Innovation, Education and Rural Development: UNWTO Strengthens Partnership with Saudi Arabia

Madrid, Spain, 14 March 2022 – UNWTO and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have agreed on the next steps they will jointly take to establish tourism as a driver of growth, opportunity and development across the Middle East and beyond.

Less than a year after the official opening of the Regional Office for the Middle East in Riyadh, plans for a range of projects to be run out of the hub have been further advanced, signalling the ever closer cooperation between UNWTO and the Kingdom.

A range of projects is being designed to establish UNWTO’s Regional Office as a leader in tourism for rural development while also making the opportunities of tourism available to everyone through a range of education initiatives. Meeting in Madrid this week, UNWTO Secretary-General Pololikashvili and Saudi Minister for Tourism HE Ahmed Aqeel AlKhateeb agreed to further advance their shared vision and committed to working closely together to fulfil the sector’s potential across the region.

**Rural Development and digitalization**

Among the projects being managed by the Regional Office is the UNWTO Global Tourism and Rural Development Programme, aimed at making tourism a pillar of growth and opportunity for rural communities. The Programme includes the world’s Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO initiative, now in its second year after the inaugural competition drew huge interest from destinations in every global region. Alongside this, the Regional Office will also focus on knowledge creation for policy and business practices, training and skills development and Technical Assistance on the ground, with plans also in place to establish a first Tourism and Rural Development Observatory in Riyadh.

Secretary-General Pololikashvili and HE Minister Ahmed Aqeel AlKhateeb emphasised their commitment to guiding tourism based on education and innovation. From the Regional Office, UNWTO will support Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) embrace digitalization with partnerships with the largest technology companies such as Amadeus, Mastercard, Cisco, Telefónica, amongst others already established. The UNWTO Digital Futures Programme aims to provide training on connectivity, e-commerce, big data and analytics, and online payments and security, to as many as 20,000 SMEs in 22 countries, including 5,000 in the first 12 months. Later this month (25-26 March), a UNWTO Tourism Tech Adventures innovation forum will be in the United Arab Emirates.
Education

To realize the goal of creating more added-value jobs in tourism through education. To this end, a new UNWTO Knowledge Lab will be launched from Riyadh, while a first Observatory on Quality of Tourism Education and Jobs will also be established to monitor the advancement of the strategy. To ensure the benefits of tourism education are enjoyed as widely as possible, 10 new online courses will be made available in Arabic through the UNWTO Tourism Online Academy, and UNWTO will also work with higher education providers from the region through the new Tourism Faculty Development Programme.

Green investments for green transitions

In line with UNWTO’s wider commitment to advancing tourism for climate action, plans are in place to make the Regional Office for the Middle East a hub for promoting green investments in the tourism sector, both in the region and worldwide, including through projects developed in partnership with the International Finance Corporation (IFC), and other partners such as the Saudi Tourism Development Fund (TDF) – responding to the UNWTO climate action framework, outlined in the Glasgow Declaration, launched at COP26.

Related Links:

UNWTO Tourism Online Academy

Best Tourism Villages by UNWTO

UNWTO Opens Regional Office for the Middle East