutely, Great Britain has an array of great events lined up for 2024 that are sure to resonate with our GCC audience. Kicking off the journey is the Rebalance

Bath - Festival of Wellbeing, in Bath (25 Jan-2 Feb 2024). This transformative event invites participants to immerse themselves in holistic wellness and rejuvenation. Moving ahead, the Feel Good Festival (7-9 June)

summer. This festival unveils the quieter side of London, presenting an exciting lineup featuring international DJs, local street food vendors, and an array of invigorating fitness courses, from martial arts to Barre.

As we look ahead to 2024, VisitBritain is excited to showcase a wave of new accommodations, eateries and entertainment venues

in Cumbria offers an immersive weekend amid Britain's scenic forests. Here, guests can soak up the peaceful ambiance while relishing farm-fresh foods and invigorating entertainment.

Continuing the well-being journey is the Wellnergy Festival in

Could you share about the new visa system?

The UK Government is set to launch a new Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) scheme in October, starting with Qatar. The ETA will eliminate the necessity for visas among citizens from GCC nations and Jordan. 🇩🇪

KSA's all new destination

► Contd. from page 1

provide residents and visitors with a wealth of new and exciting experiences while supporting the city's rapidly developing entertainment sector. SEVEN's entertainment destination is inspired by Yanbu's beautiful natural seascape, embodying the city's rich history as one of the oldest ports in the Kingdom. SEVEN Yanbu will offer something for everyone."

Fakher Al Shawaf, Chairman and Group CEO, Al Bawani Co. Ltd, said: "We are excited to partner with SEVEN to deliver this project. The design has taken into consideration Yanbu's coastal location and its history as one of the oldest ports in Saudi. SEVEN's investment will support Yanbu's growing population to meet its entertainment needs. Al Bawani is well-positioned to deliver this unique destination to meet the ever-growing aspirations of Saudis."

Ramez Al-Khayyat, President of UCC Holding, stated: "We are delighted to spread joy in Yanbu through our partnership with 'SEVEN'. We will leverage our



SEVEN is investing over SAR50 billion to build 21 entertainment destinations, which will provide unique world-class entertainment experiences

extensive experience in building entertainment destinations to deliver the project on time, to the highest international standards."

SEVEN Yanbu will be home to an immersive carnival themed family entertainment centre with world class rides. Other attractions will include a Clip 'n Climb

facility providing 30 climbing challenges for both adults and children, a junior family entertainment centre, a state of the art 10-screen cinema, a futuristic neon 10-lane bowling experience, an indoor adventure golf course, as well as a wide variety of local and international retail and dining experiences.

SEVEN is investing more than SAR50 billion to build 21 entertainment destinations, which will provide unique and innovative world-class entertainment experiences and global partnerships from within the sector. SEVEN recently announced the beginning of construction of its entertainment destinations in the Al Hamra district of Riyadh and Tabuk.

The projects are located in 14 cities across the Kingdom: Riyadh, Kharj, Makkah, Jeddah, Taif, Dammam, Khobar, Al Ahsa, Madinah, Yanbu, Abha, Jazan, Buraidah, and Tabuk. 🇩🇪

Recognising talent in the industry

► Contd. from page 1

who have been in the forefront of promoting and working to go over and beyond the general norms of the industry. Middle East has always been the most resilient region, especially the UAE and Dubai in particular set an example to all the destinations of the world on how to move forward and achieve in every possible way. The public and private partnership in the GCC region provided the industry with a much faster comeback ensuring their commitment to move forward. Now, it is time to reward the industry experts and their establishments to advance ahead



Sanjeet
Mentor
Arabian Travel Awards

do so. Check the website www.arabiantravelawards.ae and vote for your leader of the year. Travel is back on track and once again tourism, travel and hospitality

The public and private partnership in the GCC region provided the industry with a much faster comeback ensuring their commitment to move forward

through all obstacles and challenges to a brand new era in the making in the region."

If you are yet to vote for your team, this is the right time to

begin their major contribution towards not just to the economy of the countries but securing employment and uplifting the standard of people's life, especially in the region. 🇩🇪

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DUBAI DOWNTOWN

Luxury with inclusivity motto for Sofitel

Sofitel Dubai Downtown, a luxury hotel situated in the heart of the iconic downtown Dubai, has gained prominence over the years with its elegant style and grandeur and has become a bleisure hub for the clients. Partnering for the 6th edition of the Arabian Travel Awards, **Caroline Trichet**, General Manager, Sofitel Dubai Downtown, shares the property's successful journey with **TRAVEL TALK**.

TT Bureau

How has the hotel evolved over the past few years post-COVID?

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sofitel Dubai Downtown has undergone a significant transformation. In accordance with Accor guidelines, we have undertaken a number of enhancements and refurbishments to ensure the safety and comfort of our guests. Our health and hygiene protocols have been strictly followed to ensure that our guests enjoy a healthy and safe environment. A seamless guest experience has also been enhanced through the implementation of online check-ins and digital services across all our outlets.

Has there been any change in terms of your inventory? If you



Caroline Trichet
General Manager
Sofitel downtown

can share the current inventory, that would be great.

