



# SKIFT GLOBAL FORUM EAST 2025

› 9 Takeaways for the Future of Travel

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## Introduction

The 2025 Skift Global Forum East brought together the region's most influential travel leaders at a moment when the Middle East is quickly reshaping global tourism. This year's conversations made one point clear: the global travel landscape is tilting toward the East as the Gulf accelerates tourism growth, expands air connectivity, and attracts a new wave of high-spending travelers. Speakers discussed how this shift affects market dynamics, visitor expectations, destination development, and long-term strategy.

Leaders also explored the rise of experiential travel, the renewed momentum in luxury, the fast-growing short-term rental economy, the cultural and economic power of major events, and the increasing pressure to build responsibly. The role of AI surfaced throughout the event as brands reconsider how travelers search, plan, and evaluate travel choices in an era of abundant but inconsistent information.

In this report, Skift partnered with the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi to present the most important insights and takeaways drawn directly from on-stage conversations.

### Topics Covered in This Report:

- Why the Middle East is emerging as travel's new center of gravity
- How live events and experiences are reshaping demand
- Why luxury travel continues to grow despite economic uncertainty

- How short-term rentals are expanding the accommodation landscape
- How Gulf destinations can sharpen their identity in a crowded region
- How AI is changing trip planning and consumer trust
- How destinations are rethinking branding, culture, and sustainability

### Speakers Highlighted in This Report:

- H.E. Saeed Ali Al Fazari, Executive Director of Strategic Affairs, Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi
- Maxim Braverman, Managing Director, Sales, Google MENA
- Steve Cox, Executive Director, Strategic Marketing and Communication Sector, Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi
- Raj Rishi Singh, Chief Marketing Officer and Chief Business Officer - Corporate, Flights and GCC, MakeMyTrip
- Cathy Wu, Head of Outbound Travel, Tourism Department, Xiaohongshu (RedNote)
- Elena Sorlini, Managing Director and CEO, Abu Dhabi Airports
- Aahan Bhojani, Founder and CEO, Silkhaus
- Amani El Sehrawey O'Neill, Head of Public Policy, Middle East, Airbnb
- Jim Murren, Executive Chairman and CEO, The Ritz-Carlton Yacht Collection
- Kate Jensen, Head of Americas, Anthropic <

# A Message From DCT Abu Dhabi

It is a pleasure to introduce this year's Skift Global Forum East report, following the inaugural edition of the forum hosted in Abu Dhabi. Welcoming this global community reflects both the region's rising influence and our commitment to shaping the future of travel through collaboration, cultural depth, and strategic investment.

Abu Dhabi is entering a defining moment. As global travel flows shift east, our role as a connector of people, ideas, and experiences becomes even more significant. Two thirds of the world is reachable from our capital within eight hours, and the expansion of Zayed International Airport will provide capacity for 45 million travellers annually.

Yet, accessibility alone does not secure enduring relevance. Abu Dhabi differentiates itself through its ability to combine world-class experiences with a strong sense of place, character, and community pride. This is particularly evident during Ramadan, when the emirate offers a profound opportunity for cultural immersion and connection.

It is a philosophy that guides our evolving cultural and tourism landscape. Saadiyat Cultural District Abu Dhabi is emerging as one of the highest concentrations of cultural experiences, anchored by Zayed National Museum, Louvre Abu Dhabi and Natural History Museum Abu Dhabi.

Our tourism ecosystem reflects the same ambition. Abu Dhabi hosts the world's greatest density of five-star hotels, with 21 new properties under development, establishing a hospitality base that supports exceptional experiences at scale. Global sporting events, major concerts, and the future arrival of Disney Abu Dhabi and Sphere Abu Dhabi are curated with care, ensuring every experience resonates with both visitors and residents.

Our international partnerships further strengthen this foundation. Thousands of trained travel trade professionals across priority markets act as an extension of our team, helping us deliver insight-led strategies that meet the needs of diverse travellers.

