



Catalysts of Change: How Startups are Powering Sustainable Development and Transforming Tourism

Tourism Development Fund White Paper



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This white paper explores the successful links between a thriving and dynamic startup ecosystem in the Kingdom and its contributions to achieving these sustainable development goals, highlighting the efforts of small and medium enterprises to proactively provide positive societal and environmental impacts through innovation and a heightened focus on sustainability. These startups are paving the way for a new wave of sustainable businesses that prioritizes the creation of tangible positive impacts. In an era where both sustainability is a critical regional and global priority, these startups are taking charge to ensure that sustainability results in equitable economic prosperity.



Gloria Guevara Manzo

Interim President & CEO

World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC)

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This paper offers a thoughtful and inspiring contribution to the conversations shaping our industry's future. Sustainability is a shared imperative for all of us, with lessons that speak to the entire travel and tourism system. To deliver truly responsible tourism, we need an entrepreneurial mindset across the sector: one that embraces innovation, challenges old models, and acts boldly. Our industry has a unique opportunity to bend the curve on climate, nature, and inclusive growth, but only if governments, investors, small enterprises, start-ups, and major companies move forward in alignment. We also recognize the urgent skills gap that must be closed to realise this transformation. The path is clear: collaborate and innovate, so that together we can redefine a more responsible model of tourism.



Gloria Fluxà Thienemann

Chair of Sustainability Committee & Vice Chair at WTTC

Vice-Chairman & Chief Sustainability Officer at Iberostar Group

FOREWORD

Tourism stands as one of the world's most dynamic multipliers, fueling job creation, modernizing infrastructure, and catalyzing the growth of small businesses. In 2024, travel and tourism directly injected over USD 3 trillion into the global GDP and supported 131 million jobs, and in Saudi Arabia, it directly generated over USD 61 million and nearly 1 million jobs, a clear sign that the sector is not just rebounding, but redefining the very nature of growth.

Yet, growth alone is no longer the ultimate goal. The question before us is whether tourism can evolve, growing within planetary boundaries, regenerating nature rather than eroding it, and delivering benefits to women, youth, and local communities who have historically been left at the margins. **This white paper answers that challenge with a decisive “yes,”** showcasing how startups are already transforming sustainability from a compliance agenda into a competitive advantage.

Why startups? Because they deliver what sustainability demands: speed, experimentation, and the courage to challenge the status quo. Across the tourism economy, founders are building the rails for a future that is low-carbon, circular, nature-positive, and inclusive: from clean mobility and food-waste valorization to coral restoration, regenerative agriculture, and women-led cultural enterprises. They are turning friction points into growth markets and proving that better economics and better outcomes for people and planet can reinforce each other.

The stakes could not be higher. An estimated 80% of tourism's value depends on nature; if ecosystems degrade, the sector's core proposition erodes with them. At the same time, overtourism amplifies environmental and social impacts. We cannot afford a model that extracts value faster than nature and communities can replenish it. The path forward is nature-positive tourism: travel that protects and restores the very assets it relies on.

The Middle East, and Saudi Arabia in particular, has a unique opportunity to lead. Vision 2030, the Saudi Green Initiative, and the Kingdom's entrepreneurial momentum are aligning policy ambition with startup vigour. Early evidence is compelling: founders across the region are mobilizing capital, talent, and technology to decarbonize operations, close material loops, conserve biodiversity, and expand dignified work, especially for women and youth. If we scale what works, tourism can become one of the region's most effective engines for sustainable and inclusive prosperity.

But potential will only translate into progress if we close critical gaps that still block startup scale: access to catalytic finance, skills and market access, enabling regulation, and demand signals from large buyers. This paper surfaces practical solutions, from regulatory

sandboxes and innovation zones to impact-linked finance, green procurement, and open standards, that can help founders move from pilots to profitability and from islands of excellence to system-level change.

The clock is ticking. Globally, only a small fraction of tourism-related SDG targets are on track for 2030. But the story is not written yet. With the right conditions, the founders featured in this white paper, and thousands like them, can bend the curve. They can help destinations remain competitive as climate risks rise; they can protect cultural heritage even as visitor numbers grow; and they can ensure that money spent by travellers leaves a positive trace in local economies and landscapes.

This is an invitation: to investors to fund what the future needs; to policy makers to enable innovation with speed and clarity; to industry leaders to buy from startups and grow demand for sustainable solutions; and to entrepreneurs to keep building with the courage to scale what works. If we act with ambition and alignment, tourism can become one of the defining success stories of sustainable development in our time: a sector that doesn't just welcome the world, but helps to re-green it, re-skill it, and re-imagine it for generations to come.