To address the increased demand for extended stays during the pandemic, we made some adjustments to our offerings. We added studio apartments, one and two-bedroom apartments to our inventory that can accommodate both single travellers and families. This resulted in a decrease of our total inventory from 350 units to 344 units.

Could you share the new clientele that you cater to and the various source markets for the property?

Sofitel Dubai Downtown has indeed become a preferred destination for bleisure travelers. Our clientele now includes a mix of business and leisure travelers from various source markets. We have seen increased interest from regional markets such as the GCC, Latin America and Israel, as well as international markets like Europe, US, Australia and Asia. The hotel's central location in the heart of Dubai's downtown area has been a significant draw for both business and leisure travellers.

What is the USP of the hotel? Could you share the various facilities that stand out?

The unique selling proposition of Sofitel Dubai Downtown lies in its



blend of French luxury, a heritage of the brand, and Middle Eastern hospitality. What sets us apart is not only our commitment to luxury but also our dedication to inclusivity. At Sofitel Dubai Downtown, we take pride in

hosting a diverse and inclusive community. With over 35 nationalities represented among our staff and guests, and the ability to communicate in over 14 languages, including sign language, we ensure that every guest,

including those with unique needs and requirements, feels welcome and well-cared for.

Our central location, just a stone's throwaway from the Dubai Mall metro and with a stunning view of the Burj Khalifa, is a major draw for our guests, regardless of the purpose of their travel. Our luxurious amenities enhance the overall guest experience.

Could you please share the importance of partnership at the Arabian Travel Awards?

Partnerships, such as the one with the Arabian Travel Awards, are vital for Sofitel Dubai Downtown. They allow us to showcase our commitment to excellence and innovation in the hospitality industry, gain recognition for our efforts, and build valuable relationships with other industry players.

Oman Air celebrates Onam in Dubai

Oman Air's office in the United Arab Emirates celebrated Onam, a popular festival of South India, with 50 important travel trade partners from the UAE. It was Oman Air's first event since the opening of their new office in Dubai. The travel trade partners and hosts were dressed in traditional attire to celebrate this special day.



Investing in people and training

The focus of Future Hospitality Summit, to be organised with **TRAVELTALK** as the media partner, is on investing in people, identifying ways to close the talent gap, recruiting and retaining the right workforce and building ESG into the recruitment process. Experts share views on the international platform where influential hospitality investment decision makers connect and explore new partnerships.

The Middle East has been investing in tourism and hospitality training over the past few years. Dubai College of Tourism, part of Dubai's Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, runs the first-of-its-kind multi-disciplinary educational platform in the region to create a dynamic, global and forward-thinking workforce of talent sourced from Dubai for Dubai.

The College offers courses specifically designed for young students aiming to work within the tourism industry. The curated certificate and diploma courses span five programme areas, offering a pathway for students to achieve professional success through world-class academic offerings. Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Tourism launched a new program to equip 100,000 young Saudis with the key hospitality skills.



Mariam Al Musharreh
Executive Director, Human Resources
Miral, Host Sponsor of FHS

“A heightened focus on attracting and retaining top talent, while cultivating and investing in their long-term growth and ensuring they have the best possible start to their career will remain paramount for the industry. Employees must be empowered to contribute meaningfully to sustainable practices by cultivating a culture of ethical governance, community engagement, and learning. At Miral, our data-driven approach to recruitment is supported by people-centric retention programmes.”



Dimitris Manikis
President EMEA
Wyndham Hotels & Resorts

“I imagine many among us look back and wonder what we did before the digital era enveloped us; the opportunity to streamline operations, optimise resources, and increase efficiency has been valuable far beyond simply growing revenue. Our industry thrives on human connection. While technology certainly enhances experiences, it's the human touch that truly matters and what our guests remember. Investing in finding and nurturing the right talent is vital for success.”



Sunil John
President, Middle East and North Africa
ASDA-BCW

“From our experience of working with the hospitality leaders, we believe that what really sets them apart is their people. As a service industry, it is the personal passion and commitment that the employees bring which build hotel brands. In today's fast changing, digital-driven landscape, the teams must stay up to date and current with the latest skills and knowledge to remain relevant and productive. The industry can assist them in this journey by investing in training programs.”



Paul Griep
Director, Industry & Alumni Relations
Hotelschool The Hague

“I don't necessarily believe that finding and retaining the right people for the job immediately means a higher investment considering only 'costs'. Investment is needed, but I believe this is more from a creative and innovative nature. Young graduates entering the industry will already be way more tech savvy than we sometimes realize. Education should develop these innovations and industry should encourage, use and take advantage of these skills to develop tech-related services.”



Jeroen Greven
Managing Director
The Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management

“In a rapidly evolving hospitality landscape, continuous learning and upskilling are crucial to keep workforce skills relevant. On-demand learning incorporating emerging technologies and industry trends enables employees to adapt and excel. Moreover, fostering a culture of learning and innovation encourages staff to embrace change. To ensure the right workforce is applied in the right role, investment is necessary, both in learning and in effective skill assessment matching tools.”

