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- Cultural landmark to attract 500k visitors03
- Retail: a catalyst to tourism growth04
- Shopping festivals boost tourism06
- 246% jump in GCC traffic from China in '23.....07
- Sun Siyam eyes biz from Middle East.....08
- ME to get pre-COVID China numbers in '2410



Sharjah light fest set to shine again

Sharjah Light Festival is scheduled to be held from 7-18 February 2024. Year on year this event has gained popularity, attracting tourists from across the globe. Artists from different parts of the world participate and display their skills at the mega fest.

Dr. Shehara Rizly

Sharjah Light Festival continues on its journey of excellence and innovation, incessantly updating its visions and ideas, developing the technologies it relies on, and adapting to new developments, in order to ensure

sustainable, positive results. **H.E. Khalid Jasim Al Midfa**, Chairman, Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Development Authority (SCTDA), reiterated, "The Sharjah Light Festival holds paramount significance, highlighting the emirate's cultural and historical richness through mesmerising light

displays. Scheduled from 7-18 February 2024, the festival illuminates 12 iconic landmarks such as Sharjah Police Headquarters, Al Noor Mosque, Al Majaz Waterfront, Sharjah Mosque, Sheikh Rashid Al Qasimi Mosque, Al Rafisah Dam, BEEAH Group HQ, Khalid Lagoon, The General Souq-Al

Hamriyah, Kalba Waterfront and Al Dhaid Fort, captivating visitors with enchanting spectacles. Anticipating a notable surge in attendance, the event typically draws thousands of visitors, fostering an appreciation for culture and boosting Sharjah's appeal as a vibrant tourist destination."



H.E. Khalid Jasim Al Midfa
Chairman of Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Development Authority

Retail – a key driver of tourism

The GCC region has been gaining popularity as an international destination for retail tourism in recent years. Industry leaders share their experience and observation with **TRAVTALK**.



Mohamed Al Rais
Executive Director
Al Rais Travel Group

The retail sector plays a crucial role in driving the growth of the tourism industry in the GCC/ ME region. Shopping is a major attraction for tourists, and the diverse retail landscape in the region, featuring luxury malls and traditional souks, enhances the overall tourism experience. Retail establishments showcase the rich cultural heritage and modern extravagance of the region, acting as key attractions for visitors. Additionally, shopping festivals and events further stimulate tourism, offering exclusive promotions and entertainment, creating a symbiotic relationship between retail and tourism that significantly contributes to the economic and cultural vibrancy of the GCC/ ME tourism industry.

Contd. on page 6 ►

Oman exceeds 2.5 mn visitor target

Oman received 2.9 million visitors till October-end, surpassing the set target of 2.5 visitor arrivals for 2023, according to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Sultanate of Oman.

TT Bureau

Oman has exceeded the set target of 2.5 million visitor arrivals in 2023 and received 2.9 million visitors by the end of October 2023, stated the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Sultanate of Oman. The development goes well with the goals of Oman 2040 vision and justifies the promotion activities undertaken by the sultanate to attract more visitors to the destination. While the target was to reach 33,000 hotel



rooms by the end of 2025, the ministry's statistics show that the number of hotels rooms stood at 32,371 by the end of

September 2023. This was revealed by Oman News Agency. The targeted goals were nearly achieved in 2022.



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Cultural landmark to attract 500k visitors

BAPS Hindu Temple, the second largest temple in the world opening in the UAE soon, is expected to attract over 500,000 visitors over the first year. The temple complex includes a convention centre, visitor centre, prayer halls, exhibitions, learning areas, and sports area for children. Hence, it will attract a diverse number of visitors promoting the UAE. Here is what experts have to say:



Jamal Abdulnazar
CEO
Cozmo Travel

“At the outset, grateful to the UAE leadership for their wisdom in embracing all faiths and fostering an environment where everyone can live in harmony and peace. The inauguration of the BAPS Hindu Temple in Abu Dhabi is a testament to this vision. Its grandeur and spiritual essence are set to attract a diverse array of global visitors.”



Praveen Shetty
Chairman
Fortune Group of Hotels, Dubai

“As a cultural and religious landmark, the temple not only caters to the spiritual needs of the Hindus but also serves as a major tourist attraction. Its architectural splendour is poised to draw a diverse range of visitors, contributing to the UAE’s cultural tapestry and bolstering its position as a global tourist destination.”



Jayaram Vaidyanathan
Managing Director and CEO
Sharaf Travel and Tourism Group

“This is a huge step towards further strengthening the people-to-people relationships and will certainly attract visitors from across all diverse cultures from world over to visit the temple. We will have a diversified audience utilizing the available areas in the complex for the betterment of our lives – spirituality, yoga, and weddings etc.”



Dinkar Dasaur
General Manager - UAE
Satguru Travel

“Being the second largest temple in the world makes BAPS Hindu Temple a must-visit place. It is an epitome of friendship between UAE & India, reflected through a marble façade with seven spires that represent each of the emirate of the country. It is also a cultural hub reflecting rich traditions, and art of Hinduism.”



Sapna Aidasani
Director Marketing
Pluto Travel

“Every Indian family that comes for holidays in Dubai ensures a visit to a gurudwara or Hindu temple. So, BAPS Hindu Temple will be a must-visit for every Indian tourist. We always plan Dubai itinerary with one day trip to Abu Dhabi, which includes grand mosque and a theme park. Now, the tourist will also ask to include it.”



Sushant Pilankar
Manager Leisure
Uranus Travel

“To substantiate BAPS Hindu Temple’s significance from tourism perspective, we can take example of Abu Dhabi Grand Mosque or even Jumeirah Mosque in early days. Both are now ‘must-have’ elements in the city tour program. For some, it’s religious visit, for others it’s architectural marvel that attracts.”

Compiled by Dr. Shehara Rizly

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Retail: a catalyst to tourism growth

Retail sector in the GCC region has been one of the key tourism drivers, attracting visitors from across the globe. With various shopping festivals and outlets sharing their latest deals on a variety of luxury items, there is an exponential growth of high spending tourists/ travellers seen across the region over the past few years. Leaders in travel and tourism share their insights with .

