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# Reflections on the theme issue outcomes: what are the growth drivers for tourism in the Middle East?

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Theme Editors: Mohit Vij and Sanjay Nadkarni share their reflections on the significance and outcomes of the theme issue with Managing Editor Richard Teare.

## Overview

Historically, travel in the Middle East mainly consisted of traders and pilgrims but with the rise of regionally-based, world-leading airlines (notably: Emirates, Etihad Airways and Qatar Airways) tourists now visit for leisure, recreation, medical treatment, business and events too. The region is also a focal point for high profile meetings and events such as EXPO 2020 hosted by the United Arab Emirates and the FIFA World Cup in November and December 2022, hosted by Qatar. Yet, most Middle Eastern countries have yet to fully scope their tourism development plans, and so this issue investigates the growth drivers and challenges for tourism in the Middle East.

The disruption of global hospitality and tourism caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is well documented in the academic and industry literature. Travel patterns across regions were significantly affected and the Middle East region was no exception. Despite its host of attractions, the region has not traditionally excelled in terms of attracting global tourism inflows. That said, a wide array of opportunities exist across the region and in response, policy changes are needed. To explore the options, we invited academics and practitioners with expertise and experience of working in the Middle East to contribute to the analysis contained in this theme issue. Our objective at the outset was to assemble a writing team that would reflect the diversity across the region while simultaneously focussing on common touchpoints that can re-invigorate hospitality and tourism in the Middle East. In so doing, it is necessary to take into account the socio-political and economic changes that are occurring. A list of the articles in this issue can be found in [Appendix](#).

## Why in your view, is your theme issue strategic question important?

The Middle East has been a leading hub for pilgrimage tourism for several centuries. The region's unparalleled heritage of monuments depicting ancient civilizations has also been a lure for many cultural tourists from around the world. In recent years, some Gulf countries, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have taken the initiative to diversify the region's tourism appeal by transforming areas of desert into luxury destinations for tourists that appeal to a wide range of business and leisure travellers. Subsequently, the Middle East and North Africa region has performed well in travel and tourism terms. Although growth was over-shadowed by the pandemic, the region is experiencing relatively rapid recovery. However, the disruption caused by the pandemic created unprecedented challenges and as an outcome, academics and travel and tourism practitioners are ready and willing to review standard operating procedures



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and practices and develop innovative solutions to on-going challenges. With this background, this theme issue sought to build a knowledge base that can contribute to developing the scope and potential for tourism development and promotion in the Middle East region. This collection of articles should enable academics and practitioners to better understand, analyse and evaluate the future prospects for tourism development in the region.

### **Thinking about your theme issue plan and approach, what worked well?**

We decided to use a broad-based call for papers in an effort to identify regional expertise and reflect this in our planning approach. The fact that our request for contributions generated significant interest is we think, a testament to the importance of the theme issue question. The region has traditionally been under-represented in the wider hospitality and tourism academic literature, and this theme issue goes some way to addressing the gap. As noted, our outreach to the academic community in the region and beyond generated a wide array of proposals which we then filtered by selecting the “best fit” options. Our aim here was to ensure adequate diversity and balance with reference to geographical location and topical coverage. Despite a lengthy team selection process, we were pleased that the submission and review process ran smoothly and on schedule, and this also included an early opportunity to withdraw contributions that we felt would be difficult to integrate with the theme issue question.

### **How did you engage with different stakeholder groups?**

Our call for papers went out to our own network of contacts and so we were confident that the analysis and writing would be to an international standard. In response to expressions of interest from prospective contributors, we answered questions about the scope, timelines and the nature of the peer review process that we had designed for our theme issue. Simultaneously, potential reviewers were approached and here we sought to ensure that we assembled a panel of reviewers that represented a blend of people with academic and industry expertise. This reflects the *WHATT* guidelines and helped us to ensure that every article was relevant to the widest possible range of stakeholders.

### **What were the highlights from stakeholder group interactions?**

Given the number of people involved, we were really pleased that the entire writing and reviewing team worked well together and managed to keep to the timelines we had established – even though some of the deadline dates were challenging to meet.

### **Thinking about your peer review process: what went well and why?**

We decided to use anonymous peer reviewing even though *WHATT* recommends a more open process. We are familiar with double-blind reviewing, as are most of our writing team members and so we also felt it would be quicker and easier to implement. Although we tried to achieve an equal balance of academics and practitioners on our peer review panel, we found this difficult because it is an unfamiliar role for practitioners. As we reflect on the process, we could perhaps have taken a different approach to practitioner engagement by encouraging industry-academia collaborative writing. If we had done this, we could have gathered more industry insights and blended them with academic analysis.

### **What are the most significant outcomes of your theme issue in terms of the contributions to knowledge and/or professional practice?**

This theme issue provides a much-needed contribution to the challenges and opportunities for hospitality and tourism development in the Middle East. Interestingly, all the articles in the collection are forward-looking, and this bodes well for a positive and conducive development

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environment for tourism in future. We are pleased to say that the articles discuss and provide recommendations relating to some of the most pertinent issues such as tourism planning and policies, sustainability, competitiveness, strategy, emerging trends, innovation and technology.