Qusai A. Al-Fakhri

Chief Executive Officer

Tourism Development Fund

INTRODUCTION

Tourism's Transformative Power in Sustainable Development

Tourism is a vital engine for socio-economic growth, shaping GDP, employment, and local demand while enhancing infrastructure and public services. In 2024, the sector directly contributed 3.1% to global GDP, amounting to USD 3.4 trillion, and directly supported 131 million jobs worldwide, representing 3.9% of global employment. The Middle East region also experienced tourism-driven growth, with the sector directly contributing USD 122.4 billion to global GDP and directly supporting nearly 3 million jobs. In Saudi Arabia, tourism directly contributed USD 61.7 billion (SAR 231.5 billion) to global GDP, accounting for 4.9% of the national economy, and directly supported approximately 966,500 jobs.

As the world recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism has re-emerged as a catalyst for economic diversification, rebuilding economies, reviving small businesses, expanding employment opportunities, and promoting cultural exchange. Looking ahead, the global tourism industry is projected to continue its substantial growth over the next decade.

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We are witnessing significant growth in the tourism sector, and at the same time, we are witnessing an increasing demand for sustainable and enriching experiences, which gives us an opportunity to reshape tourism while preserving our planet and promoting positive change that benefits societies and their future economy.⁴



His Excellency Ahmed Al-Khateeb

Minister of Tourism of Saudi Arabia, Chairman of the Executive Council of UN Tourism



DIRECT ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF TOURISM IN 2024

Global Overview¹

Direct Tourism GDP	Share of Global GDP	Direct Jobs Supported
USD 3.4 trillion	3.1%	131 million (3.9% of global employment)

Regional Insights

Middle East²

Direct Tourism GDP	Share of Regional GDP	Direct Jobs Supported
USD 122.4 billion	3.6%	3 million (3.6% of regional employment)

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)*

Direct Tourism GDP	Share of KSA's GDP	Direct Jobs Supported
USD 61.7 billion	4.9%	966,500 (5.5% of national employment)

Projections for 2034 Global Forecast³

Direct Tourism GDP	Share of Global GDP	Direct Jobs Supported
USD 4.9 trillion	3.5%	163 million (4.4% of global employment)

**Preliminary estimates from the Ministry of Tourism*
**Exchange rate used: 1 USD = 3.75 SAR*

Tourism's remarkable growth is a powerful engine for prosperity, weaving together governments, travellers, local communities, and businesses in a vibrant tapestry of economic and social benefit. Yet, as the sector expands, it is essential to ensure that this progress is not only robust, but also responsible, supporting the environment, society, and the economy in ways that are truly sustainable. Tourism, for all its promise, faces – and sometimes exacerbates – environmental and social challenges that can diminish its positive impact. By acknowledging these realities, we not only underscore the urgent need for change, but also unlock new opportunities for innovation and the adoption of more sustainable practices.

This white paper explores the transformative potential of startups to drive sustainable development outcomes within the tourism sector. Through compelling case studies, actionable insights, and innovative ideas, it demonstrates how entrepreneurial ventures are reshaping the tourism ecosystem and delivering solutions that fuel sustainable growth. The paper also shines a light on the unique challenges and risks confronting startups, especially within the MENA region, and offers pathways to overcome these barriers, amplifying the impact of these ventures.

Transforming Challenges into Opportunities

Addressing environmental challenges is no longer optional; it is imperative. A landmark 2012 report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and UN Tourism warned that, if left unchecked, tourism could increase energy consumption by 154%, greenhouse gas emissions by 131%, water consumption by 152%, and solid waste disposal by 251% between 2011 and 2050.⁵ These sobering projections highlight a world operating at the edge of its environmental capacity, where pollution, resource inefficiency, and waste

threaten the very foundation of our ecosystems. Continuing on this path risks breaching ecological limits and causing irreversible harm to nature.

Mass tourism, in particular, has emerged as a major driver of marine ecosystem degradation, fuelled by coastal development and erosion.⁶ This loss of biodiversity undermines the very appeal of travel and tourism, which depend on healthy, thriving ecosystems to attract visitors. For the sector to remain resilient, it must pivot toward sustainable practices that minimize its environmental footprint while nurturing both the natural world and economic vitality.

From a social perspective, tourism's impressive growth has not always translated into widespread community benefit. Too often, the gains bypass local populations, especially in destinations where governance and value chains are dominated by external actors. Neglecting community-focused approaches can lead to the commoditization of local culture, the erosion of socio-cultural assets, and the proliferation of inauthentic experiences⁷ – outcomes rooted in traditional business models that fail to prioritize local impact.

To truly harness tourism's potential for positive social change, the sector must focus on generating meaningful socio-economic benefits, especially through job creation and community enrichment. Globally, one new job is created for every 34 international visitors, and in the Middle East, the impact is even greater: one new job for every 24 visitors.⁸ Tourism has been also been shown to boost incomes more rapidly than the broader economy, with GDP per capita growing at 2.9% annually from 2011 to 2019, compared to 1.7% for the overall economy.⁹ As the fastest-growing sector worldwide,¹⁰ tourism's influence is undeniable, but its future hinges on sustaining growth while safeguarding communities and the planet.



Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Envisioning Sustainable Development in Tourism

Despite the environmental and social challenges that accompany rapid expansion, tourism holds immense promise as a catalyst for sustainable development. It can drive social prosperity while stewarding the world's natural and cultural assets. This potential is recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where tourism is explicitly cited for its ability to spur economic growth, create

jobs, promote local culture and products, and support the sustainable use of marine resources.¹² In fact, tourism has the power to influence all UN SDGs, both directly and indirectly, making it a cornerstone of global progress.^{13,14}

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Growth is not the enemy. Growth is the eternal story of mankind. The answer should never be to halt the activity, and lose all its clear benefits, but rather to live up to the challenge and manage it correctly.¹¹

Taleb Rifai

Former Secretary-General, UN Tourism



'Qasr Al-Farid,' AlUla, Saudi Arabia



Tourism creates jobs and income opportunities, alleviating poverty and funding community initiatives through tourism-related taxes.



By promoting sustainable agriculture and agritourism, tourism enhances food supply and supports local farmers.



Investments in tourism-related hygiene and health services improve community healthcare and restore consumer confidence.



The tourism sector fosters workforce development through tailored education programs, enhancing skills and career opportunities.



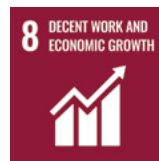
Tourism empowers women by providing job opportunities and entrepreneurial avenues, increasing their participation in society.



Investments in tourism infrastructure improve access to water, hygiene and sanitation in local communities.



Tourism promotes renewable energy initiatives and energy efficiency, contributing to climate change mitigation.



Tourism stimulates economic growth and job creation, particularly in developing regions.



Tourism drives infrastructure development and innovation, promoting, sustainable and resource-efficient growth.



Involving local populations in tourism development helps reduce economic disparities and support rural and urban renewal.



Tourism investments can enhance urban infrastructure and contribute to the preservation of natural and cultural assets.



By adopting sustainable practices to optimize resource use and minimize waste, the sector can significantly reduce environmental impacts.



Tourism can contribute to climate change mitigation by reducing carbon footprints in transportation and accommodation.



Sustainable tourism practices help conserve marine ecosystems and promote the responsible use of marine resources.



Tourism supports biodiversity conservation and sustainable practices, linking community welfare with environmental health.



By fostering cultural understanding and ethical practices, tourism can promote peace and respect for human rights.



Tourism encourages collaboration among diverse stakeholders to achieve the SDGs through innovative public-private-community partnerships.

STARTUPS AS CATALYSTS: ACCELERATING THE SHIFT TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In today's rapidly evolving landscape, transforming conventional business models into responsible, future-ready alternatives is no longer a choice; it's a necessity. Accelerating sustainable development for both people and planet demands bold thinking, relentless innovation, and a willingness to challenge the status quo. These are the hallmarks of startups: agile, creative, and entrepreneurial at their core.

Startups are a dynamic force reshaping the global economy, with an astonishing 50 million new ventures launched every year.¹⁵ In the MENA region, this entrepreneurial energy is reaching new heights. In April 2025 alone, startups secured

USD 228.4 million in investments, a staggering 300% increase over the previous year.¹⁶ Saudi Arabia is leading the charge, attracting USD 158.5 million and accounting for nearly 70% of the region's total investment.¹⁷

This surge places startups at a pivotal crossroads, where their innovative spirit can spark transformative change across industries. Recognizing their power to drive economic growth, Saudi Arabia has set an ambitious target: by 2030, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), including startups, will contribute 35% to national GDP.¹⁸ By embedding startups at the heart of Vision 2030, the Kingdom is championing economic diversity and resilience.

Startups in the Tourism Sector

The impact of startups is especially pronounced in tourism. In the first half of 2024, travel startups raised approximately USD 2.8 billion, an impressive 115% jump compared to the same period in 2023.¹⁹ This growth is not just about more deals; it is about bigger ambitions. Several startups secured funding rounds exceeding USD 100 million, signalling a shift in investor confidence and strategic priorities. The spotlight is on mobility, hospitality tech, and AI-driven travel solutions; innovations that are redefining how we experience, manage and sustain tourism. The message is clear: the market is hungry for fresh, innovative solutions in travel experiences, accommodations, transportation, and management platforms.

Startups thrive on agility. They can be established quickly and pivot with ease, adapting to the ever-changing needs of the tourism market. Entrepreneurs are uniquely positioned to spot emerging trends and tailor their business models to meet evolving consumer expectations. The rise of ecotourism, wildlife adventures, and outdoor experiences is a powerful signal: sustainability is now central to the global tourism agenda.²⁰ For entrepreneurs, this is an open invitation to design offerings that prioritize conservation and responsible travel.

