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UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Visits India to Deepen Strategic Partnership

NEW DELHI: His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE, arrived in India this afternoon for a historic official visit that underscores one of the most dynamic bilateral relationships in the world, one built on centuries-old cultural ties and powered by modern economic ambition.

This marks Sheikh Mohamed's third official visit

to India as President and his fifth journey to the South Asian nation in the past decade, reflecting the depth and momentum of UAE-India relations that have transformed from traditional friendship into a comprehensive strategic partnership.

Sheikh Mohamed's previous visits to India include trips on September 9-10, 2023 and Jan 9-10, 2024, as President of the UAE,



and visits on February 10-12, 2016, and Jan 24-26, 2017, as Crown Prince of

Abu Dhabi.

The UAE President's latest visit comes at a time when bilateral trade has crossed the symbolic \$100-billion mark in 2024-25, while more than 4.3 million Indian expats, representing 35pc of the UAE's total population, form the backbone of people-to-people connections between the two nations.

(Cont. on page - 2)

IndiGo hikes night allowances of pilots

CHENNAI: India's largest airline IndiGo, which recently faced operational crises due to a shortage of pilots and crew, has announced increase in pilot allowances across categories.

The airline will raise night stop allowances for pilots to Rs 3,000 from the

existing Rs 2,000, while first officers will see their allowance increased to Rs 2,000 from Rs 1,000. The airline has also increased deadheading allowances for both categories, raising them to Rs 4,000 from Rs 3,000 for captains and to Rs 2,500 from Rs 2,000 for first officers. Deadheading refers to the practice of transporting airline crew

(Cont. on page - 2)

Changi airport fourth busiest international airport

SINGAPORE: Changi Airport was the fourth-busiest international airport in 2025, according to data from global travel data platform OAG. The airport recorded a seat volume of 42.6 million for 2025, three per cent higher than in the previous year, OAG's World's Busiest Airports of 2025 report said.

This brought Changi Air-

'Welcome my brother': PM Modi receives UAE President upon latter's arrival in India

Today, he will hold bilateral talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi to explore ways to further strengthen strategic, economic and cultural co-operation.

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) released a video with the facts and figures that highlight the strong, strategic and multi-faceted India-UAE relations.

The numbers tell a remarkable story of economic integration. The UAE ranks as India's third-largest trading partner, while India holds the position as the UAE's second-largest trading partner, with Indian imports valued at over \$63 billion in FY 2024-25.

For India, the UAE is the second-largest export destination, with exports reaching \$37 billion in the same fiscal year. The robust trade relationship was fortified when both nations signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in February 2022, opening new avenues for commerce and investment.

(Cont. on page - 3)

Flight disruptions due to R-day rehearsals

NEW DELHI: Travellers passing through India's busiest hub should brace for significant disruptions this week.

A Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) confirms that Indira Gandhi International Airport (DEL) will suspend all take-offs and landings between 10:20 am and 12:45 pm each day from Jan 21 to 26.

The closure—part of heightened security and air-space management for the Republic Day parade and aerial fly-past—could affect more than 600 flights, according to avia-

tion-data firm Cirium. Airlines are already re-timing services: Air India has advanced its London flight to 8 am, while IndiGo is pushing several domestic departures to the late afternoon.

For travellers whose new flight times might push them over visa validity dates—or for companies suddenly rerouting staff through other countries—VisaHQ can smooth the process. The platform's India desk (<https://www.visahq.com/india/>) can rush-process fresh e-visas, secure extensions or

obtain multi-entry permits, with real-time tracking that helps mobility

(Cont. on page - 2)

Kochi registers surge in tourists

KOCHI: The gateway to Kerala tourism is living up to its name, as evidenced by the tourist buses plying on the thoroughfares of Kochi and the multi-lingual crowd thronging the well-catalogued tourist spots in the district.

This tourism season has been excellent, since there has been a significant increase in the number of tourists, both domestic and international, arriving in Ernakulam, especially in Kochi. "The 2025 tourism

year has been a good one, and we can see a similar trend happening this year too," an official with the state tourism department told a TV channel adding that Ernakulam took the top spot when it came to tourist arrivals, due to airport access and the good accommodation infrastructure.