The themes explored at Skift Global Forum East highlight the scale of change reshaping global travel, from the Gulf region's growing role as a global hub and India's expanding outbound influence to the return of Chinese travellers seeking culture-led experiences. Experts also discussed the rising power of events, the impact of AI on planning and personalisation, and the growth of new opportunities across the region.

Skift Global Forum East exemplifies the collaboration our sector needs. The conversations held here will help shape the next decade of travel, and we are proud to contribute to this shared journey.

## ***Abdulla Yousuf***

Director of International Operations  
Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi



📍 Al Wathba Desert Resort & Spa

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Find your pace



**H.E. Saeed Ali  
Al Fazari**

Executive Director  
of Strategic Affairs,  
Department of  
Culture and Tourism –  
Abu Dhabi

## Supporting Travel's Next Wave

His Excellency Saeed Ali Al Fazari, strategic affairs executive director at the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi, outlined the emirate's plan to lead travel's next wave through a value-driven tourism model built on quality, culture, and sustainability rather than volume alone.

### Growth With Purpose

Abu Dhabi sits at the center of global mobility, with two-thirds of the world's travelers located within an eight-hour flight. Al Fazari said that the government intended to leverage that position through its Tourism Strategy 2030, targeting 7% annual visitor growth, 18,000 additional hotel rooms, and a nearly doubling of tourism GDP contribution to \$24.5 billion (90 billion AED). That growth is designed to diversify the economy beyond oil, support 216,000 tourism jobs, and anchor community benefits.

### Experience at Scale

Abu Dhabi now hosts the highest concentration of five-star hotels in the world, with 21 additional properties in development. At the same time, investments are expanding both heritage and future-ready assets:

the Saadiyat Cultural District, the reopening of Al Ain Museum, and upcoming institutions such as the Natural History Museum and Zayed National Museum. On the infrastructure side, digital systems such as biometric airport access and unified e-services deliver a smooth travel experience.

With 30 airlines flying to 220 global destinations and a data-driven approach to segmenting demand, Al Fazari said that Abu Dhabi is pursuing "flexible, customized, and digitally enabled experiences" that turn awareness into advocacy and tourism into long-term economic value.

"Abu Dhabi is not just keeping pace with global travel trends. We are helping to define them. Our blueprint blends culture, sustainability, and technology to prove that we can grow responsibly while enriching the lives of both visitors and residents," he said. <



**Maxim Braverman**

Managing Director,  
Sales, Google MENA



**Steve Cox**

Executive Director,  
Strategic Marketing  
and Communication  
Sector, Department of  
Culture and Tourism –  
Abu Dhabi



**Rafat Ali**

CEO/Founder, Skift

# Travel 2030: Building a More Connected Future

Maxim Braverman, managing director, sales at Google MENA, and Steve Cox, executive director, strategic marketing and communication sector, Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi, unpacked how the next decade will transform destination positioning and how consumers plan and experience trips.

## Turning a Vision into Brand Momentum

Cox described Abu Dhabi as being at a key moment where years of investment are now materializing into global pull. He said that the emirate's growth strategy is about defining what the destination means to travelers rather than adding hotels and attractions.

He described Abu Dhabi's marketing challenge as a flywheel: low global awareness but a high-quality product creates room for rapid growth. The priority now is to replace the idea of a "generic Middle East" with a distinct destination identity.

For Cox, the advantage is both emotional and physical. "It's not just about incredible buildings. It's the way you're embraced here, the feeling that you're at home." With 80% summer occupancy, rising airlift, and new cultural and retail districts coming online, he sees the region as "the best place in the world right now for visitor economy growth."

## AI, Search, and the New Rules of Tourism Marketing

Braverman said AI is reshaping every part of how people search, plan, and experience travel. "Search is going through its biggest revolution since it was invented," he said, noting that queries are now longer, more specific, and increasingly driven by voice, video, and image inputs.

Travel marketing is shifting from keyword buying to personalization at scale. AI-generated ad creatives now allow destinations to test and localize campaigns faster and cheaper than traditional production. He also pointed to the rise of creator-led travel discovery, especially among Gen Z, who "don't see themselves as consumers, but as creators."

