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INSIDE

TOURISE for collaborations

Page 3

Saudi Arabia unlocks new opportunities

Page 4



Applauding Saudi travel trade

The UAE's coveted Arabian Travel Awards will debut in Saudi Arabia on 10 December 2025. It is the perfect platform to recognise individuals and companies making Saudi Arabia a tourism powerhouse.



Dr Shehara Rizly Fernando

Known as the 'Oscars of the industry', the Arabian Travel Awards started in the UAE in 2017. After eight years of success, and requests from the avid readers of TRAVTALK, this year they make their debut in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Arabian Travel Awards are DDP Group's first-ever international initiative to celebrate the best talent from the tourism and hospitality industries in the Middle East.

The awards follow a unique system of jury judgement and internet voting to give

out fair and unbiased results. **SanJeet**, Mentor, Arabian Travel Awards, and CEO, DDP Group, says this award is an honour bestowed on the visionaries, innovators, and leaders who have significantly contributed to the travel, tourism, and hospitality industry. "With the Arabian Travel Awards,



we aim at identifying and encouraging talent of all kinds in the tourism sector. Owing to these stars, the graph of the Middle East tourism industry has touched remarkable heights. It is our pleasure to honour them for their achievements."

He added, "This initiative will help encourage more talent to develop and take this vibrant industry to a much higher level. We celebrate excellence, recognise achievements, and look forward to the continued growth and success of our

Contd. on page 17 ▶

UAE hotels earn \$26 billion in H1

The UAE has set a global benchmark in developing an innovative and competitive tourism sector, enabled by the support of the country's visionary leadership. This forward-thinking approach aligns with emerging trends in innovation, digital technology, and AI.



TT Bureau

His Excellency Abdullah Al Saleh, Undersecretary, Ministry of Economy and Tourism, UAE, said the government's efforts have significantly enhanced the quality of tourism experiences and elevated services for visitors from around the world. "The tourism sector has attracted investments totalling \$28.8 billion in 2023, increasing to \$32.2 billion in 2024, with projections forecasting a rise to \$35.2 billion by 2025," he said, speaking recently at the Sharjah International Travel and Tourism Forum (SITTF).

Organised by the Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Development Authority (SCTDA) in strategic partnership



His Excellency Abdullah Al Saleh
Undersecretary, Ministry
of Economy and Tourism, UAE



His Excellency Khalid Jasim Al Midfa
Chairman
SCTDA

with the Sharjah Investment and Development Authority (Shurooq), SITTF focused on the theme, 'New Waves of Tourism Spectrum'.

HE Al Saleh said the sector remains a major contributor to the national economy, supported by an increasing number of tourists, national campaigns, and growing investments in innova-

tion and sustainability. "More than 16 million guests stayed in UAE hotels during the first six months of the year, while hotel nights reached 56 million," he said, adding that these figures reflect the UAE's ability to keep up with global travel trends, digital technologies, and changing visitor expectations.

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TOURISE rewrites travel's future

Fahd Hamiduddin, CEO, Saudi Tourism Authority and Vice Chair, TOURISE, in an interview with **TRAVTALK**, outlines how TOURISE is redefining the global tourism landscape. Unlike traditional conferences, the event acts as a powerful convener, uniting policymakers, industry leaders, urban planners, tech innovators, and cross-sector stakeholders to shape the future of travel.

 TT Bureau

Tourism is one of the world's most dynamic industries, yet it has long been fragmented with countless conferences that often replicate each other's efforts. **Fahd Hamiduddin**, CEO, Saudi Tourism Authority and Vice Chair, TOURISE, says the sector does not need another conventional gathering — it needs a convener. "TOURISE is created to bring together the groups that rarely meet, enabling them to co-design strategies, address shared challenges, and unlock opportunities

that no single entity can achieve alone."

At the heart of TOURISE is the belief that the travel experience must be designed with intention. While destinations work hard to promote their offerings, many of the elements that shape the visitor journey — mobility, retail, urban planning, telecom, real estate, housing, culinary experiences — operate in silos. TOURISE brings these sectors under one roof to orchestrate a more integrated, seamless experience for travellers and residents. Technology plays a central role, creating the backbone that



Fahd Hamiduddin
CEO, Saudi Tourism Authority &
Vice Chair, TOURISE

links services, enhances accessibility, and elevates visitor satisfaction.

Global tourism destinations are facing several challenges, such as overtourism, digital

overload, rising safety concerns, and the limitations of traditional tourism operators working independently. TOURISE aims to address these by fostering cross-industry collaboration. This year's edition offered a testbed for new ideas and partnerships, with the commitment to review what works, refine what does not, and introduce new initiatives annually. Remarkably, 60 per cent of participants were from outside the tourism industry, underscoring the platform's relevance across sectors.

The global nature of TOURISE was reflected

in its speaker lineup — ministers, policymakers, mayors, technology leaders, mobility innovators, and stakeholders from

important source market. After strong growth from neighbouring countries, Saudi Arabia is focusing on mid-haul markets,

TOURISE is created to bring together the groups that rarely meet, enabling them to co-design strategies, address challenges

sports, retail, and beyond. One standout outcome was the proposal from several mayors to form a TOURISE Alliance for destination leaders, targeting 100 members by next year. The discussion also turned to Asia, now Saudi Arabia's most

particularly across Asia Pacific. India and China lead this expansion. One innovative initiative discussed at TOURISE involves transforming visa access for Indian travellers by integrating financial services, banks, and technology providers. ➔

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KSA looks beyond religious tourism

Gloria Guevara, Interim President and CEO, World Travel & Tourism Council, in an interview with **TRAVTALK**, reflects on her years shaping Saudi Arabia’s tourism strategy. She also shares insights from WTTC’s recent Global Summit, the sector’s rapid growth in the Middle East, and the opportunities and challenges shaping the future of global travel and tourism.

 TT Bureau

Gloria Guevara’s return to Riyadh is both professional and personal. Having lived in the Saudi capital for three years as Chief Special Advisor to **His Excellency Ahmed Al Khateeb**, Minister of Tourism, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, she played a key role in developing national tourism strategies aligned with Vision 2030. She highlights the kingdom’s powerful combination of vision, leadership, and resources. Saudi Arabia’s opening to tourism has unlocked new opportu-



Gloria Guevara
Interim President & CEO
World Travel & Tourism Council

nities across the region. Once focused primarily on religious visitors, the Kingdom is now attracting business and leisure travellers drawn by giga-

projects, new airlines, expanded airports, and vibrant cultural seasons in Riyadh and Jeddah. With more than 100 mil-

rooms and diverse destination developments.