According to Geethu Mondas, a travel influencer from Ernakulam, Kochi is a must-visit place in the itinerary of every domestic and foreign traveller. "For

Kochi, Mattancherry and Kadamakudy are places that feature high on the list," she said.

Kerala Travel Mart (KTM) president Jose Pradeep highlighted the remarkable occupancy percentage that hotels in Kochi recorded in the last three months of 2025 (Oct-Nov-Dec). "January has started off on a good note. Kochi's recognition as a MICE and Wedding Tourism destination has come as a boon,"

(Cont. on page - 2)

port's capacity back in line with pre-Covid-19 levels in 2019, said the report, which generated the rankings based on scheduled capacity and seat numbers for international flight routes.

Dubai International Airport retained its pole position in 2025 as the world's busiest international air-

(Cont. on page - 2)

Rupee nears Rs 25 per dirham, NRIs set to gain

DUBAI: The Indian rupee's steady weakening is pushing the UAE dirham closer to the psychologically important Rs 25-mark, raising expectations of stronger remittance inflows from the Gulf and giving expatriate workers a timely exchange-rate boost.

With RBI signalling it

will not defend any specific currency level and markets forecasting further rupee depreciation, traders increasingly see downside pressure as difficult to avoid in the near term. At current levels, the shift is already working in favour of overseas earners. With the rupee trading around 90.87 to the dollar,

the UAE dirham — pegged at roughly 3.6725 to the greenback — is hovering between Rs 24.70 and Rs 24.75. If the rupee weakens to Rs 92 per dollar, as some forecasts suggest, the dirham would cross Rs 25 for the first time, delivering a direct boost to the rupee value of monthly transfers sent home by UAE and GCC-based workers.

RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra said the central bank does not target any particular rupee level, including psychologically significant thresholds such as 90 or 91 to the dollar, and intervenes only to curb excessive volatility. Malhotra said India's exchange

rate policy remains market-driven, with RBI focused on financial stability and orderly currency movement rather than defending fixed levels.

For expats in the Gulf, the implications are clear. With the dirham, Saudi riyal, Qatari riyal and other GCC currencies linked to the dollar, every incremental rupee decline amplifies remittance value. A move

from Rs 24.7 to Rs 25 per dirham would translate into thousands of additional rupees annually for many households, helping families manage rising education, housing and healthcare costs in India.

Malhotra said India's

macroeconomic fundamentals remain strong, citing high growth, relatively low inflation, foreign exchange reserves of about \$690 billion and a manageable current account deficit. "On the whole, on the external front, we are very comfortable," he said, while cautioning that currency movements are never linear and often involve short-term swings.

Over the long term, the RBI governor noted that the rupee has depreciated by around three per cent annually on average, which he described as natural given India's higher inflation compared with advanced economies.

India to become 'Upper middle-income country'

MUMBAI: India achieved \$1,000 per capita income for the first time since independence in 2009 and reached \$2,000 per capita in another 10 years in 2019. It is expected to touch \$3,000 by 2026.

India is set to transition to "Upper Middle Income" category of countries in the next four years from the current "Lower Middle Income" country status, a research report by SBI said.

"India set to touch \$4,000 per capita in another four years in 2030 to transition to an "Upper Middle-Income" country and join China and Indo-

nesia at current classification," the report said. India took 60 years to transition to lower-middle income in 2007 from low-income country. Its per capita GNI (Gross National Income) increased from \$90 in 1962 to \$910 in 2007, a CAGR of 5.3 per cent. India took 60 years since independence to reach \$1 trillion and then \$2 trillion in next 7 years in 2014 and reached \$3 trillion mark in another seven years in 2021.

India achieved \$4 trillion in another four years in 2025 and likely to achieve \$5 trillion in another two years.

Kochi registers surge in tourists

(Cont. from page - 1) he said. According to Jose, the average occupancy in hotels in Kochi was around 70pc on Oct, 80pc in Nov and 85pc in Dec. "These are mainly high-end tourists from abroad and travellers from Tier-I cities like Mumbai and Delhi," he pointed out. Meanwhile, Kerala Homestay and Tourism Society (K-HATS)

director MP Sivadathan noted that homestays in tourist areas near the city have been enjoying 100pc occupancy.

"December has been a good season. The Cochin Carnival and the Kochi Muziris Biennale brought a bonanza of business for the homestays and hotels in Fort Kochi and Mattancherry. The trend is continuing this month as well," he said.

