

GIG ECONOMY

As more and more travellers plan trips around chasing passion-led events across the globe, “gig-tripping” isn’t just a fad – it’s a whole new way to travel

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

Between 2023 and 2024, former country singer turned international pop star Taylor Swift single-handedly became one of the biggest revenue generators for the global hotel and tourism industries. Already a popular entertainer, this was the era that Swift became a ground-breaking cultural icon. Her aptly-named Eras Tour – which ran from 17 March 2023 to 8 December 2024 – grossed a record US\$2 billion dollars, without even counting merchandise. But that wasn’t the only reason why it was described as being one of the most disruptive events in music history. It was also because of the impact that it had on fan culture; the way that the tour was promoted and marketed – with a concert film and book also released during its tenure; and the profound impact it had on the global hospitality and travel industry.

Swift’s Eras Tour – a record-breaking event consisting of 149 shows in 21 different countries across five continents, with more than 18 different artists enlisted as supporting acts – sold out stadiums across the world... and with them, countless flights and hotels. According to the U.S. Travel Association, each “Swiftie” (as her fans are called) spent an average of US\$1,300 on their tour experience, incorporating travel and transport, hotels, food, and merchandise. The price of the tickets themselves typically cost upwards of US\$1,000, and fans’ spending patterns were more dramatic than any other tour in history. In fact, the association even estimated that as a collective, Swift’s fans contributed upwards of US\$10 billion in terms of



LEFT: Greenday will perform in Dubai in January 2025

BOTTOM: Maroon 5 was a headliner at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix 2024

OPPOSITE PAGE: Taylor Swift’s “The Eras Tour” created a new global phenomenon in travel and tourism, and fan behaviour

overall economic impact. Sales of merchandise – t-shirts, sweatshirts, tote bags, posters, and more – raked in around US\$200 million. Data from JLL, a global property services firm, found that the tour had generated approximately US\$1 billion in additional hotel revenue across the U.S., Europe, and Asia, before it had even wrapped.

As a money-making engine, its impact was powerful enough to rival some of the world’s most popular events. In fact, Taylor Swift’s economic influence has been so intense that a term has been coined for it: Swiftonomics. The daily economic impact of the tour’s three-night run in Vancouver, Canada, for instance, reportedly exceeded what the 2010 Winter Olympics did for the city. The global head of research for JLL’s hotels group was quoted claiming that on an individualised night basis, the figures from nights of her concert in the French capital in May →



IMAGES: KEVIN WINTER/TAS24/GETTY IMAGES; VISIT DUBAI; ETHARA



ABOVE: The UFC has attracted a large number of tourists to Abu Dhabi for its live fight nights in recent years

BOTTOM RIGHT: Eminem's headliner concert at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix 2024 was a major draw for the event

2024 had outperformed the individualised peak nights at the summer's Olympic Games Paris 2024.

Marriott International – the world's largest hotel group – made good use of the hype. As the touring sponsor in select cities, the group created exclusive offers for members of the Marriott Bonvoy loyalty programme. Bonvoy members who were Swift fans – or Swift fans who became Bonvoy members – had the chance to nab seats at highly sought-after concerts in Europe and North America through exclusive sweepstakes, or by redeeming Marriott Bonvoy Moments points. Some prizes were for concert tickets only; others included air travel and hotel accommodations as well as tickets, with the top ones including a Marriott Bonvoy Welcome Gift.

Even hotels that weren't a touring sponsor got on board: the Windsor Court Hotel in New Orleans, Louisiana launched an "Enchanting Eras Tour package" complete with premium suite tickets to the concert and private suite access, Swift-themed rooms (with special merch, including custom headpieces from a local milliner), private transport to and from the concert venue, and US\$200 of credit for breakfast or room service at the property. The packages cost US\$15,000 for the night in a premium non-club room, or US\$17,500 for a premium club option. To enhance the luxury even further, guests could upgrade to the Presidential or King Suite. Meanwhile, in Toronto, the Bisha Hotel renamed one of its suites the "Taylor", with its décor inspired by the pop star, her album artwork, and custom friendship bracelets like those sported by many fans during the tour. To stay there would cost US\$1,500 a night. And it didn't stop there: the hotel temporarily transformed five of its floors by theming them around some of Swift's albums, changing its lounge and lobby with Swift-themed elements, and even dressing its staff in clothing inspired by another album.

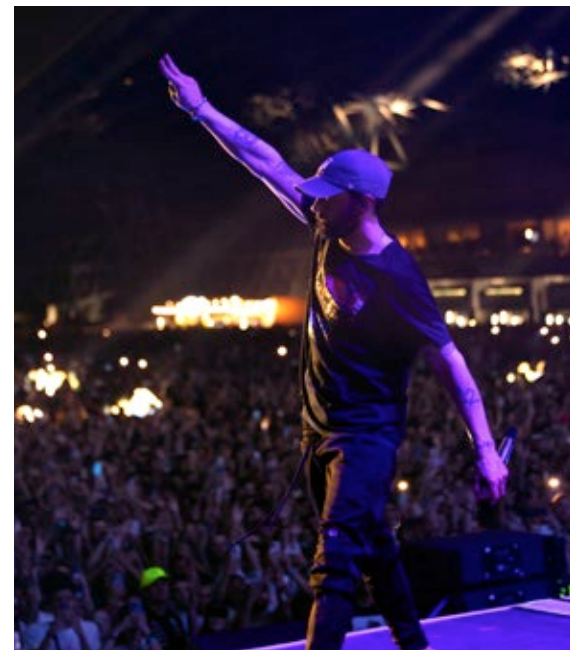
It was a pretty powerful impact from a petite 35-year-old blonde bombshell from West Reading, Pennsylvania.