Within this transformation, startups play an irreplaceable role in shaping visitor experiences. Travel is ultimately about people, and authentic, personalized experiences cannot be delivered without startups. They bring the human connection that large attractions often lack; the tour guide's storytelling, the curated cultural immersion, and the sense of belonging that travelers seek. This human touch is the fastest-growing segment in tourism because it cannot be replicated by technology alone. Experiential travel, such as guided tours or transformational activities like learning how to plant dates, is driving loyalty, with a high number of travelers citing experience as the biggest differentiator. Large companies, on the other hand, provide scale, infrastructure, and global reach. Rather than pure competition, the future lies in cooptition – a balance of cooperation and healthy competition: startups deliver authenticity and creativity,

while large players enable growth through data, connectivity, and advanced technology. Together, they can create a tourism ecosystem that combines intimacy with efficiency, ensuring experiences remain personal while reaching broader markets.

Technology and generative AI present unprecedented opportunities for startups to overcome traditional barriers. With limited staff, startups can leverage AI to automate operational tasks, personalize recommendations, and manage multilingual customer interactions, freeing human talent to focus on delivering exceptional experiences. Unlike larger corporations, startups can innovate and pivot faster, responding to emerging trends and niche demands. However, challenges remain. Five years ago, access to finance was the primary hurdle; today, access to data and connectivity is equally critical.

Driven by innovation, a strong appetite for risk, and unmatched flexibility, startups have the potential to revolutionize entire sectors. Their solutions are often deeply rooted in the needs of their communities, making them powerful engines for sustainable growth. Startups frequently create opportunities for marginalized groups, including women, youth and rural populations, advancing economic inclusion and reducing inequalities.²¹

This startup-led evolution is not just important; it's imperative. Achieving a truly sustainable tourism sector requires alignment with global and local agendas, from the UN SDGs and net-zero ambitions to Vision 2030 and the Saudi Green Initiative.

Industry consensus is clear: investing in AI, training people, and forging strategic partnerships are all critical to success. While technology will enable scale, human connection remains the comparative advantage that sets startups apart. Authentic experiences, curated by startups and amplified through technology and collaboration with larger players, are the future of tourism.

*Asir Mountains, Saudi Arabia*

Key Environmental and Socio-Economic Themes

Across the tourism sector, startups are tackling critical environmental, social, and economic challenges head-on. Through their innovative approaches, they are turning obstacles into opportunities for sustainability. This white paper explores these opportunities in depth, categorizing them into two distinct groups.



Addressing Environmental Challenges: How Startups Tackle Tourism's Ecological Footprint



Reducing Waste:
Circular Economy
Solutions for Tourism
Waste



Mitigating Emissions:
Transitioning to
Sustainable Energy



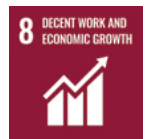
Nature-Positive Tourism:
The Link between Tourism and
Ecological Restoration



Achieving Socio-economic Empowerment: How Startups Transform Lives and Local Economies



Women Leading Change:
Empowerment and
Innovation in Tourism



Inclusive Growth:
Community Empowerment
through Tourism Startups



Safeguarding Identity:
Tourism's Role in Cultural and
Heritage Preservation



ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES: HOW STARTUPS TACKLE TOURISM'S ECOLOGICAL FOOTPRINT



REDUCING WASTE: CIRCULAR ECONOMY SOLUTIONS FOR TOURISM WASTE

Tourism's Environmental Challenge

As tourism continues to expand globally, so too does its environmental footprint, particularly in the form of waste. The sector's impact is felt acutely in our oceans, where plastic pollution threatens to outpace marine life itself.

By 2050, projections warn that the world's oceans could contain more plastic than fish,²³ underscoring the urgent need for transformative action across all industries, with tourism at the forefront.

Consider Barcelona, a Mediterranean tourism hotspot, where plastic waste now comprises 38% of the catch for local fishing boats between Barcelona and Vilanova i la Geltrú, a stark illustration of how travel can accelerate environmental degradation when unchecked.²⁴ Yet, plastic is only part of the problem.

Food waste and water pollution are equally significant,²⁵ with mass tourism driving up demand for goods, food, and water, especially during peak seasons. This surge in consumption generates substantial waste, straining local infrastructure and diminishing both environmental quality and community well-being, particularly in regions lacking robust waste management systems.

Food Waste: An Invisible Burden

The true scale of food waste in tourism remains largely unmeasured, but its consequences are profound. The UN Tourism Secretary-General has identified food waste as a top priority,²⁶ with 1.6 billion tonnes of food discarded each year, enough to feed two billion people.²⁷ This waste contributes 3.3 billion tonnes of CO₂ emissions annually.²⁸ The hospitality industry alone contributes 12% of all food waste, equating to 192 million tonnes and translating to a staggering USD 100 billion in lost value each year.²⁹ Buffets in hotels and resorts, emblematic of excess, exacerbate this issue through overproduction and inefficiency.

