

Dubai at the forefront of global tourism recovery, a year after reopening to international travellers

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As Dubai marks a year since reopening its borders to international tourists on 7 July 2020, the latest data published by Dubai's Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (Dubai Tourism) shows the city welcomed 3.7 million overnight visitors during the 11-month period from July 2020 to May 2021. The positive performance reinforces the leading role Dubai is playing in global tourism recovery, underscoring the city's enduring appeal as a must-visit destination and reaffirming its commitment to ensuring the health and safety of all residents and visitors.

HH Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Dubai Crown Prince and Chairman of The Executive Council of Dubai said: "The new data reveals that Dubai's tourism rebound is gathering pace despite the current challenges faced by international markets. The growing momentum of recovery not only reflects the fundamental strengths of Dubai's tourism sector and the diversity of its source markets but also the emirate's economic resilience and agility in the face of a rapidly fluctuating global environment. We have seen inspiring commitment and proactivity from all stakeholders in the public and private sector to work together to adopt innovative approaches that can consolidate the sustainable recovery of the sector. Furthermore, Dubai's ability to implement a rigorous precautionary protocol regime has made the city one of the world's safest destinations for travelers. As we gear up to host Expo 2020, these exceptional standards will enable us ensure the event provides the highest global benchmarks of safety and security for all visitors."

According to the data published by Dubai Tourism, the emirate received more than 1.7 million visitors between July and December 2020 from markets that were open, and an additional two million visitors in the first five months of 2021. Travel restrictions in key traditional source markets affected the industry's overall performance over the past year but strongholds like India and UK retained their dominance to be among the top five traffic generators during this period, along with Russia, Pakistan and Egypt. The evolving travel landscape has, however, brought forth some noteworthy performances from other feeder and emerging markets, especially CIS countries like Kazakhstan and Ukraine, and East African markets Ethiopia and Sudan, that have all exhibited strong growth potential to be among the top 15 source markets for Dubai since it reopened its doors to global travellers.

His Excellency Helal Saeed Almarri, Director General of Dubai Tourism, commented: “The series of swift strategic measures taken by Dubai’s leadership enabled the city to demonstrate a high level of resilience, foresight and agility in managing the pandemic and eventually take the lead in the restart of international tourism. The resurgence in international arrivals demonstrates our commitment to a diversified market strategy, the ability of our tourism sector to adapt and respond with agility across all our markets, the enduring appeal of our world-class diverse offerings and the trust that visitors place in Dubai as a safe destination. The positive performance also validates the effectiveness of Dubai’s public-private partnership model and our robust international marketing campaigns designed to sustain Dubai’s appeal as the destination of choice for global travellers. The critical role played by our strategic partners such as Emirates, flydubai, Dubai Airports and other industry stakeholders, as they consistently conveyed the message that Dubai is open and safe for all travellers, contributed immensely towards industry stabilisation.”

Dubai’s robust tourism rebound is testament to the success of its multi-pronged strategy to combat COVID-19. Inspired by its visionary leadership, Dubai rapidly initiated a comprehensive citywide management of the pandemic, which saw it implementing decisive and effective measures to limit the spread of the virus. The provision of a relief package worth over AED7.1 billion combined with a phased reopening of key sectors and Dubai Tourism’s strong collaboration with local stakeholders and over 3,000 partners worldwide, helped the industry chart a steady course for recovery.

Hospitality sector rebounds as domestic market kick-starts tourism recovery

Dubai’s recovery strategy, implemented in close coordination with stakeholders, proved crucial in reinvigorating the domestic hospitality market in May 2020, preparing the ground for the return of international visitors to the city in July 2020. Pent-up demand for staycations among UAE residents, both Emiratis and expatriates from over 200 nationalities, drove tourism growth with hotel occupancy rising significantly from 35 per cent in July 2020 to 58 per cent in May 2021. Hotel occupancy in Dubai peaked in December 2020 (69 per cent) and in January 2021 (66 per cent) with the city ranking second globally in terms of occupancy after Singapore and ahead of Paris and London, according to data from hotel management analytics firm STR. Notably, the average daily rate (ADR) recovered from AED238 in July 2020 to AED383 in May 2021. Despite the disruption caused by COVID-19 across sectors, Dubai continues to represent a major opportunity for hotel developers. A total of 591 hotel establishments with 100,000 rooms were operating in July 2020 in full compliance with health and safety protocols. This has now increased to 715 hotel establishments offering 128,000 rooms in May 2021.