From the WTTC perspective, Guevara empha-

While Europe remains the largest region globally, the Middle East is the fastest-growing, breaking records in visitor numbers

lion visitors recorded in 2023 — surpassing Vision 2030’s initial target — the country is now working toward an ambitious 150 million visitor goal, supported by over 500,000 new hotel

sises the Middle East’s exceptional momentum. While Europe remains the largest region globally, the Middle East is the fastest-growing, consistently breaking records in visitor num-

bers, investment, and job creation. She notes that WTTC’s recent Global Summit in Rome was the most successful to date, attracting more than 300 CEOs, 100 governments, and top global leaders. Key takeaways from the summit included urgent workforce needs, with 91 million new jobs expected and 43 million at risk of remaining unfilled without proper training and youth engagement. She also highlighted AI’s expanding role in improving sustainability, efficiency, and traveller experience, from reduc-

ing resource use to generating itineraries.

IMPORTANT TAKEAWAYS

- ❖ **91** million new jobs expected
- ❖ **43** million jobs at risk of remaining unfilled without proper training and youth engagement
- ❖ **150** million visitor goal of Saudi Arabia

Slow & local experiences trend

As the year draws to a close, the global travel trends indicate a renewed focus on reflection, rejuvenation, and responsible exploration. While winter has traditionally been associated with festive breaks and family reunions, today’s travellers are seeking something deeper than traditional leisure. They are searching for authenticity, purpose, and meaningful travel.

The year-end travel trends herald a new era, shaped by slow tourism, hyper-local experiences, and purpose-driven journeys. These trends are redefining how individuals explore the world, including the Middle East.

Slow tourism

In an era characterised by accelerated lifestyles and constant mobility, the growing prominence of slow tourism signifies a conscious shift toward mindfulness, sustainability, and deeper cultural engagement. Rather than pursuing busy itineraries, contemporary travellers are increasingly opting to immerse themselves in fewer places for longer, allowing for more meaningful interaction with its

environment, traditions, and local communities.

During the winter season, slow travel has emerged as a defining trend, par-

Moreover, slow tourism aligns closely with global sustainability objectives by encouraging lower carbon emissions, supporting local economies,

Rather than pursuing busy itineraries, contemporary travellers are opting to immerse themselves in fewer places for longer

ticularly across destinations that foster reflection and reconnection. Examples range from the Feynan Ecolodge in Jordan, Misfat Al Abriyeen, Oman, to the desert colodges in the UAE. In each context, travellers demonstrate a preference for extended stays, reduced movement, and enriched experiential depth.

and promoting cultural preservation.

Hyper-local experiences

The concept of hyper-local travel is gaining increasing prominence, particularly among younger and more discerning travellers seeking authenticity and cultural depth. Rather than en-

gaging with standardised tourism products, contemporary visitors are drawn to experiences that reflect the unique social and cultural identity of a destination. Within the Middle East, this trend is manifesting through initiatives that celebrate indigenous heritage, traditional craftsmanship, and community-based tourism. For example, Rijal Almaa Heritage Village in Saudi Arabia offers visitors an immersive rural tourism experience that emphasises authenticity, biodiversity, and community-led development.

Rise of wellness & nature-based travel

Post-pandemic travel has highlighted the connection between well-being and exploration. Once

associated with spa retreats, wellness tourism now embraces holistic experiences that nurture physical health, mental clarity, and emotional transformations. Winter, with its traditional reflective pace, offers the ideal backdrop for such journeys. From mountain meditation retreats in Oman to yoga and sound-healing sessions amid the UAE’s desert landscapes, travellers are increasingly turning to nature as both sanctuary and guide.

Sustainability at the core of travel

Environmental awareness is increasingly shaping travel choices. Travellers are prioritising destinations and accommodations that demon-

strate tangible commitments to sustainability, conservation, and community support.

Winter travel in 2025 is defined by intentionality and mindfulness. Across the Middle East, travellers are seeking journeys that are slower, more local, and transformative.



Dr Sean Lochrie
Associate Professor
Heriot-Watt University Dubai
(The views expressed are solely of the author.)

Abu Dhabi raises the bar for hotels

The Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi announced that it is updating the Abu Dhabi Hotel Classification Manual to reflect travel trends and deepen relationships with stakeholders by providing guidance on quality standards. The manual is used for determining a hotel or resort's star rating, establishing clear standards in categories from housekeeping to safety.

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The Abu Dhabi Hotel Classification Manual, introduced in 2007, features mandatory minimum criteria and rating criteria for hotels and resorts. It was updated in 2018 to add a guest experience index, mystery shopping, and product designators. The new edition is designed to build on this work and add further refinements, creating a global benchmark for hospitality excellence and guest experience.

His Excellency Saleh Al Geziry, Director General – Tourism, DCT Abu



Dhabi, said, "The updated Hotel Classification Manual will deliver on Abu Dhabi's Tourism Strategy 2030 by positioning Abu Dhabi as a thought leader in global hospitality regulation and enhancing the

emirate's alignment with international benchmarks while showcasing unique service excellence elements. It provides granular detail and guidance that chart a clear path for hotels as we meet

the strategy's goal of increasing visitors by more than half between 2023 and 2030."

The updated manual will have changes in three main areas. It will reflect

current global best practices, expand category definitions to widen coverage to more hotels and resorts, and introduce accolades to recognise hotels that exceed expectations in specific areas.

Visitors, hotels, and investors will all benefit from the update: visitors through elevated and more consistent hotel experiences, hotels through new opportunities to differentiate their offering via specialised classifications, and investors through streamlined infrastructure requirements that reinforce Abu Dhabi's status as a premier destination.

The updated manual is expected to be completed by Q2 2026, followed by a grace period for implementation of the new standards. The project is spearheaded by DCT Abu Dhabi's Licensing, Regulatory and Classification Department (LRCD), which is leading the roll-out of the manual.



