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# Sharjah fest: celebration of artistic brilliance

Sharjah Light Festival, celebrating its 14<sup>th</sup> edition, is one of the key culturally-rich events which draw visitors from across the GCC. Year-on-year the festival's offerings have grown to include new elements which never cease to amaze the travellers and residents.

**Dr Shehara Fernando**

The 14<sup>th</sup> Sharjah Light Festival returns under the patronage of His Highness Dr Sheikh Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah, to showcase the emirate's cultural richness and innovative spirit through breathtaking displays of light and art. The iconic event, organised by the Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Development Authority (SCTDA), has become a cornerstone in Sharjah's annual calendar. Scheduled to take place from 5-23 February 2025, the festival promises to captivate audiences with its artistic brilliance and immersive experiences.



H.E. Khalid Jasim Al Midfa  
Chairman, SCTDA

**The Sharjah Light Festival is not just a celebration of light but a reflection of Sharjah's vision for inclusivity, innovation, and cultural enrichment**

**Inclusivity and innovation**  
H.E. Khalid Jasim Al Midfa, Chairman, SCTDA, said, "This year's Sharjah Light Festival reflects the emirate's commitment to creativity, innovation, and cultural harmony. The festival is not just a celebration of light but a reflection of Sharjah's

vision for inclusivity, innovation, and cultural enrichment. We look forward to sharing this extraordinary experience with residents and visitors alike."

**A global celebration**  
The 2025 edition of the Sharjah Light Festival brings together tal-

ent from across the globe, with participation from various countries. Each artist contributes their unique perspective, creating a rich tapestry of creativity that reflects the emirate's cosmopolitan ethos. From intricate light projections to immersive installations, the festival's international line-up

underscores its reputation as a platform for cultural exchange and artistic innovation.

**Illuminating iconic landmarks**  
This year, some of Sharjah's most iconic landmarks will transform into mesmerising works of art. Sharjah Research Technology and Innovation Park, Al Majaz Waterfront, Al Jada, BEEAH HQ, Al Heera Beach, Sharjah Mosque, Al Rafisah Dam, Al Dhaid Fort, and Masjid Al Tayari will serve as canvases for light projections, telling stories that blend tradition with modernity.

**A destination for families**  
Building on the success of previous years, the festival will once again feature the popular family destination complex. This vibrant hub offers a wide range of activities, entertainment, and culinary delights, ensuring there is something for visitors of all ages. From live performances to interactive exhibits, the family complex provides a dynamic and engaging environment that complements the festival's artistic offerings. ▶

## TRAVTALK excels in Middle East

TRAVTALK earned 13<sup>th</sup> position in the list of Top 30 Middle East Magazines of 2025, released by Feedspot. The magazine is celebrated for its authority, relevance, and timely insights.

**TT Bureau**

The recognition of TRAVTALK among the 'Top 30 Middle East Magazines in 2025' by Feedspot is based on relevancy, authority, social media followers, and freshness. Established over 22 years ago in the UAE, with a legacy of over 35 years in India, TRAVTALK has solidified its position as a premier B2B print and electronic magazine dedicated to the travel, tourism, and hospitality sectors. The magazine offers comprehensive coverage of travel industry insights, tourism trends, interviews with travel experts, and special features, ensuring that tourism professionals and businesses remain informed about the latest news.

The magazine's commitment to delivering timely and relevant content has been instrumental in achieving this accolade. By focusing on the dynamic Middle Eastern market, TRAVTALK provides insights into regional tourism movements, government policies, daily trending news, and market features. This

dedication has fostered a loyal readership and a strong presence within the industry. In addition to its print edition, TRAVTALK maintains a robust online platform, offering digital access to its content, expanding its reach, and allowing audiences across the globe to stay updated with



the Middle East's tourism industry. The recognition by Feedspot acclaims TRAVTALK influence and authority in the region's travel and hospitality sectors, attributing it as a vital resource for professionals seeking in-depth analysis and up-to-date information. ▶



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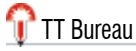
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# NDC for personalised experiences

New Distribution Capability (NDC) has become an integral part of the travel journey, as it helps in personalising experiences and bridging the gap between two parties. NDC's features are improving the relationship between airlines and travel fraternity, making it more acceptable to travel agents. **Kathryn Wallington**, Head of MEA, UK&IE, Central & Eastern EU, Travelport, shares details with **TRAVELTALK**.



## How does NDC improve the relationship between airlines and travel agents?

When NDC is applied in a way that values indirect channels, travellers can quickly and easily find that perfect option that feels personalised to their needs. We see that NDC is pushing travel toward its modern retailing era.

## Could you share the key benefits of adopting NDC for travel agents and their customers?

NDC presents an opportunity for agents to benefit from access to more competitive offers from airlines, more personalisation, and better merchandising.

## What challenges do travel agents face in implementing NDC, and how can these be addressed?

NDC is implemented differently by every airline. Travel agents often see duplicated content on screen,



**Kathryn Wallington**  
Head of MEA  
UK&IE, Central & Eastern EU, Travelport

mind, and not just focus on the airline community. That is why at Travelport, we are laser focused on delivering complete, end-to-end retailing solutions, rather than interim NDC solutions that restrict agents from being able to fully service travellers post-booking.

Agents need to be able to quickly process a refund or exchange without having to point customers to the airline to manage changes. Effective NDC solutions need to be built with agency and traveller needs in

mind, and not just focus on the airline community. That is why at Travelport, we are laser focused on delivering complete, end-to-end retailing solutions, rather than interim NDC solutions that restrict agents from being able to fully service travellers post-booking.

## Are there possibilities for travel agents leverage NDC to offer more personalised and dynamic travel experiences?

## NDC presents an opportunity for agents to benefit from access to more competitive offers from airlines, more personalisation, and better merchandising

NDC was created to give airlines the opportunity to create distinctive and unique air offers that are personalised and customised for individual custom-

ers. This is essential to modern retailing as we know it, because travellers want to be able to easily find and purchase the products we want.

## Will you be able to share the role technology providers play in helping travel agents transition to NDC?

Widespread adoption of NDC makes content distribution and aggregation more important



panemic peaks over the next year. Very few agencies can deal with the complexity of potentially hundreds of simultaneous connections to assemble the best possible itinerary. They need the right technology to 'normalise' NDC content and ensure content can be easily viewed and compared side-by-side with other sources of content, including ATPCO, EDIFACT and LCC. That is why travel retailing and distribution platforms like Travelport+ are becoming more valuable than ever to be able to quickly (as in milliseconds) sort through an in-

creasing volume of nuanced supplier content options, analyse the choices, then curate and promote those that are most relevant.



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# 8.7% rise in demand for ME flights

The Middle East emerged as a key driver of global aviation growth in November 2024, with airlines reporting an 8.7 per cent rise in passenger demand and notable gains on international routes, according to the latest report by IATA. The region contributed significantly to the industry's 8.1 per cent global increase in passenger traffic, supported by strong performance by the Gulf countries.

 TT Bureau

There was a notable growth across the global aviation sector in November 2024, according to the passenger demand data released by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) recently. Among the highlights, the Middle East emerged as a significant contributor to the upward trend, with the region's airlines reporting an 8.7 per cent year-on-year increase in revenue passenger kilometers (RPK). The growth was further complemented by a 3.9 per cent rise in capacity and a 3.6 percentage point (ppt) improvement in load factor, reaching 81.0 per cent.

Middle Eastern flights demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, particularly on key international routes. The Middle East-Asia route, for instance, experienced a 9.5 per cent year-on-year increase in



**William Walsh**  
Director General  
IATA

RPK, while the Africa-Middle East route led growth globally with a staggering 12.7 per cent surge. These achievements underline the pivotal role of Gulf nations as aviation hubs, bolstered by their strategic geographic position and advanced airport infrastructure.

Despite geopolitical challenges in certain areas, Middle Eastern airlines capitalised on robust international demand and the region's

connectivity, ensuring steady recovery and expansion. Alongside Asia-Pacific airlines, which saw the highest year-on-year RPK growth at 19.9 per cent, the Middle East significantly boosted global air travel momentum.

### Global trends

On a global scale, November 2024 marked an 8.1 per cent increase in total passenger demand compared to the same month in 2023. Capacity grew by 5.7 per cent, and the load factor reached an all-time high for November at 83.4 per cent, up 1.9 ppt from the previous year.

International passenger demand recorded an impressive 11.6 per cent year-on-year rise, with Asia-Pacific and European carriers driving this growth. Europe achieved the highest load factor among regions at 85.0 per cent, while Asia-Pacific closely followed with 84.9 per cent. Capacity growth remained robust at

8.6 per cent, underscoring strong global recovery dynamics. Domestic markets, however, grew at a more subdued pace, with a 3.1 per cent increase in RPK year-on-year. This was primarily due to a contraction in the US domestic market, which recorded a 2.7 per cent decline as low-cost carrier

all regions. Capacity grew by 16.2 per cent, and the load factor climbed 2.6 ppt to 84.9 per cent.

**Europe:** European airlines posted a 9.4 per cent year-on-year increase in demand, supported by a 7.1 per cent rise in capacity and an 85.0 per cent load factor.

cent increase in capacity. However, the load factor saw a slight dip of 0.4 ppt to 84.4 per cent.

**Africa:** African airlines experienced 12.4 per cent rise in demand, with 4.1 ppt improvement in load factor to 72.9 per cent.

## International passenger demand recorded an impressive 11.6% year-on-year rise, with Asia-Pacific and European carriers driving this growth

activity waned. In contrast, India emerged as a standout performer in domestic markets, registering a remarkable 13.3 per cent increase in RPK.

### Regional highlights

**Asia-Pacific:** With a 19.9 per cent surge in international passenger demand, Asia-Pacific led

**North America:** Growth remained modest, with a 3.1 per cent rise in demand and a 1.6 per cent increase in capacity. The load factor stood at 81.0 per cent, up 1.1 ppt.

**Latin America:** The region achieved an 11.4 per cent rise in demand, alongside an 11.9 per

### Future predictions

The Middle East's performance was buoyed by its world-class aviation hubs, which facilitate seamless connectivity across continents. Combined with Asia-Pacific's resurgence, these regions are anchoring global recovery. The IATA's November data showcases the resilience and adaptability of the global aviation sector with international markets continuing to grow, driven by pent-up demand and easing restrictions in 2025.

# Festivals & events boost UAE tourism

The UAE has strengthened its position as a global hub for cultural, entertainment, and business events. From extravagant festivals like the Dubai Shopping Festival to world-renowned events like Expo 2020, the region has strategically leveraged its position to attract millions of visitors annually. Emirates like Dubai and Abu Dhabi have transformed into bustling hubs where tradition meets modernity.

The Dubai World Cup, Abu Dhabi Film Festival, GITEX Global, and Dubai Food Festival are just a few examples that draw visitors from across the globe to the UAE. The country's tourism sector experienced remarkable growth in 2024, which aligns with the objectives of UAE Tourism Strategy 2031.

Reports indicate that Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah airports collectively handled over 103 million passengers by September 2024.



The UAE government has prioritised investments in infrastructure, airports, and hotels, creating a seamless experience for international visitors. The recently announced expansion of Al Maktoum Airport, which will eventually become the world's largest by capacity, is one example of this sustained investment. The synergy between the public and private sectors has enabled the country to host large-scale events that cater to diverse demographics and in-

terests. The festivals and events play a critical role in the UAE's economy. For instance, the Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF) is not just a retail extravaganza but a significant contributor to the country's GDP. According to the Dubai Festivals and Retail Establishment (DFRE), DSF attracts millions of visitors annually, generating billions in retail sales and boosting the hospitality sector. The hospitality industry, in particular, experiences a surge during these events.

Hotels record high occupancy rates, while restaurants and recreational centres witness increased footfall. The impact extends beyond tourism, generating economic linkages across the economy, including in the transportation, retail, and healthcare sectors, positioning festivals as a powerful economic catalyst.

of the hospitality sector further highlights this growth. Revenue from hotel establishments rose to AED 33.5 billion in the first nine months of 2024, reflecting a 4 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2023. The UAE's average hotel occupancy rate climbed to 77.8 per cent, one of the highest globally, while hotel nights surged to ap-

proximately 75.5 million between January and September 2024, marking an 8 per cent year-on-year growth. The increasing popularity of high-profile festivals, world-class events, and cultural celebrations across the seven emirates has attracted millions

of visitors, creating a ripple effect that benefits multiple industries. Festivals in the UAE are not just about economic gains; they also serve as platforms for cultural preservation and exchange. Events like the Sharjah International Book Fair and Al Dhafra Camel Festival celebrate Emirati heritage while inviting global audiences to experience the region's rich traditions.