	What is the contribution of retail to the growth of tourism industry in GCC/ ME?	How does shopping festivals help in bringing in more tourists to the GCC?	Could you share the expected growth numbers for this year with retail tourism?
 Samir Mehta Chief Operations Officer Desert Adventures Tourism	The GCC's retail sector has elevated tourism with varied shopping experiences, from opulent malls to authentic souks, helping grow tourist numbers and spending by attracting different visitor segments, and extended stays. At Desert Adventures, we have capitalised on the wide retail product offering by curating unique shopping experiences based on visitor source markets. By strategically leveraging retail's vital role in shaping a robust tourism ecosystem, we not only enhance the overall visitor experience but also drive tourism revenue.	Shopping festivals serve as powerful magnet as they create a vibrant retail extravaganza, complementing the wide range of other in-destination experiences. These festivals attract incremental visitors seeking immersive and value-add retail opportunities, and augment the overall multi-dimensional offering of the destinations, creating a compelling draw for tourists seeking distinctive blend of entertainment and retail indulgence. Beyond the retail aspect, the festive atmosphere, accompanied by many events, plays a key role in enhancing Dubai's culture, captivating millions of visitors.	GCC's retail tourism anticipates robust growth this year, with a projected 5.7 per cent CAGR till 2026. Propelled by economic revival, population surge, and the growing regional prominence on the world stage, we anticipate on-going investment in retail, leisure, entertainment, and hospitality. The anticipated growth numbers underscore not only the economic potential but also the vision of the region. As consumers and tourists alike look for unique experiences, we believe the GCC is well-positioned to deliver and elevate its status as a premier retail tourism destination.
 Jaal Shah Managing Director Travel Designer Group	The retail sector plays a crucial role in enhancing the overall tourism experience and contributes to the economic growth of these countries. It supports local businesses, creates jobs, and stimulates economic development. The revenue generated from tourism-related retail activities contributes significantly to the economies of GCC countries. Popular shopping destinations like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha have become international shopping centres, attracting tourists specifically for their extensive retail options.	These festivals are strategically designed events that combine retail promotions, entertainment, and cultural activities to create a unique and appealing experience for visitors. Shopping festivals go beyond just retail; they incorporate various entertainment events and activities. Concerts, cultural performances, fireworks, and celebrity appearances are common features. These events create a festive atmosphere, making the destination more appealing to tourists. Shopping festivals through winter and summer contribute immensely to the GCC's tourism and economy.	The growth of retail tourism is anticipated to align with the overall expansion of the tourism sector, and in destinations like Dubai, it is poised to outpace the general growth due to the city's emphasis on luxury shopping experiences and innovative retail offerings. Year on year, member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), such as UAE and Qatar, innovate and introduce new elements to further enhance the travellers' experience. Novel concepts coupled with unique experiences support the overall growth of retail tourism in GCC countries.
 Aga Pytlík General Manager Panworld Travel	The tourism industry functions as an ecosystem, comprising a network of various organisations working collaboratively to enhance the visitor experience. In modern times, as customer needs evolve, travel has become a blend of multiple needs, ranging from exploration to experiencing the destination's unique offerings, including personal needs like shopping. Destinations that offer unique and attractive retail programs tend to attract more tourists. Such destinations not only provide a richer, more diverse experience but also contribute to the tourism growth.	In the context of promoting and growing a tourist destination, it's crucial to provide activities and experiences that not only attract first-time visitors but also encourage repeat visits. The success of destinations like the UAE in hosting shopping festivals exemplifies this approach. These festivals offer a dynamic blend of shopping, cultural, and entertainment experiences, catering to a wide range of visitor interests. By continuously enhancing these experiences and introducing new attractions, destinations can maintain a steady flow of tourists.	Analyzing public data, the retail industry in the GCC is forecasted to reach \$370 billion by 2026, with significant contributions from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are expected to account for 78.5 per cent of the total retail sales in the region by then. The sector's growth trajectory is driven by a rebound in tourism and economic activity, highlighting the integral role of retail in boosting tourism. We have observed that the interest in combining leisure holidays with shopping is on the rise. This trend is fuelled by the exclusive and special offers available in the GCC, particularly in Dubai.
 Ibrahim Nalkhande General Manager Business Travel LLC	Retail contributes a lot towards the growth of Tourism Industry. Traditionally, 'Food and Shopping' are two critical elements in the selection process of destination. Shopping is no longer a past time activity at the destination, it plays a vital role in the selection process of the destination, enhances the positioning and foreign exchange earnings, support local brands and products. It's a complete transformation. Frankly speaking 'shopping' contributes 30 per cent of the total spending worldwide and it's comparatively much higher among GCC nationals and residents.	Shopping festivals are icing on the cake. As a matter of fact 'Dubai Shopping Festival' started featuring in the list of top five shopping festivals globally. The list of shopping festivals keep on growing with every passing year. Sharjah Shopping Festival, Hala Shopping Festival Kuwait, Shop Qatar, Riyadh Shopping Festivals etc. The influx of low-cost carriers, and additional capacity deployed by the full service carriers is the game changer for tourism in GCC. These shopping festivals smartly spread with regular intervals, and attract tourists to the GCC.	It's a bit challenging to project exact numeric data but it's unanimously anticipated by tourism industry's fraternity across GCC to experience double digit growth during 2024 for Retail Tourism. The recovery started from 2022 after the pandemic. Year 2023 was an extremely good year where either the pre-pandemic level or more has been achieved. It is anticipated that the prevailing momentum will gain higher pace in 2024. We are expecting 2024 to further grow in terms of attracting more visitors from across the globe. Winter and summer equally become important.
 Ayman Al Qudwa General Manager Falcon Travel	The travel and tourism sector in the GCC achieved strong growth rates after COVID-19, specifically in 2022 and 2023, and contributed an average of 10-15 per cent of the GDP of the GCC economies. The GCC, on an average, contributes 3-5 per cent of the GDP of the total global tourism traffic. Tourism Industry in the GCC achieved strong growth rates after the pandemic, specifically in 2022 and 2023, and contributes an average of 10-15 per cent of the GDP to the GCC economies. In total, the GCC contributes 3-5 per cent to the GDP of the total global tourism traffic.	Activating the tourism and shopping festival would reduce prices, develop tourism, create a boom in the domestic trade sector, and place the festival on the foreign tourism list to attract more tourists. To benefit the local consumer and international tourists, especially since the festival constitutes external propaganda, as it works to attract tourists. The festival would revive domestic tourism and return it to the pre-pandemic levels. Yes, shopping festival would reduce prices, develop tourism, create a boom in the domestic trade sector.	The GCC countries aim to increase the spending of incoming tourists at an annual growth rate of 8 per cent. Growth is expected to reach more than \$188 billion at the rate of 12.8 per cent by 2030. Retail tourism market is projected to reach US \$7.8 billion by 2025 owing to rapid urbanization and development of shopping centres and malls. Various retail outlets across the GCC provide ample opportunities to attract tourists within the GCC region, as well as visitors who fly just to experience a full-fledged destination that consists of various retail outlets.
 Soumava Mukherjee General Manager Travelpoint LLC	Retail plays a crucial role in the growth of tourism industry in the GCC/ ME by enhancing the overall visitor experience, providing diverse shopping opportunities, and contributing significantly to the region's economic development and tourism revenue. Retail significantly boosts the tourism industry in the GCC/ ME by enhancing visitor experiences, providing diverse shopping options, and contributing to the overall economic growth. Shopping, often intertwined with cultural experiences, becomes a pivotal attraction, enticing tourists.	Shopping festivals attract more tourists to the GCC by offering exclusive discounts, cultural events, and a vibrant atmosphere. These festivals create a unique and enticing environment, positioning the region as a premier shopping destination. The combination of entertainment, discounts, and diverse offerings boosts tourism, stimulating economic growth in the process. Various new areas in Oman attract many retail tourists across the year. Retail Tourism consists of a wide variety of clientele; those who shop for memorabilia and others who seek high-end luxury goods.	The global travel retail market size was valued at US \$5.74 billion in 2022 and is projected to grow from US \$60.72 billion in 2023 to US \$117.18 billion by 2030, exhibiting a CAGR of 9.85 per cent during the forecast period. The numbers are driven by dynamic factors, such as economic conditions and global events. Across GCC, we have witnessed the intra-GCC travel which contributes in many ways to the growth of the tourism sector. Retail wise, there are many tourists who would combine visits over the weekend as a getaway, sometimes just to get the latest product on sale.

Compiled by Dr. Shehara Rizvi

GCC's penchant for luxury shopping

Outlet shopping is a trend the GCC travellers have been developing over the past many years. With designer outlets such as McArthurGlen with outlets across Europe, it is a retail therapy haven which provides them the perfect opportunity to enjoy and experience. **Sabina Piacenti** - International Markets Manager - McArthurGlen Designer Outlets, shares some insights with **TRAVELTALK**.

TT Bureau

What are the outbound destinations GCC travellers prefer to visit for shopping?

From our perspective as a market leader in Outlet Retail, with 25 centres across 8 countries in Europe and Canada, we observe that GCC travellers primarily aim to visit the European fashion capitals of Paris, Milan, Vienna, and London. Additionally, they show interest in other cities such as Salzburg, Dusseldorf, and Malaga.

From MAG side, how do GCC travellers shop? With family, friends, or in groups?

GCC travellers have a penchant for shopping quality premium and luxury designer brands, coupled with a strong sense of value for money. This preference aligns perfectly with the Outlet proposition, where prices are

discounted up to 70 per cent off all year round. Furthermore, in our centres, they have the opportunity to find their favourite shops all in one place, within a relaxing atmosphere, and with dedicated services for the whole family.

It's common for GCC customers to shop in small groups, enjoying a collective experience with family or friends during their outings. Residents often align their travel plans with the seasons, incorporating them into their annual vacations, making it highly probable that they will engage in

shopping activities. The high summer period provides a great opportunity to enjoy the Summer Sale for additional bargains. The prevalence of group travel is also noticeable in incentive or corporate travel scenarios, with an increasing number of companies now willing to include shopping stops in the itinerary.

How much business do GCC travellers conduct in comparison to other travellers? GCC travellers significantly contribute to McArthurGlen's revenue, surpassing tax-free figures, thanks to their distinct



Sabina Piacenti
International Markets Manager
McArthurGlen Designer Outlets

preference for premium and luxury brands.

Are they interested in high-end lounge services and personalised shopping experiences?

Yes, GCC travellers are accustomed to luxurious experiences and have easy access to international retail brands, shaping their awareness

and preferences for such indulgences when they travel. This familiarity contributes to an expectation of a similar level of sophistication and quality in their travel experiences, encompassing shopping for high-end products and enjoying premium services.

In terms of MAG, how do you accommodate the requests from GCC travellers?

We have cultivated strong relationships with the travel trade and are prepared to offer steadfast assistance, whether for marketing promotions, inclusion in travel itineraries, or VIP support required by their clients visiting our centres. Our team maintains open communication channels with the trade, regularly providing updates on retail events such as Black Friday or Fashion Festivals, brand openings, and newly implemented services.

We extend our support to partners by offering services such as private transfers, hands-free shopping, and lounge access on a case-by-case basis, ensuring a seamless and enhanced experience for their clientele.

Could you share some key requests GCC travellers make while shopping?

In addition to the exclusive services mentioned earlier (private transfers, lounge and shopping facilities), GCC travellers often request tax refund and currency exchange offices, children's playgrounds, halal food options, and quiet rooms for their prayers – amenities that many of our centres can accommodate. Groups receive personalized welcomes and briefings on exclusive discounts, meal vouchers, and other noteworthy highlights of the centre that they might want to explore or experience.