Water Pollution: The Hidden Cost of Travel

Water is indispensable to tourism, used extensively for cleaning, cooking, and agricultural production. Nearly 75% of the sector's water footprint is tied to agriculture,³⁰ and wastewater from these activities is a major source of environmental contamination.³¹ Tourists, moreover, consume water at rates three to four times higher than local residents,³² compounding the challenge of wastewater management and increasing the risk of pollution in natural environments.



Innovative Solutions:**Pioneering a Circular Economy in Tourism**

Faced with these challenges, the tourism sector must act decisively. The adoption of a circular economy model offers a promising pathway: one that re-imagines waste as a resource and champions a “restorative economic system” where materials are reused and never discarded.³³ This approach emphasizes maintenance, reuse, refurbishment, remanufacture, recycling, and composting,³⁴ and when integrated into the food system, could drive a 49% reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.³⁵ Startups are at the vanguard of this transformation, leveraging circular economy principles to tackle material waste, food waste, and wastewater. Their innovations, ranging from compostable bioplastics to advanced wastewater treatment, demonstrate that sustainability and profitability can go hand in hand.

Agritech:**Cultivating Sustainable Solutions**

Emerging agricultural technologies (agritech) are reshaping the landscape, harnessing artificial intelligence (AI), internet of things (IOT), and big data analytics to optimize crop management and drive efficiency. These solutions address food security, climate change, resource scarcity, and waste, empowering startups to meet the demands of a growing global population and tourism sector while safeguarding natural resources.

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, where 85% of food is imported, there is a growing movement to strengthen local farm ecosystems.³⁶ Agritech companies are building online marketplaces that connect local farmers with businesses, fostering efficient, localized food systems and reducing reliance on imports.

The following case studies showcase how entrepreneurial ventures are turning environmental challenges into profitable opportunities. By enabling industrial scale solutions to waste management and valorization, startups are proving that responsible innovation can drive both sustainability and economic growth.

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This shift won't happen by accident. It demands bold leadership. It demands doing. It demands making circularity the economic norm: financially viable, commercially attractive, irresistible, and scalable.²²

Jonquil Hackenberg

CEO, Ellen MacArthur Foundation



CASE STUDY



‘PLASTIC WHALE’: FISHING FOR A PLASTIC-FREE FUTURE





In the picturesque canals of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, a hidden crisis lurks beneath the surface: plastic pollution. As plastic waste accumulates, it threatens marine life and the beauty of these iconic waterways. The urgent need to address this issue is compounded by the growing awareness of environmental conservation among locals and travelers alike.

Enter *Plastic Whale*, the world's first "plastic fishing" company, founded by Marius Smit.³⁷ Inspired by the devastating impact of plastic waste he witnessed during his travels, founder Marius Smit created *Plastic Whale*, the world's first 'plastic fishing' social enterprise, with the mission: "Together for plastic-free land & sea, built on three pillars – We Collect, We Create, We Educate." The startup designs team-building and educational cleanup experiences on the canals, where corporate teams, local communities, and schools 'fish' plastic from the water and turn it into a hands-on, measurable conservation effort. Aside from plastic fishing, the startup actively organizes land and beach cleanups, mobilizing volunteers to reduce pollution and raise community awareness.

Plastic Whale operates on a circular economy model, processing collected plastic into recycled materials. Collected PET bottles are separated, washed and recycled into PET foam boards and PET felt. The foam boards form the hulls of *Plastic Whale's* boats, while the felt is used in the 'Plastic Whale by Vepa' circular office furniture collection, including

tables, chairs, acoustic panels and lamps.³⁸ From *Plastic Whale*, a spin-off venture emerged: 'WasteBoards,' which produces skateboards made from recycled plastic bottle caps, further promoting the circular economy.³⁹

Plastic Whale has gained significant traction, partnering with Booking.com⁴⁶ and being featured in the World Economic Forum's 'Nature and Biodiversity' stories.⁴⁷ *Plastic Whale* is a financially self-sustaining social enterprise, generating revenue through company sponsorships, corporate plastic fishing and cleanup events, and boat rentals.⁴⁸ Grants and donations, channeled via the 'Plastic Whale Foundation,' support its school programmes and public events.⁴⁹

Plastic Whale aligns primarily with SDG 14: Life Below Water, and further contributes to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) through its circular products and multi-stakeholder collaborations. Their initiatives not only clean the waterways but also educate the public about the importance of protecting marine ecosystems.

The model of *Plastic Whale* is replicable in other regions facing similar plastic pollution challenges. By expanding their efforts to other plastic-rich waters, they aim to inspire communities worldwide to take action against plastic waste.⁵⁰ Their innovative approach demonstrates that environmental conservation can be both impactful and engaging, and that collective action can turn the tide against plastic pollution while creating memorable experiences for participants.