YouTube's mix of short and long-form video now acts as both inspiration and a trip-planning tool. He said the real opportunity now is persistent engagement, with tools like Google Maps allowing destinations to influence travelers not just before the trip, but while they're already on the ground. ◀



**Saniya Zanpure**

Research Analyst, Skift

## Skift Research: The Indian Outbound Opportunity

India is set to become the world's most powerful outbound travel engine, and the Middle East is already winning the race. Skift Research Analyst Saniya Zanpure highlighted that proximity, policy, and cultural familiarity give the region an edge, but future growth depends on shifting from volume to value.

### A Young Nation on the Move

India's outbound travel market is expanding at unprecedented speed. With over 1.4 billion people and a median age of just 28, the country's young, digitally focused population is driving a surge in spending power. Indian travel expenditure is expected to rise from \$260 billion to \$410 billion by 2030, a \$150 billion increase in just six years. The Middle East already commands a major share of this traffic, capturing nearly half of India's outbound travelers in 2024, led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

### Why the Middle East Leads

The region's success rests on what Zanpure calls the "frictionless advantage" of proximity, strong policy, excellent connectivity, and cultural familiarity. Flights between Indian cities and Gulf hubs are as short as domestic routes, and shared food, entertainment,

and hospitality traditions make Indian travelers feel at home. This ease of travel has helped the Middle East attract and retain India's growing middle class as they shift from value-driven to experience-led tourism.

### Courting the High-Spending Indian

The next phase of growth depends on winning over India's high-value travelers in three key niches: luxury, destination weddings, and live tourism. India adds a new millionaire household every 30 minutes, creating a booming luxury market. The Middle East's tax-free shopping and world-class hotels make it a natural magnet. Meanwhile, the \$2 billion destination wedding market provides multi-day, multi-sector revenue potential, and the region's rise as a hub for global sports and entertainment is drawing young Indians eager for live experiences abroad. Retaining the mass market while capturing these high-value segments will define the Middle East's travel future. <



**Raj Rishi Singh**

Chief Marketing Officer and Chief Business Officer - Corporate, Flights and GCC, MakeMyTrip

## Why India and China Matter More Than Ever

Rising affluence, younger travelers, and social platforms are propelling India and China into a new era of outbound travel. MakeMyTrip's Raj Rishi Singh and Xiaohongshu's Cathy Wu stressed that the next growth wave will reward destinations that eliminate travel friction.



**Cathy Wu**

Head of Outbound Travel, Tourism Department, Xiaohongshu (RedNote)

### India's Outbound Travel Boom

"India is getting more affluent. Around 50 million households can afford to travel today, and this number is expected to triple to 200 million within the next three years. As incomes rise and platforms like Instagram visually inspire people to explore the world, travel is becoming one of the most important spending categories in the Indian economy." — **Raj Rishi Singh**

"The new Indian traveler is younger and more experience-led. Gen Z may not be as affluent, but they spend more on travel than on assets like cars or real estate. They want to discover new places, try new things, and they look for experiences that haven't been explored before, even in familiar destinations." — **Raj Rishi Singh**



**Peden**

**Doma Bhutia**

Asia Editor, Skift

### China's Experience-Driven Traveler

"When Chinese users search for destinations, they want deeper, experience-focused content. Japanese users look for experiences such as snowboarding and hot springs in winter, cherry blossoms in spring, and local festivals in summer. In Korea, people search for beauty and fashion culture: skincare, styling studios, and photo booths that make them feel like K-pop idols. The demand isn't only for places, but for the lifestyle and moments people can live there." — **Cathy Wu**

"Half of our users are under 30, so the content has to feel real and personal. They can immediately tell when something is staged or copied. If a post is duplicated, our AI system reduces its reach or removes it entirely. What consistently performs best is authentic, first-person content, not polished ads. Users trust real experiences from real travelers, and that trust is what drives engagement and, ultimately, bookings." — **Cathy Wu** ◀



**Elena Sorlini**

Managing Director  
and CEO, Abu  
Dhabi Airports

## Transforming the Airport Experience

Elena Sorlini, CEO of Abu Dhabi Airports, outlined how technology, design, and collaboration are transforming Zayed International Airport into one of the world's most passenger-centric hubs.