Malaysia unveils 2026 experiences

Get ready to embark on a spectacular journey, as Malaysia rolls out the red carpet for Visit Malaysia 2026, a tourism campaign set to make waves across the globe. The campaign also supports Malaysia's goal to welcome 50 million international visitors, backed by enhanced connectivity — including daily flights from Dubai to Kuala Lumpur by Batik Air starting 1 January 2026.

TT Bureau

Under the Visit Malaysia 2026 campaign, Tourism Malaysia has launched its Calendar of Events, a curated showcase of over 100 festivals, exhibitions, and adventures that reflect the nation's rich cultural heritage, natural beauty, and innovative spirit.

Visit Malaysia 2026 is more than just a campaign — it's an invitation to experience a year filled with colour, celebration, and discovery. A country known for its rich multi-cultural heritage and natural wonders, Malaysia is setting the stage for travellers to create memories that last a lifetime. The official Calendar of Events is packed with high-energy festivals, cultural showcases, religious celebrations, international concerts, global



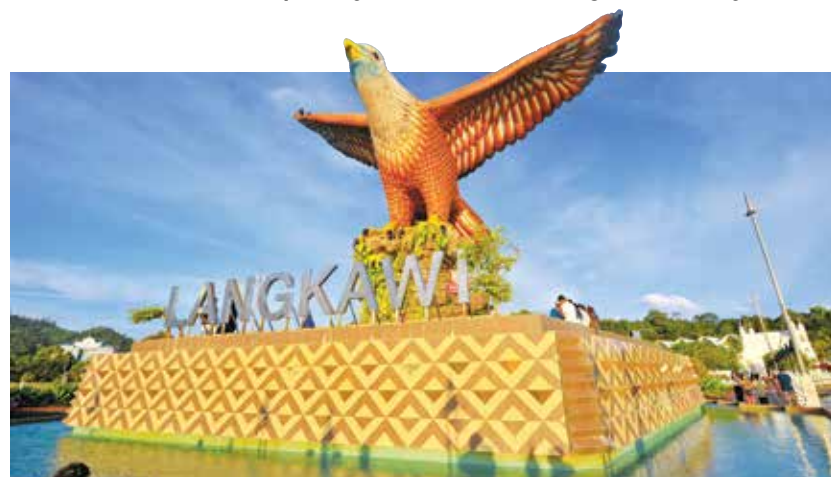
exhibitions, eco-tourism adventures, shopping carnivals, and major sporting events. Every month offers something unique, ensuring every visitor finds an experience that speaks to their interests and passion.

Cultural enthusiasts can immerse themselves in Malaysia's incredible tapestry of traditions, with signature celebrations — from the Chinese New Year and Hari Raya to Deepavali, Gawai, and Kaamatan festivals. The 22nd Royal Langkawi International Regatta 2026 is an annual event held in Langkawi, Malaysia. It is one of the region's premier sailing events

for local and international competitors to compete in various classes, with a focus on both offshore and inshore racing. The regatta is a significant event on the Malaysian tourism calendar and will be held from 19 to 24 January 2026.

The Colours of Malaysia or Citrawarna — Malaysia's unique blend of multicultural diversity from her people, food, language, and culture and arts will come together in one festive celebration of life in May. In June, the city of Kuching in Sarawak will host the Rainforest World Music Festival (RWMF) from 26 to 28 June. It is an annual three-day music festival celebrating the diversity of world music set in an actual rainforest under the beautiful backdrop of Mount Santubong.

Malaysia marks its 69th Independence Day on 31 August 2026 with VM2026 celebrations and Independence Day Parade in Putrajaya. This event honours the journey of growth, unity, and progress for Malaysia with a rich cultural herit-



Dataran Helang, Langkawi



Colours of Malaysia

age, diverse population, and a strong and flourishing economy. Runner enthusiasts and professionals can look forward to the annual Penang International Bridge Marathon in December 2026. This annual event takes place at Penang's iconic second bridge, the Sultan Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah Bridge. This is the largest mass-participation sporting event in Penang, bringing tens of

Calendar of Events is packed with high-energy fests, cultural showcases, religious celebrations, and international concerts

thousands of runners out onto the streets. Malaysia is ready to shine as Southeast Asia's premier year-round destination. Plan ahead, mark your calendars, and get ready to experience Ma-

laysia's warmth, hospitality, and unforgettable adventures in 2026. The journey begins now — Visit Malaysia 2026 is going all out to welcome the world with open arms! ➡



Rainforest World Music Festival

UN hails Riyadh's transformation

Natalia Bayona, Executive Director, UN Tourism, in an interview with **TRAVTALK**, praises Riyadh's rapid transformation, emphasising the city's dynamic youth, strong innovation ecosystem, and fast-growing tourism sector driven by Vision 2030. She also highlights the milestone appointment of the organisation's first woman and youngest Secretary-General.

TT Bureau

Natalia Bayona, Executive Director, UN Tourism, lauded Riyadh as a vibrant and fast-evolving city that reflects the essence of Saudi Arabia's tourism transformation. Highlighting the Riyadh's transformation since her first visit to the Kingdom, Bayona said, "Today, Riyadh stands as a hub where youth are empowered through startups, accelerators, and innovation-driven initiatives." She expressed admiration for Riyadh Boulevard and the diversity showcased through Riyadh Season, underscoring how each



Natalia Bayona
Executive Director
UN Tourism

edition brings new culinary and cultural experiences that elevate the city's global presence.

Bayona emphasised that Saudi Arabia's rapid tourism growth is a direct result of Vision

2030, which positions tourism as a pillar of economic diversification. This momentum, she said, sets an example for nations worldwide, proving that tourism can serve as a primary driver of economic growth. Bayona also praised the historic appointment of the first female — and youngest-ever — Secretary-General of UN Tourism, calling it a milestone for the organisation and



the industry. She noted that this development

Saudi Arabia's rapid tourism growth is a direct result of Vision 2030, which positions tourism as a pillar of economic diversification

symbolises the rising influence of women and youth, reinforcing tourism's ability to foster inclusive leadership and human development.

Reflecting on the day's AI-themed session on shaping the future of

tourism, Bayona highlighted the importance of keeping humanity at the centre. Tourism, she said, is the most human of economic sectors, and technology should be used as a tool to empower people and create meaningful journeys. 📌



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Abu Dhabi sees robust growth in H1

The Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi announced robust tourism growth in the first half of 2025, a testament to the successful execution of its ambitious Tourism Strategy 2030. Strategic investment in cultural and heritage sites attracted over 4 million visitors between January and June 2025, a 47 per cent year-on-year increase on H1 2024.