GCC travellers have a penchant for shopping quality premium and luxury designer brands, coupled with a strong sense of value for money



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Shopping festivals boost tourism

▶ Contd. from page 1



Ahmed Al Khaja
CEO, Dubai Festivals and Retail Establishment

“Events and entertainment properties play a central role in the Dubai Festival offering, and help cement the city’s status as the best place in the world to live, work and visit. With 321 Festival, we wanted to create a new groundbreaking iconic festival that not only features A-List artists but also brings our city’s stakeholders together with the best that Dubai has to offer, to create memories for our audiences that last a lifetime.”

“I affirm that DSF transcends mere discounts; it’s an experiential marvel. Distinguished by a spectrum of entertainment, from live concerts to cutting-edge tech attractions, DSF sets itself apart on the global



Manuel Garcia
General Manager
Millennium Place Marina

“It has been instrumental in the growth of tourism; all international firms are present in the region and the footfall numbers of the shopping malls continue to rise justifying the opening of new venues. The shopping festivals, and take DSF as an example, it started in 1996 and still going on strong, have evolved and created added value to the retail tourists by adding concerts, raffles, light shows, etc. I am confident the numbers of retail tourists will grow.”

“As a partner of Dubai Festival and Retail Establishment (DFRE), Majid Al Futtaim is proud to work together to create dynamic and immersive experiences for our community and visitors from around the world during



Nisreen Boustani
PR and Corp. Comm. Manager,
Mercato and Town Centre Jumeirah

“DSF not only draws in visitors from across the globe but also showcases Dubai as a premier destination for shopping, leisure, and entertainment. As part of this season and in celebration of the shopping extravaganza, Mercato is hosting spectacular activities and entertainment, catering to families and children, with shopping deals for bargain hunters and unforgettable luxury prizes. An experience enjoyed year on year by families and friends alike.”

“Dubai is a global model of the Experience Economy. Events like the Dubai Shopping Festival are pivotal to enhancing how people engage with their favourite retailers and lifestyle destinations and help set new



Fareed Abdelrahman
MD, Dubai Holding Asset Management - Retail Destinations

benchmarks for the industry. As long-standing partners of DFRE and DSF, we are proud to rally DHAM’s diverse retail portfolio, which includes iconic destinations like Bluewaters, The Outlet Village and Boxpark.”



Praveen Shetty
Chairman
Fortune Group of Hotels, Dubai

stage. This year’s infusion of virtual shopping and augmented reality exemplifies its commitment to innovation, attracting more tourists to the dynamic and immersive GCC retail experience.”



Fuad Mansoor Sharaf
MD - UAE Shopping Malls
Majid Al Futtaim Properties

Dubai Shopping Festival 2023-2024. Our commitment to this landmark event goes beyond offering promotions during the festival - we aim to contribute and enrich the city’s thriving tourism and retail sectors.”



Hayssam Hajjar
Director Asset Management UAE,
Al-Futtaim Real Estate

“We consistently strive to enhance our in-mall experiences, offering families the finest entertainment and exclusive promotions. This Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF), we are bringing one of the most beloved entertainment concepts to the city – PAW Patrol, exclusively available at Dubai Festival City Mall. From 12-28 January 2024 at Festival Bay, kids will have the opportunity to engage in numerous activities, including a Paw Patrol Lookout Tower.”

“It is a privilege for Arabian Automobiles Company to collaborate with DFRE for the Dubai Shopping Festival since its inception, a symbol of Dubai’s vibrant spirit and boundless possibilities; our partnership



Jad Toubayli
Founder & CEO
Idealz

“It’s our honor and privilege to come together with DFRE again for the 29th edition of Dubai Shopping Festival. DSF has long been the pinnacle season of raffles and promotions in the region and this year is no different. Alongside DFRE, we have planned many exciting raffles this year. Idealz will also remain the exclusive digital point of sale for the DSF Nissan Mega Raffle allowing customers from all over the world to participate. We will also be launching many campaigns.”

“We are thrilled to announce our collaboration with Dubai Shopping Festival 2023-2024. The Beach, JBR is set to mesmerise visitors with stunning drone shows and fireworks, offering a



Vikas Chadha
CEO
Jumbo Group

“As a customer-centric company, we are always looking to enhance the shopping experience for our customers, and to give them something back in return for their loyalty; Dubai Shopping Festival provides the perfect opportunity to do both. This year too, as Dubai Shopping Festival’s long-standing strategic partner, Jumbo offered customers opportunities to win prizes. Events and experiences have made the festival more attractive to all ages.”

“ENOC Group has been a proud supporter of the DSF since its inception in 1996. Every year, we aim to provide customers with a unique set of promotions and life-changing winning opportunities as part of



H.E. Saif Humaid Al Falasi
Group CEO
ENOC

our mission to enhance experience. During the 2024 edition, and for the first time we are enabling ENOC, AutoPro, and ZOOM site customers throughout the UAE to experience our annual offerings and take part.”



Michel Ayat
CEO
AWR Automotive

reflects our dedication to advancing Dubai’s legacy under the visionary and wise leadership of the nation. As Official Automotive Partner, we reaffirm our commitment to elevating the retail and automotive sectors, promoting tourism.”




Lizelle Fitoussi
Marketing Director
Merex Investment

visual spectacle. At City Walk, visitors will be treated to entertainment themed ‘Music through the Ages’, a vibrant mix of live music and dance performances. This tie-up highlights our dedication to creating good experiences.”

Compiled by TT Bureau

246% jump in GCC traffic from China in '23

Jinyan Li, Vice President - Business Development, DidaTravel, in a special interview with , talks about the importance of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) market for Chinese travellers and their journey in the Middle East market since 2019. The Chinese outbound market into the GCC countries grew by 246 per cent in the year 2023, she shares.

 Dr. Shehara Rizly

How do you see the Chinese market recovery this year towards the ME region?

Since the early months of 2023, as the travel restrictions in China lifted gradually, at DidaTravel we witnessed an increasingly strong travel recovery from China. Overall, despite some uneven recovery, the Chinese outbound market into GCC countries grew by 246 per cent in 2023. As such, DidaTravel's pre-pandemic numbers are not a relevant metric in this case, as our Middle East business was in its infancy in 2019, it's fair to say that the wider Chinese outbound market has still not yet fully recovered to the pre-pandemic levels.

What do you see as main destinations booked by Chinese in terms of the ME region?

The UAE is still by far the most popular Middle East destination,



Jinyan Li
Vice President - Business Development
DidaTravel

with bookings in our systems registering more than 500 per cent grow versus 2022 from the

Chinese source market. Though, this year Saudia Arabia has become a much more relevant destination for DidaTravel. Our strategic partnership with the Saudi Tourism Authority has enabled us to grow our volumes significantly from the Chinese market, and with the massive efforts being made by the Kingdom to develop both the tourism infrastructure and awareness of the beauty of this previously little-known destination, the interest and demand from Chinese travellers continues to rise.

Will we witness more luxury Chinese travellers this year?

The UAE is still by far the most popular ME destination, with bookings in our systems registering over 500% growth versus 2022 from Chinese market



Absolutely. The increasing demand for luxury travel has been a significant trend from the Chinese outbound market for some time and, of course, the Middle East region has some of the world's most luxurious hotel properties and premium experiences to fulfil that demand effectively. In 2023, more than 65 per cent of all Chinese hotel bookings registered

in DidaTravel's system were for 5-star properties and that proportion is set to grow continually. It is fair to say though that more still needs to be done by the industry in this region to adapt to the specific needs and expectations of the Chinese traveller if they want to continue to compete effectively with other luxury destinations worldwide.

How does Dida travel cater to the ME market?

As the number one B2B travel wholesaler in China, DidaTravel works with all types of hotels, from budget motels, downtown boutiques to 5-star luxury resorts, sourcing its inventory through direct contracts with hotels, chains and channel managers. DidaTravel is truly global. 

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- Fortune Classic Apartments - Al Qusais, Dubai



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Sun Siyam eyes biz from Middle East

Sun Siyam Resorts saw a 30 per cent growth last year. In an exclusive interview with **TRAVELTALK**, **Deepak Booneady**, Chief Executive Officer, Sun Siyam Resorts, says they look forward to carry on with the growth momentum in the new year. They have reopened Sun Siyam Pasikudah, a boutique hotel in the eastern coastal belt of Sri Lanka, after carrying out renovation work worth US \$1.5 million.

TT Bureau

Deepak Booneady, Chief Executive Officer, Sun Siyam Resorts, says that they saw a 30 per cent growth last year and look forward to increase it this year. "This growth is across both the UK and GCC markets. Hence, we are expecting further growth this year," he shares.