## The UAE government has prioritised investments in infrastructure, airports, and hotels, creating a seamless experience for international visitors

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTTC), the tourism sector's contribution to the UAE's national economy is projected to reach AED 236 billion in 2024, accounting for 12 per cent of the country's GDP. The remarkable performance

proximately 75.5 million between January and September 2024, marking an 8 per cent year-on-year growth. The increasing popularity of high-profile festivals, world-class events, and cultural celebrations across the seven emirates has attracted millions



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



# KSA's domestic bookings rise 44%

Family and group bookings have emerged as an important driver of domestic tourism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with over 70 per cent growth registered across the segments. Almosafer's latest travel trend report reveals a robust 44 per cent growth in domestic bookings in 2024. **Muzzammil Ahussain**, CEO, Almosafer (part of Seera Group) shares details with **TRAVELTALK**.

TT Bureau

## How much growth in domestic bookings was seen in Saudi Arabia in 2024, and how does it contribute to the travel landscape?

Saudi Arabia's long-term tourism strategy is backed by robust infrastructure investments that have created a dynamic domestic travel landscape. As one of the Kingdom's foremost travel and tourism entities, Almosafer has always been at the forefront of enabling seamless experiences for travellers through our omnichannel offerings. Our latest travel trend report, based on proprietary data drawn from across Almosafer's booking channels, shows that in 2024 alone, there has been a 44 per cent growth in domestic bookings compared to 2023. A booming local tourism sector buoyed by enhanced connectivity, attractive all-year-round



**Muzzammil Ahussain**  
CEO  
Almosafer

activities, and seamless booking experience have significantly contributed over 40 per cent to the overall travel landscape in Saudi Arabia.

**Which emerging destinations are gaining popularity among domestic travellers, and what unique features do they offer?** Saudi Arabia's unique geographical wealth offers travellers a spectrum of cultural, religious

and entertainment options. Makkah, Riyadh, Jeddah, Al Khobar, and Madinah are the classic spots central to people's travel plans. Besides, travellers are also attracted by Abha's cool mountainous climate, Al Jubail's pristine beaches, Jizan's coastal charm, Tabuk's scenic natural landscapes, and Hail's adventurous desert terrain. These emerging destinations that offer event-based and experience-rich travel opportunities are a testament to the Kingdom's constant investment in tourism infrastructure, ensuring there is something to keep everyone engaged each time they visit these destinations.

**How have traveller preferences shifted regarding hotels, and what trends are evident among families and groups?** Luxury stays are still in demand, with 36 per cent of room nights booked in 5-star accommodations. At the same time, we have

## Saudi Arabia's long-term tourism strategy is backed by robust infrastructure investments that have created a dynamic domestic travel landscape

noticed a significant increase in budget-friendly stays in 3-star and below properties, representing 35 per cent of all booked room nights. Our data showcases a remarkable 100 per cent growth in volume for families and groups, revealing the domi-

nance of value-conscious group travel. Travellers increasingly opt for alternative accommodations, such as vacation rentals and hotel apartments, that offer them greater flexibility and affordability. We witnessed a surge of 90 per cent in family bookings in

these accommodations, which also saw a growth of 60 per cent in group bookings.

## What trends were observed in booking methods and payment preferences in 2024?

Most people prefer to make travel bookings on the go, mainly on mobile platforms. Almosafer's app makes up for a 76 per cent share of total bookings. Our web bookings saw a 7 per cent growth in volume. Retail bookings are used for more complex services bookings, especially higher-value bookings.

### Segments

- Family and group bookings all time high in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- 44% growth in domestic bookings in 2024

### Accommodation

- 36% of room nights booked in 5-star properties
- Budget-friendly stays in 3-star and below properties represents 35%

### Bookers

- 90% in these accommodations make up for family bookings
- 60% growth in group bookings at the properties in Saudi Arabia



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# Middle East in the spotlight @

The 45<sup>th</sup> edition of Fitur witnessed an increased presence from the Middle East, bringing in major players from the region. Oman, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Iraq stood out in terms of main pavilions set up at the international trade tourism fair, whereas Atlantis made a vast difference as an iconic partner with many agents opting to meet the team.

 Dr Shehara Fernando

**Jose Sanchez**, Commercial Manager - Middle East, Africa, Asia, IFEMA, said that they are looking at further enhancing the tourism ties between the United Arab Emirates and Spain in the next edition, and details regarding that would be released in due course. "Middle East is one of the most important markets for us and we are currently focusing on the United Arab Emirates, as we have seen the growth potential from the different emirates. Hence, we are in conversation with the teams to see how we can further partner with the United Arab Emirates," Sanchez said.

The total number of GCC residents visiting Spain in 2023 reached 434,000, 33 per cent more than in 2022, with an average stay of 8.6 days. Specifically, visitors from the UAE totalled more than 140,000 and spend-



**Jose Sanchez**  
Commercial Manager - Middle East  
Africa, Asia, IFEMA

ing grew by 37.8 per cent, with an average spend of 2,668 euros, 26 per cent more than in 2022. According to sources in the industry, around 200,000 Spanish tourists visit Dubai every year.

This year, Qatar, Oman, Egypt, Jordan, Persia (Iran), Iraq, and Turkiye stood out in terms of pavilions. Israel and Palestine too had their presence. From the UAE, there were many iconic



**ME is one of the most important markets for us and we are currently focusing on the UAE, as we have seen the growth potential from the different emirates**

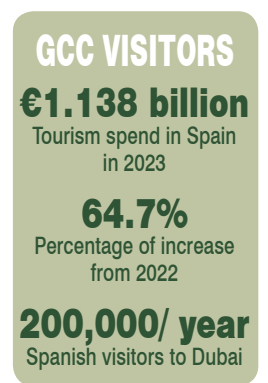
hotels and tour operators, such as dnata, desert adventures and Rida International, who showcased their offerings at

the event. The recovery of the region has been quite impressive and stronger than any other market. One of the key attrac-


tions for the Middle East travellers were the halal food options available at the pavilions.

Growth of the Middle East economy has been more than the average growth of the countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), resulting in higher spending by the travellers from the region. If you take the GCC

market in consideration, Spain witnessed an unprecedented growth in 2023 in terms of travellers and tourism expenditure. In 2023, tourists from the Gulf region spent more than €1.138 billion in Spain, 64.7 per cent more than in 2022, according to Turespaña estimates based on INE data (Frontur and Egatur). These travellers are considered as "large consumers", with spending well above their European counterparts.



## AI to future-proof hospitality sector?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is revolutionising the hospitality industry, reshaping how businesses operate, engage with customers, and optimise performance. From personalised guest experiences to operational efficiency, AI is becoming an indispensable tool for hoteliers worldwide. Industry leaders share their insights on the topic with .

 TT Bureau

Some of the key impacts of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the hospitality include enhanced guest experience where AI-powered tools, such as chatbots and virtual assistants, provide 24/7 support, answer inquiries instantly, and offer personalised recommendations. These solutions enable seamless communication, improving customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Operational efficiency is another aspect with AI streamlining repetitive tasks like check-ins, room allocation, and housekeeping schedules. Machine learning algorithms analyse data to predict maintenance needs, reducing downtime and operational costs. AI transforms revenue management by analysing vast amounts of market data, historical trends, and external factors to optimise pricing strategies. This ensures competitive pricing and maximises profitability.



**Ralph Melis**  
COO  
ExploreTECH

AI also enables hyper-personalised experiences by analysing guest preferences and behaviour. Hotels can offer tailored services, such as customised room settings, dining

**Operational efficiency is another aspect with AI streamlining repetitive tasks like check-ins, room allocation, and housekeeping schedules**



**Michael J Goldrich**  
Founder and Chief Advisor  
Viviander Advisors

options, and exclusive offers, enhancing the overall guest journey.

**Ralph Melis**, COO, ExploreTECH, said, "Our focus is on develop-



**Leo Berrit**  
Vice President Sales  
FLYER Hospitality

ing platform functionality. We are launching an advanced conversational AI tool and introducing a tech stack builder tailored for hotels. Later this year, we will also enhance the RFP and RFI tools on the platform. Beyond technology, we are planning events in collaboration with vendor partners at ATM and Future Hospitality, among others."

**Michael J Goldrich**, Founder and Chief Advisor, Viviander



**Brian Hicks**  
President and CEO  
HSMIAI Global

Advisors, said, "In 2025, we expect a significant adoption of technology in hospitality. Many teams didn't budget for AI and related technologies in 2024 due to their late emergence, but this year, they are prepared. Hotels will increasingly leverage AI to boost productivity, enabling highly segmented, personalised messaging that drives revenue."

**Leo Berrit**, Vice President Sales, FLYER Hospital-

ity, said, "Our focus for 2025 is expanding AI-driven solutions for hotels. AI-driven analytics and machine learning are helping hotels extract deeper insights from data, saving time and improving focus on high-impact revenue dates."

**Brian Hicks**, President and CEO, HSMIAI Global, said, "Our 2025 strategy emphasises education, content creation, and certifications across sales, revenue, and marketing.



# RAK received over 1 mn visitors in '24

Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority (RAKTDA) reports 2024 as its strongest year ever, welcoming a record-high 1.28 million overnight arrivals, with 12 per cent growth in tourism revenues and a notable 15 per cent rise in MICE visitors. The success is a testament to the Emirate's strategic and sustainable growth vision to attract over 3.5 million annual visitors by 2030.

TT Bureau

Commenting on the Ras Al Khaimah's achievements, **Raki Phillips**, CEO, Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority, said: "2024 was a milestone year for Ras Al Khaimah, showcasing our commitment to sustainability, enhanced connectivity, and diverse experiences tailored to every traveller. Looking ahead, our vision extends beyond attracting more visitors; we aim to position Ras Al Khaimah as a destination of the future. With significant investments, world-class events, and groundbreaking developments on the horizon, 2025 is set to be another remarkable year." Several factors contributed to this robust performance in 2024, including the opening of new hotels and resorts, a growing calendar of international events, increased



Raki Phillips  
CEO  
RAKTDA

connectivity to Ras Al Khaimah International Airport, best-in-class marketing campaigns and over 2,200 international activities and market engagements across 70 cities.

**RAK's key achievements in '24**

❖ **Record-breaking visitor numbers:** 1.28 million overnight arrivals, marking 12 per cent growth of tourism revenues and 15 per cent rise in MICE visitors.

❖ **Global recognition for sustainability:** RAKTDA's sustainability programme was named the 'Middle East's Most Sustainable Project' at the Forbes Middle East 2024 Sustainability Leaders' Summit.

❖ **Enhanced connectivity:** Boosted accessibility to the Emirate with the introduction of new direct flights from key cities enhancing connectivity through Ras Al Khaimah International Airport.

❖ **Expanded hospitality offerings:** The opening of Sofitel Al Hamra Beach Resort and

Anantara Mina Al Arab Resort introduced new luxury experiences, including the Emirate's first overwater villas.

❖ **Exceptional events:** From the third HIGHLANDER Adventure hiking challenge and RAK Golf Championship to the Arab Aviation Summit and Global Citizen Forum held for four consecutive years, Ras Al Khaimah continues to host world-class events. Highlights also include the 16<sup>th</sup> Ras Al Khaimah Half Marathon, the HUAWEI AppGallery Gamers Cup, and the launch of the Seven Wonders experiential concert series.



❖ **Record-breaking New Year's Eve celebrations:** The Emirate ushered in 2025 with a spectacular fireworks and drone display, setting two new GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS™ titles.

❖ **Workplace excellence:** For the 4<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, RAKTDA was certified as a Great Place to Work®, recognised in multiple categories: 'Best Workplaces in the Middle East', 'Best Workplaces in

Hospitality™ in the GCC', and 'Best Workplaces for Women in the GCC'.



**In 2024, Ras Al Khaimah achieved new milestones in market engagement, further solidifying its position as an international tourism destination**



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# GCC carriers drive EU tourism

The past few years have witnessed Eastern European market growing, both in terms of inbound and outbound tourism. Opening of the European destinations, along with some of the GCC carriers serving the markets with great connectivity, has played an important role in the growth. **TRAVELTALK** speaks to some of the experts from the GCC to know their views about the key market.