TT Bureau

A key pillar of DCT Abu Dhabi's Tourism Strategy 2030 is commitment to diversify offerings that profoundly reshape its visitor landscape. Through strategic initiatives and investments that aim to preserve its rich cultural heritage while embracing a forward-looking vision, the emirate is being established as a city

renowned worldwide for its culture and creativity.

Culture at the heart of growth

Between January and June 2025, Abu Dhabi's cultural and heritage sites welcomed over 4 million visitors, marking an incredible 47 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2024. Flagship institutions continued to thrive, with Louvre Abu Dhabi



HE Saood Abdulaziz Al Hosani
Undersecretary
DCT Abu Dhabi

maintaining strong visitor numbers at 784,606.

His Excellency Saood Abdulaziz Al Hosani, Undersecretary, DCT Abu Dhabi, said, "Our exceptional first-half performance is a powerful

testament to DCT Abu Dhabi's strategic vision and the effective execution of Tourism Strategy 2030. These results are a direct reflection of our deliberate investments in cultural infrastructure, the diversification of our world-class offerings, and our targeted efforts to attract visitors from global markets. This momentum strategically positions us to accelerate toward our ambitious 2030 targets, solidifying Abu Dhabi's reputation as a must-visit destination where culture and Emirati hospitality are at its core — offering authenticity, innovation, and immersive experiences.

Strategic expansion boosts results

This strategic diversification and expansion of the emirate's cultural offerings, coupled with an enhanced visitor experience, contributed to a significant growth across the hospitality sector. Abu Dhabi's hotels welcomed 2.9 million guests between January and June 2025, a 2 per cent increase compared to 2024. This momentum translated into substantial economic gains.

Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR) reached \$446, a 24 per cent year-on-year increase, while hotel occupancy

remained strong at 80 per cent. The average length of stay for international hotel guests also saw an increase, reaching 3.2 nights.

2030 TOURISM STRATEGY

- ❖ Tourism Strategy 2030 aims to attract 39.3 million visitors annually
- ❖ Create 178,000 new tourism jobs
- ❖ Expand hotel capacity to 50,000 rooms

Our first-half performance is a testament to DCT Abu Dhabi's strategic vision and the effective execution of Tourism Strategy 2030



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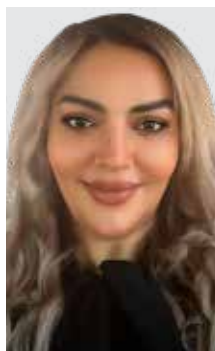
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A new brand identity for L'AZURE

Paving the way for expansion from the local Saudi market to the global stage, L'AZURE Hospitality announces a comprehensive brand restructure designed to strengthen guest-centric and employee-centric values. With this initiative, L'AZURE Hospitality is setting the stage for sustainable growth, innovation, and a stronger presence in the international hospitality industry.

TT Bureau

“This is more than a restructure; it is a milestone in our vision to share the spirit of Saudi hospitality with the world,” said **Nuran Kilani**, Chief Commercial Officer, L'AZURE Hospitality. The restructure marks a turning point in L'AZURE Hospitality's growth strategy. By aligning its brand identity with the core values, it is preparing to introduce L'AZURE Hospitality to international mar-



Nuran Kilani
Chief Commercial Officer
L'AZURE Hospitality

kets while maintaining the authenticity and warmth



This is more than a restructure; it is a milestone in our vision to share the spirit of Saudi hospitality with the world

that define Saudi hospitality. The transformation reflects L'AZURE's commitment to:

- Guest-Centric Excellence: Enhancing every

touchpoint of the guest experience, ensuring personalised service and world-class hospitality.

- Employee-Centric Culture: Empowering teams

with the tools, training, and environment they need to thrive — recognising that engaged employees are the foundation of exceptional service standards.

“Our guests and employees remain at the heart of everything we do, and this new chapter ensures we are ready to deliver excellence globally,” Kilani concludes. ➔

For China, experience trumps shopping

China's outbound market is exploding again and changing the rules for destinations worldwide. With more than 160 million active passports and a fast-growing wave of younger, independent, and experience-led travellers, China has become the growth engine no destination can afford to overlook. The winners will be the destinations that understand how they travel.

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China's return is not a rebound. It is a shift in how one of the world's largest source markets moves, decides, and experiences a holiday. The numbers tell the story. The country is set to surpass its pre-pandemic record of 155 million outbound trips in 2025. During the recent National Day break alone, mainland citizens made more than nine million border crossings, close to 10 per cent higher than last year. Flight capacity has also climbed back to over 90 per cent of 2019 levels. In simple terms, China is travelling again



Sienna Parulis-Cook
Director – Marketing and
Communications
Dragon Trail International

with confidence and scale. Here are some key facts as shared by **Sienna Parulis-Cook**, Director – Marketing and Communications, Dragon Trail International, at the PATA insights session at WTM.

Demand returns

Outbound flights reached over 90 per cent of 2019's capacity. With over 11 per cent of the population now holding passports, China's travel demand has become stable and structural.

Travel choices now

Relaxation leads the list of motivations for 2025, followed by culture, cuisine, and nature. Travellers increasingly want holidays that feel personal and restorative. Family travel continues to grow. Shopping has dropped in importance, replaced by a search for meaningful, immersive moments. Short city breaks, luxury

hotels, scenic escapes, and culinary-focused itineraries all rank high.

FIT, a new norm

Independent travel has now become the domi-

nant mode. During the National Day holiday, more than half of outbound travellers chose FIT itineraries, and among those aged 18 to 24, the figure rose to more than 70 per cent. Group tours

still exist, but the model has evolved. Travellers prefer small groups, private tours, customised themes, and higher-end design. Family pods and special interest groups are shaping a new premium segment.

