

Beyond Convention

Expanding the horizons of a growing MICE market

In 2019, according to the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), MICE (Meetings, Conferences, Incentives, and Exhibitions) travel contributed more than US\$1.5 trillion annually to the global economy. The industry was on a steady upward trajectory, not only supporting hundreds of jobs through the actual events themselves, but also contributing large amounts to the host country's GDP, and offering a major boost to the travel industry through airlines, hotels, and the various hospitality elements that would stand to gain from the foot traffic along the way. And then the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

The global travel and hospitality industry lost US\$925 billion in 2020, yet despite the fact that business events – with MICE travel

as a key part of that – were forced to all but grind to a halt, people still hoped to be able to travel. And within a year after the effects of the pandemic started to wane, surveys already showed that people were increasingly willing to travel, especially for programmes that were “worth it”.

Although businesses across the world adapted to the rise of virtual meetings and remote work in the wake of the pandemic, the allure of face-to-face interactions remains unmatched. In 2024, thanks to this burgeoning demand for meetings in propria persona, and a renewed appreciation for in-person engagement, MICE travel has become an even more vital component of the global business landscape. From industry conferences to trade shows, corporate retreats, and everything in between, the demand for events that can offer

multiple networking opportunities while allowing attendees to close numerous deals under one roof has surged, fuelled by pent-up demand and the appeal of forging stronger and more meaningful new connections in an increasingly globalised world. Today, the MICE tourism market has bounced back with force, valued at \$US42.8 billion in 2022, and with a 7 per cent compound annual growth rate predicted for the next decade. The market is currently estimated to be worth US\$83.9 billion by 2032.

As the boundaries between work and leisure continue to blur with the rise of “bleisure” travel, business travellers are also increasingly extending their business trips to incorporate personal as well as professional gain. The modern business traveller increasingly hopes to maximise their time

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DUBAI WORLD TRADE CENTRE

for business networking and striking deals, while simultaneously carving out chances to explore places beyond the convention halls – particularly those with an authentic cultural aspect, alongside a bit of recreation – and giving businesses in related industries new opportunities to showcase their unique offerings. The international meetings market is estimated to be worth US\$2,330 billion by 2026, and countries from the UAE to Japan have been investing in new infrastructure to support this growth. Locations such as Las Vegas, London, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Singapore, and São Paulo have historically been among the world's best destinations for MICE travel, and with this resurgence, their appeal is still going strong. But there's also a new crop of destinations rising in the ranks. Here, we explore some of the global locations proving to be a boon for this lucrative market, and vice versa.

Dubai, UAE

Established in 1979, the Dubai World Trade Centre (DWTC) celebrated its 45th anniversary this year. The building, commissioned by the late Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum and designed by British architect John Harris – and inaugurated by Queen Elizabeth II – hosts the region's leading MICE events around key sectors including travel and tourism, technology and innovation, healthcare, energy and sustainability, food and beverage, and hospitality. In 2022, it generated Dhs13 billion in economic output, of which Dhs7.4 billion was retained within the local economy, through 63 large-scale events. In 2023, it added 33 new events, hosted a total of 301 exhibitions and events, and welcomed 2.47 million visitors – and its portfolio only continues to grow from strength to strength.