Deepak Booneady
Chief Executive Officer
Sun Siyam Resorts

Talking about Sun Siyam Pasikudah, their latest niche project in the eastern coastal belt of Sri Lanka, Booneady says, "We renovated this premium boutique resort with a total cost of US \$1.5 million with an exclusive boutique collection of 84 rooms. We want to boost the tourism in Sri Lanka, as we had a few setbacks over the past

short-haul destination. Hence, travellers can even opt to do a quick weekend getaway. We have planned special packages for our guests so that they can enjoy a varied set of experiences during their stay in Pasikudah. In our itinerary we have

Eastern visitors to this great market. "As I mentioned earlier, we are working with several DMCs in Sri Lanka to promote it with varied experiences which could attract more visitors from the region. From Dubai it is a four to five-hour flight. Hence, a very quick getaway for those who wish to rejuvenate. There are options to reach by road or by flight. Each mode of transport that travellers will select they would have an option to really enjoy all their experiences. From an elephant orphanage to great natural springs, or parks across the area and the hills, and the plains across the lands make it one of the most beautiful places on earth," he says.

When asked about the reason to develop the boutique resort in the east, Booneady responds, "West coast of Sri Lanka is well developed, and the east stands out as one of the most untouched and pristine places in the country. Hence, we ventured into the area. The famous Trincomalee harbour is quite close to Pasikudah and we have the white pristine beaches akin to the Maldives. The previous government was making a lot of effort to develop the eastern coast. Hence, we strategically partnered so that we can play our part in bringing in the niche tourists, especially from the Middle East region."

Speaking about the Middle East, Booneady says that two resorts have become favourites of the clientele, mainly due to the varied experiences offered. "In Siyam World, the ME travellers enjoy the slides, especially



because it is a family focused property. We have the floating water park, horses guests can ride on the beach, which I must say that a lot of people com-

the airport, take a speedboat, and go to Iru Veli. Iru Veli is a 4-star plus resort with about five restaurants and this resort is positioned as a full board,

but also the guests can decide if they opt to have it as half board or so as well. Most people from Middle East do prefer full board." **D**

We want to boost tourism in Sri Lanka, as we had a few setbacks over the past few years, and tourism, which is a revenue earner, had many pitfalls

few years, and tourism, which is a revenue earner for the destination, had many pitfalls. Hence, we feel that now is the time to actually embrace and showcase the beautiful pearl of the Indian ocean to visitors, especially from the Middle East."

He adds, "Sri Lanka is a safe country to visit and ready to welcome guests, especially from the Middle East, as we have so many activities and experiences that will be enjoyed by the ME travellers. It is a

included a visit to the famous heritage places in the cultural triangle so that the rich heritage and culture can be explored by our Middle Eastern guests. We are working with some DMCs who have helped us put together tailor-made packages as well for those visitors from the region. Pasikudah is different from Maldives; it is a must-visit beach destination in everyone's bucket list."

Booneady further explains plans to attract the Middle



ing from Dubai always want to experience. Siyam World has seven restaurants and eight bars. Before, we never used to have Indians, now we have a lot of Indians, Filipinos, Europeans, Americans coming from the Middle East. Another property popular among the Middle East travellers is the Iru Veli Resort with 125 rooms. This is popular as all the rooms are equipped with a swimming pool, a lot of privacy, very small boutique resort, so this is what is the most preferred for the GCC market, especially for the locals in GCC. Another fact that Iru Veli is popular for is that it is close to Male and people traveling from Dubai, they do not want to wait another 2-3 hours again with their families to board another aircraft or boat. Iru Veli is close to Male, only 40 minutes by speedboat, so they arrive in



Elevating Arabian luxury on the sea

The 335-metre-long ship with 19 decks and 1,682 elegant cabins is currently undergoing an extensive refurbishment to tailor it to the highest standard in line with the taste of Arabian passengers.



TT Bureau

AROYA Cruises, the new Arabian cruise line operated by Cruise Saudi, a Public Investment Fund owned company responsible for the development of Saudi's cruise industry, unveiled its first cruise ship recently. The 335-metre-long ship is currently undergoing an extensive refurbishment to tailor it to the highest standard in line with the taste of Arabian passengers. It has 19 decks and 1,682 elegant cabins.

Lars Clasen, Chief Executive Officer, Cruise Saudi, said: "We

This marks an exciting milestone for Cruise Saudi in creating a world-class cruise industry in the kingdom, whilst offering a new way to holiday for Saudis

are delighted to sail into the new year with the unveiling of our first AROYA Cruises ship. This marks an exciting milestone for Cruise Saudi in creating a world-class cruise industry in Saudi, whilst offering a new way to holiday in the Kingdom for locals. We look forward to welcoming the first passengers on-board."

With exceptional on-board service, an eclectic culinary offering, and a sensational activities programme, guests aboard AROYA Cruises will enjoy a unique Arabian hospitality experience that reflects the warm and welcoming values of Saudi culture. AROYA Cruises will set sail from Jeddah in 2024. 📌

Gulf oasis of adventure & heritage

THE RIG., world's 1st adventure tourism destination to be built on an offshore platform in the Arabian Gulf, will redefine the leisure experience while celebrating the legacy of KSA's oil and gas heritage.

TT Bureau

THE RIG. has announced the launch of its master-plan for the world's first adventure tourism destination, to be built on an offshore platform in the Arabian Gulf. The project, one of Public Investment Fund's (PIF) entertainment projects, is in line with Public Investment Fund's (PIF's) strategy and the Kingdom's Vision 2030 objectives of contributing to the growth of the tourism sector. The project

The project will cover a gross floor area of over 300k sq. mt., located 40km from the coastline, near Al Juraid Island and Berri Oil Field in the Arabian Gulf

will cover a gross floor area of over 300,000 square metres, located 40km from the coastline, near Al Juraid Island and Berri Oil Field in the Arabian Gulf. It will seek to attract over 900,000 annual visitors

by 2032, appealing to a wide range of domestic, regional and international audiences. The range of hospitality, leisure, entertainment and accommodation options to be built include three hotels totalling 800 rooms, along with 11 restaurants, an extreme sports and adventure park, a world-class marina, and helipads.

It will feature a wide variety of water activities, including a diving centre, in addition to an amusement park, splash park, an e-sports centre, an immersive theatre and multi-purpose arena. The project will be developed by the Oil Park Development Company (OPDC). 📌





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ME to get pre-COVID China numbers in '24

The number of visitors coming to the Middle East from China during Golden Week increased in October. **Prof Dr Wolfgang Georg Arlt FRGS FRAS**, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), COTRI China Outbound Tourism Research Institute & CEO, Meaningful Tourism Center, in a special interview with **TRAVEL**, shares insights about the tourism recovery from China and other important issues.

TT Bureau

As we embark on the Chinese New Year, which is the time they conduct outbound travel, how does it look like for the ME region?

Chinese New Year is traditionally a time for outbound travel, during the last Golden Week in October 2023, about 6 million outbound trips took place. The OTAs like trip.com and Tuniu are recording strong booking development for Chinese New

Year 2024. The ME is still close enough to China to be a destination for trips of less than one week duration, so likely to profit from the return of Chinese to international travel.

How do you see the Chinese market recovery this year (towards ME region)?

ME region saw a better result, as many trips were done for non-leisure reasons, especially business and MICE. However, Chinese outbound



Prof Dr Wolfgang Georg Arlt FRGS FRAS
Chief Executive Officer
COTRI

tourism recovered slower than expected in 2023, reaching only 74 million border crossings, less than half of the 170 million in 2019 (Source: COTRI Analytics). For 2024, it can be expected that the 2019 level will be reached again, or at least almost reached again. The problems with missing passports and slow visa application processing have been resolved, and air travel capacities are returning to 2019 levels. Chinese are more

careful with their spending and demand more quality for money, but they are still eager to travel abroad.

What do you see as main destinations booked by Chinese in terms of the ME region?

UAE, Qatar, Oman will see many visitors, with KSA as the new destination added. The Gaza strip conflict might scare some Chinese and keep them from travelling to the region forever. Of course, nobody will travel to

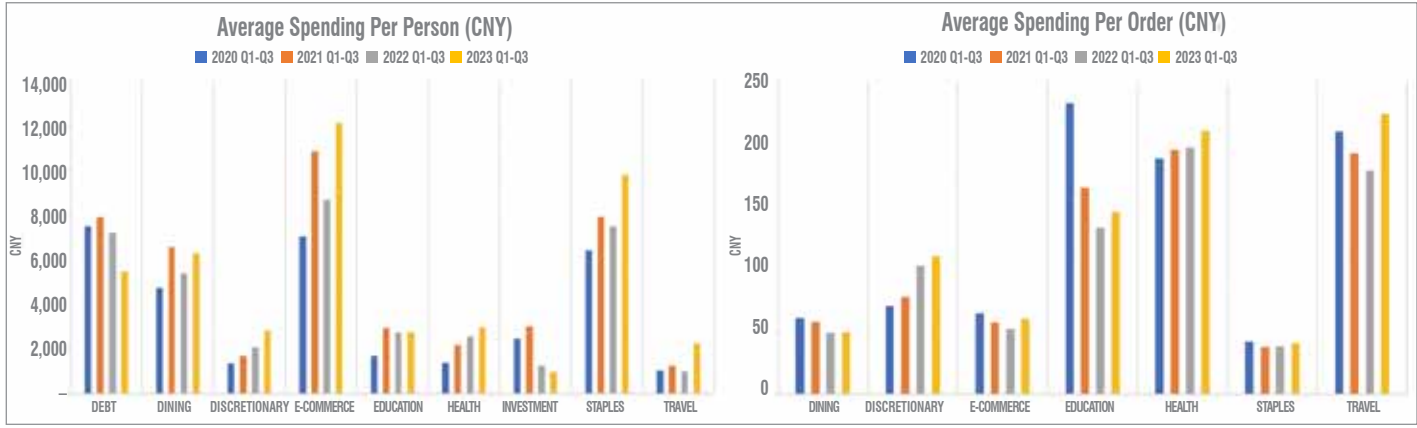
Israel and less than otherwise to Egypt, but the more experienced travellers can distinguish between Dubai and Cairo.