During the National Day holiday, over 50% outbound travellers chose FIT, and among those aged 18 to 24, the figure was over 70%

Digital path

Chinese travellers build their journeys online. Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and WeChat drive destina-

Social sharing

About 94 per cent of Chinese travellers share their trips online. WeChat Moments leads, followed closely by Xiaohongshu and Douyin. This constant visibility creates a cycle where shared experiences inspire the next wave of travel decisions. ➔

Riyadh sets 50-year roadmap

The 26th session of the UN Tourism General Assembly concluded with the adoption of the Riyadh Declaration on the Future of Tourism, a momentous step taken by member states towards enhanced cooperation over the next 50 years. The declaration reaffirms the Kingdom's leadership in global tourism and its position at the heart of major, industry-changing decisions.

TT Bureau

The Riyadh Declaration on the Future of Tourism is a shared roadmap to guide the sector's next half-century around sustainability, inclusion, and AI-powered innovation. It underscores strengthening international cooperation, resilience, and the empowerment of local communities, setting a vision to ensure tourism remains a force for economic growth, cultural understanding, and environmental stewardship worldwide.

His Excellency Ahmed Al Khateeb, Minister of Tourism, Kingdom



Members at the 26th Session of the UN Tourism General Assembly

of Saudi Arabia, said, "From Riyadh, we move from declarations to delivery. The agreements signed here and the platforms we are launching will mobilise investment, upskill our people, digitise our SMEs, and pro-

tect culture and nature. As home to UN Tourism's Regional Office for the Middle East, the Kingdom will continue to convene partners and deliver measurable outcomes, so tourism remains a bridge between

nations and a driver of shared prosperity."

"The declaration's adoption signals renewed determination among the international community to unlock the full economic and social value of tour-

ism as we pursue the SDGs. It is also a vote of confidence in Saudi Arabia's position as a facilitator of dialogue and a new hub for collaboration."

During the 26th General Assembly of UN Tourism,

delegates also ratified the appointment of Shaikha Nasser Al Nowais as the next Secretary-General of UN Tourism, making her the first woman and GCC national to lead the organisation. Her term will begin at the start of 2026. ➡

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Swiss lures ME with winter escapes

Switzerland is sharpening its pitch to Middle East travellers as Saudi Arabia opens up, regional confidence grows, and families seek cooler, nature-driven holidays. In an interview with **TRAVTALK**, **Martin Nydegger**, CEO, Switzerland Tourism, shares how the destination plans to deepen its connection with the region and shape year-round travel.

 TT Bureau

Switzerland has always enjoyed a strong relationship from the Middle East, but **Martin Nydegger**, CEO, Switzerland Tourism, sees the region entering a new phase entirely. As he puts it, the change is not just in outbound travel. It is in mindset.

“You can really tell that here (at TOURISE in Riyadh) this Vision 2030 and the new leadership is opening not only Saudi Arabia to the world, but also the minds of the people,” he says. That shift is creating real momentum

for destinations that offer nature, comfort, and a gentler pace.

Switzerland, he believes, sits naturally in that space. Geneva in summer, for example, has earned itself a nickname among the Swiss. “It is called Riyadh Olak,” he says with a smile. “Riyadh at the Lake. You can really see that there are lots of Arabs there. They love it.” And Switzerland is keen to welcome more. The opportunity now lies in extending that appeal across the year. Middle East travellers already lean towards summer escapes, but Nydegger wants them to discover the winter side



Martin Nydegger
CEO
Switzerland Tourism

of Switzerland as well. “I say snow and not skiing,” he explains. “Winter is a completely different element and a completely different country.” For Gulf travellers who seek cooler weather, dramatic

scenery, and places that prioritise family comfort, Swiss winter opens up a brand new palette.

The region’s taste for privacy, scenery, and effortless logistics makes Switzerland an easy sell. The country’s transport system, boutique hotels, and mountain villages give families the kind of quietness and convenience they often crave. And unlike many destinations, Switzerland’s tourism strategy hinges on quality over volume. It prefers longer stays, more meaningful travel, and a spread of visitors across both hotspots and hidden gems. As

Nydegger puts it, the strongest differentiators remain timeless. “Nature, mountains, landscape. That is why you go to Switzerland.” What has changed is accessibility. With more than 600

for smooth, reliable, low stress movement.

Looking ahead, the goal is not just to increase numbers; it is to build a steady, loyal base of travellers who return for different

Switzerland fits ME travellers perfectly, with Geneva nicknamed ‘Riyadh at the Lake’ because many Arab visitors feel at home

mountain railways and the Swiss Travel Pass, the country’s most remote corners become effortless day trips. This matches the Middle East’s preference

seasons and discover new regions with each visit. “If you keep circling only the main attractions, you will miss out the beauties on the side,” concludes Nydegger. ➡



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Agentic protocol to transform travel

The Agentic Tourism Initiative was unveiled at the TOURISE Summit, introducing the world's first Agentic Protocol for Tourism, a digital framework set to transform every stage of the traveller's journey. Launched in partnership with TOURISE and Globant, the initiative builds on the 'Tourism's AI Takeover: Reinventing Travel through Agentic Tourism' whitepaper to create an app.

TT Bureau

The agentic AI trend is fast replacing traditional AI. Where AI would collate information and respond to queries, agentic AI has the ability to track user activity/information, make decisions, and take action without so much as a human prompt. The travel trade is understandably up in arms about agentic AI — not only because it is a potential threat to human agency, but because it is an undeniable threat to agents in the business of travel.

The Tourism Initiative directly answers the



trade's call to create an Open Protocol for Tourism AI, defining how AI agents interact from inspiration to return. The result: intelligent, seamless, and sustainable travel experiences across the global tourism ecosystem.

The initiative brings together a diverse coalition of founding members across technology, infrastructure, aviation, and

destination leadership, including Globant, Red Sea Global, HUMAIN, Riyadh Air, King Salman International Airport, World Travel & Tourism Council, Amazon Web Services, Salesforce, Hollobob, and Trip.com. This collaborative approach ensures the agentic protocol is technically robust, inclusive, and adaptable to the evolving needs of travellers, operators, and destinations worldwide.

