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21  
Years & Counting

## Arabian Travel Awards are back to dazzle ME

Arabian Travel Awards, one of the region's esteemed accolades in travel, tourism & hospitality sectors, returns for its 8<sup>th</sup> edition on 25 November, 2025. Leaders will gather from across GCC to honour excellence in the Middle East travel landscape.

Dr Shehara Fernando

Held as an exclusive, invitation-only affair, the Arabian Travel Awards 2025 has become a platform for celebrating the achievements of the region's most influential tourism and hospitality leaders. With every year, the event continues to raise the bar, highlighting individuals and organisations whose commitment has evolved the way the world sees the Middle East.

True to its reputation for fairness, winners are determined through



SanJeet  
Mentor  
Arabian Travel Awards

an internet-based voting process. Backed by and TravelTV News, the ATA will spotlight excellence across four key segments: Personal Awards, Business Awards, Trending Awards

and Partner Awards. Categories include Best Business Hotel, Best City Hotel, Best Green Hotel, Best Destination Management Company, Best B2B Travel Portal and Best

**SanJeet**, Mentor, ATA, said, "The awards come at a pivotal time. With the region seeing historic growth and tourism fast becoming a pillar for diversified economies, it is

**With the region witnessing growth and tourism fast becoming a pillar for diversified economies, it is vital to celebrate those leading the way**

Luxury Hotel, among others. Each category acknowledges excellence across different facets of the Arabian travel and hospitality ecosystem.

important than ever to celebrate those leading the way. the Arabian Travel Awards is a tribute to those redefining the future of travel in the GCC."

## AI to modify guest journey

With challenges ranging from fragmented technology systems to shifting guest expectations lies an opportunity, reimagination of hotel retailing by turning every guest interaction into a personalised, data-driven experience powered by AI.

TT Bureau

At this year's Arabian Travel Market (ATM) in Dubai, Sabre Hospitality is poised to lead the conversation on how technology is revolutionising the guest experience. Industry experts from Sabre Hospitality—**Frank Trampert**, Global Managing Director, Com-



Frank Trampert  
Global MD, Community Sales and Marketing, Sabre Hospitality



Amy Read  
Vice President-Innovation Sabre Hospitality

munity Sales and Marketing, and **Amy Read**, Vice President of Innovation—will share their insights on how intelligent retailing and AI-driven personalisation are not only addressing common industry challenges but also unlocking new revenue streams. recently interacted with Trampert and Read to

Contd. on page 20 ▶



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# 150 Chinese buyers at CVS UAE

Alexander Glos, CEO, China i2i Group, in an interview with , shares his viewpoint on China Visitors' Summit (CVS), scheduled to take place in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Al Ain in August. Since founding the company in 1999 and bringing the summit to the UAE in 2013, Glos has been at the forefront of bridging the China-Middle East travel corridor.

 TT Bureau

**Tell us about CVS in the UAE this year?**

The CVS is returning to the UAE this year with two conferences in three cities— 25 to 26 August in Dubai at the So/Up-town Dubai Luxury Hotel and 28 to 29 August in Abu Dhabi and Al Ain at the Rotana Hotel. It is a major expansion, underscoring how vital the UAE has become to Chinese outbound tourism.

**How many Chinese buyers are attending the conferences?**

With our partners in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, we are hosting 150 of China's



Alexander Glos  
CEO  
China i2i Group

top travel buyers, making this the largest Chinese travel trade event outside of China. These are decision-makers representing tour operators for luxury and adventure, OTAs and MICE specialists.

**What is included in the CVS 2025 programme?**

The summit will feature four days of face-to-face meetings, five days of destination discovery, including site inspections, trainings, and collaboration with DMCs, airlines and hotels and the like. It is a mix of B2B meetings and experiential product engagement.

**Why is the UAE so attractive to the Chinese travellers?**

The UAE is a regional hub for Chinese tourism, thanks to good air connectivity from China, a range of affordable to luxury travel options, its role as a launchpad for

travel to KSA, Egypt, Qatar, Georgia, Maldives and beyond. Dubai and Abu Dhabi are key gateways, not just destinations.

**How has the Chinese travel market changed post-pandemic?**

We are seeing more lux-

values personalised service, quality and deeper cultural experiences.

**What's the main challenge in attracting Chinese travellers today?**

The challenge is in finding the right audience. China offers every kind of

traveller requires targeted digital engagement.

**What is the best way to market the UAE to the Chinese travellers?**

At China i2i Group, we help more than 400 global partners each year through a gamut of ways. These include: We Chat. Little Red Book (Xiaohongshu), Weibo and Trip.com, among others.

**Who are the key partners in the CVS events?**

We have partnered with Abu Dhabi Tourism, our official destination sponsor, and partners like Accor, Rotana, Hilton, Marriott, Hyatt and Palazzo Versace and dnata.

**With our partners in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, we are hosting 150 of China's travel buyers, making CVS largest Chinese travel trade event**

ury and ultra-luxury travellers, a rise in FITs and families and growth in silver tourism (travellers aged over 55). This group

traveller—luxury, groups, FITs, shoppers, families—but competition is high, and the market is vast. Reaching the right






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PALACE HOTEL DUBAI  
MOUROUJ GLORIA

**URBAN ELEGANCE REDEFINED**




**ITB**  
CHINA

# bullish on GCC entrants

ITB China, to be held from 27 to 29 May, expects over 700 exhibitors from 90 countries, while the number of buyers is set to increase by 30 per cent, reflecting the growing global interest in the event. , as the media partner for the event, speaks with Lydia Li, Deputy General Manager, ITB China, to find out more about the global exhibition.



Dr. Shehara Fernando

## How important is the ME market for ITB China?

The Middle East market holds importance for China's travel industry and ITB China. Firstly, the demand for diverse and unique experiences—Chinese outbound is shifting from mass tourism to premium, personalised experiences—places such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia offer shopping, futuristic architecture and exclusive cultural attractions to Chinese visitors.

Secondly, Visa Facilitation and Policy Support—ME nations has streamlined visa processes for Chinese tourists (e.g., visa-on-arrival, e-visa programme),



Lydia Li  
Deputy General Manager  
ITB China

Business Travel—The Middle East is a global hub for MICE tourism, with world-class venues.

As Chinese corporations expand internationally, demand for business travel and corporate events in the Middle East rises. ITB China facilitates partnerships between the Gulf MICE providers



## Chinese outbound travellers are shifting from mass tourism to premium, personalised experiences

removing barriers to travel. ITB China amplifies these advantages by connecting Middle East tourism boards and agencies with Chinese travel trade buyers, ensuring promotion of visa-friendly policies and destination accessibility. Thirdly, MICE Tourism and

and Chinese enterprises thereby fostering cross-border collaborations and revenue growth.

**Which countries/ other entities have reserved space already and what is the space dedicated?**  
Visitor can see a line-up

of exhibitors from ME this year at ITB China. They include exhibitors from Qatar, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Oman, Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority, Diriyah, Abu Dhabi, and companies such as Miral Destinations, Satguru Travel and Tour Service, Iran Pardisan Tour & Travel Company, Qatar Airways, Steigenberger Hotel & Residence Doha, Safar Pishe Parse Tour and Travel and many others. Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria from North Africa have confirmed to take part in the event.

## This year, we have many newcomers, including Oman, Abu Dhabi, Ras Al Khaimah, Iran from ME, and Algeria from North Africa

### Are there any new exhibitors from the Middle East?

We are happy to see more friends coming to the ITB China to find business in China. This year, we have many newcomers, including Oman, Abu Dhabi, Ras Al Khaimah, Iran from ME, and Algeria from North Africa, and many from other regions.

### Could you share how this year will be different?

Firstly, we expanded international participation with more global destinations and unique tourism providers to meet China's evolving traveller demands.

Secondly, we increased the diversity of buyers, be it in terms of scale, business types, or representing the diversified needs of domestic consumers, especially in sectors such as themed and customised travel.

Tech-driven engagement and our new Travel Innovation Hub project will be one of the highlights. The hub aims to foster collaboration between the tourism and technology sectors and feature a Travel Tech Forum, Innovators Pitch, and an Innovation Showcase. MICE and biz travel sector will still be a focus, due to the growing trend of Chinese compa-

nies going abroad, there is a huge potential market in China.

### Would you be able to share about the conferences, which will take place?

ITB China Conference 2025 will run alongside ITB China, featuring exclusive sessions that spotlight the hottest topics to define the future of China's dynamic travel industry. MICE Meeting Point is an international platform and is designed to cater to the evolving needs of rapidly changing MICE industry of China. The event will take place from 11 to 12 September this year in Beijing.