Another factor that has brought great visibility to Kochi is its back-to-back mention in international travel magazines and platforms. Also, the reels

of picturesque sights in and around Fort Kochi and Mattancherry posted on social media by various content creators, especially those from North India, have piqued interest.

According to Contract Carriage Operators Association state president Binu John, majority of domestic tourists arrive from Maharashtra, Gujarat and Delhi. "These tourists plan their vacations to coincide with the holidays like Diwali. However, in the case of tourists from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, the arrivals are few and far between," he added.

Flight disruptions due to...

(Cont. from page - 1) managers stay ahead of paperwork while coping with the airport shutdown. Global-mobility managers

moving project teams or assignees through Delhi during the period should expect cascading delays at connecting hubs such as

IndiGo hikes night allowances...

(Cont. from page - 1) members, such as pilots or cabin staff, as passengers on a flight when they are not operating that flight. This is typically done to position crew at a different location for their next scheduled duty or to return them to their home base

The decision was aimed at easing workforce discontent and strengthening operational resilience after the airline faced significant disruptions earlier in the month. However, from a market perspective, the announcement reinforced concerns about rising cost pressures at a

time when margins are already under stress due to higher fuel costs, currency volatility and operational inefficiencies. Investors appeared wary that incremental employee-related expenses could weigh on profitability in the coming quarters. The InterGlobe

Aviation-promoted airline also witnessed a slight decline in market share after a long gap following the operational crisis, which saw the parent company's shares slide by nearly two per cent on Indian bourses as an impact of the additional cost pressure and market share fall.

Doha, Dubai, and Singapore. Carriers will waive change fees for tickets issued before the NOTAM date, but fare differences may apply. Importantly, travellers transiting on separate tickets risk mis-connecting if their inbound flight is held on the ground at origin airports.

The timing overlaps with dense winter fog, which has already contributed to sporadic cancellations this month.

Experts recommend booking morning flights that land before 09:30 am or evening services after 14:30 pm, to minimise disruption. Employers with time-critical mobility moves—such as end-of-month payroll or compliance filings—may consider rerouting staff through Mumbai or Bengaluru.

(Cont. from page - 1) port, marking the third consecutive year in which it placed first.

The airport's seat volume for 2025 grew four per cent on the year to 62.4 million, overtaking 2019 levels by 16pc. Notably, it surpassed the second-busiest international airport by a lead of 13.5 million seats. In second place stood London's Heathrow Airport, which recorded a one per cent rise in seat volume to 49 million, a four per cent increase from 2019 levels.

Incheon International Airport in Seoul maintained its third position with 43 million seats, an increase of three per cent from the year prior and of two per cent from 2019.

While Hong Kong International Airport recorded the largest year-on-year growth among the top 10 busiest international airports, its seat volume remained 14pc beneath 2019 levels. The airport's seat volume rose 12pc year on year to 38.7 million seats in 2025, placing it in eighth.

Changi airport fourth busiest international airport

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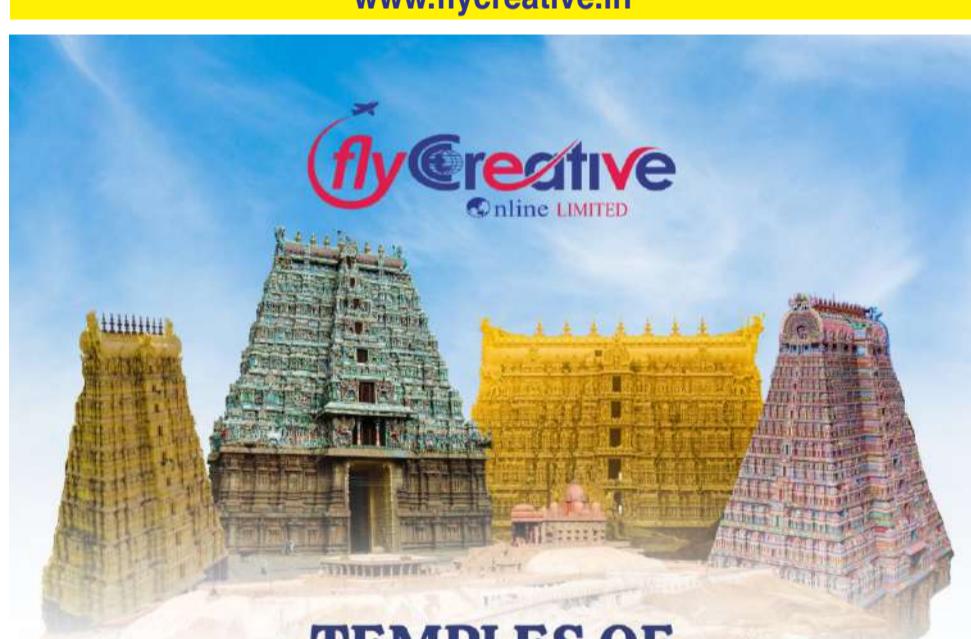
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Senior citizens may get tax relief in budget