His Excellency Ahmed Al Khateeb, Minister of Tourism, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, said, "We are proud to see the Agentic Tourism Initiative take flight from the Kingdom, reflecting our commitment to shaping the future of global travel through innovation and collaboration. This protocol represents a bold step toward harmonising technology with the human spirit of

exploration." Guided by the principle "digitise the expected and humanise the unexpected", the initiative aims to amplify, not replace, human creativity, empa-

Martín Migoya, CEO and Co-founder, Globant, said, "We are witnessing the dawn of a new era for tourism, where technology and human ingenuity converge to

Guided by the principle 'digitise the expected and humanise the unexpected', the initiative aims to amplify human creativity

thy, and connection. AI will serve as an enabler, empowering the people and places that make travel meaningful while supporting destinations in achieving long-term, sustainable growth.

create experiences that are not only smarter, but also deeply personal and truly memorable. The initiative is more than a technical milestone; it is a strategic leap toward shaping how AI is used in travel." ▶

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Aseer joins as member of GSTC

Aseer Development Authority has joined as a member of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC). Situated in southwestern Saudi Arabia, Aseer region is known for its elevated landscapes and distinct seasonal climate. It contains 60% of Saudi Arabia's forests, a 125-km coastline, and over 4,000 cultural and heritage villages.

TT Bureau

The Aseer Development Authority signed a membership agreement with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) earlier this year. Going by the agreement, the authority has outlined a series of initiatives across four main areas — Planet, Governance, Prosperity, and People. These are



Our membership in the GSTC reflects our commitment to applying the best international standards in responsible and sustainable tourism

— Hashim Al-Dabbagh

aimed at preserving natural surroundings for future generations, improving efficiency, creating economic opportunities, and strengthening social connections to support long-term development.

The Aseer Development Authority states that it aims to develop a unique and sustainable tourism model, which includes

increasing green spaces by 30 per cent, protecting wildlife, and promoting the use of eco-friendly materials in its projects. The region targets reaching 9.1 million visits annually by 2030, creating 94,000 new jobs, and contributing approximately 26 billion Saudi Riyals to the GDP, in alignment with the goals of Saudi Vision 2030 for tourism sector development.

Commenting on the development, **Hashim Al-Dabbagh**, Chief Executive Officer, Aseer Development Authority, said, "We strive to establish Aseer as a global destination for sustainable tourism by enhancing the tourism experience, supporting local economic growth,

a comprehensive training programme guiding hotels towards improvement and preparing them for the requirements to obtain GSTC Certification within a specified timeframe. The training will feature three intensive courses scheduled for 2025, delivered by Nastadeem, GSTC's of-



We welcome Aseer's membership in the GSTC and congratulate it on its commitment to developing sustainable tourism

— Randy Durband



and protecting the region's unique natural and cultural heritage. Our membership in the GSTC reflects our commitment to applying the best international standards in responsible and sustainable tourism."

official training partner for the Arab region.

GSTC welcomes the authority

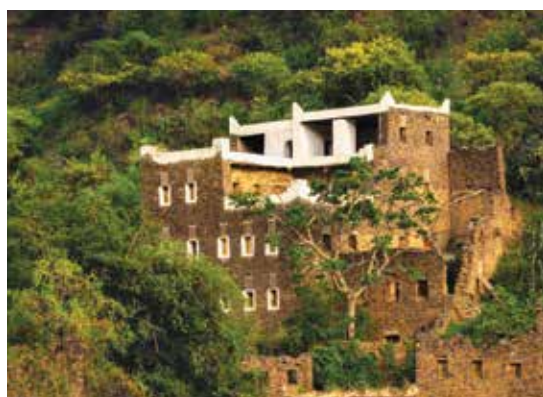
Randy Durband, Chief Executive Officer, GSTC, expressed his happiness

with the partnership, saying, "We welcome Aseer's membership in the GSTC and congratulate it on its commitment to developing sustainable

tourism in this unique destination. We hope and expect that it will benefit from the comprehensive approach to applying GSTC Standards in its management and the management of the tourism sector in Aseer." 📌

Training programme to support hotels

The Aseer Development Authority will soon launch



Recognition for Saudi professionals

► Contd. from page 1

industry. The DDP Group, a titan in the B2B media landscape, has been the heartbeat of the travel, tourism, and hospital-

East and have set a new benchmark for collaboration and knowledge-sharing across the industry." The Arabian Travel Awards are divided into four categories: **Personal**

and consistently exceed expectations in their fields. **Trending Awards** — Chosen by critics, these are for individuals who have achieved something extraordinary. **Partner Awards** — For those, who have contributed towards making this event a success. The awards process begins with online nominations, which prompt everyone to reflect on what makes them stand out. This is followed by an online voting process. Then comes the final decision from the jury. The personal awards are further divided into four categories: **Gallery of Legends, DDP Gamechanger, DDP Trailblazer** and **Face of the Future**. ▶

With the Arabian Travel Awards, we aim at identifying and encouraging talent of all kinds in the tourism sector

— SanJeet

ity industry in the Middle East. With TRAVTALK as our flagship publication, we have been pushing boundaries, fostering innovation, and inspiring growth within the industry while strengthening ties in the Middle

Awards — For the legends and leaders of today and tomorrow. These are industry stalwarts as well as rising stars ready to shape the future. **Business Awards** — Recognising organisations that set high benchmarks

UAE tourism to bring ₪35 bn investment

► Contd. from page 1

HE Al Saleh said the tourism sector experienced remarkable growth in 2025, reflecting the strength and synergy of efforts between federal and local entities and the private sector. Hotel establishments generated revenues of AED 26 billion during the first half of the year, marking a growth of 6.3 per cent. Additionally, these establishments welcomed more than 16 million guests, achieving a 5.5 per cent increase.

Addressing the SITTF, **His Excellency Khalid Jasim Al Midfa**, Chairman, SCTDA, said the tourism and travel sector is one of the most influential eco-

nomie industries globally. Quoting the UN Tourism's World Tourism Barometer report, he highlighted a 5 per cent growth in global tourism during the first half of 2025 compared to the same period in

HE Al Midfa reiterated that Sharjah continues to advance in digital transformation and sustainable innovation within the tourism sector, aided by visionary leadership that prioritised

The tourism sector has attracted investments totalling ₪32.2 bn in 2024, with projections forecasting a rise to ₪35.2 bn by 2025

2024, despite existing challenges. Additionally, he noted that international tourist arrivals reached approximately 690 million between January and June 2025, representing an increase of 33 million from the previous year.

infrastructure development and the adoption of smart solutions. These advancements have elevated visitor experiences, showcasing the emirate's unique diversity in culture, nature, and environment. ▶

