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In transit: Pathways to circular tourism in the Middle East

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Contents

- 3** Foreword
- 5** About this report
- 6** Executive summary
- 11** Introduction
- 16** The state of sustainable tourism
 - 16** Sustainability in global tourism
 - 19** The Middle East context
 - 19** Challenges to accelerating sustainable tourism
 - 21** The case for sustainability in tourism
- 23** Pathways to circular tourism
 - 26** Changing minds and behaviours
 - 26** Education
 - 29** Embedding circular tourism practices
 - 29** Strategic commitment
 - 31** Reducing consumption and waste
 - 35** Optimising consumption
 - 38** Supply chain localisation
 - 42** Monitoring progress
 - 42** Collecting data and information
- 47** Conclusion

Foreword

It is a pleasure to introduce this report, produced by Economist Impact and sponsored by the Earthna Center for a Sustainable Future, to our readers. Earthna (“our legacy” in Arabic) is a newly created policy centre at Qatar Foundation. It is aimed at formulating policy options to help guide a path towards sustainability for Qatar and other countries with hot and dry climates that face similar economic and environmental challenges. We partner with a range of organisations, including Qatar Tourism who is supporting our efforts towards promoting circular tourism principles in the region.

As the report shows, tourism is highly dependent on resources from a wide range of sectors, generating meaningful contributions to people’s lives and the economy. At the same time, the future of the sector needs to be linked to the urgent global efforts to promote sustainability and to fight the environmental challenges of our time. In this context, responsible tourism practices and sustainable tourism developments have become a priority for countries in the Middle East.

To achieve this transformation of the industry, a systematic approach is necessary—one in which different sectors collaborate, with a focus on environmental, social, economic and cultural dimensions. Earthna believes that this multifaceted collaboration can lead to commitments and policy changes that will enable all stakeholders of the tourism industry to adapt and prosper.

As the report highlights, the tourism industry in the Middle East accounts for around 9% of the region’s GDP. Yet, there is limited practical research available regarding the value creation, challenges and opportunities of adopting circular economy principles across the industry. To fill this gap, this report seeks to shed light on circularity as an enabler for sustainability. Circularity in tourism promotes natural resource conservation and regeneration, as well as the sustainable use of resources and a reduction in waste. Moreover, circularity enables new business models, creates opportunities for new jobs and services, and relies more heavily on digitalisation. Tourism provides great strategic value as it is considered a major element in a diversified economy.

There are many global and local best practices shared in the report in embedding sustainability across the tourism value chain in a way that actively contributes to communities and the health of their environments.

We hope that this report can be seen as a first step to motivate the industry to view sustainable tourism not as an option, but as the only way forward for the betterment of business, the environment and humanity at large.

Dr Gonzalo Castro de la Mata,
executive director, Earthna Center for a Sustainable Future



As we emerge slowly but surely from the upheaval of the global pandemic, the tourism sector now finds itself in a radically different landscape.

Far from climate change being a “future problem”, consumers expect governments, private businesses and other stakeholders to meaningfully deliver on their sustainability pledges, and right now. As the data shows, people are more than willing to change their behaviour to make better, more informed choices for our planet and our future.

With the recovery of the sector under way, we must be determined not to fall back into old habits. We are at an inflection point and must forge a way forward that takes on the seismic task of becoming truly sustainable.

In the Middle East, our industry is expected to double in size by 2030. This creates a huge responsibility to urgently transform the way we work, placing environmental policies front and centre of everything we do.

But in change lies tremendous opportunity. From policymakers to hoteliers, everyone throughout the business can reap the innumerable rewards of sustainable tourism, not just in helping to tackle climate change, but also in creating new micro economies and essential jobs.

Middle Eastern countries possess a rare, infectious enthusiasm—it’s the same positive, can-do spirit that saw Qatar secure the honour of hosting the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™, a regional first.

A holistic transformation in the region will not be the result of one significant change, one significant idea or one significant programme. Breakthroughs rarely take place in this way. Rather, transformation will emerge on the back of a cohesive and interwoven network of big and small initiatives. We can all play our part in helping to solve one of the most pressing issues of our time. By holding stakeholders to account with real measurement, learning from early adopters of circular tourism policies and, most importantly, working together, we can make the changes necessary to show the world how sustainable tourism is done.

Berthold Trenkel,
Chief Operating Officer, Qatar Tourism



About this report

In transit: Pathways to circular tourism in the Middle East is an Economist Impact report supported by Earthna (previously the Qatar Green Building Council). The findings are based on an extensive literature review and interviews with experts to provide insight on the potential pathways to circularity for sustainable tourism in the Middle East.

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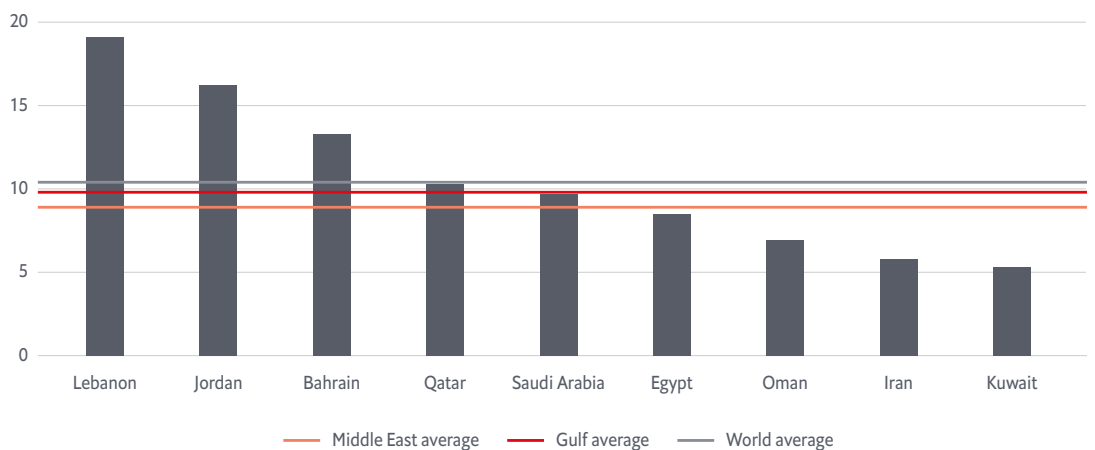
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Executive summary

After an unprecedented halt in tourism at the height of the covid-19 pandemic, a slow recovery in global tourism is under way.¹ According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), global international tourist arrivals increased by 130% in January 2022 compared with 2021.² The industry is a valuable contributor to livelihoods—both directly and through its vast supply chain—accounting for over 10% of global GDP, and an even larger share in some regions: 12% in Southeast Asia and 15% in the Caribbean, for example.³ In the Middle East, tourism accounts for around 9% of GDP.⁴ The post-covid recovery of the industry, therefore, signals wider economic recovery.

FIGURE 1. Total economic contribution of tourism to GDP in the Middle East (% of GDP, 2019)



Source: World Travel and Tourism Council⁵

¹ The current war in Ukraine and the global repercussions for economic growth, however, seem likely to derail this recovery.
² UNWTO (2022), "Tourism enjoys strong start to 2022 while facing new uncertainties". <https://www.unwto.org/news/tourism-enjoys-strong-start-to-2022-while-facing-new-uncertainties>
³ World Travel and Tourism Council, Economic Impact Reports. <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>
⁴ World Travel and Tourism Council, Economic Impact Reports. <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>
⁵ World Travel and Tourism Council, Economic Impact Reports. <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>

But while it is a significant economic contributor, the tourism industry is also responsible for environmental degradation through carbon emissions, waste generation and resource depletion.⁶ It accounts for 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions—of this, almost 50% is generated from transport alone, including aviation and ground transport.⁷ The sector is also responsible for around 14% of all solid waste generated globally,⁸ with each tourist generating an average of 1.7kg of waste per day,⁹ over twice as much as the global daily average per person of 0.7kg.¹⁰ These challenges to sustainability are even more concerning in the Middle East region, where the tourism industry is expected to more than double in size by 2030—the fastest projected growth of any region in the world.¹¹

Thus, a rapid recovery in tourism as it is structured today threatens global efforts to address climate change and reach net zero. But it also offers opportunities for the sector to break the link between economic growth and environmental degradation.

Circularity principles provide a framework for breaking this link, emphasising the recycling and regeneration of resources to maximise use, and the reduction of waste. They go beyond isolated initiatives to address sustainability challenges to instead take a life-cycle approach that embeds sustainability across the tourism value chain. Research by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation finds that, while reducing consumption, switching to renewables and focusing on energy efficiency can cover 55% of the emissions that need to be reduced to meet net-zero targets, circularity allows the remaining 45% to be tackled.¹²

How can tourism be transformed from a linear to a circular industry? Where in the tourism supply chain can the most value be created for catalysing a circular economy in the Middle East? What are the barriers to creating a sustainable tourism industry? What role should different stakeholders play?

Economist Impact has carried out a study to identify a range of solutions to make the tourism sector in the Middle East more sustainable, or one that is mindful of its current and future environmental impacts. The solutions identified in this study focus on circularity principles that can be adopted by the industry to maximise the use of resources, and to minimise waste. The research entails a literature review and in-depth interviews with a diverse mix of global and regional experts from academic, policymaking and private-sector backgrounds. Our findings offer insight into global best practice in embedding circularity across tourism value chains, and how this best practice can be applied within the unique context of the region.

⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/resource-efficiency/what-we-do/responsible-industry/tourism>

⁷ Lenzen, M. et al. (2018), "The carbon footprint of global tourism". <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-018-0141-x>

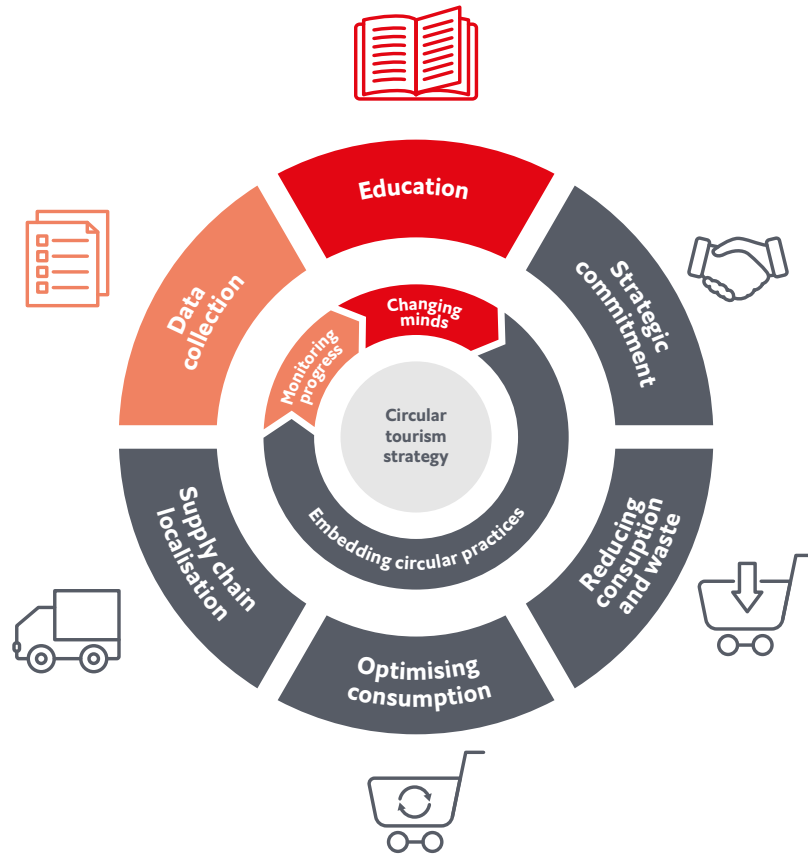
⁸ McDowall, M. (2016), "Managing waste in tourist cities". <https://resource.co/article/managing-waste-tourist-cities-11319#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Environment%20Programme,or%20have%20a%20low%20population>

⁹ Obersteiner, G. (2021), "Carbon footprint reduction potential of waste management strategies in tourism". <https://www.science-direct.com/science/article/pii/S2211464521000075#:~:text=In%20an%20extensive%20review%20in,et%20al.%2C%202016>

¹⁰ Economist Impact analysis based on World Bank data accessed from: <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/search/data-set/0039597>

¹¹ UNWTO (2019), "Transport-related CO2 Emissions of the Tourism Sector". <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284416660>

¹² Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2021), "Completing the Picture: How the Circular Economy Tackles Climate Change". <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/completing-the-picture>



Key findings:

The Middle East is still at an early stage on its journey to sustainable tourism owing to a unique set of challenges. Unlike countries such as Costa Rica, Turkey and Portugal which have made strong progress on sustainable tourism, the Middle East lags behind. According to many of the experts we interviewed, the “boom and bust” nature of economies in the Middle East region means that sustainability issues are often placed on the backburner in favour of more immediate action to revive the economy, such as government stimulus. The hot climate across the region, particularly in the Gulf countries, combined with access to cheap fuel also mean that energy use is high while the incentive to transition to more renewable sources is low. Experts also note that the lack of accountability—both in policymaking and within the energy industry—creates additional challenges. With regard to the former, the short tenure of government officials incentivises measures to boost tourism numbers over a focus on the long-term development of the industry. At the industry level, experts highlight barriers created by the franchise model for hotels. They note that franchise contracts are often limited to guidance on amenities, branding and marketing, and so while sustainability may form a core part of the strategy for large international hotel groups, targets do not always trickle down to regional franchises.