***Plastic Whale's* impact is demonstrated through the following achievements:**

40,000+

PET bottles collected annually⁴⁰

15,630

individuals participated in plastic fishing in 2023⁴¹

639

cleanup events held in 2023⁴²

500

school classes and approximately 13,000 students engaged in plastic fishing activities⁴³

13,462

circular furniture pieces produced in 2023⁴⁴

A growing fleet of**13** canal boats made from recycled plastic (as of 2023)⁴⁵

CASE STUDY



‘THE WASTE LAB’: TRANSFORMING FOOD WASTE INTO OPPORTUNITY





In the UAE, food waste is a growing concern, with discarded scraps and leftovers contributing to landfill overflow and greenhouse gas emissions. When food waste decomposes in landfills, it releases methane, a potent greenhouse gas that exacerbates climate change. The challenge lies in changing perceptions about waste: from viewing it as a problem to recognizing it as an opportunity for sustainable resource management.

The Waste Lab is a women-owned startup that sees food waste as a valuable resource. Their mission is to create a closed-loop value journey by transforming food scraps into healthy compost and other beneficial byproducts.⁵¹ *The Waste Lab* offers customized composting solutions, both off-site and on-site, tailored to the needs of homes, businesses, schools and events. Their services include segregation and collection bins, segregation-at-source setup, pick-up, workshops and training, quality control and further segregation at their control station, granular data collection and impact reporting. This ensures that food waste is effectively repurposed into compost at their compost station to enrich local soil and support sustainable agriculture.

The startup is building a solid market presence, partnering with notable clients in the tourism sector and participating in high-profile events like COP28, Gulfood, and GITEX exhibitions. Their innovative approach has attracted investment, raising USD 486,000 from investors as well as winning several grant-based startup competitions, including the Standard Chartered Bank Women in Tech UAE, Visa She's Next, Tie UAE & MENA, HSBC Regenerative Agriculture Venture Programme, and Sharjah Entrepreneurship Festival – Impact Track. They also participated in Sharjah Startup Studio (S3) incubator program by Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center (Sheraa)⁵⁵, and Mohammed Bin Rashid Innovation Fund accelerator.⁵⁶

The Waste Lab aligns with multiple SDGs, including SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, and SDG 13: Climate Action. By promoting effective food waste management practices, they contribute to creating sustainable urban environments and enhancing climate resilience.

By fostering partnerships with local businesses and communities, *The Waste Lab's* impact can expand, inspiring a broader movement that demonstrates that with innovation and commitment, waste can be turned into a valuable resource.

***The Waste Lab's* impact is impressive:**

Over **5 million**
kg of food scraps rescued

Over **1 million**
kg of compost created

Over **5 million**
kg of CO₂e emissions
prevented

167
partners onboarded,⁵² including major
clients like Expo City Dubai, Dubai World
Trade Centre, Hilton and Majid Al Futtaim⁵³

**Recognized with the SEFFY Award for Social
Impact in 2025, achieved MAJRA's Verified
Impact Project Stamp and featured on UAE's
'Future100' list for two consecutive years⁵⁴**



MITIGATING EMISSIONS: TRANSITIONING TO SUSTAINABLE ENERGY

Energy Use in the Tourism Sector

Energy is the lifeblood of cities and communities, especially in developing nations where reliable power is essential to build infrastructure and welcome international visitors. In 2023, tourism accounted for 8.1% of global energy consumption, with a striking 88% of that demand met by fossil fuels. Transportation alone represented 54% of the sector's energy use,⁵⁸ underscoring the urgent need to accelerate the transition to renewables.

This heavy reliance on fossil fuels means tourism is a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, intensifying the impacts of climate change. In 2023, travel and tourism was responsible for 6.5% of global GHG emissions, with the sector's footprint growing across all major pollutants.⁵⁹ With global temperatures already 1.1°C above pre-industrial levels, and projections warning of a possible 3.2°C rise by 2100 if current trends persist,⁶⁰ the stakes for adaptation are high. Without decisive action, the consequences for human health, global security, and economic stability could be severe, threatening the very foundation of the climate ecosystem.

Navigating Climate Challenges: Why Tourism Must Lead on Sustainability

Tourism is uniquely sensitive to climate change, directly impacted by extreme weather events and rising sea levels.⁶¹ Coastal and marine tourism, which accounts for nearly half of global tourism and 5.2% of global GDP (USD 4.6 trillion),⁶² is especially vulnerable. Rising sea levels threaten critical infrastructure such as seaports and airports,⁶³ while soaring temperatures and heatwaves can render destinations inhospitable or unsafe for travellers.