## RESEARCH FINDINGS

1<sup>st</sup>

China ranked in business travel spending

**372.5 billion**  
It spent \$372.5 in business travel

**\$2 trillion**  
It's projected to exceed by 2028





# Jordan highlights its UNESCO sites

Jordan invites residents to explore its seven UNESCO World Heritage marvels, which offer enriching experiences of the country’s magnificent past and vibrant present. The journey can start from ancient Petra, situated between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea and inhabited since the prehistoric times. The UNESCO sites serve as a perfect getaway for short-haul visits.

TT Bureau

From the remnants of ancient civilizations, defined by Petra, to the breathtaking landscapes of Wadi Rum, visitors to Jordan can explore timeless wonders, all of them preserved with authenticity. They can also marvel at the ingenuity of people who once walked the land, their rich cultural and artistic legacy, and the mesmerising flourishes that nature has carved for itself.

**Dr Abdelrazzak Arabiyat**, MD, Jordan Tourism Board, said: “Our seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites are a powerful



Dr Abdelrazzak Arabiyat  
Managing Director  
Jordan Tourism Board

testament to the diverse civilizational influences that shaped Jordan. Each site has something unique to offer to visitors, transporting them to the marvels of the past, and opening their hearts and

minds to the wonders of nature, as well as the rich cultural, trade and architectural legacy of our ancient communities.”

Just a short flight from all major GCC cities, Jordan’s UNESCO sites serve as perfect geta-

nect with the soul of nature, there are a few other places that offer such a diversity of attractions.

The journey can start with Petra, situated between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea and inhabited since prehistoric times. The




## The rock-cut capital city of the Nabateans became a major caravan centre for the incense of Arabia and the silks of China

ways for short-haul visits – offering all members of the family fascinating cultural experiences. For those who love to con-

nect with the soul of nature, there are a few other places that offer such a diversity of attractions. The journey can start with Petra, situated between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea and inhabited since prehistoric times. The

spices of India, during Hellenistic and Roman times. Petra is half-built, half-carved into the rock, and is surrounded by mountains riddled with passages and gorges. In the south of Jordan is the Wadi Rum Protected Area sprawling over an area of 74,200 hectares. Wadi Rum is defined by


fascinating aspects such as desert landforms developed within continental sandstones. The most recent addition to UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Umm Al-Jimal rises out of Jordan’s northern basalt plain. It is a modern and an ancient archaeological site, home to 2000 years of fascinating history.





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# Madagascar debuts at ATM 2025

**Kanto Ravelojaona**, Director of Partnerships, Tourism Board of Madagascar; **Zoelisoa Rajohnson**, Marketing and Commercial Director, Ravinala Airports and **Manitra Andriamanantsoa**, Cluster Director of Marketing & Communications, Radisson Hotels Madagascar, share details about Madagascar's offerings at Arabian Travel Market 2025 with **TRAVELTALK**.

TT Bureau

**What key messages or themes is Madagascar aiming to highlight at Arabian Travel Market? Madagascar will highlight 3 key messages:**

❖ Authenticity and diversity of experience: Madagascar is a unique destination offering rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes and exceptional biodiversity.



**Kanto Ravelojaona**  
Director of Partnerships, Tourism Board of Madagascar

❖ Travel and leisure experiences connected to nature: Madagascar offers a variety of activities that allow visitors to relax while exploring the country's natural beauty. From peaceful beaches to tropical forests, travellers can enjoy quiet moments, outdoor walks, or wellness stays in an authentic and welcoming environment.

❖ Investing in sustainable tourism: A strong commitment to responsible development that empowers local communities and protects the environment.

**How does your participation in ATM 2025 align with Madagascar's broader tourism and investment goals for the coming years?**

Our participation in ATM 2025 is fully aligned with Madagascar's national strategy, as the Malagasy government has set an ambitious goal of welcoming one million tourists by 2028. As the official promoter of the destination, we have a key role to play in achieving this target. The upcoming Emirates route to Madagascar presents a major opportunity to increase tourist arrivals, while also serving as a catalyst for attracting investment in both tourism infrastructure and airport development.

**What partnerships are you seeking to explore or strengthen with Middle Eastern travel operators and investors?**

We are looking to establish business partnerships with tour operators specialising in tourism and leisure. We aim to open up to new

market opportunities and strengthen our presence in the Middle East.

**How is Radisson Blu Madagascar adapting its offerings to attract high-value travellers from the GCC region?**

As part of our commitment to delivering exceptional, culturally rich and tailored experiences for high-value travellers, Radisson Blu Madagascar has developed a series of curated offerings designed to resonate



**Manitra Andriamanantsoa**  
Cluster Director of Marketing & Communications, Radisson Hotels Madagascar

with the preferences of the GCC market. These experiences combine luxury hospitality with immersive local discovery, making Madagascar an exclusive and meaningful destination.

**Elevated Culinary Journeys:** At Radisson Tam-

boho, our sister hotel a few steps from the Radisson Blu Antananarivo Waterfront, guests can enjoy an authentic Malagasy dining experience in a refined culturally inspired setting. FireLake Grill House & Cocktail Bar at Radisson Blu Waterfront presents a curated selection of Madagascar's premium local products.

**Wildlife & Biodiversity Encounters:** Our concierge-led excursions highlight Madagascar's unique wildlife — lemurs, chameleons and endemic fauna — offering guests a rare and intimate connection with nature.

**Outdoor & Wellness Experiences:** Madagascar's varied terrain offers ideal conditions for golf, trekking and eco-sports in year-round weather.

Customised itineraries can be developed around wellness, soft adventure or nature-focused experiences, appealing to travellers seeking exclusivity and balance.

**Outskirts Discovery & Eco-Retreats:** We offer curated overnight and day trips to Madagascar's most scenic rural destinations, including Andasibe's rainforests



and Ampefy's volcanic lakes and waterfalls.

**Cultural Immersion & Urban Heritage:** Through private city tours, we provide a deeper understanding of Antananarivo's identity — from visits to the Royal Palace and colonial landmarks, to curated access to institutions such as the Musée de la Photographie.

**Are there any upcoming infrastructure developments or airport expansion plans to improve international connectivity to Madagascar?**

Madagascar has taken up several projects aimed at improving international connectivity. The most notable initiative is the expansion of its two primary international airports, Ivato Airport in Antananarivo and Fascene Airport in Nosy Be. These upgrades include reinforced runways, expanded terminal facilities, and the ability to accommodate wide-bodied aircraft for the first time. Ivato Airport's passenger handling capacity is set to more than double to 1.5 million annually, while Fascene Airport will support up to 500,000 passengers per year.

These developments are expected to enhance Madagascar's global competitiveness, particu-



**Zoelisoa Rajohnson**  
Marketing and Commercial Director, Ravinala Airports

larly in tourism and trade, while also boosting employment and generating substantial tax revenues.

## TOUR OVERVIEW

- ❖ **Day 1: Arrival in Antananarivo**
- ❖ **Day 2: Flight to Tulear – Exploration of Sarodrano and its caves**
- ❖ **Day 3: Visit to Saint Augustin and coastal hike**
- ❖ **Day 4: Reniala Park and visit to Mangily village**
- ❖ **Day 5: Return to Antananarivo – Craft market visit**
- ❖ **Day 6: Lemurs' Park visit – Departure**



(Advertorial)





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# Spain eyes more growth from ME

As one of the year-round destinations, Spain has gained traction from the Middle East region over past few years. Travel data reveals there has been an exponential growth of over 20 per cent from the region and this year their expectations are much higher. **Carlos Ruiz González**, Director, Spanish Tourist Office, GCC region, shares some of their key strategies.

 Dr Shehara Fernando

**T**ell us about the special Women's Day event conducted in collaboration with Aga Khatib Marketing Services, and Pullman Downtown Dubai?

We have noticed that there is a clear trend where more women from the Middle East region choose to travel either independently or with their friends to Spain. Our partnership at the special Women's Day Programme in conjunction with Aga Khatib Marketing Services – Women in Tourism, TravTalk and Pullman Hotel Downtown provided us an opportunity to network first-hand with leading women from the travel, tourism and hospitality sectors. Spain is an inclusive and safe destination where everyone is welcome, regardless of gender, religion, or background. Women from the Middle East play a pivotal role in organising their own family vacations and short getaways, hence this platform provided us to showcase Spain's luxury, diversity and premium experiences.