NEW DELHI: Senior citizens could be among the largest beneficiaries of Union budget 2026, with the government expected to consider higher deductions on interest income and healthcare-related relief according to Tarun Garg, Executive Director at Deloitte India.

"I would call it from an individual tax perspective that the government may want to give some impetus to senior citizens," Garg told a TV channel in an exclusive interview. "Medical expenditures are increasing and they have to put in more on their health budget and healthcare, so maybe some bit of additional deductions may be given to senior citizens."

The budget for 2026-27 will be presented in parliament on Feb 1.

Garg said there is also growing demand to raise deductions on interest income earned from bank deposits and small savings schemes. "There is a vast majority of individuals who are saying that this should be increased," he said, referring to the cur-

rent limits of Rs 10,000 for non-senior citizens and Rs 50,000 for senior citizens. According to Garg, higher exemptions on interest income could help senior citizens cope with inflation and rising living costs.

Beyond senior citizens, Garg said budget 2026 is more likely to focus on fine-tuning the new tax regime rather than announcing "path-breaking or huge changes", particularly because "the government also doesn't have that kind of a kitty within their availability". One such targeted change could involve provident fund contributions. Garg said the

government "may want to bring in" employer-driven provident fund deductions into the new tax regime.

"When we talk about provident fund, you are doing it structurally through the employer and you do not need to furnish additional proofs for that," he said, adding that this could help bridge gaps between the old and new tax regimes without increasing compliance burdens.

While the old tax regime has seen little change in recent years, the standard deduction under the new tax regime "may get further increased", possibly by Rs 25,000 or more.

UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Visits India to Deepen...

(Cont. from page - 1)

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows from the UAE into India have crossed \$22 billion since April 2000, with the UAE ranking as the fifth-largest source of FDI into India in 2024-25 alone, contributing \$4.3 billion. Overall, the UAE stands as the seventh-biggest FDI investor for India.

Perhaps most significantly, the UAE has committed to invest \$75 billion in India's infrastructure, a pledge that signals long-term confidence in India's growth trajectory.

The foundation stone for Bharat Mart at Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone in Dubai was laid in February 2024.



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GULF FAQS

UAE to tighten freelance visa review process?

The UAE plans to tighten the reviewing and auditing procedures of granting freelance visas, known as the Green Residency, Emirati newspaper Emarat Al Youm reported.

The reason behind this intensified scrutiny is to protect rights and regulate the market in a way that serves everyone's interests, said Gen Mohammed Ahmed Al Marri, Di-

rector General of Dubai's General Directorate of Residency and Foreigners Affairs (GDRFA).

News of tighter auditing comes as Al Marri dismissed recent social media rumours claiming suspension of these self-employment permits.

He stressed that freelance visas continue to be issued normally through official channels. In fur-

ther comments, Al Marri stressed that the country is moving forward in supporting the transition toward a flexible economy. He added that a few cases of misuse of this type of

residency programme or attempts to illegally trade visas were detected. Necessary measures were taken to protect the labour market and maintain the integrity of the system, Al

Marri clarified. The recent spread of rumours coincided with an increased demand for this particular type of UAE visa, he added.

UAE Freelance Visa is among the most prominent government initiatives that enables self-employment and what is known as the talent economy, allowing applicants to legally carry out their professional ac-

tivities without the need for a sponsor or a traditional employer.

Holders of a freelance visa are entitled to legal residency and permits to practice their activity, provided they comply with the required conditions. However, the visa does not grant the right to sponsor other individuals or employ labour under one's name.