**Jyoti Panchmatia**  
General Manager-Gulf Region  
Travco LLC

“ Eastern Europe is gaining traction among Middle East travellers due to its affordability, rich cultural heritage, scenic beauty, and improved connectivity with direct flights. ME tourists seek unique experiences, from

“ Eastern Europe showcases years old history and culture which was earlier not open to tourists. Eastern Europeans have started travelling to UAE, Middle East, as this region is an aspirational destination further enhanced by the availability of direct flights on flydubai, safety of the destination, co-existence of culture, heritage with modernity and progress. Travellers to Eastern Europe prefer to spend on health retreats. ”



**Mohamed Jassim Al Rais**  
Executive Director  
Al Rais Travel and Shipping Agencies

nature to halal-friendly services. Conversely, Eastern Europeans are drawn to the UAE's warm climate, cultural diversity, and business opportunities. ”



**Elmira Heshmati**  
CEO  
Elaxiom Travel

“ The rise of Eastern European destinations has drawn Middle Eastern travellers due to its blend of rich culture, affordability, and historical charm. ME tourists are attracted to cities with scenic landscapes and architecture. Eastern Europeans, meanwhile, prefer the Middle East for its luxury, modernity, and warm climate. Middle East travellers spend on high-end shopping, leisure activities, and wellness experiences. ”

“ Eastern Europe is increasingly enticing Middle Eastern travellers with its unique mix of rich history, picturesque landscapes, and affordable luxury. The charm of cities like Prague, Budapest, and Warsaw attracts visitors seeking cultural exploration. The region's growing hospitality and ease of travel create an irresistible invitation for Middle Eastern tourists to indulge in a more diverse, enriching European experience. ”



**Dinkar Dasaur**  
General Manager - UAE  
Satguru Travel

“ Eastern Europe is becoming a top destination for ME travellers due to its unique culture, cooler climate, and affordability. Countries like Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic offer immersive experiences. Conversely,



**Aga Pytlík**  
General Manager  
Pan World Travel

“ The GCC market is dynamic, with Europe remaining a favourite. However, over the past two years, there has been a growing trend toward exploring new European destinations. Eastern Europe offers fresh vibes, unique culinary experiences, and cultural richness in developing yet modernised countries. Eastern Europeans are drawn to the UAE for its blend of luxury and cultural diversity, and shopping experiences. ”

“ The Eastern European market offers unique experiences that resonate with Middle Eastern travellers—rich history, picturesque landscapes, and exceptional value for money. These destinations provide a blend of cultural immersion and



**Jamal Abdulnazar**  
CEO  
Cozmo Travel

modern amenities, making them popular in the ME region. Conversely, Eastern Europeans are drawn to the UAE and ME for warm climate and luxury offerings. ”



**Matthew Vlemmiks**  
Leisure Manager  
dnata Travel

“ Eastern Europe attracts Middle Eastern travellers with its affordability, scenic landscapes, and rich cultural heritage. Destinations like Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan offer family-friendly experiences, halal-friendly services, and snow ac-

“ Countries in Eastern Europe are witnessing a rise in tourism due to their diverse landscapes, rich history, and cultural heritage. Additionally, the region is becoming more accessible from the UAE due to improved flight connectivity with carriers like flydubai and Air Arabia. The growing popularity of adventure tourism and outdoor activities is contributing to the market's development and appeal. ”



**Varsha Pherwani**  
Travel Counsellor Associate  
Travel Counsellors

tivities, making them ideal for GCC nationals. ME travellers are known for luxury spending, indulging in private tours, and premium hotels. ”



**Sapna Aidasani**  
Director - PR and Marketing  
Pluto Travel

“ Eastern European countries, once part of the USSR, are turning into amazing tourist spots. Take Bulgaria, for example; it just joined the Schengen area, making travel a breeze since you don't need separate visas anymore. Plus, getting an appointment to visit these countries is super easy. These places are all about raw, natural beauty, perfect for travellers looking for something fresh and untouched. ”

“ Eastern Europe attracts Middle Eastern travellers thanks to its rich culture, affordable travel options, and ease of access with direct flights and flexible visa policies. The mild climate is a significant draw, especially during hot summers in



**Basel Atassi**  
Travel Counsellor  
Travel Counsellors

Middle Eastern countries. Eastern Europeans prefer travelling to the ME/ UAE for its warm climate, luxury shopping, good flights, and proximity. ”



**Ivan Mavrov**  
Business Development Manager -  
Concierge ONE Tourism

“ Eastern Europe is truly a gem that continues to captivate Middle Eastern travellers. The region offers breathtaking natural landscapes, from lush green mountains to serene coastlines. Beyond the scenery, visitors are drawn to the warmth and hospitality of the local people. The rich cultural heritage and diverse culinary experiences make it an memorable place. ”



**James De Silva**  
Senior Sales Officer  
NBK Travel and Tourism

Eastern Europeans visit the Middle East for luxury shopping, sunny beaches, and unique desert adventures. ”

Contd. on page 20 ▶



# Swissotel Al Murooj gets a new look

Swissotel Al Murooj Dubai has undergone a transformation to redefine luxury. The renovations at some of its rooms, outlets and spa took place over a period of time, ensuring that they are ready at a time when the number of travellers increases in Dubai due to the special winter/spring season. **Amro Nagar**, General Manager, Swissotel Al Murooj Dubai, shares details with **TRAVEL**.

TT Bureau

## Do tell us about the refurbishment of the hotel?

We are thrilled to share the exciting refurbishment updates at our hotel. A key highlight of this transformation is the complete renovation of the 14<sup>th</sup>-floor rooms, which have been meticulously redesigned to offer a blend of modern elegance and ultimate comfort.

Additionally, we have revamped our Executive Lounge, Swiss Lounge, creating a sophisticated space tailored for our esteemed guests to relax, work, or socialise in style. These enhancements reflect our commitment to continually elevating the guest experience and ensuring every stay is memorable.

In addition, we have transformed our spa into the stunning Aura Spa, an oasis of serenity and wellness, offering guests an el-



**Amro Nagar**  
General Manager  
Swissotel Al Murooj Dubai

evated experience of relaxation and rejuvenation. Our all-day dining restaurant has also undergone a remarkable makeover and is now reimagined as Le Murooj, a culinary destination serving a variety of exquisite international cuisines in a refreshed and inviting ambiance. These upgrades reflect our dedication to providing unforgettable stays and memorable moments for all our guests.

## What are the new outlets, areas that you are focusing on for this year?

We are excited about the renovations that will elevate guest experience with us! Our main hotel lobby will be undergoing a stunning transformation to create a more welcoming and luxurious ambiance. The pool area will be revamped to offer ultimate relaxation and leisure. Additionally, we will be enhancing our rooms and upgrading the apartments

tuned for the unveiling of these remarkable changes!

## Please share the expectations for the year?

My vision for 2025 is to position it as a year of growth, innovation, and exceptional guest experiences. Key priorities for the year include:

- ❖ Focusing on elevating service quality and personalising guest experiences to uphold Swissotel

completion of enhancements to the lobby, pool, rooms, and apartments, creating a refreshed and modernised environment for our guests.

- ❖ Building on previous environmental initiatives, such as the tree-planting project, by integrating sustainable practices into our daily operations and long-term strategy.

- ❖ Solidifying our position as a preferred choice for travellers through innovative marketing approaches and leveraging Dubai's status as a global tourism hub.

- ❖ Promoting a culture of growth, collaboration, and empowerment within our team to consistently deliver excellence and exceed guest expectations.

## Have you seen new source markets in the hotel?

We have observed the emergence of new source markets

interest from regions, such as Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Africa, alongside our traditional markets from the GCC, Europe, and Asia. These new markets bring a unique set of preferences and expectations, which we are adapting to by tailoring our offerings and services to meet their needs. Additionally, Dubai's growing status as a global hub for business, leisure, and events continues to attract a diverse and expanding audience, further enriching our guest demographics.

**These enhancements (at Swissotel Al Murooj) reflect our commitment to continually elevating the guest experience and ensuring every stay is memorable**

to provide unparalleled comfort and style. These upgrades are designed to redefine luxury and ensure your stay with us is nothing short of exceptional. Stay

Al Murooj's reputation as a premier destination for both business and leisure travellers.

- ❖ Ensuring the successful



(Advertorial)

# 'Visit Malaysia' eyes Gen Z travellers

The Middle East is an important source market for Malaysia. To further boost numbers of travellers from the region, Malaysia Tourism will be focusing on families and Gen Z or Millennials, reveals **Mohd Amirul Rizal Abdul Rahim**, Head of Secretariat, Visit Malaysia 2026, as they unveil the Visit Malaysia 2026 campaign to international media at the ASEAN Tourism Forum.

TT Bureau

**Mohd Amirul Rizal Abdul Rahim**, Head of Secretariat, Visit Malaysia 2026, while unveiling the Visit Malaysia 2026 campaign at the ASEAN Tourism Forum, said that the new campaign will be promoted through a number of roadshows in the Middle East over the next few months.

"Visit Malaysia 2026 will target high yield tourists, as well as tourists seeking sustainability. However, the theme for the year will be 'Malaysia: a sustainable destination and rich in culture'," he said.



**Mohd Amirul Rizal Abdul Rahim**  
Head of Secretariat  
Visit Malaysia 2026

The Visit Malaysia campaign was launched last month by their Prime Minister, Datuk Sri Arnold Ibrahim. Showing the unique logo on the screen,



Ibrahim said, "The logo for Visit Malaysia 2026 represents Malaysia's diverse, multicultural, harmony and natural beauty. For Visit Malaysia 2026, or in short form, VM 2026, we are focusing on two main agendas, which are the high-yield tourists and also the sustainable tourism, with the theme of Malay-

sia: a sustainable destination and rich in culture."

He explained, "The theme is in accordance with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. So, these are the pillars. In order to achieve the target of Visit Malaysia 2026, we are going to focus on three main

pillars, specifically increasing tourist arrivals by converting short visits into extended stays. For example, we have excursionists, we want to convert excursionists to become tourists, especially the tourists who visited Singapore, who visited Thailand, and also at the same time, the Singaporeans and the

Thais, the bordering countries, to convert them to non-excursionists to become tourists." He added, "And extending the length of stay by enriching our cultural, ecotourism experiences, empowering local communities and also improving infrastructure. We also want to encourage higher spending by promoting niche tourism experiences. Our theme goes further to state 'surreal experiences'."

## MASCOT FOR VM 2026

Cuddly sun bear to attract people of all ages

Male sun bear named Wira

Female sun bear named Manja

Male and female version to show inclusivity and diversity

**Visit Malaysia 2026 will target high yield tourists. However, the theme for the year will be 'Malaysia: a sustainable destination and rich in culture'**

# Aseer highlights its offerings at STF

Aseer is one of the distinctive destinations in Saudi Arabia focusing on cultural heritage and natural diversity of the region. The Aseer Development Authority's (ASDA's) objective is to achieve national goals and strengthen Saudi Arabia's thriving tourism ecosystem. Through 'Discover Aseer' ASDA highlights Aseer's unique offering as a tourist destination at the Saudi Tourism Forum (STF).

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The Aseer region's annual number of visitors is expected to reach 9.1 million by 2030, with tourism contributing 26 billion riyals to the GDP. The region also aims to strengthen relationships with key stakeholders, both locally and internationally in the tourism sector, and will support opportunities that are aligned with the region's economic and sustainable growth strategy.



'Discover Aseer' invites visitors to experience the cultural heritage and natural diversity of the region

Participating for the first time at the third edition of Saudi Tourism Forum (STF), **Hatem Al-Harbi**, Chief of Tourism, Aseer Development Authority (ASDA), said:

"We are happy to announce the participation of ASDA through its tourist identity, Discover Aseer, for the first time at the STF to

highlight Aseer's unique offering as a tourist destination."

Al-Harbi added, "We aim to create authentic and sustainable tourism experiences that strengthen our past and shape our future. Our participation today also sheds light on Aseer as an all-year-round tourist destination where the region aims to activate three seasons throughout the year, namely Spring, Summer

and Winter seasons, in addition to its natural and cultural elements, various activities and activations, and ambitious future projects. We are also supporting and empowering destination companies, hospitality companies and owners of heritage villages, by enhancing their presence within the 'Discover Aseer' pavilion to enhance tourism development opportunities of various kinds in the region."

'Discover Aseer' invited visitors to experience its traditions through several activities during STF, such as the region's renowned flower crowns, discovering the details and colours of the Aseeri Qatt Art, and enjoying a taste of the Aseeri cuisine, which was universally honoured with the World Region of Gastronomy 2024 by the International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism, the first region outside of Europe to win that recognition.