Consider this: 57% of infrastructure in Pacific Island nations is located within just 1 km of the coastline, placing assets worth USD 21.9 billion at risk from rising seas.⁶⁴ The Caribbean has already seen tourist demand decline as beaches disappear, and the socio-economic impacts of climate change disproportionately affect disadvantaged communities in the world's least developed countries.⁶⁵ In Greece, wildfires have

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Without immediate action to reduce emissions and adapt to continued warming, threats to planetary health and human systems are inevitable. To put it in no uncertain terms – NOW is the time for climate action.⁵⁷

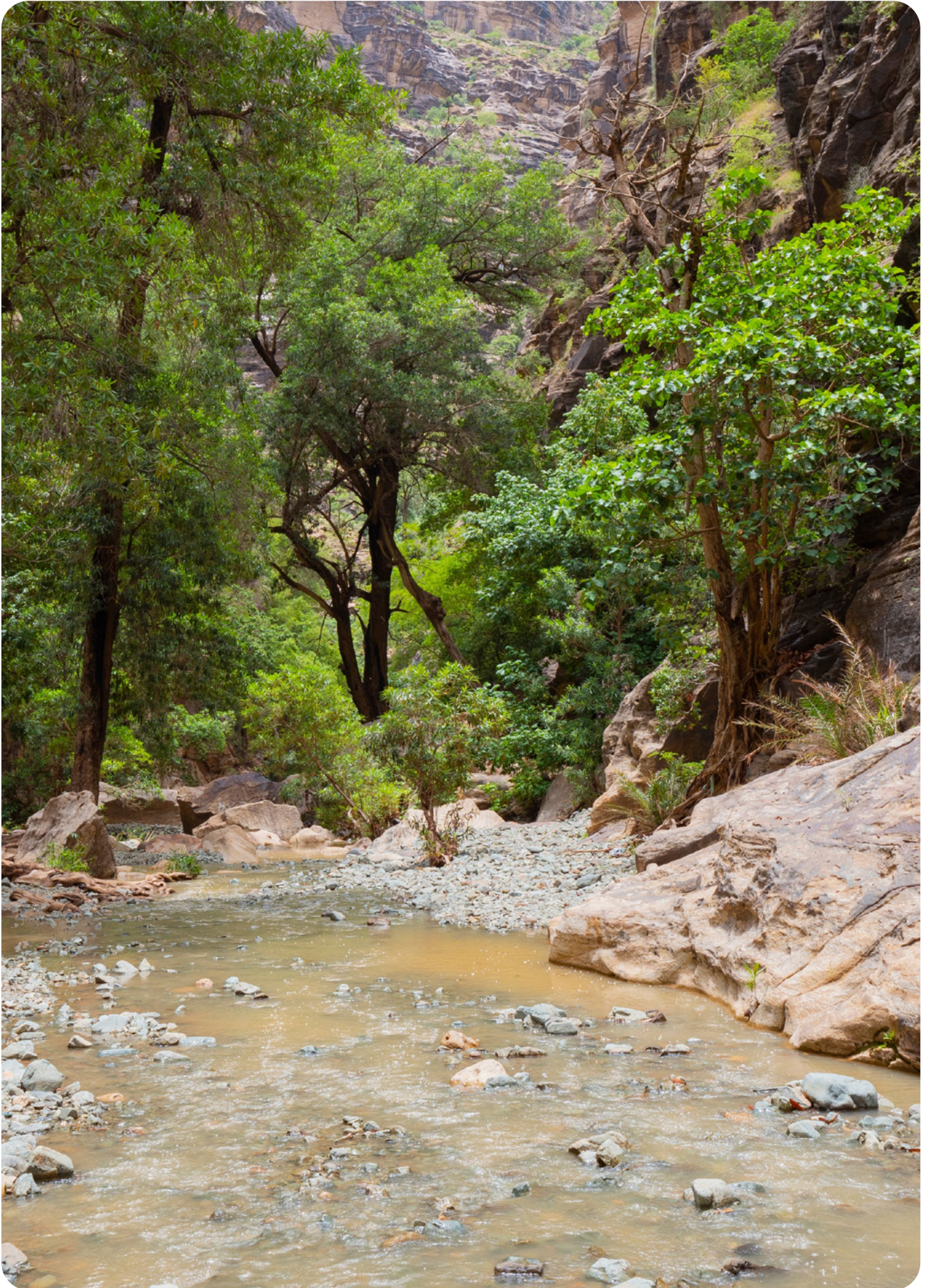
Jim Skea

Chair, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

forced the evacuation of thousands of visitors, and iconic sites like the Acropolis have closed due to extreme heat.⁶⁶ The MENA region faces its own climate-related vulnerabilities, from Egypt's Nile Delta threatened by severe weather to luxury hotels in Dubai reducing rates by nearly 50% to attract visitors during scorching summers.^{67,68}

These challenges make it clear: the tourism sector must urgently embrace sustainable practices and build resilience to climate hazards. Startups are rising to this challenge, pioneering innovative solutions that address climate change and its impacts on the industry. Immediate, effective action is essential, not only to transform tourism into a low-carbon sector, but to ensure its long-term viability in a rapidly changing world.