A circular tourism industry can offer many opportunities for economic growth in the Middle East. Investments—both private and public—in circular tourism can help expand the sector, spur economic growth and create jobs for the local population. For example, a circular tourism strategy that aims to platform local destinations can create jobs for unemployed youth who are uniquely qualified to act as tour guides showcasing their local history or to host tourists in small bed-and-breakfasts. Governments in the region must emphasise the economic opportunities of sustainable tourism to increase private-sector engagement and help achieve the dual objective of economic growth and a reduced carbon footprint.

Mega events in the Middle East can serve as a catalyst for circular tourism, but fully leveraging the benefits requires strategic long-term planning and integration with the wider sustainability agenda. The Middle East is establishing itself on a global platform as a host destination for large international events, such as Expo 2020 and the 2022 FIFA World Cup. On one hand, these events can lead to sizable impacts that are environmentally harmful. Studies, for example, show that the Olympic Games create extensive carbon emissions, which have been increasing over time as the games have grown in scale.¹³ On the other hand, these events can act as an accelerator for the sustainable tourism agenda in numerous ways, from educating attendees on the need for sustainable action to implementing best practices in sustainability. If managed in the right way, they can provide an opportunity for host countries to explore new circular pathways, promote carbon-neutral practices, and build and maintain these practices to derive long-term sustainability benefits.

Changing mindsets towards sustainability and circularity across all tourism stakeholders is the single most important hurdle to overcome before progress can be made. On the supply side, experts interviewed note that a major barrier to the implementation of sustainability initiatives is the view that it might detract from service quality and the customer experience. Contrary to this perception, a survey of 120,000 hotel guests across the US revealed that the implementation of green initiatives does not diminish their satisfaction.¹⁴ On the demand side, tourists are concerned about the perceived cost implications of greener holidays—two in five respondents to a Booking.com survey identify cost as a barrier to sustainable travel.¹⁵ Meanwhile, studies show that green initiatives can help the tourism industry lower costs in the long term, with positive feedback loops to the price to consumers.¹⁶ Education plays a primary role in raising awareness around the issues of sustainability in tourism, clarifying misperceptions and stimulating action on both the demand and supply sides.

Successfully transitioning the tourism industry to a pathway to circularity requires cross-stakeholder collaboration to achieve scale and impact. The tourism value chain is vast and complex, involving a range of stakeholders. Each plays a role in creating a circular tourism industry. The industry (including hoteliers, tour operators, transport providers and others) plays a role in identifying innovative ways to minimise or eliminate waste in processes through circular practices. For example,

¹³ Müller, M. et al. (2021), "An evaluation of the sustainability of the Olympic Games". <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-021-00696-5>

¹⁴ Circular City Funding Guide. <https://www.circularcityfundingguide.eu/circular-sector/tourism/>

¹⁵ Booking.com (2019), "Booking.com reveals key findings from its 2019 sustainable travel report". <https://globalnews.booking.com/bookingcom-reveals-key-findings-from-its-2019-sustainable-travel-report>

¹⁶ Hyrdofinity (2018), "How Green Rankings Benefit Hotels". <https://www.xerostech.com/hydrofinitly-blog/reasons-to-go-for-green-rankings-hotels#:~:text=Green%20efforts%2C%20more%20often%20than,win%2Dwin%20for%20green%20hotels>

businesses can find ways to maximise the productive use of materials and natural resources—such as by eliminating the use of single-use plastics—manage energy and water consumption, and switch to renewable forms of energy. Similarly, tourists play a role in approaching tourism with a more sustainable mindset and changing their behaviour accordingly—research from Booking.com shows that while 84% of travellers want to reduce their waste on holiday, only 40% say that they reuse their towel when staying in hotels.¹⁷ Finally, policymakers also play a role in defining the agenda and setting goals for sustainability, and developing the infrastructure and policy environment to achieve them.

Developing systems for collecting data on key sustainability metrics will enable informed decision-making on the demand and supply sides. The availability of data is a particular challenge in the Middle East. Sustainability metrics can allow tourism industry players to track progress and identify gaps. With the right data, travel agencies, for example, can curate alternative holiday packages to allow informed customers to then make decisions weighing up factors that matter to them such as environmental impact, cost and experience. The travel agency, Responsible Travel, screens suppliers against sustainable travel criteria and shares this information with its customers.¹⁸ Third-party certification, governed by regulators, can enable the collection of this data, providing a basis for measuring the impacts of sustainability initiatives across the tourism industry and setting expectations. However, it is also important to recognise the cost involved in obtaining certification, which is disproportionately borne by smaller businesses.

¹⁷ Booking.com (2021), "Sustainable travel report 2021". <https://globalnews.booking.com/download/1037578/booking.comsustainabletravelreport2021.pdf>

¹⁸ Responsible Travel. <https://www.responsibletravel.com/>

Introduction

After a US\$4.5 trillion hit from the covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the global tourism industry is finally showing signs of a recovery.¹⁹ International tourist arrivals increased by 130% in January 2022 compared with 2021.²⁰

While this return is welcomed by industry players and tourists alike, it raises serious environmental concerns. The tourism industry comprises sectors such as aviation and other forms of public transportation, and hospitality and accommodation, all of which have unsustainable business models with a high carbon footprint. The sector as a whole is estimated to contribute approximately 8% of all global greenhouse gas emissions—of this, almost 50% is generated from transport alone.²¹

On the demand side, tourist behaviour also tends to be at odds with sustainability. Research estimates that each tourist generates an average of 1.7kg of waste per day,²² over twice as much as the global daily average per person of 0.7kg.²³ John Bevan, senior vice president at dnata Travel, reflects that “tourists view travel as a reward for their hard work. They might have the most sustainable lifestyle at home, but a holiday is seen as a chance to take a break from their usual routine and enjoy the full extent of the leisure and luxury that comes with it.” Mindsets are beginning to shift—in a 2021 survey by Booking.com, 83% of global travellers believe that sustainable travel is crucial,²⁴ up from 72% in 2019.²⁵ However, there remains a gap between the desire for sustainability and actual behaviour

¹⁹ World Travel and Tourism Council, Economic Impact Reports. <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>

²⁰ UNWTO (2022), “Tourism enjoys strong start 2022 while facing new uncertainties”. <https://www.unwto.org/news/tourism-enjoys-strong-start-to-2022-while-facing-new-uncertainties>

²¹ Lenzen, M. et al. (2018), “The carbon footprint of global tourism”. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-018-0141-x>

²² Obersteiner, G. (2021), “Carbon footprint reduction potential of waste management strategies in tourism”. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211464521000075#:~:text=In%20an%20extensive%20review%20in,et%20al.%2C%202016>

²³ Economist Impact analysis based on World Bank data accessed from: <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/search/data-set/0039597>

²⁴ Booking.com (2021), “Booking.com’s 2021 Sustainable Travel Report Affirms Potential Watershed Moment for Industry and Consumers”. <https://globalnews.booking.com/bookingcoms-2021-sustainable-travel-report-affirms-potential-watershed-moment-for-industry-and-consumers/>

²⁵ Booking.com (2019), “Booking.com reveals key findings from its 2019 sustainable travel report”. <https://globalnews.booking.com/bookingcom-reveals-key-findings-from-its-2019-sustainable-travel-report>

change or demands for action from the industry—only 40% of respondents to the same survey, for example, say that they reuse their towels when staying in hotels.²⁶

Driven by actions—or lack thereof—on both the supply and demand sides of tourism, a 2019 report by the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and the International Transport Forum (ITF) revealed that CO₂ emissions from the industry are forecast to increase by 25% by 2030 compared with 2016 levels.²⁷ Tourism is therefore an essential industry in which to introduce environmental reforms and encourage innovation and circularity for sustainability. This is particularly important in the Middle East, where the tourism industry as a share of GDP prior to the covid-19 pandemic was at 5.1%, above the world average of 4%.²⁸ Its tourism industry is also projected to grow at an average annual rate of 7.2% to 2030, compared with a much slower global average of 1.3%.²⁹

Circularity principles provide a framework for greater sustainability in the tourism industry through an emphasis on the recycling and regeneration of resources to maximise use, and on the reduction of waste. Research by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation finds that, while reducing consumption, switching to renewables and focusing on energy efficiency can cover 55% of the emissions that need to be reduced to meet net zero targets, circularity allows the remaining 45% to be tackled.³⁰ Recent research has shown the ways in which circular economy practices contribute to several SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) targets, including SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).³¹

Against this backdrop, this report explores pathways for catalysing sustainable tourism and the circular economy in the Middle East. It addresses the following research questions:

- Why is there an urgent need for circular tourism practices, and what benefits can they bring to the environment, economy and local community?
- What are the unique challenges and opportunities in transitioning to circular tourism in the Middle East?
- What initiatives and policy instruments can countries use to enable a transformation of the tourism sector from a linear to a circular industry?
- Who are the key stakeholders in tourism and how can they play a role across different sustainability and circularity initiatives?

²⁶ Booking.com (2021), "Sustainable travel report 2021". <https://globalnews.booking.com/download/1037578/booking.comsustainabletravelreport2021.pdf>

²⁷ UNWTO (2021), "Transforming Tourism for Climate Action". <https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development/climate-action>

²⁸ UNWTO (2021), "The Economic Contribution of Tourism and the Impact of COVID-19". <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/10.18111/9789284423200>

²⁹ UNWTO (2019), "Transport-related CO₂ Emissions of the Tourism Sector". <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284416660>

³⁰ Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2021), "Completing the Picture: How the Circular Economy Tackles Climate Change". <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/completing-the-picture>

³¹ Schoreder et al. (2018), "The Relevance of Circular Economy Practices to the Sustainable Development Goals". <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jiec.12732>

In addressing these research questions, Economist Impact carried out a comprehensive review of existing literature on sustainability and the tourism industry, identifying critical knowledge gaps. The literature review uncovered global best practice in embedding sustainability and circularity principles across tourism value chains, including those that could be adopted in the Middle East. We also conducted in-depth interviews with a diverse mix of leading global and regional experts from academic, policymaking and private-sector backgrounds. These interviews offered a more granular understanding of the issues surrounding sustainability in the industry, including the unique challenges faced by the Middle East. Discussions with regional experts allowed for an examination of the appropriate policy instruments required to drive the sustainability agenda in the context of the region.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- The first section discusses the current state of play in the tourism sector, both globally and in the Middle East.
- The next section explores pathways to circular tourism in the Middle East, focusing on specific measures and the roles of key tourism stakeholders under three broad pillars: changing minds and behaviours; embedding circular tourism practices; and monitoring progress.



Key definitions

This report focuses on circular tourism practices that could be adopted in the Middle East to build a sustainable tourism industry. While the term “circular tourism” is often used interchangeably with “sustainable tourism” or “ecotourism”, each term offers a nuanced and distinct meaning.

Tourism: The UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) defines tourism as a “social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or professional purposes”.³² Tourism includes both domestic tourists visiting from the same country, and inbound tourists from other countries.

Leisure tourism: The act of travel during personal time outside of work for leisure purposes. This could include travel for different types of leisure activities including, but not limited to, visiting family and friends, cultural tourism and religious tourism.

Business tourism: The act of travel for the purpose of undertaking business activities. This could include, for example, to attend exhibitions, meetings, conferences, and others.

Sustainable tourism: Defined by the UN Environment Program and UNWTO as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”.³³

Responsible tourism: The actions taken by individuals, businesses and policymakers to create a sustainable tourism destination.

Circular tourism: A framework for creating a sustainable tourism destination through an emphasis on the recycling and regeneration of resources to maximise use, and on the reduction of waste.