Aseer is committed to protecting its unique ecosystem and cultural heritage. The region aims to become a leader in sustainable development due to its traditional architectural design and more than 4,000 historic villages. Additionally, 'Abo Noghta Castles' in the historical town of Tabab, has also been recently added by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) to the prestigious list of the 'Best Tourism Villages of 2024'.

Al-Harbi added: "Our engagement at the Forum is not merely about participation, but a declaration of Aseer's ambition to become a critical part of the Saudi Arabia's tourism ambitions. We want to create a destination that resonates with today's and tomorrow's travellers."

**ASEER IN NUMBERS**

**Projected Growth**  
**9.1 million**  
annual visitors by 2030

**Economic Impact**  
**\$6.9 billion**  
(26 billion SAR) contribution to the Kingdom's tourism GDP by 2030

**Investment Target**  
**\$2.1 billion**  
(7.8 billion SAR) in private sector investments by 2030

**Aseer is committed to protecting its unique ecosystem and cultural heritage. The region aims to become a leader in sustainable development**

# Hatta gets AED3.6 billion makeover

Hatta, an exclave of Dubai in the Hajar Mountains, has been promoted over the years as a special winter destination for travellers. Now, significant development initiatives aim to enhance Hatta's appeal as a premier tourist destination. The efforts are part of the broader Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan, which emphasises sustainable growth and environmental preservation.

TT Bureau

**H**is Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE & Ruler of Dubai, unveiled the Hatta Sustainable Waterfalls project recently. The project, a part of the Hatta Master Development Plan worth AED3.6 billion, is being implemented by DEWA. Apart from the Hatta Sustainable Waterfalls project, many other projects are also underway with the partnership of private sector.



HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum visits Hatta project

## Hatta Waterfall

The project features a stunning waterfall descending from the Hatta Dam, and the world's largest mosaic panel on the waterfall's slope, recognised by Guinness World Records. Covering 2,200 square metres and crafted from 1.2 million pieces of natural marble, the mosaic pays tribute to the UAE's

founding fathers, late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum. The Hatta Sustainable Waterfalls project aims to boost tourism and investment in the region, with retail stores and F&B outlets offered free of charge to local Emirati citizens.

## The Hatta Beach Project

Covering 53,000 square metres, aims to transform the area into a year-round tourist destination. It features a 10,000-square-metre beach, an artificial 'Crystal Lagoon', service facilities, rest areas, pedestrian pathways, cycling tracks, restaurants, food trucks,

and an outdoor cinema, in addition to offering swimming and water sports activities. There were two other projects.

## Other projects

Among other projects include a 1,000-guest wedding hall, the Hatta Dam Amphitheatre,

**Apart from the Hatta Sustainable Waterfalls project, many other projects are also underway with the partnership of private sector at the destination**

the Hatta Service Centre, 200 homes for Emirati citizens, and a model residential neighbourhood. The project portfolio also includes expansion of cycling and mountain biking trails, the first-of-its-kind hydroelectric power station in the GCC region with a capacity of 250MW and 1,500MWh storage, and the Dubai Mountain Peak cable car. The 5.4-kilometre cable car will transport tourists from Hatta Dam to the summit of Um Al Nesoor Peak, the highest natural summit in Dubai, passing over the Hatta Lake, the hydroelectric power station, and the surrounding mountains. Other projects include the develop-

ment of the Hatta Hospital, enhancements to the Hatta Sports Club, and the maintenance of dams across the region.

**HATTA PROJECT ANALYSIS**

**AED3.6 billion**  
Total project cost of Hatta Sustainable Waterfalls project

**41**  
Projects completed so far

**65**  
Total number of projects

# King Khalid Airport's 87% flights on-time

King Khalid Airport emerges as the global leader with 86.65% of its flights departing on-time during the year, finds Cirium, after the 2024 on-time performance review, a benchmark of excellence for airlines and airports demonstrating outstanding punctuality and operational reliability. The airport also triumphed in the highly competitive 'Large Airport' category, outperforming leading contenders.



Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport earned the coveted title of the most On-Time 'Global Airport' for 2024 with an impressive 86.65 per cent of flights departing as scheduled. With this, the airport sets a new standard for operational efficiency on the world stage. Further solidifying its status as a premier aviation hub, King Khalid International Airport

Global airline leaders				
Airline	Completion Factor	Within Block Time	On-Time Arrivals	On-Time Departures
Aeromexico (AM)	99.32%	75.82%	86.70%	87.73%
Saudia (SV)	99.82%	68.34%	86.35%	88.82%
Delta Air Lines (DL)	98.95%	77.34%	83.46%	83.74%
LATAM Airlines (LA)	98.52%	71.04%	82.89%	83.23%
Qatar Airways (QR)	99.72%	73.76%	82.83%	82.56%

also triumphed in the highly competitive 'Large Airport' category, outperforming leading

contenders from across the globe. As the gateway to Saudi Arabia's vibrant capital, this dual

recognition underscores the airport's critical role in advanc-

**The dual recognition underscores King Khalid Airport's role in advancing the KSA's Vision 2030 goals and elevating the region's position in global aviation**

ing the Kingdom's Vision 2030 goals and elevating the region's position in global aviation. These accolades reflect not only the

airport's commitment to operational excellence but also its strategic focus on enhancing passenger experience.



The top performing global airports of 2024				
Airport	On-Time Departures	On-Time Arrivals	Total Routes Served	Total Airlines Served
Riyadh King Khalid Int'l Airport (RUH)	86.65%	81.79%	115	60
Lima Jorge Chavez Int'l Airport (LIM)	84.57%	78.64%	71	27
Mexico City Benito Juarez Int'l Airport (MEX)	84.04%	84.82%	102	22
Salt Lake City Int'l Airport (SLC)	83.80%	84.78%	104	14

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# Ajman unveils 'Emirati-crafted' tourism

The Ajman Department of Tourism Development has announced the selection of two unique tourism experiences as part of the 'Tourism Experiences Training Programme' in Ajman. The initiative was launched by the department to enrich the Emirate's tourism content, support the participation of Emirati talent in the tourism sector, and align with sustainable goals and digital innovation.

 TT Bureau

The Ajman Department of Tourism Development, under its 'Tourism Experiences Training Programme', has selected the tourism experiences created by Abdullah Al Ali and Mariam Al Hamrani. These experiences are focused on showcasing the hidden gems of Masfout, with the goal of empowering the local community, highlighting the Emirate's tourist destinations, and enhancing its role in the national tourism sector. Both Abdullah Al Ali and Mariam Al Hamrani are committed to offering fresh, impactful tourism ideas that promote cultural exploration, personal growth, and local engagement, positioning Ajman as a key player in the tourism landscape.

In this regard, **His Excellency Mahmood Khaleel Alhashmi**, Director General, Ajman Department of Tourism Development, said: "Through the training programmes and tourism initiatives



Officials from Ajman Tourism

we offer, we aim to motivate the younger generation, engage them in the country's tourism sector, and invest in local human talents and abilities. This contributes to creating new and innovative job opportunities for them, while instilling a more youthful and dynamic spirit filled with creativity and passion. The tourism experience training programme in Ajman

is a clear testament to our commitment to empowering youth and strengthening the tourism sector in the Emirate."

For her part, **Khadija Mohammed Turki**, Tourism Marketing and Promotion Expert, Ajman Department of Tourism Development, said: "We are pleased to announce the two tourism experiences selected

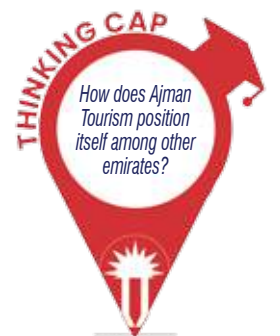
as part of the Tourism Experiences Programme. This training programme focuses on several key areas, providing space for environment-friendly initiatives by encouraging the preservation of the Emirate's historical character and traditional crafts. It also motivates all members of the community to contribute to the development of the tourism sector and

**The tourism experiences offered by the participants include a visit to Masfout. During this visit, tourists explore various tourism landmarks and sites in the area**

create activities and events that enhance its growth and prosperity, thus achieving its goals in driving sustainable tourism development, preserving cultural heritage, and supporting social empowerment."

The tourism experiences offered by the participants include a visit to Masfout, with a two-day stay. During this visit, tourists explore various tourism landmarks and sites in the area, enjoying activities like hiking and meditation sessions, in addition to visiting local museums and farms, walking through the ancient water channels (Aflaj) and spending a day as guests of local families from the area. The Department of Tourism Development in Ajman is

committed to supporting tourism in the Emirate by organising various activities, events, and training programmes that foster innovation and progress, strengthening Ajman's position as a leading global tourism destination.



# Miral rolls out sustainable strategy

Miral unveiled its comprehensive Sustainability Strategy, a milestone in its ongoing environmental and social commitment. It outlines Miral's ambitions to become a regional benchmark for sustainable Leisure, Entertainment, and Tourism (LET) experiences by 2030. The strategy underscores Miral's commitment to positioning its destinations and attractions as regional references for sustainable practices.

 TT Bureau

Building on years of experience in sustainable business practices, Miral will place a strong emphasis on its responsibility to provide a brighter future for generations to come. The long-term strategy underscores Miral's commitment to positioning its destinations and attractions as regional references for sustainable practices.

Commenting on the strategy, **Mohamed Abdalla Al Zaabi**, Group CEO, Miral, said: "Miral is pursuing a major milestone in its advancement by putting sustainability at the core of everything we do. Our Sustainability Strategy will guide this evolution, ensuring responsible growth and innovation while delivering lasting value for our stakeholders and the community. It also demonstrates our commitment to contributing to



Miral's pledge is to reduce its carbon footprint by 2030 in alignment with the UAE's Net Zero by 2050 Strategy

the UAE's Net Zero 2050 Strategy to address climate change, while driving sustainable tourism in Abu Dhabi."

Miral's Sustainability Strategy is the result of a comprehensive assessment of its current operations and future vision, identifying key areas of focus with am-

bitious targets and timelines. Set to impact current and upcoming attractions across Yas Island and Saadiyat Island, Miral's commitment to sustainability is driven by three key objectives: Develop the most sustainable LET experiences in the region; operate LET experiences in the most sustainable way in the region; and posi-

tion its destinations as the most sustainable in the region. Rooted in the belief that sustainability is a catalyst for positive change, the strategy relies on four pillars:

❖ **Experiences for a better world:** Miral aims to foster cultural enlightenment through attractions like Qasr al Watan and

champion nature protection with initiatives like the Yas SeaWorld Research and Rescue Centre and create meaningful entertainment experiences that integrate educational elements and foster a deeper understanding of social and environmental issues.

❖ **Decarbonisation and resource management:** Miral's pledge to reduce its carbon footprint by 2030 aligns with the UAE's Net Zero by 2050 Strategy. A multi-faceted approach is adopted to improve Miral's carbon efficiency across its assets.

❖ **People:** This pillar represents a key priority within the strategy, ensuring the well-being of Miral's employees through initiatives that champion diversity and inclusion, Emiratisation, professional development, and a healthy work-life balance. This responsibility extends towards upholding the

highest standards for the welfare of construction workers.

❖ **Sustainable development:** Further to implementing sustainable practices within its operations, Miral's sustainability efforts will expand towards its destinations. These initiatives encompass responsible supply chain management by prioritising sustainable procurement.

## KEY FEATURES OF THE STRATEGY

❖ Miral's Sustainability Strategy outlines major initiatives to achieve Miral's goal of becoming the region's benchmark for LET sustainability by 2030

❖ The strategy builds upon a legacy of its ongoing commitment to responsible entertainment

# 'Dubai No. 1 destination for Chinese'

The Lunar New Year or Spring Festival, as it is known in China, is the largest and most important outbound travel season for Chinese travellers. Traditionally, travellers from China preferred warm-weather destinations like Southeast Asia but in recent years, they have been travelling to the Middle East in significant numbers during the holiday season. **Alexander Glos**, CEO, China Visitors Summit, shares insights with .

 TT Bureau

The Middle East, particularly Dubai and Abu Dhabi, has gained significant popularity as an outbound destination for Chinese travellers during the Lunar New Year holidays. A key factor contributing to the trend is the growth of Middle Eastern airlines connecting Chinese travellers to Europe. With European carriers scaling back flights to China due to airspace restrictions over Russia, Chinese airlines and Middle Eastern carriers have stepped in to fill the gap. For example, Emirates and Etihad Airways have significantly increased their services to major Chinese cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, providing convenient connections through Dubai and Abu Dhabi. As a result, these cities are benefiting from short-term layover business, making them increasingly attractive destinations.



