

# Business Traveller

MIDDLE EAST

FEBRUARY 2024

businesstraveller.com

## SIR ROCCO FORTE

*The legendary hotelier prepares to expand his business*

## THE SUITE SPOT

*Business class products coming online in 2024 and beyond*

## A GOOD LIFE

*A visit to the historic sites on the Italian island of Sicily*

## PLUS

*Elevator Pitch • Global News • Sustainable Traveller*

# A KINGDOM'S VISION

*Saudi Arabia marches forward with grand 2030 plans*



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### UNSTOPPABLE

Here's how Saudi Arabia has set itself on a one-way path to becoming a superpower on the global stage



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**W**ith a competitor such as Riyadh in the running, Busan and Rome knew that the outcome was inevitable and would in all probability not be in their favour. Still, they went through the paces when it came to the voting process to win the bid to host World Expo 2030. As the final votes were tallied during the 173rd General Assembly of the Bureau International des Expositions in November, Riyadh secured 119 nods, while Busan and Rome gathered 29 and 17 respectively.

As the kingdom now prepares itself for Riyadh Expo 2030 – for which it is forecasting a staggering 40 million site visits – it is hurtling down a path of development, guided by its Vision 2030

programme, that is unprecedented in scale, speed and sheer ambition. From NEOM and Diriyah to Qiddiya and The Red Sea, the giga projects across Saudi Arabia will go a long way helping it open its doors wide to – by some accounts – as many as 150 million tourists by 2030. Everything from its aviation to hospitality sector is being bolstered with billions of dollars as the country marches forward – our cover story (pg18) attempts to piece together some of the major undertakings across the kingdom.

Elsewhere in this issue, we have an exclusive interview with the legendary hotelier – Sir Rocco Forte (pg26). In fact, as you read that piece, you'll notice Saudi Arabia now plays a significant part in his luxury hotel empire – the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund, recently agreed to pick up a 49 per cent stake in Rocco Forte Hotels.

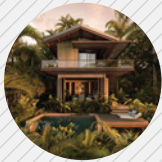
There's more on Saudi over the next few pages, including eco-lodges being built in the country, courtesy ENVI Lodges (pg32). We speak to ENVI's co-founder Nöelle Homsy as she outlines the plans for her hospitality startup whose idea was conceived during the initial days of the pandemic.

Also in this edition, read our travel piece on Sicily and the historic sites to take in, especially in Palermo (pg46). And if you happen to be travelling through an airport this month, it might be worth checking out the special duty free retail items available celebrating the Chinese New Year and the start of the Year of the Dragon (pg52).

Enjoy the issue.

Varun Godinho  
Editor

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An eco-lodging startup grows roots (Page 32)



### THE SUITE SPOT

Business class products coming soon (Page 38)



### A GOOD LIFE

The best on offer on the Italian island of Sicily (Page 46)

# Business Traveller Middle East

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# Celebrating 25 years of oneworld

**oneworld** has been helping top tier flyers  
Travel Bright for a quarter of a century

**This month marks 25 years** since the **oneworld** Alliance revolutionised the airline industry and made frequent flying better for millions of passengers.

**oneworld** was founded in 1999 by American Airlines, British Airways, Cathay Pacific and Qantas, who saw the benefit of joining forces to offer customers a wider network of destinations, improved services and seamless connectivity.

Since then, the alliance has grown to 13 airlines including Alaska Airlines, American Airlines, British Airways, Cathay Pacific, Finnair, Iberia, Japan Airlines, Malaysia Airlines, Qantas, Qatar Airways, Royal Air Maroc, Royal Jordanian and SriLankan Airlines, plus 26 affiliate airlines.

The alliance also welcomes Oman Air later this year, which will strengthen its leading position in the Middle East and add new destinations to its network, including Khasab in Oman and Chittagong in Bangladesh.



Further expanding its reach in the Pacific is the first **oneworld connect** partner, Fiji Airways. With a combined fleet of more than 2,300 aircraft serving over 900 destinations, a **oneworld** flight takes off or lands roughly every seven seconds. That equates to over 12,500 flights per day, or 4.5 million flights annually.

## GLOBAL CONNECTION

In April 2005, **oneworld** became the first global alliance to complete interline e-ticketing between all member airlines – some three years ahead of its competitors. This meant customers could fly throughout the network on a single e-ticket. Next, it launched an innovative Round The World consumer fare product. Today,



several options exist to suit budgets and travel plans, for example the **oneworld Explorer** ticket is priced on the number of continents visited, while the **Global Explorer** ticket is priced on distance travelled.

Last year, **oneworld** also launched an AI-powered online tool to simplify booking complex global itineraries on its website.

## ONEWORLD PRIORITY BENEFITS

Customers can earn and redeem miles and points interchangeably across the entire alliance network. Upon meeting certain qualification criteria, customers enrolled in frequent flyer programmes of a **oneworld** member airline will automatically be awarded with one of **oneworld's** priority tiers: Emerald, Sapphire or Ruby, and start enjoying priority benefits.

**oneworld** is the only global airline alliance that welcomes eligible top-tier customers to use First Class lounges, while premium customers and frequent flyers are invited to use over 600 airport lounges around the world.

Other special privileges and rewards for frequent flyers include

extra baggage allowances, fast track security lanes and priority boarding. (You can find out exactly what benefits you're entitled to by checking your **oneworld** tier status privileges at [oneworld.com/travel-benefits](http://oneworld.com/travel-benefits)).

For corporations whose business spans the globe, **oneworld's** corporate travel programme offers a range of benefits, such as access to discount fares on member airlines on a single agreement, plus a dedicated account representative for one-to-one service.

In 2020, **oneworld** became the first global alliance united behind a common goal of net zero carbon emissions. To reach carbon neutrality by 2050, **oneworld** airlines are reducing single-use plastics and waste, improving operational efficiencies and using sustainable aviation fuel (SAF).

**oneworld** aspires to reach 10 per cent SAF use by 2030.

**oneworld's** quest to transform the way we travel has been recognised by a host of industry awards. This includes being voted *Business Traveller's* Best Airline Alliance for 11 years in a row, the first award dedicated to airline alliances.

The 25th anniversary of **oneworld** celebrates an innovative alliance that has changed travel over the past quarter of a century, and will undoubtedly continue to do so for another 25 years.

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malaysia

QANTAS

QATAR

ROYAL JORDANIAN

ROYAL JORDANIAN

SriLankan Airlines



## Kempinski rebrands two hotels in Downtown Dubai



**AS OF 1 JANUARY, 2024**, Kempinski Hotels officially rebranded two properties in Dubai. It signed a partnership with Abu Dhabi National Hotels to reflag Address Boulevard and Address Dubai Mall which are now known as Kempinski The Boulevard Dubai and Kempinski Central Avenue Dubai respectively.

In addition to those two properties, Kempinski has two other operational hotels in Dubai – the Kempinski Hotel Mall of the Emirates and Kempinski Hotel and Residences Palm Jumeirah. When it opens in 2025, Kempinski Residences The Creek Dubai will become the first standalone Kempinski private residences in the region.



## Global business travel spending to reach US\$1.8 trillion by 2027

**GLOBAL BUSINESS TRAVEL** spending rose by 47 per cent to US\$1.03 trillion last year and is expected to grow to nearly US\$1.8 trillion globally by 2027, according to a report by the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA). The *2023 GBTA Business Travel Index Report* also found that the global business travel industry rebounded faster than expected in 2023. It attributed factors including pent-up demand following the pandemic and healthier economic conditions than forecasted as having significantly contributed to this recovery. The latest findings come at a time when the Arabian Travel Market (ATM) has announced a strategic partnership with the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) and the GBTA for the upcoming edition of the annual ATM event which will be held from 6-9 May, 2024, at the Dubai World Trade Centre.

## Three Dubai hotels join JW Marriott and Autograph brands

**ABU DHABI NATIONAL HOTELS (ADNH)** recently reflagged three of its Dubai properties under Marriott's JW and Autograph Collection brands. From the start of this year, Address Dubai Marina is now known as the JW Marriott Hotel Marina, while the Vida Downtown Dubai Hotel has become Hotel Boulevard, Autograph Collection, and Manzil Downtown Dubai Hotel was rebranded as The Heritage Hotel, Autograph Collection. ADNH said that as part of the rebranding process, "each property will undergo carefully planned enhancements to deliver tailored and world-class experiences".







## Türkiye extends visa-free entry to nationals of four GCC countries

**STARTING LATE** December 2023, Türkiye extended its visa-free entry programme to nationals of four GCC countries including the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. The decision, issued through a presidential decree by Tayyip Erdogan, President of Türkiye, allows tourists from these four countries to now spend 90 out of 180 days in Türkiye without a visa. Additionally, Türkiye is also providing e-visa options to expats living in GCC countries. Eligible travellers can apply to the Türkiye e-visa system. Nationals of Algeria, Egypt, India, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines and Yemen holding a valid visa or valid residence permit from one of the Schengen countries, USA, UK or Ireland can apply for the e-visa. Turkish Airlines has praised the move as one that would "further strengthen the country's tourist numbers from 2024"

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## Hamad International welcomes record 45.9 million passengers last year

**DOHA'S HAMAD INTERNATIONAL** welcomed a record 45,916,104 passengers last year, up 31 per cent from the previous year when Qatar hosted the FIFA World Cup. A total of 52 airlines served 255 destinations from the airport across passenger, cargo and chartered flight operations. Hamad International completed the first phase of a renovation and expansion project in late 2022, with the second phase underway and plans to increase traffic to over 70 million passengers annually.

## Middle East's first Apartments by Marriott Bonvoy signed in Saudi Arabia

**MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL** has signed an agreement with NEOM to bring its Apartments by Marriott Bonvoy to the luxury island destination of Sindalah in the Red Sea off Saudi Arabia's northwest coast. Set to open in 2024, the Apartments by Marriott Bonvoy project will offer premium and luxury apartment-style accommodations and will feature units ranging from studios to one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments, all equipped with a separate living room, full kitchen, and in-unit washer and dryer. The signing of Apartments by Marriott Bonvoy Sindalah marks the fourth collaboration between NEOM and Marriott International on the luxury island, which will also include two Luxury Collection properties and an Autograph Collection Hotel.







## THE RITZ-CARLTON, DIRIYAH SET FOR 2026 OPENING

**MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL** has confirmed that The Ritz-Carlton, Diriyah will welcome its first guests in 2026. The hotel will feature 195 guestrooms including 34 suites along with a speciality restaurant, an all-day dining venue, meeting rooms, an outdoor pool, and a fitness centre. Another Marriott property, Bab Samhan, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Diriyah, is expected to be the first hotel to open within Diriyah this year. Marriott International and Diriyah have previously announced the signings of an EDITION Hotel and a Moxy Hotel too.

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### Accor signs deal to employ hundreds of Saudi nationals

**HOSPITALITY GROUP ACCOR** has signed a strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Tourism to recruit Saudi talent within the kingdom's hospitality industry. Through its Tamayyaz by Accor programme, it will offer fresh graduates and others a path for career advancement, expedite nationalisation by identifying essential roles, cultivate internal talent, implement onboarding programmes, and design career growth plans. Tamayyaz by Accor has three distinct tracks: Hospitality Specialist, Hospitality Operations, and Hospitality Leadership. Upon completing the six-month programme, 256 trainees will be employed in their preferred departments within its hotels.



### Dubai Duty Free sales reached US\$2.16 billion in 2023

**DUBAI DUTY FREE (DDF)** reported sales worth US\$2.16 billion for 2023, representing a 24.39 per cent increase over the previous year and 6.4 per cent over the pre-pandemic numbers of 2019. DDF, which recently celebrated its 40th anniversary, recorded more than 20 million sales transactions throughout 2023, an average of 55,000 transactions daily. It added that 55.2 million units of merchandise were sold over the course of last year. The top five selling categories for 2023 were perfumes (US\$374 million) followed by liquor (US\$310 million), gold (US\$212 million), cigarettes and tobacco (US\$204 million), and electronics (US\$172 million). In terms of top source markets for DDF's sales, India ranked first with US\$266 million sales, followed by Russia at US\$208 million, China at US\$154 million, Saudi Arabia at US\$140 million, and the UK in fifth place with sales of US\$102 million.



## Flydubai commences flights to Mombasa

### DUBAI-BASED CARRIER

flydubai has commenced operations to Mombasa in Kenya. The four-times-weekly service to the Kenyan coastal city, operated every Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday, takes the airline's African network up to 12 destinations across 11 countries. With the commencement of these flights, flydubai is now the first UAE national carrier to operate direct flights from Dubai to Mombasa. The other destinations it flies to in Africa include Addis Ababa, Alexandria, Asmara, Cairo, Dar es Salaam, Djibouti, Entebbe, Hargeisa, Juba, Mogadishu and Zanzibar.



## Mandarin Oriental debuts in Saudi Arabia

**IN JANUARY**, the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group officially rebranded Al Faisaliah Hotel in Riyadh. The Mandarin Oriental Al Faisaliah, Riyadh is Mandarin Oriental's first opening within Saudi Arabia. Located within the city's prestigious Olaya district, it is easily accessible from King Khalid International airport. The renovated hotel now features refreshed interiors and advanced spa and wellness treatments. The renovated public and private spaces feature bespoke Saudi-inspired artworks, custom chandeliers, and architectural elements influenced by the local culture. The northern building houses several new room and suite categories. The luxury hotel also has nine distinct dining destinations.



## EMIRATES TO RECRUIT 5,000 CABIN CREW GLOBALLY IN 2024

**EMIRATES HAS ANNOUNCED** a global cabin crew recruitment drive. The drive to hire 5,000 crew members will be aimed at "those who will soon or have recently stepped into the world of work." The airline said that it is seeking fresh graduates with internships or part-time jobs on their résumés, and those with around a year's experience in hospitality or customer service. Its recruitment team will host open days and assessments in more than 460 cities across six continents. Last year, the airline hired 8,000 cabin crew. Its cabin crew currently number approximately 21,500.



# ETIHAD LAUNCHES TWO NEW ROUTES TO INDIA

## UAE NATIONAL CARRIER

Etiha Airways has introduced two new daily services to the Indian state of Kerala. It has commenced operating flights from Abu Dhabi to Kozhikode (CCJ) and Thiruvananthapuram (TRV). These nonstop services take the total number of Indian gateways served by Etihad to 10. In 2023, Etihad reintroduced services to Kolkata. Furthermore, the airline has increased the frequency of its flights to Mumbai and Delhi, two of its busiest routes, from two per day to four.



## Qatar Airways grows European network

**ONEWORLD MEMBER** Qatar Airways has announced another round of network expansion. From July, it will launch daily flights from its Doha hub to Hamburg. Hamburg will be Qatar Airways' fifth destination in Germany, following Frankfurt, Munich, Berlin and Dusseldorf. Also, from June, it will return to Venice with daily flights. The Hamburg and Venice announcements come on the back of a recent expansion to its winter schedule which includes increased flight frequencies to destinations such as Amsterdam, Bangkok, Barcelona, Belgrade and Miami.



## IHG CONFIRMS STAYBRIDGE SUITES FOR RAS AL KHAIMAH

**IHG HOTELS AND RESORTS** will open a Staybridge Suites property in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah within the UAE. Staybridge Suites Mina Al Arab will be located on Hayat Island and is a result of a partnership between IHG and real estate developer RAK Properties. The 156-key Staybridge Suites Mina Al Arab will offer studio, one- and two-bedroom apartments. The 14-storey tower will feature a fitness centre as well as breakfast and restaurant areas. IHG first partnered with RAK Properties with the signing and opening of InterContinental Ras Al Khaimah Resort and Spa in 2022. Guests at the Staybridge property can avail of amenities of the nearby InterContinental resort.



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## Qatar Airways allows Privilege Club members to bid Avios on experiences

**QATAR AIRWAYS** has introduced a new platform allowing members of its Privilege Club to bid and spend Avios on “unique events and experiences”. The Privilege Club Collection gives members access to events and packages across sports, leisure, culture and music categories, offering a combination of ‘auction’ listings (for which members must bid Avios) and ‘buy now’ listings (items that are available for a fixed number of Avios). If a member places a winning bid, they will be notified and the Avios will be deducted from their account. Should members not have sufficient Avios, they can also use the platform to purchase additional Avios to top-up their accounts.



## Saudia carried more than 30 million passengers in 2023

**SAUDIA**, the national flag carrier of Saudi Arabia, said that it transported more than 30 million guests last year. That figure, it added, marks a 21 per cent year-on-year increase, and involved the operation of more than 176,300 flights. Saudia transported more than 16.7 million passengers through its international flight network, with in excess of 79,400 international flights. Domestically, Saudia carried more than 13.5 million passengers, a 7 per cent growth over 2022. It currently operates flights to over 100 destinations across four continents with a fleet of 142 aircraft.



## VIRGIN TO INCREASE FLIGHTS TO DUBAI

**VIRGIN ATLANTIC'S** route between Heathrow and Dubai – which resumed last October after a four-year hiatus – will increase to daily next winter. It has also announced plans to boost its routes to Maldives and Barbados. The carrier launched thrice weekly flights from Heathrow to the Maldives in October, and will increase this service to daily for the winter 2024-2025 season. Its flights to Barbados – which first launched in 2017 – will operate twice daily from Heathrow throughout winter 2024, in addition to a four-times-weekly service from Manchester.