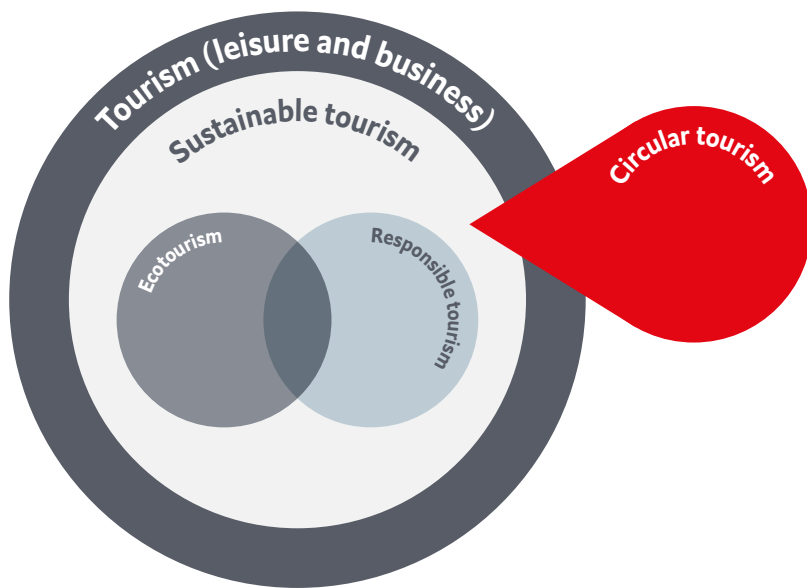
Ecotourism: Defined by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and involves interpretation and education”.³⁴ It is a subset of sustainable tourism which focuses on the preservation of natural areas.

³² UNWTO (2008), “Glossary of Tourism Terms”. <https://www.unwto.org/glossary-tourism-terms>

³³ Global Sustainable Tourism Council, “What is Sustainable Tourism?”. <https://www.gstcouncil.org/what-is-sustainable-tourism/>

³⁴ TIES (2015), “TIES Announces Ecotourism Principles Revision”. <https://ecotourism.org/news/ties-announces-ecotourism-principles-revision/>

FIGURE 2. Understanding tourism terminology



A framework for creating a sustainable tourism destination through an emphasis on the recycling, regeneration and reuse to minimize waste

Source: Economist Impact



The state of sustainable tourism

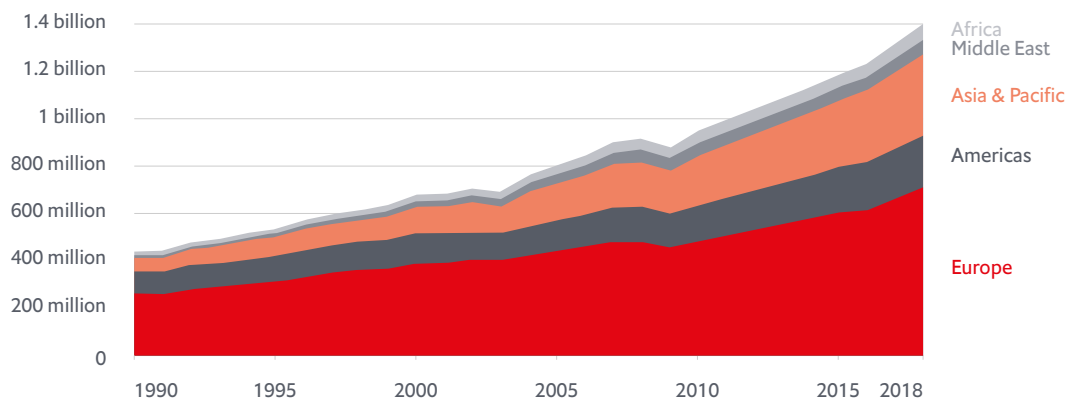
Sustainability in global tourism

In the decade leading up to 2020, the global tourism sector experienced a period of uninterrupted growth. Tourist arrivals reached 1.5 billion globally in 2019, with average year-on-year growth of 5% since 2009.³⁵ A strong global economy with an expanding middle class

allowed an increasing share of the population to travel.³⁶ More affordable options for travel, such as budget airlines, also contributed to this growth. Accounting for the direct impacts, but also the wider impacts through the vast supply chain network of the industry, travel and tourism contributed about 10% to global GDP in 2019.³⁷

FIGURE 3. International tourist arrivals

International tourist arrivals per year by region



Source: United Nations World Tourism Organization - World Tourism Barometer (2019)

OurWorldInData.org/tourism/ • CC BY

Source: UNWTO (2019)

³⁵ UNWTO (2021), "The economic contribution of tourism and the impact of covid-19". <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284423200>

³⁶ UNWTO (2021), "The economic contribution of tourism and the impact of covid-19". <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284423200>

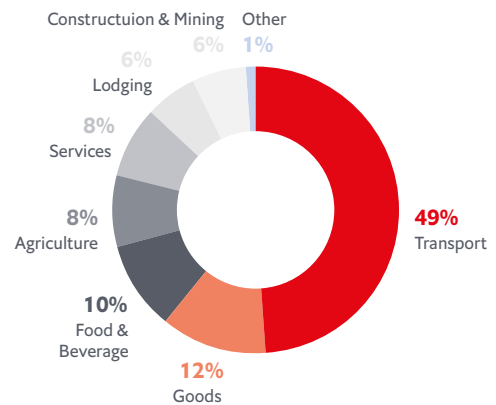
³⁷ World Travel and Tourism Council, Economic Impact Reports. <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>

However, this impressive growth in the sector was not accompanied by an expansion of measures to limit its environmental impact. In 2019, the UNWTO, in collaboration with UN Environment, conducted a study to assess the focus on sustainability in tourism policies.³⁸ The study found that while countries around the world are broadly referring to sustainability in their tourism strategies and policies, specific policy instruments to regulate consumption and production, such as taxation or voluntary programmes, are limited.³⁹ Virginia Fernández-Trapa, programme officer at the UNWTO’s Sustainable Development Department, attests to this: “UNWTO provides guidance in order to narrow the gap between strategic plans for sustainability and their implementation on the ground, which reflects still limited incentives and finance available to integrate sustainability in the tourism value chain and enhance monitoring skills.”

Perhaps as a result, the biggest sectors in tourism remain far from transitioning to a sustainable business model. The aviation sector, which contributes to global warming through emissions of CO₂ as well as other gases and pollutants into the atmosphere, lacks comprehensive or concrete plans for pollution reduction. According to a study by David Lee et al. (2020), the aviation sector is responsible for 3.5% of total global warming.⁴⁰ Given that most aircraft currently rely on hydrocarbons as their fuel source, decarbonisation is a challenge. Randy Durband, CEO of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council

(GSTC), describes aviation as “the achilles heel of tourism” when it comes to greenhouse gas emissions because of its visibility to the public, and the fact that the use of sustainable aviation fuel and other big leaps towards cleaner aviation are some years away. Airbus, one of the largest manufacturers of commercial aircraft, is aiming to build the first zero-emission aircraft using hydrogen fuel by 2035, but the technology is likely to be limited to very small aircraft due to restrictions on battery capacity.⁴¹ Transformative solutions in aviation therefore seem unlikely to materialise in the near future.

FIGURE 4. The carbon footprint of global tourism, by sub-sector



Source: Sustainable Travel International (2018)⁴²

The accommodation sector does not fare any better. According to Mr Durband, “business models continue to prioritise guest comfort far above anything else—for example allowing or

³⁸ UNWTO (2019), “Sustainability a key part of tourism policies, but more still to be done, UNWTO/UN Environment report notes”. <https://www.unwto.org/global/press-release/2019-06-04/sustainability-key-part-tourism-policies-more-still-be-done-unwtoun-environ>

³⁹ UNWTO (2019), “Sustainability a key part of tourism policies, but more still to be done, UNWTO/UN Environment report notes”. <https://www.unwto.org/global/press-release/2019-06-04/sustainability-key-part-tourism-policies-more-still-be-done-unwtoun-environ>

⁴⁰ Lee, D.S. et al., “The contribution of global aviation to anthropogenic climate forcing for 2000 to 2018”. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1352231020305689>

⁴¹ Airbus. <https://www.airbus.com/en/innovation/zero-emission/hydrogen/zeroe>

⁴² Sustainable Travel International, “Carbon Footprint of Tourism”. <https://sustainabletravel.org/issues/carbon-footprint-tourism/>



encouraging guests to leave the air conditioning turned on at all times.” This leads to an unsustainable consumption of resources. He adds that, to date, the majority of hotels do not disclose data about their sustainability practices, which makes addressing this issue more difficult.

Waste also remains a challenge in the food and beverages industry. A study of 450 hotel companies in 25 countries found that 8–20% of total food costs could be attributed to leftovers and damaged produce.⁴³ Moreover, the covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a resurgence in single-

use plastics due to health and safety concerns.⁴⁴ According to the Thailand Environment Institute, plastic waste from food packaging increased by 62% in the country, from around 2,000 tons per day in 2019 to around 3,400 tons per day in April 2020.⁴⁵

On the consumer side, most experts agree that there has been an increase in demand for sustainable tourism in recent years. A growing number of travellers, particularly millennials and Generation Z,⁴⁶ are becoming more concerned about the environmental impact of their behaviour on holiday.⁴⁷ At Travel Weekly’s Sustainability Summit in 2021, Google presented data from research conducted across the UK, US, France and Germany showing that most global travellers want to travel more sustainably, and almost 50% are willing to pay more for it.⁴⁸

However, consumer demand for sustainability has not yet grown enough to have a significant impact on the tourism industry. There also remains a gap between the desire for sustainability and actual behaviour change or demands for action from the industry—while 72% of tourists surveyed by Booking.com seek more sustainable travel choices, only 45%, for example, say they turn off the air conditioning in hotel rooms when they aren’t there.⁴⁹

⁴³ IDB Invest (2020), “Fighting Food Waste in the Tourism Sector”. <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sites/default/files/fighting-food-waste-in-the-tourism-sector.pdf>

⁴⁴ World Travel and Tourism Council (2021), “WTTC and UNEP release new report on Single-Use Plastic Products to advance sustainability in Travel and Tourism”. <https://wtcc.org/News-Article/WTTC-and-UNEP-release-new-report-on-Single-Use-Plastic-Products-to-advance-sustainability>

⁴⁵ Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (2021). “COVID-19 impact on household food and plastic waste generation in Bangkok”. <https://www.iges.or.jp/en/pub/000/en-1>

⁴⁶ Millennials and Generation Z refer, roughly speaking, to anyone born between 1981 and 2012.

⁴⁷ CE360 Alliance (2020), “Circular economy in travel and tourism”. <https://circulareconomy.europa.eu/platform/sites/default/files/circular-economy-in-travel-and-tourism.pdf>

⁴⁸ Travel Weekly (2021), “Google data shows growing consumer demand for sustainable travel”. <https://travelweekly.co.uk/news/air/google-data-shows-growing-consumer-demand-for-sustainable-travel>

⁴⁹ Booking.com (2021), “Sustainable travel report 2021”. <https://globalnews.booking.com/download/1037578/booking.com-sustainable-travel-report-2021.pdf>

In the coming years, as tourism recovers from the slump caused by the pandemic, there is an opportunity for industry players to craft strategies with sustainability and circularity in mind. The UNWTO's Ms Fernández-Trapa is optimistic about the future of the sector and believes that the pandemic has been a game-changer for tourism. "It gave people the opportunity to reflect on their behaviour," she says. Aspects such as the long-term wellbeing of people and the health of the planet are not, she believes, a roadblock to profitable operations, but they in fact go hand-in-hand against the backdrop of growing awareness of both consumers and providers of tourism services.

The Middle East context

The tourism industry in the Middle East lags behind many other regions in its transition to sustainability, evidenced by high resource consumption, vast amounts of waste generated and, perhaps most importantly, the absence of sustainability mandates for the industry. Some of the challenges facing the industry in the region are similar to those faced in other parts of the world, such as high carbon emissions from the aviation industry and the proliferation of low-cost carriers that is increasing total emissions through an increase in flights.

But the region also faces some unique challenges. On the supply side, Noha El-Bassiouny, professor at the German University in Cairo, explains that the construction and accommodation sector leaves a tremendous amount of waste in the environment. Capacity constraints in the recycling sector, which is at a nascent stage, means that widely used plastic materials are not recycled locally. On the demand side, Ms El-Bassiouny explains that levels of waste generated by individuals—from food waste to

consumables—are high and public demand for sustainability is weaker than in other parts of the world. We explore the most pressing challenges unique to the region in more detail below.



Challenges to accelerating sustainable tourism

The impediments to a circular transition, and sustainable tourism more broadly, in the Middle East start at the macro level. Governments in the region are constantly preoccupied with economic priorities considered more urgent, such as job creation and economic growth. Many Middle Eastern countries struggle with high unemployment rates, such as Jordan, which recorded an unemployment rate of 19% in 2020.⁵⁰ Muna Haddad, founder of Baraka,

⁵⁰ International Labour Organisation (2020). ILOSTAT database. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=JO>

a consulting firm specialising in sustainable tourism development in Jordan, points to the “boom and bust” nature of Middle Eastern economies which creates a short-term mindset, placing sustainability issues on the backburner in favour of more immediate action to revive the economy. As a result, Ms El-Bassiouny notes, ministries of environment are in need of more funding to develop ambitious, holistic projects that can have a significant impact on advancing the sustainability agenda. Without adequate public and private investment in sustainability, the transition to sustainability is likely to happen at a snail's pace.