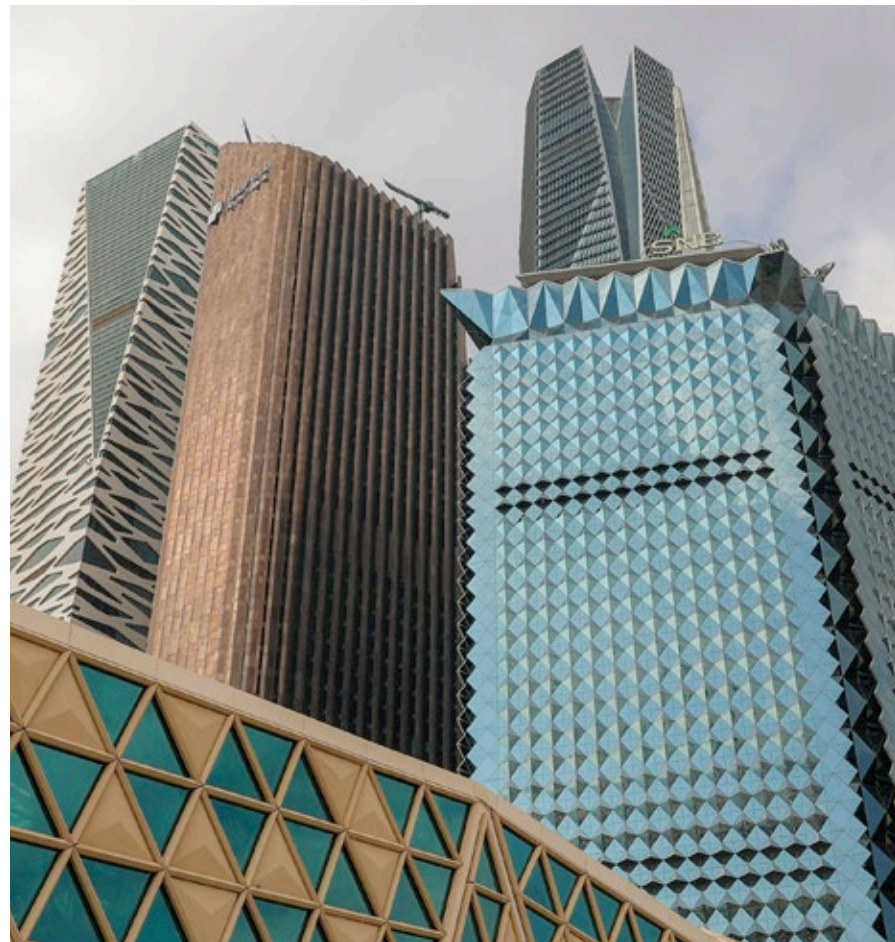
Its 2024 calendar includes 70 shows during the first half of the year alone, with a number of its events not only surpassing their pandemic recovery levels, but also breaking new records.

Among these events, the food, hotel, and catering sectors are among its top three, while the Arabian Travel Market – the leading global event for both the inbound and outbound travel industry in the Middle East – is experiencing a 29 per cent year-on-year growth. More than 40,000 people – including 30,000 visitors – attended last year's event, and this year's, held from 6 to 9 May, is expected to surpass these figures. DWTC was also named the World's Best Convention Center at the 2023 World MICE Awards.

Meanwhile, the UAE's capital is also up and coming, with Abu Dhabi recently having been named the Middle East's leading destination for MICE events by the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA). →

Doha, Qatar

In 2023, the National Museum of Qatar was named Best MICE Event Venue at the World MICE Awards. With the 2022 FIFA World Cup having shown how Qatar can handle world-class large-scale events, and an ever-growing list of venues with state-of-the-art facilities, outstanding hotels, and a rich cultural offering alongside that, Doha's potential as a MICE destination is only starting to scratch the surface. Supported by an expansive destination list through its national airline, Qatar Airways – and the award-winning Hamad International airport, which has been recognised by the Airports Council International (ACI) as the second most-connected airport in the Middle East – Qatar's capital and main financial hub is set to become another rising star for MICE travel in the region and beyond.



Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

With its strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and Asia, and as one of the Middle East's most exciting new travel and tourism destinations of the future, Saudi Arabia is also one to watch for MICE travel. The kingdom's MICE market was valued at US\$2.33 billion in 2023, and is expected to reach US\$4.84 billion by 2030, plus continue growing at a CAGR of 11 per cent by 2030. Supported by the country's Vision 2030 initiative, governmental support to develop the industry, and major investments in its travel and tourism sector – including plenty of new infrastructure with cutting-edge technology and forward-thinking design – and the country's considerable efforts in economic diversification, the kingdom is forecasted to attract countless more business travellers from the globe in the coming years. Amidst its impressive and speedy growth, it's anticipated that Saudi Arabia's MICE industry will offer multiple opportunities for revenue generation across the travel, tourism, hotels, and hospitality sectors, not to mention many new jobs.