**Alexander Glos**  
CEO  
China Visitors Summit

**UAE & Saudi Arabia popular**  
Dubai remains the number one arrival destination for Chinese travellers, followed by Abu Dhabi. Both cities are start-



Participants at the China Visitors Summit

ing to distinguish themselves by attracting different types of travellers. Dubai appeals more to luxury leisure travellers, while Abu Dhabi is positioning itself

as a more cultural and family-friendly destination. For example, Burj Khalifa and The Dubai Mall continue to be major draws for Chinese tourists in Dubai, while Louvre Abu Dhabi and Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi appeal to those seeking cultural experiences.

Another most popular destination for Chinese travellers in the region is now Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom has made significant

efforts to attract Chinese leisure and group travellers by promoting its diverse attractions and multiple destinations. For instance, AlUla, with its ancient rock formations and historical sites, has become a key highlight for Chinese tourists, alongside Riyadh Season and Jeddah's coastal attractions.

**Changing preferences**  
Chinese travellers have significantly changed since pre-

COVID. The big-budget group tours that were common before the pandemic have been largely replaced by bespoke, higher-end travel experiences.

Today's Chinese travellers are seeking cultural and historical experiences, culinary adventures, and outdoor and adventure activities. For example, instead of large tour groups visiting shopping malls, we now see smaller groups exploring heritage sites like Qasr Al Hosn in Abu Dhabi or enjoying desert safaris in Dubai.

**Saudi Arabia has made significant efforts to attract Chinese leisure and group travellers by promoting its diverse attractions and multiple destinations**



## Empowering the Emirati youth

A new hub dedicated to empowering young Emirati entrepreneurs has opened its doors at Dubai International Airport (DXB). Emirati District, an initiative led by the Federal Youth Authority in partnership with the Fatima bint Mohammed bin Zayed Initiative, represents a key project within the first phase of the National Youth Agenda 2031 and aims to support youth transiting to the travel industry.

 TT Bureau

The 'Emirati District' project aims to position young Emiratis as regional and global role models while expanding their access to international markets. Located between the bustling Concourses B and C in Terminal 3, the project capitalises on high footfall, estimated at six to seven million guests annually. The dynamic space provides a platform for launching small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in high-growth sectors, providing specialised training programmes focused on effective management and enhancing



competitiveness in both local and international markets.

The launch of the Emirati District features four flagship projects: Amadal by Afnan Bushalat, a concept centred around creating products that offer a taste of home; Mira Farms by FBMI, a social enterprise by FBMI that empowers underprivileged communities, particularly female farmers, by providing global market ac-

cess for their natural produce; Nuwa by Abdulaziz Al-Jabri, a brand that celebrates the UAE's agricultural heritage by using locally sourced ingredients to produce world-class quality products; and From the Arab by Alyazi Almheiri, a luxury home fragrance brand that reintroduces Arabic scents to modern homes worldwide.



The project provides a unique opportunity for ambitious young Emiratis, allowing them to launch their businesses and display their products at DXB, the world's busiest international airport. It allows ambitious young Emiratis to gain a unique opportunity to launch their businesses on a global stage. The initiative exemplifies the UAE's commitment to cultivating a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem for its youth. Through access to resources, training, and the unparalleled platform, the project aims to empower a

new generation of Emirati business leaders who will drive the nation's economic growth and global competitiveness.

**The project provides a unique opportunity for ambitious young Emiratis, allowing them to launch their businesses and display their products at DXB**



# Adagio: bleisure hot spot of Doha

Literal meaning of 'home away from home' comes alive at the Adagio in Doha. It is a complex where Adagio and Ibis rule over the area with its different types of rooms, catering to bleisure clientele. Location is a key aspect which drives in tourists, especially from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the complex. **Rajiv Tarcar**, General Manager, Adagio and Ibis Doha, shares more in a tête-à-tête with .

 TT Bureau

Location plays a key role in attracting travellers to a hotel. Adagio and Ibis Doha is 'one signal away from Saudi Arabia' is the term used by many, including **Rajiv Tarcar**, General Manager, Adagio and Ibis Doha. "Our key source market are travellers from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We are located on the main Salwa Road. As you know, GCC travellers enjoy driving from one country to another with their family and friends. The border is just 40 minutes away from the hotel complex, so driving for a



**Rajiv Tarcar**  
General Manager  
Adagio and Ibis Doha

few hours and then once passing the border it is imperative for travellers to find a breakaway where they can relax and un-



wind, and this is the luxury that we offer to our guests. Our location is our USP and attraction to drive in many guests from GCC nations," Tarcar said.

#### Bleisure travellers

He added, "Ibis caters to the busy business traveller who seek a comfortable yet compact and easy to commute hotel. Whereas families espe-

cially drive to the hotel and opt for the apartments in Adagio. We have from Studio to one and two-bedroom apartments, fully furnished with all amenities that help even the long stay business travellers. In Doha, there are many corporate clients who seek a place for their corporate staff to have a long-term accommodation and this fits the bill."

#### Occupancy all time high

In recent times, Adagio and Ibis Doha has been receiving a lot of Eastern Europeans. Tarcar said, "We have been enjoying very good numbers in terms of occupancy. 2023 occupancy was 94 per cent and 2024 occupancy reached its peak to 100 per cent. So, I must add here that we are extremely busy, especially in the night, as we receive a lot of

walk-ins from GCC. We always keep some rooms available for these walk-ins who will come around 10 or 11pm. These kind of business travellers bring us good revenue, as they come in late but spend at least 3 to 5 nights with us and they also indulge in food and beverage. So, we not only obtain our room revenue but also get a fair contribution to our food and beverage."

#### ABOUT IBIS AND ADAGIO

**100%**  
occupancy in 2024 against  
94% in 2023

**250-300 QAR**  
normal room rate

**40-minute**  
drive from Saudi border

**We have been enjoying very good numbers in terms of occupancy. 2023 occupancy was 94% and 2024 occupancy reached its peak to 100%**

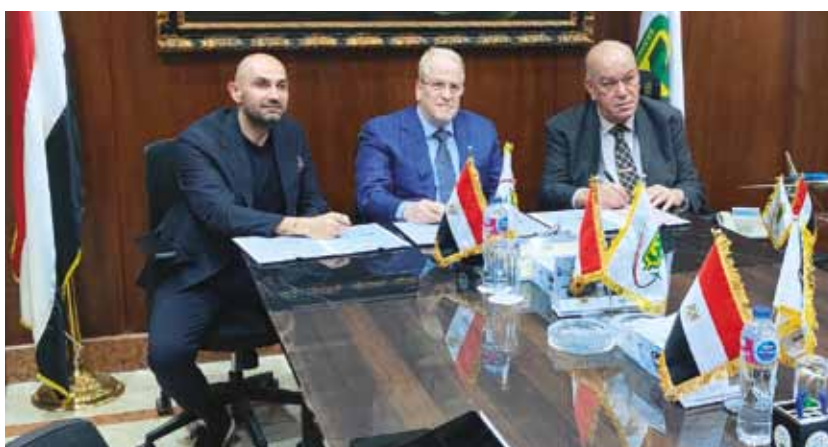
# PPG to manage 6 lounges at Cairo

Plaza Premium Group (PPG), the leading global airport hospitality services provider, Egypt Aviation Services (EAS), and Cairo Airport Company (CAC) have announced a strategic joint venture. As per the agreement, together they will manage six lounges across various terminals at Cairo International Airport (CAI), leveraging PPG's global expertise in creating award-winning airport hospitality experiences.

 TT Bureau

Plaza Premium Group (PPG), the leading global airport hospitality services provider, Egypt Aviation Services (EAS), and Cairo Airport Company (CAC) have announced a strategic joint venture. Under this collaboration, PPG will manage, operate, and commercialise six lounges across various terminals at Cairo International Airport (CAI), leveraging PPG's global expertise in creating award-winning airport hospitality experiences.

The lounges will be rebranded as Plaza Premium Lounge by CAC and EAS. CAC has assigned the full management of CAC VIP Lounges to a joint venture formed between EAS and PPG, who have taken over six lounges in Terminals 1, 2, 3 and the Seasonal Terminal of the Cairo International Airport. Furthermore, a new lounge by the F Gates of Terminal 3 is being



(From left to right) Okan Kufeci, General Mohamed Kamel Moustafa and Magdy Ishak Azzer at the MoU signing ceremony

developed. This landmark partnership marks the official market entry of PPG into Egypt, another important milestone in the company's expansion in the MENA region, alongside its recent expansions into other key markets in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Kenya and Abu Dhabi.

Cairo International Airport (CAI) is a pivotal hub for air travel in Egypt and the broader region, playing a significant role in the

**This landmark partnership marks the official market entry of PPG into Egypt, another important milestone in the company's expansion in the MENA region**

country's economy and connectivity. It is the busiest airport in the country and Africa, handling 26.4 million passengers in 2023 and has non-stop passenger

flights scheduled to 125 destinations in 62 countries.

**Okan Kufeci**, Senior Vice President - Europe, Middle East and

Africa, PPG, said, "This unprecedented partnership with Egyptian Aviation Services, and Cairo Airport Company opens up exciting opportunities for our first entry into the Egyptian market through this strategic partnership, bringing our global standards and expertise in delivering award-winning airport hospitality experiences to Cairo. We are committed to our mission of making travel better for all passengers flying through Cairo International Airport with our portfolio of Plaza Premium Lounges."

**Magdy Ishak Azzer**, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Cairo Airport Company, said, "Egypt represents a burgeoning market in global tourism, with Cairo International Airport being a key hub, connecting travellers to Egypt, across Africa, and the MENA region. We are committed to enhancing the airport experience and supporting Egypt's vision in becoming a premier global destination."

**General Mohamed Kamel Moustafa**, Chairman and Managing Director, Egypt Aviation Services, said, "The opportunities arising from the travel and tourism industry in Egypt is growing exponentially, driven by increased passenger traffic, new routes and expanded capacity among leading airlines. We are pleased to collaborate with PPG in amplifying Egypt's reputation as a global aviation hub by optimising passenger experiences and services in the multiple airport lounges within the Cairo International Airport."

#### KEY NUMBERS

**26.4 million**  
Passengers in 2023

**125**  
Total destinations

**62**  
Countries

# STM aligns with KSA's Vision 2030

Saudi Travel Market 2025, the premier B2B show for travel, tourism and hospitality sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, will kick off at the Riyadh International Conventions & Exhibitions Centre from 10-12 February 2025. **TRAVEL MIDDLE EAST** is the official media partner for this second edition of the event. **Mohamed Al Harbi**, CEO, Rent Exhibitions and Saudi Travel Mart, shares details.

 Dr Shehara Fernando

The Saudi Travel Market (STM) serves as a prominent platform showcasing the vast opportunities within Saudi Arabia's tourism sector. It provides a comprehensive view of industry developments and fosters collaboration among local and international stakeholders. STM aims to support Vision 2030 by facilitating meaningful connections among tourism professionals and highlighting efforts to position Saudi Arabia as a distinctive and diverse global destination. The second edition boasts an expanded exhibition area, an increased number of international and local participants, and specialised workshops and seminars focusing on cutting-edge tourism technologies and innovations. The event aims to build bridges between local and global businesses, fostering collaborations that drive the creation of tourism products tailored to evolving market demands.

**How does the event facilitate collaborations between global firms and Saudi stakeholders?**



**Mohamed Al Harbi**  
CEO, Rent Exhibitions  
and Saudi Travel Mart

**What role do tourism authorities play in fostering these partnerships?**

Tourism authorities play a pivotal role in supporting participants by offering guidance and resources that ensure successful and sustainable partnerships.

**What emerging trends in the travel industry will be highlighted at the event?**

The exhibition will focus on innovations, such as AI-driven solutions, virtual reality experiences, and sustainable practices that are reshaping the global tourism landscape.

**How will the exhibition promote innovation in tourism?**



Officials at first Saudi Travel Mart opening in Riyadh

**What solutions or technologies are expected to take centre stage in the 2025 edition?**

Highlights include the application of artificial intelligence in enhancing travel experiences, virtual reality for immersive destination previews, and sustainable destination management solutions.

**How will the STM enhance international awareness of Saudi Arabia's attractions?**

The event emphasises the cultural and geographical diversity of Saudi Arabia by featuring local companies that showcase the unique experiences and attractions the Kingdom has to

showcase the beauty and cultural diversity of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

**How does promoting domestic tourism contribute to the Kingdom's broader economic development?**

Domestic tourism stimulates local economies by creating jobs, empowering communities, and increasing tourist spending within the Kingdom, supporting the objectives of Vision 2030.