Will we witness more luxury Chinese travellers in ME region this year?

Yes, as the very rich (HNWIs) have restarted international travel faster than the merely rich (wealth below US \$2 million). However, they do not longer look for conspicuous consumption, but get the bragging power rather from finding just exactly what they were looking for, going for quality as they see it rather than just going for the most expensive.

How should ME agents prepare to welcome Chinese travellers?

Generally, ME is in a good position for 2024, but needs to change products and marketing from "Ultimate Luxury" to "100 per cent luxurious experience made just for you".



Specific ways to cut down CO₂ emissions

The tourism industry has consistently presented a complex challenge when it comes to its environmental impact. While serving as an economic catalyst that promotes prosperity in various global destinations, it also constitutes a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and environmental damage. Here is how a few small steps can cut down on carbon emissions and help in the green cause.

A report released by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTTC) in 2021, shows that the tourism industry is accountable for approximately 11 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, with transportation and accommodation sectors standing out as primary contributors. Alarming, it is projected that this proportion is expected to double by 2050.

The aviation sector, for example, is a major contributor to carbon emissions, primarily due to the need to travel by air to reach diverse global destinations. In July 2023, there was a



26.2 per cent increase in total traffic, measured in revenue passenger kilometres (RPKs), when compared to July 2022.

Globally, the current traffic levels have reached over 95 per cent of what they were before the onset of COVID-19.

To cater to the influx of tourists, the construction and continuous operation of hotels, resorts, and other lodging establishments demand substantial energy consumption and resource utilisation, further amplifying the environmental impact of the tourism

sector. Given the increasing severity of climate change consequences, it is crucial for the tourism industry to take proactive steps to address both its detrimental environmental effects and its ability to adapt to the evolving climate conditions.

One of the most effective ways the tourism industry can mitigate its carbon footprint is through offset programs.

These initiatives push travellers and tourism businesses to invest in projects that reduce or capture an equivalent amount of carbon emissions to those produced during their trips. For example, travellers can purchase carbon offsets for their flights, which fund projects like reforestation, renewable energy, or methane capture. Tourism companies can also take a leading role in carbon offset programmes by voluntarily offsetting their own emissions and encouraging their customers to do the same. Hotels and resorts can significantly reduce their carbon footprint by adopting energy-efficient technologies and utilising renewable energy sources. This entails the incorporation of solar panels, energy-efficient lighting, and HVAC systems, along with the adoption of water-saving strategies. Educational programs aimed at

both tourists and professionals within the tourism industry are crucial for addressing the impacts of climate change and advancing sustainability.

It's high time for the tourism industry to now deliver a more sustainable future for the benefit of the planet, and the future prosperity of the industry.




Dr Ross Curran
Associate Professor at Edinburgh Business
School at Heriot-Watt University, Dubai
(The views expressed
are solely of the author.)

Hotels can significantly reduce their carbon footprint by adopting energy-efficient technologies and utilising renewable energy sources

Qatar welcomes 4 mn visitors in 2023

Qatar has recorded four million visitors in 2023, surpassing the annual number of visitors of the past five years. The numbers reflect the positive momentum of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™ and the country’s ongoing efforts to advance the tourism sector. **His Excellency Saad bin Ali Al Kharji**, President, Qatar Tourism, shares more on the issue.

 TT Bureau

The record turnout of visitors in Qatar finds reason in the continuity of the Hayya platform and ease of visa procedures for visitors coming to Qatar. These efforts have been complemented by easy travel policies that allow citizens of 95 countries around the world to obtain an instant visa upon arrival in Qatar. Events and roadshows organised by the Qatar Tourism throughout the year have also contributed significantly to the steady increase in visitor numbers.

His Excellency Saad bin Ali Al Kharji, President, Qatar Tourism, said: “Qatar continues to establish itself as a global tourism destination with extended and safe tourism infrastructure in an atmosphere of authentic Arabian hospitality. Qatar’s diverse tourism offerings, with its pristine 500 kilometres of coastline, world-



His Excellency Saad bin Ali Al Kharji
President
Qatar Tourism

class museums, and cultural and contemporary facilities, complement Qatar’s diverse tourism offerings to provide a unique and distinctive holiday for visitors to Qatar locally, regionally and specifically GCC nationals, as well as internationally. Qatar Tourism is keen to promote family tourism in the State of Qatar and provide something suitable for all family members for an exceptional

experience. We continue to work at Qatar Tourism to promote opportunities and further growth in the tourism sector.”

Since the beginning of 2023, Saudi Arabia tops the number of visitors coming to Qatar, with 25.3 per cent of the total international visitors coming from the Kingdom, followed by India

During the opening of the first international edition of the Geneva International Motor Show last October, Qatar Tourism recorded the attendance of 1,000 journalists and 180,000 visitors over the course of 10 days.

The 2023-24 cruise season, Qatar’s largest cruise season, was also launched in conjunc-

Qatar Tourism is keen to promote family tourism in Qatar and provide something suitable for family members for an exceptional experience

(10.4 per cent), Germany (4.1 per cent), UK (3.9 per cent) and Kuwait (3.5 per cent). Visitors arriving by air accounted for 85 per cent, followed by 14 per cent by land ports and 1 per cent by sea.

tion with the arrival of the luxury cruise ship, Crystal Symphony, where 81 cruises are expected to be received and attract about 350,000 visitors, achieving a significant increase compared to



the previous season, which saw 54 cruises and 253,191 visitors. As part of its ambitious plans for 2024, Qatar is preparing to host more than 80 events ranging from sports tournaments, cultural activities and international exhibitions, in addition to organising a series of shopping festivals and hosting many international sum-

mits. Hosting the AFC Asian Cup, Qatar Shopping Festival, Doha Jewellery & Watches Exhibition, Katara International Arabian Horse Festival, Qatar Annual Economic Forum and Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix are the highlights of 2024, as well as the Electric and Self-Driving Mobility Forum and hosting the World Summit. 



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Sleep tops UAE travellers' choices

One of the key trends witnessed for 2024 among the United Arab Emirates (UAE) travellers is that they are seeking the kind of experiences that relax and rejuvenate them during their holidays, with a high percentage of them giving preference to sleep. A whopping 63 per cent of the UAE travellers sleep better on holiday, according to the latest research by Skyscanner.

TT Bureau

The Skyscanner's research focused on three key areas - Trending destinations, Behaviours and Traveller types. When it comes to trending destinations, there are two sets of destinations; trending and value destinations based on the booking data on Skyscanner.

The floor opened with the trending destinations, and this year at number one in the category as the most buzzing place is Osaka, Japan, which witnessed 305 per cent search increase from the UAE. This increase is due to the ease of visa for Emiratis or UAE nationals. Introduction of the e-visa system by Japan for expatriates who live in the UAE also boosted the numbers in the past few months. Antalya, Turkiye, was placed at number 2 with 273 per cent, followed by Tokyo, Japan, with 250 per cent. Rome took the 4th position with 154 per cent and Berlin at 5th position with 96 per cent. Amsterdam and New York shared 62 per cent each, with London at 52 per cent, Athens at 47 per cent and Paris at 32 per cent as the top 10 destinations.

Best value destinations
Orlando, USA, was the first des-

ination offering the most value for travellers with 72 per cent price drop, followed by Male in Maldives with a drop of 58 per cent. Some of the reasons for the price drop were mentioned as the increase of the number of routes, which had impacted as a reason to drop in price year on year. In terms of the experiences that were booked by travellers cultural and personal experiences were some of the rising trends seen.

Travel behaviours
In terms of behaviours or vibes to be expected this year, sleep tourism is a growing trend in the UAE with 63 per cent of UAE travellers stating that they sleep well when travelling or on holiday. Gastronomy or seeking places to try out new dishes is another emerging trend for 2024 by UAE travellers and in this regard, Osaka has taken over the top position.

Attending concerts abroad is a key trend that is catching on with the UAE travellers. Skyscanner's term 'Gig tripping' is that most UAE travellers are willing to go on a short haul flight as many as 72 per cent consider travelling to a gig or concert in a different country. Once again the trend of main character energy or visiting film sets and locations where various movies were filmed still



has 28 per cent travellers opting to personally visit these place and revisit the experience this time live on site.

