

Green shoots of revival bloom in Dubai's tourism and hospitality sectors

10 Aug 2020, Dubai, UAE



Dubai's tourism and hospitality sectors are benefitting from a rapid rebound driven by a multi-phase roadmap being executed by the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (Dubai Tourism). Prominent players in the industry have experienced a surge of interest from across the world since the reopening of the city to international tourists on 7 July.

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- Dubai is currently among top 5 destinations for internet searches or tourist considerations
- Jumeirah registers an average daily increase of 109% in booked room nights

"Dubai continues to take effective steps under the guidance of the visionary leadership of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, and Ruler of Dubai to build on the strategic initiative to reopen the city to tourists on 7 July. Since then, we have been greatly encouraged by the market's response in the current second phase of our recovery strategy, which was activated along with the gradual resumption of economic sectors, as well as the staggered and tentative restart of travel across the world," said His Excellency Helal Saeed Almarri, Director General of Dubai Tourism.

"We have received considerable interest from international markets, particularly Europe and Russia," said Jose Silva, CEO of Dubai-based Jumeirah, one of the world's leading luxury hospitality brands. "In the first week following the reopening to international tourists, online bookings for planned stays on Jumeirah's website (www.jumeirah.com) doubled from the previous week while its properties registered an average daily increase of 109% in booked room nights."

Bookings being received by Emirates Airline and flydubai are also showing positive signs for the tourism sector. Emirates will be operating to a total of 70 destinations across six continents in August, while flydubai is set to expand its network to 66 destinations over the summer.

Improving global market sentiment and the perception of Dubai as one of the safest destinations in the world are key drivers of the increasing momentum for recovery. "People are much more optimistic and well informed now and are ready to go on holidays to destinations that are safe and have put in place strong health and safety protocols," said HE Helal Al Almarri.

However, at the height of the global COVID-19 crisis, the mood was circumspect. The international tourism industry bore the brunt of worldwide restrictions in domestic and cross-border mobility. According to the

World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the COVID-19 pandemic could cost global tourism and related sectors between US\$1.2 and US\$3.3 trillion in lost revenue depending on the timing of recovery.

For Dubai however, the peak of the crisis was a time to explore a strategic reset. During what HE Helal Almarri calls the 'pause phase', the focus was on planning and repositioning. Tourism authorities worked to create a framework for meeting tourist expectations once restrictions would be removed. "We rethought business strategies and plans working closely with stakeholders and partners to develop innovative initiatives to manage the 'new normal'. In cooperation with key authorities, we mapped out stringent health protocols and precautionary measures that would reassure even the most demanding safety-conscious tourists," the head of Dubai Tourism said.

Rekindling the domestic tourism market was a key element of the recovery plan. Since opening for domestic tourism in May, Dubai saw strong pick up in numbers with hotels creating offerings to meet pent-up demand for staycations. From an early stage, beach properties registered occupancy rates of above 80% over the weekend. Today, hotels are continuing to offer a range of staycation deals to UAE residents ranging from discounts on room rates and F&B to family entertainment offerings. As part of stimulating the broader domestic tourism market, industry stakeholders are working in tandem to encourage residents to experience all other destination offerings such as malls, attractions and entertainment centres.

"The domestic market has proven extremely important and we are seeing increased demand at Jumeirah properties, particularly over the weekends. Dedicated staycation offers are helping to drive ongoing interest together with the introduction of new dining concepts to enhance the experience. For example, we recently opened our French Riviera pop-up at Jumeirah Al Qasr and have other new dining activations planned for the coming months," said Jose Silva.

The effective management of the pandemic by Dubai, resulting in dwindling infection numbers and rising recovery rates, enabled the city to reopen itself to tourists on 7 July. "The UAE and Dubai were decisive, strategic and methodical in tackling the pandemic. We are grateful to the federal and local governments for their comprehensive measures, which prepared the ground for the revival of tourism and other sectors. We also remain optimistic due to the pivotal role being played by our key partners like Emirates and flydubai in facilitating tourism growth through a wide range of measures designed to instill confidence among travellers and encourage them to make the city their destination of choice. As we continuously assess the current situation and take steps to consolidate the industry revival that is underway, we expect to see good progress in the last quarter of 2020 based on strong growth strategies that we have adopted to accelerate momentum ahead of the full reopening of the sector," said HE Almarri.