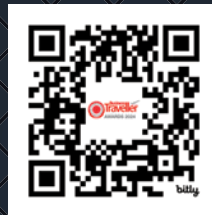


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## Sofitel Dubai The Obelisk receives Green Key certification

**S**ofitel Dubai The Obelisk has been awarded a Green Key certification. The hotel, part of the Accor Group, said that it has undertaken several steps to earn that certification. It worked closely with suppliers to source ingredients from local, organic, fair trade, and sustainable producers. In 2022, 25 per cent of all food and beverage at Sofitel Dubai The Obelisk was sourced sustainably. It also partnered with Reloop to reduce and repurpose its waste. All food leftovers are sent to compost instead of landfill, which is then returned to local farms. The hotel added that it has created more than 365,000kgs of compost with Reloop since 2022. The Obelisk has also done away with plastic water bottles by installing an in-house water filtration and glass bottling system in partnership with the Dubai Can project. It has therefore saved more than 1.25 million plastic bottles from reaching a landfill. Furthermore, the property's Building Management System monitors the heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning within the public areas and has enabled more than a 36.97 per cent KWh decrease in energy consumption.

## WIZZ AIR UAE SIGNS SUSTAINABILITY AGREEMENT WITH UAE'S MINISTRY OF ENERGY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

**IN DECEMBER,**

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi signed a memorandum of understanding with the UAE's Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure to increase awareness on sustainability.

The airline and the Ministry will collaborate

on several areas to raise awareness

about sustainability amongst the carrier's passengers. This includes online educational campaigns across both organisation's social media platforms and websites. Wizz Air Abu Dhabi and the Ministry will also endorse the 'Switch off Take off' initiative which encourages people to be more conscious of energy and water use. The second largest airline in Abu Dhabi by seat capacity, Wizz Air Abu Dhabi operated more than 6,000 flights and carried in excess of 1.2 million passengers in 2022. It expects to double the number of passengers it carries from Abu Dhabi during this fiscal year to between 2.5 million and 3 million and also plans to recruit 250 employees as it prepares to double its fleet size in the fiscal year ending March 2024.



## DUBAI DUTY FREE UNDERTAKES ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVE

**LAST MONTH, DUBAI DUTY FREE (DDF)** embarked on its first tree planting activity for the year with 40 employees planting Ghaf tree seedlings, the national tree of the UAE, at Hemaya School in Deira, Dubai. The activity was in support of the Tree Planting Initiative of the Dubai Police Academy and Zayed International Foundation for the Environment which aims to plant 100,000 trees all over the UAE at various locations such as educational institutes, embassies, police stations and government buildings. "This initiative not only focuses on achieving the nation's environmental goals in sustainability, but also those of Dubai Duty Free as a responsible retailer," says Colm McLoughlin, Dubai Duty Free's executive vice chairman and CEO. During DDF's tree planting exercise last month, 30 Ghaf tree seedlings were planted, among eventually a total of 300 Ghaf trees to be planted at Hemaya School under the Dubai Duty Free name. Thus far, a total of 454 trees have been planted in the name of Dubai Duty Free in Dubai and Ras Al Khaimah since 2018.



## QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“Developed countries have to assist in the financing of climate action in the developing countries, because if we don’t do that, inequality will only grow and you will have winners and you will have losers. Rebuilding trust cannot be limited to only a number of countries. It has to include the whole world” – **Luc Triangle**, general secretary, International Trade Union Confederation



## Seventy hotels awarded Dubai Sustainable Tourism Stamp

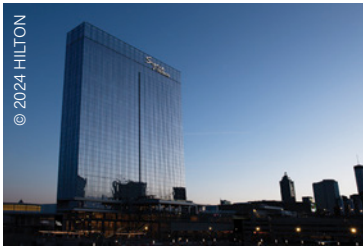
**THE DUBAI DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMY AND TOURISM (DET)** has awarded 70 hotels in Dubai with the Dubai Sustainable Tourism Stamp. The new initiative seeks to recognise hotels with the highest level of adherence to DET’s 19 ‘Sustainability Requirements’ including energy, food and water management plans, guest education, and corporate social responsibility programmes for local communities, among other criteria. The stamp, with a validity of one year, is awarded based on a three-tiered system of gold, silver, and bronze, correlated to the recipient’s achieved level of compliance. Those who earned the gold tier included the likes of Pullman Dubai Downtown, Raffles Dubai, Grosvenor House, a Luxury Collection Hotel, Dubai and Al Jaddaf Rotana Suite Hotel, among others. Issam Kazim, CEO, Dubai Corporation for Tourism and Commerce Marketing, said, “We are committed to supporting the industry with frameworks and initiatives that can contribute to achieving our shared goals, and the launch of the DST Stamp has underlined our commitment to collaborating with our stakeholders – in this case hotels – to set the highest standards and reward those who achieve them.”

## MILLENNIUM HOTELS AND RESORTS PARTNERS WITH SWITCH FOODS

**MILLENNIUM HOTELS AND RESORTS, MEA**, has partnered with Switch Foods, a UAE-based foodtech startup. Switch Foods offers sustainable plant-based meat alternatives. As part of the agreement, Switch Foods’ offerings will be incorporated into the menus at Millennium Hotels, spanning its F&B outlets and in-room dining. Millennium Hotels and Switch Foods will also unveil an extensive selection of plant-based dishes, including options such as loaded nachos, Switch fajita wrap, spaghetti bolognese and lasagna al forno. Guests at Millenium Palace Mirdif or the Copthorne Hotel can already avail a selection of plant-based meat alternatives, with availability expanding to other Millennium properties shortly. Fahad Abdulrahim Kazim, CEO of Millennium Hotels and Resorts, said, “Our collaboration with Switch Foods is a significant step in our journey towards a greener and more responsible approach to culinary excellence. We are proud to embrace this partnership, which aligns perfectly with our commitment to eco-conscious practices. By working with Switch Foods, our shared vision is to introduce cuisines that are not only nutritionally rich but also authentically flavourful, with no compromise on taste.”







### 1 Hilton reveals 976-room Signia hotel in Atlanta

Hilton has opened the first new-build hotel under its MICE-focused Signia brand. The 42-storey Signia by Hilton Atlanta is the largest ground-up hotel development in Atlanta's downtown area for 40 years. Built on the site of the demolished Georgia Dome, it has 976 rooms, and 100,000 sq ft of meetings space.



### 2 Park Hyatt enters Morocco

Hyatt has opened the first Moroccan property under its Park Hyatt brand. The 130-key Park Hyatt Marrakech is situated at the foot of the Atlas Mountains, next to the Al Maaden Golf resort, around nine miles from the city's Medina district. Designed by Marrakech-based architect Imaad Rahmouni, it comprises 16 pavilions built around a central patio.



### 3 Heathrow's passenger traffic reached 79 million in 2023

Heathrow's total passenger traffic for 2023 reached just over 79 million, third only to its 2018 (80.1 million) and 2019 (80.9 million) numbers. It is still around 17.5 million more than the annual traffic for 2022. A total of 24 routes recorded more than one million passengers last year, with New York JFK topping the list.



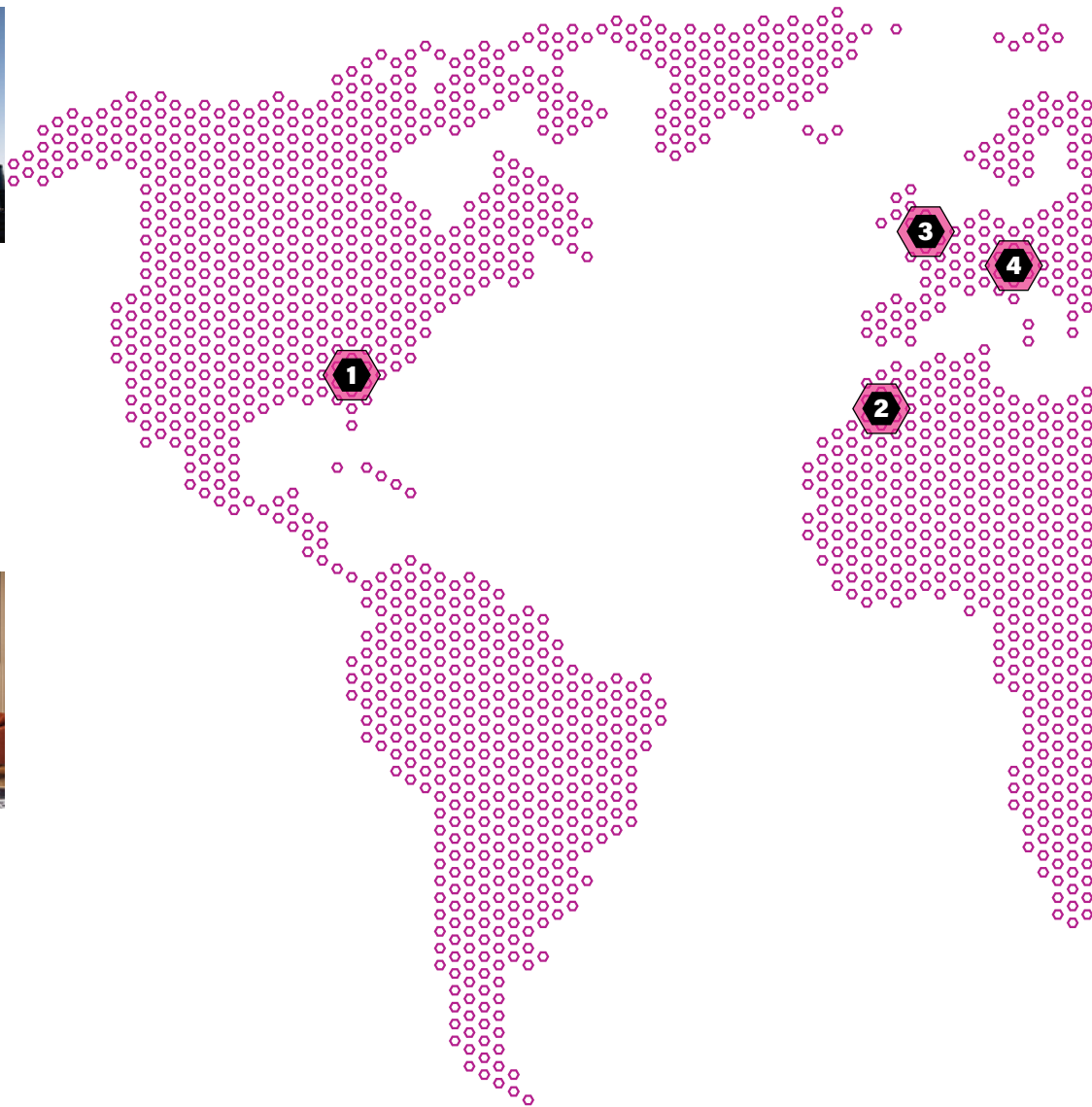
### 4 Vienna airport to begin work on expansion

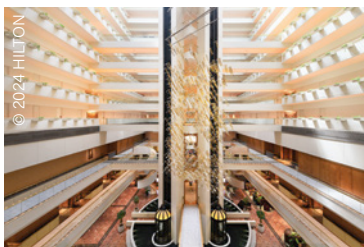
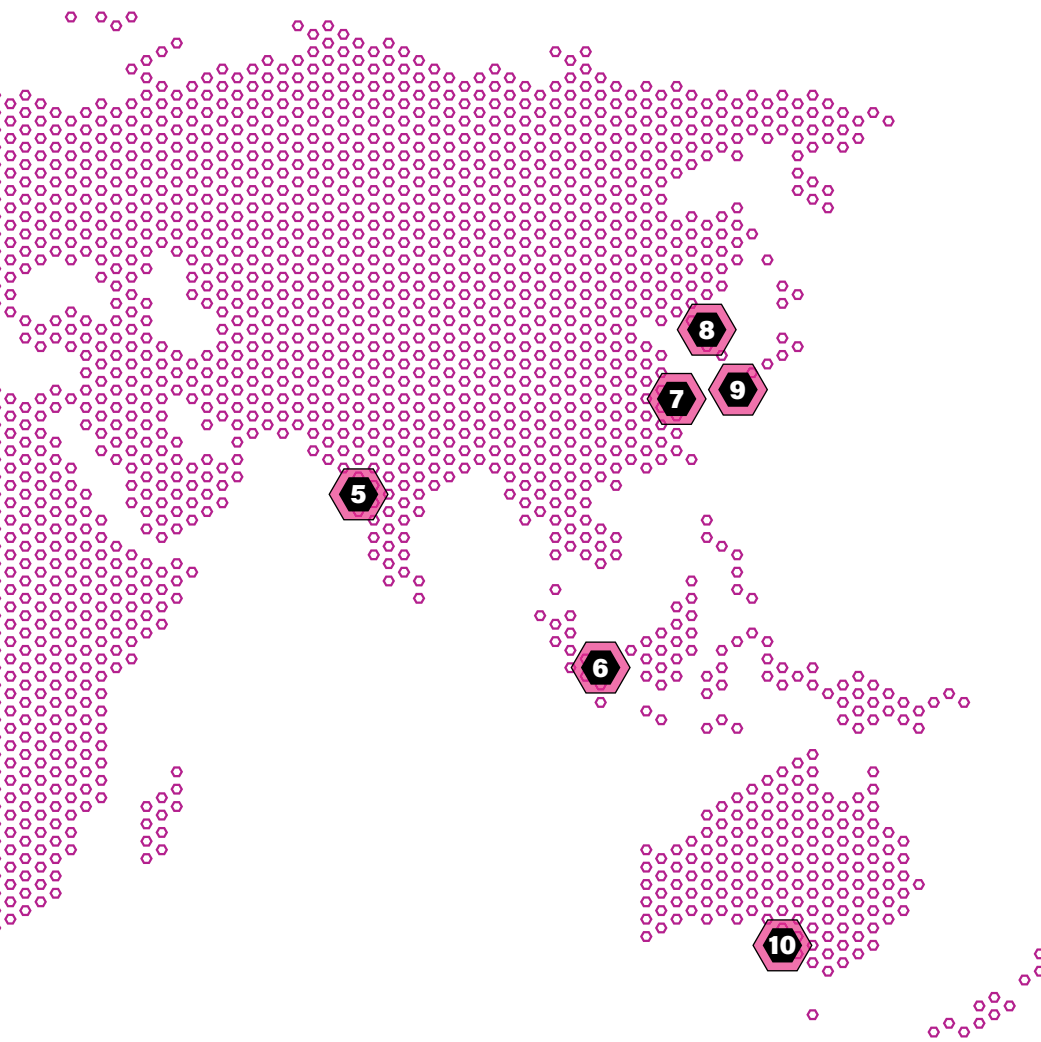
Construction is set to commence on the expansion of Vienna airport's Terminal 3 this month, with completion set for 2027. The project will add 70,000 sqm of space to the existing terminal building. It will enable convenient transfer connections between D, F, and G gates, and see centralised security checks moving to the new building.



### 5 Vistara to commence Mumbai-Paris service

Vistara, the Singapore Airlines joint venture carrier from India, will launch a five-weekly Mumbai-Paris CDG service from 28 March. This will be the airline's second route to Paris, complementing its Delhi-CDG operations, which has a similar number of weekly flights. It marks Vistara's third long-haul route from Mumbai, following London and Frankfurt.





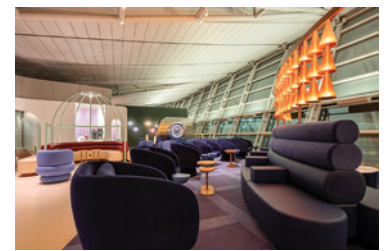
#### 6 Conrad Singapore Orchard welcomes its first guests

Conrad Singapore Orchard, located on Cuscaden Road, recently welcomed its first guests. Formerly Regent Singapore, Hilton rebranded and refreshed the hotel as Conrad Singapore Orchard. It now has 445 nature-inspired contemporary guest rooms and 46 suites, with each suite featuring a spacious lounge and expansive terrace.



#### 7 Four Seasons opens resort in Suzhou

Four Seasons Hotel Suzhou has opened in China's Jiangsu province. Situated on a private nine-hectare island in Jinji Lake, it has 119 guest rooms and suites, along with 11 independent villas featuring private courtyards. The property also offers more than 1,000 sqm of events and meetings space.



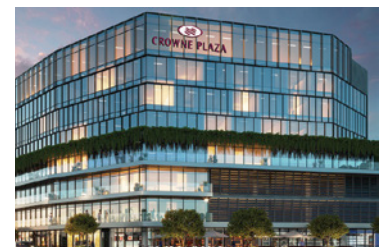
#### 8 Seoul gets world's first oneworld branded lounge

Oneworld has officially opened its first fully-branded lounge, located in Incheon International airport's Terminal 1, close to gate 28. It collaborated with Swissport and the team behind the group's ASPIRE lounges to create a 555 sqm facility with seating for up to 148 customers. Available here are a buffet food setup, a full-service bar and private shower facilities.



#### 9 Marriott unveils ninth property in Japan

Marriott Hotels has opened Nagasaki Marriott Hotel, marking the brand's debut in Kyushu, Japan's southernmost main island. It is the ninth Marriott Hotel to open in Japan. Directly connected with JR Nagasaki Station, it is less than a two-hour drive from Fukuoka airport. Nearby landmarks include the Atomic Bomb Museum and Peace Park.



#### 10 IHG's Crowne Plaza to debut in Adelaide

IHG Hotels and Resorts is gearing up to open its newest property in Adelaide – the Crowne Plaza Mawson Lakes. Originally announced as a 130-room Holiday Inn and Suites, it transformed during the development phase and is now positioned in the upscale space that would appeal to both leisure and business travellers.