**What level of participation is expected from international and local entities?**

The event welcomes diverse

## Platinum Sponsor

Türkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA) has signed up as the Platinum Sponsor at Saudi Travel Mart 2025. This partnership underscores the shared commitment between Saudi Arabia and Türkiye to enhance tourism collaboration and explore new opportunities. TGA will showcase Türkiye's unique destinations and innovative initiatives that highlight its commitment to sustainable tourism during the event.

greater development opportunities in the tourism sector. Additionally, we aim for the event to be a sustainable platform supporting Saudi Arabia's vision for balanced and diversified growth in tourism.

**How can the outcomes of this event drive investment in Saudi Arabia's tourism sector?**

The event will showcase KSA's immense potential in the tourism industry, attracting global investors and driving new projects that bolster the national economy.

**What lessons from the first edition are being applied to ensure greater success in 2025?**

Key lessons include the importance of delivering a seamless visitor and participant experience, focusing on high-quality organisation, and creating exceptional opportunities for networking and collaboration.

**How does the General Authority for Exhibitions and Conferences support this event?**

The General Authority for Exhibitions and Conferences provides essential support and guidance to ensure the event's successful execution on all levels.

**In what ways will the Saudi Travel Market strengthen the country's position as a global tourism hub?**

By uniting key players in the travel and tourism industry, the event showcases the Kingdom's advancements and its commitment to integrating tradition with modernity, solidifying its position as a global hub for tourism.

**What are the long-term expectations from the Saudi Travel Market in shaping the region's tourism landscape?**

We aspire for the Saudi Travel Market to strengthen regional cooperation and knowledge sharing, paving the way for

## Diamond Partner

The Saudi Travel Market 2025 announced its partnership with Visit Qatar as the Diamond Sponsor for its second edition. This partnership highlights Visit Qatar's commitment to strengthening its presence in the Saudi and regional markets. The event will provide a unique opportunity to engage with leading global tourism companies and organisations and showcase Qatar's pioneering efforts in sustainable tourism and the promotion of its world-class destinations.



STM organiser with Rezlive team

By creating an interactive environment, the event enables direct meetings and agreements between exhibitors and visitors, enhancing partnerships across the tourism value chain.

Through dedicated seminars and panel discussions, the event will provide a platform to exchange groundbreaking ideas, showcasing solutions that redefine visitor experiences.

offer, inspiring global visitors to explore. Several Saudi Destination Management Companies (DMCs) will represent different regions of the Kingdom, highlighting key landmarks and

participation from international and local companies and organisations, creating opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange across the tourism sector.

# Cruise Saudi to sail from private island

Cruise Saudi announces the soft launch of newly developed private island for cruising in the heart of the Red Sea. Saba Beach on Jabal AlSabaya marks a significant milestone for Cruise Saudi, and the development of the private island is a natural progression in Cruise Saudi's mission to position Saudi as a prominent destination for cruising.

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Just a short sail from Jeddah, roughly 220 Nautical miles, Jabal AlSabaya will be exclusively accessible to all cruise line passengers, offering an unparalleled Red Sea experience that combines luxury, local culture, and the natural beauty of Saudi's coastline. Upon completion of the first phase, facilities will include a floating park, full-service restaurant, retail shops, a VIP beach and VVIP beachfront villas. Visitors can also treat themselves to a spa experience, a shisha lounge and a range of land and water activities that cater to all kinds

of travellers. Guests can relax on beachside cabanas at Saba Beach or explore the crystal-clear waters of the Red Sea with a snorkelling excursion.

Designed to integrate seamlessly with the natural environment, the island's development represents the best of Saudi culture, with influences from the Aseer and Hijaz regions, coastal Roshan designs, and patterns inspired by Sadu and AlKhou. The project's development began in 2024 – from the start the island's facilities were also built with sustainability at the forefront. Construction was undertaken with minimal impact, using local materials and crafts-



manship along with off-site pre-fabrication, whilst measures were put in place to protect the island's surrounding environment.

Lars Clasen, CEO, Cruise Saudi, commented: "Since the inception of Cruise Saudi, our vision has been to create unique and exceptional cruise experiences

for passengers from around the world. The launch of Saba Beach represents not only a world-class destination but also our commitment to enhancing Saudi's tourism industry. We are opening up a truly unique area of the region and look forward to welcoming cruise passengers from around the world."

Barbara Buczek, Chief Destination Experiences Officer, Cruise Saudi, said: "The soft launch of Saba Beach on Jabal AlSabaya is another pioneering and innovative development in the creation of Saudia Arabia's cruise sector. At the heart of what we offer is the guest experience, showcasing Saudi's incred-

ible and diverse natural assets, culture and history to our passengers and the launch of Saba Beach represents a milestone in bringing a previously unseen Saudi to the local, regional and international markets."

The development of Saba Beach on Jabal AlSabaya is testimony to Cruise Saudi's dedication to promoting the region as a global cruising hub, whilst ensuring that every cruise visit offers authentic Saudi experiences with world-class facilities.

**Designed to integrate with the natural environment, the island's development represents the best of Saudi culture, with influences from Aseer and Hijaz regions**



# London on top-of-mind for Kuwaitis

One of the largest outbound travellers in the GCC are Kuwaiti travellers and they always seek destinations which are more towards their comfort zone. As the New Year begins, London in Europe, Manila in Asia and Tokyo in South East Asia are likely to be hot favourites for Kuwaiti travellers over other destinations for their trip, shares Wego in its predictions for 2025.

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Wego shared predictions on the top destinations favoured by Kuwaiti travellers in 2025 by leveraging current search data. It has pinpointed several cities that are poised to be popular among Kuwaiti travellers in the coming year.

In Europe, London takes the top spot of most searched destinations for 2025 on Wego so far. London holds a lasting fascination among Kuwait travellers, as it also recorded the highest bookings of all European cities on Wego last year.

Wego experts noted its reign as a favourite due to its cultural allure and the enhanced accessibility afforded by the expanded UK ETA programme. The online and expedited ETA programme, which promises a three-day processing period, has simplified travel, making



the UK an even more attractive destination for Kuwait citizens. Beyond London, other European

cities, such as Tbilisi City, Milan, Moscow, and Baku are also expected to be in high demand.

**Beyond London, other European cities, such as Tbilisi City, Milan, Moscow, and Baku are also expected to be in high demand for Kuwaiti travellers**

These destinations offer a mix of unique and familiar cultural experiences and have been steadily climbing the ranks of preferred cities in 2025 on Wego.

In Asia, Southeast Asian cities were the most frequented by Kuwait travellers last year, a trend that is likely to continue into 2025. Manila, in particular, has seen the highest number of flight



searches for the year ahead, reflecting the strong community ties between Kuwait and the Philippines. Other Southeast Asian mainstays like Bangkok, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur are predicted to also dominate travel searches in 2025.

Based on Wego data, experts additionally predicted that cities outside of the SEA region like Tokyo and Seoul will continue to grow as top destinations among Kuwaitis, indicating a broadening interest in more diverse cultural and travel experiences in Asia.

## MOST POPULAR DESTINATIONS

### European Cities

London  
Milan  
Tbilisi

### Asian Cities


Manila  
Bangkok  
Jakarta

### South East Asian Cities

Tokyo  
Seoul  
Kuala Lumpur



# Cruise demand from GCC surges

The cruise holiday industry in the GCC is experiencing a significant surge as travellers from the region increasingly embrace the allure of exploring the world's most breathtaking destinations by sea. Popular as 'Cruise Guru' in the industry, **Ashok Kumar**, Founder and Managing Director, Cruise Master, shares insights on the industry trends in the GCC with .

 TT Bureau

## Popular cruise destinations captivating GCC travellers

Cruise enthusiasts from the GCC have a wide array of options, with Mediterranean voyages, Greek Isles itineraries, and Northern Europe sailings being perennial favourites. The enchanting fjords of Norway, the majestic glaciers of Alaska, and the picturesque coastal towns of the Mediterranean provide unforgettable experiences for families, couples, and solo travellers alike. Leading cruise lines, such as Princess Cruises, Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL), Royal Caribbean International, MSC Cruises, Costa Cruises, and Disney Cruise Line offer diverse itineraries tailored to these iconic destinations.

Although cruise holidays are available year-round, Middle Eastern travellers show a strong preference for travelling during



**Ashok Kumar**  
Founder and Managing Director  
Cruise Master

the summer holidays. This trend stems from the region's family-oriented demographics, where school vacations play a significant role in planning holidays to ensure children can join the trip. These cruise lines cater to various preferences, from Disney's family-friendly experiences to Royal Caribbean's groundbreaking ships and MSC's elegant Mediterranean-inspired voyages. GCC travellers, known

for their appreciation of personalised luxury and curated experiences, find these cruises particularly appealing.

## Cruising close to home

Closer to home, the Arabian Gulf has emerged as a vibrant hub for cruise holidays. MSC Cruises, Costa Cruises, Celestyal Cruises, and Resorts World Cruises lead the charge, offering convenient departures from regional ports like Dubai, Abu

Saudi Arabia's commitment to growing its tourism sector has also led to the launch of Aroya Cruises, the country's first homegrown cruise line. With itineraries that explore Saudi Arabia's pristine coastline and cultural landmarks, Aroya Cruises is poised to become a key player in regional cruising.

## Polar expeditions

For the more adventurous GCC traveller, polar expeditions rep-

resent the pinnacle of exploration. Albatros Expeditions, a pioneer in sustainable and Halal-certified cruising, offers once-in-a-lifetime journeys to Antarctica and the Arctic. These expeditions provide a rare opportunity to witness untouched landscapes, catering to the growing demand for experiential and eco-conscious travel.

## The industry leader in the ME

At the forefront of this cruise industry boom is Cruise Master, the largest cruise agency in the Middle East. With 18 years of expertise, Cruise Master plays a pivotal role in promoting cruise holidays through its extensive network of travel trade partners across the GCC. As the GSA for Carnival Corporation brands like Princess Cruises, Cunard, and P&O Cruises, as well as other prestigious lines, such as Windstar Cruises and Celestyal Cruises, Cruise Master offers unparalleled access to world-class cruising. Cruise Master covers the entire spectrum of cruise holidays from Contemporary, Premium, Luxury to River, Expedition, and Niche segments.

## A bright future for GCC cruising

The cruise holiday industry is set to grow exponentially. With a combination of local sailings, iconic international itineraries, and groundbreaking polar expeditions, the cruise industry is charting an exciting course in the region.

## BEST CRUISES TO SAIL WITH


### Popular cruise lines in GCC

Princess Cruises  
Norwegian Cruise Line  
Royal Caribbean International  
MSC Cruises  
Costa Cruises  
Disney Cruise Line

### Arabian Gulf cruises

MSC Cruises  
Costa Cruises  
Celestyal Cruises  
Resorts World Cruises

# 'ASEAN Pass' for ME travellers

The Middle East is an important market for Southeast Asian countries. With a view to attracting more travellers from the Middle East market, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has restarted 'ASEAN Pass', which enables easier accessibility to hitherto explored destinations in the Southeast Asia region, says **Eddy K Soemawilaga**, President, ASEAN Tourism Association (ASEANTA), in an interview with .

 Dr Shehara Fernando

Online Travel Agents (OTAs) and travel agents could provide a more seamless service to their customers with ASEAN Pass. **Eddy K Soemawilaga**, President, ASEAN Tourism Association (ASEANTA), said: "To attract Middle Eastern tourists, ASEANTA collaborates with airlines and promotes initiatives like the ASEAN Pass, which offers affordable inter-ASEAN travel options. The pass, implemented via AirAsia's platform, encourages multi-destination travel and invites participation from other airlines and travel agents. Partnerships with NGOs, governments, and organisations like PATA are in discussion to broaden ASEANTA's scope. Future plans include engaging more stakeholders to foster regional and global cooperation."



**Eddy K Soemawilaga**, President, ASEAN Tourism Association (ASEANTA)

As sustainability is an important aspect for travellers today, Soemawilaga added, "ASEANTA recognises sustainability as a

priority. Efforts include awarding businesses that implement sustainable practices and advocating for sustainable aviation

fuel (SAF) and efficient navigation systems to reduce carbon emissions. In Indonesia, airlines are advocating for a 1 per cent SAF adoption while promoting

work across ASEAN and beyond. The association facilitates matchmaking between certified professionals and employers through a dedicated platform."

Since sustainability has become part and parcel of life, ASEANTA recognises it as an imperative requirement in the industry. Efforts include awarding businesses that implement sustainable practices and advocating for Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) and efficient navigation systems to reduce carbon emissions.