Government inaction is also a result of insufficient public demand for progress towards sustainability. In many countries in the region, the idea of sustainability is seen as an issue for more privileged societies in developed economies, explains Ms Haddad. John Bevan from UAE-based dnata Travel reflects a similar view, with his travel agency not seeing significant trends in clients demanding more sustainable holidays. “Holidays are a high-value item for households which people do not want to compromise on. I would like to say that we are getting customer pressure for sustainability, but it is just not happening,” he says. As a result, there is less public pressure on governments and the industry to pursue sustainability initiatives which, in other economies, are a dominant force for change.

In the accommodation sector, Mr Durband of the GSTC points to the franchise model as one of the biggest barriers to sustainability in the region.

Many world-renowned hotel brands have robust internal sustainability targets and strategies. The Marriott, for example, is committed to sustainability through its Serve360 programme, in which it aims to meet a comprehensive list of sustainability and social impact goals.⁵¹ Similarly, the Hilton launched LightStay, a proprietary system made to measure hotels' environmental performance.⁵² Such examples indicate that it is possible to introduce sustainability initiatives even in luxury tourist accommodation. However, contracts with franchisees in the region tend to be limited to guidance on amenities as well as branding and marketing, and sustainability mandates are often absent. So, despite well-developed strategies in their home markets, hotel franchisees have so far not been required to adopt many of the brand's sustainability practices.

Energy consumption in the Middle East is also estimated to be considerably higher than in other regions—in the Gulf countries, in particular, consumption per capita is over three times higher than the global average.⁵³ Firstly, the hot climate necessitates greater use of energy for cooling. According to estimates from the International Energy Agency (IEA), cooling accounts for almost 10% of energy use in buildings in the Middle East, compared with a global average of 6%.⁵⁴ Furthermore, easy access to fuel—particularly in oil-producing countries in the region—means that some firms and individuals are more dependent on the resource and are yet to diversify and seek alternative sources of energy. Investments in large-scale

⁵¹ Serve 360 (2021), “2021 Serve 360 report Environmental, Social, and Governance Progress at Marriott International”, http://serve360.marriott.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021_Serve_360_Report.pdfhttp://serve360.marriott.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021_Serve_360_Report.pdf

⁵² Hilton (2019), “LightStay – A Decade of Managing our Environmental and Social Impact”. <https://newsroom.hilton.com/brand-communications/news/lightstay-a-decade-of-managing-our-environmental-and-social-impact>

⁵³ Economist Intelligence Unit data

⁵⁴ International Energy Agency (2018), “The Future of Cooling: Opportunities for energy-efficient air conditioning”. https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/0bb45525-277f-4c9c-8doc-9c0cb5e7d525/The_Future_of_Cooling.pdf

renewable energy projects will be needed for countries in the region to begin reducing their reliance on fossil fuels.

The case for sustainability in tourism

While some challenges may hinder the Middle East's progress towards circular tourism, overcoming these challenges could be beneficial from economic, environmental and social perspectives.

Building a more sustainable tourism industry through circularity can be part of the solution to the Middle East's wider economic challenges. Investments in sustainable tourism can help expand the sector, stir economic growth and create jobs for the local population. For example, a sustainable tourism strategy that aims to platform local destinations can create jobs for unemployed youth who are uniquely qualified to act as tour guides showcasing their local history or to host tourists in small bed-and-breakfasts. Seeing sustainability as an economic opportunity

rather than an obstacle makes it more appealing for public and private engagement.

At a time when countries are under the microscope for their environmental record, adopting sustainable practices can help countries in the Middle East progress towards their climate goals and create reputational benefits across the international community. In addition to the direct environmental benefits from more sustainable tourism practices to reduce consumption and minimise waste, sustainable tourism can act as a catalyst for broader sustainable development. The tourism industry is deeply interlinked with a range of domestic industries—achieving sustainability in tourism sectors can therefore create knock-on effects across the wider economy. Jesper Manniche, senior researcher for the Centre for Regional and Tourism Research in Denmark, advocates this view, explaining that “tourism has a real potential for acting as an eye-opener for consumers and politicians. When we travel there is an opportunity to get inspired by sustainable practices which we can then bring back into our daily lives.”



From a social perspective, circular tourism provides an opportunity to showcase the Middle East's diversity of local and cultural attractions. A key part of a circular tourism industry is the localisation of touristic experiences. Natalia Bayona, director of innovation, education and investments at the UNWTO, notes that a country should not promote tourism only within its big industrial cities, since this can lead to the overconsumption of energy and resources. Promoting smaller, local destinations can offer tourists unique and authentic experiences that also create less depletion of natural resources. This approach to tourism could be particularly rewarding for the Middle East which has been subject to conflict-driven media coverage in recent decades, creating a global perception of the region as an unsafe travel destination. Walter R. Stahel, founder and director of the

Product-Life Institute, notes that, for this reason, many potential tourists have not explored the region. It also aligns with the growing demand for eco-tourism⁵⁵ which prioritises the safety and integrity of natural ecosystems and local communities. Therefore, investing in and promoting the various local cultural assets of the Middle East is an opportunity to challenge global preconceptions and attract a new market of tourists.

While there are many challenges restricting progress towards circular tourism in the Middle East, there are even greater opportunities that the region can seize. The next section explores the different strategies that the region can explore to create a cleaner tourism sector—one which brings wealth and prosperity to the local economy.

⁵⁵ CBI Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020), "The European market potential for nature and ecotourism". <https://www.cbi.eu/market-information/tourism/nature-tourism/nature-eco-tourism/market-potential>

Pathways to circular tourism

Achieving sustainability in the Middle East's tourism sector will require shifting the model from one in which "economic capital is the only source of growth" to one in which "human capital and ecological capital play an equally important role", in the words of Ms Bayona from the UNWTO. This requires a shift towards measuring the success of tourism not only in terms of the number of people it brings and how much they spend, but also in terms of how much the industry contributes to environmental protection and enables the development of local communities.

The concept of circularity provides a framework for building a sustainable tourism industry in a way that is holistic and encompasses the entire tourism value chain and all its stakeholders. The overarching notion of circularity is the removal of waste from linear production processes by keeping products in use for as long as possible before they are disposed of or, ideally, recycled for a new purpose.⁵⁶ Nancy Bocken, professor of sustainable business at Maastricht University, describes circularity as a "shift away from value destruction by throwing away products after

a limited number of uses, to value retention through keeping products in use as long as possible, reduced [non-renewable] material and energy use in the production and [consumption] phases, regeneration of natural resources used by the business, and recycling in the end-of-life phase".

In the tourism industry, circularity can take multiple forms. Life-extension models seek to maximise product and service use⁵⁷—for example, through improving the efficiency of energy and water consumption. They also include the sharing or leasing of products and space—new business models such as Airbnb and Fairbnb have pioneered this approach in the tourism industry through sharing platforms to efficiently match supply and demand for accommodation. Value-recovery models⁵⁸ are targeted at reducing excess consumption to eliminate waste. This could include recycling products for alternative uses or donating products that are no longer being used by the industry, such as leftover food.

⁵⁶ CE360 Alliance (2020), "Circular economy in travel and tourism". <https://circulareconomy.europa.eu/platform/sites/default/files/circular-economy-in-travel-and-tourism.pdf>

⁵⁷ Circular City Funding Guide. <https://www.circularcityfundingguide.eu/circular-sector/tourism/>

⁵⁸ Circular City Funding Guide. <https://www.circularcityfundingguide.eu/circular-sector/tourism/>

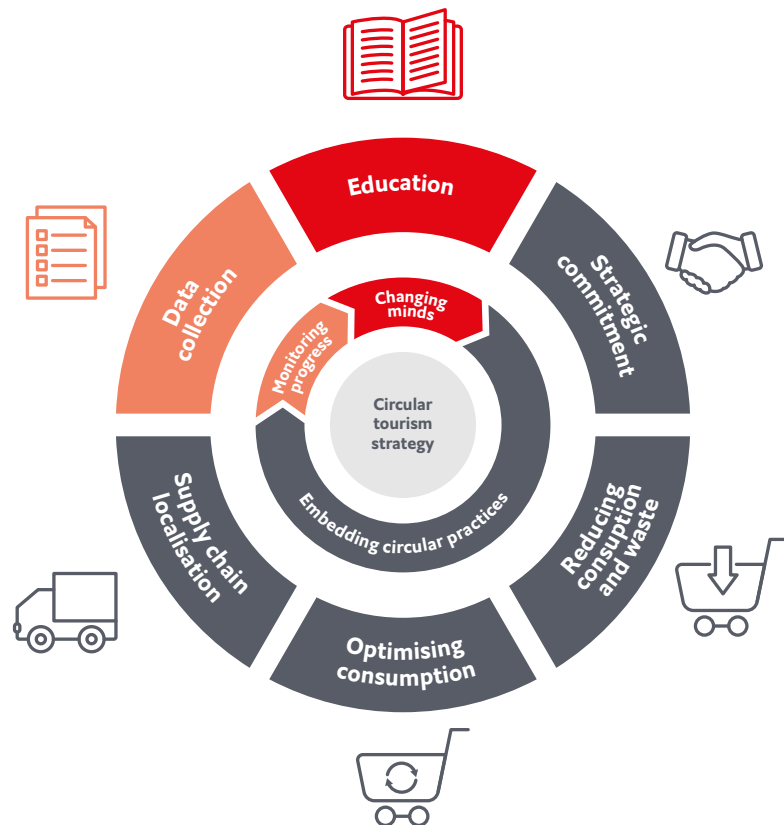
An effective strategy for circular tourism requires a three-stage approach (see Figure 5 below):

- Changing minds and behaviour: To spur action towards greater sustainability, the case for change needs to be clear. This includes incentivising industry players to adopt more sustainable practices, and building awareness of the individual responsibility of tourists in making more sustainable choices.
- Embedding circular practices: Education to change minds and behaviour needs to be complemented with tangible initiatives targeted at reducing emissions and waste and improving social and economic outcomes.

While the onus is on the tourism industry, these initiatives require collaboration across stakeholders, with support from policymakers and regulators and actions by tourists.

- Monitoring progress: Finally, an easy and effective process is needed to collect data and information to monitor and measure the impacts of sustainable policies and initiatives, and to hold stakeholders to account. The availability of data then provides a basis on which tourism supply (the industry) and demand (the tourists) can act. This helps close the loop, creating a virtuous cycle in which more data enables more action towards sustainability.

FIGURE 5. Circular tourism framework



Source: Economist Impact

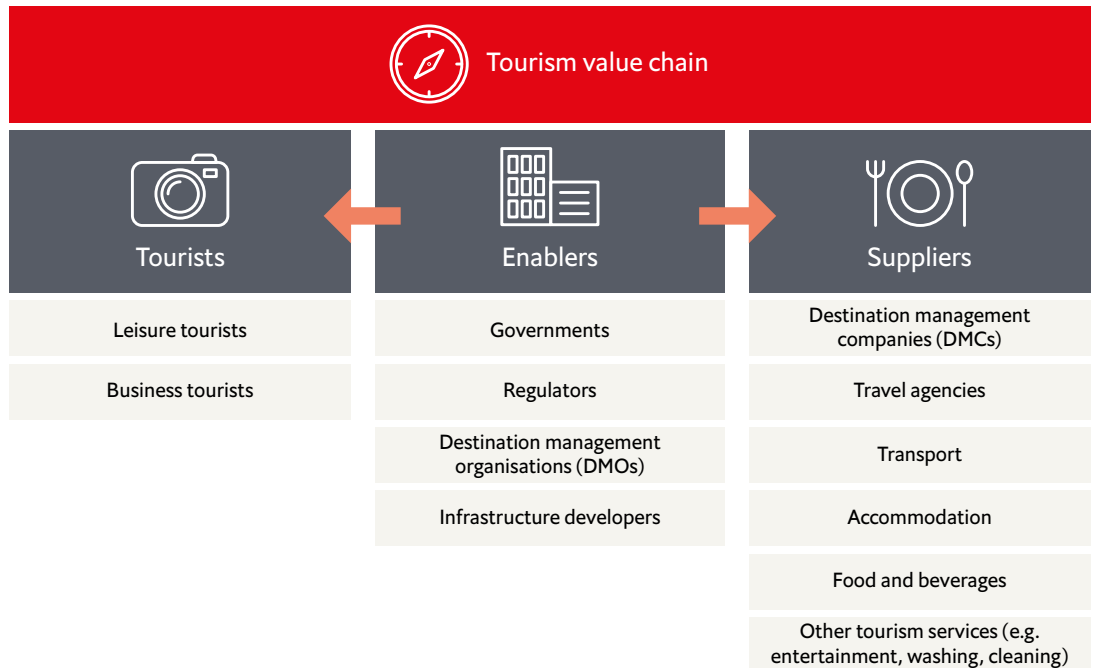
Delivering on a circular tourism strategy needs to be a collaborative effort across all stakeholders.⁵⁹ The tourism industry is vast and complex, covering a range of core sectors with close ties to other sectors through interlinked value chains. Public–private and cross-industry collaboration will allow for integrated models that place sustainability at the centre of delivering tourism services.⁶⁰ At the simplest level, the industry can be broken down into the following groups of stakeholders, each with a unique role to play in driving forward sustainability and circularity:

- **Tourists:** This includes both business and leisure travellers. It is also important to recognise the heterogeneity of tourists, which

means that sustainability strategies need to be targeted and tailored to specific groups.