# UNSTOPPABLE

As Saudi Arabia progresses towards the goals of its Vision 2030 programme, and its capital readies to host the World Expo 2030, here's how it has set itself on a one-way path to becoming a superpower on the global stage

WORDS VARUN GODINHO



**W**hen Saudi Arabia announced its Vision 2030 back in 2016, some of the broad objectives it set itself to achieve included building an economy that sharply diversified itself away from a dependence on oil revenues, opening up the country and introducing reforms that would make it more welcoming and appealing to expats, and raising the kingdom's overall profile on the global stage.

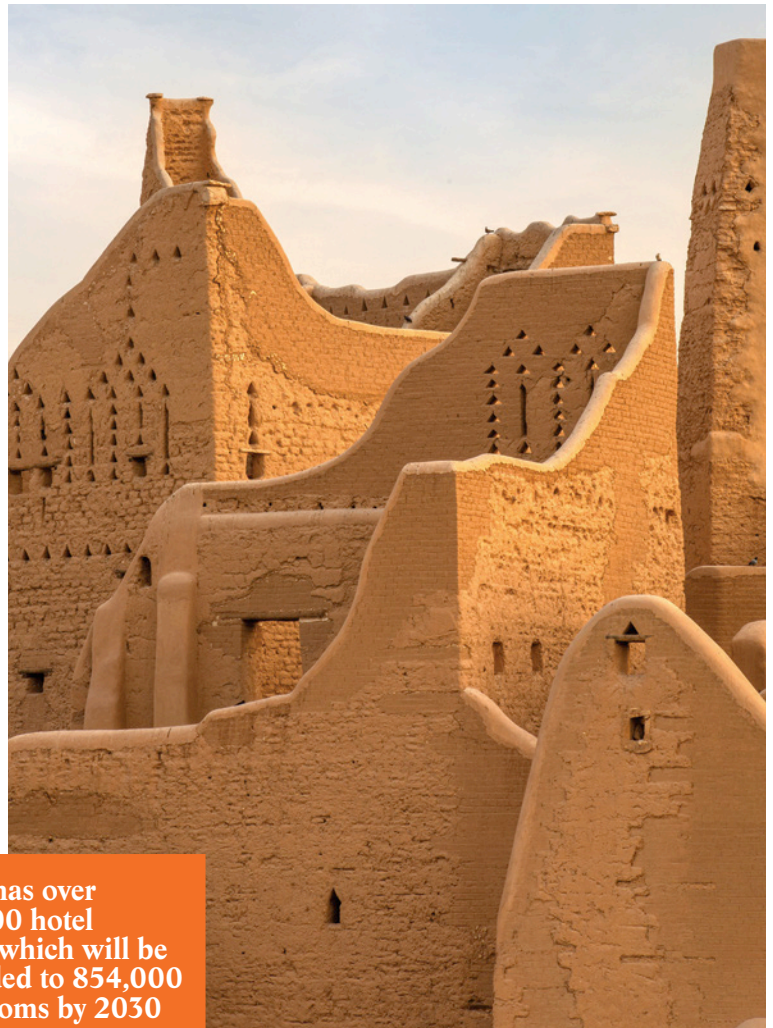
Eight years in, Saudi Arabia has handsomely blown past those initial objectives and moved the goalpost far further down the field. This year, the Arab world's largest economy expects a total revenue of SAR1.172 trillion and a total expenditure of SAR1.251 trillion. It intends to keep up the pace with plans to increase spending to SAR1.3 trillion in 2025 and SAR1.368 trillion the following year.

The kingdom has made giant strides in opening itself up to visitors from around the world, most notably due to its expansive visa reforms. The country's tourism sector really took root in 2019 when it began to roll out these visa reforms, and today, nationals from more than 59 countries as well as Schengen visa holders, and permanent residents of the UK, US, and any EU country are eligible for e-visas to visit Saudi Arabia. The country is targeting around 70 million overseas visitors annually by 2030.

One of the biggest test cases of what Vision 2030 would look like in its physical form is to examine the country's capital Riyadh which is teeming with multi-billion-dollar projects. Last year, a new company, backed by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), was launched to build what was billed at the time as the world's largest modern downtown in the Saudi capital. The New Murabba Development Company (NMDC) is tasked with the New Murabba project which is due to be completed by 2030. Spread over an area of 19 sq km, it will accommodate several

**Saudi has over 400,000 hotel rooms which will be expanded to 854,000 new rooms by 2030**

FAHD HAMIDADDIN,  
CEO and member of the  
Board of Saudi Tourism



hundred thousand residents. The numbers are simply staggering whereby it will offer over 25 million sqm of floor area, feature more than 104,000 residential units, 9,000 hotel rooms, and encompass in excess of 980,000 sqm of retail space. This downtown project alone is expected to add SAR180 billion to the kingdom's non-oil GDP and create 334,000 direct and indirect jobs by 2030.

Riyadh is also the centre for three of the kingdom's giga-projects, namely Diriyah, Qiddiya and ROSHN, all of which are backed by the PIF.

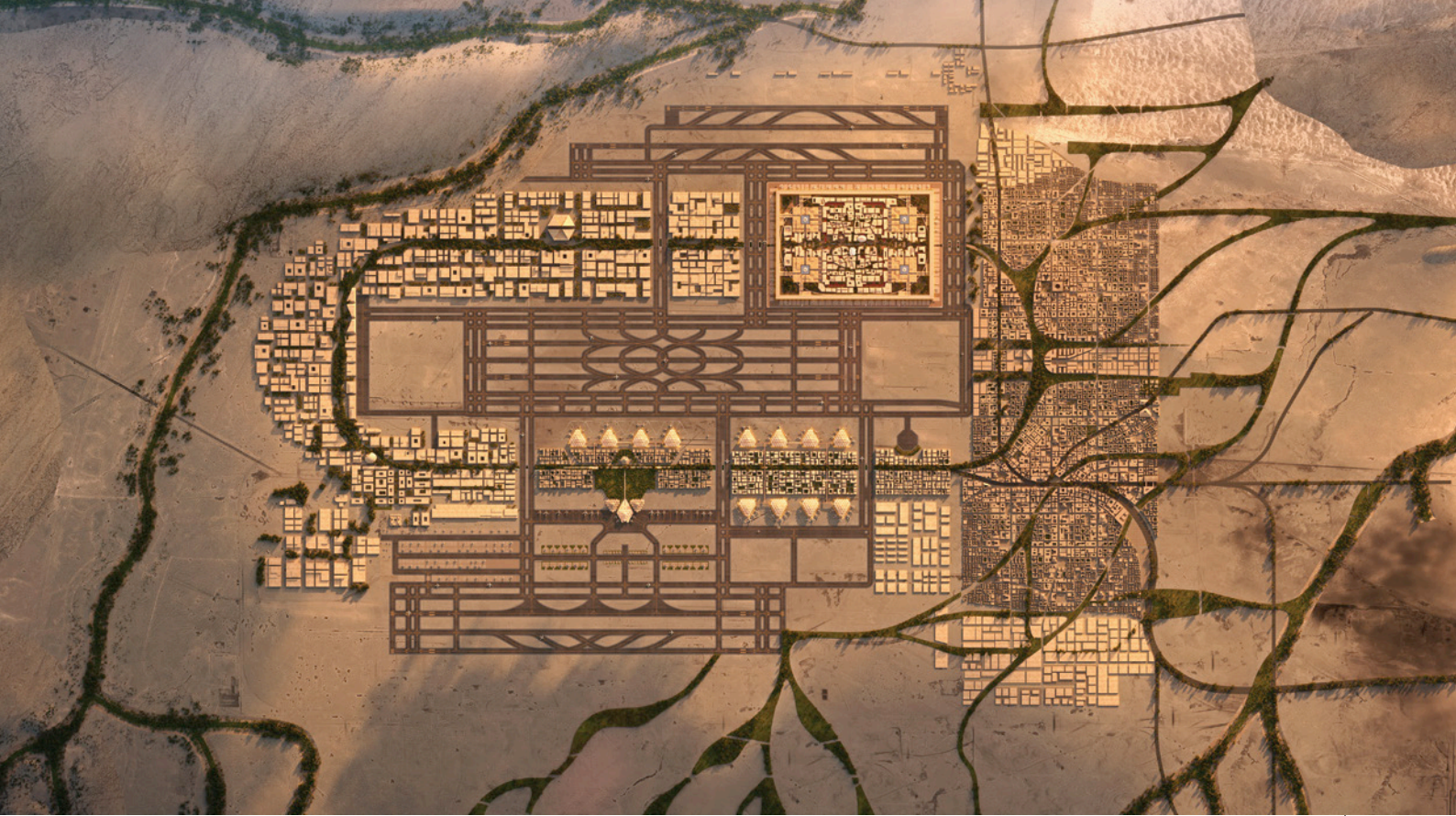
Diriyah meanwhile is a US\$63.2 billion masterplan spread across 14 sq km and whose focal point is the UNESCO World Heritage Site of At-Turaif. It will have 38 hotels, museums, a retail district and more than 100 places to dine, with several restaurants already open within Diriyah's Bujairi Terrace which is now operational. →

**ABOVE:** Diriyah is a mega mixed-use development in Riyadh

**LEFT:** The Line, which will be a part of NEOM

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** The New Murabba is a project planned for downtown Riyadh





20

**19**  
**SQ KM**

The area across which the New Murubba project will be built in Riyadh

**185**  
**MILLION**

The planned passenger capacity by 2050 for King Salman International airport

**SAR10**  
**BILLION**

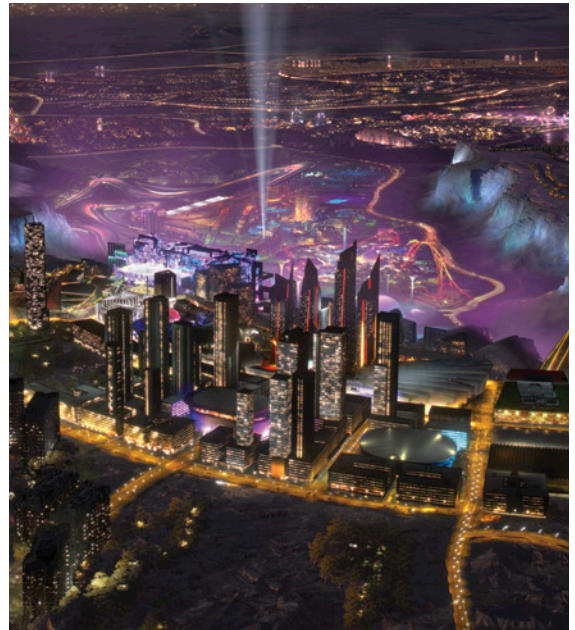
The value of contracts already awarded for Qiddiya City



The ROSHN Group meanwhile aims to build more than 400,000 homes by 2030 within the country and develop mixed-use spaces. SEDRA within Riyadh is its first project in the kingdom and will be built across eight phases and offer more than 30,000 homes. WAREFA is ROSHN's second community in Riyadh and is located in the Al Janadriyah district.

As for Qiddiya, its first development will be Qiddiya City, located around 40 minutes from the centre of Riyadh. Qiddiya City is wholly dedicated to the themes of entertainment, sports and culture and will include a gaming and esports district, golf courses, and Six Flags Qiddiya as well as a multipurpose stadium. Contracts worth SAR10 billion have already been awarded for the project.

Building these mega projects to attract tens of millions of international visitors each year, means that the city also has to put in place a transport infrastructure to support that growth. That aim is being realised by way of a new King Salman International airport that has already been announced for Riyadh. Covering an area of 57 sq km, and featuring six parallel runways, this mega airport is being



readied to accommodate up to 120 million travellers by 2030 and 185 million passengers annually by 2050 – besides contributing SAR27 billion each year to the kingdom's non-oil GDP and creating 103,000 direct and indirect jobs.

In a major announcement, Saudi Arabia also unveiled plans for a brand-new airline last year which will be headquartered in the capital and called Riyadh Air. That airline has already placed orders for up to 72 Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner aircraft. "The aviation sector is a big part of the country's Vision 2030 goals, so we're working closely with the different partners to help fulfil these targets. Riyadh Air is supporting the ambition of Saudi Vision 2030 to triple annual travellers to 330 million and attract





**Our major contribution will be to connect Riyadh to over 100 destinations by 2030**

TONY DOUGLAS,  
CEO of Riyadh Air

150 million tourists to the kingdom by 2030. Our major contribution will be to connect Riyadh to the world with over 100 destinations to and from the kingdom's capital by 2030. By connecting Asia, Africa and Europe, we are helping connect Saudi Arabia to the world," Riyadh Air's CEO Tony Douglas told *Business Traveller*. "The National Aviation Strategy is already making a positive impact on the kingdom's aviation sector and this will only continue to grow when Riyadh Air makes its maiden flight in 2025."

Riyadh's singular focus on building a world-class city was rewarded recently when it won the bid to host World Expo 2030. Riyadh went up against two major cities, Busan and Rome, to emerge victorious during the

final voting process held by the Bureau International des Expositions in Paris.

It scored an overwhelming 119 votes, compared to 29 and 17 for the South Korean and Italian cities respectively.

The Riyadh Expo 2030 will be held from 1

October 2030 to 31 March 2031. According to internal projections revealed by the Saudi Tourism Authority in November, the event which will be held under the theme of "The Era of Change: Together for a Foresighted Tomorrow", is predicted to welcome close to 40 million site visits. It is expected to have 246 unique event participants.

"It's fantastic to have the Expo 2030 coming to Riyadh, it's going to be a momentous occasion for the city and the entire kingdom. The kingdom is already used to hosting major, world-class events, particularly in sport, and Expo 2030 will be no different. We're looking forward to seeing so many countries represented at the world's fair in Riyadh," says Douglas.

A precursor of what to expect from Expo 2030 will be present at the upcoming Expo 2025 in Osaka where Saudi Arabia will be participating with a Foster and Partners-designed pavilion. "Expo 2025 Osaka is an incredible platform for Saudi Arabia to demonstrate the wonders of its profound history and diverse culture to the world, showcasing the nation's identity and its ambitious plans



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** An aerial view of the proposed King Salman International airport in Riyadh; Riyadh Air will commence operations in 2025; A rendering of the Saudi Arabia pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka; Riyadh Air's CEO Tony Douglas; The upcoming Qiddiya City in Riyadh; Jeddah located in the west of the kingdom





**200,000**  
The number of direct and indirect jobs that will be created by Riyadh Air

**29**  
Average age of population in Saudi Arabia

**40 MILLION**  
The number of site visits predicted for Riyadh Expo 2030

for the future. Our pavilion is one of over 160 international participants' pavilions and is being designed to exhibit the diverse offerings of the kingdom. This will mean that visitors will witness a state-of-the-art structure symbolising a connection between historical legacy and future advancements. Our heritage is incredibly rich, and through the pavilion we will showcase examples of our story, with interactive exhibits and experiences to learn about Saudi's past, present and vision for the future. This future includes valuable insight into the unique experiences visitors can expect in 2030 when Saudi Arabia will host the next World Expo," notes Othman Almazayad, commissioner general of Saudi Arabia Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka.

Hosting the millions of visitors attending Expo 2030, as well as the millions more the kingdom hopes to attract over the next decade, would require a rapid expansion of its hospitality industry. "I believe that Expo 2030 will serve as a catalyst for growth and its impact on Saudi's tourism sector will be felt immediately. Today, Saudi has over 400,000 hotel rooms which will be expanded to 854,000 new rooms by 2030," Fahd Hamidaddin, CEO and member of the Board of Saudi Tourism said the day after Riyadh won the bid to host the Expo.

The growth in hospitality is being supported by most major hospitality groups. IHG, for example, currently operates 40 hotels across five brands in the kingdom, including InterContinental, Crowne Plaza, Holiday Inn, Staybridge Suites, and voco. It has 36 hotels in the development pipeline within the country which are set to open within the next three to five years. Among them, is the ultra-luxury Regent Jeddah which will be the first Regent hotel in the Middle East when it opens later this year.

### Saudi Arabia is Hilton's largest pipeline market in EMEA

**FAWAZ MOUMINA,**  
country manager and senior director of operations for Saudi Arabia at Hilton



Hilton too has pledged to open more than 50 new hotels across 10 of its brands within Saudi Arabia. "Saudi Arabia is Hilton's largest pipeline market in Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) and the fourth largest globally. The country is well on its way to becoming a world leader in travel and tourism, investing significantly in major tourism infrastructure and hosting world events such as Expo 2030," says Fawaz Moumina, country manager and senior director of operations for Saudi Arabia at Hilton. "In the last few years, Hilton has ramped up its presence in Saudi Arabia and we continue to expand our footprint, aiming to reach more than 75 trading properties across the country. Our development pipeline will see the introduction of some of Hilton's award-winning hospitality brands to both existing and emerging locations, including LXR Hotels and Resorts, Canopy by Hilton, Embassy Suites by Hilton, and Hampton by Hilton."

Marriott International meanwhile has been heavily focussed on two giga projects along the western coast of the country – namely The Red Sea and NEOM. Within The Red Sea development located along the



country's northwest coast, Marriott will imminently open the Nujuma, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve. The Red Sea is being designed as a regenerative destination that has a net positive effect on the local environment. NEOM meanwhile is one of the country's most ambitious projects and includes several sub-developments. Among them are The Line which will be only 200m wide, but will span 170km in length and will be a vertically layered futuristic city; Oxagon will be a floating city and Sindalah is NEOM's luxury island destination and will have an 86-berth marina, more than 400 ultra-premium hotel rooms and 300 top-end suites, as well as a golf course.