TT Bureau

AI catalyses the travel industry

In today's ever-evolving travel landscape, keeping pace with technological advancements has become paramount. In an exclusive interview with **TRAVELTALK**, **Shakir Kantawala**, Co-Founder and Managing Partner, WingsWay Training Institute, shares how understanding and upskilling in the latest technological trends is not just beneficial but essential to stay ahead in the game.

Dr. Shehara Rizly

Why is it vital for travel professionals to stay updated with travel tech trends?

A recent study reveals that 33 per cent of travellers now rely on virtual travel assistants to plan their trips, underscoring how new technologies are reshaping the travel booking landscape. To remain competitive, travel professionals must stay abreast of the latest travel trends and developments in emerging technologies to provide top-notch services.

How can travel professionals leverage Artificial Intelligence (AI) to benefit their business and clients?

AI has catalyzed a revolution in the travel industry, streamlining operations, and optimizing resource utilization. Businesses



Shakir Kantawala
Co-Founder and Managing Partner
WingsWay Training Institute

can harness the power of AI and chatbots to automate repetitive tasks, delve into customer data for tailored recommendations, and offer round-the-clock customer support. This not only enhances efficiency but also ensures competitiveness in a fast-evolving market.

What challenges do travel agents and businesses face due to the rise of AI?

A primary concern revolves

around the fear of job displacement. Numerous individuals worry that AI will render their roles obsolete.

However, it's crucial to understand that AI is designed to enhance human capabilities rather than replace them. I often say, "AI will not take over their job, but a person using AI will definitely take over the job."

If new-age technologies have helped businesses boom, then why do some travel businesses struggle to scale?

While AI has undoubtedly fuelled business growth, travel businesses often fail to scale because they rely on outdated methods for booking and customer support. To scale successfully, it's imperative to integrate modern technology solutions and train employees to use them effectively.

What practical steps can travel professionals take to upskill and adopt the latest tech in their operations?

To begin, consider enrolling in virtual or classroom based training courses or attending workshops that focus on travel tech and AI. Invest in software that streamlines operations,

we offer free GDS trainings and comprehensive coverage of the importance of AI and ML in the travel business.

Can you tell us more about how WingsWay Training Institute addresses the need for upskilling in the travel industry?

WingsWay Training Institute

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has catalyzed a revolution in the travel industry, streamlining operations, and optimizing resource utilization

enabling you to efficiently compare options and make bookings, all in one place. We understand the growing demand for these skills, and that is why in our Foundation in Travel and Tourism program,

proudly serves as an Authorized Training Center for the International Air Transport Association (IATA). Our Foundation in Travel and Tourism Diploma course encompasses a wide range of key concepts within

the travel and tourism industry. This includes in-depth coverage of tour planning strategies, electronic booking tools, AI, and the latest technological advancements relevant to the travel industry. Our consistently impressive pass rate can, in part, be credited to the rigorous nature of our mock exams.

Hence, our approach ensures a comprehensive learning experience, helping travel agents upskill and acquire the in-demand skills of this industry. Our industry-best offerings include guaranteed internships at three international airports in UAE and travel agencies across the region. We also conduct an exclusive training session on a real Boeing 737 Aircraft, with full access to the cockpit and all other areas in and around the aircraft. ➡

QTM to focus on places, people & cultures

The second edition of Qatar Travel Mart (QTM) will be organised under the theme 'Places, People, and Cultures' from 20-22 November 2023. **RAWAD SLEEM** is the media partner for the annual event. **Rawad Sleem**, Co-Founder and General Manager, NeXTfairs for Exhibitions and Conferences, says this year they expect the event to be 50 per cent larger in scale.

 Dr. Shehara Rizly

Could you share about QTM, how it started, importance this year, the theme, and main sponsors?

The inception of Qatar Travel Mart (QTM) traces back to a vision of elevating the tourism sector and aligning with Qatar's 2030 vision. Fuelled by unwavering passion, we embarked on a journey to organise an exhibition in Qatar dedicated to travel and tourism. This endeavour aims to establish a benchmark that would resonate for years to come, resulting in a momentous achievement not only for the nation but also for the entire GCC region.

The second edition of QTM is set to unfold under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman Bin Jassim Al

Thani, the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, and in collaboration with key partners such as the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Qatar Tourism, Katara Hospitality, Qatar Airways, and Mowasalat.

This edition will once again bring together the world's leading destinations and unveil the latest trends in Sports, MICE, Business, Cultural, Leisure, Luxury, Medical, and Halal Tourism. All of these elements will converge under the overarching theme of "Places, People, and Cultures". The event is scheduled to take place from 20-22 November 2023 at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Center (DECC) in Doha.

Give us an overview of the programmes, and discussions that will take place at QTM.



Rawad Sleem
Co-Founder and General Manager, NeXTfairs for Exhibitions and Conferences

This year, QTM is set to offer an array of impactful events, including an international conference, the Global Village exhibition, a gala dinner, an awards ceremony, and a thoughtfully designed Hosted Buyers' Program. These components are tailored to enhance B2B prospects. In addition, there will be media familiarization trips and cultural tours. These endeavours collectively aim to cater to

the needs of both inbound and outbound travel enterprises.