- **Enablers:** This group consists of policymakers and regulators who play a key role in defining the agenda for sustainability and supporting the industry in achieving it through policies and other measures. The enablers act as intermediaries between tourists and suppliers.
- **Suppliers:** Immediate suppliers include, among others, accommodation providers, transport operators, tour operators and destination management companies. However, beyond the direct tourism industry is a much wider network of ancillary suppliers, such as food and beverages and events, which also have a role to play in the sustainability agenda.

FIGURE 6. Tourism value chain



Source: Economist Impact

⁵⁹ Girard, L.F. and Nocca, F. (2017), "From linear to circular tourism 1". https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321878501_From_linear_to_circular_tourism_1

⁶⁰ UNWTO (2020), "Circular economy in travel and tourism – A conceptual framework for a sustainable, resilient and future proof industry transition". <https://www.unwto.org/Covid-19-oneplanet-responsible-recovery-initiatives/circular-economy-in-travel-and-tourism-a-conceptual-framework-for-a-sustainable-resilient-and-future-proof-industry-transition>

Changing minds and behaviours

Education

Education plays a primary role in raising awareness around the issues of sustainability in tourism, clarifying misperceptions and stimulating action on both the demand and supply sides.

“Consumers vote with their money on what stays and what doesn’t. Unless there is demand for sustainability, the supply side will not change.”

Muna Haddad, founder, Baraka

On the supply side, experts interviewed state that a key barrier preventing tourism suppliers from pushing ahead with sustainable initiatives is the view that sustainability is at odds with service quality and the customer experience. A global study by the Sustainable Hospitality Alliance found that the hotel industry would need to reduce its emissions by 66% per room by 2030, and 90% per room by 2050, to meet global net-zero targets.⁶¹ Reducing energy consumption plays a key role in this, but hoteliers worry that this could be detrimental to guests’ comfort. Contrary to this perception, a survey of 120,000

hotel guests across the US revealed that the implementation of green initiatives does not diminish their satisfaction.⁶²

Tourists on the demand side of the equation play an important role in shifting these perceptions of suppliers. “Consumers vote with their money on what stays and what doesn’t,” according to Ms Haddad of Baraka. “Unless there is demand for sustainability, the supply side will not change.” But, in order for tourists to make more sustainable choices, they need to be educated about the need for sustainability. A 2019 survey conducted by Booking.com suggested a shift in global tourist behaviour—almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents expressed an intention to stay in eco-friendly accommodation rather than traditional hotels, compared with 62% in 2018.⁶³

However, the same survey reveals that the cost implications of more sustainable travel remain a key barrier for almost 40% of travellers.⁶⁴ Higher costs for more sustainable travel could price some tourists out of the market. Mr Manniche, from the Centre for Regional and Tourism Research, also notes that “many suppliers are unsure of whether tourists would pay the additional costs”, making them reluctant to implement sustainable initiatives.

⁶¹ Sustainable Hospitality Alliance (2017), “Global Hotel Decarbonisation Report”. <https://sustainablehospitalityalliance.org/resource/global-hotel-decarbonisation-report/#:~:text=The%20report%20shows%20that%20hotels,corresponding%20increase%20in%20carbon%20emissions>

⁶² Circular City Funding Guide. <https://www.circularcityfundingguide.eu/circular-sector/tourism/>









⁶³ Booking.com (2019), “Booking.com reveals key findings from its 2019 sustainable travel report”. <https://globalnews.booking.com/bookingcom-reveals-key-findings-from-its-2019-sustainable-travel-report>

⁶⁴ Booking.com (2018), “Where Sustainable Travel is Headed in 2018”. <https://globalnews.booking.com/where-sustainable-travel-is-headed-in-2018/>

Education on costs and benefits would help to bridge the gap between the perceptions of tourists and tourism suppliers and encourage simultaneous shifts in both. “You can be a conscious tourist, but if there are no options for sustainability on the supply side, you cannot make a change,” notes Ms Bayona from the

UNWTO. “Similarly, as a tourism provider you can have a lot of sustainable initiatives, but if tourists are not conscious then they won’t have the intended impact.” She adds that governments play a role in “creating an education plan supported by policies with incentives that drive real action”.

The role of tourism stakeholders in education:

 Policy makers	 Travel agencies	 Tourism suppliers	 Tourists
			
<p>Policy makers play a role in educating both tourists and the sector about the need for greater sustainability and establishing policies to support them in changing behaviour.</p>	<p>As the intermediaries between tourists and suppliers, travel agencies can act as the voice of tourists, relaying shifts in demand and consumption patterns to the industry.</p>	<p>Tourism suppliers can help clearly communicate the benefits of their sustainability initiatives to their guests to encourage tourists to be more sustainable.</p>	<p>Tourists can demand more information on sustainable practices from tourism suppliers, demonstrating demand for more sustainable practices to encourage a shift on the supply side.</p>

Key:  Intensity of stakeholder role

Education: Driving behavioural change

Sustainable Sydney 2030 is an initiative launched by the City of Sydney to achieve its vision of having a green, global and connected city by the end of the decade. It is a prime example of the use of education and capacity building to drive sustainable behaviour.

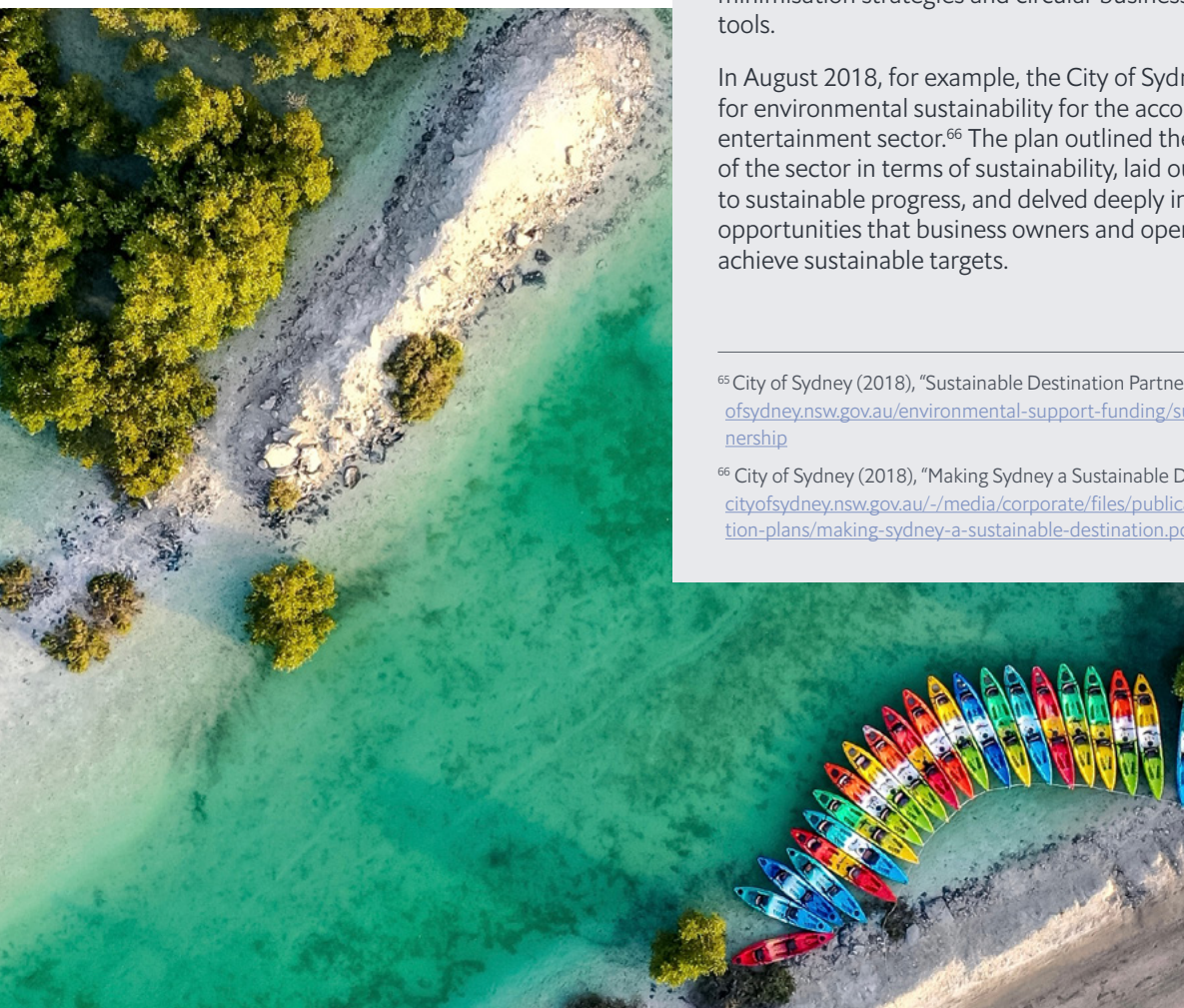
As part of this initiative, the local government engages and creates partnerships with businesses in the local area to make the case for sustainable business models and to support their progress towards them.⁶⁵

The government develops comprehensive plans to identify the best courses of action for different industries on the path to sustainability. These include resource-efficiency methods, waste-minimisation strategies and circular business models, among other tools.

In August 2018, for example, the City of Sydney released a plan for environmental sustainability for the accommodation and entertainment sector.⁶⁶ The plan outlined the current state of the sector in terms of sustainability, laid out the challenges to sustainable progress, and delved deeply into the different opportunities that business owners and operators can leverage to achieve sustainable targets.

⁶⁵ City of Sydney (2018), "Sustainable Destination Partnership". <https://www.city-ofsydney.nsw.gov.au/environmental-support-funding/sustainable-destination-partnership>

⁶⁶ City of Sydney (2018), "Making Sydney a Sustainable Destination". <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/-/media/corporate/files/publications/strategies-action-plans/making-sydney-a-sustainable-destination.pdf?download=true>



Embedding circular tourism practices

Strategic commitment

Establishing strategic commitment to sustainable tourism—on the part of both policymakers and the industry—is a crucial first step towards achieving sustainability by providing guidance and direction, and setting the targets to be achieved.

From a policy perspective, countries are beginning to refer to sustainability in their tourism strategies, but the identification of specific instruments such as regulations and incentives to drive sustainable action is limited.⁶⁷ Establishing strategic commitment by setting targets and adopting policy tools creates a clear signal to the industry of the direction of travel.

Policy-level strategic commitment to sustainable tourism also enables investment to be allocated to achieving sustainability targets. Infrastructure development, for example, plays an important role in enabling circular tourism models to take shape. This includes the provision of facilities for recycling and waste management. There is significant potential for the Middle East to expand its recycling infrastructure as a key enabler of circularity—a recent study estimates a market opportunity in the recycling industry worth US\$6 billion per year across the Gulf countries, with the potential to create 50,000 new jobs.⁶⁸











National-level strategies can then cascade down to the industry level where businesses across the industry must establish their own plans and targets for sustainability. These targets need to be accompanied by processes for measurement and monitoring in order to create accountability. As with policy-level strategies, establishing commitment at the business level also allows for funding to be earmarked to drive sustainability initiatives on the ground.