The two areas that Saudi Arabia is ensuring it pays close attention to while racing towards its 2030 goals are providing high-quality employment opportunities for its nationals and fulfilling its commitments to the subject of sustainability. A census conducted in 2022 revealed that Saudi's population had reached 32.2 million, with 18.8 million of them being Saudi nationals. The proportion of Saudis under the age of 30 stood at 63 per cent, therefore representing a vast pool of the country's workforce that has recently come into the job market or will be doing so over the coming decade. "As a digitally native nation with the average age of the population in the kingdom being 29, there's a greater demand for its



new national carrier to also be digital-first. The country has ambitious plans and is constantly evolving and innovating and this will only continue at an accelerated pace. We're also contributing to the kingdom's wider economic diversification by creating 200,000 jobs, both directly and indirectly," says Riyadh Air's Douglas.

Hilton's Moumina adds, "We also continue to partner with local academic institutions, such as the Bunyan for Training in Saudi Arabia, providing students with first-hand hospitality experience and supporting government efforts to nurture homegrown talent. Many of these training and internship opportunities evolve into permanent employment opportunities for young talent."

As for sustainability, Vision 2030 envisages the kingdom meeting 50 per cent of its energy requirements from renewable sources and also setting Saudi Arabia on the path to a net zero future by 2060. Large scale projects such as The Red Sea and NEOM are all being built to rely on renewable energy from day one of opening to the public.

As the kingdom hurtles towards a path of unimpeded growth, Saudi Arabia has proved itself capable of going from strength to strength. The momentum that it has built thus far has unequivocally made it unstoppable. **BT**

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** A rendering of the Saudi Arabia pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka; Waldorf Astoria Jeddah - Qasr al Sharq; Canopy by Hilton Porta Jeddah is expected to open in 2028; Conrad Riyadh Laysen Valley in Riyadh will be the second Conrad opening in the kingdom when it welcomes its first guests in 2025; Grand Hyatt Red Sea; Hilton's Fawaz Moumina



# Cultivating a culture of learning within the hospitality sector

*Crafting a strategy that integrates learning into professional growth models of individual employees can prove transformational for the hospitality industry within the region*



**PANOS LOUPASIS**  
MARKET MANAGING DIRECTOR, TÜRKİYE,  
MIDDLE EAST, EURASIA AND AFRICA AT  
WYNDHAM HOTELS AND RESORTS

**I**n the thriving landscape of the Middle East, the hospitality industry represents opulence, luxury, and unrivalled service. Yet, behind the glittering façade of the region's top hotels and resorts lies an indispensable key to their enduring success – its people. In an industry abundant with competition, how do we ensure employees thrive in the right roles?

As the region's hospitality sector continues to grow, the importance of a culture of learning cannot be overstated. Investing in the development of employees at all levels is not just a noble pursuit, but a strategic one too. It drives individual success, promotes loyalty, enhances productivity, and contributes significantly to a brand's success.

Having dedicated my career to best practices in the hospitality industry, I have come to recognise the truly transformative influence of a rich culture of learning. Fostering an environment in which the importance of knowledge-sharing permeates an entire organisation is the key to sustained success.

## ENRICHING ONBOARDING EXPERIENCES

It's not a one-size-fits-all approach. It's a tailored experience that considers individual strengths, aspirations, and the collective goal of providing unparalleled guest experiences. Enriching onboarding experiences goes beyond paperwork and procedural introductions. They include first-hand interactions with seasoned professionals, engaging workshops that bring the organisation's core values to life,

and an introduction to the heartbeat of the organisation – a commitment to service excellence. Enriching onboarding experiences are reflected in the seamless integration of new team members into the hospitality family. You will witness not only accelerated learning curves, but also a genuine enthusiasm to contribute to exceptional experiences.

## FOSTERING PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

This is not about climbing the corporate ladder. Rather, it's about embracing a mindset that values continuous learning at every stage. The journey to excellence doesn't end with a job title. It's an ongoing commitment to honing our skills and staying abreast of industry trends. By fostering this mentality, we create an environment where individuals, regardless of their current position, are empowered to embark on a journey of perpetual professional development. This encourages people to bring fresh perspectives and innovative solutions to their roles, not only elevating individual performance, but also contributing to the organisation's overall success.

## EMPOWERING TRAINING AND ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is more than a buzzword. It's a commitment to recognising and celebrating the unique contributions

of every member. In a collaborative atmosphere where voices are heard, ideas are valued, and individuals are empowered to take ownership of their growth, job satisfaction increases, and there is a clear correlation with elevated guest experiences. The training initiatives need to extend beyond the basics, delving into the art of anticipating needs, nuances of cultural sensitivity, and the mastery of personalised service. By doing so, the hospitality industry doesn't just empower employees, but also elevates them into ambassadors of hospitality excellence.

## FACILITATING INNOVATION

Our success stories in innovation are not just about adopting the latest technology. They are also about reimagining service delivery, enhancing sustainability practices, and embracing cultural subtleties that define Middle East hospitality. It's about creating an ecosystem where innovation is not a top-down directive, but instead a collective journey embraced by all.

## PROMOTING CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT

As the saying goes, 'Every day is a school day' – and so it should be. We should all continue to learn throughout our careers, regardless of our titles. The opportunity to continuously learn and develop skills is more than just a job perk, it's a pathway to professional growth. **BT**

The journey  
to excellence  
doesn't end  
with a job title

# THE ELEVATOR PITCH

*Business Traveller Middle East* gives **Richard Alexander**, general manager of The Lana, Dorchester Collection in Dubai, five minutes to pitch his property to prospective guests



**“**In the ever-evolving crossroads of global travel and innovation, The Lana, Dorchester Collection’s inaugural Middle East property, is set to redefine ultra-luxury hospitality in the city. Set to make a grand entrance in the heart of Dubai on 1 February 2024, it’s not just any new hotel, it’s a wonderful mixture of cosmopolitan sophistication with the authentic charm of the local landscape, presenting an unparalleled experience for both business and leisure travellers.

Operated through a partnership with OMNIYAT, The Lana will unveil the next chapter in Dorchester Collection’s global history of top-notch service and quality. We are almost certain it’s going to be the talk of the town and the go-to destination for social butterflies and businessmen, all eager to soak up the finest Dubai has to offer.

Dubai has turned into a hotspot for business and luxury tourism. Strategically situated in Business Bay, The Lana enjoys a prime spot with easy access to Downtown Dubai, D3, DIFC, and the iconic Burj Khalifa. The picturesque waterfront setting along the Dubai Water Canal, combined with its status as a buzzing business and commercial hub, makes it the perfect choice for those who want

a taste of luxury in Dubai, without missing out on the local experience.

From the architectural marvel, courtesy of Foster and Partners, to the curated services and bespoke experiences, every nook and cranny reflects a dedication to luxury. With interiors personally designed by Gilles & Boissier, The Lana isn’t just a hotel – it’s a destination that speaks to both locals and guests from all over the world.

The exceptional culinary team of 130 talented professionals is led by our culinary maestro, executive chef Oliver Jackson. Together, they’ll be operating four in-house outlets. Our four other concepts have been developed in collaboration with



**“With interiors personally designed by Gilles & Boissier, The Lana isn’t just a hotel – it’s a destination that speaks to both locals and guests from all over the world”**

three internationally acclaimed chefs including Martín Berasategui, Jean Imbert and Angelo Musa.

Jara by Martín Berasategui is a pioneering dining concept, marking the acclaimed chef’s first venture in the Middle East. Situated on the 18th floor, Jara offers Basque cuisine, pintxos, and cocktails, emphasising a shared dining experience with a vibrant atmosphere inspired by the Basque region’s colourful spirit. Riviera by Jean Imbert, located on the fourth floor, introduces modern Mediterranean cuisine, reflecting Imbert’s heritage and global travels. Bonbon Café Angelo Musa, a ground-floor patisserie, brings Parisian sophistication with Musa being an acclaimed pastry chef. Other hotel outlets include The Gallery, Veranda, Bitter Honey, and Txakolina.

The rooftop pool on the 30th floor, accessible to only in-house guests, offers captivating 180-degree views. High Society, also perched on the rooftop, transforms from a tranquil daytime poolside retreat to a lively evening lounge from 5pm daily.

Whether you’re hashing out deals in the boardroom or saying “I do” in grand style, our elegant event spaces are designed to set the perfect scene, where luxury, cutting-edge technology and unforgettable experiences come together.

Dorchester Collection brings a global sensibility to guests who admire and appreciate elegance over opulence, singularity over formula and seek a way of life united in shared values.

We’re eagerly anticipating the kick-off of an exhilarating new chapter in the brand’s history, where every stay promises a dash of excitement and a touch of that classic British wit – because that’s just how we do things at The Lana. **BT**



HOTEL DE RUSSIE

Sir Rocco Forte who comes from a family that has spent decades in the hospitality industry, has built a hotel business that has become the envy of niche ultra-luxury operators worldwide

WORDS VARUN GODINHO

# SOLID FOUNDATIONS





From around the age of 14, Sir Rocco Forte would spend his school, and later his university, holidays working within his father's Trusthouse Forte hotel business. He remembers the time he spent washing up in the hotel's kitchens – an experience that allowed him first-hand insights into what takes place at the grassroots level to build a hotel empire. Working there at a young age also allowed him to witness his father's commitment to building a hospitality business. All that came to bear when he established his own hospitality company alongside his sister Olga Polizzi.

"I decided to start a new business focusing on luxury hotels after Trusthouse Forte was sold. With a new company and limited capital, it was important to focus. Luxury hotels are the most interesting because they are the most complicated to run, and through service it is possible to compete with the big players as a niche operation. I felt there was an opening in the marketplace for hotels which had a strong personality and design element and were more customer-friendly than most luxury hotels which were rather pompous at the time. The other important aspect was a strong sense of place, which now 26 years later everyone is talking about but does not necessarily deliver," Sir Rocco, the 79-year-old chairman of Rocco Forte Hotels, recently revealed to *Business Traveller*.

The first two Rocco Forte hotels to open, back in 1998, were The Balmoral in Edinburgh, and Hotel Savoy in Florence. Sir Rocco says that the fact that he was able to buy back The Balmoral which had previously been a part

**OPPOSITE PAGE:**  
Sir Rocco Forte

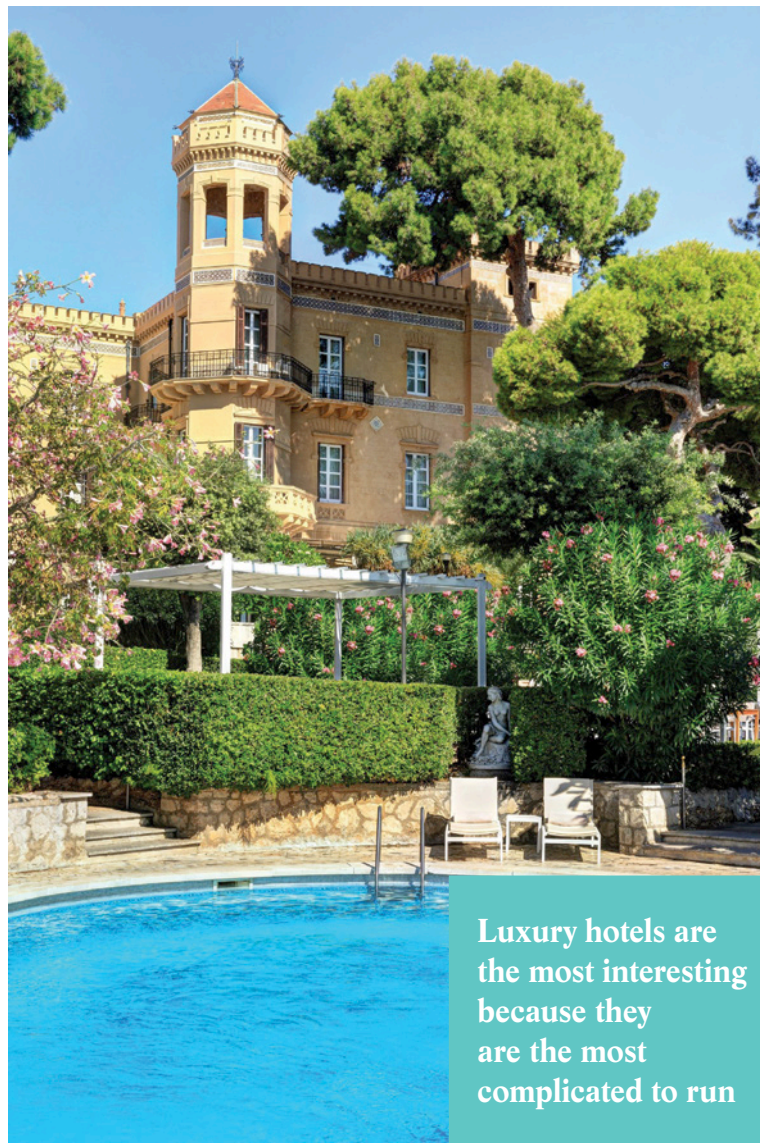
**CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW:** Brown's Hotel in London; The Balmoral in Edinburgh; The Scone and Crombie suite in The Balmoral; Among the first two properties to open under the Rocco Forte Hotels banner was The Balmoral in 1998

of the Trusthouse Forte portfolio gave him the confidence that he was on the right track to building a luxury hospitality brand of his own.

He has spent the better part of nearly three decades building a curated, hand-picked collection of grand properties around the world. "We currently have 14 hotels, resorts, residences and villas across Europe and are looking to expand further afield. In the UK, we have the landmark The Balmoral in Edinburgh and Brown's Hotel, in London's Mayfair. In Italy, Hotel de Russie and Hotel de la Ville, in addition to Rocco Forte House, are all in Rome. In Florence is the gem of Hotel Savoy on Piazza della Repubblica and in Puglia, on the heel of Italy, is the spectacular Masseria Torre Maizza." →







Luxury hotels are the most interesting because they are the most complicated to run

“Having opened in 2021, the palatial Villa Ignea became our second property in Sicily. Verdura Resort, is on the south coast of the island, with the recently launched Forte Private Villas. In Germany, The Charles Hotel, named after my father, is near Munich’s Botanical Garden and Berlin’s Hotel de Rome sits by the Opera House in Mitte, whilst in Brussels, Hotel Amigo, is moments from the Grand Place,” he says.

With an underlying emphasis on driving a sense of place across each property, Rocco Forte Hotels has brought unique additions to each hotel. At the Brown’s Hotel in London, for example, it opened the Sir Paul Smith suite last year. Designed by Olga Polizzi along with Sir Paul Smith, it features elements including the British designer’s Signature Stripe, a curated selection of

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** The pool at Villa Ignea in Sicily; The Junior suite at Hotel Savoy in Florence; The Drawing Room at Brown’s Hotel in London; Hotel Amigo in Brussels; The Nijinsky suite at Hotel de Russie in Rome



art and books, and a Mario Bellini leather desk chair too. Similarly, the brand’s Hotel Amigo in Brussels unveiled a Peter Lindbergh suite last year that featured some of the photographer’s famous pieces. Meanwhile, its Hotel Savoy in France, last year, temporarily hosted replicas of artist Antonio Signorini’s sculptures that guests could not only admire, but also purchase.

Rocco Forte Hotels has remained a family-driven business over the last few decades with the next generation





14

The number of properties within the Rocco Forte Hotels portfolio



49%

The stake that the Public Investment Fund agreed to buy of Rocco Forte Hotels

of the Fortes bringing with them unique growth avenues. Irene Forte became the first of Sir Rocco's children to enter the business in 2013 and eventually steered the company's focus on a burgeoning sector within hospitality – wellness. Since 2018, not only has she acted as the group's wellness director and consultant, but she also launched an organic skincare line with ingredients sourced from the gardens of the group's Verdura Resort.

Lydia Forte, Irene's sister, came into the business in 2014. As group director of food and beverage, Lydia is tasked with growing the culinary division of the business. "The restaurants and bars in each of our hotels represent an enormous part of each property," says Sir Rocco Forte. "They are important because they have the ability to attract local customers which is what creates the atmosphere and enables them to become destinations in their own right. The Donovan Bar and Charlie's restaurant at Brown's in London, the Stravinsky Bar and Le Jardin Restaurant at Hotel de Russie in Rome, and the rooftop terrace at Hotel de La Ville also in Rome are all icons within their cities and bring guests back time and time again.

"We are constantly looking at opportunities for our restaurants and bars. At Hotel Amigo, the Bar Magritte opened in November to huge acclaim, and we are currently looking at a range of restaurant pop-ups at Verdura Resort for the summer. In Munich at The Charles, a world-famous Japanese restaurant will be taking over for a period."

Sir Rocco's youngest son, Charles, joined the group in 2017 and is the director of development. He plays a pivotal role in identifying new geographies for the group to expand. One of his passion projects is Rocco Forte Houses, the →





30

brand's first fully-serviced private units, which it launched in 2019, on the Piazza di Spagna in Rome. "We have had great success with Rocco Forte House in Rome, our apartment-style residences that provide an excellent central location offering all of the amenities of the nearby Hotel de la Ville. Following this model, we will be opening Rocco Forte House in Milan in the summer, anticipating the launch of The Carlton, Milan in 2025. My sister Olga, who runs our design team, is working closely on the design with Paolo Moschino who we have worked with before on Villa Ignea, the 19th-century palazzo in Palermo," says Sir Rocco.