**Carlos Ruiz González**  
Director  
Spanish Tourist Office - GCC region

**What will you focus on at Arabian Travel Market this year with your partners?**

We are preparing for a robust showcase of Spain's tourism offerings, with a strong focus on sustainability, regional diversity and premium experiences tailored for the Middle Eastern travellers. There will be around 20 partners at our stand

Spain is one of the most successful countries in global tourism, and we are a well-recognised destination. So, we hope to leverage that recognition to support our partners in showcasing their offerings. We are focusing strongly on sustainable tourism, which is our main strategic direction moving forward and among the key regions being highlighted are Madrid—not just the city, but the entire region, which has many attractions and is well connected. We also have a strong presence from Andalusia, including Marbella, and from the Balearic Islands with Mallorca.

**Could you share your expectations from the GCC market this year?**

Over the last two years, Spain has witnessed a

**There will be 20 partners at our stand at ATM and our goal is to ensure these partners benefit from the strength of the Spanish brand**

at ATM and our main goal is to ensure these partners benefit from the strength of the Spanish brand. As you know,

significant uptick in visitors from the GCC, with both volume and quality of tourism on the rise. In 2024, we experienced a



17-20 per cent increase in tourist arrivals from the GCC compared to 2023. Not only are we welcoming more visitors, but spending per visitor is also rising, which aligns with our goal of increasing quality tourism rather than just volume. Looking ahead, Spain is setting its sights on steady and sustainable growth in 2025, with expectations of around 10 per cent growth in visitor numbers from the region.

We want travellers from the GCC to feel welcome, to explore all corners of Spain, and to take part in experiences that are authentic, luxurious and environmentally conscious. In line with the luxury preferences of many GCC travellers, Spain is positioning itself as a high-end destination that balances authenticity with sustainability.

Given that the Middle Eastern market is oriented towards premium and luxury travel, we are emphasising offerings that cater to that segment. The idea of 'Green Spain' ties into both sustainability and a authentic experience.

**How important is sustainability?**

Spain is working to transform the tourism experience from coast to countryside, spreading economic benefits while preserving its natural and cultural assets. We are currently implementing a national strategy developed by our Secretary of State, which aims to make Spain more sustainable across the entire tourism value chain. This also includes

sumption to reduce environmental impact and foster local economies.

**Do share with us how you will be educating the travel trade?**

Keeping Spain top-of-mind for regional travel professionals remains a key part of the strategy. We are proactively engaging with the travel trade throughout the year. One of our biggest events is a joint workshop with other European countries—

**Spain is setting its sights on steady growth in 2025, with expectations of around 10 per cent growth in visitor numbers from the region**

promoting lesser-known destinations to reduce pressure on our more popular coastal areas, especially during peak summer months.


We want travellers to explore inland Spain, which offers rich experiences in heritage, culture, gastronomy and authentic local life. The Spanish tourism board supports a "zero-kilometre product" approach—promoting local production and con-

Germany, France and Austria—just before ATM "Discover Europe Travel Summit Meets Marhaba 2025". This year from Spain we are bringing 35 partners, even more than we have at ATM, to meet with local travel agents and operators. Some of our additional initiatives include workshops, destination presentations and familiarisation trips, which are crucial in helping agents deepen their knowledge of Spain. ▶





# Sustainability: a necessary investment

Future Hospitality Summit will take place from 11-13 May at Mandarin Oriental Al Faisaliah in Riyadh, with  as the media partner. Sustainability is no longer an option; it has to be incorporated in every single aspect of travel, tourism and hospitality. Industry experts share their views on the impact of implementing sustainability in the industry.



**Paul Stevens**  
CEO, Middle East, Africa and Türkiye,  
for the Premium, Midscale and  
Economy brands, Accor

“As the operating costs rise, sustainability is not just a responsibility, but a smart business strategy. Sustainable practices improve efficiency and reduce costs across hotel operations.”



**Khalid Abuhaimeed**  
CEO  
Al Khozama Investments

“As KSA moves forward with its sustainability goals, hospitality has both a responsibility and an opportunity to lead. At Al Khozama, sustainability is aligned with the Saudi Vision 2030.”



**Ali Ayoub**  
Head of Business Development - Middle  
East & Africa, Sommet Education

“Sustainability is no longer optional, but has become a component of operational strategy in the sector. Hotels that prioritise sustainability are better equipped to meet future regulations.”



**Iftikhar Hamdani**  
Area GM – Northern Emirates,  
Bahi Ajman Palace Hotel and Coral  
Beach Resort Sharjah

“Coral Beach Resort Sharjah and Bahi Ajman Palace Hotel are working on the sustainability initiatives. Both are designed to empower communities by pushing responsible waste management.”



**Michael Goetz**  
General Manager, Mövenpick Hotel  
Jumeirah Beach Dubai

“At Mövenpick Hotel Jumeirah Beach, sustainability is central to our operations and has a direct impact on costs and efficiency. Sustainability initiatives also enhance our brand image.”



**Prachi Praveen Shetty**  
Executive Director  
- Fortune Group of Hotels

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ATM DAY 2 — MAY 2025 11



# Access 1 mn accommodations

Expedia TAAP enters the United Arab Emirates to extend partnership within secondary cities in the Middle East, in line with its regional tourism development goals. **Robin Lawther**, Vice President, Expedia Travel Agent Affiliate Programme (TAAP), shares with **TRAVEL**, the wide range of offerings it brings to connect the luxury tourism market with agents across the Middle East.

TT Bureau

## How does Expedia TAAP plan to expand its presence and partnerships within secondary cities in the Middle East?

Expedia TAAP is excited to launch in the Middle East, starting with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a key gateway for regional and international travel and a thriving hub for the luxury tourism market. The UAE represents a strategic entry point, not only due to its strong infrastructure and high travel demand but also because of the growing number



Robin Lawther  
Vice President, Expedia Travel Agent Affiliate Programme (TAAP)

of travel agencies looking for robust and reliable platforms that help them better serve their clients. Over the past few years, our team has consistently



attended Arabian Travel Market and has observed a significant surge in interest from travel agents across the region.

Many have expressed the need for a solution tailored to their unique requirements, something Expedia TAAP is designed to deliver, with its vast global inventory, competitive rates and intuitive user experience.

Our expansion into the UAE is just the beginning. By empowering the local

travel agents with the right instruments, we aim to support the development

## By empowering local agents, we aim to support development of emerging markets and contribute to their tourism strategies

of emerging markets and contribute meaningfully to their long-term tourism strategies.

**What initiatives does Expedia TAAP have in**

## place to support local travel agencies and SMEs in the ME region?

As part of our launch into the UAE, Expedia TAAP is proud to offer local

travel agencies access to our extensive, directly sourced lodging inventory, featuring over 1 million accommodations worldwide. Agents in the region benefit from competitive

standalone, package, and promotional rates, along with enhanced earning potential, instant and guaranteed booking confirmations and prompt commission payments.

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LIFE IS A JOURNEY OF WELL.

# MICE boom in the Middle East

From Dubai World Trade Centre to Riyadh International Convention Centre, there has been a diverse calendar of events welcoming global exhibitions and conferences across sectors.



Kerry Healy  
Chief Commercial Officer - Middle East, Africa and Asia Pacific for the Premium, Midscale and Economy brands, Accor



Arijit Paul  
Director - Sales & Marketing - Mövenpick Grand Al Bustan Hotel & Convention Centre Dubai



Saurabh Tiwari  
Area Director - Middle East & CIS Taj Hotels, part of IHCL

“The MICE sector in the Middle East is evolving at pace, driven by government strategies, world-class infrastructure, and global demand. While the UAE leads with established venues and connectivity, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are closing the gap—transforming themselves into international business and event hubs.”

“In 2025, Dubai continues to lead MICE travel in the region, bolstered by cutting-edge infrastructure, global connectivity, and a strong rebound in corporate events. At Mövenpick Grand Al Bustan, we offer versatile event spaces, seamless service and proximity to Dubai International Airport, making us an ideal partner.”

“MICE travel from the Middle East continues to gain momentum, driven by strong regional economies, increased corporate spending, and a growing appetite for experiential events among visitors. Today's clients seek more than just venues, they look for immersive experiences that blend business with culture, wellness and sustainability.”



# Industry unites on Women's Day

International Women's Day was celebrated recently by Women Leader in Tourism, **Agnieszka Elkhatab**, Founder, Aga Khatib Marketing Services and Spain Tourism office in GCC, with  as media partner and Pullman Downtown Hotel as the host hotel. The evening brought together leading woman from the travel, tourism and hospitality sector across the UAE.