The Eras' Tour has, in many ways, been a masterclass in how to leverage a buzz-worthy event to create a major travel-related boost. For industry folk the world over, the key lesson here is that fan exploitation can pay some seriously big bucks – and that turning different elements of travel for an event into a rich and immersive experience can really pay off.

GAME, SET, MATCH

Historically, major football events have been another way to attract fans from across the world. The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar not only boosted the aviation sector through an unprecedented number of flights to Qatar (and its neighbouring

countries), the event also inspired changes to the city's infrastructure that had not only significant, but lasting impact. The event was surmised to be the most expensive World Cup in history, but it also injected serious economic benefits back in to the country, with a US\$17 billion boost and the creation of nearly 500,000 jobs. Events like this are about more than just bringing guests in for the duration of the event itself – they're also about helping to put the host locations on the world map in a way that they weren't before. Especially in the age of social media, where those who travel for specific events can share their authentic, direct experiences to countless others in every corner of the world, it's an invaluable form of marketing, PR, and brand- and reputation-building on a world stage.



IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES; ETHARA

MARK YOUR CALENDARS FOR THESE EVENTS IN THE REGION IN 2025

SPORTS



2025 Jeddah E-Prix II, 14-15 Feb, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Held at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit, the electric series will use a short version of the Formula 1 Jeddah Corniche Circuit, with extra chicanes.

Games of the Future 2025, starting 21 Nov, Dubai, UAE. Covering phygital disciplines uniting cyber and classical sports, 100+ countries took part in the first edition in 2024, held in Kazan, Russia.

2025 ESports Olympics, Dates TBC, Saudi Arabia. This will be the inaugural edition, and signifies a new era for international sport.



2025 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, 5-7 Dec, Abu Dhabi, UAE. This will be the 17th edition of this prestigious event, and the final race of the F1 season.

ARTS & CULTURE



Middle East Film and Comic Con, 18-20 April, Abu Dhabi, UAE. The biggest pop culture event in the Middle East that boasts a large celebrity guest list, this will be its 13th edition.

Red Sea Intl Film Festival, Dates TBC, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. This prestigious annual film festival in historical Jeddah has star-studded line-ups.



Art Dubai 2025, 18-20 April, Dubai, UAE. This is the Middle East's leading international art fair.

Islamic Arts Biennale 2025, 25 Jan-25 May, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Organised by the Diriyah Biennale Foundation, it will explore how faith is experienced, expressed, and celebrated.

ENTERTAINMENT



Coldplay at Zayed Sports City Stadium, on 11, 12 & 14 Jan, Abu Dhabi, UAE. The British band's Music of the Spheres tour was an instant sell-out in the UAE.

Green Day Live at Expo City Dubai, 27 Jan, Dubai, UAE. This concert will be the iconic rock band's first time ever performing in the Middle East, and they'll be supported by fellow U.S. rockers The Offspring.

Guns N' Roses at Etihad Arena Yas Island, 27 May, Abu Dhabi, UAE. The rock legends will return with their new world tour.



The Corrs at Coca-Cola Arena, 6 Feb, Dubai, UAE. The beloved Irish pop stars will be playing their greatest hits from the past 30 years.

BUSINESS



Gulfood 2025, 17-21 Feb, Dubai, UAE. The world's largest annual food event will take over the Dubai World Trade Centre in February.

GITEX 2025, 23-25 Apr, Dubai, UAE. The biggest tech and startup show in the world will return to the Dubai World Trade Centre this spring.



Arabian Travel Market, 28 Apr-1 May, Dubai, UAE. Held at the DWTC, this highly anticipated trade show is one of the most important dates on the calendar for the travel and tourism industry.

Future Hospitality Summit 2025, Various Dates. FHS Saudi Arabia will be held in Riyadh from 11-13 May, and FHS World in Dubai, UAE, from 27-29 October.

In December 2024, Saudi Arabia won an uncontested bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup. With the event set to take place just four years after the country arrives at its Vision 2030, it will undoubtedly draw even more eyes to the kingdom's many unique offerings in travel and tourism.