## To attract ME tourists, ASEANTA ties up with airlines and promotes initiatives like the ASEAN Pass, which offers affordable inter-ASEAN travel options

efficient navigation systems as a cost-effective alternative to reduce emissions post-COVID financial constraints."

Sharing the ASEANTA's plans in 2025, Soemawilaga said, "The priority for 2025 is to enhance ASEANTA's regional presence. While national-level associations are strong, ASEANTA aims to consolidate its influence

Exchange in Kota Kinabalu on 25 June 2025, promoting lesser-known destinations and fostering B2B interactions."

In terms of contribution to travel and tourism and training the next in line towards the industry, he shared, "ASEANTA supports the ASEAN tourism professional certification standard, enabling certified individuals to



# Tech, SAF among key topics @ATM

Several leaders from the international aviation sector are expected to participate in the 32<sup>nd</sup> edition of Arabian Travel Market (ATM), which will take place at Dubai World Trade Centre (DWTC) from 28 April to 1 May 2025. Organised under the 'Global Travel: Developing Tomorrow's Tourism Through Enhanced Connectivity' theme, this year's event will discuss some of the most pressing topics of the industry.

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Among the topics to be discussed at the 32<sup>nd</sup> edition of Arabian Travel Market (ATM) is the anticipated increase in production of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF). According to the latest findings of the International Aviation Transport Association (IATA), SAF production has doubled in 2024 to 1 million tonnes and expected to reach over 2.1 million tonnes in 2025. Regionally, Emirates and Etihad have significantly reduced CO<sub>2</sub> emissions using SAF on several routes, including Singapore Changi Airport, Amsterdam, London Heathrow, Paris, Lyon, Oslo, and Japan.

New technology will also be addressed due to its increasing role in supporting airports and airlines to drive operational efficiencies and reduce costs. Artificial intelligence (AI), for example, supports



Danielle Curtis  
Exhibition Director ME  
Arabian Travel Market

aviation industry professionals in various ways, from streamlining the customer journey to tracking weather, optimising routes, and even undertaking predictive maintenance. It has become an integral tool for the aviation industry, analysing scenarios to determine potential disruptions and providing data-driven decisions that minimise risk. Leading examples include London Heath-

row Airport's pilot AI-assisted air traffic control system, the Japan Airlines AI-powered baggage management system, and Gatwick Airport's AI-powered smart-stand technology, developed to enhance how aircraft turnarounds are managed.



Danielle Curtis, Exhibition Director ME, Arabian Travel Market, said: "At ATM, we recognise the critical importance of addressing the latest trends and innovations shaping the aviation industry. New technology and the increased use of sustainable fuels will be a game changer for the sector, with far-reaching benefits for years to come."

The sector's growth is a topic anticipated to create substantial

**New technology and the increased use of sustainable fuels will be a game changer for the sector, with far-reaching benefits for years to come**

discussion on the show floor. In 2025, industry revenues will surpass US\$1 trillion for the first time, according to IATA. In addition, traveller numbers are expected to hit 5.2 billion, up 6.7% compared to 2024, exceeding the 5-billion mark for the first

time, with the number of flights expected to reach 40 million.

Business travel will feature high on the agenda, particularly as part of ATM's new feature, IBTM@ATM. According to Flight Centre Corporate, business

travel is set to increase in 2025, with 40 per cent of businesses planning to increase travel from July to June, and 42 per cent of corporates are forecast to spend more than in 2024. Another trend for 2025, which has already become prominent in the Middle East, is the 'gate escape'. For modern travellers, particularly Gen Z and millennials, the airport is transitioning to be a hub for entertainment, luxury and relaxation. This year, ATM will welcome several new and returning exhibitors.

SAF	Exhibitors	Travel stats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Production has doubled in 2024 to 1 million tonnes, according to the latest findings of the IATA</li> <li>Expected to top 2.1 million tonnes in 2025</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In 2024, 4.5% of exhibitors were from the aviation sector, occupying 10% of the show's space</li> <li>Significant growth expected in 2025</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In 2025, travel industry revenues will surpass US\$1 trillion</li> <li>Traveller numbers are expected to hit 5.2 billion, up 6.7% compared to the year 2024</li> </ul>

# Qatar attracted 5 mn visitors in 2024

In keeping with its momentum after hosting the first ever FIFA World Cup in the Middle East in 2022, Qatar has been driving in travellers from across the globe with its various initiatives taken in the last few years. The country attracted more than 5 million international visitors in 2024, reflecting a growth of 25 per cent compared to 2023, according to the latest report released by Qatar Tourism.

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Qatar has achieved a new milestone. The country received more than 5 million international visitors in 2024, reflecting a growth of 25 per cent compared to 2023 and reinforces Qatar's position as a leading global tourism destination, announced Qatar Tourism recently.

**His Excellency Saad bin Ali Al Kharji**, President, Qatar Tourism, said: "The number of visitors exceeding 5 million is a landmark achievement for the State of Qatar and is an embodiment of Qatar Tourism's vision of establishing Qatar as one of the world's leading family tourism destinations. The 25 per cent year-on-year growth, coupled with exceptional sales of nearly 10 million hotel nights, is a testament to the effectiveness of the strategy and the efforts of partners. This achievement is



His Excellency Saad bin Ali Al Kharji  
President  
Qatar Tourism

not just a celebration of what has been achieved, but also a foundation for future growth, as we continue to provide exceptional experiences and services in all tourist destinations to every visitor."

His Excellency added, "Between 2022 and 2030, we aim to almost triple the number of visitors, at least double tourism spending within destinations, and increase the tourism sec-

tor's contribution to the GDP between 10 and 12 per cent."

GCC nationals accounted for 41 per cent of the visitors in 2024, with the remaining 59 per cent coming from other international markets. Major markets, including Saudi Arabia, India, the UK, Germany and the USA, have shown significant growth, reflecting Qatar's diverse appeal.

In addition to exceeding the target of 4.79 million visitors, Qatar exceeded its annual target of 8.8 million hotel nights, selling nearly 10 million hotel nights in 2024. About 56 per cent of the visitors arrived by



air, 37 per cent by land, and the remaining 7 per cent by sea. In addition, Qatar's hospitality sector has grown significantly, with more than 40,000 hotel rooms. Visitor numbers

to Qatar witnessed continuous growth throughout the year, with notable increases at the beginning and end of 2024. The AFC Asian Cup in January helped the country move towards an exceptional year, while the end of the year saw additional momentum coinciding with the start of the 2024-25 cruise season, the Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix, as well as a record influx of visitors from Saudi Arabia during the school holidays in November.

Qatar National Vision 2030 seeks to position Qatar as a premier family-tourism destination distinguished by service excellence. Qatar's comprehensive roadmap is aimed at promoting and expanding the tourism industry by leveraging the nation's rich culture, developing their new attractions and enhancing luxury experiences.

**TOURISM IN NUMBERS**

**25%**  
Growth in the number of international visitors to Qatar in 2024 compared to 2023

**41%**  
Share of GCC nationals in visitor arrivals

**10 million**  
Sale of hotel nights

# ME all set to welcome Chinese guests

As the Chinese New Year begins, the Middle East's travel, tourism, and hospitality sectors are well-prepared to meet the needs of Chinese travellers. A key factor attracting the Chinese travellers to the UAE and Saudi Arabia is their streamlined visa policies, offering convenient access. Experts share their views on the significance of this vital source market with **TRAVELTALK**.



**Ayman Al Qudwa**  
General Manager  
Falcon Travel

“Main criteria include enhanced connectivity, tailored travel packages, cultural experiences, luxury amenities, safety, and strong marketing efforts highlighting the GCC as a desirable destination. Chinese tourists often prefer destinations like Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia for luxury shopping and entertainment options.”



**Jaal Shah**  
Managing Director  
Rezlive.com

“Visa free or simplified visa policies, direct flight connectivity, luxury shopping, unique cultural experiences, and tailored offerings like Chinese speaking guides and cuisine attract Chinese travellers to the ME region. Preferred destinations in the ME region include: Dubai, Abu Dhabi & Doha.”



**Prem Sagar**  
Group General Manager  
Al Rais Travel and Shipping Agencies

“The Chinese New Year significantly boosts Chinese visitor numbers to the Middle East region. Key drivers include luxury shopping, cultural experiences, and world-class attractions. Destinations like Dubai and Abu Dhabi attract Chinese travellers with iconic landmarks and shopping festivals.”



**Sushant Pilankar**  
Manager - Leisure & MICE Travel  
Uranus Travel & Tours LLC

“Key driving factors to attract Chinese travellers during the CNY holidays are cultural experiences, luxury shopping, unique desert landscapes, and experiences. In particular, with the UAE, the modern architecture and futuristic cityscapes also attract them. Another key factors are visa ease and better air connectivity.”



**Jinyan Li**  
VP - Business Development  
Dida Travel

“During Chinese New Year, the Middle East become an increasingly popular destination for Chinese tourists, with cities like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Jeddah, Riyadh, and Doha attracting numerous visitors. Travellers are drawn to cultural landmarks like the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve.”



**Deepa Rajesh**  
Director - Sales and Business Development, Cozmo Travel

“Chinese travellers are drawn to the ME region for its iconic landmarks, luxury shopping, and rich cultural heritage. Dubai and Abu Dhabi are top destinations due to their world-class attractions, ease of travel, and tailored services. The Chinese New Year serves as a peak travel period.”

Inputs by: TT Bureau

Media Partner



## The gateway to global travel and tourism growth

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#1 IN CIRCULATION & READERSHIP MIDDLE EAST'S LEADING TRAVEL TRADE MONTHLY		
EVENT TALK		
FEBRUARY 2025		
Date	Event	Venue
9-13	Outbound Travel Roadshow – Middle East 2025	Riyadh, Kuwait, Bahrain, Dubai, UAE
10-12	Saudi Travel Market (STM) 2025	Riyadh, KSA
11-14	The 51 <sup>st</sup> UN Tourism Regional Commission Conference for the Middle East	Doha, Qatar
19-20	MALT Congress (MICE Arabia & Luxury Travel)	Abu Dhabi, UAE
23-26	Connections Luxury ME	Doha, Qatar

# 'EU has long been a magnet'

▶ Contd. from page 8



**Malith Chamika**  
Holidays Supervisor  
E Travels & Tours

“Steeped in history, layered cultures, diverse landscapes, luxury shopping, efficient infrastructure, availability of halal food, and ease of visa access, the EU market has long been a magnet for travellers from the ME. Similarly, the ME has attracted the Eastern Europeans, who are drawn not only by the region’s religious, recreational and cultural offerings, but also by major events, such as the World Cup, Asian Games, and international exhibitions. Every traveller has unique preferences—whether for bleisure, adventure, wellness, entertainment, or exploring history and culture—and both the ME and Eastern Europe cater to all such interests.”

“Eastern Europe is becoming a favoured destination for Middle Eastern travellers, offering a blend of culture, natural beauty, and cooler climates. Proximity, visa-friendly policies, and affordable luxury make it an attractive option, particularly during the



**Divya Nanda**  
Travel Counsellor  
Travel Counsellors

summer. Meanwhile, the Middle East, especially the UAE, draws Eastern Europeans with its world-class hospitality, iconic landmarks, and year-round sunshine. Middle Eastern travellers to Eastern Europe seek unique experiences, luxury stays, and cultural exploration, while Eastern Europeans visiting the region enjoy desert safaris, shopping, and family-friendly activities.”



## Trendsetters of the month



### Abu Dhabi Tourism

Traditional art of 'Khous'—a weaving technique—celebrating the region’s cultural heritage, is trending with **3.3K** views and **1K** likes



### NEOM

NEOM’s groundbreaking stadium, seamlessly integrated into THE LINE, went viral with **7.5K** likes and **727** reposts



### Etihad Airways

Etihad Airways & Badminton World Federation partnership reels hit over **27.8M** views and **40.6K** likes, celebrating the BWF World Tour



### Qatar Airways

'When the in-flight experience is so good, you forget how to leave. Qatar Airways shows why you'll want to stay forever!' got **47.5M** views and **1.4M** likes



### Emirates

Emirates Airlines' New Year post garnered over **9K** likes and **319** reposts, highlighting the spirit and integrity of Dubai's New Year celebrations



### Riyadh Air

Riyadh Air's post is trending with **3.3K** likes and **24** reposts, celebrating their sustainability milestones of joining the UN Global Compact



## Important AI tools for business

# H2O.ai: A data-driven assistant

Imagine having a tool that predicts customer preferences, improves operational efficiency, and identifies emerging travel trends. H2O.ai is your go-to AI platform that brings data-driven intelligence to every corner of your travel business.