Are freelancers eligible to get leave, other benefits?

I am a manager in a mainland Dubai company. If I hire a freelancer for a six-month project, can I ask him to come to the office? What kind of working relationship would we have — in terms of office hours, leave etc.?

In UAE, the freelance model of work is defined in Article-8 of the Cabinet Resolution No. 1 of 2022 on the Implementation of Federal Decree Law No. 33 of 2021 Regarding the Regulation of Employment Relations, which reads as, "1. Freelance is an independent and flexible work arrangement, whereby the natural person generates income by providing his services for a specified period of time or performing a task or providing a specific service, whether for individuals or establishments, whereas this natural person is in no way a worker for those individuals or establishments.

2. The Cabinet shall, based on the minister's proposal, issue the necessary resolutions for determining the procedures, rules and mechanisms for registering freelancers in the ministry of HR & Emiratisation (MoHRE) systems and for obtaining, renewing and cancelling the work permit, in a manner that ensures the enhancement

of labour market flexibility and its requirements."

Further, Article-6 of the Federal Decree Law No. 33 of 2021 on the Regulation of Employment Relations mentions the types of work permits and freelance work permits and Article 6(1) (l) of the Cabinet Resolution No. 1 of 2022, which states: "Subject to the provisions of Article (6) of the Decree-Law, the types of work permits shall be determined as follows: Freelance

permit: This permit is is-

self-employment without being sponsored by a specific organisation or

with contract, whereby the natural person earns money by providing his services

to individuals or establishments, whereas this natural person is in no way a worker for those individuals or establishments." Based on the aforementioned provisions of law, you may have a formal engagement letter or service agreement which clearly defines the scope of work, deliverables, timelines, and payment terms. If an individual is employed as a freelancer without a valid work permit is- sued by MoHRE, then such employment may be considered illegal.



Priority for annual leave dates? Is it legal?

I wanted to travel back home this Feb, but my boss said preference would be given to families since it coincides with the school break. Is this legal? Can companies dictate when their employees can take their vacation?

In the UAE, an employee is entitled to an annual leave of not less than 30 calendar days for each year of service. This is in accordance with Article 29(1) (a) of the Employment Law, which states that "Without prejudice to the employee's rights acquired for the

period preceding the date of enforcement of the provisions of this Decree by law, the employee shall be entitled to an annual leave with full pay of not less than:

a. 30 days for each year of his extended service."

However, an employer has the right to determine the dates of annual leave, depending on work requirements. This is in accordance with Article 29(4) of the Employment Law, which states: "The employee must enjoy his leave in the year of its entitlement, and the Employer may de-

termine the dates of these leaves in accordance with work requirements and in agreement with the worker or grant them in rotation among the establishment's workers in order to ensure the progress of his work, and he must notify the worker of the specified

date for enjoying his leave at least one month in advance."

Based on the above, your employer may determine the annual leave dates for all employees in accordance with the operational requirements of the employer. However,

your employer must ensure that you are granted your full annual leave entitlement within the applicable year or allow you to carry forward at least 50pc of your annual leave to the subsequent year in accordance with Article 29 (8) of the Employment Law.

Therefore, while your employer may schedule or postpone leave, depending on the operational requirements of the employer, you may discuss alternate dates with your employer to amicably resolve the dates for your annual leave.

Russia-India labour deal sparks concerns over migrant workers' rights, safety

NEW DELHI: India and Russia signed a mobility agreement in Dec 2025 to ease labour movement and boost trade, but concerns remain about protecting vulnerable Indian workers from exploitation.

India is pursuing labour mobility deals and a new bill to safeguard workers abroad, yet challenges persist, including skills mismatches and the need for constant agreement updates.

During Russian President Putin's closely watched visit to India in Dec 2025, the two countries agreed to ease the movement of Indian workers to Russia. They also pledged to increase bilateral trade.

The agreements with Russia "will open up new avenues for collaboration between the two countries", said Ministry of External Affairs spokesman Randhir Jaiswal, in response to a question.

"We look forward to put-

ting this into action," he said. "There is a requirement on both sides to strengthen our economic partnership, our technology partnership." On paper, it is a win-win for labour-starved Russia and labour-surplus India.