⁶⁷ UNWTO (2019), "Sustainability a key part of tourism policies, but more still to be done, UNWTO/UN Environment report notes". <https://www.unwto.org/global/press-release/2019-06-04/sustainability-key-part-tourism-policies-more-still-be-done-unwto-un-environ>

⁶⁸ Strategy& (2020), "The \$6 billion GCC recycling opportunity". <https://www.strategyand.pwc.com/m1/en/articles/2020/the-six-dollar-billion-gcc-recycling-opportunity.html>



The role of tourism stakeholders in establishing strategic commitment:

 Policymakers	 Tourism suppliers	 Tourists	 Travel agents
			
<p>Policymakers play a leading role in setting tourism strategies with sustainability at their core, establishing targets to be met by the industry, and providing investment to develop supporting infrastructure.</p>	<p>Tourism suppliers play an equally important role in translating national-level policies to their specific businesses to drive forward the sustainability agenda on the ground.</p>	<p>Tourists can play a role in vocalising their demand for sustainable tourism options to create the pressure for strategic commitment at the policy and industry levels.</p>	<p>Travel agents can play an indirect role in pushing for more sustainable tourism options, driven by growing tourist demand.</p>

Key:  Intensity of stakeholder role

Costa Rica: A model for sustainable tourism

Costa Rica offers a best-in-class framework for sustainable tourism. The Latin American country is widely recognised among experts interviewed for this research as having one of the most effective and sustainable tourism industries in the world.

At the heart of the industry's success is the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) which is the government body responsible for promoting sustainable tourism. The work of this government agency stands out for its cross-sectoral approach to tourism. It is organised into numerous departments that take responsibility for different aspects of the planning and development of the industry.⁶⁹

As an example of the ICT's departmental efforts, the Tourism Development Department aims to create local capacity in the tourism sector across different parts of the country.⁷⁰ It encourages the development of small- and medium-sized enterprises and the participation of local communities in tourism around the country, and helps promote their activities. The Department's Crafts with Identity programme, launched in 2011, for example, supports local artisans in developing and commercialising their crafts. This form of investment in the local community enables the development of a more circular tourism industry which relies on promoting existing assets and maximising the use of local resources.

⁶⁹ Costa Rica Tourism Board (ICT). <https://www.ict.go.cr/en/>

⁷⁰ Costa Rica Tourism Board (ICT), Tourism Development Department. <https://www.ict.go.cr/en/our-work/tourism-development.html#ii-crafts-with-identity-program>

Reducing consumption and waste

While the willingness to make tourism more sustainable is apparent in most policy-level and business strategies, the implementation of initiatives is far less widespread. One group of initiatives that needs wider implementation relates to the reduction of excess consumption across the industry to minimise waste.

Transport is one of the biggest contributors to emissions from the industry, accounting for 5% of all man-made CO₂ emissions.⁷¹ So before tourists even arrive at a destination, they have already created a substantial carbon footprint.⁷² Emissions from transport are additive—that is, they are additional emissions created by the act of tourism. By comparison, emissions from other parts of the tourism industry, such as accommodation, largely replace emissions that would otherwise have been generated at home.

Tourists can help reduce consumption by travelling less frequently, spending more time in one location, or even travelling over shorter distances.⁷³ This, however, requires tourists to actively consider the impact of their travel decisions and make choices that are more sustainable—and this stems from strong awareness of the issues.

Beyond transport, there are other tangible tactics to reduce consumption in other parts of the tourism industry. The use of single-use plastics is particularly rampant across the Middle East.⁷⁴ A reduction in single-use plastics and increased use of recycled plastic by accommodation

⁷¹ UNWTO (2019), "Tourism's carbon emissions measured in landmark report launched at COP25". <https://www.unwto.org/news/tourisms-carbon-emissions-measured-in-landmark-report-launched-at-cop25>

⁷² Manniche, J. et al. (2017), "Destination: A circular tourism economy. A handbook for transitioning toward a circular economy within the tourism and hospitality sectors in the South Baltic Region" https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320739252_Destination_A_circular_tourism_economy_A_handbook_for_transitioning_toward_a_circular_economy_within_the_tourism_and_hospitality_sectors_in_the_South_Baltic_Region.

⁷³ Manniche, J. et al. (2017), "Destination: A circular tourism economy. A handbook for transitioning toward a circular economy within the tourism and hospitality sectors in the South Baltic Region". https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320739252_Destination_A_circular_tourism_economy_A_handbook_for_transitioning_toward_a_circular_economy_within_the_tourism_and_hospitality_sectors_in_the_South_Baltic_Region.

⁷⁴ Zafar, S. (2020), "Recycling of Plastics". <https://www.ecomena.org/tag/plastic-wastes-in-middle-east/>

providers, food and beverages companies and tourists themselves could help to address this issue. Some parts of the region are moving in this direction—the UAE, for example, expects to ban the use of single-use plastics by the end of 2022.⁷⁵ Hotel group, Rotana, has also announced plans to eliminate single-use plastic toiletries across its Middle East operations.⁷⁶

Circular value-recovery models can also enable the tourism industry to reduce or eliminate waste. For example, restaurants can donate their leftover food to organisations that provide food to those in need. Food waste is a particular challenge in the Middle East—the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that at least one-third of all food is wasted in the region.⁷⁷ This is exacerbated by the Middle East’s buffet culture which typically results in less than half of the food served being eaten.⁷⁸

There are many innovative circular initiatives that have been implemented around the world which could be adopted in the Middle East. In 2018, Milan established a local “food waste hub” located in a municipality warehouse for the redistribution of food from street markets,

grocery stores and private canteens. The city authorities also introduced a 20% municipal tax reduction for any organisation that donates food to food charities.⁷⁹ Reverse logistics is also gaining traction, particularly in the food industry, as an approach to reducing waste by reusing materials and packaging.⁸⁰ It is important for all businesses to design their own bespoke waste management strategies that identify the most waste-generating practices in their business based on data, and develop policies to reduce or eliminate them.

Digital technology is a key enabler of waste reduction across the tourism industry. Hotels, for example, are using smart meters to measure and manage their energy consumption. In collaboration with Schneider Electric, Marriott International has achieved 10–15% energy savings using these technologies.⁸¹ Restaurants are also using smart technology to reduce food waste. InterContinental Hotel Group uses technology from Winnow that analyses the amount of ingredients used in restaurants and left on plates returned to the kitchen, identifying food wastage patterns to help shape menus.⁸²

⁷⁵ The National (2022), “Dubai to introduce charge for single-use plastic bags from July 1”. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/government/2022/02/07/dubai-to-introduce-charge-for-single-use-plastic-bags-from-july-1/>

⁷⁶ Rotana (2022), “Rotana eliminates single-use plastic toiletries across all hotels”. <https://www.rotana.com/newsarticle/2718>

⁷⁷ Arab News (2021), “Food waste strategies vital to Middle East’s sustainability”. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1849956>

⁷⁸ The National (2017), “UAE hotels scale back on buffets in bid to reduce food waste”. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/uae-hotels-scale-back-on-buffets-in-bid-to-reduce-food-waste-1.39243>









⁷⁹ Ellen Macarthur Foundation (2019). “Collaborating to change local food systems: Milan”. <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/circular-examples/collaborating-to-change-local-food-systems>

⁸⁰ iGPS, “Reverse logistics in the food industry: How to make reuse easy”. <https://igps.net/blog/2019/04/04/reverse-logistics-in-the-food-industry-how-to-make-reuse-easy/>

⁸¹ Schneider Electric, “Marriott International Customer story”. <https://www.se.com/uk/en/work/campaign/life-is-on/case-study/marriott-hotel-china.jsp>

⁸² Hospitality Technology (2019), “AI Technology Helps IHG Hotels Track, Measure and Reduce Food Waste”. <https://hospitality-tech.com/ai-technology-helps-ihg-hotels-track-measure-and-reduce-food-waste>

The role of tourism stakeholders in reducing consumption and waste:

 Tourism suppliers	 Tourists	 Policymakers	 Travel agents
			
<p>The tourism supply chain—including sectors such as transport, accommodation and food and beverages—plays a key role in transforming its business models to reduce resource consumption and enable more sustainable alternatives or circular models of business</p>	<p>Tourists can plan holidays with sustainability in mind, reduce overall resource consumption and ensure proper disposal of waste in the move towards more sustainable consumption habits.</p>	<p>Policymakers play a supportive role in reducing tourism consumption by setting targets for the industry, planning and developing supporting infrastructure, and introducing complementary policies such as bans on single-use plastics and incentives for recycling and waste minimisation.</p>	<p>Travel agents can play an indirect role in advising tourists on how they can plan their holidays so that they are more sustainable.</p>

Key:  Intensity of stakeholder role



Reducing plastic consumption in hotels

According to estimates, each month a single 200-room four-star hotel uses on average 20,000 plastic water bottles, almost 50,000 plastic amenities and over 200,000 pieces of plastic for food and beverages operations.⁸³ Hotels across the globe are using innovative models and new technologies to reduce the consumption of plastics on their premises. For example:

- Hilton has removed all plastic straws from its operations, switched from plastic cards to digital cards, and removed all plastic water bottles from meetings and events.⁸⁴
- Marriott has rolled out a global initiative to eliminate its use of single-use plastics. This initiative includes replacing single-use toiletry bottles with refillable pump-topped bottles.⁸⁵
- The Taj Group of hotels is phasing out single-use plastics, starting with replacing plastic utensils with wooden or paper-based alternatives. At its property on Havelock Island in the Andamans, it has also developed an on-site bottling plant which eliminates the need for plastic bottles.⁸⁶
- Mandarin Oriental is replacing single-use plastic water bottles with either glass or aluminium across its operational areas, and over one-third of its hotels rely on onsite water-filling practices for their bottles.⁸⁷

Initiatives at the hotel level are also being supported by bans on single-use plastics at the national or sub-national level. A 2018 report by the UN Environment Programme found that 127 of 192 countries reviewed had adopted some form of legislation to regulate the use of plastics.⁸⁸

⁸³ Eco-Business (2019), "Going plastic-free: How hotels are joining the anti-plastic fight". <https://www.eco-business.com/news/going-plastic-free-how-hotels-are-joining-the-anti-plastic-fight/>

⁸⁴ Eco-Business (2019), "Going plastic-free: How hotels are joining the anti-plastic fight". <https://www.eco-business.com/news/going-plastic-free-how-hotels-are-joining-the-anti-plastic-fight/>

⁸⁵ Marriott International (2019), "Marriott International to Eliminate Single-Use Shower Toiletry Bottles from Properties Worldwide, Expanding Successful 2018 Initiative". <https://news.marriott.com/news/2019/08/28/marriott-international-to-eliminate-single-use-shower-toiletry-bottles-from-properties-worldwide-expanding-successful-2018-initiative>

⁸⁶ Signe Magazine (2018), "A plastic-free paradise in the Andamans by the Taj Group". <https://signemagazine.com/lifestyle/hotelspa/a-plastic-free-paradise-in-the-andamans-by-the-taj-group/>

⁸⁷ Mandarin Oriental (2020), "Sustainability Report 2020". <https://photos.mandarinoriental.com/is/content/Mandarin-Oriental/mandarin-oriental-sustainability-report-2020-2>

⁸⁸ United Nations Environment Programme (2018), "Legal limits on single-use plastics and microplastics". <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/legal-limits-single-use-plastics-and-microplastics>

Managing food waste: Mutual benefits for businesses, consumers and the environment

Too Good to Go is a free online app available in Europe and the US that allows people to search for unsold food in nearby restaurants and shops. The food items on the app are available at highly discounted prices to encourage users to purchase them before the restaurant or shop closes for the day and disposes of the food.

According to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), approximately 2.5 billion tonnes of food are wasted globally every year.⁸⁹ This means that over 40% of the food that is produced annually for human consumption is either lost or wasted.

Too Good to Go relies on a circular business model that helps create progress against these alarming rates by preventing surplus food from being wasted. It offers a net benefit to both the private sector and to consumers. Businesses can make money out of the food that would otherwise be disposed of and consumers can access food at more affordable prices.

According to Zero Waste Europe, Too Good to Go saved 29 million meals and avoided over 72,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions.⁹⁰

Restaurants, hotels, venues and other tourism businesses can all develop similar circular practices to avoid or minimise their food waste, while managing any potential risks related to health and safety from expired food.

⁸⁹ WWF (2021), "Driven to Waste: Global Food Loss on Farms". https://www.panda.org/discover/our_focus/food_practice/food_loss_and_waste/driven_to_waste_global_food_loss_on_farms/

⁹⁰ Zero Waste Europe (2020), "The story of: Too Good To Go". https://zerowasteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/zero_waste_europe_CS7_CP_Too-GoodToGo_en.pdf

Optimising consumption

Reducing consumption is one way to directly reduce emissions from tourism by cutting out the activity, and hence the emissions, altogether. But Ms Fernández-Trapa at the UNWTO cautions that "cutting on travel is not the solution for sustainability in tourism but only a shallow headline which misses the point altogether, since it would severely harm other SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). We need to travel more responsibly and embrace solutions that allow accelerating the transition to a low-carbon tourism model to achieve net zero in time."