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### **What are the implications for management action and applied research arising from your theme issue outcomes?**

At the outset, we briefed the writing team on the need to highlight the practical implications of their research, and we think that this goal was largely met. Taken as a whole, the theme issue provides policymakers across the Middle Eastern region with a distillation of current thinking and best practice ideas that could enable them to address critical policy gaps. Additionally, articles covering functional areas such as technology and marketing provide actionable insights for managers in this geographical context.

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### **Having served as a WHATT theme editor, what did you enjoy about the experience?**

We should like to thank the entire writing and reviewing team for their professionalism and timely responses throughout the process. Together, we have been able to contribute to addressing a knowledge gap in hospitality and tourism research in the region, particularly in the post-COVID-19 context, and this has given us a real sense of achievement. We thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to serve as theme editors and to collaborate with an array of experts in Middle Eastern development issues, and we would also like to thank managing editor Richard Teare for his encouragement, responsiveness and support.

### **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).

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.

*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 the Managing Editor, Dr Richard Teare via the Emerald website.

### **Appendix**

#### **Theme issue contents (WHATT v15 n2 2023)**

#### **What are tourism's growth drivers and challenges in the Middle East?**

*Mohit Vij and Sanjay Nadkarni*

Examines the various constraints and opportunities faced by the Middle East region in developing and promoting tourism. Finds that the scope and potential to develop tourism in the Middle East region is significant. However, political turmoil in the past and its stereotypical image emerged as the major constraints. Acknowledging the significance of the tourism sector, governments in the region are trying hard to improve international arrivals and revenues.

**Tourism policy and United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16: peace and stability in the Middle East and North Africa**

*Ahmad Anouti, Samantha Chaperon and James Kennell*

Explores the ways in which the relationship between tourism, sustainable development and peace in the Middle East and North Africa is presented in national tourism policies, with a focus on United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace Justice and Strong Institutions. The article links SDG 16 to tourism policy and provides insights into how this relationship could be developed in a region experiencing recurrent crises, and high levels of tourism growth.

**Exploring the tourism development strategies of Gulf Cooperation Council countries: commonalities, contrasts and clusters**

*Ashraf A Mahate, Sanjai K Parahoo*

Examines the commonalities and contrasts in the tourism objectives and strategies of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, thereby revealing the foundations and pillars underlying the strategic initiatives implemented. Four distinct clusters were identified: lifestyle glamour, emerging giant, sports-induced country branding and eco-friendly regional-based strategies.

**Understanding barriers to inbound medical tourism in the United Arab Emirates from a provider's perspective**

*Vinaytosh Mishra, Sudhir Rana*

Identifies the main barriers to the development of medical tourism in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Further, the article aims to explain the relationships between these barriers and propose a framework to overcome them, and concludes that healthcare cost, healthcare quality and the inapplicability of international medical insurance are the most important barriers.

**Local tourists' perceptions of tourist destinations' competitiveness: a comparative study of the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Oman**

*Mohamed Abou-Shouk, Nagoua Zoair, Ahmed Elbaz, Marwa Mahmoud*

Aims to test the effect of the dimensions of the travel and tourism competitiveness index on destination competitiveness in the UAE, Egypt, and Oman and how competitiveness influences tourism performance and development. Reveals that the competitiveness index components are significantly contributing to destination competitiveness and that this competitiveness is predicting both tourism performance and development.

**Exploring the challenges for medical tourism in the United Arab Emirates during the COVID-19 pandemic era: a stakeholder perspective**

*Ahmad Okasha, Farooq Haq, Anita Medhekar, Naveed Yasin*

Explores medical tourism development challenges in the UAE before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and finds that medical tourism is a becoming a dynamic, rapidly developing area and an engine for economic growth. Concerns relating to medical tourism development in the UAE include higher medical services costs and a shortage of highly qualified medical expertise.

**Marketing strategies for the tourism industry in the United Arab Emirates after the COVID-19 era**

*Usha Seshadri, Pranav Kumar, Anu Vij, Tabani Ndlovu*

Reviews tourism trends in the UAE in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and highlights a radical shift in the consumption of travel products and the marketing strategies that tourism enterprises can adopt. Reveals the importance of digital technology in building a relationship between the supplier and

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customer and the fact that businesses can leverage virtual reality to provide enriching experiences to the customer and influence their tourism product choice.

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**The role of artificial intelligence and blockchain technologies in sustainable tourism in the Middle East**

*Mohammad Abul Kashem, Mohammad Shamsuddoha, Tasnuba Nasir, Asma Akter Chowdhury*

Reviews the role of two significant smart technologies; artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchain technology (BT) in achieving sustainable tourism success. It is argued that this technology will enable consistent tourism growth in the Middle East and North Africa region by improving environmental, social and economic sustainability, and finds that the potential of these technologies (AI and Blockchain) can internalize a win-win situation for economic prosperity and sustainable conservation of environmental resources.

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**Middle East tourism – opportunities and solutions**

*Mohit Vij and Sanjay Nadkarni*

Highlights the key outcomes relating to tourism growth drivers and challenges in the Middle East that could assist in policy and decision-making by stakeholders in the UAE and more widely across the region, and suggests the need for public and private sectors to align their vision and efforts directed at developing and promoting sustainable tourism in the region with particular reference to innovation, technology, partnerships and marketing campaigns.