QTM 2023 will serve as a unifying platform where local and international DMCs, tour operators, travel agencies, travel technology companies, associations, and tourism boards

interactions but also play a pivotal role in propelling expansion and ingenuity across the travel and tourism landscape.

Do Qatar Tourism and Qatar Airways align with this event? If so, in which capacity?

Qatar Tourism and Qatar Air-

tioning Qatar as the unparalleled entryway to the Arabian Gulf.

Why is QTM important to the industry? Who is the target audience?

Qatar has emerged as the Middle East's swiftest-expanding tourism destination, a trajectory catalysed by the resounding success of the FIFA World Cup 2022. In pursuit of the ambitious goal to welcome over 6 million visitors annually by 2030, the country has orchestrated a series of triumphant endeavours, securing prominent events that underscore its ascent. Qatar has assertively established itself as a significant global destination within the economic landscape. The mission of Qatar Travel Mart goes beyond mere intention; it aims to firmly position Qatar as a distinguished epicentre for travel and tourism. 📌

Local and international DMCs, tour operators, travel agencies, travel technology firms, associations, and tourism boards will meet at QTM 2023

will converge. Through this endeavour, fresh connections will be forged, novel opportunities seized, and pre-existing relationships rekindled. This cohesive ecosystem will not only facilitate professional in-


ways stand in alignment with Qatar Travel Mart. Qatar Tourism serves as our strategic collaborator, alongside Qatar Airways as our designated airline partner. Both entities share a steadfast dedication to posi-

Melia, Turespaña thank UAE partners

Spanish hotel chain Melia, along with Turespaña or Spain tourism Office in the United Arab Emirates, hosted some of the travel trade partners for a networking session in Dubai recently. It was an interactive session where trade partners exchanged their experiences about the destination and the hotel chain with the hosts Turespana and Melia Collection.



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Sustainable LUXURY

Qatar: Family luxury destination

The past few years have witnessed Qatar gearing up as one of the most luxurious getaways in the Middle East. With Dubai leading the board for many years, Qatar has accomplished itself as a family luxury destination ticking most of the boxes for its comprehensive leisure experiences. New lounge at the Hamad International Airport (HIA) is just another luxury addition.

 Dr. Shehara Rizly

Journey on Qatar flights

Qatar Airways has been making a mark over the years with its many exemplary offerings onboard the aircraft. The award-winning airline has continued to amaze its customers with its economy, business, first class cabins and business jets as well. Service onboard the aircraft has been exceptional over the years. Now, with the new lounge at the Hamad International Airport (HIA), it has gone a step further in making it one of the most modern, tech savvy lounges in the world. Flying first class or business class on Qatar Airways has always been an exceptional experience although the flight is just 30 minutes from Dubai.

HIA and its lounge services

The transformation of Hamad International Airport in Doha



Maryam Sultan Al Jassim
Manager Communication & Public Relations
Msheireb Properties

has been amazing in the last 10 years. When you disembark a flight, you will be guided to the respective areas, and in some cases, you can just hop into a sky train or metro within the airport. If you are flying the first class, you can just head over to the special lounge where your documents will be checked within no time, and you be able to enter the destination. The architecture of the first class



Khalid bin Ibrahim Al Sulaiti
General Manager
The Cultural Village Foundation-Katara

and business class lounges is exceptional; the open spaces and intricate designs take you to a different world altogether. If one is just a regular passenger flying economy, the choices in the HIA are truly elevated. From

est concepts such as the first Oreo café in an airport.

The spokesperson from HIA reiterated, "We pride ourselves for being at the pinnacle of luxury within the airport industry. Our award-winning airport houses over 180 world-class retail and dining options, many of them being world firsts and exclusives. We are also the home to The Oryx Airport Hotel, which is a world-class facility equipped with many amenities that make it a unique proposition within the terminal, such as a modern gym, spa services, a swimming pool overlooking the airport, a squash court and a golf simulator. The Orchard, which is an



dreds of curated experiences all under one roof."

The Ned – a must experience!

One of the best located hotels in Doha, The Ned provides you (if you get a sea view room) the best view in the city, as you can wake up and fall asleep enjoying the skyline of Doha. The rooms are remarkable, as it's a mixture of yesteryear with a modern

were unique, as you can truly fall asleep as soon as you hit the bed, let us put it that way. It has a variety of different restaurants to dine in and high tea is a must and the best breakfast, as well as you can enjoy the skyline of Qatar in the morning and by evening you will be serenaded with music by the special jazz band. It is also a great location for MICE or events, as it has its own venue that can

Msheireb Downtown Doha, the smart sand sustainable city, has evolved as a major tourist and cultural destination in Qatar.

– Maryam Sultan Al Jassim

a beautiful water feature in the indoor garden, or an orchard you may call it, is the first that one comes through in the Middle East, with dining areas such as Gordon Ramsay's burgers or pizza or a delightful "cuppa" at the Harrods Tea House and stop over at the Louis Vuitton lounge. Each aspect of the airport has been well thought of providing absolute luxury to all passengers. From tailored experiences and industry firsts in retail and dining, art installations, relaxing and rejuvenating offerings and a tropical indoor garden, HIA has emerged as one of the most outstanding ones in the region with all these offerings to provide the best services to its customers. I must also mention Time Valley, public art installations, the airport hotel which has its own golf course and many other lat-



indoor tropical garden that sits within the terminal, is designed to invoke feelings of peace and inspire wellness. We aim to give passengers travelling through the airport the ability to explore hun-

twist, brilliantly capturing the most intricate details that absolutely matter to the guests. I must say, for a person who has trouble sleeping on different mattresses and pillows, the ones at the Ned

house from cocktail parties to state dinners with elegance.

