

DYNAMICS OF THE TOURISM DIASPORA: A SPOTLIGHT ON THE UAE'S INFLUENCE IN THE GCC REGION

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Abstract

The tourism sector in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has witnessed remarkable growth, transforming into a vital component of economic diversification and development. This study examines the evolution of the tourism industry in the GCC countries since the 1990s, with a specific focus on the UAE, as it emerges as a leading destination for international travellers. Utilizing a descriptive and analytical approach, the research explores the economic, social, and cultural implications of the burgeoning tourism sector in the region. Drawing upon a comprehensive review of literature spanning tourism research, impacts, and the specific context of West Asian tourism, the study delineates key trends, challenges, and opportunities shaping the sector. Additionally, the research investigates strategies for intra-regional cooperation within the tourism industry and assesses the role of the UAE in fostering such collaboration. While primarily relying on secondary sources including books, articles, reports, and online materials, the study offers insights into the dynamic landscape of tourism development in the GCC countries, contributing to a deeper understanding of the sector's multifaceted dynamics and its significance in regional economies.

Keywords: Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Intra-regional Cooperation, Economic Diversification, United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Introduction

The tourism sector plays a pivotal role in global economic development, influencing national economies and socio-cultural landscapes. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have

become significant players in the international tourism arena, leveraging their unique assets to attract a diverse range of visitors. Among these states, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) stands out for its remarkable tourism growth, driven by ambitious infrastructure projects, strategic marketing campaigns, and a commitment to delivering exceptional visitor experiences. International tourism has become one of the largest and most important economic sectors of the global economy driving vast flows of people, commodities, and capital. It literally operates on the leading edge of globalization as it continually transfers consumer tastes, cultural practices, business people, and capital into new spaces across the globe.

Tourism research encompasses various interdisciplinary perspectives, from the economic and social sciences to cultural studies. Ritchie, Burns, and Palmer (2005) highlight the need for research into the economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism, emphasizing applied examples for effective planning and implementation. Holden (2005) underscores the theoretical foundations of tourism studies within the social sciences, emphasizing its interdisciplinary nature.

Moreover, the impact of tourism on economies and societies has been widely studied. Prideaux and Moscardo (2006) discuss tourism management and hospitality services, providing insights into research methods and further development of the field. Harrison (2001) examines the significance of tourism in less developed countries, acknowledging its potential for economic growth while addressing the associated challenges.

In the context of the GCC countries, Daher (2007) assesses factors driving tourism development, including the role of local communities and external influences like September 11. Orbasli (2007) explores the challenges of managing tourism and conservation in Islamic neighborhoods, offering insights applicable to historic urban destinations. Oxford Business Group's report "Emerging Abu Dhabi" (2006) provides a detailed account of tourism in the UAE, highlighting its economic contributions and basic amenities. While studies on the GCC countries often focus on political, economic, and security dimensions, research specific to the tourism sector is limited. Most existing literature provides general information and broad trends, neglecting the detailed implications of tourism growth. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the growth of the tourism sector in the GCC countries, with a focus on the UAE. By critically analyzing the positive and negative impacts and exploring strategies for intra-regional cooperation, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of

tourism development in the Gulf region.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Tourism

The tourism sector stands as a quintessential component of global economic development, wielding substantial influence over national economies and socio-cultural landscapes. Amidst the dynamic forces of globalization and shifting market demands, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have emerged as pivotal players in the international tourism arena, harnessing their unique geographical, cultural, and economic assets to attract a diverse array of visitors. Among these states, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) epitomizes an exemplar of burgeoning tourism growth, characterized by ambitious infrastructure projects, strategic marketing campaigns, and a commitment to fostering a vibrant visitor experience.

Historically, tourism in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has not been considered an important industry. This region has nothing that deserves the attention of the tourists as it is mainly of desert and extreme weather conditions. The only places that attracted people from within and outside the region were Mecca and Medina, the holiest sites for the Muslims that constitute part of present day Saudi Arabia. However, arrival of international tourists has increased substantially in the last few decades due to the rapid development the region is witnessing. In world tourism, West Asia sustains its position with a growth rate of 17 percent and the Arab Banking Corporation Investment report on GCC tourism (2009) clearly shows that in 1990 the tourist arrivals of same day was 9.6 percent of the world arrivals which went up to 37.8 percent in 2005 and 47.6 percent in 2007. An important reason behind the growth of the tourism sector has been the conscious decision of some of these countries to reduce their over-reliance on an oil and gas-based economy and to diversify the economic activities to other sources of revenue generation.