'Everywhere' takes the crown
The word 'everywhere' has come up as the most searched word from the UAE. When travellers want to check a destination, this seems to be the most trending word and 97 per cent UAE travellers are keen to go somewhere new in 2024. Skyscanner appointed its first ever 'Everywhere Agent' and launched its new 'Everywhere Guide' for the UAE travellers. Whilst 97 per

cent of the UAE travellers are keen to try somewhere new in 2024, 38 per cent share that one of their biggest struggles when booking travel is deciding where to go. What is more, 70 per cent of the UAE travellers affirm that they place higher trust in advice from seasoned travellers who have explored themselves

exploration and writing six travel books, he is a treasure trove of travel insights. In collaboration with Skyscanner, Garfors will be available for a limited, first-come, first-served virtual service where UAE holidaymakers can book a free 10-minute Everywhere Appointment video call for personalised travel rec-

media. For example, some of my favourite destinations within a 5-hour flight from the UAE include the cultural capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, and further afield Issyk-Kul Lake, which is surrounded by wild and impressive mountains, as well as small and charming villages. Alternatively, visitors who are seeking a beach trip to Seychelles can explore Praslin and La Digue, as both offer a more laid-back atmosphere and are home to more affordable resorts and hotels than popular Mahé."

This year Osaka, Japan, was at number one in the trending destinations category. Osaka saw 305 per cent search increase from the UAE

Ayoub El Mamoun, Travel Expert, Skyscanner says, "Our Everywhere programme is not just about offering alternatives; it's about inspiring a shift in perspective. Through exclusive one-to-one sessions with record-breaking Gunnar Garfors and his recommendations that go beyond the ordinary on the Everywhere Guide, we hope to empower and equip travellers with the tools needed to discover and enjoy destinations that they didn't even know they desired."

extensively. Amid the current weariness towards predictable travel destinations, coupled with rising concerns about travel expenses and a preference for recommendations from experienced travellers, Skyscanner's new Everywhere Guide and Everywhere Agent was created to help cash and time strapped UAE travellers. Inspired by the UAE's favourite search tool 'Everywhere', the new programme will provide unrivalled travel advice to help consumers navigate their way through the plethora of recommendations available ahead of their 2024 trips.

'Everywhere Agent'
The first person to visit every country in the world twice and holder of 10 travel-related world records, **Gunnar Garfors**, Everywhere Agent for the UAE, Skyscanner, is dedicated to assisting Skyscanner travellers with their holiday plans. After 30 years of

ommendations and tips on how to make their travel spend go further in 2024.

Garfors says, "Having travelled the world twice, my aim is to ignite enthusiasm and inspire people to uncover unique and incredible destinations. I suggest going above and beyond the clichés dominating social

2024 travel demand is high

- ❖ A huge 97 per cent of travellers are keen to visit somewhere new in 2024, but 10 per cent struggle to discover any new destinations
- ❖ Amid the current fatigue felt towards conventional tourist hotspots, 96 per cent of travellers feel that the same destinations are perpetuated by social media, TV and film
- ❖ Contrary to the repetitive echo-chamber of social media recommendations, 70 per cent of holiday-makers affirm that they place higher trust in advice from seasoned travellers who have explored extensively themselves
- ❖ 77 per cent of travellers admit that the prospect of booking travel in 2024 is overwhelming
- ❖ 42 per cent attribute their apprehensions to the cost of travel, alongside 38 per cent saying it stems from deciding where to go



Amadeus commits to sustainability

Amadeus has joined the Sustainable Hospitality Alliance (the Alliance) to bring its travel expertise to the table in the quest to support a more prosperous and responsible hospitality sector.

TT Bureau

The Sustainable Hospitality Alliance, with donor members including 27 world-leading hotel companies with a combined reach of over 50,000 properties, brings together hospitality companies and the wider hospitality value chain, such as owners, investors, and suppliers to address key challenges affecting people and places around the world related to hospitality. Through strategic initiatives and global networks, the organisation develops practical programmes to create a prosperous and responsible hospitality sector that contributes to a positive net impact on destinations.

As part of its membership, Amadeus will hold a permanent position on the Senior Advisory Council that was established to provide strategic advice, create a network of influential leaders



Glenn Mandziuk
Chief Executive Officer, Sustainable Hospitality Alliance

and drive change towards Net Positive Hospitality.

Glenn Mandziuk, Chief Executive Officer, Sustainable Hospitality Alliance, says: "Having Amadeus' broad, global travel expertise in the discussion with the Alliance is a game changer. Onboarding Amadeus to our Senior Advisory Council is an important step in tackling the challenges the hospitality in-

dustry faces. Having Amadeus as a member will help drive our collaborative approach on the journey to Net Positive Hospitality. The Alliance is built for the industry, by the industry, to deliver positive results not only to hospitality players but also for the environment, local communities, and preservation of culture."

Francisco Pérez-Lozano Rüter, President - Hospitality, Amadeus, adds: "Our membership in the Alliance reflects our wider ambition to work towards a more sustainable travel industry. Thanks to our position as a global travel technology provider, we look forward to making a meaningful contribution to the Alliance. By sharing insights and experiences based on our best practices across all travel sectors, we aspire to help accelerate the advancement of the industry's goals toward net positive hospitality."

KSA sees 156% visitor growth in 4 yrs

Saudi Arabia has accomplished an extraordinary achievement in tourism, achieving a full recovery and recording a 156% growth in international arrivals in 2023 compared to 2019.

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This achievement has not only contributed to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA's) economic growth but also positioned it as a key driver in the Middle East's tourism recovery, highlights in the World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) Barometer report released in January 2024. The Middle East region, led by Saudi Arabia, is the only one to exceed pre-pandemic tourism levels, with a 22% growth in 2023 compared to 2019, it says.

Globally, the tourism sector is steadily rebounding. By the end of 2023 the global average achieved 12 per cent below pre-pandemic levels in international arrivals, with about 1.3 billion international arrivals. The sector's international revenues neared \$1.3 trillion, reaching 93 per cent of the 2019 figure of \$1.5 trillion. The direct contribu-



UNWTO Barometer January 2024

tion of tourism to the global GDP was estimated at 3 per cent, or \$3.3 trillion, in 2023, based on the UNWTO's preliminary indicators. Looking ahead, the UNWTO forecasts a complete recovery of global tourism from the pandemic by 2024, with an expected growth of 2 per cent compared to 2019. Saudi Arabia's tourism sector stands out in the UNWTO reports, leading the G20 nations in the growth

rate of international arrivals in 2023 and ranked 2nd as the world's fastest-growing tourist destination for Q1-Q3 2023. The Kingdom has seen remarkable growth in various tourist destinations, achieving a record in international visitor spending. The first three quarters of 2023 recorded an international visitor spending exceeding 100 billion Saudi riyals, according to the Saudi Central Bank (SAMA).

Aviation leaders meet in Abu Dhabi

With the opening of the new terminal at Abu Dhabi airport and recovery of travel, airline leaders recently met in Abu Dhabi to discuss new strategies and way forward for the future. As sustainability and climate change have become pivotal today, the industry leaders further shared ideas, strategies and the way to combat climate change.



Commercial aviation surge ahead

The 18th edition of the Dubai Airshow, organised at DWC, Dubia Airshow Site, recently attempted to redefine the future of the industry. The mega event featured more than 1,400 exhibitors from over 95 countries, 350+ international leading speakers, 80+ start-ups and 20 country pavilions. There were more than 190 aircraft on static and flying display at the airshow.



Future Hospitality Summit returns to Riyadh

After the record-breaking success of 2023 edition of the Future Hospitality Summit (FHS) Saudi Arabia, which was attended by more than 1,100 delegates from 35+ countries, the Kingdom's most influential hospitality investment event returns to Al Faisaliah Hotel in Riyadh from 29 April to 1 May 2024. The objectives of FHS Saudi Arabia are strategically aligned with Vision 2030.

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Launched in partnership with Saudi Arabia's G20 Secretariat in 2020, FHS Saudi Arabia brings together the hospitality investment community leaders to discuss development, investment, entrepreneurship, sustainability, innovation, and human capital with insights on the continued growth of the Kingdom's hospitality and tourism sectors. This will be the 7th industry conference organised by The Bench for the Saudi market, in association with Al Faisaliah Hotel and Al Khozama Investment.

"We are thrilled to welcome back Al Faisaliah Hotel and Al Khozama Investment as our host sponsors after the resounding success of this year's event at the iconic Al Faisaliah Hotel," said **Jonathan Worsley**, Chairman of The Bench. "The objectives of



This will be the 7th industry conference organised by The Bench for the Saudi market, in association with Al Faisaliah Hotel and Al Khozama Investment

FHS Saudi Arabia are strategically aligned with Vision 2030, and our carefully curated programme will focus on the development

and sustainable growth of the hospitality industry in Saudi Arabia, the adoption of technology, innovation and entrepreneurship

in the sector, as well as investment and job creation opportunities," added Worsley.