TT Bureau

The event started with a speech by the key organiser, **Agnieszka Elkhatab**, Founder, Aga Khatib Marketing Services, recognised as a Women Leader in Tourism. "Women's Day is not just a celebration—it's a reminder of the strength, grace and resilience that women bring into every aspect of life. The event was a beautiful testament to the power of women—balancing personal responsibilities while leading with vision and purpose in their careers. It highlighted the multi-tasking skills we so often take for



granted, as women continue to shape families, industries, and communities," Elkhatab said. "What made this event truly special was the unity. Women from different walks of life came together not just to celebrate, but to connect, support and inspire each other. It was proof that

behind every successful woman is a network of others who understand the journey, the challenges, and the dreams. At the heart of this gathering was the Women in Tourism platform—a safe space to share knowledge, empower one another, and remind our-

selves that we don't have to do it all alone," she added. Elkhatab thanked participants at the event.

Destination partner for the event was Spain Tourism. **Carlos Ruiz González**, Director, Spain Tourism office in GCC, shared that in Spain they use sur-

names of their parents, when they write their names, hence the reason for them to have two surnames instead of one. He further mentioned how an event of this nature would provide an opportunity to share some of the most

experiences one can enjoy in Spain. **Elie Jawich**, Director - S&M, Pullman Downtown Dubai, shared that it is an honour to host the leading women from the travel, tourism and hospitality sector. The panel consisted of Sha-

**International Women's Day celebration was proof that behind every successful woman is a network of others**

— Agnieszka Elkhatab

unique experiences in Spain which could be enjoyed by women as solo travellers or as groups. The destination video provided a glimpse into the

reena Ali, Vice President - Corporate Communications, Accor and Souhilla Taarabit, Group HR Travel, Al Futtaim, apart from Agnieszka Elkhatab. ▶





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# Cruise Travel Mart draws 200 agents

9 April marked the conclusion of the fourth edition of Cruise Travel Mart in Dubai, welcoming representatives from 17 leading cruise lines and 200 travel agents from across the Middle East. The event has established itself as a key gathering for cruise industry professionals in the region. This year's edition offered attendees valuable industry insights and meaningful networking opportunities.





# Qatar - Where tradition meets tomorrow

Qatar, a country that lies in the heart of the Arabian Gulf, is now fast becoming a must-visit destination in the Middle East. It has been enchanting visitors with the amalgamation of history with modernity. A safe and welcoming destination, it has something for everyone, whether it is families, groups, corporates or solo travellers.

TT Bureau

Qatar enchants its visitors with the way history has amalgamated with modernity. One of those rare countries where its Arabic roots are seamlessly woven into a futuristic landscape. You can trace the evolution from ancient traditions to the contemporary while marvelling at how camels have given way to the best that the motoring world has to offer within a short period of time. Qatar prides itself in offering an immersive experience at every turn.

Tawfeeq Holidays, the distinguished inbound division of Tawfeeq Travel Group, emerges as the quintessential companion for those eager to uncover Qatar's splendour. With an intimate knowledge of the region and an



Rehan Ali Syed  
CEO  
Tawfeeq Travel Group

iconic landmarks, from the majestic Museum of Islamic Art to the enchanting Katara Cultural Village and the bustling Souq Waqif, where Qatar's essence comes alive in a symphony of sights, sounds and aromas.

For the adventurous souls, Tawfeeq Holidays offers exhilarating desert safaris, allowing you to marvel at Qatar's golden



esque coastline, where breathtaking vistas and gentle sea breezes await.

**Rehan Ali Syed**, CEO, Tawfeeq Travel Group, said, "Tawfeeq Holidays has been around for a decade, and we pride ourselves in showcasing the best that Qatar has to offer. From the time you land in Doha and until you depart, our team ensures attention to detail delivered with utmost professionalism. My team's hands-on approach can be seen on everything we do. From airport transfers to guided tours and activities, we handle every aspect of your journey to ensure

a seamless and stress-free experience."

Qatar's ascent as a MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) hub owes much to several factors. Its exceptional air connectivity through the award-winning Hamad International Airport and the myriad number of

**With an intimate knowledge of the region, Tawfeeq Holidays crafts tailor-made journeys to satisfy the desires of every traveller**

also offer impeccable service and exquisite dining options, ensuring a seamless and enjoyable experience for at-

for attendees to explore. Visitors can marvel at architectural marvels like the iconic Museum of Islamic Art, soak in

**Qatar's exceptional air connectivity and the number of airlines flying into Doha ensures easy access from major cities of the world**

unwavering commitment to excellence, Tawfeeq Holidays crafts tailor-made journeys to satisfy the desires of every traveller. Explore Doha's

sand dunes and partake in thrilling activities like dune bashing, camel riding and sandboarding. Alternatively, embark on a sunset cruise along the pictur-



amazing airlines flying into Doha ensures easy access from major cities worldwide. Moreover, Qatar boasts a plethora of luxury hotels and accommodations ideal for hosting MICE events. These venues not only feature state-of-the-art meeting rooms and conference facilities but

tendeeds. Complemented by efficient transportation systems and modern infrastructure, Qatar provides smooth logistics for event organisers and participants alike. Beyond its infrastructure, Qatar's rich cultural areas and vibrant attractions make it an enticing destination


the ambiance of Katara Cultural Village, or leisurely stroll along the picturesque Corniche waterfront promenade.

Whether you are drawn to Qatar's cultural heritage or its natural wonders, Tawfeeq Holidays guarantees an unforgettable travel experience. 📍





# Tech innovations upgrade events

Middle East has become one of the key regions to conduct a range of world-class events from travel, tourism and hospitality to sports. An emerging trend in the region is the adaptation of different formats in terms of events. **Gokul Bajaj**, AVP - Sales & General Manager, Cvent Dubai, shares with , some of the key opportunities and the way forward in the industry.

 TT Bureau

**H**ow are event organisers in the Middle East adapting event formats to incorporate in-person, virtual and hybrid experiences, and what unique challenge or opportunities does the region present?

The Middle East is rapidly emerging as a hotspot for world-class events. Event organisers in the region are innovatively blending in-person, virtual and hybrid formats to keep up with the industry's fantastic growth. According to the 2025 Cvent Event Industry Report, Middle East Edition, 73 per cent of event professionals



Gokul Bajaj  
AVP - Sales & General Manager,  
Cvent Dubai

are planning to increase their event volume by 2025. Live events remain the top favourite for 63 per cent of them, primarily because face-to-face interactions provide a higher return on experience (ROE). Virtual and hybrid events are also on

the rise, especially since they can break down geographical barriers and reach a global audience.

**What factors are driving the increase in event budgets across the Middle East, and how are these investments enhancing attendee engagement and overall experience?**

According to the latest Cvent report, 70 per cent of the event professionals plan to increase their event spending this year. Countries like UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia host a plethora of major international events, ranging from conferences and sports tournaments to cultural festivals. These events attract a diverse

demography from across the world, including the young and tech-savvy, international travellers

ues, food and beverages, travel and accommodation are pushing up overall budgets.

customised branding, and network building. The Cvent report highlights that 90 per cent of organisations in the Middle East are eager to explore new event technology solutions, driven by AI's potential.

**90 per cent of organisations in the Middle East are eager to explore new event technology solutions, driven by AI's potential**

and affluent guests, consistently seeking premium and technologically advanced experiences.

This is the reason why 47 per cent believe investing in enhancing the event experience is the primary factor driving the increase in event budgets in the region. Additionally, rising costs for ven-

**How is the integration of advanced event technologies, including AI, transforming event management and marketing in the ME?**

Traditionally viewed as a 'nice-to-have', event technologies are now becoming essential for simplifying tasks like attendee registration, information dissemination,

KEY FINDINGS

**73%**  
of event professionals to increase their event volume by 2025

**63%**  
prefer live events

Virtual and hybrid events are on the rise

# Wellness experience par excellence

Health, wellness and leading a balanced life have become an essential part in today's world. The Middle East travellers understand the importance of Ayurveda and its therapeutic benefits of longevity, detoxification, rejuvenation and stress relief. Siddhalepa Ayurveda Health Resort, Wadduwa, Sri Lanka; MDF and Sri Lankan Airlines organised a special familiarisation trip.

 TT Bureau

**T**he age-old Sri Lankan Ayurveda, or Natural Medicinal system, offers options throughout the year with competitive pricing for locals and expats in the region. To better serve our Middle East clientele, we recently obtained the medical licence in the UAE to offer all our specialised Ayurveda products to this important market, which understands leading a balanced lifestyle. One of the most amazing experiences, which could transform you to a new person, full of energy and vitality, at Siddhalepa



Ayurveda Health Resort, Wadduwa, Sri Lanka.

**Smiles aboard the national carrier**  
As we entered the SriLan-

kan Airlines, it was an experience by itself in terms of the warm welcome received. Their natural charming smile was a distinct way to make you

feel that you have already stepped into the country itself with the delectable cuisine and service of the inflight staff, who made you feel at ease. The fly-

ing experience was one of a kind, as we truly enjoyed the journey.