The business has further expanded its real estate offering, specifically with the Rocco Forte Private Villas which are available for sale at prices starting from €2.95 million all the way up to €10 million. "This year we have launched phase two of Rocco Forte Private Villas at Verdura Resort. Launching the first phase in 2021, with 20 beautiful villas on the grounds of Verdura Resort, we are currently in the process of building 20 more villas, which will be put on the market for clients to purchase. They are quite spectacular villas, spanning up to 765 sq ft with views either to the Mediterranean Sea, or to the rolling Sicilian hills behind, beautifully landscaped and well-formed for families or groups of friends. Residents of the Villas can access all the amenities of Verdura Resort including two Kyle Phillips championship golf courses, six restaurants by chef and creative director of food for Rocco Forte Hotels, Fulvio Pierangelini, numerous tennis and padel courts, water sports activities, kids' clubs, infinity pools, and an award-winning spa."

One of the biggest developments for Rocco Forte Hotels came in December last year when it confirmed that Saudi Arabia's powerful sovereign wealth fund – the Public



**FROM TOP:** The pool at Verdura Resort in Sicily; The Julep Print room at Hotel de la Ville in Rome

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** A villa within Verdura Resort in Italy

Investment Fund (PIF) – had agreed to buy a 49 per cent stake in Rocco Forte Hotels in a move that would see Italian company CDPE selling its stake. The Forte family added that it would retain majority control and ownership, with Sir Rocco remaining as executive chairman and Olga as deputy chairman.

"PIF will be minority shareholders and the company will remain family-run, as it has always been. Our last partnership with CDPE worked extremely well and enhanced our development in Italy over the eight years we worked together so we were looking for a partner which was more global. PIF came along with an excellent proposal, they value and respect our company and expertise and share the same values and vision for the future so we are extremely





lucky to be able to partner with them. PIF has a long-term vision and will be very helpful in developing the company further,” adds Sir Rocco.

The entry of PIF into Rocco Forte Hotels has led to speculation about whether the Middle East is next for the hospitality group to extend its reach. To this, he says, that the Middle East has always been a huge source of luxury travellers and represents a significant proportion of guests at Rocco Forte Hotels which are priced at the higher end of the luxury hotel spectrum. “It is important for us to have hotels in the [Middle East] region, as it increases our exposure in the area. Currently, we are looking at projects in the UAE and hopefully will be able to announce a deal in the near future. I also look forward to visiting Saudi again in the next months to see what properties are on offer.”

Rocco Forte Hotels has had its share of challenges – he has previously been vocal about the heavy impact that Covid and the resulting lockdowns and restrictions on travel, for example, have had on the business. However, he has outlined that some of the challenges arising out of

**PIF has a long-term vision and will be very helpful in developing the company further**

globalisation, have in fact led to Rocco Forte Hotels gaining a competitive advantage. “The luxury hospitality industry has seen such a high number of mergers over the years, increasing globalisation and in many cases creating huge luxury hotel companies that are unable to offer guests anything unique or individual. It is because of the very large companies that we stand out and are even more in demand. Our hotels have personalities and a true sense of place, they are individual. We can train each member of staff more easily and curate our guest stays depending on their needs. You walk into one of our hotels and you feel a warmth of welcome which is not necessarily common to other large hotel groups; the family are present and this makes the difference.”

With the recent backing of PIF, Rocco Forte Hotels is poised to grow even further. Sir Rocco says that these growth regions could include the GCC, the main cities and holiday destinations of Europe, and the East Coast of the US. “Our new confirmed ventures are in Milan where we have Rocco Forte House opening this year and The Carlton Milano planned for 2025. We have also signed a contract to operate a new luxury resort in Sardinia’s Porto Cervo, Costa Smeralda, that will open as a Rocco Forte hotel in 2025.” The coming decade could well be the one where the Forte family truly take their hotel business global. **BT**



**N**öelle Homsy, an architect by training, would often find herself at a construction site surrounded by 400 workers, while directing the design of a building and overseeing its every last detail. She gradually moved into a more management-focused role within the construction industry and ended up working for a hospitality operator in Dubai within its development team.

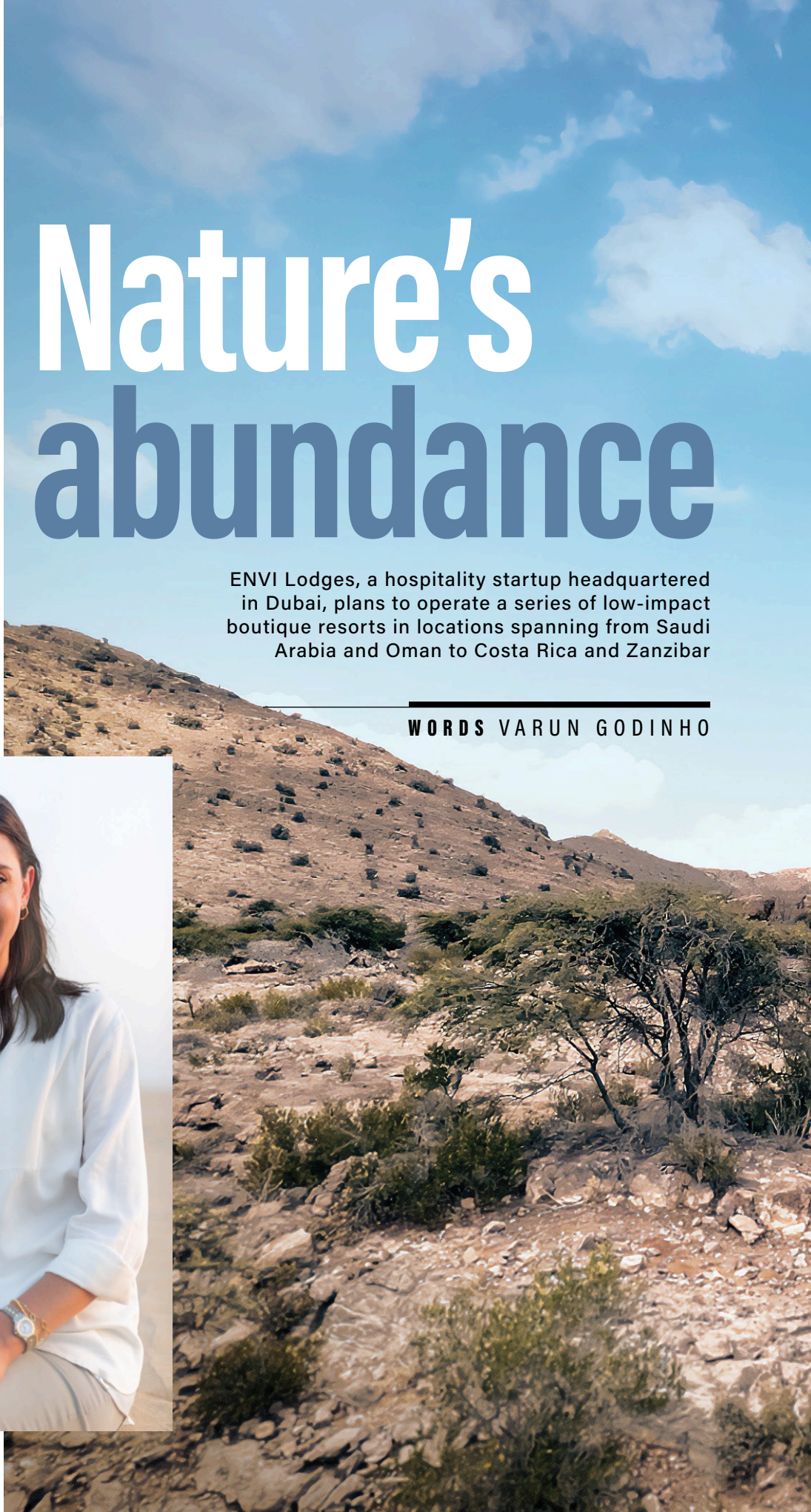
At the time that the pandemic struck, while she was still working within that team, it allowed her time to pause and reflect on the future of experiential hospitality. It led her to fall back on her own experiences of experiential hospitality from a few years prior. "Right after my MBA gap year in 2017, I was based in Singapore and travelled a lot around South East Asia. I stayed at a few very nice eco-lodges in South East Asia. That is when

# Nature's abundance

ENVI Lodges, a hospitality startup headquartered in Dubai, plans to operate a series of low-impact boutique resorts in locations spanning from Saudi Arabia and Oman to Costa Rica and Zanzibar

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WORDS VARUN GODINHO





## ENVI LODGES

**THIS SPREAD:** The upcoming ENVI Al Jabel Al Akhdar in Oman

**BOTTOM LEFT:** ENVI Lodges co-founder Nöelle Homsy

I realised there's a side of tourism that we actually don't know or we're not used to growing up in the Middle East. We're used to the glitz and glamour of traditionally built hotels. I realised that hotels can be very well integrated with nature and with the local communities playing a huge part in delivering a specific guest experience," says Homsy.

That realisation, coupled with her experience within the construction and hospitality industry, led to her along with her co-founder Chris Nader launching ENVI Lodges in September 2021. "Chris and I realised that there's a huge demand in the market from travellers to stay at unique experiential properties that don't necessarily look like their rooms at home. They want to interact with nature, they understand the benefits of responsible tourism and the impact they have when they travel.

"After Covid began, we started to

hear more about sustainable hospitality and regenerative hotels, especially in the Middle East. No brand which was simultaneously global and at the same time maintained the individual identity of each property, focused only on that. The most successful properties around the world are the mom-and-pop shops, individual one-off properties that were built by either locals or an expat who fell in love with the location and decided to create the concept there. But somehow, they fail to replicate that model elsewhere. So, we decided that we need to create an operator company that can easily [replicate that experience] and expand to other continents," explains Homsy.

ENVI Lodges, with its corporate headquarters in Dubai, came to life by way of a basic PowerPoint presentation. To go from concept to realisation, she and Nader began to speak to around 50 people from

diverse backgrounds. "We pitched the idea to people from different industries, not necessarily only those from the hotel and tourism industry, because it's very important to hear different perspectives to cross-pollinate ideas. You can learn a lot from other industries and apply them to the lodging space." The initial concept considered how many keys each property should have, outlined the need for it to operate in the luxury space and defined the amenities and prospective locations for the lodges.

ENVI also built an advisory board that included the likes of Hisham Attar, former senior director Investment Division (MENA), senior director Local Partnerships and former SVP Saudi Equities at the Public Investment Fund in Saudi Arabia; Tea Ros, managing director, Strategic Hotel Consulting; and Jonathan Worsley, chairman of Bench Events. →







## ENVI LODGES

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Another vital member of the team, Homsy says, is Paul Jordaan – a former Six Senses and Aman Resorts executive – brought on-board to manage operations, and is someone she describes as the “third pillar” of ENVI alongside her and Nader.

The plan was to begin with the Middle East and then expand beyond that. However, it was Costa Rica where ENVI ended up announcing one of its first projects back in January 2023. “Our initial plan was to start in the Middle East and then move to other parts of the world. But we got opportunities on other continents which we couldn’t say no to. The Costa Rica site is a very beautiful property and it’s opening around 2026 so we have time to gear up to operate there,” says Homsy.

ENVI has partnered with The Islita Developments to operate ENVI The Islita in Punta Islita on the country’s Nicoya Peninsula. With the South American country aiming to have a zero net emissions economy by 2050, ENVI’s decision to open there was further bolstered. Already, approximately half a million species inhabit the country, which is roughly equal to around 5 per cent of the planet’s total number of species, making ecotourism an important part of that country’s future development.



ENVI The Islita will include 31 guest units made from canvas and wood, as well as 26 “low-impact villas” that will be sold to individual owners and then put back in a rental pool that will be managed by ENVI Lodges as part of its inventory.

Following the Costa Rica announcement, ENVI revealed two destinations in Saudi Arabia. The ENVI Al Nakheel in Saudi Arabia’s UNESCO World Heritage-listed Al Ahsa Oasis was announced last June and is being built within a date palm

farm. It will include 25 eco-lodging pods configured in one- and two-bedroom options. There will be an arrival pavilion, café, a farm-to-table dining concept, a spa and a swimming pool. Thai-based Fractal Architects, along with interior design firm, Kristina Zanic Consultants, have been relying on a ‘plant-based architecture’ model wherein the designs of the pods are a nod to a date palm’s trunk, leaves and fronds. “The Al Ahsa region is part of the 2030 tourism strategy set by the government.





This is why it was important for us to be there. ENVI Al Nakheel is on a date farm and we're trying to create an agritourism experience. The designers and architects have marked the palm trees there and designed the pods to go in between them to minimise the movement of these trees," notes Homsey.

A few weeks later, in August, ENVI revealed another location for an upcoming eco-lodge – ENVI Laguna Bay in King Abdullah Economic City along the kingdom's Red Sea

coast. "The second property that we're working on in Saudi Arabia is on a beautiful pristine beach, nestled between mangroves. Because the mangroves need to be preserved, everything there has to be eco-friendly. There will be around 40 pods distributed along this beach with facilities such as the main house and lobby, a reception, a spa, a kids' club and an Envi Garden to grow fruits and vegetables, and beautiful restaurants sitting directly on the beach," says Homsey. While ENVI Al Nakheel is slated to open in the second half of this year, ENVI Laguna Bay is scheduled to do so early next year.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, ENVI has outlined plans for two properties in Oman – one being a high-altitude resort, while the other is located along a beach. ENVI partnered with Oman's Ministry of Defence Pension Fund to announce ENVI Al Jabel Al Akhdar as the sultanate sets itself a target to attract 11.7 million tourists by 2040. This property will have 40 tents designed by South African firm Tenthouse Structure and will include a heating system – necessary when you consider that the location is 2,000 metres above sea level. Down at sea level within Oman, ENVI recently announced ENVI Al Sifah along the shores of Al Sifah, an hour away

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** ENVI Al Nakheel will be built within a date palm farm; Natural materials will be used in the construction of ENVI Al Nakheel; A rendering of the bedroom within ENVI The Isleta in Costa Rica; ENVI's property in Costa Rica is located in the country's Nicoya Peninsula

from the country's capital Muscat. Here too, ENVI has partnered with Tenthouse to offer 40 sea-view tents with guests enjoying a mix of a wadi and beach experience during their stay. Both Oman properties will be operational next year.

Beyond the Middle East, and apart from Costa Rica, ENVI has announced an expansion into Africa, specifically into Zanzibar. There too it plans to build a beachfront lodge in Paje. Scheduled to open towards the

end of this year, it will feature 25 villas with private pools.

While eco-tourism and low carbon impact are central to ENVI Lodges, Homsey chooses a pragmatic approach to the limits to which sustainability can be built into ENVI's model. "When we created ENVI, we created our overall sustainability standard based on pillars including respecting the land, creating it with a sense of place, sourcing locally, renewable energy, and so on.

"And while Chris and I had big dreams to save the planet, when it eventually came to designing and developing the units, we realised →

**You can learn a lot from other industries and apply them to the lodging space**





that we could not save the planet. We cannot implement all that we had on paper as the execution of some of it was simply not feasible. We had to be more reasonable when it comes to sustainability and find the balance between what is comfortable for guests, buildable within a specific location, and what is economically sustainable too. We're dealing with projects on a case-by-case basis," says Homsey. She adds that technology could play a greater role in the company's sustainability plans going forward, especially to monitor consumption, identify areas to enhance efficiency, and aid guests in making sustainable choices.

Building eco-lodes in different parts of the world is capital-intensive. Homsey and Nader are therefore in the midst of raising funds. One of the major geographical areas where ENVI Lodges plans to expand next is Europe. "We're raising funds to plant our flag on the European continent, and plan to develop four lodges around France. We're raising around €100 million for France together with a partner there. We're allowing investors who put money in this fund to buy equity in ENVI to fund our next chapter," says Homsey.

Last month, ENVI announced a deal with Blue Ocean Capital France to build these lodges in France. ENVI indicated that phase two of the cooperation with Blue Ocean Capital France will involve considering developments beyond France into markets including Spain, Greece, Portugal and Italy.

While building eco-lodes isn't cheap, the return on investment,

**ABOVE:** ENVI Al Sifah in Oman will open next year

**BELOW:** A rendering of ENVI Al Nakheel in Saudi Arabia

she says, is relatively quicker as the turnaround time for these projects is typically around 18 months. Add to that the small scale of each of them – typically between 30-50 keys – means that ENVI can keep operating costs down too. "The return

on the investment is much higher than other hotels because of the high average daily rates that you can command [with eco-lodes] based on your uniqueness, location, and the experiences you can create.

**We look for plots that are remote and not suitable for urban development**



"We also look for plots that are remote and not suitable for urban development and this is why we get access to cheap land. Sometimes, the owners own the land. At other times, such as in Saudi, they lease it from the municipality or from whichever ministry owns it at very affordable rates." She is crystal clear that ENVI will operate within the luxury space – though not the ultra-luxury space. Prices therefore will be on the aspirational scale, though not bordering on the unaffordable spectrum of some other hotel brands.

Crucially, each property will integrate the local community into its plans. That would involve engaging these communities to build storytelling experiences for guests, bringing local chefs to experiment with the cuisine, using local hiking guides, or sending guests on sustainable fishing trips with a local fisherman as will be the case in Oman. "All of these little gestures and little infusions of local culture make or break the experience. And this is what I saw succeed during my travels in South East Asia. In some cases, my stay was very simple, close to not being comfortable in terms of amenities or the bed. But I was so happy simply because the experience was delivered by warm locals and that's what we are trying to replicate, but at the luxury level."