FHS Saudi Arabia 2024 will address the Kingdom's latest developments and the industry's hottest topics under the theme 'Invest in Tomorrow: Today, Together', with conference tracks focused on hospitality investment, industry entrepreneurship, sustainable development, and

FHS Saudi Arabia 2024 will address KSA's developments and industry's hottest topics under 'Invest in Tomorrow: Today, Together' theme

human capital. "The FHS Saudi Arabia Advisory Board convened in Riyadh last month to discuss and shape the event programme and we look forward to developing their invaluable input on topics and speakers into a thought-provoking three-day agenda," said **Tanja Millner**, Production Director at The Bench. In addition to the main-stage conference sessions, the event will feature an international exhibition of Saudi hospitality brands showcasing their projects and investment opportunities, the Global Restaurant Investment Forum (GRIF) connecting restaurant investors and operators, and

dedicated student sessions, networking experiences and business opportunities.

Khalid Saud Abu Haimed, Chief Executive Officer, Al Khozama Investments, said: "We are excited to partner with The Bench again as the host sponsor for the upcoming Future Hospitality Summit in Saudi Arabia, right here in our vibrant home, Riyadh. Anticipating the arrival of delegates, we are eager to host what promises to be another exceptionally successful event, fostering collaboration and advancements within the hospitality investment community." 📌

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Global biz travel spend rise by 47% in '23

The business travel industry is experiencing significant growth, as evidenced by statistics from the 2023 GBTA Business Travel Index™ Report. As per the report, the global business travel spending rose by 47 per cent to \$1.03 trillion last year. Pent-up demand following the pandemic and healthier economic conditions than forecast were highlighted as significant contributing factors for this shift.

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The 2023 GBTA Business Travel Index™ Report stated that global business travel spending rose by 47 per cent to \$1.03 trillion last year and is expected to grow to nearly \$1.8 trillion globally by 2027. **Danielle Curtis**, Exhibition Director, Arabian Travel Market (ATM), said: "All of the latest research suggests that the business events and business travel sectors are going from strength to strength. These sectors have always been important verticals at ATM, and the official partnership with ICCA (International Congress and Convention Association) and GBTA (Global Business Travel Association) for the 2024 edition will take our offering to the next level. By collaborating with these respected industry leaders, ATM aims to deliver even more value and innovation to its attendees



Danielle Curtis
Exhibition Director
Arabian Travel Market

and exhibitors. With a focus on these two vital sectors, ATM is committed to offering a world-

class event that provides a platform for networking, education, and business opportunities for professionals from around the world."

ATM announced a strategic partnership with the ICCA and the GBTA for the upcoming edition of the event, which takes place from 6-9 May 2024 at the Dubai World Trade Centre. The renowned global organisations have been appointed as 'Knowledge Partners' for the regional trade show, providing in-depth insights and opportunities for the thriving segments of business events and travel.

All of the latest research suggests that the business events and business travel sectors are going from strength to strength



Dr Senthil Gopinath, Chief Executive Officer, ICCA, said: "ICCA proudly announces our collaboration with ATM as we celebrate the inclusion of business events as a foundational segment in future editions. Envisaging a dynamic future, we see global business events seamlessly integrating with ATM's rich tapestry of opportunities. With ICCA

joining as a Knowledge Partner for the MICE segment, we are collectively positioned to redefine the landscape of collaboration, innovation and success in the interconnected realms of business. We look forward to working together in 2024 and beyond."

Catherine Logan, Regional Senior Vice President EMEA

and APAC, GBTA, added: "Although one of the smaller global business travel markets, the MEA region has huge potential for growth and recovered more than any other region in 2022, reaching 95 per cent of the pre-pandemic business travel spending. Business travel spend in the region is forecast to exceed this figure in 2023 and reach US \$30.6 million."

Commercial strategy key to biz growth

The hotel industry is once again in a state of flux; the pandemic changed the way hotels operate but we are currently in a second evolutionary phase in which the convergence of technology and strong commercial leadership is proving to be an operational imperative for hotels to ensure profitability over the long-term, shares **Noelani Schroy**, Vice President - Commercial Strategies, LodgIQ.

TT Bureau

What are the key areas to focus on in order to bring better revenue to the property?

An important first step in this new operational evolution is the implementation of a commercial leader to oversee all the internal departments responsible for revenue generation. In the past few years, commercial teams have started being established in big, branded properties, but today, it is important for all properties – from a 50-room independent property to a 1000-room resort – to implement a commercial leadership role or department to be successful going forward. And, even if you have a small 10-room BnB, changing to a more commercially focused mindset will do nothing but good for your operational efficiency and your bottom line.

Is it necessary for all properties to have a commercial leader?

A hotel's success relies heavily on the ability of its revenue management, marketing, and sales departments to seamlessly collaborate towards shared goals, breaking down the siloes that traditionally exist between these operational departments. This is made possible through the implementation of a robust commercial leadership team, which will oversee the three departments, keeping them working towards common business goals through collaborative action. This strategic alignment ensures that all efforts are synchronized, maximizing the impact of the hotel's commercial initiatives.

Strong leadership fosters a culture of collaboration, innovation, and adaptability, which is hugely important in our ever-changing hospitality industry, but leadership alone will not give hoteliers the edge that they need to stay ahead of the curve. Informed interdepartmental decision-



Noelani Schroy
Vice President - Commercial Strategies
LodgIQ

making, based on easy-to-understand un-siloed data, is the cornerstone of successful commercial strategies, making a commercial strategy platform the catalyst for a property's strategic alignment.

One important caveat: Many solutions call themselves a commercial strategy platform but they don't actually perform functionality beyond that of a data well,

which will unsilo your data but will not have a real impact on your property's bottom line. The real ROI of a commercial strategy platform is the strategic insight that it offers, which enables each revenue generating department to take proactive, clear, forward-thinking actions.

What is a commercial strategy platform?

A commercial strategy platform is a centralized hub that provides an aggregated and real-time view of critical metrics, which eliminates the traditional data silos that have existed between a property's operational departments. Using a shared pool of information across the revenue management, sales and marketing departments allows for a more holistic understanding of the market, guest behaviors, and the overall performance of the hotel, which is beneficial for all three departments' deliverables and responsibilities. From adjusting room

rates based on demand and consumers' willingness to pay, refining marketing campaigns to target specific demographics, or optimizing sales efforts for peak periods, a commercial strategy platform provides a single source of real-time data upon which all

functionality, such as rate optimization, group rate optimization and forecasting functionality. But the best part is that commercial strategy platforms give your revenue management, sales and marketing teams access to strategic recommendations on how

A hotel's success relies on the ability of its revenue management, marketing, and sales departments to seamlessly collaborate towards shared goals


strategic decisions should be made, ensuring more effective, data-based decision-making.

Commercial strategy platforms provide hoteliers with the property data that traditional business intelligence solutions offer, as well as real-time demand and market data, in addition to providing valuable revenue management

to best accomplish their departmental business goals.

By providing all the data that all three departments could need, from a centralized solution, it empowers the departments to act independently, without the need to request information from other departments to facilitate timely decision-making.

Saudi Travel Market sparks global interest

The inaugural Saudi Travel Market (STM), to be organised from 25-27 February 2024 in Riyadh with  as the media partner, will provide a platform for key exhibitors from Saudi Arabia and the rest of the world to showcase their offerings. This premier event promises to be a dynamic convergence of key players, innovators, and stakeholders within the travel sector.

TT Bureau

Arabian Travel Award winner Rezlive has signed up as gold sponsor with Rent Conferences and Exhibitions Company for the first edition of the Saudi Travel Market (STM). Jaal Shah, Group Managing Director, Travel Designer Group, shared, "We will be participating in the inaugural Saudi Travel Market 2024 as both an exhibitor and sponsor. Saudi Arabia holds significant importance in the travel industry, and your presence at this event reflects your commitment to exploring and contributing to this thriving

market. Being a part of the first edition of this prestigious event offers a unique opportunity to engage with travel partners, fostering valuable connections and collaborations. This premier event promises to be a dynamic convergence of key players, innovators, and stakeholders within the travel sector, and we are very happy to be a part of this event."

Mohammed Al-Harbi, General Manager, Rent Conferences and Exhibitions Company, said: "We are pleased to sign a new agreement with Rezlive to sponsor the Saudi Travel Market. The part-



Jaal Shah
Group Managing Director
Travel Designer Group



Mohammed Al-Harbi
General Manager
Rent Conferences and Exhibitions Company



Zaheer Jedly
Vice President-Sales
Rezlive.com

zoog Suleiman said: "We are pleased to sponsor one of the most promising tourism exhibitions in Saudi Arabia. Through our new partners, we aim to present a distinctive first edition of a tourist exhibition that befits Saudi Arabia as a leader in the regional and global travel and tourism market."

