

DUBAI HOSTS THE ARABIAN TRAVEL MARKET YEARLY FOR THE LAST 28 YEARS. WHY?



Arabian Travel Market (ATM), is the leading global event for the Middle East travel and hotel industry. The event, over ¼ Century old, generates more than \$2.5 billion of industry deals. The annual business-to-business (B2B) exhibition showcases over 3,000 products and destinations from around the world to over 50,000 exhibitors/buyers and travel trade visitors across four days at the Dubai International Convention and Exhibition Centre (DICEC).

But why was Dubai chosen to host this event at all? Dubai has one of the most stable economies and is one of the safest cities in the World. It also hosts the World's largest and busiest airport with 92 million travelers in 2018 (London, UK #2 is 80 million). Interesting to note, Dubai, with a population of 2.75 million had arrivals of 15 Million in 2018. It will have, by 2020 for Dubai's World Fair, 175,000 hotel rooms. Consider this in comparison to New York City, which had a population in 2018 of 8.9 million. New York had 60 Million travelers in 2018 and will have this year, 225,000 hotel rooms, only 50,000 more rooms than Dubai. Putting this in perspective, Dubai has a lot of hotel rooms for ¼ of the population and less than ¼ of the tourist arrivals. To even enhance the comment further, Dubai in 1980, 40 years ago, had about 11 hotels and 3,000 hotel rooms.

Oh yes, to throw Canada into the equation, we have in the entire country, only 425,000 hotel rooms and 15 ½ million arrivals last year in 2018.

I must here digress to share a little bit about Dubai's history; the area was sustained by fishing and pearl diving for a thousand years with the first records of Dubai being made in 1799 when the Bani Yas clan established it as a dependency of Abu Dhabi. Dubai became a separate Sheikhdom in 1833. The invention of artificial pearls in 1926 and the Great Depression in 1929 caused a collapse in the pearl market, which resulted in Sheikh Saeed looking for an alternative source of income and Dubai becoming one of the leading re-export ports in the world.

In 1966, oil was discovered in Dubai, which changed the country beyond recognition and led to Dubai becoming a vibrant, modern, business-centered city.

My first trip to Dubai was in 1980. I was invited to visit the Hyatt Regency Dubai which had just opened with the only ice skating rink in the Middle East, then and now. I think I was invited because the General Manager knew I was a Canadian and assumed I could ice skate and would show some of the locals how it is done. Unfortunately, he did not know that I had played goalie and could only skate side to side.

Initially, the Arabian Travel Market in Dubai started as a result of the growth of the real estate market in Dubai which had more condominium construction than does Toronto, Canada in those day in 2019. Toronto Canada has more Canadian construction than other city in the Americas. Dubai has grown to be one of foremost modern hotel cities of the world. Every major hotel brand and most independents have at least one hotel there and most more. All of Marriott's 31 brands are represented, all of Hilton's and InterContinental's brands as well.

The ATM in 2019

What happens at an ATM? Firstly, the ATM does not open until the Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, arrives and cuts the opening ribbon which could be anytime that he feels it's time to open the show! In 2019 it was at 12:45 p.m. on the first day, April 28th. An important fact is that the ATM is the only major trade fair in the World that is free to enter for everyone; no entrance fee at all! There are crowds of business people mulling around talking to each other in a party atmosphere as all booths offered free refreshments and food. The show opened with free seminars held on Revenue Management, Etiquette for the Region, etc. The organizers also provided Promotional Activities on how to attract more visitors from two of the World's biggest inbound source markets, China and India. During the event, they hold educational seminars. One seminar was on the 3 Pillars of Sustainability

being economic, social and environmental. Other panels discussed how technologies old and new from blogs to podcasts to virtual reality are used to virtually transport the customers to destinations and sell them the Products. There were also, at the Global Halal Tourism Summit, some of the World's leading Halal friendly destinations were on hand to discuss their success in developing Muslim focused tourist offering and revealing exactly how they are tapping into the top Muslim tourist market.

A large contingence of Cruise people attended as Dubai was originally settled by pearl divers and the cruise business is vital to the economy. They expect One Million cruise tourists for the World Fair in starting in the fall of 2020.

There were blurring lines in online and offline travel with more and more of today's connected travelers not limiting themselves from either, but seeking out benefits from both Worlds.

This session took an in-depth look at the opportunity for forward thinking travel business to offer and capitalize on a wide range of touch points.

On the final day, May 1st, the ATM Travel Agents Academy was in action. This very popular initiative saw travel agents receiving invaluable destination briefings and honing their sales and presentations skills in the half day free workshop.

The ATM, due to its location, needs to offer added value to attract exhibitors, attendees and buyers. Especially since the adage that Dubai is a "cheap" place to visit and shop in is long gone. It is now easily as expensive for shopping and eating out as is New York or London. The hotel accommodation rates exceed Toronto's easily, and air B&B has yet to get a foothold in the region.