The litmus test of whether Homsey and Nader have got it right with their hospitality startup will be realised later this year as ENVI's first set of properties become operational. From now on though, there's no turning back. **BT**



# TÜRKİYE

## A COUNTRY OF WONDERS



**TURKISH AIRLINES**

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER





# Hitting the suite spot

It's boom time for business class innovation, with product launches continuing into 2024 and beyond. We round up some of the best seats (and suites) due to debut this year

WORDS GORDON SMITH

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**A**re you sitting comfortably? Once upon a time, this summed up airline expectations around premium air travel; a more generously proportioned seat and, if you were lucky, a spot of lunch and a glass of fizz. Fast forward a few decades and, thanks to a combination of innovation and competition, today's carriers are reimagining the concept of flying business class.

Several sky-high perks – once the exclusive preserve of first-class passengers – are filtering into the business class cabin. This blurring of boundaries has led many operators to scrap first class altogether, while others have scaled back their top-tier offering to select routes and certain aircraft types.

This trend shows no sign of slowing down. Over the following months there are due to be more than a dozen new business class products entering service with carriers around the world. Such is the comfort afforded by many of these next-generation options, it can leave the term 'business class seat' feeling slightly outdated. From Auckland to Abu Dhabi and countless cities in between, 2024 will be the year when the business class suite truly goes global.

## Lufthansa

The German flag carrier is using the Allegris brand to market its new long-haul offering. Spanning all four cabins, Lufthansa is billing the changes as a "completely new travel experience" and for business class passengers, the most eye-catching (and potentially puzzling) feature is the enormous range of seating options.

In recent years standardisation has been a prized commodity,

with this egalitarian approach ensuring that no seat is significantly better than others. Lufthansa is tearing up this rulebook with a total of seven different business class seats on offer within the same cabin, each tailored to different passenger preferences.

The litany includes front-row 'double suites', others with extra-long (86-inch) beds, and some with additional work surfaces for mid-flight meeting

**RIGHT:** Lufthansa's Allegris business class product, featuring a sliding privacy door

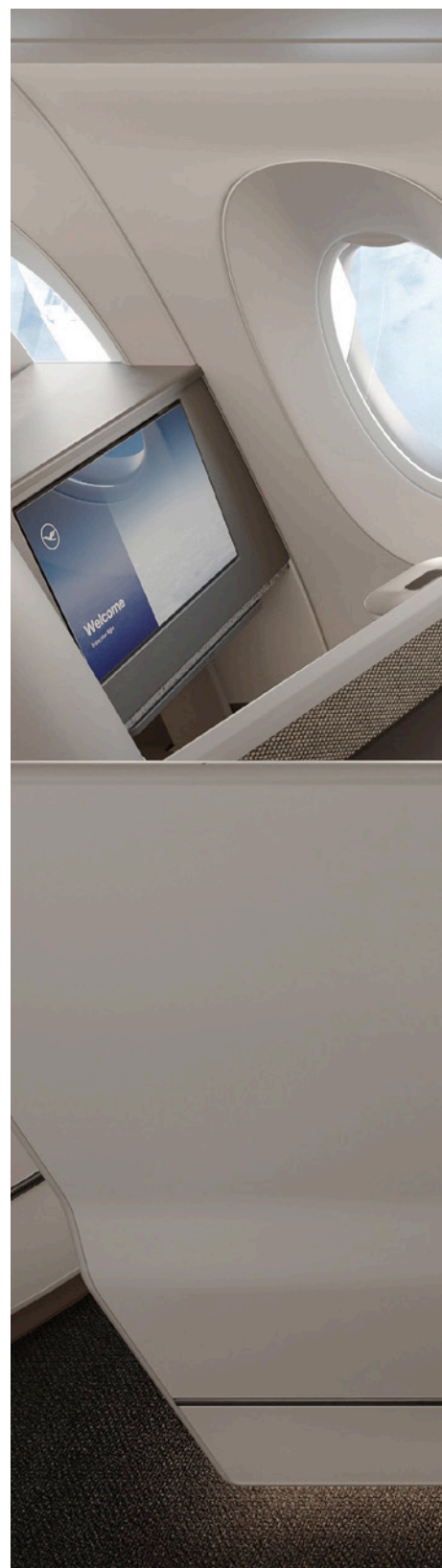
preparations. A double seat, in which the central console transforms into a reclining surface for two, is also available. All options are equipped with sliding doors and 4K HD monitors of up to 27 inches.

Other highlights of this product include a personal heating and cooling system, wireless charging modules, and an individual minibar.

Allegris forms part of the largest product and service overhaul in the history of the Lufthansa Group, comprising a total investment of €2.5 billion. More than 80 new jets, including Boeing 787-9s, Airbus A350s, and the yet-to-launch 777-9s, will feature the new standard. Existing aircraft such as the Boeing 747-8 jumbo will also be retrofitted, with the entire project seeing 27,000 seats replaced. [lufthansa.com](https://www.lufthansa.com)

## Cathay Pacific

After a particularly prickly pandemic, Cathay Pacific is bouncing back in style. In









August, the Hong Kong carrier sparked a frenzy of speculation with a promotional video hinting at a new business class proposition. Due to launch in the second quarter of 2024, the Boeing 777-300ER will be the first to see the reimagined cabins, which Cathay is branding the Aria Suite.

While specific details are yet to be confirmed, the teaser clip invites guests to “savour the quiet luxury” of the all-new spaces, which include a privacy door and wireless charging. Regular readers may notice that Aria is breaking from Cathay convention, with the carrier’s traditional dark green interiors replaced with a more natural palette of earthy brown and wood tones.

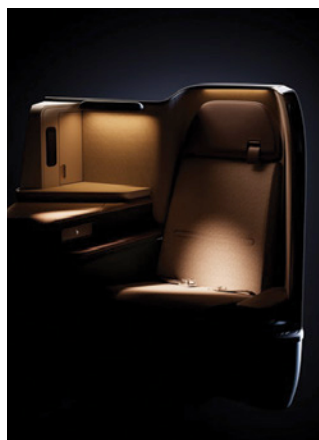
The Aria exterior appears to have gently curved wings, which could be popular for those wanting increased privacy without closing the sliding door. Enhanced personal storage options in and around the seat are also in the pipeline, meaning essential items can be kept secure while still within easy reach. [cathaypacific.com](http://cathaypacific.com)

## American Airlines

Billed as the Flagship Suite, American Airlines promises a “truly private, premium experience”, complete with the all-important privacy door, for its new business class product. This is due to be installed on new Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner and Airbus A321XLR deliveries from 2024. Chaise longue-style seating and more personal storage space are among the notable features.

American’s new 787-9s will boast a business-heavy configuration with 51 of the

**CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:** American Airlines’ Flagship Suite; flydubai’s Business Suite; Cathay’s Aria Suite



new seats – 21 more than the existing setup. On the Dreamliner, these will be complemented by 32 premium economy options. Meanwhile, the A321XLR will be equipped with 20 suites and 12 premium economy seats.

The good news is that it isn’t just the 787 and new Airbus narrowbodies receiving the new look. Starting in late 2024, the 777-300ER – a mainstay of transatlantic operations – will also be overhauled. American has 20 of the Boeing jets in

service, with all of these due to be retrofitted to bring them up to the new standard. [aa.com](http://aa.com)

## Flydubai

Often overlooked by its all-widebody big brother Emirates, flydubai is proving that single-aisle aircraft can still be big on comfort. The UAE carrier, whose fleet comprises exclusively of Boeing 737-800s and MAX jets, is preparing to shake up the sector with the launch of The Business Suite.

Flydubai is the launch

customer for the new format, which offers direct-aisle access and claims to rival the experience found on widebody aircraft. The development is the latest in the evolution of the Dubai-based carrier, which entered the business class market in 2013 and introduced its first lie-flat bed in 2017.

Flydubai is also breaking from traditional narrowbody offerings, with The Business Suite boasting a high-backed shell incorporating a closeable sliding door. While not the





**ABOVE:** Etihad's new business class on its Boeing 787 aircraft

**BELOW:** Air India's forthcoming business class product

widest seat in the sky, the lie-flat bed extends to a relatively generous 75 inches.

From a tech perspective, built-in Bluetooth enables easy connectivity with personal devices, and a 17.3-inch 4K touchscreen is equipped with a comprehensive back catalogue of films and TV programmes.

The design team has also placed extra attention on the smaller details to make the most of the limited space, with ambient lighting built into the shell of the suite alongside extra lights inside personal stowage areas and under the ottoman. Flydubai says the new suites will

be deployed "on select longer flights" within the carrier's network. Originally due to enter service in November 2023, they are now expected to be rolled out from early 2024.

**flydubai.com**

## Etihad Airways

Proving that there's no room for complacency, Etihad is gearing up for an overhaul of its popular Boeing 787 business class cabin. The UAE's national carrier is further enhancing an already competitive product, building on the well-received launch of the Business Studio on its flagship A350-1000 in June 2022.

Described as a "second evolution", the wall of each suite has been increased in height compared to the model debuted on the A350. Each of the new 787 aircraft will have 32 business seats, all with direct aisle access in a 1-2-1 configuration.

The seats recline to 78 inches and feature a 17.3-inch 4K screen, Bluetooth pairing, and wireless charging as standard. Sky-high surfers can also look forward to improved wifi connectivity with live streaming capabilities. The first of the new-look jets is due to enter service early in 2024.

**etihad.com**

## Air India

The radical transformation of the Indian flag carrier is due to pick up pace in 2024, with a wholesale fleet upgrade in the works. A US\$400 million programme to modernise the interiors of its existing 43 widebodies is already underway, with new business class seats, IFE systems, and enhanced wifi among the key elements. Air India says that by March, around a third of its long-haul aircraft will be retrofitted, with the full fleet "reborn" by the end of 2025.

In line with a slick new livery and corporate branding, the interiors of the business class jets are also being refreshed with a more modern look and feel. It's farewell to the classic 'ketchup and mustard' furnishings, and hello to a metallic colour scheme of contemporary greys and brushed silver tones.

Frequent flyers keen to experience the very best that the airline has to offer should track its new A350, which entered into service last month and has initially been deployed on domestic routes within India. **airindia.com**







**LEFT:** Air New Zealand's Business Premier Luxe suite, set to launch in 2024

**BOTTOM:** LOT Polish Airlines will unveil its new business class offering in 2026

## Air New Zealand

With Air New Zealand's longest routes boasting flight times of more than 15 hours, its business class product is a particularly important consideration. Yet in recent years, the airline's long-haul cabins have started to show their age, especially compared to fresh-faced offerings from

international rivals. To reaffirm its place in the market, the Kiwi carrier is gearing up for a rather rousing 2024 with the biggest change to its business class in well over a decade.

The most coveted spots in the new cabin are eight Business Premier Luxe suites. These have been cleverly designed to

take advantage of traditionally underutilised space in the front row. Akin to The Retreat Suite on board Virgin Atlantic's new A330 neo, each has a spot for a companion to join, with design chiefs even suggesting that two passengers could share a meal in the luxurious surroundings. Put all of this

together and the carrier is promising "the best sleep in the sky".

In total, there are 42 Business Premier seats in the new setup, all equipped with a sliding privacy panel, 24-inch entertainment screen, wireless charging, and a spacious storage unit. Note, however, that only the Luxe suites have a fully closing door.

Passengers on the airline's flagship services linking Auckland with New York and Chicago are due to enjoy the new offering from September 2024. Air New Zealand will welcome a tranche of factory-fresh Boeing 787-9s equipped with the new product, while its existing Dreamliners will also be overhauled. Watch this space. [airnewzealand.co.uk](https://airnewzealand.co.uk) **BT**

SAFRAN/AIR NEW ZEALAND; LOT POLISH AIRLINES

## BEYOND 2024

### SWISS

Switzerland's flag carrier is eyeing a 2025 launch for its new business class cabin. The revamp coincides with the expected delivery of its first A350-900s, with five due to join the fleet before the end of 2026. As a Lufthansa Group airline, the multi-faceted Allegris platform is the basis for the upgrade, but look out for distinctly Swiss twists when it comes to furnishings and the soft product. [swiss.com](https://swiss.com)

### QANTAS

Antipodean aviators should also count 2025 as a year to watch. Qantas is due to unveil its new business class suites to mark the launch of nonstop flights linking Sydney with London and New York. A dozen of the carrier's specially modified Project Sunrise A350-1000s will ply the ultra long-haul routes, which can carry up to 52 business class passengers as part of a four-class setup. Given the marathon journey times, expect a focus on wellbeing

amenities and other premium lifestyle features. [qantas.com](https://qantas.com)

### LOT POLISH AIRLINES

Poland's flag carrier is making major improvements to its Boeing 787-8 workhorses. London creative agency Tangerine, known for its collaborations with British Airways and Finnair, is working

on the project, which will see LOT's business class switch to a 1-2-1 direct-aisle layout with sliding doors. The retrofit will also introduce a new design language, with the aim of incorporating "the spirit of Polish hospitality" while injecting greater modernity into the brand. The first Dreamliners with the new look are due to take to the skies in 2026. [lot.com](https://lot.com)







# A vibrant way of life

**Vida Emirates Hills**, with its proximity to two golf courses, is an ideal spot for those who treasure combining sports with their hotel stay

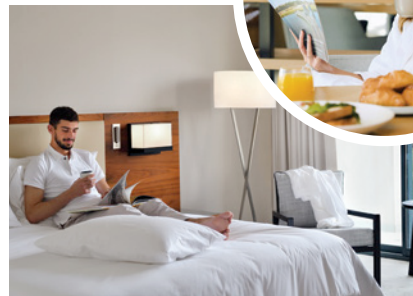
**V**ida Emirates Hills, a part of the Emaar Hospitality Group, is located in an enviable location within Dubai. It is not only in the heart of the city with easy access to nearby beaches, but it is also within striking distance of a golf course and offers a range of eclectic amenities.

Located in a lush green neighbourhood, the hotel is a community space for those who work hard and play harder. Vida Emirates Hills is situated in the green and calming surroundings of Dubai's exclusive gated community of Emirates Hills.

Only a handful of properties can boast of being on the doorstep of a championship golf course. As business travellers visiting Dubai often find themselves torn between a hectic work schedule and finding the time to unwind, all they need to do here is take a few

steps from their hotel and they will find themselves on a world-class golf course ready to tee off in the company of colleagues. Furthermore, they can even continue a business meeting from earlier in the day on the golf course in the evenings.

Food and beverage options at the hotel include Junipers, which is inspired by an old-fashioned library serving an extensive menu of specially crafted drinks and bar bites. Origins is an all-day dining restaurant with international treats overlooking lush golf-course views.



As a pet-friendly hotel, you can also bring along your pet. There's a special Purina Pet playground here that allows your four-legged friend to enjoy themselves in the dedicated play area while you unwind.

For those who turn to this property for their business needs, there are co-working spaces that make it the perfect spot to set up a remote office location.

Now, Vida Emirates Hills is offering an exclusive offer: Early Bird, Big Savings by the Hills.

Plan your getaway well in advance and bask in the special early-bird discounts at Vida.

Subject to terms and conditions, book 30 days in advance and save 15 per cent; book 60 days in advance and save 20 per cent – the earlier you book, the more you save. If a hotel with brilliant

views (and easy access) to a golf course right within the heart of Dubai is what you're searching for, you will do well to book a stay at Vida Emirates Hills.

For more information, visit [vidahotels.com](http://vidahotels.com)





# The Royal Lifestyle



Combo GW/SW made with  
Dots & Score lines. The ball  
stops NOW



"The Putter," like a Rabbit,  
"seeks" the hole every time



The #2 Driver already heralded  
as the longest-hitting golf club





# Limitless

**Jack Charles**, president of The Royal Lifestyle Corp, has had a riveting career that spans from developing his own golf clubs to manufacturing perfumes and even becoming a movie producer. Here, he recaps his incredible journey



"I went to college and played golf, ran on the track team, and studied engineering and drama. I also acted in several stage plays while in college and had fun creating characters different from myself. I was interested in how things were made, so after college, I worked in engineering for four years and loved it.

While working as an engineer, I played golf before and after work and on the weekends. This helped keep my body and golf game in very good shape. Eventually, I got tired of working indoors all the time and decided to try professional golf. This was fun, but 'living out of a suitcase' just wasn't for me, so I decided to try and become an actor, writer and producer. So I went to Hollywood to see what would happen. Because of my acting and golfing abilities, I wrote and hosted several TV commercials for various auto companies, and got invited to play golf as a celebrity in charity golf tournaments all over the US.

The genesis of my line of golf clubs is a noteworthy one. I remembered from my engineering days that energy is magnified as it comes out through the surface of the ball bearing – like hitting a nail with a hammer. I named this line of clubs after a movie I wrote called John Jumbo, and named the driver in this line of clubs JC1 – The Only One. This club quickly gained a reputation for being one of the world's longest-hitting golf clubs.

Now, as president of The Royal Lifestyle Corp, with our promotional abilities, our brands and products are already in high demand worldwide. My wife, the Roman countess Donatella Pecci-Blunt, has developed a superb perfume fragrance called 'Contessa.' I would like very much to see The Royal Lifestyle become a household name and a super profitable company. As a company, we have no debts and all our products have been extensively tested to make sure that people will love them. As always, I am keen to speak with potential partners and investors who can help take the Royal Lifestyle brand to the next level.