Rezlive.com is an award-winning international B2B online booking system that provides global travel content - hotels, sightseeing, activities, and transfers to travel partners. Rezlive.com was launched in 2007 in India and is the flagship product of Travel Designer Group, one of the largest and fastest-growing B2B online travel portals in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. From humble beginnings in Ahmedabad, India, Rezlive.com today employs over 250 employees in 32 offices in 18 countries around the world. 

Rezlive has signed up as gold sponsor with Rent Conferences and Exhibitions Company for the first edition of the Saudi Travel Market (STM)

nership with one of the world's leading companies in the travel and tourism sector is very important in attracting international companies to the Kingdom. We consider the Saudi Travel Market to be one of the important exhibitions through which we intend to place the Kingdom on the list of major tourist destinations in the coming years. Through this exhibition, we aim to attract the large-

est international companies to the Kingdom and make it the first and best choice for everyone."

The company's Vice President of Sales in the Gulf Cooperation Council, Zaheer Jedly said: "The Gulf Cooperation Council market is one of the most important markets in the region in the field of travel and tourism, and Saudi Arabia is the largest and

most important market for us. Therefore, our sponsorship of this exhibition is a testament to the importance of the exhibition and the region for us. We strive to be one of the leading players in the region, and we expect many new agreements and partnerships from this exhibition."

Rezlive's Business Development Manager in Saudi Arabia, Mar-

Media Partner





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MOVEMENTS

TRAVELPOINT Oman

SOUMAVA MUKHERJEE has recently been appointed as General Manager with Oman's leading Travel Management Company, TravelPoint LLC based in Muscat, Oman. Prior to this change, Soumava was employed with GMR Group of Airports as Head-Airline Marketing & Route Development for their new greenfield airport at Goa, India. Soumava brings wealth of experience of more than two decades across all sectors of Travel & Aviation including Travel Technology & Tourism in India & Middle East. He has demonstrated history of working with leading organisations like Jet Airways, Singapore Airlines, IHCL, Interglobe Technology Quotient in India & with Bhawan Travel Group in Oman. Soumava is a growth contributor.



FORTUNE GROUP OF HOTELS Dubai

PRACHI P SHETTY joins Fortune Group of Hotels as Director of Marketing and Operations. With a deep-rooted connection to the family business, where her entrepreneurial spirit found its first sparks at a young age, she is committed to carry forward a legacy and contribute to the dynamic hospitality industry. With a background in finance from University of Warwick, UK and pursuing a master's degree in international hospitality from Les Roches, Spain, led her an opportunity to work with one of the leading restaurant companies in Hong Kong. She immersed herself in this dynamic industry, working in various capacities within restaurants and in finance that exposed her to the intricacies of the service sector.



JW MARRIOTT HOTEL Muscat, Oman

JW Marriott Hotel Muscat has appointed **HADI MEDAWAR** as Director of Sales & Marketing for the brand's flagship hotel in Oman, which reopened its doors recently. Medawar brings with him 15 years of diverse hospitality and academic experience in sales and marketing roles, event management and revenue management, with past involvement with pre-opening projects. He adds his leadership, passion, and commitment to quality and service. Originally from Lebanon, Medawar holds a Bachelor's degree in Hospitality and Tourism Management, a Master's degree in International Events Management from the Ecole de Management in France and is currently studying for his PhD in Tourism from Lebanese University in Beirut.



ANDAZ Doha

Hyatt appoints **JAFAR ABU BAJI** as General Manager of Andaz Doha, ahead of its highly anticipated opening in 2024. Possessing an extensive experience in the hospitality, particularly within the Hyatt portfolio, Baji brings a wealth of industry wisdom to his role. With an impressive career spanning over 22 years, he brings with him almost two decades of dedicated service with the Hyatt brand across the Middle East, working in Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Prior to this, he was the Hotel Manager at Hyatt Regency Riyadh Olaya. During his tenure, Baji has played a pivotal role in the opening and continued success of the hotel in the KSA capital. As a passionate hospitality professional, he embodies a profound understanding of this dynamic hospitality industry.



SABRE Corporate Office

CHINMAI SHARMA has joined Sabre Travel Solutions as Global Head - Lodging, Ground & Sea. In his new role, Sharma will lead the lodging, ground and sea segment within Sabre's global distribution business. Previously named one of the 'Top 20 Extraordinary Minds within Sales, Marketing, and Technology' by HSMAI Europe, Sharma has more than two decades of global travel and hospitality experience. He is actively involved with the boards of non-profit hospitality associations like HSMAI and HEDNA, and is a current mentor with the start-up incubator at NYU Jonathan M. Tisch Center of Hospitality Innovation Hub. Sharma's industry experience includes working across the globe with leading companies such as Expedia, Wyndham Hotel Group, and Taj Group of Hotels.



PARK INN BY RADISSON HOTEL & APARTMENTS Kuwait

Radisson Hotel Group appoints **ODILE DE GROOT** as General Manager of the newly signed Park Inn by Radisson Hotel & Apartments Kuwait. Groot, a seasoned professional with 18 years of service at Radisson Hotel Group, steps into this role backed by her extensive industry experience and leadership qualities. A notable participant in the company's mentor programme, Odile has been instrumental in nurturing talent within the hospitality sector. The Park Inn by Radisson Hotel & Apartments Kuwait, scheduled to open in the beginning of 2024, is poised to become a landmark property with its 250 rooms and large ballrooms. Geographically advantaged, the hotel overlooks the Arabian Gulf and is located just 36 kilometres south of Kuwait City.



IHG HOTELS & RESORTS Kuwait

IHG Hotels & Resorts introduces **Rabih Al Atrash** as General Manager of Arabella Beach Hotel, Kuwait, Vignette Collection. In his current role, Atrash is spearheading the pre-opening preparations and leading the hotel's team to ensure the successful launch of the first Vignette Collection property in Kuwait in the first quarter of 2024. Atrash is a highly experienced hotelier recognized for his expertise in team development, cost management, revenue enhancement, and achieving outstanding guest satisfaction scores. His strategic acumen, coupled with his ability to drive effective initiatives, optimize revenue, and establish comprehensive training programs, make him an invaluable asset. His people-centric approach consistently fosters successful team accomplishments.



HYDE HOTEL Dubai

Luxury lifestyle hotel, Hyde Dubai has appointed **Milana Kulkeyeva** as its new Head of Marketing. Kulkeyeva brings a rich educational background with degrees in Law and Economics from prestigious institutions in Beijing, China, and Kazakhstan, respectively. Her professional journey includes a commendable four-year stint at InterContinental Hotels Group, where she played pivotal roles in the pre-opening of Crowne Plaza Dubai Marina and later served as Cluster Digital, PR and Marketing Manager for a group of four hotels at Dubai Festival City. Her accomplishments include a string of successful pre-openings, relaunches, brand conversions and consistently fruitful marketing campaigns.



THE BENCH Dubai

Daria Smith has joined The Bench as Portfolio Director of the Future Hospitality Summit series based from their Dubai office. A seasoned event leader having held senior roles with top international event organisations and a passionate advocate for diversity and women's empowerment in the events sector, Smith serves as a Founding Director and Board Member of the Women in Exhibitions Network. Additionally, she contributes to the Association of Event Organisers Development Board, focusing on talent attraction and retention. Smith actively engages in knowledge sharing as an ambassador and mentor for Elevate Mentoring — a pioneering programme supporting career development in the events industry.



SHAZA HOTELS Dubai

Shaza Hotels announced the promotion of **Shaji Abu Salih** to Vice President - Business Development & Growth. As Vice President for Business Development & Growth, Abu Salih will be leading the new Developments and Portfolio Growth of the company, along with the existing role in heading sales, revenue and marketing strategies for the operating and upcoming hotels. Shaji has been a part of the Shaza family since 2009, before which he spent several years with Kempinski Hotels in various Sales & Marketing roles. He also holds an MBA from NEOMA Business School in France in Hospitality & Tourism Management.



SHAZA HOTELS Dubai

Shaza Hotels announced the promotion of **Franck Descat** to be the Vice President - Finance & Asset Management. In his role as Vice President - Finance & Asset Management, Descat will be leading corporate finance, driving financial performance, implementing internal control, and overseeing pre-opening budgets and tax compliance. A CMA certified professional, Descat holds two Bachelor's degrees in finance and accounting, and information systems from Fordham University and Skema Business School, and an MBA from Ecole Hotellier Lausanne. As a member of the Shaza Family for the past 12 years, he has a very good understanding of the brand and all areas of the organisation.



SHAZA HOTELS Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Amjad Irshaidat has been promoted as Vice President for KSA Operations at Shaza Hotels. Irshaidat is a seasoned professional in the hospitality industry with an impressive track record of over 30 years in various international brands. Born in Amman, Jordan, he joined Shaza Madinah Hotel in August 2010 as the first General Manager at Shaza and ever since then, he consistently showcased his commitment to maintaining exceptional standards of guest satisfaction, and operational efficiency at all hotels he have operated. His experience not only serves as a source of inspiration but also plays a vital role in shaping the success and growth trajectory of Shaza Hotels within the KSA hospitality sector.



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