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Madrid, Spain

Barcelona has traditionally been known as one of the world's best destinations for business travellers, particularly those who are looking to easily slip in a bit of culture, sightseeing, and great food alongside their work trips – but in recent years, Madrid has also become a fantastic location for MICE travel in Spain. In 2021, it was named the World's Leading Meetings and Conference Destination at the World Travel Awards, and in 2024, it was named Europe's Leading Meetings and Conferences Destination at the European World Travel Awards for the seventh year in a row.

Renowned for the quality and professionalism of the different sectors contributing to a great MICE experience, the city's varied and expansive business environment is bolstered by an amazing selection of gastronomical options, and a wide and diverse range of cultural attractions that are easy to explore. There are also an immense amount of event and exhibition spaces that can cater to a wide range of occasions at

different scopes, including the acclaimed IFEMA Madrid, which welcomes around 2.5 million visitors a year. Established in 1980, it boasts more than 230,000 sqm of combined exhibition space – split into 200,000 sqm of indoor space and 1 million sqm of outdoor space with 12 exhibition halls, two auditoriums, two congress centres, and 80+ meeting rooms – as well as 14,000 parking spaces and a connected metro station, all easily connected to both the city centre as well as the airport.



Tokyo, Japan

With a wide range of convention centres and exhibition halls, a highly-efficient metro system, two key airports, and a wide range of hotels for all styles and budgets – not to mention a large list of new hotel properties

currently opening and set to open – Japan's capital is a city built for MICE travel. From the 5,012-seat Tokyo International Forum – which is described as one of the world's leading grand halls – and the 140ft-tall octagonal Nippon Budokan (which can hold almost 14,500 people), to the Tokyo Big

Sight (which has a total exhibition area of 115,420 sqm), Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Jiyu Gakuen Myonichikinan, and many more, the events, exhibitions, conventions, and related industries are spoilt for choice in this bustling metropolis. The city is also developing a new Shinagawa Station, with a 25,000 sqm site that will house a large new international conference centre and a number of hotels and offices, currently set to complete the bulk of its construction by 2027. While Japan has already historically been known as a popular destination for business travellers from Asian countries, thanks to a number of new initiatives aimed to strengthen its business and economic ties with the Middle East – and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar in particular – the Land of the Rising Sun is certainly one to watch for new opportunities for business travel from the region.



GABRIELE MALTINTI, HIT1912/ADOBE STOCK



Marrakech, Morocco

In 2023, a historic MICE event took place: the inaugural edition of GITEX Africa, which was the international debut of the globally-renowned tech show that began at the UAE's Dubai World Trade Centre in 1981 – making it one of the world's longest-running tech exhibitions, as well as one of the largest. Its debut in Morocco was its first foray into another continent, and the event was welcomed with such excitement that it sold out long before the show. Held in a purpose-built venue under the high patronage of His Majesty King Mohammed VI of the Kingdom of Morocco, organised by KAOUN International and hosted by the Digital Development Agency (ADD) – the public entity leading the Moroccan government's digital transformation agenda under the authority of the Moroccan Ministry of Digital Transition and Administration Reform – the event welcomed more than 900 exhibitors,

startups, and visiting delegations from 95 countries, and provided a major boost to the local economy. This year, it will be back from the 29 to 31 May with an even larger offering, and greater buzz around it.

Marrakech is considered a leading African city for business travel – and one that seems to also be proving popular with digitally-savvy visitors, after also securing the top position in a 2024 online report that analysed Instagram posts tagged with the hashtag #businesstrip among African cities. The local hotels and hospitality industries are taking note.