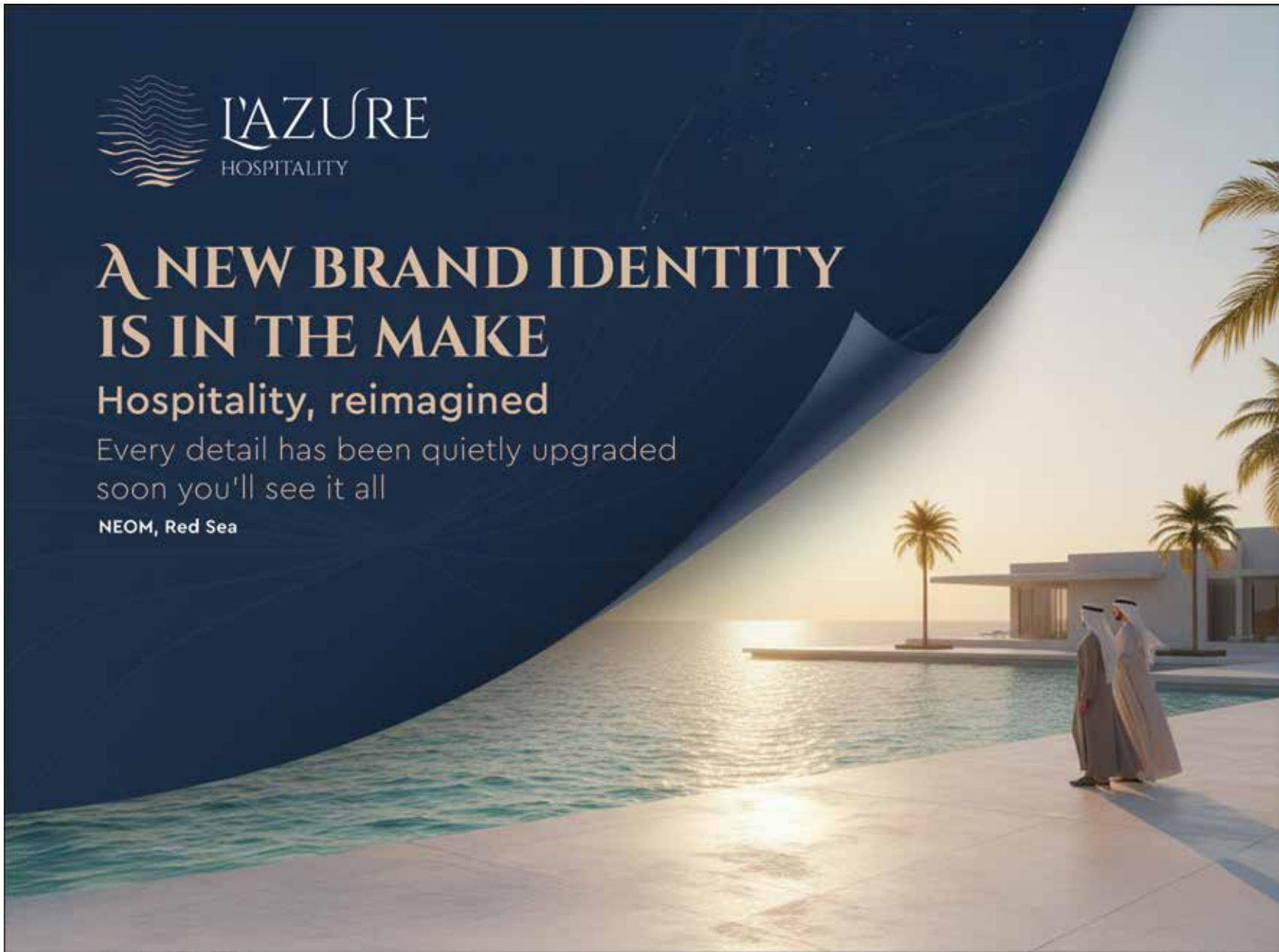


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SITTF discusses latest travel trends

The 12th Sharjah International Travel and Tourism Forum (SITTF) was organised by the SCTDA under the theme ‘New Waves of Tourism Spectrum’ in Sharjah recently. The event, held in strategic partnership with the Shurooq, brought together global experts, creative industry leaders, and policymakers, who discussed and explored the latest trends in global tourism.



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World travel community

World Travel Market London 2025, held from 4–6 November 2025 at ExCeL London, brought together important industry players from around the world. The event, organised under the theme ‘Reimagining Travel in a Changing World’ provided an international marketplace for the global travel community to meet, network, and conduct business.



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MOVEMENTS

RIXOS HOTELS

Saudi Arabia

Ahmed Elnawawy has been appointed Area General Manager – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for Rixos Hotels. He will continue to serve as the General Manager of the flagship Rixos property in King Abdullah Economic City. He has more than two decades of experience in luxury hospitality. In his new role, Elnawawy will be at the forefront of Rixos Hotels' strategic expansion in the Kingdom, marking a milestone for the brand's entry into the Saudi market.



AL HABTOOR GRAND RESORT, AUTOGRAPH COLLECTION

Dubai

Al Habtoor Grand Resort, Autograph Collection has promoted **Aziz Sharipov** to the position of Director of Sales & Marketing. Sharipov has been a key force behind the resort's success since joining as Director of Sales in 2021. Over the past four years, he has delivered outstanding results across the leisure, corporate, and MICE segments, building strong partnerships, and elevating market positioning.



THE CHEDI AL BAIT

Sharjah

The Chedi Al Bait, Sharjah, part of Chedi Hospitality's distinguished portfolio of heritage properties, has appointed **Ahmed Kamha** as the Director of Sales & Marketing. He has close to two decades of experience in the luxury hospitality industry across the UAE and wider GCC. In his new role, he will oversee the resort's commercial strategy, driving key initiatives to elevate The Chedi Al Bait's presence as Sharjah's most exceptional cultural retreat.



SHANGRI-LA

Dubai

Shangri-La Dubai has appointed **Denis Glibic** as the Director of Sales and Marketing. With over 15 years of international experience spanning Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, Glibic brings extensive expertise in commercial strategy, hotel launches, and brand positioning. In his new role, Glibic will lead the hotel's commercial strategy and oversee all sales and marketing initiatives aimed at strengthening market positioning and driving revenue growth.