Tourism is a valuable economic activity, and provides significant opportunities to stabilise the economies of the Middle East. Instead of reducing tourism consumption entirely, a complementary approach is to adopt more efficient options when it comes to the use of energy, water and other scarce resources. For example, switching to modes of transport that are less energy-intensive where possible, such as trains or cars instead of air travel, is a potential option which allows tourists to continue to travel but in a more sustainable way.⁹¹

Globally, the accommodation sector has also been moving towards increasing efficiency, adopting several practices that could be replicated in the Middle East. Hotels are optimising their operations and improving their efficiency across three core areas: heating and air conditioning; water use; and lighting.⁹² Initiatives range from simple measures reminding customers to switch off lights and water when not in use, to sophisticated energy management systems that monitor energy use and adjust









⁹¹ Manniche, J. et al. (2017), "Destination: A circular tourism economy. A handbook for transitioning toward a circular economy within the tourism and hospitality sectors in the South Baltic Region". https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320739252_Destination_A_circular_tourism_economy_A_handbook_for_transitioning_toward_a_circular_economy_within_the_tourism_and_hospitality_sectors_in_the_South_Baltic_Region

⁹² Shipley Energy, "Tips for Hotel Energy Management: How to Create a Green Machine". <https://www.shipleyenergy.com/resources/commercial/energy-efficiency-for-hotels#:~:text=Generally%2C%20if%20a%20facility%20reduces,energy%20usage%20and%20improve%20efficiency.>

consumption accordingly.⁹³ Developing concrete policies in this context can be particularly effective, and within the region, some countries are taking this approach. Dubai Sustainable Tourism, for example, has set sustainability

requirements for hotels to comply with that measure and monitor indicators related to waste management, water consumption, energy use and other factors.⁹⁴

The role of tourism stakeholders in optimising consumption:

 Tourism suppliers	 Tourists	 Policymakers	 Travel agents
			
<p>Tourism providers such as transport, accommodation and food and beverages have an important role in embedding practices that monitor and reduce energy consumption.</p>	<p>Changes in the mindset of tourists towards greater sustainability will allow them to change their behaviour and embrace more efficient practices (for example, switching off lights when they leave their hotel rooms and minimising water consumption).</p>	<p>Policymakers play a supportive role in reducing tourism consumption by setting the strategy for the industry and introducing complementary policies such as requirements and targets for energy efficiency.</p>	<p>Travel agents can play an indirect role in advising tourists on the most efficient options for their travel. This can be enabled through eco-labelling of tourism products and sharing sustainability data with customers, which travel agents can facilitate.</p>

Key:  Intensity of stakeholder role

⁹³ Shipley Energy, "Tips for Hotel Energy Management: How to Create a Green Machine". <https://www.shipleyenergy.com/resources/commercial/energy-efficiency-for-hotels#:~:text=Generally%2C%20if%20a%20facility%20reduces,energy%20usage%20and%20improve%20efficiency.>

⁹⁴ Baker McKenzie (2022), "Middle East: How hotels can keep on top of ESG issues". https://insightplus.bakermckenzie.com/bm/real-estate_1/middle-east-how-hotels-can-keep-on-top-of-esg-issues/

Innovation in energy use

Players across the tourism value chain are exploring sustainable solutions to improve the efficiency of their energy use.

In the accommodation sector, Crowne Plaza in Copenhagen stands out as a best-practice example, and was awarded the Green Key eco-tourism award in 2010.⁹⁵ The hotel is built on an underground water-based climate system which is used for both heating and cooling. It uses a climate control automation system to control room temperatures based on capacity and usage. Through this system, the hotel uses 65% less energy than an average hotel of similar size. All other electricity requirements across the property are met predominantly by renewable energy sources such as wind and solar energy generated by solar panels covering the hotel's facade.⁹⁶

On the transport side, innovations have centred around the use of sustainable aviation fuels (SAF), moving away from highly polluting fossil fuels. Many challenges remain in commercialising the use of SAF, particularly related to the cost, which is at least double that of traditional fuels.⁹⁷ However, some air carriers are making progress in sustainable travel. KLM, for example, has started to add 0.5% SAF for its flights departing from Amsterdam, with options for travellers to purchase additional SAF when making bookings.⁹⁸ Beyond the use of SAF, KLM has been exploring changes to the design of its aircraft, making them more aerodynamic to reduce fuel consumption by almost 20%.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Green Key (2016), "Crowne Plaza Copenhagen Towers, an award winning hotel focusing on sustainability". <https://www.greenkey.global/stories-news-1/2016/8/25/crowne-plaza-copenhagen-towers-an-award-winning-hotel-focusing-on-sustainability>

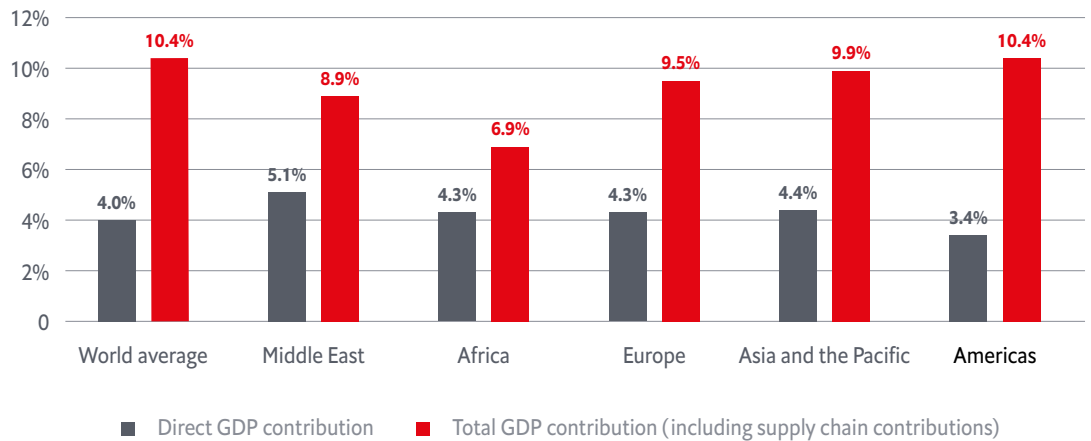
⁹⁶ Manniche, J. et al. (2017), "Destination: A circular tourism economy. A handbook for transitioning toward a circular economy within the tourism and hospitality sectors in the South Baltic Region". https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320739252_Destination_A_circular_tourism_economy_A_handbook_for_transitioning_toward_a_circular_economy_within_the_tourism_and_hospitality_sectors_in_the_South_Baltic_Region

⁹⁷ CNBC (2022), "Sustainable aviation fuel costs more but consumers will be willing to pay, IATA chief says". <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/11/sustainable-aviation-fuel-costs-more-but-consumers-willing-to-pay-iata.html>

⁹⁸ KLM (2022), "KLM further expands approach for Sustainable Aviation Fuel". <https://news.klm.com/klm-further-expands-approach-for-sustainable-aviation-fuel/>

⁹⁹ Lombard Odier (2020), "Up in the Air...?: The challenge of sustainable aviation". <https://www.lombardodier.com/contents/corporate-news/responsible-capital/2020/november/up-in-the-air-the-challenge-of-s.html>

FIGURE 7. Economic contribution of tourism



Source: World Travel and Tourism Council¹⁰⁰; UNWTO¹⁰¹

Supply chain localisation

Localising supply chains can help make tourism more sustainable while also enhancing benefits to local communities. Interestingly in the Middle East, the core tourism sector—including accommodation and transport—contributes a

higher share to the region’s GDP than in other parts of the world (5.1% compared with a global average of 4%).¹⁰² However, when accounting for the entire supply chain—for example, the sourcing of food—the total economic contribution of the industry drops (8.9% compared with a global average of 10.4%).¹⁰³ This suggests a global, rather than a local, approach to supply chain management, resulting in lost economic benefits from tourism.

From an environmental perspective, the localisation of supply chains minimises the reliance on imported goods to deliver tourism services. By sourcing products locally, the distance travelled between production and consumption is significantly reduced, minimising carbon emissions from the transportation process. For example, onsite vegetable gardens offer an innovative approach to food sustainability in hotels—AccorHotels has developed over 1,200 urban gardens across its properties to grow its own produce that is then used in its restaurants.¹⁰⁴ Green procurement policies can also play an important role here,

The success of supply chain localisation lies in “a combination of regulation of imports and development of the local industry”.

Darrell O’Neill, director of food and beverage, Mandarin Oriental Qatar

higher share to the region’s GDP than in other parts of the world (5.1% compared with a global average of 4%).¹⁰² However, when accounting

¹⁰⁰ World Travel and Tourism Council, Economic Impact Reports. <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>

¹⁰¹ UNWTO (2021), “The economic contribution of tourism and the impact of covid-19”. <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/epdf/10.18111/9789284423200>

¹⁰² UNWTO (2021), “The economic contribution of tourism and the impact of covid-19”. <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/epdf/10.18111/9789284423200>

¹⁰³ World Travel and Tourism Council, Economic Impact Reports. <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>

¹⁰⁴ Accor Group. <https://group.accor.com/en/commitment/planet-21/food>



setting standards for the products and services that businesses purchase from their suppliers to minimise their environmental impact.¹⁰⁵

The challenge arises when local alternatives are not available. Darrell O'Neill, director of food and beverage at the Mandarin Oriental Doha, reflected on challenges faced in switching from single-use plastics, given the limited availability of suitable alternative materials in the region. "It took me two years to source local suppliers for alternatives [to plastic], and many were not able to provide certification to validate the emissions generated from their production. Instead, I have to source alternatives from Asia which increases our carbon footprint and is 20—30% more expensive," he says.

Regulation can play an important role in setting standards for products used in the industry

and how they are acquired. Mr O'Neill points to regulations promoting the use of local dairy brands, such as Baladna, over imported brands in the food and beverages industry. He adds that the solution lies in "a combination of regulation of imports and development of the local industry".

In addition to the direct environmental benefits, localising tourism provides substantial opportunity for developing local communities. Ms El-Bassiouny from the German University of Cairo notes that "tourism is a means to export culture, every tourist destination tells a story." Many tourists travel in search of these stories and to learn about new cultures; tourism suppliers can leverage this. The Middle East benefits from its unique cultural offering: the Islamic tourism industry, for example, was valued at US\$189 billion in 2018, and is expected to grow to \$274 billion by 2024.¹⁰⁶ Localising supply chains to provide more authentic cultural experiences for tourists both enhances the value proposition and delivers opportunities for employment across local communities.

Incentivising longer and less frequent stays by tourists can be an effective way of localising the industry. Longer stays allow the emissions created from travelling to a destination to be spread over a longer period of time, reducing the average emissions from the trip.¹⁰⁷ Randy Durband of the GSTC explains that, in addition, "tourists who stay longer will visit the iconic tourist destinations on the first day, but will then spend their time on more local tourist activities, dispersing the wealth and revenue created by tourism."









¹⁰⁵ UK Government (2017), "Sustainable procurement policy". <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainable-procurement-policy>

¹⁰⁶ Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (2020), "International tourism in the OIC countries: Prospects and challenges". <https://sesricdiag.blob.core.windows.net/sesric-site-blob/files/article/757.pdf>

¹⁰⁷ Manniche, J. et al. (2017), "Destination: A circular tourism economy. A handbook for transitioning toward a circular economy within the tourism and hospitality sectors in the South Baltic Region". https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320739252_Destination_A_circular_tourism_economy_A_handbook_for_transitioning_toward_a_circular_economy_within_the_tourism_and_hospitality_sectors_in_the_South_Baltic_Region



The role of tourism stakeholders in supply chain localisation:

 Tourism suppliers	 Policymakers	 Travel agents	 Tourists
			
<p>The tourism industry, including sectors such as transport, accommodation and food and beverages, plays a primary role in revisiting its supply chains and localising them to support market transformation.</p>	<p>Policymakers play a supportive role in identifying and nurturing local businesses to enable the localisation of supply chains.</p>	<p>Travel agents can provide incentives and promote longer and less frequent stays for tourists, providing options for local cultural experiences in addition to more commercial tourist experiences.</p>	<p>Tourists play a role in actively choosing more localised experiences and considering longer and less frequent trips to minimise their carbon footprint.</p>

Key:  Intensity of stakeholder role

Empowering local communities

Baraka is a company based in Jordan which works through a network of local and international professionals to promote sustainable tourism. Its consulting work includes: delivering training programmes; developing destinations; building marketing strategies; and conducting environmental impact assessments.¹⁰⁸

One of Baraka's biggest projects is Baraka Destinations, a social venture that drives sustainable tourism by including and empowering local communities.¹⁰⁹ Baraka Destinations works with local owners of tourism businesses to enable them to develop their areas and villages into vibrant tourism destinations. It operates the businesses with them for a few years before handing over once they have developed the capacity to run them independently. Muna Haddad, founder of Baraka, notes that the guiding principle behind the project is to "allow local communities to lead the narrative that they are showcasing to tourists, and make sure that it is their story being heard". She adds that 70% of the money generated by the project stays within the communities, and 63% of those involved are women.