"MICE tourism represents a lucrative part of the tourism mix across the globe – especially for a country like Morocco, which prizes both business innovation and advanced tourism strategies as part of its economic diversification efforts. This type of travel has only come into focus in recent years, enhancing cultural exchanges and highlighting the visibility of Marrakech as a destination thanks to large-scale

events such as ICOH and GITEX Africa. Interestingly, research suggests that two-thirds of professionals may extend their business trips if permitted, thus stimulating the local economy far beyond a singular conference," says Alain-Thomas Briere, general manager at Mandarin Oriental, Marrakech. "In addition to MICE events, we have seen a huge increase in 'workcations' thanks to the rise of flexible and remote jobs which allow digital nomads to work from anywhere. It's therefore vital that hospitality providers invest in strong wifi, cutting-edge equipment, and inviting workspaces in which professionals can execute their visions. At Mandarin Oriental, Marrakech, every detail is meticulously crafted to provide an environment that epitomises professionalism and warmth. It's about balancing business and leisure opportunities to ensure an exceptional stay, ultimately leading to returning visitors and loyal fans of the brand," Briere adds.

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ONE TO WATCH: Limassol, Cyprus

On 10 July last year, Limassol – the second-largest urban area in Cyprus after Nicosia – welcomed City of Dreams Mediterranean, Europe's first fully integrated resort. The project – which had an investment of more than €600 million behind it – is a new major landmark for the region that will attract thousands of new travellers to the country through premium tourism ventures, world-class entertainment offerings, and a major new international business hub that includes facilities for MICE tourism. The property, created by Melco Resorts & Entertainment, boasts 8,000 sqm of both indoor and outdoor event space, which is equally capable of hosting weddings as well as exhibitions and conferences for a global audience. And any visiting travellers won't have to move far for accommodation and entertainment:

City of Dreams Mediterranean's luxury hotel features 500 guest rooms and suites over 14 storeys – including the largest presidential



suite in Cyprus – that all offer private balconies and epic views of Akrotiri Salt Lake, Lady's Mile Beach, and the Troodos Mountain Range. When one is looking for entertainment, guests can enjoy a swim in the island's largest pool complex, a

family-friendly adventure park – that includes a zipline, trampoline zone, and waverider – or a turn in the 7,500 sqm casino, before refuelling with culinary delights from eight different restaurants and bars. Although the closest airport is in Larnaca – which is a 45-minute drive away – Limassol has enjoyed a significant amount of both local and foreign investment in recent years, allowing it to develop so rapidly and impressively to the point that it is now being dubbed by some as Europe's next coveted riviera. With a number of new hotels, golf courses, and enticing real estate options – that are attracting high net worth individuals from Europe as well as the Middle East – not to mention an increasing amount of direct flights to the country, the tourism scope of Limassol has been growing, and is only set to flourish.

Cape Town, South Africa

While Kenya was named Africa's Best MICE Destination in the 2022 World MICE Awards, for business travellers from the Middle East, South Africa still holds a unique and increasing appeal as a destination for MICE travel. In recent years, the relationship between South Africa and the Middle East – and the GCC in particular – has continued to grow, not just through the number of South Africans moving to work in the region as expatriates, but also through a growing economic focus. Imports and exports have been booming through increased trade that has been growing year-on-year since the early 1990s, in everything from food and beverage to gold, oil-related products, machinery, transportation, technology and electronics, and more. And efforts continue to increase bi-lateral trade between South Africa and countries such as the UAE. There is also a strong cross-investment culture between the two countries – which are both major hubs that can connect business travellers to the rest of their respective regions – through FDI and real estate for both commercial

VALENTINOS LOUCAIDES, OLAUF HOLLAND/ADOBE STOCK



residential property alike. Home to Africa's leading convention centre, the Cape Town International Convention Centre, popular MICE destination Cape Town has previously been named the number one city in Africa for hosting international association meetings by the ICCA. The CTICC boasts a capacity of 121,000 square feet (including two auditoriums), is a stone's

throw from a number of the city's most enticing attractions, such as the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront, and has hosted more than 9,000 events in the last two decades – with almost 700 of them being international events. This number is only set to grow, with reports showing that the centre is already booked for at least 105 international conferences up until 2026. **BT**