**Collaboration**


This special experience was a collaboration between Siddhalepa Ayurveda Health Resort, MDF and Sri Lankan Airlines. We would like to take this opportunity to thank them for a job well done.

**Experiencing authenticity**

We arrived at the renowned Siddhalepa Ayurveda Health Resort, Wadduwa. It had the most breathtaking views with a vast expanse of land, which felt like you have entered a beautiful

and tranquil garden. Welcoming us with herbal tea, we were allocated our rooms. Once we were relaxed and ready for our treatments, we paid a visit to the in-house doctor who examined and noted down our history and any kind of ailment. Then we were prescribed with a special meal plan, as per our ailments.

**Yoga and healing**

What we liked most during the day was basking in the sun. The fresh air was so cool, as the resort is on the beach itself. The sound of the waves, chirping of birds and watching the sunset were some of my favourites. 



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# Two Icons, One Vision: A New Chapter for Sheraton Jumeirah Beach Resort and Aloft Palm Jumeirah

Sheraton Jumeirah Beach Resort, a beloved classic nestled on the shores of JBR, continues to enchant guests with its warm spirit, beachfront setting, and loyal following. Known for its heritage and heart, the resort remains a go-to destination for families, leisure travelers, and long-time guests who return year after year.

TT Bureau

Aloft Palm Jumeirah, a vibrant and contemporary lifestyle hotel, brings a different kind of energy to the city. Located on the East Crescent of the iconic Palm, it stands out for its youthful vibe, edgy design, and connection with today's trend-savvy travellers.



**Mohamed El Aghoury**  
Multi-Property General Manager,  
Sheraton Jumeirah Beach Resort and  
Aloft Palm Jumeirah



**Mohamed Afifi**  
Multi-Property Director of Sales &  
Distribution, Sheraton Jumeirah Beach  
Resort and Aloft Palm Jumeirah



Now, in an exciting strategic move, both properties will operate as one cluster team, bringing together their Sales, Distribution and Marketing functions to drive stronger results and shared success. **Mohamed Afifi** will lead the Sales and Distribution function across

both hotels, bringing his strong leadership, commercial expertise

and market insights to the forefront of this new cluster structure.

**Newly formed cluster commercial team is poised to unlock greater synergies, expand market reach and deliver stronger performance**

Marketing for both properties will now fall under the leadership of **Sonia Parmar**, who will continue to elevate brand visibility, storytelling and demand generation through a unified and focused strategy. Together, the newly formed cluster commercial team is poised to unlock great-

er synergies, expand market reach and deliver stronger performance across both brands.

**Mohamed El Aghoury**, Multi-Property General Manager, Sheraton Jumeirah Beach Resort and Aloft Palm Jumeirah, shares his vision: "This is a significant

milestone for both hotels. By aligning our teams, we create room for innovation, collaboration and efficiency, enhancing the experience for our guests and partners. I'm confident that with Mohamed and Sonia leading the way, we are positioned for exceptional growth."



# Wego joins Waves for yacht service

Wego announced its partnership with Waves, the innovative experience app and aggregator that seamlessly connects users with yachts and chalets. This collaboration brings an unparalleled luxury experience to travellers looking to explore coastlines, indulge in water activities, or celebrate special occasions in style.

TT Bureau

With this partnership, Wego customers can now easily book family-friendly yacht trips ranging from 2 to 6 hours, accommodating an average of 25 guests for bespoke journeys across Dubai, Kuwait, Jeddah and Qatar. Whether it's a tranquil coastal escape, an adventurous boating experience, or an exclusive celebration, Wego and Waves together offer the perfect setting for unforgettable moments at sea.

Abdulrahman Alsadoun, CEO, Waves, said: "By integrating Waves with

Wego, we are bringing our world class yacht experiences to a broader audience. This partnership is a testament to our commitment to redefining travel by seamlessly connecting land and sea."

Waves has quickly established itself as a regional leader, beginning its journey in Kuwait before expanding to Qatar during the World Cup and further into Saudi Arabia and Dubai. The platform is known for its hassle-free booking experience, ensuring reliability, convenience, and premium service for all users. Mamoun Hmidan, Chief Business Officer, Wego,



said: "We are excited to partner with Waves to offer our customers exclusive luxury experiences. This partnership enhances our mission of providing travellers with unique, hassle-free travel options that go beyond conventional tourism."

Through Wego's extensive reach and seamless technology, travellers now have easier access to Waves' fleet of luxurious yachts, making premium water experiences more accessible than ever.

The collaboration aligns with both companies' missions to enhance travel convenience and elevate experiential tourism in the region. Travellers can now access Waves' premium yacht rental services through Wego's platform, allowing for smooth and effortless reservations. Whether planning a relaxing family outing, a corporate event, or a luxurious getaway,

users can browse and book their dream experience within minutes.

### PROGRAMME DETAILS

- ❖ Yacht trips ranging from 2 to 6 hours
- ❖ Accommodates an average of 25 guests for bespoke journeys
- ❖ Caters across Dubai, Kuwait, Jeddah and Qatar



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# RAK's hotel tally to double by 2027

Stirling Hospitality Advisors released the fourth edition of the RAK Investment Pulse report, highlighting the rapid growth of Ras Al Khaimah's hospitality sector. The research showcases the emirate's growing tourism, which has seen a robust increase in visitor numbers, a rapidly evolving hotel pipeline, and the emergence of branded residences as a key investment asset.

TT Bureau

With tourism at an all-time high, Ras Al Khaimah's hospitality sector is poised for significant expansion. By 2027, the emirate's total hotel inventory is expected to more than double, with 7,537 new rooms added to the existing 7,144, bringing the total to over 14,600. Notably, 71 per cent of this pipeline falls within the five-star category, further cementing RAK's status as a premier luxury hospitality destination.

The emirate is set to welcome over 15 international hotel operators across all segments, from luxury to midscale.



Tatiana Veller  
Managing Director  
Stirling Hospitality Advisors

New entrants, such as Wynn, Millennium, Radisson Red, Ushuaia, and Rove Al Marjan underscore RAK's growing and diversified hospitality landscape. Providing valuable insights into market performance, supply trends and investment



opportunities, the report also highlights a shift in market leadership among hotel operators, with Accor surpassing Hilton in 2024 due to strategic rebranding initiatives. This transition was fuelled by the conversion of Al Marjan Resort into Pullman and the rebranding of

Hilton Beach Resort into Rixos Al Mairid, reflecting the emirate's dynamic hospitality landscape and commitment to world-class guest experiences.

Commenting on the report's findings, Tatiana Veller, MD, Stirling Hospitality Advisors, said:

"Ras Al Khaimah's hospitality sector is undergoing a remarkable transformation. The combination of strong government support, ambitious development plans, and the arrival of global hotel brands and investors is setting the stage for a new era of growth. Our latest edi-

tion of RAK Investment Pulse provides invaluable insights into these shifting dynamics."

## HOSPITALITY PROJECTIONS

**7,500 keys**  
the emirate will add to hotel pipeline by 2027 and another 1,000 by 2030

**5,600**  
branded residences under 16 projects will be added by 2029

**1.28 million**  
overnight visitors RAK welcomed in 2024, marking a 5.1% increase year-on-year

# Disruption of tech is main hurdle

Contd. from page 1

know how their expertise is helping hotels navigate today's complex landscape. Trampert explains that one of the biggest hurdles facing hotels is the fragmentation of technology. Many properties still rely on siloed systems that struggle to

tality's merchandising solution, are designed with a modular and flexible architecture, allowing hotels to enhance their existing technology stack incrementally. This means that instead of undertaking a costly overhaul, the hoteliers could gradually integrate

passionately champions the idea of intelligent retailing—a concept where hotels evolve from selling rooms to curating a range of tailored experiences. "Guests today want more than just a bed," he explains. "They are looking for value-added, personalised experiences, whether that is a late check-out, a bespoke wellness package, or a curated local excursion," he adds.

Sabre's SynXis Retailing framework empowers hoteliers to package and sell these additional services to both hotel guests and non-staying guests. By breaking down traditional revenue models, hotels can unlock entirely new streams of income, while enhancing the overall guest experience. This approach meets current

market demands and positions hotels for long-term success. Read, whose journey from co-founding Techsembly to spearheading innovation at Sabre Hospitality is formidable, emphasises AI and data are revolutionising the way hotels understand and serve their guests. "AI empowers hotels to tap into massive amounts of data, analys-

Sabre, where she is spearheading AI interactions into our solutions and offerings.

SynXis Concierge.AI, the company's first generative AI-powered tool, is designed to respond to guest inquiries in real-time, thereby reducing staff workload. "These AI tools are transforming the guest experience

tions. This keeps guests engaged on the site and empowers hoteliers to drive direct bookings and forge meaningful relationships with their guests," Read explains.