Redefined heritage and culture

Two of the other most remarkable architectural marvels are



the National Museum of Qatar and Museum of Islamic Art. The National Museum of Qatar has been designed by Pritzker Prize winning architect Jean Nouvel. His works would amaze you all the time, the first time I personally met him was at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, another brilliant creation from him. His works are different, elegant and when you walk around the museum, the way it is designed, one will not feel the distance or fatigue, this is something personal that I realised in my journey. He draws inspiration from and recreates the naturally occurring crystal formations known as the “desert rose” featuring interlocking disks, intersections, and cantilevered angles. His designs are both immersive and experiential, the museum offers an enriched environment for visitors to ex-

Doha, the smart sand sustainable city developed by Msheireb Properties, has evolved as a major tourist and cultural destination in Qatar. Our world-class facilities exceed our visitor’s expectations and provide them exceptional experiences that highlight the rich cultural heritage and modern advancements of Qatar. The luxury hotels, retail shops, food and beverage outlets, as well as art, cultural and historical venues perfectly meet the needs and aspirations of the new era of tourists, and position us as a top-tier destination for global travellers. We welcome all visitors to enjoy a unique luxury experience at Msheireb Downtown Doha that reflects our true legacy”.

Katara Cultural Village

It is one of the most picturesque places that must be visited



Vision 2030. Featuring beautiful theatres, concert halls, exhibition galleries and cutting-edge facilities, Katara is one of the leading tourism destinations in Qatar. From exploring its magnificent ar-

The Pearl

Another interesting place to visit is the man-made island near Doha’s West Bay District, known as “The Pearl”. Qanat Quartier, Porto Arabia, Marsa Malaz

ment. I tasted the best baklava coupled with other Lebanese cuisine such as Manouche Jebneh, hummus, kharouf wfrikeh in “Em Sherif” restaurant. The island sits on 230,000 sq.mt. comprising entertainment attractions and high-end hospitality services. Featuring Lusail Winter Wonderland, Nammos Beach Club, a high-end dining district of the world’s finest restaurants and more, Al

as it caters to all needs for the entire family from designer wear to cosmetics, household requisites, play areas for the kids, great dining outlets, retail outlets that extend from jewellery to even celebrated art.

Area of Lusail

From Lusail Boulevard, Lusail Marina district to the Lusail Stadium, it is a continuous picturesque destination. At this point



plore the rich history of Qatar. Another marvel not to be missed is the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), which houses one of the most comprehensive collections of Islamic art in the world, with masterpieces from every corner of the globe representing the diversity found in Islamic heritage.

Msheireb Downtown Doha (MDD)

It is acclaimed to be one of the world’s first sustainable downtown regeneration projects, strategically located in the heart of Doha. Msheireb Downtown Doha inspires a modern and digital community, featuring smart living and working environments, and is nothing short of a wonderful place to work, shop, enjoy and live. It houses the Doha Design District, a cultural hub for regional and international talent. Harrods Tea House in the premises becomes the heart of the district and the best part of all for me was the four heritage houses which celebrate the history of Qatar in this beautiful district known as Msheireb Museums.

Maryam Sultan Al Jassim, Manager Communication & Public Relations, Msheireb Properties, shared, “Msheireb Downtown

in Doha, Qatar. For those like myself who love art, culture and theatre, you have some of the greatest works all in one place. From an amazing set of art galleries which house many Qatari artistes to a few public art spaces and an astonishing classical Greek style amphitheatre, opera house and many spectacular buildings such as the Katara mosque – the lavish Golden Mosque, Katara Hills and the promenade. Most important activities of the day will be shopping at the iconic French department store Galleries Lafayette and the boutiques of 21 High Street, and savouring the scrumptious high tea served or just relax on Katara beach.

Khalid bin Ibrahim Al Sulaiti, General Manager, The Cultural Village Foundation-Katara, reiterated, “The Cultural Village Foundation Katara is an exceptional project for human interaction through art and cultural exchange. Keeping pace with the emerging global culture that emphasises the importance of diversity in human development, Katara Cultural Village is the largest and the most multidimensional cultural project in Qatar and a key contributor to the achievement of Qatar National

chitectural designs and art exhibitions, to attending performance at Katara Opera House, to shopping at 21 High Street and dining at its diverse array of local and international restaurants, there are lots of things to do that appeal to all tastes. Building on this reputation, we seek to influence and

Kempinski, shopping and dining destinations, promenade are some of the key areas that cannot be missed. Featuring Mediterranean-style yacht-lined marinas, residential towers, villas, and hotels across various areas, the destination offers its residents and visitors an inte-



enrich the cultural scene at both regional and global levels through further supporting culture and human art, celebrating national identity, and launching a real dialogue that contributes to strengthening global cultural coexistence while featuring the revived image of Qatar.”

grated leisure experience complemented by a luxurious shopping experience with premium designer boutiques and stores.