In reality, however, as logistical, bureaucratic and human elements come into play, this partnership might be far from straightforward.

The deal has brought into focus India's push for labour mobility deals amid concerns that there are not enough safeguards to protect blue-collar Indian workers, most of whom are less educated and vulnerable to exploitation, going overseas for work.

India has been eager in pursuing such labour deals to turn its population boom into an economic engine. India's official data shows its unemployment rate is going down, but job seekers are plagued by un-

even economic growth, mismatch between skills and jobs, and stagnant incomes.

There are more than

South-east Asia, with more opportunities opening up for Indians in Russia, Israel, Japan and Taiwan.

"There is opportunity

to create a proper corridor and give opportunity to the right people," said Alijan Rajan, managing director of Vira International Place-

Saudi Welcome to Arabia



Saudia (Saudi Arabian Airlines) recently launched its "Saudi Welcome

to Arabia" tourism campaign with a striking new livery on a Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner (HZ-ARF), featuring vibrant purple, patterns celebrating Saudi culture and a welcoming child, distinct from their usual colours to promote

This special paint job on the Dreamliner serves as a flagship for the Kingdom's growing tourism push, highlighting Arabic heritage and hospitality alongside other unique liveries Saudia has used for events like Saudi National Day.

nine million Indian migrant workers in the Gulf region. Millions more skilled and unskilled workers work across the US, Europe and

ments, a Mumbai-based recruitment agency that has sent Indian workers to many overseas destinations, a Mumbai-based recruitment agency that has sent Indian workers to many overseas destinations.

Saudi Tourism Authority showcases 'Essence of Saudi' event in Kolkata

CALCUTTA: Building on the strong momentum of its successful Spectacular Saudi campaign, the Saudi Tourism Authority's consumer-facing brand, "Saudi, Welcome to Arabia," curated an exclusive experiential showcase ti-

ttled "Essence of Saudi" in Kolkata. The immersive event was hosted at Ozora, a rooftop restaurant at the city's premier Acropolis Mall.

Designed as a multi-sensory introduction to Saudi, the showcase centred

around a fragrance-led experience, using signature scents inspired by key Saudi cities and regions.

Destinations including Riyadh, Jeddah and Taif, along with the UNESCO World Heritage Site of AlUla and the Saudi

Red Sea, were represented through distinctive fragrance profiles that evoked their unique atmosphere, culture and natural landscapes.

AlUla, once a crossroads of ancient civilisations, was represented by Amber Patchouli, combining deep resinous amber with earthy patchouli, while the Saudi Red Sea unfolded through Ocean Breeze, a fresh, green, marine-inspired aquatic fragrance.

Together, the scents highlighted Saudi as a destination defined by pristine nature, cultural depth and a forward-looking Vision 2030, rooted in sustainability and transformative tourism. The strong response from trade part-

ners in the "City of Joy" reflected growing interest in Saudi as a compelling destination for Indian travellers seeking bespoke luxury experiences and cultural richness. Strengthening connectivity further, Saudia and Air India have announced a codeshare agreement effective Feb 2026, enabling seamless connections to Saudi destinations via Delhi and Mumbai for travellers from Kolkata and other Indian cities.

India and Saudi are currently connected by six carriers—Saudia, Air India, Flynas, IndiGo, Air India Express and Akasa Air—with over 313 weekly flights, reinforcing Saudi's appeal as a year-round destination.

Intra-GCC tourism sees healthy growth

MUSCAT: International tourism revenues in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries reached about \$120.2 billion in 2024, an increase of 39.6pc compared with 2019 and 8.9pc compared with 2023, raising the GCC's share of global tourism revenues to 7.5pc.

Data issued by the Statistical Center of the Co-operation Council for

the Arab States of the Gulf explained that this reflects the continued strong performance of inbound tourism to the GCC countries during 2024, recording remarkable growth in the number of visitors, revenues and jobs, which enhances the sector's role as one of the main drivers of economic diversification and support for the gross domestic product.

The "Travel and Tourism in the GCC Countries for 2024" report issued by the centre indicates that the total number of international tourists coming to the GCC reached 72.2 million tourists in 2024, achieving a growth of 51.5 per cent compared with 2019 and 6.1pc compared with 2023, raising the market share of the region to 5.2pc of global tourism.