**Many properties rely on siloed systems to communicate, making it challenging to provide personalised experiences**

—Frank Trampert

communicate thereby making it challenging to provide a personalised experience for each guest. "Integration is a key challenge, but it is not impossible," he noted. According to him, modern solutions like SynXis Retailing, Sabre Hospi-

solutions—such as dynamic pricing and intelligent merchandising—that work in tandem with legacy systems to ensure a smoother, more efficient operation.

Beyond solving integration issues, Trampert

**AI empowers hotels to tap into massive amounts of data, analysing booking patterns and guest feedback**

—Amy Read

ing booking patterns, guest feedback, and even in-stay behaviours to deliver hyper-personalised guest experiences," she shares. This capability is central to her work at

by providing highly personalised, interactive bookings and real-time responses to queries, whether it's about reservations, property services, or local attrac-

## AI IN HOSPITALITY

❖ Hotels shift from traditional to room-centric model

❖ Guest-centric approach

❖ Personalised experiences

❖ Operational efficiency

❖ Transforms the future of hotel retailing





# Amsa Hospitality trains Saudi hoteliers

As Saudi Vision 2030 drives change across the Kingdom and reshapes the tourism industry, staying ahead requires constant learning in the dynamic hospitality sector. The private sector plays a pivotal role in turning this vision into reality. Amsa Hospitality, in partnership with Luxury Hotelschool Paris, has set up an academy to impart training to Saudi hoteliers.

TT Bureau

Recognising the need for top-notch vocational training, Amsa Hospitality created in 2024 its own academy in partnership with Luxury Hotelschool Paris, a global institution recognised for its excellence in pedagogy and endorsed by leading hotel chains, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The academy's programmes, including a two-week hospitality apprenticeship across multiple departments, are open to all interested Saudi hoteliers, and not just prospective employees of Amsa Hospitality's properties.

Since its launch in May 2024, Amsa Hospitality Academy has extended its collaborative agreements to some of the best universities and colleges across the Kingdom. One notable collaboration is with King Khalid University, which allows recent graduates to enrich their academic learning with real-world practical experience. The first cohort of graduates is currently undertaking training at the brand-new Mercure Khamis Mushait and has experienced the dynamic operations of a hotel pre-opening phase. The comprehensive curriculum encompasses various



topics, from guest service excellence to operational efficiency and regional cultural nuances.

Amsa Hospitality Academy continues to achieve remarkable milestones, such as the agreements with Princess Nooura University and King Saud University. Moreover, the academy has welcomed **Abdulrahman Abdullah Almarwani**, Deputy Governor for Training Policies and Quality and Director General of Private Training, to its premises. During his visit, Almarwani was given an overview of ongoing training programmes and the chan-

Our focus is on providing industry-relevant training classes that equip young hoteliers with the skills they need to excel in their careers

nels through which Amsa Hospitality Academy endows students with the required knowledge to pursue successful career paths. The two parties engaged in fruitful discussions on further developing the academy's educational activities. "Our focus is on providing high-quality, industry-relevant training classes that equip young hoteliers with the skills they need

to excel in their careers," said **Muin Serhan**, CEO, Amsa Hospitality. "The academy aligns with Saudi Vision 2030's ambitious goals to build one of the world's top tourism destinations." Mohammad Mandili, CEO, Amsa Hospitality Academy, added that, "The academy aims to create a learning environment that fosters critical

thinking, creativity, and a genuine commitment to service excellence. By providing aspiring hoteliers with the necessary industry know-how, we empower them to contribute toward an exceptional guest experience." Through significant investment in learning and development, Amsa Hospitality Academy aims to enhance individual careers and contribute to the success of the Saudi hotel sector. The future of hospitality in Saudi Arabia will undoubtedly depend on nurturing a passionate and thoroughly trained workforce. (Advertorial)





# KSA launches two air ambulance helipads

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) unveiled plans to fortify its medical care capacity with the launch of two dedicated air ambulance helipads in the vicinity of Holy Mosque of Makkah.

TT Bureau

The two air ambulance helipads in the vicinity of Holy Mosque of Makkah have been launched with a view to evacuating critical patients to hospitals across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in case of medical emergency.

The development marks a significant advancement in healthcare KSA prepares to welcome millions of worshippers for the Umrah season. Helicopters will operate 24/7, providing continuous support, with some hos-



pitals reachable within minutes. Additional helicopters can be deployed on short notice as needed, showing the KSAs commitment to provide pilgrimage experience.

Saudi authorities recently conducted an air ambu-

lance landing drill at the mosque's eastern runway, testing the readiness and efficiency of medical operations. The drill ensured that patient evacuations can be carried out swiftly and in line with the highest medical standards..

# e-learning platform to train in tourism

SPARK along with EYouth and support from Google.org has launched Maharat for Tourism e-Learning Hub in Egypt, a platform designed to equip 25,000 individuals across the MENA region.

TT Bureau

The launch event, held at Triumph Plaza Hotel in Cairo, welcomed 100 stakeholders, including representatives from Egypt's Ministry of Tourism, industry leaders and digital learning experts. The initiative aligns with Egypt's national priorities to enhance workforce competitiveness and drive tourism sector growth.

With the tourism sector evolving, Maharat for Tourism offers freetraining for aspiring and experienced professionals.

The platform provides interactive courses on digital skills, business management and cus-

tomers service, ensuring users stay competitive in a job market. This initiative contributes to Egypt's economic resilience and job creation in one of its most vital industries.

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**25,000**  
individuals across the  
MENA to benefit from  
platform

**100**  
stakeholders attended  
the launch event

Tie-up with EYouth  
and support from  
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**Strategic partnership**  
Egypt's Ministry of Tourism recognises its role in modernising workforce training and driving long-term industry sustainability. **Dina Almasaeid**, Regional Programme Director, SPARK, said, "The Maharat for Tourism E-Learning Hub is live and available in English as well as Arabic."

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# \$400 mn Retrofit Programme on track

Air India’s \$400 million Retrofit Programme, which started last year, has made significant progress. The programme, aligning its legacy aircraft with the modern, passenger-focused standards of its newest deliveries, aim to enhance the in-flight experience and position the airline as a premium full-service carrier internationally.

 TT Bureau

Last year, Air India announced it has commenced its \$400 million retrofit programme, one of the largest such programmes globally. The airline has since made significant strides in it, aligning its legacy aircraft with the modern, passenger-focused standards of its newest deliveries.

This comprehensive overhaul, encompassing narrowbody and widebody aircraft, is aimed at enhancing the inflight experience and positioning Air India as a premium full-service carrier.



With such a diverse fleet being retrofitted across locations in India and around the world and each set of aircraft having their own retrofit timelines, here is a deep dive into Air India’s programme with timelines of when travellers can expect to fly Air India’s other

upgraded aircraft in time to come.

Four of Air India’s legacy Airbus A320 narrowbody aircraft have now been retrofitted to the same standard as on 14 recently-delivered aircraft, with the upgradation of 23

more legacy narrowbody aircraft to be completed by September 2025.

At that point, together with the aircraft acquired through the merger with Vistara, Air India full-service fleet of more than 110 narrowbody aircraft will have been upgraded to a world-class standard.

The 40 legacy widebody aircraft have also commenced their upgradation programme, which will ultimately see the entire fleet match the product already available on the airline’s flagship A350 service presently operating between Delhi and London and New York.

The first of 13 legacy Boeing B777 aircraft has just completed an interim “Heavy Refresh” that involved replacing interior panels, lavatories, seat

contracted vendors, arising from industry-wide supply chain constraints.

The first of 27 legacy Boeing B787 fleet, on which

**Air India’s four legacy Airbus A320 narrowbody aircraft have now been retrofitted to the same standard as on 14 recently-delivered aircraft**

upholstery, carpets, and curtains, with the remainder to follow in the coming months. The decision to undertake this interim heavy refresh ahead of full retrofit was made due to protracted delays in the delivery of seats from the

the seat vendors have been less impacted relative to the B777s, will depart to Victorville, California, later this month where it will commence a full retrofit of new seats, entertainment systems and other interior fittings. ▶



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# Strengthening connectivity in MEA

RwandAir has been instrumental in promoting Rwanda through its vast operations between Middle East and Africa over the past few years. **Muhamud Wayiga**, Country Manager UAE, RwandAir, shares with **TRAVEL MIDDLE EAST**, some of the key achievements and plans for the region, including strengthening its operations and providing ancillary offerings like e-visa to holidays.