**Gordon Smith**

Airlines Editor, Skift

**Gordon Smith: How do you ensure that the airport runs smoothly when you're looking at double-digit growth year in, year out?**

**Elena Sorlini:** We've seen extraordinary growth since opening the new Zayed International Terminal in 2023 — 44% in 2023, 28% last year, and another 13% growth so far this year. Passenger numbers have doubled since 2022, from 17 million to around 33 million expected this year. We're fortunate to have available capacity, which is rare in this industry, and we're using technology to shorten processing times while improving the passenger experience.

Our strategy puts the passenger at the center of everything, so collaboration across the ecosystem with airlines, ground handlers, and government partners is essential. We work hand-in-hand with Etihad Airways, our main growth engine, and other stakeholders across the ecosystem to deliver a smooth experience.

**Experience-led travel and live tourism are major trends. How do you bring a sense of Abu Dhabi into the airport?**

We work closely with the city to ensure consistency across the visitor experience. Our service

scores, which average around 4.7 out of 5 in the Airports Council International (ACI) Airport Service Quality (ASQ) survey, reflect this focus. We want transit passengers, who make up about 60% of our total, to experience a taste of Abu Dhabi, even without leaving the terminal. Our collaboration with Etihad's stopover program and other airlines encourages travelers to spend 24 to 48 hours in the city. It's one of the best ways to convert transfer traffic into future destination visitors.

**How close are we to a truly paperless airport using AI and biometrics?**

We've already implemented facial-recognition biometrics at five of the nine passenger touch-points and are rolling it out across all nine. The next challenge is applying this to transfer passengers, where data collection is more complex, but we're running live trials now. Beyond that, we're testing AI-powered systems that predict and manage disruptions across the airport ecosystem. We're also using digital twins and predictive models to anticipate constraints, such as recurring delays, and coordinate responses across airlines, handlers, and government partners. <



**Seth Borko**

Head of Research, Skift

## Skift Research: Travel's Center of Gravity Moving East

Skift's Head of Research, Seth Borko, highlighted that the future of travel is decisively shifting east, with the Gulf driving growth through its aviation strength, the rise of the experiential economy, and rapid advances in AI.

### The New Heart of Global Tourism

Borko demonstrated that the "center of gravity" for international travel has shifted thousands of miles east over the past three decades, from Spain to Turkey, and continues to move toward the Gulf. With unmatched aviation density and investment in tourism infrastructure, the Middle East has become both a key connector and a destination. The region now sits at the crossroads of east-west and north-south travel corridors, positioning it as the natural meeting point for the world's travelers.

### Experience Is the New Identity

Borko described how travel has evolved into a form of self-expression, with younger travelers choosing trips that reflect their personal identities. Food lovers travel to eat, runners cross continents for marathons, and music fans plan entire holidays around festivals. Skift Research data shows that over 70% of travelers

view travel as essential to their lifestyle, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia leading globally. Ambitious tourism projects across the region are tapping into this trend with immersive, experience-driven attractions that inspire visitors to return.

### AI, Trust, and the Future of Trip Planning

Artificial intelligence is quickly changing how people discover and book travel. The share of travelers using tools like ChatGPT for trip planning has more than doubled in the past year. These systems provide personalized, conversational recommendations that mimic a travel agent's role. However, Borko cautioned against what he called "AI slop," the flood of low-quality, generic content that undermines trust. In a world where experiences are deeply personal, impersonal suggestions feel like a betrayal. The future will belong to brands that use AI to deepen trust and create meaningful, human-centered travel experiences. ◀