In the region, Saudi Arabia's tourism industry is unique in the sense that despite strict entrance visa regulations and the tourism industry has strong growth. The overall GDP of Saudi Arabia is 6.6 percent in which travel and tourism industries represent approximately 2.0 percent of GDP in 2006. One of the main drivers for the tourism industry is religious tourism and every year millions of Muslims come to Mecca for Hajj, the largest annual pilgrimage in the world. Business travel is also growing, given the country's position as the world's largest oil exporter, not to mention its other large industries such as defence. Saudi authorities emphasise their plan to diversify away from their dependence on oil, and the tourism industry has been a focal point. Government expenditure has focused on developing

religious tourism and business travel sectors in particular. The government is also keen to develop its domestic tourism market. Bahrain is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the region with over two million tourist arrival in a year. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) report, the travel and tourism industry of Bahrain contributed 8.3 percent of the total \$ 13.3 billion GDP in 2006. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) report, in 2005 same day tourist arrivals was 3914, which went up to 4519 in 2006.

Most of the visitors are from Arab states of the Gulf but there are also increasing number of tourists from outside the region thanks to an awareness of the Kingdom's rich heritage. The government of Bahrain is encouraging tourism development and contributes to large-scale tourism projects. Oman has many tourist attractions. Growth rate for the tourism sector has increased from 14.5 percent in 2004 to over 19 percent in 2005. The UNWTO report shows that in 2005 same day tourist arrival was 989 and in 2007, it rose up to 1144. The Government is making every effort to improve the tourism sector in order to reflect the geographical and historical importance of the country. Dhofar, the well-known summer resort, is one of the most important tourism locations and attracts increasing number of tourists from inside and outside Oman. Al Jabal Al Akhdar, famous for its agricultural diversity, is yet another attraction. Qatar allures tourists from the world over. Tourism is strongly promoted during international events and exhibitions in Qatar. According to the UNWTO report, same day tourist arrival in 2005 was 913, in 2006 it went up to 946 and in 2007 it reached 964. A significant milestone for tourism in Qatar was the recently-held Doha Asian Games, an international sporting event that changed people's perceptions about this country and its facilities. The tourism industry in Kuwait is relatively less developed. The historical buildings and towers are the main reasons for increasing popularity of tourism. The Liberation Tower in Kuwait is one of the most famous destinations. According to the WTTC, the travel and tourism industry of Kuwait contributed 1.3 percent of the total \$ 8.3 billion GDP in 2006. In 2000 only 78 tourists were found to be arrived in Kuwait, but in 2005, the number had gone up to 104. However, Kuwait is trying to catch up with the trend by developing its tourism sector.

The growth of the tourism industry in the UAE has been phenomenal over the years and is

often regarded as one of the fastest growing tourist destinations. The UAE has experienced the largest growth rate within the region, with an increase of 500 percent in international arrivals between 1990 and 2003. At present the tourism sector accounts for 20 percent of the country's GDP and it is projected to rise further in the coming years. It may overtake oil as the main source of foreign exchange. Due to its developed infrastructure, tolerant culture, safe environment, world-class hotel and hospitable industry and soothing climate, the UAE has attracted both leisure and business travellers from across the world.

In recent times, the development and proliferation of different modes of communication has given a boost to the tourism sector. The UNWTO report shows that same day arrival of tourists was around 7126 in 2005 and it went up to 13145 in 2007. Leisure travellers choose UAE as a favourite tourist destination because they get lots of options for recreational activities that can range from power boat races to sand skiing. Of late, the UAE has also become a much sought after venue for sports events. Some of the main tourist attraction in the UAE are The Abu Dhabi Cultural Centre; the Khor Harbor, an important international trading centre; the small towns of Kabla and Khorfakkan; Al Quwain's long clean beaches; Seneyah Island, a natural reserve and Al Qaram trees etc. Dubai's main tourist attractions are Burj al Arab, Gold Souq market and the dunes safari. Sharjah is famous for sandy beaches and it is also known as the modern city of the UAE, famous for sports tourism. Further, numerous shopping centres and a fascinating night life in the country have also promoted tourism in the UAE to a great extent.

A number of new trends can be discerned in the tourism industry of the GCC countries that point to the potential of the sector. These are: the increase of intra- regional tourism; the innovation of new types of tourism such as medical and health tourism, ecological and sport tourism; the new interpretation of pilgrimage sites and other religious spots in a popular context (Saudi Arabia is promoting the "Summer Umrah"); taking part in tourist fairs and exhibitions in the newly emerging markets; spatial organization of new tourist destinations and hotel capacities; enlargement and enrichment of the tourism support infrastructure (entertainment parks, shopping malls, cultural events and festivals, new flight destinations, apartment hotels, etc); focus on the activities of international and local hotel management companies; and intra-GCC cooperation in the tourism sector at various public and private levels.