TT Bureau

**What are some of the key products RwandAir is focusing on?**

RwandAir is currently focusing on enhancing its core flight services across both premium and economy classes. Key product areas include improving the in-flight experience with better entertainment, seating comfort and meal options. Cargo services are also a strategic priority, with efforts aimed at increasing capacity, efficiency and network connectivity to support trade across Africa and beyond. Additionally, the DreamMiles loyalty programme continues to be a major focus, aiming to build long-term customer engagement. The airline is also expanding its an-



Muhamud Wayiga  
Country Manager UAE  
RwandAir

illary offerings, such as e-Sim, e-Visa and RwandAir Holidays.

**Will there be any new route added for summer or winter?**

RwandAir is actively evaluating route expansion opportunities and planning to introduce select new routes dur-

ing both the summer and winter seasons. These new routes will aim to strengthen connectivity between Africa and high-potential markets in the Middle East.

**Do you have and code-share in the pipeline?**

RwandAir is in advanced discussions with several regional and international carriers to establish new codeshare partnerships. These collaborations are intended to expand network reach, provide seamless travel experiences and give customers more convenient flight options and destinations.

**How will you attract more travellers from the Middle East? What is your USP?**

RwandAir's Unique Selling Proposition (USP)



lies in its ability to combine competitive fares, top-tier customer service and strategic connectivity between Africa and the Middle East. To attract Middle Eastern travellers, the airline is launching localised marketing campaigns, engaging with regional trade partners and promoting its reputation for operational excellence and punctuality.

**Could you share the importance of travel agents and what percentage of business do you receive from them?**

Travel agents remain a cornerstone of RwandAir's sales and distribution network, contributing approximately 50 to 60 per cent of overall

ticket sales. Their expertise, regional reach

**Travel agents remain a cornerstone of RwandAir's sales and distribution network, contributing about 50-60% of overall ticket sales**

and ability to provide tailored customer service are invaluable in both B2C and B2B segments, particularly in markets where online penetration is still developing.

**Are there any collaboration to promote the destination to Middle Eastern travellers?**

Yes, RwandAir is actively collaborating with tour-

ism boards and regional stakeholders to promote Rwanda as a preferred destination for Middle Eastern travellers. These efforts include joint campaigns, familiarisation (Fam) trips for travel agents and co-branded promotional activities that highlight Rwanda's wildlife, culture and luxury tourism offerings.

**Will you be attending ATM this year? What will be your strategy and expectations from this region?**

RwandAir will indeed be participating in Arabian Travel Market (ATM) this year. The focus will be on reinforcing brand visibil-

ity, nurturing relationships with regional partners and promoting our code-share network and new routes. Our expectations from the region include increased passenger volumes, enhanced trade partnerships and stronger brand loyalty among Middle Eastern travellers.

## PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES

- ❖ Fam trips for travel agents
- ❖ Co-branded promotional activities
- ❖ Nurturing relationships with regional partners
- ❖ Increased passenger volumes
- ❖ Enhanced trade partnerships





# Emirates to showcase A350 @ATM

Emirates will present an extensive range of their latest cabins and products at the Arabian Travel Market 2025. From reducing carbon emissions to align with global net-zero goals, Emirates will also be looking at a vast range of countries across the globe. **Adil Al Ghaith**, Senior Vice President, Commercial Operations Centre, Emirates, shares his thoughts with **TRAVELTALK**.

**Dr Shehara Fernando**

## What will you showcase at ATM this year?

We are looking forward to unveiling our latest A350 cabin experience, welcoming visitors who have not yet experienced the aircraft yet for a sneak peek into our next-generation products. This is in addition to our iconic Airbus A380 products such as the Onboard Lounge, Shower Spa, and of course our game changer First Class suite on the Boeing 777.

We also have a dedicated area to showcase our latest sustainability initiatives, including lounge wear, amenity kits, and blankets, alongside our

ates A350 is part of our efforts to operate a modern and fuel-efficient fleet. We also focus on operational sustainability, utilising Artificial Intelligence to optimise flight routes and minimise fuel consumption. Additionally, our community-focused 'Aircraft KIDS' programme demonstrates our dedication to responsible consumption and community engagement.

As part of the programme, we recently completed distribution of more than 1,300 handmade schoolbags and stationary products across Africa.

This is just the beginning, and the project is now set to expand across coun-



**Adil Al Ghaith**  
Senior Vice President, Commercial Operations Centre, Emirates

ceiving the first of our 65 A350s on order. They have already been deployed to select short and medium-haul destinations across the Middle East, Africa and Europe. In the coming months and as we receive more deliveries, the aircraft will help us meet growing demand and deliver an exceptional onboard experience while optimising operational efficiency.

We have also been investing in the refurbishment of the existing Emirates fleet through our in-house retrofit programme.

So far, more than US\$ 5 billion has been earmarked to completely refit over 220 A380s and B777s to ensure they remain a key part of our operation in the years to come and offer our passengers an enhanced travel experience, and a

consistent level of service and comfort across all our routes.

## How is Emirates leveraging AI and digital transformation to enhance passenger experience, improve operational efficiency, and drive personalisation in its services?

At Emirates, we use Artificial Intelligence (AI) to enhance both the customer experience and operational efficiency. We have implemented contactless and biometric solutions at key touchpoints, offering a seamless travel experience, including at check-in, security and boarding processes, helping us offer our passengers a frictionless and seamless travel experience. The advanced technology is also helping us optimise our flight routes, improve fuel efficiency, and provide predictive maintenance to ensure operational reliability.

## What are Emirates' key target markets for expansion in this year and beyond? Are there plans to increase connectivity to secondary cities, particularly in KSA and other markets in Asia?

Connectivity remains a key part of our strategy to support international



trade and tourism. We have just recently announced expansion into China with the start of services to Shenzhen in July, as well as Da Nang – our third point in Vietnam, and Siem Reap, our second destination in Cambodia, both commencing in early June.

It does not stop there as we continue to evaluate growth opportunities. Further destinations will be announced by the airline in due course.

## Emirates has formed strategic partnerships with various airlines and travel stakeholders. Are there alliances in the pipeline?

We are always exploring strategic partnerships that complement our global network and offer more choice and convenience for our customers. Our current number of partners stands as many as 162—allowing our customers reach

nearly 1,700 cities across the world.

## How is Emirates innovating its premium economy products to cater to evolving passenger preferences?

Innovation is central to our brand promise. We continue to invest in new generation products, including the Premium Economy cabin. It offers more legroom, wider seats, an elevated dining experience for discerning travellers, and other thoughtful amenities. Our Premium Economy network currently stands close to 40 cities, operated by B777s, A350s, and A380s. This product has proved to be popular among travellers seeking an affordable yet premium product.

## Introduction of Emirates A350 is part of the efforts to operate a fuel-efficient fleet. The airlines is using AI to optimise flight routes

'Aircraft by Emirates'—a capsule collection of luggage, bags and accessories, made in-house from upcycled materials.

## What are your latest initiatives to cut reduce emissions, and how do they align with global net zero goals?

The introduction of Emir-

tries in West Asia, the Middle East, and other parts of our network.

## Given the increasing demand for travel, how is Emirates planning its fleet expansion? Are there any upcoming aircraft acquisitions?

We have just started re-



**LINKING THE WORLD**

- ❖ 1,700 cities across the world
- ❖ Premium Economy network currently stands at 40 cities
- ❖ US\$ 5 billion to refit more than 220 A380s and B777s in its fleet
- ❖ U65 A350s were deployed to cities across the ME, Africa and Europe



# MOVEMENTS

## UNITED HOSPITALITY

Dubai

United Hospitality Management (UHM) has appointed **KLAUS ASSMANN** as Chief Operating Officer for the Middle East, India & Southeast Asia. A veteran in the industry, Assmann brings nearly four decades of international leadership, with a stellar track record in luxury hotel operations, asset enhancement, strategic development and large-scale mixed-use hospitality projects. Having led world-class projects and pre-openings, Assmann's global experience adds unparalleled depth to UHM's leadership team.



## HILTON

Dubai

Hilton has appointed **LIZ PERKINS** as the Vice President, Commercial, Middle East and Africa (MEA). Perkins most recently served as Vice President, Commercial Operations, Asia Pacific at Hilton and moves to Dubai to take on the new role, which will see her oversee commercial performance at more than 150 hotels across MEA. She has more than 20 years of revenue management and commercial experience across Asia Pacific, Europe and MEA - including five years at Hilton.



## HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT HOLDING

Dubai

Hospitality Management Holding (HMH) has promoted **HAYTHAM ABDELAZIZ** to the role of Chief Operating Officer (COO). With his proven leadership and operational excellence, Abdelaziz has played a pivotal role in driving HMH's success. In his new role, he will oversee the execution of key initiatives, ensuring optimal performance across the group's portfolio and driving the launch of upcoming properties. His achievements include leading the successful openings of the Coral Al Madinah Hotel and ECOS Dubai Hotel at Al Furjan.