Al Maha Island

This is a must visit family destination housing the best when it comes to dining and entertain-

Maha Island is the finest getaway combining entertainment and leisure in one place. .

Doha Oasis

It is in the heart of the city strategically positioned adjoining the new Fashion and Design District, Doha Oasis is a one-stop lifestyle destination offering

of time, one must not forget to visit Place Vendôme, which is an extravagant mall spread over 1,150,000 sq.mt. and inspired by classic French architecture.

The four-floor open concept mall houses 580 high-end and mid-range stores, including almost every international

**The Cultural Village Foundation
Katara is an exceptional project for
human interaction through art and
cultural exchange.**

– Khalid bin Ibrahim Al Sulaiti

fashion brand. Within the nooks and curves of the grand mall, you will find plenty of culinary experiences within cafes, restaurants, and food courts. It is a paradise for the entire family. Qatar has transformed itself into a luxurious family destination. ➔

Driving transformation primary goal

The 3rd ICCA Middle East Summit concluded in Oman recently. During the two-day event, industry experts from across the globe took part for networking and exchange of views. In an interview with **TRAU TALK**, the media partner for the event, **Dr Senthil Gopinath**, CEO, International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), shares the importance of the event for the travel trade.

TT Bureau

Could you share the importance of the event?

The significance of the third Middle East Summit lies in its mission to demonstrate how ICCA can elevate the region to become a top-tier global destination for international business events with genuine international allure. In the process, this summit aims to stimulate the growth of local economies by actively engaging key local stakeholders. ICCA holds the belief that the Middle East possesses abundant potential, and by uniting in a spirit of cooperation and shared objectives, we can effectively highlight the multitude of compelling reasons why our destinations can create more vibrant commercial prospects. I must also praise the partnerships this year with Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Oman Convention Bureau, Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre,

Intercontinental Hotel, Desert Dreams and Infoplus who made the event possible.

What was the main theme, objective and plans of ICCA?

ICCA's primary goal is to drive transformation. In an industry characterised by rapid change, ICCA, as staunch advocates for the field, must take the lead. We aspire to demonstrate to our current and prospective members that ICCA possesses a deep understanding of how associations and the broader business events industry operate and evolve.

The summit's overarching theme centres on fostering collaboration, facilitating knowledge exchange, and promoting the adoption of best practices. Our aim is to empower delegates, equipping them with the tools and insights needed to construct a robust brand value proposition for the Middle East, one that



Dr Senthil Gopinath
CEO
ICCA

resonates globally and extends far beyond regional borders.

Would you share the contribution towards the development of tourism in the destination?

We aim to firmly implant the Middle East into the hearts and minds of our members. This involves active promotion of the Middle East through our numerous social channels. We endeavour to illustrate that the Middle East boasts a captivating, albeit intricate, history, a profoundly

rich culture, an abundance of world-class facilities and infrastructure, and a renowned hospitality that should unquestionably feature on everyone's list for experiencing something distinct and truly exceptional.

Recent trends indicate that 'Bleisure' is significantly shaping how people plan their holidays, trips,

that can be observed and appreciated in these destinations.

How do you get the industry involved in ICCA activities?

We are a member-driven organisation, boasting a presence in over 100 countries with more than 1,000 members worldwide. This gives ICCA a potential business network of over 100,000

workings, activities, and most importantly, their needs and aspirations. This helps our members hone their value proposition when it comes to partnering with associations. Much of this dynamic matching is made through the famous ICCA Business Intelligence Database. It is a globally respected vault of names, numbers, and industry-essential data collected and collated across the years, and it gives our members a real advantage when it comes to spotting and winning new business opportunities.

Our values and our story are clearly set out at www.iccaworld.org, but I encourage anyone interested in ICCA to contact their local Regional Director because these outstanding industry professionals understand the global perspective from a local angle and epitomise ICCA's commitment to maintaining strong person-to-person relationships. **D**

We aspire to show our members that ICCA possesses a deep understanding of how associations and the broader business events industry operate

and vacations. It is imperative for our industry to transcend the confines of meeting spaces and conference halls and embrace a broader, more vibrant spectrum of experiences. This includes highlighting the cultural allure

meeting professionals. Add a 60 plus year heritage and it becomes obvious that ICCA has a recognised seat at the top table of our industry. We possess an intimate understanding of our member associations; their inner

New KSA hotels to enhance Accor brand

The past few years have seen Accor's aggressive growth plan within the Middle Eastern region in terms of the various brands under their portfolio. They have a host of openings planned over the next 12 months. **Camil Yazbeck**, Global Chief Development Officer, Accor Premium, Midscale & Economy, shares with **TRAU TALK** their growth plan and path to sustainability.

Dr. Shehara Rizly

What are Accor's latest hotel developments in the region?

