

Themed editorial: What are the growth drivers and challenges for tourism in the Middle East?

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In recent years, memorable travel to and beyond the Middle East has become closely associated with the region's world-leading airlines: Emirates, Etihad Airways and Qatar Airways. Added to this, the Middle East has become a focal point for high profile meetings and events such as EXPO 2020 hosted by the United Arab Emirates and the FIFA World Cup hosted by Qatar in November and December 2022. However, the region as a whole has not yet determined the scale and scope of its provision for tourism. In this issue, theme editors Mohit Vij, Sanjay Nadkarni and their writing team investigate the growth drivers and challenges for tourism in the Middle East. I would like to thank Mohit, Sanjay and all the authors and reviewers for providing a fascinating analysis of the possibilities in a fast-developing world region.

Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes (WHATT) aims to make a practical and theoretical contribution to hospitality and tourism development, and we seek to do this by using a key question to focus attention on an industry issue. If you would like to contribute to our work by serving as a *WHATT* theme editor, do please contact me.

Richard Teare

Managing Editor, WHATT

What are the growth drivers and challenges for tourism in the Middle East?

Tourism in the Middle East has existed since time immemorial. However, the stereotypical visitor groups to the region – mainly traders and pilgrims, have become more diverse and now include tourists visiting for leisure, recreation, medical treatment, business and events. Over the past 20 years, arrivals in the Middle East and North Africa increased dramatically until the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this trajectory. Although the impact of the pandemic lingers on, the Middle East region experienced strong recovery in the first half of 2022. Even though the region has good infrastructure and renowned hospitality, the region's destinations face many challenges – mostly related to its legacy image as a dangerous and violent region. In response, greater political stability, improved security measures, diversified products and markets and pro-tourism policies are some of the factors that have helped the region to improve its tourism appeal and prospects. However, if the governments of the region are to further improve inbound tourism, they must play an enabling role in strategizing for the future. National tourism plans with a clear vision and goals must be developed; effective governance has to be ensured in aligning the functions of all public sectors with these plans; new source tourist markets need to be identified to complement existing ones; destinations should be ready with appropriate infrastructure and services, and marketing campaigns need to be designed to connect with the target markets. Furthermore, sustainability, innovation and technology are instrumental to the entire process.

We hope that the Middle East can continue to build its tourism by cooperating internally and externally with other countries to offer its distinctive heritage, culture, hospitality, cuisine and unique destinations to the wider world. In this context, our theme issue focuses on challenges to be addressed in the post-pandemic era in order to realize the true potential of tourism in the region.

Mohit Vij and Sanjay Nadkarni

Theme Editors



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About the Theme Editors:

Dr Mohit Vij is an associate professor in the Department of Business Administration at Liwa College of Technology, United Arab Emirates. With more than two decades of experience, he is an expert in developing and planning academic and training programs and has led research and consultancy projects for several Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). Among others, Mohit developed the Tourist Guide License program for Sharjah Commerce and Tourism Development Authority (SCTDA), Ajman Tourism Development Department (ATDD) and Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Authority (RAKTDA). Dr Mohit believes passionately in giving back to society and making a difference by providing education and training to community groups and he has conducted female empowerment programs, professional skills training for taxi drivers and tourism programs for participants in punitive and correction centres.

Dr Sanjay Nadkarni is Director of Research and Innovation, The Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, United Arab Emirates. His special interests are in the convergence of analytics, digital and sustainability in services where he conducts academic and applied research, advisory and consultancy assignments for corporate, government and multilateral agencies. His pedagogic practice includes visiting professorships at academic institutions in Asia and Europe. He is also a verified Dubai Futures research contributor and a non-resident Fellow of Trends Research and Advisory, an Abu Dhabi based Think Tank. Sanjay focuses on applied research and pedagogy that have a tangible impact on industry and society. He is passionate about using innovation frameworks to help democratize data science for the benefit of small and micro-businesses. He also enjoys mentoring in digital and social entrepreneurship.

Richard E. Teare

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