

IN-STORE

Why the Middle East is the new luxury travel destination

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By ERIN SHEA

Luxury hotel marketers are opening numerous properties in the Greater Middle East area, suggesting that the region is a new choice destination for in-the-know affluent travelers.

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Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, Starwood Hotels and Resorts, Hilton Hotels' Waldorf Astoria and The Ritz-Carlton have recently opened or plan to open new properties in the Middle East. New luxury hotels in this area should prepare for a variety of affluent guests with the influx of business and leisure travelers.

"Some of the stunning countries in the Middle East became luxury destinations a long time ago, and the United Arab Emirates is one of them," said Pascal Duhauffour, area vice president of Europe and Middle East at [Ritz-Carlton](#), Manama, Bahrain.

"We currently have nine hotels open in the region, and another four under construction," he said.

"The volume of business and leisure travelers visiting continues to grow."

Now open

Over the next few years, there will be new luxury properties opening all over the Greater

Middle East and Africa areas.

Starwood Hotels and Resorts plans to open 50 new hotels across the Middle East and Africa over the next five years.

These plans include luxury hotels with the addition of St. Regis hotels in Abu Dhabi and Cairo, Egypt. The property in Abu Dhabi will be the second St. Regis hotel in the city, making it the only city worldwide to have two St. Regis properties, per the brand.

Also, Fairmont Hotels and Resorts recently announced a new development in Istanbul that will offer a hotel, residences and offices as a part of the Quasar Istanbul complex.



Rendered image of Fairmont Quasar

Fairmont also plans on opening a property in Baku, Azerbaijan, this year.

Furthermore, Hilton Hotel's Waldorf Astoria will open a new hotel in Doha, Qatar, that will be located close to the modern business and diplomatic district, the Qatar Stock Exchange and the upcoming Doha Convention Centre, which opens later this year.

The new Waldorf Astoria property is expected to be running by 2016.

In addition, the Ritz-Carlton opened a hotel March 12 in Abu Dhabi. The hotel chain already has nine other hotels in the region and has others under construction.

The hotel chain plans to additional properties in Herzliya, Israel; Cairo; Tamuda Bay, Morocco; and Muscat, Oman, as well.



Ritz-Carlton, Abu Dhabi, Grand Canal

“The United Arab Emirates is certainly flourishing and I can see a bright future for this segment of the industry, both in terms of business and leisure travel in the country,” Mr. Duchauffour said.

“Outbound travel numbers are increasing, both in terms of business and leisure travel in the country,” he said. “Outbound travel numbers are increasingly significant year-on-year and our hotels around the world are enjoying increased volume of Emirates visitors in all locations.”

Traveler profile

Luxury hotels in the Middle East and Africa should consider that there is no typical affluent traveler in these destinations. Many guests visit for work, while others visit for pleasure, with a mixture of locals and tourists.

“There seems to be a relatively large number of affluent travelers in the Middle East when combining both the vacation and business travelers,” said Ron Kurtz, president of the [American Affluence Research Center](#), Atlanta.

“There are areas of the Middle East that are popular destinations for affluent residents of Middle Eastern countries who want to get away from their home country to have fun and to enjoy their wealth without feeling self conscious,” he said.

“Some cities in the Middle East are also important business hubs that need luxury hotels to accommodate the business visitors.”

However, when luxury hotels open up in new areas, the hotel property and its employees should understand and be accustomed to the culture to know how to properly cater to their guests.

“Luxury hotels need to be mindful of what the affluent Middle Eastern resident is seeking when traveling and what visitors from outside of the Middle East want in their hotel and travel experiences,” American Affluence Research Center’s Mr. Kurtz said.

“These expectations – in terms of food, entertainment, security, staff nationality and gender – are different in some cases,” he said.

New frontier

The greater Middle East area seems to be the new frontier of affluent travelers both for work and for pleasure. This has been an increasing trend for a few years, experts say.

“Over the past decade, the Middle East has established itself as the next frontier in luxury travel,” said Taylor Rains, account coordinator at [Rawle Murdy Associates](#), Charleston, SC.

“The region offers a myriad of new and unique experiences formerly unavailable to the luxury market,” he said.

“As long as Middle Eastern destinations continue to develop with the same commitment to marrying innovation with tradition, the region will continue to grow as a top luxury destination.”

This increased travel could be due to the expanding tourism and business opportunities in the area, along with the favorable weather conditions.

“All our Middle Eastern hotels are in destinations where sunshine is almost guaranteed 365 days of the year,” Ritz-Carlton’s Mr. Duchauffour said.

“Each of [the locations] is an emerging tourist destination that is calling out to be discovered and holds a great appeal to travelers from all over the globe,” he said.

In addition, many of the destinations attract visitors that are coming to the area of the world for the first time.

This could lure affluent consumers into the area to experience a destination that many others have not.

“For a great many, the Middle East offers a newness that is not found in other global destinations,” Rawle Murdy’s Mr. Rains said.

“At the same time, many Middle Eastern destinations have chosen to build upon that sense of wonder by establishing some of the world’s most unique sites,” he said.

“It is this purpose-build development, coupled with the growing sense of accessibility, that has resulted in the recent surge in Middle East travel.”

Final take

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