For more details on The Royal Lifestyle, call +971567106410 / +33680860281 or visit [theroyallifestyle.com](http://theroyallifestyle.com)



DESTINATION


# A good life

Historic sites, breathtaking landscapes  
and exquisite culinary delights are an  
integral part of a visit to Sicily

---

WORDS IAIN AKERMAN





THIS SPREAD: Mount Etna is an active volcano site

Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean and home to Mount Etna, is a place I'd always wanted to visit. Partly because of *Cinema Paradiso*, director Giuseppe Tornatore's ode to the golden age of film, and partly because of food. Film and cuisine. What better reasons to travel?

Thanks to flydubai, there's a direct flight to Catania-Fontanarossa airport three times a week from Dubai which is perfect for anyone planning a little getaway or an extended weekend trip. You can catch a train from Catania to Palermo, but it'll take an age, so we opted for the bus, which winds its way across the island via Enna and Viadotto Daino. The scenery is glorious and initially you have Mount Etna as a backdrop. For those holidaying for an extended period, there's always the option to stay a day or two in Syracuse, which is south of Catania and rich in both Greek and Roman history, or in hillside-hugging Taormina. Our base, however, was to be Palermo, a grand but decaying city on the island's north-west.

Before our visit, I asked a friend who had once lived in Palermo for their recommendations. "Just walk around and eat everything you see," she said. "And get lost in Kalsa." We took her at her word, opting not only to stay in Kalsa, but also to spend much of our time there. For hours at a time, we would roam its streets and alleys, searching for nothing in particular, but enjoying its vibrancy and eclecticism. Sicily's capital is a curious medley of artisanal shops, galleries, cafés, bars, restaurants, and food stalls, and is what some people would describe as unpolished. It's a polite way to say dilapidated. There's plaster falling off the walls, the paint is peeling, and there's trash around, but that only adds to its allure.

Kalsa derives its name from the Arabic words *Al Khalisa*, which means "the elected" or "the pure," and stems from the Arab rule of Sicily in the 9th and 10th centuries. Originally an administrative centre under →



**CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:** Discover quaint streets in Palermo; Piazza Pretoria; Piazza Bellini in the historic centre of Palermo; Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri; Norman Palace

both the Arabs and the Normans, it is home to a mix of architectural styles, ranging from the Arab-Norman to the Baroque, and reflects the city's layered history. Such a history means Kalsa features several significant landmarks, including the Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri, a medieval castle that served as a court for the Spanish Inquisition, and the Fontana Pretoria, a monumental fountain located in Piazza Pretoria. It also constitutes a significant chunk of the historical centre of Palermo, with its grand and opulent buildings, seven of which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Among them is the Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio, a 12th-century masterpiece of stunning Byzantine, Norman, and Arab-Norman architectural styles overlooking Piazza Bellini.

It is in Piazza Bellini, located on the border of Kalsa and Albergheria, that our adventure begins. Driven initially by hunger and then by desire, we grab a bite to eat at the appropriately named Bellini before exploring our immediate surroundings. There's the aforementioned Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio, as well as the Church of San Cataldo which dates back to the 12th century, Palazzo Pretorio, and Teatro Bellini – all of them wrap Piazza Bellini in an exquisite architectural embrace. That embrace is replicated across the historical centre of Palermo, with everything from Palermo Cathedral to the Norman Palace reinforcing the city's reputation as a unique cultural tapestry that has been woven through centuries of Arab, Norman, Byzantine, and Italian influence. The Norman Palace is one of the most significant examples of Norman architecture in the world, with its luxurious halls, intricate frescoes, and Islamic arches.

Food has always been, and will always be, one of the primary reasons







to travel. On our first evening, during a meandering stroll from Hotel NH Palermo, via the Foro Italico promenade, and on to Quattro Canti (the centre of historic Palermo), we manage to eat twice. First at Caponata Cucina and Pizza on Via Vittorio Emanuele, and then, much later, at Timilia on Via Maqueda. At Caponata, we ordered the restaurant's namesake dish, a traditional Sicilian caponata. A classic creation brimming with aubergine and a variety of other vegetables, it was wonderfully seasoned with olive oil, tomato sauce, celery, and olives. At Timilia we ate Sicilian pizza with thick, fluffy crusts and rich toppings of prosciutto and buffalo mozzarella. On both occasions we sat outside, mesmerised by the sheer number of people around us.

Palermo is transformed at night. Many, if not all, of its historic buildings are illuminated, and the city's restaurants, trattorias, cafés, and bars buzz with activity. Its terraces and sidewalks fill with people of every age, as do the street markets of Vucciria and Ballarò, which burst to life as locals and tourists enjoy the delights of Sicilian street food. Everywhere you look are the merriments of life. Through this throng of humanity, we walk, stopping occasionally for a drink or to admire a piazza. When we reach Teatro Massimo, we realise we've walked far enough for one day, and head back before our energy runs out.

Palermo is infinitely walkable, even if you trek to the Capuchin Catacombs, which are a good four kilometres from Hotel NH Palermo, a four-star hotel with views of the Mediterranean. An extensive network of subterranean passageways and tombs, the catacombs are a macabre spectacle. Hundreds of mummified corpses in varying degrees of decomposition are on display, including that of Rosalia Lombardo, a two-year-old girl who died in 1920. The catacombs are not too far from the Norman Palace, so our second day is concentrated on the western end of the historic centre. We search for the shooting locations of *Cinema* →



## DESTINATION

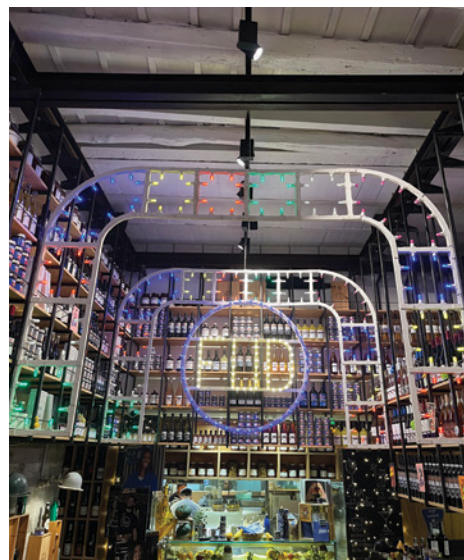
**RIGHT:** Try the Sicilian pizza at Timilia on Via Maqueda: Burger restaurant Fud to the east of Teatro Massimo in Palermo

**BELOW:** Images of Hotel NH Palermo

*Paradiso*, too, before passing the No Mafia Memorial on Via Vittorio Emanuele by chance. A forceful reminder of the violence that has shadowed Sicily, the museum includes a remarkable photographic exhibition on Sicilian banditry, alongside a main exhibition that focuses on the assassination of public officials and anyone who dared to challenge the mafia's authority.

The following day we headed to Cefalù, a ludicrously picturesque coastal town on the island's northern shore. About an hour's drive (or train ride) from Palermo, the atmosphere here is laid-back, with a beautiful stretch of golden sand overlooked by La Rocca, a towering limestone rock formation that dominates the landscape of Cefalù. The town's historic centre is a maze of narrow, cobbled streets and medieval buildings, all lined with shops and restaurants. It is here that I pick up a few souvenirs and gifts, including a set of Sicilian coasters and a bottle of olive oil. There's a cathedral here too. Like the Monreale Cathedral, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and something to behold. It is in Cefalù that part of *Cinema Paradiso* was filmed, with other locations scattered across the northern fringe of the island, including Tornatore's hometown of Bagheria. The film's famous square, however, is located in Palazzo Adriano, a small town about 30km south of Palermo.

On our final night, we head to Fud, a burger restaurant to the east of Teatro Massimo. It's a trendy little spot with great staff, a sizeable outdoor seating area, and jawbreaking burgers. Mine has a Sicilian beef patty topped with mixed salad, buffalo mozzarella, pesto, tomato, and mayonnaise – all between two halves of a soft seeded bun. It's an enjoyable way to end a memorable four days, even if it's not fully Sicilian. [BT](#)





# A NIGHT ON EARTH

## THE JOURNEY



Crafted without compromise. Please savour The Macallan responsibly.

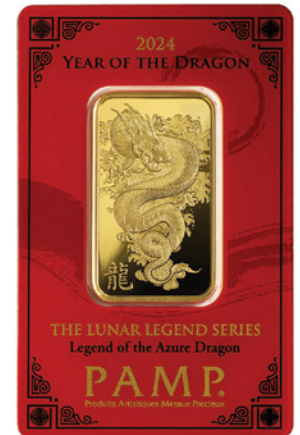
*The* **MACALLAN**



# EAST BOUND



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FC6553  
**Dhs23,370**



As we mark the Chinese New Year this month, and the commencement of the Year of the Dragon, here are a few travel retail products celebrating the occasion at Dubai Duty Free



**Clé de Peau Beauté**  
Le Serum 50ml CNY  
Limited Edition  
**Dhs932**



**Sisley** Phyto-Blanc Le Cushion  
Limited Edition 0c 180062  
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**Swatch**  
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**Hennessy X.O**  
Chinese New Year  
Deluxe Limited Edition 700ml  
**Dhs836**



**Sisley** Ecological  
Compound 125ml  
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**Dhs722**



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Le Rouge Interdit  
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New Year 2024  
**Dhs163**



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 3. Ofuton Sleeping Bag **Dhs845** Snow Peak, [ssense.com](http://ssense.com); 4. Wading Staff **Dhs584** Patagonia, [patagonia.com](http://patagonia.com);  
 5. Fringed Checked Wool Blanket **Dhs374** Pendleton, [mrporter.com](http://mrporter.com); 6. Adventure Easy-Carry Lunch Cooler **Dhs482** Stanley, [stanley1913.com](http://stanley1913.com); 7. The Cave - Maharishi Edition Tent **Dhs3,860** Heimplanet, [heimplanet.com](http://heimplanet.com) 8. Backpacking Coffee Set **Dhs522** Snow Peak, [snowpeak.com](http://snowpeak.com); 9. Wood Burning Stove **Dhs253** Patagonia, [patagonia.com](http://patagonia.com)



# Battling the elements

The best outerwear edit for work and play

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Jacket  
**Dhs1,458**  
ALEX MILL  
[alexmill.com](http://alexmill.com)



ACG Rope de Dope Logo-  
Print Padded Shell Jacket  
**Dhs850**  
NIKE  
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Checked Virgin Wool and  
Cashmere-Blend Coat  
**Dhs16,940**  
TOM FORD  
[tomford.com](http://tomford.com)



Himalayan Quilted Ripstop  
and Shell Jacket  
**Dhs936**  
THE NORTH FACE  
[thenorthface.com](http://thenorthface.com)



Adachi Fleece-Trimmed  
Padded Shell Gilet  
**Dhs1,285**  
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Painting by Almudena Angoso



**Business**  
**Traveller** Middle East

# the report

**Tried,  
Tested,  
Tasted.**

## TRIED AND TESTED FLIGHT

**Beond** Airbus A319  
(business class)  
Riyadh – Malé

**58**

## TRIED AND TESTED HOTELS

**SO/ Uptown Dubai**  
**Virgin Hotels Edinburgh**

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## SMART TRAVELLER

**Our guide to...**  
New routes in 2024

**64**





## Beond Airbus A319 business class RIYADH – MALÉ

58

**BACKGROUND** Touted as the world's first premium leisure airline, Beond took off on its inaugural flight in October 2023. Based out of Malé, Maldives, Beond offers all-business class seats, replicating the private jet experience through best-in-class amenities, a fine dining menu, and attentive service to elevate the on-board experience for leisure travellers. The airline is now offering flights to three destinations: Riyadh, Zurich and Munich. From summer 2024, it will also service Milan and Dubai with regular flights to Malé, for those looking to do it with a VIP touch. There are ambitious expansion plans to offer some 60 routes within the next five years. Best of all, despite the luxurious business class offering, it's competitively priced with ticket costs closer to that of a premium economy fare on other airlines.

**CHECK-IN** As part of the business class experience, all Beond passengers benefit from access to Riyadh's Altanfeethi lounge, which is located at Terminal 3 of King Khalid International airport. This means a dedicated private check-in away from the main passenger terminal, allowing you to simply hand over your passport and relax while all the travel formalities are swiftly completed. There's even a concierge that will personally take your bags to have them loaded onto the plane

(another benefit of flying Beond – the generous 40kg checked baggage allowance). Within 15 minutes, my passport was returned with my ticket issued, so I could more fully enjoy the benefits of the lounge.

**THE LOUNGE** Spacious and contemporary, the Altanfeethi lounge ticks all the boxes for a relaxing pre-departure experience. There's calm background music playing, and plenty of velvet and suede-covered armchairs in cream and emerald green spread across a double-

**The airline is now offering flights to three destinations: Riyadh, Zurich and Munich**

sided space, so it doesn't feel crowded or uncomfortable. If you're working on the go, there are a number of charging ports and free wifi so you can stay connected, crucial for both business and leisure passengers. For keen aviation enthusiasts, the windows look out towards the airfield to encourage a session of plane-spotting. You can help yourself to water, as well as order coffee and juices from a dedicated lounge bar, where service is friendly and nothing is too much trouble. For those looking to dine before take-off, QR code menus serve the kind of tasty snacks and

dishes ideal for grazing on before you fly, but with a regionally-inspired Middle Eastern flavour, like mezze spreads and salads. A plentiful mezze tray arrives well within 15 minutes of ordering it.

**BOARDING** Boarding began roughly 20 minutes after the scheduled boarding time, with staff coming around personally to invite passengers to board. Even with a full flight and despite it being the inaugural one from Riyadh to Malé, everything was smooth and efficient once we began to board, and after a short escorted walk to the gate, we were swiftly in our seats. There was another short delay for take-off, but the staff ensured all passengers stayed busy

### FLIGHT DURATION

5 hours 45 minutes

### CONFIGURATION

2-2

### SEAT WIDTH

21in/53.3cm

### SEAT LENGTH

60in/152.5cm

### BED LENGTH

71.2in/180.8cm

### PRICE

Internet rates for a return Riyadh-Malé flight in February start from SAR8,659

### CONTACT

flybeond.com





and hydrated, coming around with welcome juices and refreshing, lightly scented towels. A seatbelt-style restraint is required for take-off and landing, in addition to the normal waist restraint.

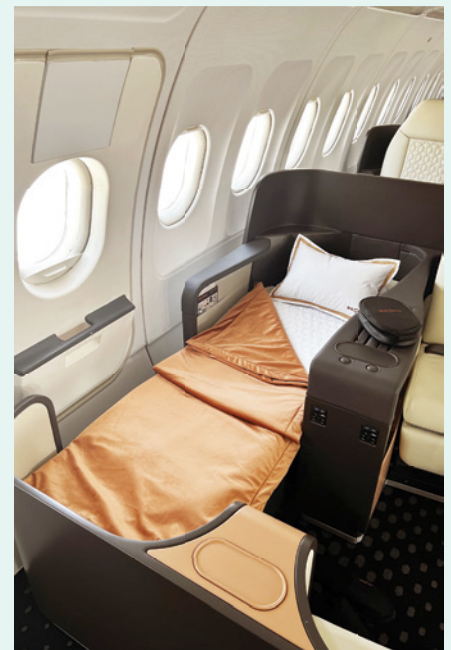
**THE SEAT** The in-flight experience is all about giving guests a luxurious and exclusive experience, so there are just 44 seats on-board, configured in a 2-2 layout. The lie-flat Optimares-designed leather seats present here, which are also found on-board the Four Seasons' private jets, are finished in smart, soothing cream and are generously sized. While there's no real bad seat on this plane, a window seat ensures you get the best views as you drift over the island archipelago of the Maldives closer to arrival. At each seat, there's a focus on technology, and each passenger is given Beats headphones (noise cancelling, of course), and can set up an iPad in front of them to stream a selection of blockbuster movies, comedic series' or listen to a podcast. Although the setup does require some level of explanation initially as it isn't obvious, an instruction manual is on hand to help. The entertainment selection isn't as extensive as some more established commercial airlines, but there's good variety nonetheless. Prefer to watch on your phone? Simply link the headphones up to your phone and stream away. There are also in-built charging ports, and ample storage space both overhead and in the area by your feet, so whether you're travelling with cabin baggage or just the essentials, there's lots of room to spread out.



**From summer 2024, it will also service Milan and Dubai with regular flights to Malé**

**THE FLIGHT** Each seat is neatly laid out with Beond branded amenities in signature orange and slate grey. Comfy slippers make you feel right at home, there's a pillow and blanket for getting some R&R inflight on your lie-flat seat that doubles up as a bed, which cabin crew will even upgrade with a mini-mattress should you wish. At just short of two metres, the lie-flat option is incredibly comfortable, and when sunken to lying flat, you feel a good level of privacy from the person sat in the seat next to you. A leather amenity kit is stocked with a toothbrush, sanitiser and even pillow mist, to make sure you're feeling refreshed again as you prepare to touch down.

The service is of the high standard you'd expect in business class. Throughout the flight, staff pass by offering to put down a mattress for those trying to get some sleep, or offer water, hot drinks and snacks. Snacks were frequently offered throughout the flight, from bags of nuts to dates and crisps, in a way that didn't feel annoying but was still attentive. An à la carte menu goes far beyond the traditional culinary offerings on a flight, with guests able to order dishes such as wagyu beef with a creamy mash and rich gravy (which I chose) and



Maldivian lobster with seasonal vegetables. A still-warm bread basket, of which several options are silver served, is a nice touch to open the palate as guests wait for their main meal. The order was taken within the first hour of our flight, but it was roughly halfway through the flight when the food was served, which felt in sync with the time zone we were headed to. It's all served swiftly on delicate chinaware that makes you feel as much like you're in a fine dining restaurant as you are on-board a flight.