Baraka Destinations' first project was in Umm Qais in Northern Jordan, supported by a grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It worked with the local community in Umm Qais to offer tourism products and experiences that can be packaged for tourists in the village. One of the businesses that emerged in Umm Qais is Galsoum's Kitchen, which hosts guests in an ordinary family house for a local meal while sharing the culture and history of Umm Qais and telling stories about the food they are eating.¹¹⁰ This is one example of the many businesses that are developed to nurture the tourism sector in Umm Qais and that are part of the local community.

Building on this success, Baraka is now working in Pella in the Jordan Valley. It has already opened a bed-and-breakfast and is supporting the development of tourism micro-businesses in the area to drive economic growth through a localised supply chain.

¹⁰⁸ Baraka. <http://www.experiencebaraka.com/what-we-do>

¹⁰⁹ Baraka. <http://www.experiencebaraka.com/what-we-do>

¹¹⁰ Baraka, "Galsoum's Kitchen". <https://barakadestinations.com/tour-item/galsoums-kitchen/>

Monitoring progress

Collecting data and information

While embedding sustainable initiatives at the private-sector level is the starting point for a sustainable tourism industry, these initiatives also need to be monitored to measure progress and hold stakeholders to account. Collecting data and information enables this, allowing tourism stakeholders to understand the impacts of their choices and be guided towards more sustainable practices.

“You can’t talk about sustainability and driving improvements without first measuring where you stand. This is what certification allows you to do.”

Jesper Manniche, senior researcher, Centre for Regional and Tourism Research (Denmark)

Travel agencies such as dnata Travel are beginning to offer their customers alternative tourism packages with different environmental impacts. John Bevan, senior vice president at dnata Travel in the UAE, notes that the business is looking to curate packages for customers based on factors such as environmental impact, cost and experience. “I don’t think it’s our job to tell our customers to be more sustainable, but instead to offer them a choice and allow them to make their decision,” he says. He adds that, currently, “there is limited tracking of emissions across the sector which makes it difficult to provide customers with this kind of information.”

Third-party certification, governed by regulators, can provide a basis for measuring the impacts

of sustainability initiatives across the tourism industry and setting expectations. “A lot of the progress in sustainability in the food industry has come from what is written on food packaging,” Mr Bevan argues. “Similarly, holidays need to be labelled too so people have reliable information on what they are buying and make decisions accordingly.” At the same time, while a good deal of certification exists across the industry, Mr Durband of the GSTC notes that “it is extremely uneven, and the definition of ‘good’ is unclear”. The GSTC seeks to overcome this, acting as a body that sets global standards and criteria for tourism, providing external verification of the sustainability of players in the industry.

Eco-tourism certification can act as a clear indicator of the adoption of sustainability best practices by businesses in the industry. It can also provide access to data that can be communicated to consumers in order to engage them in the circular transition of the tourism industry. However, it is important to recognise the cost involved in obtaining certification, which is disproportionately borne by smaller businesses. “Certification is a better tool for large hotel chains that can pay the cost,” says Mr Manniche of the Centre for Regional and Tourism Research. Regardless, he acknowledges that the purpose of certification is not in obtaining the certificate itself, but to provide a means of measuring and documenting progress to drive internal improvements at the business level when it comes to sustainability. He notes that “you can’t talk about sustainability and driving improvements without first measuring where you stand. This is what certification allows you to do.”

Enabling data-driven sustainable choices

Travel agencies and aggregator websites, aimed at offering one-stop shops for travellers, are beginning to collate emissions data across the industry, to enable customers to make informed decisions.









- Travelyst, a non-profit organisation, offers information to help travellers be more sustainable. It is working on an industry-wide framework for a sustainable tourism model which is being piloted in the accommodation sector. Partnering with Google and Booking.com, for example, it has created a mechanism for hotels and other accommodation providers to submit their sustainability practices and certifications which are then displayed to customers.¹¹¹
- SkyScanner, an online flight aggregator platform, provides travellers with an option to search and book “greener” flights by highlighting flights with lower CO2 emissions. According to the company’s website, more than 68 million travellers have selected flights with lower emissions since 2019.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Travelyst (2021), “Accommodation: Helping Consumers Make More Sustainable Choices”. <https://www.travalyst.org/accommodation-v1/>

¹¹² Skyscanner, “Travel with a conscience”. <https://www.skyscanner.ca/environment>



The role of tourism stakeholders in data collection:

 Policymakers	 Travel agents	 Tourism suppliers	 Tourists
			
<p>Policymakers, at both the national and international levels, play a key role in establishing standardised guidance and criteria for the industry to adhere to. Third-party validation by policymakers offers a credible and reliable source of information for tourism stakeholders to respond to.</p>	<p>Travel agents can act as aggregators of data and information across the industry, holding suppliers to account and helping tourists to make informed decisions regarding their travels.</p>	<p>Tourism suppliers play a role in following the guidance established by national and international accreditation bodies and collecting data on their sustainability practices to measure and monitor progress.</p>	<p>Tourists play a role in being active consumers of data created by the industry and using it to make informed decisions that minimise the environmental impacts of their travel.</p>

Key:  Intensity of stakeholder role



Promoting sustainable tourism through mega events

The Middle East is rapidly establishing itself on a global platform as a host for large international events. With the recent conclusion of the EXPO2020 held in Dubai, and upcoming events such as the FIFA World Cup in Qatar and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Egypt, the region is becoming a major player in the events market.

The region has a geographical advantage in hosting mega events which makes it a strong contender for hosting bids. Jose Pablo Retana, sustainability senior manager for the FIFA World Cup Qatar, notes that the size of many parts of the region makes it a prime location for these events. "The fact that you have everything so close and can host an event at a large scale in a single city makes for a unique experience for visitors," he says.

Mega events can act as an accelerator for the sustainable tourism agenda in numerous ways, from educating attendees on the need for sustainable action, to showcasing best practices in sustainability. For example, the Sustainable Sourcing Code developed for the FIFA World Cup in Qatar outlines the minimum standards that are required from suppliers, licensees and sponsors in managing the environmental impact of their supply chains. The Code includes the prioritisation of Qatari and regional suppliers in supply chains and the encouragement of partnerships with local companies.¹¹³ However, the implementation of these policies and the overall environmental performance of the Qatar World Cup are yet to be conclusively assessed.

When it comes to developing sustainable pathways, mega events can act as a catalyst for change, pushing policymakers and the tourism industry to strive for greater sustainability in the run-up to the event. Mr Retana notes that winning the bid for the event has allowed the country to "accelerate technologically". He adds that "30% of buses in Qatar will become electric by the end of this year, which was not an ambition the government was striving for before the World Cup."

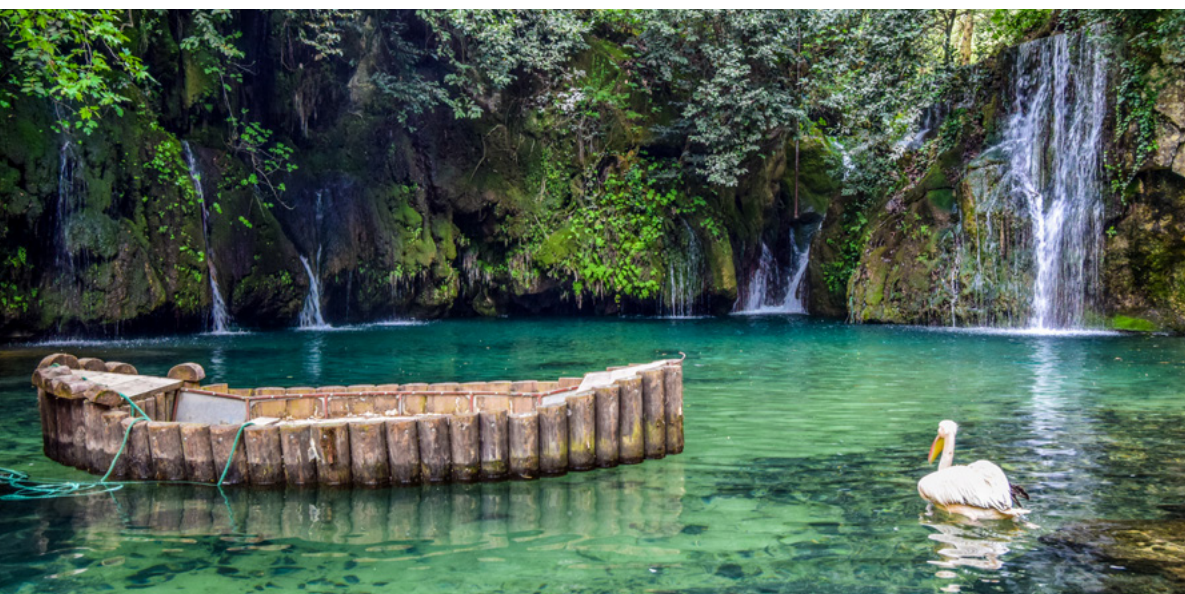
Mega events also provide broader opportunities to grow the tourism industry of the Middle East. The FIFA World Cup in Qatar "provides an opportunity for cultural exchange," remarks Gaia Pretner, sustainable procurement manager for the event. "This is the first time the World Cup is being hosted in the Middle East and it will allow visitors to see a new side of the region that they are not used to." A short term, one-off event, can therefore create an opportunity for longer-term tourism.

¹¹³ Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy (2020), "Sustainable Sourcing Code". <https://www.qatar2022.qa/sites/default/files/documents/SC-Sustainable-Sourcing-Code-EN.pdf>

Although hosting mega events and being the focus of a global audience comes with significant opportunities for host countries to develop their models for sustainable tourism, it is also important for the benefits to be retained over time. The need to develop infrastructure for mega events is a particular challenge from a circularity perspective, with the scope for substantial waste generation. The Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, which leads the organisation for the FIFA World Cup Qatar, has placed a strong emphasis on ensuring the sustainability of its event venues to address this challenge. The Al Bayt Stadium that will host the opening match, for example, is designed to be powered by solar energy for 70% of its lighting requirements. Another stadium, Stadium 974, takes an innovative approach to minimising post-event waste—it is designed in a modular structure using shipping containers that can be dismantled after the event, with different parts repurposed for other projects.¹¹⁴ As Ms Pretner from the FIFA World Cup Qatar says, “a big question is what to do with the infrastructure after the event. It’s an important sustainability consideration for any country that wants to host a mega event.”

Mega events offer a unique opportunity for Middle Eastern economies to establish themselves as a tourist destination and, importantly, as a sustainable tourist destination. However, achieving this requires a strategy, not just for hosting the event itself but for building on the benefits it brings over the longer term. In the words of David Stubbs, former head of sustainability for the London Olympics 2012, “an event is like the comma in the sentence, not the full stop.”

¹¹⁴ FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, “Sustainable Stadiums”. <https://www.qatar2022.qa/sites/default/files/documents/FIFA-World-Cup-Qatar-2022%E2%84%A2-Sustainable-Stadiums-EN.pdf>



Conclusion

As the growth of tourism in the Middle East gains pace, there is an urgent need to address the sustainability challenges prevalent in the industry. The Middle East has the benefit of being able to learn from others that have been early adopters of sustainable tourism, while also crafting novel strategies for the unique challenges in the region.

Embedding sustainability and circular economy principles at the centre of tourism strategies, along with an actionable plan to achieve targets, is imperative. For the Middle East region, this starts with educating tourists and industry players to address misperceptions surrounding sustainable tourism, particularly the impact it has on the experience and cost.

Once the demand for sustainable tourism is strengthened and the industry is prepared to offer more sustainable options, identifying new offerings which minimise the environmental impact of tourism activities forms the next part of a sustainable strategy. The tourism value chain is vast and complex, involving a range of stakeholders, all playing a role in creating a

sustainable tourism industry. The industry itself plays a role in identifying ways to minimise or eliminate waste in its processes through circular practices. Tourists play a role in approaching holiday planning with a more sustainable mindset. And policymakers play a role in developing the infrastructure and regulatory framework to support greater sustainability.

Finally, standardising and enhancing data collection will be crucial to monitor progress and to hold all stakeholders to account. Access to data allows tourists to make more sustainable choices and enables the industry to measure the impact of its sustainability initiatives.

Circular tourism offers significant opportunities for the Middle East to manage the environmental consequences of tourism while showcasing its unique and diverse local culture and addressing the region's economic challenges by creating new jobs and new channels for growth. While there are many challenges to market transformation that need to be addressed, there are even greater opportunities to seize.

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