In the run-up to the city's reopening to foreign tourists, Dubai left no stone unturned to assure tourists of a smooth and safe experience at every stage of their travel journey, from arrival at airports to the point of departure from Dubai. "We knew that most travellers will look at the type of healthcare services and processes in place before selecting a holiday destination. We put in place a zero-tolerance approach in the management of health and safety protocols at hotels, retail outlets and tourist attractions with regular monitoring to ensure compliance," said Issam Kazim, CEO of Dubai Corporation for Tourism and Commerce Marketing (DCTCM).

"We are fortunate that Dubai has mature tourism, hospitality and retail sectors. Establishments truly understand that maintaining high health and safety standards are critical to the success of their own business as we work to meet the demands of the new norm," the CEO of DCTCM noted.

Jumeirah believes that the certified health and safety measures it put in place were some of the key factors in the growth in bookings. "Jumeirah Al Naseem was the first hotel in the world to receive the prestigious Bureau Veritas Safeguard Label, followed by three of our other Dubai-based luxury hotels, with certifications of the remaining properties to follow suit. We believe this has gone a long way in helping to restore confidence for both domestic and international travellers," said Silva.

"Examples of the vigorous new protocols we have put in place include circulating three times more fresh air throughout our hotels, provision of hygiene amenities, leaving rooms vacant between guest stays, using disinfectant fogging for rooms and thermal hygiene processes for our bedding and pillows," he added.

To recognise and foster industry-wide compliance, Dubai Tourism rolled out the 'DUBAI ASSURED' stamp, with the aim of reinforcing the emirate's positioning as one of the world's safest destinations. To obtain the stamp, establishments have to submit to stringent checks by inspectors to verify adherence to high standards of safety and health precautions. Over 1,000 establishments have already been inspected for compliance as part of the programme, making them eligible to receive the 'DUBAI ASSURED' stamp.

Dubai's commitment to maintaining the highest standards of hygiene and safety in line with international best practices received a strong endorsement from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), which gave the city a 'Safe Travels' stamp in recognition of the stringent measures taken to combat COVID-19.

Besides the standard precautionary measures of social distancing and wearing of masks at all times by guests and employees, Dubai hotels have deployed enhanced disinfection measures across all their facilities, including the fitting of equipment for contactless screening of guests at entrances. Dubai also implemented technologically-integrated advanced safety controls, to prevent, monitor, detect, and ring-fence any incidences within the tourism ecosystem.

A wide range of air travel protocols for visitors has further boosted the confidence of tourists. All travellers, including tourists, residents and citizens arriving in or transiting through the UAE, must present a negative COVID-19 PCR test result obtained 96 hours prior to departure. Arrivals from some countries require a coronavirus test before boarding the plane and again on arrival.

Furthermore, Emirates became the first airline in the world to help its passengers travel with confidence by providing free global cover for COVID-19 related medical expenses of up to EUR 150,000 and quarantine costs of EUR 100 per day for 14 days, should they be diagnosed with COVID-19 during their travel.

Along with implementing health and safety standards, Dubai Tourism set in motion an aggressive international marketing strategy involving close coordination with more than 3,000 partners worldwide to drive tourist bookings. A series of digital campaigns were among notable global marketing activities launched to ensure the city continued to stay top of mind among tourists. Two high-impact digital campaigns, #Till We Meet Again and #We Will See You Soon, were rolled out ahead of the reopening while the third titled #Ready When You Are was launched just as Dubai reopened itself to overseas tourists.

The marketing campaigns resulted in Dubai becoming one of the most sought-after destinations among tourists looking to travel again. According to Dubai Tourism, the emirate is currently among the top 5 destinations for internet searches or tourist considerations. A survey by global travel company Kuoni shows that the UAE is 'the world's most searched destination for 2021' in 11 countries. The firm based its findings on Google's global data from 131 countries. In 2019 the Mastercard Global Destination Cities Index (GDCI) had ranked Dubai as one of the world's top five most visited cities in the world for the fifth year in a row.

With numbers in the initial reopening phase showing promise, Dubai hopes to maximise opportunities once the tourism sector is fully reopened, which will mark the final stage in its recovery strategy. "As a destination, Dubai is always prepared to evolve in the face of global challenges. We expect to see significant progress and are looking forward to galvanising growth as confidence builds further in the months ahead," Kazim said.