**Aahan Bhojani**

Founder and  
CEO, Silkhaus



**Amani El  
Sehrawey O'Neill**

Head of Public Policy,  
Middle East, Airbnb



**Peden  
Doma Bhutia**

Asia Editor, Skift

## Powering the Short-Term Rental Boom

The short-term rental market in the Middle East is entering a new phase of maturity. Silkhaus CEO Aahan Bhojani and Airbnb's Head of Public Policy for the Middle East, Amani El Sehrawey O'Neill, discussed how flexible accommodation is reshaping tourism growth across the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

### Building the Infrastructure for Flexible Stays

"The short-term rental model uses residential assets for commercial purposes, which makes this region especially exciting. Most real estate in Dubai belongs to individual investors, so we focus on empowering that long tail of small landlords. Retail investors are emerging in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, while institutional owners remain important. Our challenge and opportunity is to balance both worlds, scaling large real estate portfolios while staying true to the independent hosts who helped us grow." — **Aahan Bhojani**

"We treat hospitality as unbundled. We provide accommodation, but also open the door to broader experiences. Guests can access local events, transport, and curated services. Our partnerships with brands such as Marriott and Emirates show how this works. Travelers can earn Skywards Miles through their stays or book select Silkhaus units on Marriott's platform. These collaborations help us deliver hotel-level consistency while keeping the freedom and authenticity that define short-term rentals." — **Aahan Bhojani**

### Shaping Policy and Community Around Growth

"Short-term rentals now form a key part of the region's tourism network. They add flexibility to markets where hotel occupancy often exceeds 80% and help destinations achieve ambitious visitor targets, such as Saudi Arabia's goal of 150 million visitors. They also draw travelers into local neighborhoods. Guests eat at small restaurants and discover new corners of the city. This diversity of experience benefits both travelers and residents." — **Amani El Sehrawey O'Neill**

"Every major event partnership we pursue involves close coordination with governments to ensure compliance, affordability, and community benefit. Whether it's the Olympics, the FIFA World Cup, or regional festivals, we work to spread the gains of tourism across local communities. When major events create surging demand, short-term rentals step in to meet it and give residents a chance to take part directly in the tourism economy through responsible hosting." — **Amani El Sehrawey O'Neill** <



**Jim Murren**

Executive Chairman  
and CEO, The  
Ritz-Carlton  
Yacht Collection



**Sarah Kopit**

Editor-in-Chief, Skift

## Travel's Next Frontier: Why Live Tourism Is Just Getting Started

Luxury is becoming the strongest and most insulated segment in travel, with immersive entertainment and personalized service driving demand. Jim Murren, CEO of the Ritz-Carlton Yacht Collection, discussed why the UAE is overtaking Las Vegas as the place where the next generation of luxury hospitality, entertainment, and gaming will take shape.

### **Sarah Kopit: What makes a luxury yacht experience different from traditional cruising?**

**Jim Murren:** A cruise ship is a public, high-capacity product — thousands of passengers, standardized shore excursions, and buses moving people in groups. A yacht is the opposite: curated, intimate, and bespoke. We use private drivers, private chefs, and itineraries that reach ports cruise ships can't access, places such as St. Barts, Ibiza, and St. Tropez. Our guests want personalization, not mass tourism.

### **Is pop culture and shows like *White Lotus* influencing the rise of yachting?**

It's not just a pop-culture bump. We've created a new category for ultra-high-net-worth travelers seeking a more private experience than a cruise. These guests are willing to spend up to \$60,000 a week for an elevated level of service. Many already own yachts but want to travel with extended family, so they book multiple suites and make it a multi-generational experience. The real driver is exclusivity.

### **What can a new gaming market learn from the successes and mistakes of Las Vegas?**

When I arrived in Las Vegas, gaming drove nearly all the revenue, but growth eventually shifted to hotels, dining, entertainment, and sports, until over 70% of revenue came from non-gaming. The UAE will accelerate this evolution more intentionally. The government understands the cultural sensitivity of introducing gaming, so it will be highly regulated, compliance-driven, and built with integrity. The UAE has the chance to define the next model rather than copy an old one.

