

UNWTO and Google Host Tourism Acceleration Program in Middle East

The program is designed to boost innovation, digital transformation and planning in the tourism sector

Dubai, December 14 - The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in partnership with Google hosted their second edition of the global [Tourism Acceleration Program](#) in the MENA region, a program designed to boost innovation and digital transformation in the tourism sector in each of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt by providing key insights and market intelligence for effective tourism planning.

Held last Thursday, the online event was attended by UNWTO Member States' tourism ministers, top travel associations, tourism boards and Destination Marketing Organizations from across the region. Participants gained first-hand access to UNWTO and Google's insights of the tourism sector and developed new strategies for a more sustainable recovery.

UNWTO Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili said: "UNWTO is proud to partner with Google to bring the power of innovation and digital transformation to tourism across the Middle East region. The effective use of data can help destinations of all sizes grow their tourism sectors, while at the same time providing key insights into how tourism can be managed responsibly and inclusively, with sustainability as the driving force." Below are some of the regional travel data insights shared with participants during the session:

Top asked questions

Google Search data shows that the top questions asked about the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are related to COVID-19 travel restrictions such as "is it safe to travel to Dubai right now?", "is Mecca open for tourism?", or "is Egypt on the quarantine list?". Similarly, and on a global level, 45% of the top 100 questions related to travel also focused on the impact of COVID-19, the yearn to travel, and required safety measures.

Trends on Google Search

Since the recent announcement of the vaccine two weeks ago, queries related to air and accommodation to the UAE have picked up rapidly for the first time since the pandemic has started, compared to a slower growth in Saudi Arabia due to travel restrictions. In

terms of outbound flights, the recent research shows that 33% of UAE travelers plan on taking a vacation abroad in the next 3-6 months compared to 25% in Saudi Arabia and 20% in Egypt.

The pandemic has also shifted some travel interests towards the outdoors and nature destinations. For example, there has been an increase in online searches for eco & sustainable tourism in Saudi Arabia (90%), the UAE (35%) and Egypt (20%) as people are looking to explore natural reservations compared to a decrease in queries about cruises, luxury travel and theme parks.

Rising domestic destinations

In November, search trends on top rising destinations across the region show that people are leaning towards traveling more within their residing countries and cities including Al Gharbia (Abu Dhabi) and Umm Al Quwain in the UAE, Dhahran (Al Dammam) and Al Khobar in Saudi Arabia, Mansheya El Bakry (Cairo), and Sidi Gaber (Alexandria) in Egypt. At the same time, there has been an increase in people looking for international flights to Saudi Arabia (52%) and Egypt (80%) in the last few weeks.

Commenting on the program, Lino Cattaruzzi, Google's Managing Director in MENA, said: "Digital skills are now more critical than ever and they will be vital in helping our region recover more quickly and more sustainably. Today's acceleration program is an opportunity for tourism boards and businesses in MENA to prepare and find new ways to engage with would-be travelers. We remain optimistic about the future of the travel and tourism sector, and about the role that Google and technology can play to help it recover faster."

The Acceleration Programme is part of the close partnership between UNWTO and Google. The first edition was held virtually and hosted by South Africa last September in an effort to accelerate the power of tourism, and drive sustainable growth for millions across the world. Following editions of the program will be announced on the [UNWTO's website](#).

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