Tourism is a fast growing industry and an important sector, contributing significantly to the

economics of GCC countries. Especially in community owned or operated businesses the tourist dollar re-circulates adding to the multiplier effect to the local economy. While the greatest economic benefit is gained from overnight visitors, substantial benefit can also be extracted from transit tourism. Tourism provides opportunities for regional development particularly for regional areas undergoing structural change. Being a labour intensive industry, this sector carries huge potential for employment and opportunities. The principal attribute which differentiates tourism from other industries is that it presents the only possible mass “face-to-face inter-cultural and inter-ethnic dialogue”. People want to interact with other cultures, learn about traditions and even confront themselves with new perspectives on life and society. It has been said that travel is a means to “discover those things unknown or forgotten within ourselves.” Tourism is largely an experience driven industry, and local culture is a unique experience more so local personality, hospitality and food than “built attractions.” However, the tourism industry has a lot of impacts, positively and negatively, on the economies of any particular region.

Tourism and its impact

As with any economic activity, tourism has some negative impacts too. Many of the fears surrounding tourism are closely associated with uncontrolled and unsustainable tourism growth. Tourism is an industry and is dominated by private enterprise with a purpose of making money. Market-led planning can fail to achieve the objectives of sustainable tourism and has a tendency to forget environmental, social and cultural impacts. There is some concern that tourism development may lead to destinations losing their cultural identity by catering to the needs of tourists, particularly from international markets. Tourism also brings new type of social behavior and practices like sexual behavior, drug abuse and women trafficking that may be culturally incompatible with the societal values of the host countries which are predominantly religious and conservative.

Prideaux and Moscardo (2006) provide critical insights into tourism management and the hospitality services. The authors, using insights derived from a wide range of tourism projects, give a profound account of the knowledge and propose a range of research methods being applied to further develop tourism and hospitality service management research. Mowforth and Munt (2003) drawing on a wealth of examples, trace the beginning of sustainability within environmentalism and its influence in the realm of socio-cultural and economic thinking, policy and practice. The authors also deal with the issues pertaining to the

third world development and tourism and the emergence of pro-poor tourism.

Moreover, Harrison (2001) is of the view that the significance of tourism in less developed countries continues to be a matter of contention as many nations seek to expand their industries in pursuit of economic rewards, but become vulnerable to adverse impacts while doing so. The author's arguments are important in the context of raising awareness and improving understanding of tourism's place in contemporary society and the development process. Here, the author has assembled a varied and thought-provoking selection of papers to illustrate some of the key issues relating to the ongoing debate on the role of the tourism industry in a countries development.

Chawla (2004) investigates and established the linkage between global tourism and the new millennium global economy. She forcefully argues that the global economy will be governed by Technology, Telecommunication and Tourism. Tourism has the potential to create maximum number of jobs. It helps to earn valuable foreign exchange. However, the rate race among the developed and developing countries to expand tourism indiscriminately, the author argues, has resulted in severe cultural and ecological damages to the host country. Development does not mean increase in GNP and GDP alone. It must add to prosperity and happiness. An important feature of the tourism industry is its contribution to the national integration and creation of harmonious social and cultural environment. It also encourages respect for and preservation of monuments and heritage properties.

It is necessary to have an overview of the global tourism. Chauhan (2005) provides a very good overview of the leading tourism countries. The author argues that tourism in recent years has developed into a global phenomenon, which has become a basic need that involves hundreds of people, involving agents in tourism activity, either the government tourism industry or public society. Almost all of the modern countries both developed or developing, in the world have established tourism as a sector in their economical, social, and cultural development. The author discusses the cultural dimension of tourism in the West Asian region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of the growth and impact of the tourism sector within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, with a particular focus on the United Arab Emirates (UAE), reveals a remarkable transformation over recent decades. The GCC countries, historically overshadowed by their reliance on oil and gas-based economies, have

strategically diversified towards tourism as a key economic driver. This transition has been accompanied by substantial investments in infrastructure, marketing campaigns, and the cultivation of unique cultural attractions. The UAE stands out as a beacon of tourism growth within the region, experiencing a staggering increase in international arrivals and a significant contribution of 20 percent to its GDP from the tourism sector. This growth trajectory underscores the country's development of world-class amenities, a hospitable environment, and a diverse array of leisure and business attractions. Moreover, the proliferation of communication channels has further propelled the tourism sector, making the UAE an attractive destination for a wide range of travellers.

The tourism sector in the GCC countries, particularly the UAE, has experienced significant growth in recent decades, contributing substantially to economic development. However, this growth has brought both benefits and challenges, necessitating a comprehensive examination of its impacts. In essence, the tourism sector in the GCC states, epitomized by the UAE's rapid growth, exemplifies both the opportunities and challenges inherent in leveraging tourism as a driver of economic diversification and socio-cultural enrichment. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is essential for charting a sustainable path forward, balancing economic growth with environmental stewardship and cultural preservation.

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