### **What do you see as the most exciting development ahead for this region?**

Entertainment is about to change dramatically. You'll see more immersive, technology-driven formats: holographic concerts like ABBA Voyage, interactive sports environments, and Sphere-style venues coming to Abu Dhabi. Las Vegas used to lead that kind of innovation, but the center of gravity is shifting. The UAE is becoming the place where the next generation of hospitality, entertainment, and gaming experiences will be built. ◀



**Kate Jensen**  
Head of Americas,  
Anthropic



**Rafat Ali**  
CEO/Founder, Skift

## The Future of AI and Travel

AI is becoming the connective tissue of travel. Kate Jensen, head of Americas at Anthropic, discussed how airlines, hotels, and OTAs are using Claude to personalize service, automate operations, and eliminate friction that has been baked into the industry for decades.

**Rafat Ali: What is Claude and Anthropic doing in travel today that the industry should be paying attention to?**

**Kate Jensen:** Claude makes travel more personalized and far simpler, especially for people planning complex trips or dealing with disruptions. Travel companies are building agentic systems on top of Claude to handle everything from itinerary planning to in-trip assistance and customer support. Anthropic is focused on business use cases, not consumer chatbots, so the goal is to power the systems travel brands already operate rather than become a booking interface itself.

**What's the lowest-hanging fruit for AI in travel right now?**

The biggest starting point is customer service and personalization. Travelers stay at the same hotel repeatedly and still have to repeat basic requests because nothing is remembered. AI can fix that immediately. Companies are also using Claude for tasks such as inventory management, rebooking, staffing, or handling receipts and documentation. Any repetitive, data-heavy operational work is a natural entry point for AI.

**What are the biggest security concerns you hear from travel companies?**

The number one question is whether their data will be used to train the model. It's not, unless a company explicitly opts in during a controlled project. Anthropic keeps enterprise data inside the cloud environments companies already use, such as AWS and Google Cloud, so it never leaves their system. The second concern is hallucination risk, which is why Anthropic invests in interpretability research to understand how models make decisions and reduce false outputs. Claude is built to operate at an enterprise level of trust.

**What skills should new talent in travel and hospitality develop in the age of AI?**

The shift right now is toward job augmentation, not replacement. The most valuable employees will be those who already know how to work with AI systems and utilize them to improve their output. Even basic habits, such as writing emails, running reports, and testing ideas through an AI tool, can change the speed and quality of work. Teams need people who're comfortable treating AI as a collaborator, because every role that touches data, communication, or service will eventually rely on it. ◀

## About Skift

Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform, providing media, insights, and marketing to key sectors in travel. Through news, research, conferences, exclusive interviews, strategic sector-focused newsletters, and more, Skift deciphers and defines the global trends that matter to the marketers, strategists, and technologists shaping the industry.

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content marketing studio, working collaboratively with partners like Accor, Abu Dhabi's Department of Culture and Tourism, AWS, Expedia, Allianz Partners, and many more to help brands solve problems, create unforgettable moments, and communicate big ideas through content, research, and event activations.

Visit <https://skift.com/work-with-us/> to learn more or email [skiftx@skift.com](mailto:skiftx@skift.com).

## About DCT Abu Dhabi

The Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi (DCT Abu Dhabi) drives the sustainable growth of Abu Dhabi's culture and tourism sectors and its creative industries, fueling economic progress and helping to achieve Abu Dhabi's wider global ambitions. By working in partnership with the organisations that define the emirate's position as a leading international destination, DCT Abu Dhabi strives to unite the ecosystem around a shared vision of the emirate's potential, coordinate effort and investment, deliver innovative solutions, and use the best tools, policies and systems to support the culture and tourism industries.

DCT Abu Dhabi's vision is defined by the emirate's people, heritage and landscape. We work to enhance Abu Dhabi's status as a place of authenticity, innovation, and unparalleled experiences, represented by its living traditions of hospitality, pioneering initiatives and creative thought.