## SHERATON JUMEIRAH BEACH RESORT AND ALOFT PALM JUMEIRAH

Dubai

Sheraton Jumeirah Beach Resort and Aloft Palm Jumeirah promotes **MOHAMED AFI** to the role of Multi-Property Director of Sales & Distribution. In his new capacity, Afifi will oversee the sales and distribution strategy for both landmark Marriott properties, shaping a unified commercial vision that reflects his track record of delivering results through innovation, leadership and collaboration. Afifi's journey is one marked by grit, growth and a clear strategic compass.



## TIME HOTELS

Dubai

TIME Hotels has promoted **SOUMITRA SAHA** to the position of Chief Financial Officer as the hotel group expands its senior management team, in line with the company's ambitious growth pipeline throughout the Middle East and Indian Ocean. A chartered accountant with over 35 years of experience in the hospitality industry, Saha joined TIME Hotels in 2022 as Vice President of Finance. In his new position, Saha will work closely with Chief Executive Officer, Mohamed Awadalla, and Chief Operating Officer, William Costley.



## GRAND HYATT ABU DHABI HOTEL & RESIDENCES EMIRATES PEARL

Abu Dhabi

Grand Hyatt Abu Dhabi Hotel & Residences Emirates Pearl has appointed **ALEX PICHEL** as the General Manager. With over 35 years of experience in the hospitality industry, Pichel will be overseeing the hotel operation and management functions of the iconic five-star property in Abu Dhabi, UAE. With a wealth of experience managing luxury hotels, Pichel's expertise will elevate Grand Hyatt Abu Dhabi Hotel & Residences Emirates Pearl to new heights.



## QASAR AL SARAB DESERT RESORT BY ANANTARA

Abu Dhabi

Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara has strengthened its leadership team with the appointment of **MICHELE GIRAUDO** as Resort Manager, bringing with him a distinguished career in luxury hospitality management. With experience spanning some of the world's most renowned resorts, he is well placed to drive the next phase of the resort's growth. Giraudo's journey in luxury hospitality began with a strong foundation in food and beverage management.



## CLARIDGE'S MAYFAIR

London

Seasoned hotelier **THOMAS KOCHS** has been appointed as Managing Director of Claridge's in Mayfair, by Maybourne, operator of London's most prestigious hotels, also including The Connaught, The Berkeley and The Emory. This move marks a welcome return to the Maybourne family for Kochs, who was General Manager at Claridge's from 2009 to 2015. He also held positions at The Berkeley and The Connaught. Over the past 10 years, German-born Kochs has held positions at luxury hotel companies.



## SHERATON JUMEIRAH BEACH RESORT AND ALOFT PALM JUMEIRAH

Dubai

**SONIA PARMAR** has been promoted to the position of Multi-Property Assistant Director of Marketing for Sheraton Jumeirah Beach Resort and Aloft Palm Jumeirah. With over 19 years of expertise in Marketing and Communications, Parmar is known for crafting compelling brand narratives and executing high-impact campaigns across digital platforms and experiential marketing.



## MANGO HOUSE SEYCHELLES LXR HOTELS AND RESORTS AND CANOPY BY HILTON

Seychelles

Hilton has appointed **HENDRICK CALLES** as the Cluster General Manager for Mango House Seychelles and Canopy by Hilton Seychelles. This new role comes as part of his expanded responsibilities as Hilton Area General Manager for Seychelles. Calles brings over 20 years of experience with Hilton, including a successful tenure as General Manager of Hilton Seychelles Northolme Resort & Spa, where he has led for the past two years.



## THE FIRST GROUP HOSPITALITY

JVC, Dubai

The First Group Hospitality has appointed **ONUR AVKAN** as General Manager of The First Collection at Jumeirah Village Circle. With over a decade of international hospitality experience, Avkan is known for his expertise in optimising operational performance and delivering exceptional guest satisfaction. In his new position, Avkan will oversee the day-to-day operations, strategic business growth and team leadership of The First Collection at Jumeirah Village Circle, located in Dubai's dynamic community of JVC.




## W ABU DHABI – YAS ISLAND

Abu Dhabi

W Abu Dhabi – Yas Island appoints **SPENCER WADAMA** as the General Manager. With nearly three decades of experience in the hospitality industry, Wadama has a proven track record of driving operational excellence, enhancing guest experiences and leading high-performing teams. In his new role, Wadama aims to elevate W Abu Dhabi – Yas Island through strategic leadership, innovative guest offerings and a commitment to service excellence, leveraging his extensive expertise in the hospitality.





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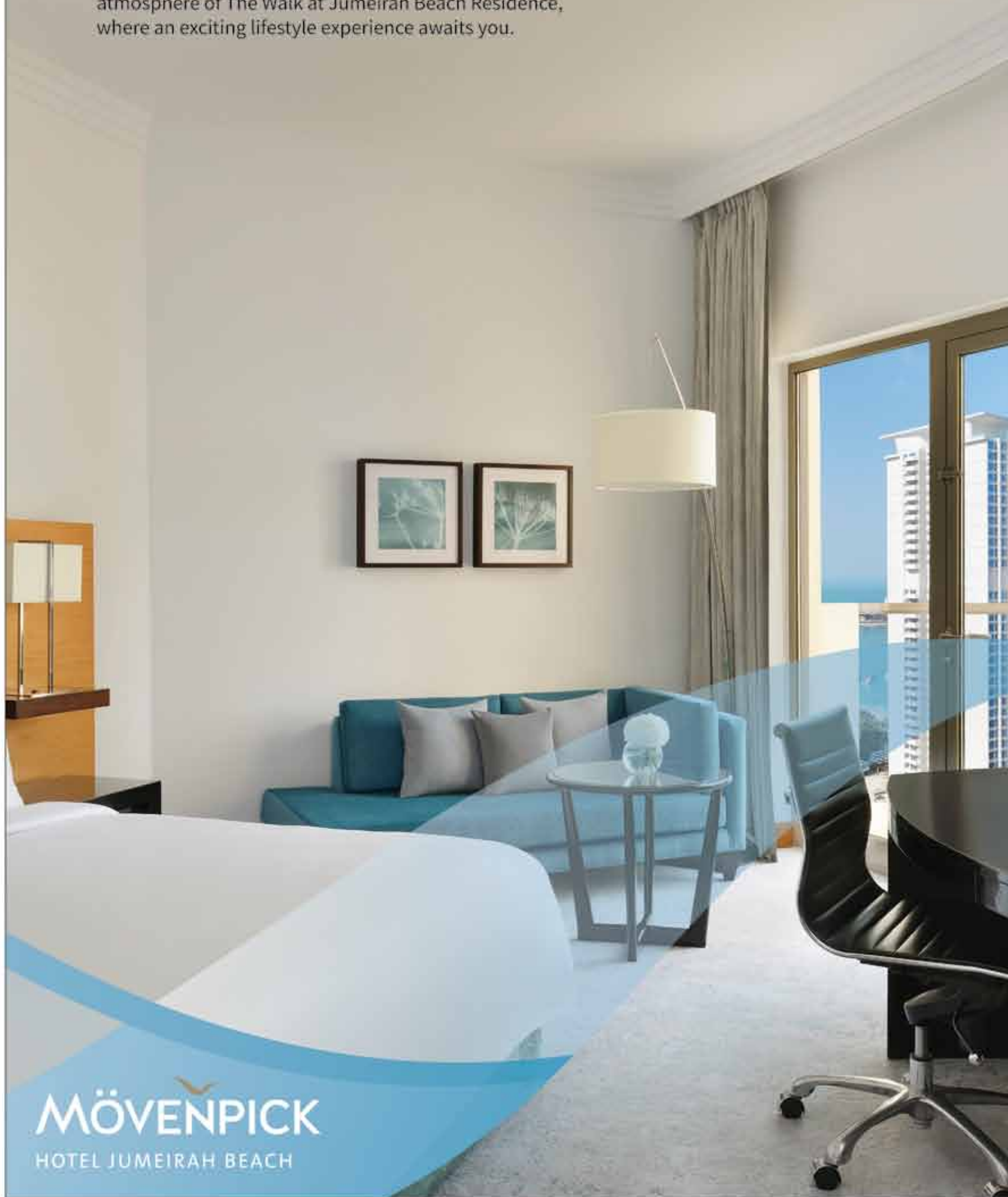
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**MÖVENPICK**  
HOTEL JUMEIRAH BEACH



# GOLDEN SANDS

## HOTEL DUBAI CREEK



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