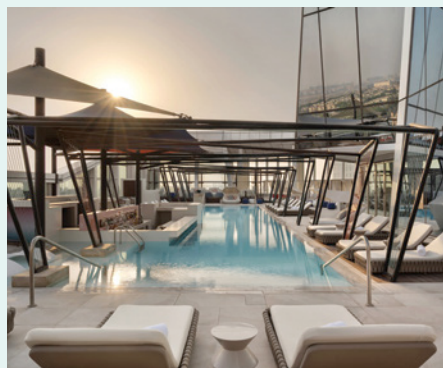
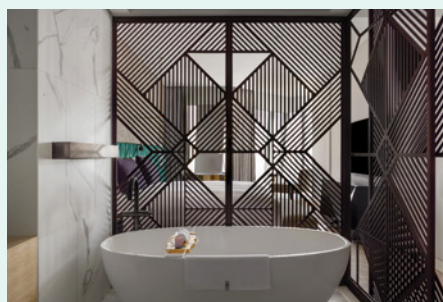
**ARRIVAL** There's a slight rush to clear everything away in time for landing, and as such the final bits of preparation for landing didn't have the same finesse as the rest of the on-board experience, but this can be accredited to operations still being in their infancy. We arrived slightly behind schedule at Velana International airport and were taken via bus to the airport terminal and quickly processed through immigration into the terminal, where our luggage was already waiting on the belt.

**VERDICT** Beond has big ambitions for the premium leisure aviation sector, and its initial routes feel well-chosen to cater to that market. With an expanding fleet and competitive pricing, coupled with its very impressive hospitality offering, this might just be the new way for the luxury leisure traveller to reach their favourite destinations.

*Alice Holtham*







## SO/ Uptown Dubai

**BACKGROUND** Accor and joint venture partner Ennismore opened the first Middle East property under their luxury SO/ brand in the second half of last year. The mixed-use Uptown Tower has office spaces from floors 9-30, 227 SO/-branded residences from floors 48-75, and 188 rooms and suites between the two.

**WHERE IS IT?** Located close to Jumeirah Lake Towers, the 340m high Uptown Tower stands out gloriously amongst its immediate vicinity where it is the tallest building.

**WHAT'S IT LIKE?** Upon entering the lobby, we were gripped with its curated selection of art, unique architecture and tasteful design. The lobby artwork has been designed by APL and Capsule Arts. There are green velvet sofas, marble tables, statues, a 3D effect on the soaring pillars, geometric patterned overhead lights, and a glass staircase – a very chic space indeed. There is an excellent selection of coffee table books too from major publishing houses including Phaidon, Assouline, Rizzoli, and Beta-Plus.

**ROOMS** From the lobby, you will need to take the elevator up to the 34th floor and then change elevators to make your way to your room. We stayed in the 67 sqm Atelier

one-bedroom suite. Avant-garde design is a major focus here, and so the coffee table in the living room resembled an abstract-shaped sculpture, while a piece of framed 3D art hung just over the dining table. In the bedroom, there were mechanised curtains controls bedside. There were also USB charging points on either side of the bed which had international socket adaptors. The suite makes very smart use of the available space – a recessed area in the room that would have otherwise been lost to the curvature of the building – has instead been smartly designed into a viewing area with a chaise

**This is a hotel that prides itself on art and design**

lounge set within it to allow for great views from the window. The large bathroom had Lanvin products in full-sized bottles and a freestanding bathtub.

**FOOD AND DRINK** There's a lobby bar and lounge, Savant, located behind the reception and The Citronelle Club, one level above, is open from 6pm-midnight and offers pan Asian cuisine. Instead, we made our way to the Uptown Brasserie all-day dining restaurant located at the other end of the check-in desks in the lobby. The views of the low-slung Jumeirah Park villas from the restaurant are amazing, so best to take up a spot near the window. For lunch, we opted for an excellent onion soup and seabass fillet, while for dinner the burgundy

snails in parsley and garlic butter, baked tiger prawns (we weren't adventurous enough to order the frog legs) and burrata all highlight the French-Italian strengths of this restaurant. Hotel guests can make their way here for the daily à la carte breakfast.

**MEETINGS** From the lobby, you can take the elevator down to the meetings and events space. There are three meeting rooms fitted with AV equipment. A ballroom is located nearby that can host up to 1,000 guests and can be split into two. There is also a large pre-function area just outside the ballroom.

**LEISURE** The spa here is stocked with Anne Semonin products. It has three treatment rooms for men and another three for women, as well as one couple therapy room – the couple's room features a water bed. The Technogym-equipped gym is open throughout the day. There is a yoga studio too. The outdoor pool, located on the seventh floor, has stylish clam-shaped pods adjacent to it to relax poolside.

**VERDICT** The hotel has a very strong personality that attempts to cut through the cookie-cutter one-size-fits-all design that unfortunately plagues far too many hotels. This is a hotel that prides itself on art and design and will be a delightful stay for any aesthete. *Varun Godinho*

### BEST FOR

Time spent in the lobby in the company of some excellent coffee table books

### DON'T MISS

A meal at Uptown Brasserie

### PRICE

Internet rates for a midweek stay in February start from Dh\$1530 for an Atelier suite

### CONTACT

Uptown Tower, Uptown, Dubai; +971 4 820 8888; so-hotels.com



# WHAT'S ON AWARDS 2024

DUBAI

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LEISURE & ENTERTAINMENT AWARDS

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# Virgin Hotels Edinburgh

**BACKGROUND** This property marked the European debut for Virgin Hotels when it opened in June 2022, and was followed by a Glasgow property in August 2023.

Virgin Red and Virgin Hotels' The Know members can link their profiles to earn Virgin Points when booking a stay.

**WHERE IS IT?** In Edinburgh's Old Town within the city's landmark India Buildings on Victoria Street. There's also a separate entrance on Cowgate via the all-day dining space Eve.

Transport options include the Edinburgh tram stop at Princes Street, which takes you to the airport, or a 15-minute walk uphill via North Bridge and the Royal Mile to Edinburgh Waverley railway station.

**WHAT'S IT LIKE?** While the bright red Virgin branding at the doorway stands out on the bend of Victoria Street, the rest of India Buildings' facade remains untouched, so it doesn't jar with the city's historic architecture.

The higgledy-piggledy layout of the hotel reflects the maze-like city itself, with various wood-panelled corridors, staircases and passageways taking you to different parts of the property. While it can be a little confusing, I found it characterful and in keeping with the neighbourhood. As the hotel is on a slope, there are two banks of lifts in different areas of the building taking you to different floors.

As you enter from Victoria Street (which is technically the sixth floor) a majestic red-carpeted staircase leads to the Oculus area

on the eighth floor – a beautiful light-filled dome with the original glass cupola and a plush seating space – while a sharp right instead takes you to the reception area.

The reception doubles as a passageway to other areas of the building, which isn't ideal at peak times, but staff in tartan trousers with tablets can also help. Check-in is from 3pm, with fun playing card-inspired keycards, and checkout at 12pm.

Further notable spaces include the roof terrace on the seventh floor, which overlooks the city's rooftops and Edinburgh Castle, and the colourful Funny Library on the sixth floor filled with books and knick knacks.

**ROOMS** The 222 rooms (or 'chambers') start from 24 sqm – Castle View rooms are recommended – and occupy ten floors. Behind townhouse-like red doors, the rooms are stylish with soaring ceilings, wood panelling and jazzy touches.

My Grand Chamber room (28 sqm) was open-plan and included a plush vanity area sandwiched between the toilet and shower

**A staircase leads to the Oculus area, a light-filled dome with the original glass cupola**

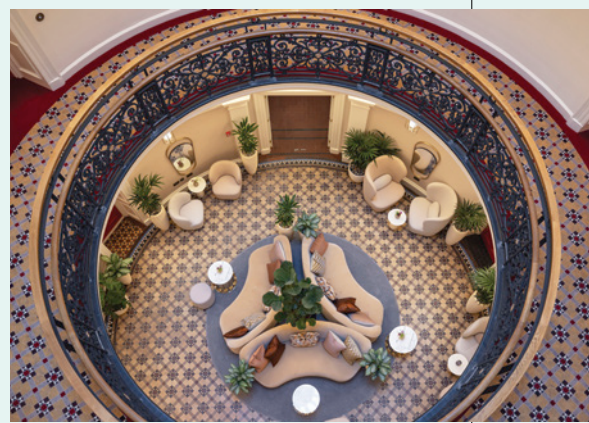
cubicles (which are behind frosted glass), an open wardrobe with a safe, and a sink area in the main space. A curtain can be drawn to separate the sleeping zone, with a soft and comfy king-size bed built into a sofa – plus built-in plug sockets so you can work at the small table and charge your devices. There's also a 50-inch flatscreen TV with streaming capabilities.

It's very on brand for Virgin, with a mini red Smeg fridge, a rotary telephone and a welcome message from the hotel in red lipstick on the mirror. On the eco side, there are large glass bottles of filtered water and local large-sized toiletries by Arran Sense of Scotland.

I downloaded Virgin Hotels' app, Lucy, during my stay which enables you to control room features and request services such as late check-out.

**FOOD AND DRINK** The buzzy Commons Club Bar on the sixth floor is also clad in wood panels, with shelves of colourful cocktailware and bartenders that converse while theatrically mixing drinks.

Eve is a colourful, casual all-day dining spot on the first floor offering small plates,



but check the events calendar as this doubles as a venue for pub quizzes and live music. Breakfast is served here daily 7am-11am, with hot food to order or a small buffet (£17).

For a quieter and more refined Scottish dining experience, head to Commons Club restaurant in the vaulted basement.

**MEETINGS** There are four meeting and event spaces, including the 198 sqm Greyfriars – a former medieval church with vaulted ceilings – with space for up to 150.

**LEISURE** There's a 24-hour gym on the third floor with Technogym equipment. Rooms also include yoga mats.

**VERDICT** This hotel is ideally located with quirky design, nods to the neighbourhood, lively public spaces and comfortable rooms for work and play. *Hannah Brandler*

## BEST FOR

A stylish city centre stay with a lively atmosphere

## DON'T MISS

The Green Leaf cocktail at Commons Club Bar

## PRICE

Internet rates for a flexible midweek stay in February start from £283 for a Grand Chamber room

## CONTACT

1 India Buildings, Victoria Street, Edinburgh EH1 2EX; +44 131 526 4810; virginhotels.com





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*Our guide to...*

# New routes in 2024

**R**oute networks have been bouncing back fiercely in the past year, with flight statistics across the board approaching pre-Covid levels. Here we look at some of the new routes launching in 2024.

## **AIR CANADA: STOCKHOLM**

Air Canada will launch two seasonal routes to Stockholm in June 2024, with three weekly flights from Montreal and a twice-weekly service from Toronto. Both routes will be served by three-class Boeing 787 Dreamliner aircraft.

There are currently no other airlines flying between Montreal and Stockholm, while the Toronto-Stockholm route is also served by SAS.

## **QANTAS: PARIS**

Oneworld member Qantas is adding another direct service between Australia and Europe with the launch of a new route between Perth and Paris ahead of the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

From 12 July, 2024, the 17-hour Perth-Paris flights will initially operate four days per week on the airline's Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner aircraft, before reducing to three services a week from mid-August 2024. The carrier's 787-9 Dreamliner seats 42 passengers in

business class across a 1-2-1 configuration, plus 28 in 2-3-2 premium economy, and 166 in standard economy class across a 3-3-3 configuration.

## **UNITED AIRLINES: FARO**

The US carrier will become the first and only airline to offer nonstop flights between the US and Faro in Portugal, with a four-times-weekly service from New York's Newark airport starting on 24 May, 2024.

The Boeing 757-200 route will add to United's existing Portuguese services between Newark and Lisbon, Washington Dulles and Lisbon, Newark and Porto, and Newark and Ponta Delgada in the Azores.

## **JETBLUE: DUBLIN, EDINBURGH AND PARIS**

The low-cost carrier will further expand its transatlantic network with seasonal services to Dublin and Edinburgh in 2024. It will operate daily flights from New York JFK and Boston Logan International to Dublin between 13 March and 30 September, 2024, and a daily service from JFK to Edinburgh from 22 May to 30 September, 2024.

JetBlue's newest transatlantic routes will be served by the carrier's A321 neo aircraft, configured with 16 Mint Suites and 144 seats in economy.

Flights between Boston and Paris will also launch on 3 April, 2024, bringing JetBlue's European network to five destinations.

## **GULF AIR: GUANGZHOU AND SHANGHAI**

Bahrain's national carrier Gulf Air will imminently launch flights to China. The carrier will fly to Guangzhou and Shanghai from its hub at Bahrain International airport. The flights will be operated using its Boeing 787 Dreamliner in a two-class configuration of 26 seats in business and 256 in economy.

## **DELTA: MUNICH AND NAPLES**

Delta has announced new routes to Munich and Naples for summer 2024.

The US carrier will offer daily nonstop flights between New York JFK and Naples from 23 May, 2024, adding to Delta's existing Italian routes to Milan, Rome and Venice.

The airline will also launch a thrice-weekly service between JFK and Munich beginning on 9 April, 2024. The carrier will additionally resume flights between JFK and Shannon on 23 May, 2024 – the first time the route has operated since 2019.

## **LEVEL: MIAMI**

LEVEL is set to launch its fifth US destination, with flights to Miami starting in 2024.





The low-cost subsidiary of the International Airlines Group (IAG) will operate three flights per week between Barcelona and Miami International starting on 31 March, 2024.

The carrier will lease a sixth A330-200 aircraft to accommodate the new service, configured with 314 seats.

The new route will join LEVEL's existing US flights to Boston, Los Angeles, New York JFK and San Francisco (seasonal).

#### **LUFTHANSA: SEATTLE, MINNEAPOLIS-ST PAUL AND RALEIGH-DURHAM**

Lufthansa is set to launch three new transatlantic routes from its Frankfurt and Munich hubs in 2024.

First up will be a daily A350 service between Munich and Seattle-Tacoma International, starting on 30 May, 2024. The route will complement Lufthansa's existing flights between Frankfurt and Seattle. The service will reduce to three flights per week for the winter season.

Lufthansa will also launch its first route to Minneapolis-St Paul next summer, with a daily year-round service from Frankfurt. Flights will start on 4 June, 2024, and will be operated by the carrier's Boeing 787-9 aircraft.

The airline has also confirmed plans to fly between Frankfurt and Raleigh-Durham for

the first time, with a five-times-weekly service launching on 6 June, 2024.

#### **NORSE ATLANTIC: LOS ANGELES**

Norse Atlantic Airways will launch a new direct route between Paris and LA on 1 May, 2024, with the six-times-weekly service operated by Boeing 787 Dreamliner aircraft.

The low-cost carrier already operates year-round services from Paris CDG to JFK, and launched a four-times-weekly Paris CDG-Miami service on 11 December.

#### **VIRGIN ATLANTIC: BENGALURU**

Virgin Atlantic will launch a new route to India, with a daily flight from London Heathrow to Bengaluru starting on 31 March, 2024.

Flights will be operated by Boeing 787-9 aircraft, configured with 31 seats in Upper Class, 35 in Premium and 192 in economy.

Virgin was also due to launch a new route to Sao Paulo on 13 May, 2024, but this has now been delayed to 2025. This is the second time the carrier has delayed this route launch, having first announced the service in 2019.

#### **AER LINGUS: DENVER**

Aer Lingus has announced plans to serve Denver International airport from 2024. The new Dublin-Denver service will operate four-times-weekly from 17 May, 2024.

In addition, the carrier is set to relaunch its Dublin-Minneapolis-St Paul service from 29 April, 2024. The reinstated route will initially operate four-times-weekly before increasing to daily from October 2024, and will be served by the airline's A321 XLR aircraft from next winter.

#### **ETIHAD: BOSTON**

Etihad Airways plans to operate a four-times-weekly service from Abu Dhabi to Boston from 31 March, 2024. This marks the carrier's fourth destination in the US, joining Chicago, New York and Washington, along with services to Toronto in Canada.

The new service will be operated by its Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner, which is configured with 22 seats in business and 271 seats in economy.

#### **BRITISH AIRWAYS: ABU DHABI**

British Airways will be returning to Abu Dhabi for the first time since 2020, with daily year-round flights restarting on 20 April, 2024, operated by Boeing 787-9 aircraft. This will complement the carrier's service to Dubai which operates up to three-times-daily.

BA also launched a new thrice-weekly service from London Gatwick to Accra in Ghana, as well as from London Heathrow to Latvian capital Riga, in October.



# FRAME THE STORY

66



## In sync with nature

NEOM's Board of Directors recently announced plans for Zardun – a nature-based resort spread across 4 sq km overlooking the waters of the Gulf of Aqaba. It will host three boutique hotels, each with 100 rooms and suites. These properties will have unique themes and offer guests views of the valley and the sea. With a focus on ecotourism, activities available at Zardun will include rock climbing, mountain biking and other sports. Plans have also been put in place for the destination to re-introduce and nurture species of plants, animals and trees that are native to the region. Furthermore, the destination will support the conservation of marine life and coral reefs within the Gulf Of Aqaba. Zardun joins other sustainable tourism destinations within the Gulf of Aqaba region already announced by NEOM including Leyja, Epicon, Siranna, Utamo, Norlana and Aquellum.

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