RIXOS BAB AL BAHR

Ras Al Khaimah

Rixos Bab Al Bahr has appointed **Ozgur Cireli** as the General Manager. Cireli joins the property after his tenure as General Manager at KeyUrla in Turkey, where he led its opening. With an impressive career spanning over 30 years in the hospitality industry, Cireli has held numerous senior leadership positions across renowned global brands, including Hilton, Radisson Blu, Wyndham, Rotana, and Rixos. His extensive experience and knowledge cover diverse markets.



FAIRMONT THE PALM

Dubai

Accor has appointed **Ugur Talayhan** as the General Manager of Fairmont The Palm. He has over three decades of international experience and brings a wealth of leadership expertise across luxury hotel brands, including IHG, Hilton, Marriott, FRHI, and Rotana. His extensive global career spans key markets in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Prior to this, Talayhan served as Country Manager for Rotana Hotel Management Corporation.



MINOR HOTELS

Qatar

Minor Hotels has appointed **Adam Harvey** as Commercial Director for the group's five distinguished properties in Qatar — Banana Island Resort Doha by Anantara, Souq Waqif Boutique Hotels by Tivoli, Al Najada Hotel by Tivoli, Al Najada Hotel Apartments by Oaks, and Souq Al Wakra Hotel by Tivoli. With more than two decades of experience in commercial strategy, sales, marketing, and revenue leadership, Harvey brings a wealth of expertise.



UNITED HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT

Dubai

United Hospitality Management (UHM) has appointed **Dominic Arel** as Vice President of Operations for the Middle East. He will be responsible for overseeing the integration of new hotels into the portfolio and ensuring profitable operations across all UHM hotels and holiday homes in the Middle East. Arel is a highly regarded figure in the UAE hospitality sector, bringing nearly 30 years of experience in luxury hospitality and hotel pre-opening projects.



MARRIOTT AL FORSAN

Abu Dhabi

Marriott Hotel Al Forsan, Abu Dhabi, has announced the expansion of its commercial leadership team and appointed **Teodora Tasic** as Director of Sales. This reinforces the hotel's commitment to commercial excellence and strategic contribution to Abu Dhabi's growing hospitality, business tourism, and MICE sectors. Tasic brings extensive experience from iconic Abu Dhabi properties, including The Abu Dhabi EDITION and Marriott Downtown Abu Dhabi.



ROYALJET

United Arab Emirates

RoyalJet has appointed **Alain Champonnois** as Vice-President Commercial. A seasoned professional in the aviation industry, Champonnois has held senior positions in business aviation for over 25 years. He has been recognised as an innovative and success-driven professional. This will be Champonnois' second stint with RoyalJet as earlier he held the post of Commercial Director. Prior to this, Champonnois was the President-CEO – IMEA at Chapman Freeborn, part of Avia Solutions Group.



MÖVENPICK HOTEL & APARTMENTS BUR DUBAI AND MÖVENPICK HOTEL APARTMENTS AL MAMZAR DUBAI

Dubai

Natalia Zubareva has been appointed as the Cluster Director of Sales & Marketing by Mövenpick Hotel & Apartments Bur Dubai and Mövenpick Hotel Apartments Al Mamzar Dubai. She has over 17 years of experience in luxury hospitality across the UAE and international markets, and brings with her a wealth of expertise.



Marriott Hotel Al Forsan, Abu Dhabi, has appointed **Jennifer Belz** as Director of PR & Marketing. Belz joins from Germany, where she honed her expertise in brand strategy, digital innovation, and creative storytelling for luxury and lifestyle destinations, bringing a fresh international perspective to the hotel's marketing and communications strategy. Strengthening commercial leadership is central to the brand's strategy of driving sustainability and supporting Abu Dhabi's hospitality vision.



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DWTC readies for 2026 mega events

DWTC Phase 1 expansion project worth ₪10 billion is set to deliver 140,000 sq m of event space. This includes 64,000 sq m of new exhibition halls and 30,000 sq m of flexible pavilion space, integrated with the existing complex.

Global leaders unite @FHS 2025

The Future Hospitality Summit (FHS), held under the theme 'Where Vision Leads, Investment Follows' at Madinat Jumeirah in Dubai from 27–29 October, brought together leading hospitality investment decision-makers from around the world to connect, exchange ideas, and explore new partnerships. The event featured more than 200 speakers.



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Georgia seeks tie-ups with GCC trade

The Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA) announced a focused strategy to deepen its engagement with the broader GCC B2B tourism sector. This initiative is aimed at positioning Georgia as a premier, high-value partner for MICE operators, travel agencies, and investors, capitalising on the nation’s rapid tourism growth and strategic development plans.

TT Bureau

The GCC outbound travel market, projected to more than double to US\$ 158.8 billion by 2034, represents a pivotal growth segment. Georgia has successfully captured this demand, with arrivals from key GCC markets experiencing triple-digit growth in recent years. This aligns with the country’s broader tourism success, which saw over 2.9 million international visitors in H1 2025

and a record US\$ 826 million in Q1 revenue, contributing 7.2 per cent to the national GDP. This proven demand presents lucrative opportunities for B2B collaboration in high-yield sectors.

Maia Omiadze, Head of Administration, GNTA, said, “We are building a foundation for long-term growth by forging strategic alliances with the GCC travel trade and investors to jointly develop high-quality, innovative tourism



products that cater to the evolving demand for authentic and immersive experiences. Georgia’s dynamic tourism landscape offers unprecedented

opportunities for partnerships and collaborations as we continue to nurture the country’s growing reputation as a preferred international travel destination.”

Targeted B2B campaign for GCC partners

As a core component of this strategy, GNTA is launching a targeted promotional and educational

2025. The programme includes destination webinars and in-person events, offering GCC tour operators, OTAs, and MICE agencies exclusive access to Georgian sup-

We are building a foundation for long-term growth by forging strategic alliances with the GCC travel trade and investors

campaign across the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait throughout Q4

pliers, in-depth market knowledge, and co-marketing frameworks. ➡

180 agents at RezLive roadshow

RezLive.com hosted a roadshow in Muscat bringing together leading hospitality brands and over 180 travel agents from across Oman. The event highlighted RezLive.com’s commitment to empowering travel agents through technology, curated content, and strategic partnerships. Attendees gained insights into RezLive’s expanding global footprint.