The concerted efforts of Dubai Tourism and partners to drive demand for domestic travel saw city hotels welcoming 5.5 million domestic visitors for the period between July 2020 and May 2021, compared to 2.66 million domestic hotel arrivals during the period July 2019 to May 2020, an astounding year-on year growth of 106 per cent. The hotels also enjoyed an average 56 per cent occupancy during the Eid Al Fitr holiday week in May 2021, which though less than the average occupancy of 62 per cent during the Eid week in 2019, highlighted the crucial role played by the domestic market in Dubai’s tourism recovery. Furthermore, domestic hotel arrivals during the Eid week in May 2021 accounted for 62 per cent of all hotel guest arrivals compared to 47 per cent in 2019.

Safety Assured

As tourists returned to Dubai to enjoy its iconic attractions, experiences and world class infrastructure including beaches, shopping malls, restaurants, theme parks and golf courses, Dubai Tourism remained firmly focused on delivering an exceptional tourism experience whilst prioritising the safety of tourists at every stage and touchpoint of their travel journey, from arrival to departure.

A variety of safety initiatives were launched, based on the guidelines of Dubai’s Supreme Committee of Crisis and Disaster Management, including a wide range of precautionary measures, in addition to effective testing and vaccination programmes. The vaccination campaign also covered employees across hotels, considered the frontline of the tourism industry, starting with a pilot programme that saw more than 10,000 employees of leading hotels on The Palm Jumeirah receiving the vaccines. The UAE is currently ranked among the top five nations globally in terms of vaccine rollout. The stringent measures are underpinned by the DUBAI ASSURED stamp, a compliance protocol that certifies establishments within the tourism ecosystem that adhere to health and safety protocols. Inspectors of Dubai Tourism, Department of Economic Development and Dubai Municipality are also taking a zero-tolerance approach towards non-compliance. In 2020, when the pandemic was at its peak, the joint teams conducted more than 140,000 inspections on establishments across the tourism ecosystem. Dubai’s extensive and

sustained efforts at containing the pandemic won international recognition with the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) awarding the city a 'Safe Travels' stamp. The WTTC stamp is also an endorsement of Dubai's strong global cooperation in combating the pandemic with comprehensive and effective measures to ensure guest health and safety.

Keeping Dubai top-of-mind among global travellers

Dubai Tourism's approach to create a unique positioning and raise Dubai's consideration among global travellers has been effectively promoted and managed amid the pandemic through global marketing campaigns which have contributed to keeping Dubai top of mind amongst international travellers. A series of digital activations including #TillWeMeetAgain, #Ready WhenYouAre and #LiveYourStory have succeeded in showcasing the diversity of Dubai's destination. Joining this list is the recently launched innovative summer campaign, #Dubai Presents: Summer 2021 to encourage global travellers to select the city for their summer vacation.

Leveraging the events ecosystem

During the July 2020 – June 2021 period, Dubai held several international leisure events, as well as all major annual festivals and events including the much-awaited Dubai Summer Surprises (DSS), Dubai Fitness Challenge (DFC) and the Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF) with precautionary measures across the board. The recently launched 24th edition of DSS will further amplify the city's position as the summer destination of choice for families and a year-round international events hub.

In addition to restarting leisure events, Dubai also developed a successful model for the recovery of the business events sector, which paved the way for the resumption of international events in October and subsequently the hosting of mega events such as GITEX in December 2020 and Gulfood, Arabian Travel Market and Arab Health in February, May and June respectively this year. Since September 2020 to mid-May, Dubai hosted a total of 3,136 business events that were attended by 813,832 delegates. Building on these homegrown events, Dubai also resumed the hosting of conferences and congresses from around the world, in many cases providing organisations and associations the opportunity to resume their face-to-face meeting activities and presenting a viable alternative to their original plans.

Alternative pathways to boost tourism growth

The city leveraged innovative alternative pathways to capture significant new visitor segments. In 2020, Dubai Tourism launched the Retire in Dubai programme offering resident expatriates and foreigners aged 55 years and above the opportunity to retire and enjoy a distinct lifestyle in the emirate, as well as a Virtual Working programme that enabled overseas professionals to work remotely based in Dubai. Two new initiatives that followed the 2019 implementation of the long-term Golden Visa programme allowed individuals to apply for 10 and 5-year residency. This was targeted at investors, entrepreneurs, specialised talent in art, medical and scientific fields, as well as students and property owners.

Dubai also launched other pioneering projects and programmes that will support tourism growth including the new Al Quoz Creative Zone, a dynamic hub for artists and designers. A host of new developments are set to expand the diversity of Dubai's offering and add to the momentum of recovery including Ain Dubai, the world's tallest observation wheel, and the Museum of the Future. These will further build on Dubai's position as a world-leading business hub, which has been reinforced by the increasing number of multinationals and start-ups choosing the city as their base of operations.