Accor has a host of notable openings coming over the next 12 months, demonstrating the exceptional value hotel owners find in our brands. We have just opened Pullman Cape Town City Centre, which marks the entry of the brand into South Africa. The appetite for Novotel in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has never been stronger and the upcoming flagship openings in Riyadh and Dhahran will further elevate the standing of the brand in the market. The Swissotel brand has a strong base in the Middle East and Turkey, and as such, we see more diversified openings under the brand in the region than in any other part of the world. Turkey will see the opening of two resorts, with highly differ-



Camil Yazbeck
Global Chief Development Officer - Accor
Premium, Midscale & Economy

entiated offerings – a mountain resort in Bursa and a beach resort in Cesme. In the Middle East, Swissotel Corniche Park Towers Doha will cement itself as a flagship city experience hotel, located in a prime location along the corniche that will offer guestrooms, and branded residences.

As sustainability seem to be the way forward, how do you incorporate them in the new developments?

More than ever, sustainability is on top of mind for investors. Governments and cities are implementing sustainability regulations to comply with, and banks and lenders are assessing borrowers through an ESG lens, so a sustainable approach is fast becoming essential to accessing credit. Moreover, sustainable development should no longer be thought of as a cost, as it's proving to be an excellent opportunity for Return on Investment (ROI). Fortunately, Accor leads the industry in sustainable hospitality – from development through to operations. Our development team is committed to creating positive impacts (economic, social & environmental) for our guests, owners, talent, local communities, and the planet. Conversion and collection brands are huge growth drivers and can be easier on the environment than undertaking new construction. Today,



more than 40 per cent of Accor's worldwide development projects involve the refurbishment of existing buildings, underpinning our environmental, social and governance (ESG) commitments.

At Accor, we have three main conversion brands which are favoured by owners:

❖ Mövenpick is a very desirable brand, strong in both urban and

leisure markets – it has established a global footprint of over 115 hotels and a pipeline of more than 50.

❖ Mercure enjoys a high global awareness among travelers – it's the second largest hotel brand outside the US, in with more than 900 hotels across 60 plus countries. The key to Mercure's success is its unique character

that we like to call "glocal" – a truly global brand with strong local anchorage.

❖ Handwritten Collection – which launched early in 2023 – is a global portfolio of charming bespoke hotels that offer an intimate and stylish hospitality experience to guests, often very expressive of the owner's personal interests and passions. **D**

Promoting ME as global biz destination

H.E. Azzan Al Busaidi, Undersecretary of the Oman Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, along with Dr Senthil Gopinath, CEO, ICCA, inaugurated the 3rd ICCA Middle East Summit 2023 in Oman recently. Industry experts from all over the world took part during the two-day summit, which promoted the Middle East as a global business destination.



MOVEMENTS

PATA Bangkok

The Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) appoints **NOOR AHMAD HAMID** as its new Chief Executive Officer. Hamid's appointment for a three-year term will usher in a new era for PATA as one of the world's most influential industry associations dedicated to promoting responsible travel and tourism within the Pacific Asia region. A Malaysian citizen, Noor, has had a distinguished 35 years career in Travel & Tourism, including the last 13 years specialising in the critical MICE sector. Noor's inaugural engagement as CEO will be at the PATA Travel Mart in New Delhi. He looks forward to connecting with host destination officials and members, chapter and youth leaders, exhibitors and buyers, partners, and the entire travel and tourism community.



CONRAD ABU DHABI ETIHAD TOWERS Abu Dhabi

Conrad Abu Dhabi Etihad Towers has appointed **VERA TSONCHEVA** as Director of Finance. Vera brings a wealth of experience and a proven record of accomplishment of strategic financial leadership within the hospitality industry. Tsoncheva is a highly skilled and effective Director of Finance known for her expertise in leading and developing teams to support the areas of finance, business planning, and budgeting. With a commitment to collaborating with leadership in strategic decision-making and operations, Vera has consistently demonstrated her ability to develop and lead programmes and operations related to the finance function. Most recently, Vera served as the Country Director of Finance for Qatar Hilton.



HILTON Saudi Arabia

FAWAZ MOUMINA, formerly Senior Director, Human Resources for Egypt, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Levant (EKSAL) at Hilton, has assumed the position of Country Manager and Senior Director, Operations for Saudi Arabia. In his role as KSA Country Manager, Mourmina will partner with Hilton's general managers and ownership community in Saudi Arabia to drive best in class operations and performance across its portfolio of 16 hotels in the Kingdom, as well as deliver on Hilton's ambitious growth plans in KSA, which features the company's largest development pipeline in the Europe, Middle East & Africa region. Mourmina brings with him a wealth of hotel operations expertise.



LAPITA, DUBAI PARKS AND RESORTS Dubai

Lapita, Dubai Parks™ and Resorts has appointed **RAVNEET ARORA** as its new Director of Sales and Marketing. Arora will play a pivotal role in driving the hotel and destination's commercial success to a new benchmark. With an extensive background in the hospitality industry spanning over 12 years, Arora's appointment follows her tenure as multi-property Director of Sales and Marketing for a collection of four Marriott hotels, where she spearheaded the sales and marketing efforts for all the hotels. In her new role, Arora will oversee the development and implementation of innovative sales and marketing strategies aimed at expanding Lapita's market share, driving revenue growth and enhancing the guest experience.