Events of a smaller scale can also lure in visitors who will book hotels and restaurants, shop, and make the most of their time at a destination. When Abu Dhabi's Fight Island launched in the UAE capital in 2020, it was described by Dana White, president and CEO of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), as a workaround for travel restrictions around the COVID-19 pandemic. These

restrictions had made it difficult for some international fighters to enter the U.S. to compete there – and as a private island that would even have a bio-secure bubble, the UAE's Yas Island was proposed as the ideal location to hold them. Although the UAE capital had already had a long-standing relationship with the UFC – with 18 related events having been held there since 2010 – Fight Island made global headlines in a big way, highlighting the appeal of visiting the city for tourism, as well as sporting events. The partnership between the UFC and the Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi was made official in 2019, and has already been extended until 2028. →



ABOVE: A “Welcome To Saudi34” sign seen in December 2024, when Saudi Arabia was announced the host nation for the FIFA World Cup 2034

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GOOD INNINGS

In 2022, DP World announced a five-year title sponsorship for the International League T20. In 2024, airport hospitality brand Encalm came on-board as a sponsor. For the 2025 season, sports tourism company ES Sport is offering fans all-inclusive ticket access and hospitality packages. ILT20 will run from 11 January to 9 February 2025.

Another major sporting partnership attracting global talent – and fans – to Abu Dhabi is The NBA Abu Dhabi Games. In 2021, the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi announced a multi-year partnership to host the first NBA games in the UAE, that would begin in 2022. In 2024, the third edition of the event – with the Boston Celtics and Denver Nuggets going head-to-head at Etihad Arena – not only enticed NBA fans from the entire MENA region and beyond to the games, it also saw the players visiting cultural sites, and their personnel meeting with local businesses. *The New York Times* published a piece titled “Why the NBA is making Abu Dhabi its Middle East hub.” Hotels in the capital created special packages for fans: the Ramada by Wyndham Abu Dhabi Corniche offered deals on rooms or suites with tickets to the games, while the Rixos Premium Saadiyat Island curated an NBA-themed staycation package, including a stay in a one-bedroom suite, complimentary tickets to the games, all-inclusive meals, and access to the hotel’s pool, beach, and entertainment facilities such as a tennis court.

Sponsorships are another way for brands to get in on the action. In 2024, IHG Hotels & Resorts became the official hotel partner of the Emirates Dubai 7s – an annual rugby sevens and social event founded in 1970, which is the longest-running sports event in the Middle East. Through its partnership with Manchester United, Marriott Bonvoy offers its members exclusive fan access, from going behind the scenes at Old Trafford to meeting team players. Last summer, the Marriott Palm Resort Jumeirah unveiled the “Twinned Suite of Dreams” – a room themed around the club, created in honour of the 25th anniversary of its historic 1998-1999 Treble-winning season. Available for a limited time only, its themed décor included unique memorabilia, such as a hub for 90s-era movies, music, and games (complete with curated VHS videos of classic team tales and matches); an adidas Predator Boot display; game-worn jerseys and authentic matchday programmes; and a retro mini-bar stuffed with treats that fans enjoyed during

the decade’s matches. Meanwhile, Premier Inn Middle East hedged a bet on racing by sponsoring a team in the 2023 Formula Ethara junior racing team’s Rookie category. The brand – which places high value on supporting sporting and community events across the Middle East – was rewarded by being able to share the joy of their sponsored team, Limitless Speed, as they became the winning team.

The aviation industry, too, has long seen the merit of sponsoring sporting teams and events. Many Middle Eastern airlines – including Qatar Airways, Emirates, Turkish Airlines, and Etihad Airways – have famously sponsored the world’s best teams in football, tennis, motorsports, horse racing, cricket, and more, as well as events like the Special Olympics. On the cultural front, many aviation and hospitality brands also sponsor festivals, performances, and events surrounding music, film, and literature. Emirates, for instance, has been the title sponsor of the Emirates Literature Foundation’s Emirates Airline Festival of Literature – the Arab world’s largest celebration of the written and spoken word, now one of the world’s leading international literary festivals – since its first edition back in 2009. MICE travel continues to be another major events-driven tourism boon, attracting thousands of people to a city for Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions – and the “bleisure” that tends to follow.

GIG-ONOMICS

In the current day, the term “Gig Economy” is typically used to describe a labour market characterised by a growing prevalence for short-term contracts or freelance work, versus permanent jobs – and “gigonomics” essentially describes the economic effects of this trend. But if Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour has taught us anything, it’s that the *other* definitions of a gig – live performances, or opportunities to earn income outside of standard, long-term situations – can be just as lucrative. In a world where limited-edition products or services – and the sense of urgency, exclusivity, and FOMO (fear of missing out) they can create among consumers – are so highly coveted, events-driven travel, aka gig-tripping, is an opportunity too great to ignore.

From concerts by world-leading musical artists to theatrical performances, sporting events, gastronomic festivals, corporate summits, MICE events, networking meet-ups, seminars and workshops, charitable occasions, and more, there is no shortage of inspiration for savvy businesses to get creative and capitalise on the power of community. Whatever the interest, no matter how common or niche it is, it will have its dedicated followers. By offering more people the chance to immerse themselves in their passions, hobbies, or careers in a way that feels truly rewarding and deeply experiential, there is plenty of opportunity to create a win-win situation for brands and consumers alike. The key here is authenticity – to really speak to the fans, it is essential to understand the fans: what they want, what drives them, what they value. And for brands who can tap into that, the sky’s the limit. **BT**