### What makes H2O.ai a game changer?

H2O.ai empowers travel companies to make smarter, faster decisions with advanced machine learning and AI solutions. Here's why it's quickly becoming an industry favourite:

- ❖ **Personalised Customer Insights:** Predict customer preferences to tailor travel packages, accommodations, and recommendations.
- ❖ **Optimised Operations:** From forecasting demand to managing booking volumes, streamline processes and enhance resource allocation.



- ❖ **Intelligent Pricing Strategies:** Dynamically adjust prices based on demand, seasonality, and competitor trends.
- ❖ **Enhanced Risk Management:** Monitor geopolitical changes, weather conditions,

- and compliance updates with predictive alerts.
- ❖ **Streamlined Marketing:** Identify high-value customers and create targeted campaigns that convert casual browsers into loyal travellers.

### For teams that needs data-driven precision

H2O.ai help your team stay one step ahead with AI-powered insights to drive growth and enhance customer satisfaction. It turns raw data into actionable insights, helping businesses stay competitive in a fast-paced market.

### Pro tip

Use H2O.ai to create hyper-personalised experiences by analysing customer reviews and social media trends. Highlight unique offerings—like eco-friendly tours or hidden gems—that resonate with modern travellers and help boost businesses.

# Qashio, Visa to make payments easy

Qashio announced its strategic partnership with Visa to launch Visa Commercial Choice Travel programme for the first time in the Middle East region. With this innovative B2B travel payments solution launch, Visa and Qashio will support the travel industry in the UAE, MENA, Europe & the UK with global issuance capabilities by allocating over AED100 million in the programme in the coming years.

TT Bureau

The travel solution will allow travel companies to obtain Qashio cards and transact in different currencies, including AED, SAR, USD, EUR and GBP issued from UAE enabling payments and settlements in multiple currencies. Qashio and Visa's specialised solution will enable travel companies to digitise and automate their payments within the travel sector, optimising their reconciliation and enhancing liquidity. The solution is seamlessly integrated with global travel management companies and their booking tools including Global Distribution Systems (GDS), making travel booking and payments seamless and secure.

Since launching in the UAE in 2022, Qashio has quickly established itself as one of MENA's top providers of business finance solutions, meeting the evol-



Armin Moradi, CEO and Co-Founder, Qashio with Salima Gutieva, Vice President and Country Manager for UAE, Visa

ving financial needs of today's businesses with a commitment to innovation. Utilising the Visa Commercial Choice Travel programme, Qashio Corporate Travel offering aims to streamline operational complexities, reduce expenses, and support companies of all sizes to manage their

travel payments. Leveraging Visa's secure payment infrastructure, the tie-up ensures high standards of protection for all B2B travel-related transactions. Beyond payment security and control, Qashio's Visa Commercial Choice Travel solution will provide real-time data insights

and analytics to make cashflow tracking and budgeting more precise. With an unlimited pool of customisable Qashio cards companies will gain full control and visibility over payments.

Sharing details about the partnership, **Armin Moradi**, CEO

**Specialised solution provided by Qashio and Visa will enable travel companies to digitise and automate their payments within the travel sector**

and Co-Founder, Qashio, said, "We are committed to continue our joint growth with Visa. We recognise that the Travel & Tourism industry is key in the region. However, the travel companies are underserved with strong technical payment solutions. We are creating a one-stop platform that simplifies the corporate travel."

**Salima Gutieva**, Vice President and Country Manager for UAE, Visa, said, "Travel and tourism are key sectors driving growth and diversification of UAE and the region's economies. This partnership reflects our commitment to providing secure and

seamless payment solutions that improve efficiencies of travel and tourism companies."

**PARTNERSHIP FOR PAYMENTS**

**AED100 million**

Total partnership

**Benefits**

Use of multiple currencies - AED, SAR, EUR, USD etc

**Solution**

Seamless global payment services

# Malaysia hosts ASEAN Tourism Forum

Promoting Johor Bahru among the Middle East travellers, Tourism Malaysia recently hosted the ASEAN Tourism Forum at the developing destination of Malaysia. The event was inaugurated by **Dato Sri Tiong King Sing**, Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Malaysia. The event saw 221 sellers showcasing the best of ASEAN tourism, 323 buyers from 42 countries, and 100 media representatives from 35 countries.



# MOVEMENTS

## JUMEIRAH GROUP Dubai

Jumeirah Group has appointed **THOMAS B MEIER** as the Chief Executive Officer. With extensive industry experience, Meier has been instrumental in guiding Jumeirah through several important milestones and will now lead the next stage of the brand's sustainable growth under its Mission 2030 strategy. As Chief Executive Officer, Meier will spearhead Jumeirah's bold plans to double its portfolio by 2030, focusing on international expansion and solidifying its position as a global leader in luxury hospitality. Under his leadership, Jumeirah aims to continue setting new standards for the industry, building on its strong legacy and reinforcing its commitment to deliver enriching guest experiences rooted in culture and connection. Meier takes on the role during a pivotal time for the brand.



## VALOR HOSPITALITY PARTNERS Middle East

Valor Hospitality Partners has appointed **PATRICK ANTAKI** as the Vice President of Operations, Middle East, effective January 2025. With over three decades of experience in the hospitality industry, Antaki brings a wealth of knowledge, a history of operational excellence, and a deep understanding of the Middle East's dynamic market. His career journey began in the UK during the mid-1980s, where he held senior management roles with renowned global brands, such as Hilton, Le Méridien, and Forte Hotels. Antaki's distinguished career also includes leadership positions at landmark properties like Al Maha Desert Resort & Spa and Le Méridien Al Aqah Beach Resort. His entrepreneurial venture as the founder of a successful hospitality consulting firm further showcases his multifaceted expertise.



## DRAGON PALACE HOTEL Dubai

Dragon Palace Hotel has appointed **HERMAN FOO** as General Manager. A Singaporean, Foo brings over 20 years of experience in Asian hospitality, blending precision, professionalism, and heartfelt guest care. His leadership will steer the pre-opening team toward excellence, aligning with the hotel's mission to deliver outstanding experiences and its vision to become a premier destination. Passionate about innovation and luxury, Foo emphasises genuine, tech-enhanced service with a personal touch, ensuring every guest's journey is unforgettable. His appointment marks a pivotal step in the hotel's growth. Dragon Palace is a luxury hotel located in International City Dubai. The hotel has 285 luxurious rooms.



## SOFITEL DUBAI JUMEIRAH BEACH Dubai

**GOPI JOGHEE** has been appointed General Manager of Sofitel Dubai Jumeirah Beach, bringing over 20 years of hospitality experience to the role. He previously served as Cluster Hotel Manager at Kempinski The Boulevard Dubai and Kempinski Central Avenue Dubai. He began his hospitality career at Sheraton Towers in India and moved to Dubai in 2004, holding leadership roles at renowned establishments like One&Only Royal Mirage, Shangri-La Muscat, Oman, and Address Hotels + Resorts. In his new role, he aims to enhance guest experiences, improve service standards, and strengthen the hotel's reputation in Dubai's competitive market. Sofitel Dubai Jumeirah Beach is celebrated for its luxurious atmosphere, offering cozy rooms with stunning views.



## RADISSON COLLECTION RESIDENCES Riyadh

Radisson Hotel Group appoints **FIRAS MNEIMNEH** as the General Manager of Radisson Collection Residences, Riyadh, which is set to open in the second quarter of this year. With over 26 years of international hospitality experience spanning Italy, Poland, the UAE, Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, Mneimneh's visionary leadership and commitment to operational excellence will elevate the property to an unparalleled standard of luxury living in Riyadh's dynamic capital. Mneimneh's illustrious career in the hospitality sector spans multiple continents, bringing invaluable operational, financial, and commercial expertise to his new role. An MBA in Hospitality Management and Tourism from Rome, Mneimneh is widely recognised for fostering a culture of innovation, inclusion, and talent development throughout his career.



## SIX SENSES SOUTHERN DUNES, THE RED SEA Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Six Senses Southern Dunes, The Red Sea has appointed **ZAHER BIZRI** as the Director of Sales & Marketing. Bizri brings over 20 years of experience in luxury hospitality, recognised for his dynamic leadership and proven success in driving revenue growth, building strategic partnerships, and implementing impactful sales and marketing strategies. His expertise in global markets and leadership with top luxury hotel brands has led to a record-breaking performance and market leadership. Throughout his career, Bizri has demonstrated a deep understanding of global markets, holding leadership roles with some of the world's most recognised international luxury hotel brands.



Sofitel Dubai Jumeirah Beach has appointed **ALBERT MEOW** as the Director of Sales and Marketing. Bringing over 20 years of hospitality expertise, Meow has held leadership roles across renowned brands like Shangri-La, Banyan Tree, and The Oberoi Beach Resort Al Zorah. Previously, he was the commercial director for Habtoor Grand Resort, driving revenue growth by overseeing sales, marketing, and business strategies, ensuring profitability and market competitiveness. In his new role, he will lead strategic sales and marketing initiatives, focusing on enhancing market presence. He is known for his strong industry relationships and proven track record of delivering the highest service standards.



## THE RITZ CARLTON Doha

The Ritz-Carlton, Doha has promoted **IKRAMI BOUSSAADIA** to the position of Executive Assistant Manager in charge of Rooms. Boussaadia's career at The Ritz-Carlton, Doha began in 2011, when he joined as Front Office Agent. Over the years, his dedication, attention to detail, and passion for guest satisfaction propelled him through a variety of key roles, including Front Desk Manager, and Director of Housekeeping. Boussaadia's ability to elevate the guest experience made him a natural fit for his current role as Executive Assistant Manager in charge of Rooms. He has played an instrumental part in driving the hotel's success, particularly during high-profile events such as the Global Leadership Conference and the recent third Asian Cooperation Summit.



## MARRIOTT MARQUIS DUBAI Dubai

Marriott Marquis Dubai at Jewel of the Creek appoints **FREDRIK REINISCH** as the General Manager. With a career spanning over 20 years in hospitality management, Reinisch brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the role. He will be responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of the hotel, driving revenue growth, and enhancing the property's position as a leading hotel in Dubai. He has a strong background with globally renowned hospitality brands, having worked in the UK, Seychelles, Sweden, and the UAE. He began his career as an assistant Front Office Manager at Copthorne Hotel in London Gatwick and went on to hold significant positions, including General Manager at The Dubai Edition. He also has managed iconic hotels in Al Habtoor City and Habtoor Grand Resort.



## THE ST REGIS Abu Dhabi

The St Regis Abu Dhabi appoints **YOMI EGBELEYE** as the Director of Rooms. Egbeleye brings 14 years of experience in luxury hospitality, with expertise in team development, operational strategy, and financial management, to the position. Renowned for driving exceptional guest satisfaction and operational success at globally recognised hotels, Egbeleye's leadership will further enhance guest experiences and uphold the standard of service excellence at The St Regis Abu Dhabi. In his new role, Egbeleye will oversee all rooms operations, including front desk, concierge, guest experience, valet, housekeeping, and fitness. In addition, he will manage the budget for the rooms division, ensuring resources align with the hotel's financial goals.



## AVANI IBN BATTUTA Dubai

Avani Ibn Battuta Dubai has appointed **ZAID MASHINI** as the General Manager. Bringing over 18 years of distinguished experience in the hospitality industry, Mashini is set to lead the property to new heights, enhancing guest experiences and driving operational excellence. His career is defined by his dedication to service quality and leadership in operational efficiency. Prior to this, he served as Hotel Manager at InterContinental Jordan Hotel, where he successfully spearheaded initiatives that elevated guest satisfaction and optimised performance. His leadership experience also includes serving as Cluster Hotel Manager for Crowne Plaza & Holiday Inn Kuwait Al Thuraya City. Mashini is excited to bring fresh ideas to Avani Ibn Battuta Dubai.



**STEVEN JOHNSTON** has been appointed as Entertainment Officer by Marriott Marquis Dubai at Jewel of the Creek. Johnston brings over 20 years of experience in radio and entertainment management. He will be responsible for overseeing and curating the hotel's entertainment activities, ensuring an engaging and dynamic experience for guests. Before joining Marriott Marquis, Johnston served as the Director of Entertainment at Yas Plaza, Abu Dhabi, where he managed various entertainment initiatives. He also held the position of Head of Programming at Gulf News Broadcasting, overseeing Radio 1 and Radio 2 in Dubai. Johnston has a history of setting up radio stations, including the first English-language CHR station in the UAE.



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