ANANTARA MINA AL ARAB RAS AL KHAIMAH RESORT Ras Al Khaimah

Minor Hotels appoints **RAMSEY SAARANY** as General Manager at Anantara Mina al Arab Ras Al Khaimah Resort. Saarany, who holds degrees from the University of Surrey, City University London, and Cornell University in New York, brings two decades of experience in the premium hospitality industry and a passion for excellence in every aspect of the field. He joins Anantara as one of the most highly respected managers in the Middle East, with a proven record of outstanding leadership. He began his career in 2004. Since January 2022, he has been driving success as GM Alwadi Hotel Doha - MGallery, in Qatar.



MARWAN FADEL has stepped into the role of Regional Director Human Resources for Saudi Arabia and the Levant. Meanwhile, as Hilton's Regional Director of HR for KSA and the Levant, Fadel brings to the role more than 20 years of HR experience from a variety of regional and international industries and organisations, including the likes of Jotun, LogiPoint, and Wataniya Insurance. Fadel holds a Master's degree in Human Resource Management from Griffith University in Australia, and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (FCIPD). Hilton recently announced plans to open over 50 new hotels across 10 of its brands in Saudi Arabia.



SAFARAK TRAVEL AND TOURISM Ras Al Khaimah

Safarak Travel and Tourism has appointed **KYLEE RENEE HAINES** as the Director of Events. With a career spanning over 26 years in the landscape of business events and hotel industry, Renee brings a wealth of experience and expertise to her new role. In her new role, Renee will play a vital role in supporting the development of Ras Al Khaimah's annual events calendar, along with Safarak Travel and Tourism's wider team, contributing to the emirate's reputation as a global tourism destination. Throughout her career she has led successful planning and execution of over 500 events across the Middle East. Her journey includes pivotal roles with entities like The Emirates Group, Arabian Adventures, and Congress Solutions International reaffirming her leadership in event management.



SHERATON JUMEIRAH Dubai

Sheraton Jumeirah has promoted **MOHAMED AFIFI** to the position of Director of Sales. A dynamic and accomplished professional, Mohamed brings a youthful vigour and a results-driven mindset to this crucial leadership role. As the newly appointed Director of Sales at Sheraton Jumeirah Beach Resort, Afifi embodies the perfect blend of youthful energy and visionary leadership. His track record of driving growth and achieving exceptional results makes him a natural fit for the pivotal role. With an impressive history of consistently surpassing targets, he has demonstrated his exceptional aptitude for sales leadership. His strategic insights, combined with a deep understanding of market dynamics and customer preferences, have propelled his and his team's success.



VFS GLOBAL Dubai

Taking a step ahead in its commitment to Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI), VFS Global has appointed **TARIQ AHMAD** as its first-ever Head of Empowerment and Inclusion for UAE. In line with the UAE government's vision to maximise employment of UAE nationals in the private sector, Ahmad will steer the company's Emiratisation strategy, policy and procedures to facilitate skilling and employment opportunities. He will be responsible for the selection, retention and career development of UAE nationals, facilitating their integration to the VFS Global workforce, both in the UAE and globally. In his new role, Ahmad will also focus on enhancing multi-cultural awareness within the organisation.



SILKHAUS KSA

Silkhaus has appointed **SABINE EL NAJJAR** as the Founding General Manager for KSA. This appointment marks a significant milestone in Silkhaus's journey as it continues to expand and grow across the Middle East. Focused on the \$14 billion short-term rental sector across Asia, Silkhaus leverages technology to provide asset owners with infrastructure tools to manage and monetize properties. Based in Saudi Arabia, Najjar brings a wealth of experience to her new role at Silkhaus, having worked across the region's startup ecosystem and management consulting industry. She previously served as GM for Kitopi KSA and showcased her remarkable leadership skills.



JW MARRIOTT MARQUIS HOTEL DUBAI AND DUBAI MARRIOTT HARBOUR HOTEL & SUITES Dubai

JW Marriott Marquis Hotel, Dubai and Dubai Marriott Harbour Hotel & Suites have appointed **GERRIT GRAF** as the new Multi-Property General Manager. Graf is an industry veteran, with a career spanning over two decades with Marriott, having held diverse roles across eight renowned brands in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East and brings with him a wealth of experience overseeing 14 successful hotel openings throughout his career. Graf's journey with Marriott began in 1996 as the Director of Food & Beverage at the Renaissance Cologne Hotel in Germany. Earlier, Graf held the position of Multi-Property GM at Le Royal Méridien Doha, Agora Doha - Autograph Collection Hotel.



DESERT ADVENTURES Dubai

SAMIR MEHTA has been appointed as Desert Adventure's new Chief Operating Officer. Joining their prestigious team of industry experts, Mehta brings an impressive 30-year history of leadership within the travel, tourism, and hospitality sectors. His remarkable journey includes spearheading the success of major DMCs in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, leaving an indelible mark on the industry. With an extensive background in enhancing operational resilience, fostering continuous process enhancement, and championing sustainability endeavours, Mehta is a true asset. His unwavering dedication to customer satisfaction, innovative strategies, and skilful utilization of technology to drive long-term ROI show that he will further elevate Desert Adventures' standing as a premier DMC partner in the Middle East.



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