The following case studies of startups showcase how entrepreneurial ventures are leading the way, implementing emission reduction strategies and enabling climate action that delivers both responsible business outcomes and positive impact for people and planet.



'Wadi Lajab,' Jazan, Saudi Arabia



CASE STUDY

‘NETZERO’: SMART AFFORESTATION FOR A GREENER SAUDI ARABIA



Desertification and deforestation threaten human health, biodiversity, and food security in Saudi Arabia. These challenges are intensified by climate change and rising temperatures, endangering fragile ecosystems across the Kingdom. In response, the Saudi Green Initiative aims to plant 10 billion trees and rehabilitate 74 million hectares of land to reverse environmental degradation.⁶⁹

In line with this national agenda, *Netzero* is accelerating the Kingdom's re-greening efforts through digital platforms that make afforestation accessible to individuals and organizations, with applications across various contexts, including tourism destinations. Through the creation of these mini-forests and pockets of urban greenery, *Netzero* seeks to improve surrounding air quality, reverse desertification and capture carbon, contributing to a nationwide effort to sustainably develop cities in Saudi Arabia. Its core technologies TreeLog, Treemap, and Treewallet leverage advanced 4IR (4th Industrial Revolution) tools to enable tree planting, monitoring, and engagement:

- TreeLog: Uses machine learning, drone, satellite, and ground-level imagery to monitor tree health and estimate carbon capture, ensuring accurate carbon offset calculations and ownership verification

- Treemap: A GIS-powered database for large-scale plantations, allowing users to track tree locations, monitor planting progress, and generate impact reports to quantify ecological benefits
- Treewallet: Engages communities by enabling tree gifting and interaction, including features like chatting with a tree to learn about its history, the surrounding area, and the value of forestation in the urban environment

Netzero has been recognized by prestigious awards such as the UN Environment Programme's Young Champion of the Earth and the Social Innovation Award, highlighting its pioneering role in environmental innovation and impact.

Netzero's initiatives directly support SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, SDG 13: Climate Action, and SDG 15: Life on Land.

The startup's modular, tech-enabled platforms are designed for scalability across geographies and sectors. Its integration of AI, GIS, and community engagement tools makes it replicable in other regions facing similar environmental challenges, supporting both national and global afforestation goals.

***Netzero* has partnered with a host of local, regional, and international organizations to drive afforestation efforts:**

Planting **1 million** smart trees with King Abdulaziz Royal Nature Reserve, one of the region's largest tech-enabled reforestation efforts

Planting **250,000** smart trees in industrial cities to reduce emissions for the Saudi Authority for Industrial Cities and Technology Zones (MODON)

Planting **175,000** mangroves to restore coastal ecosystems and support blue carbon initiatives with Alinma Bank

Planting **200,000** trees and launching the Smart Green Eastern Province Project with Nesma & Partners



CASE STUDY

‘REHLA’: PIONEERING SUSTAINABLE RIDESHARING IN SAUDI ARABIA



Saudi Arabia’s religious tourism brings millions to Madinah and Makkah, leading to congested roads and increased carbon emissions. With the Kingdom preparing for the 2034 FIFA World Cup, efficient, eco-friendly transportation is essential.

Established in 2020, *Rehla* is the first ridesharing app in Saudi Arabia that connects passengers with drivers heading to the same destination. Inspired by the shared economy, it facilitates ridesharing, standard ride-hailing, and guided tours, aiming to become a regional “super app.”⁷⁰ By allowing multiple riders to share trips, *Rehla* reduces vehicle numbers and carbon emissions. Its unique “tour guide” option pairs passengers with licensed guides, enhancing the travel experience while creating job opportunities.

Recognized by King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) as one of the “37 TAQADAM Startups Ready to Disrupt,” it has also been featured in Entrepreneur Middle East and Arab News, solidifying its status as a trailblazer in the region.⁷¹

Rehla aligns with SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, promoting shared mobility solutions that reduce carbon emissions, enhance urban transportation efficiency, and contribute to a sustainable future for Saudi Arabia.

Rehla overcame common startup funding challenges. It started with USD 267,000⁷² in bootstrapped funding from the founders, followed by USD 600,000⁷³ raised through the TAQADAM Startup Accelerator. Additionally, it secured USD 3.3 million via three rounds of equity crowdfunding. *Rehla* also received comprehensive capacity-building assistance through the TDF program, which supported the startup to strengthen its operations and scale effectively.

Rehla’s model is replicable in other regions facing similar transportation challenges. Its commitment to sustainability, including plans to plant a tree for every ride, allows for scalability while engaging customers in meaningful environmental initiatives. *Rehla* is not just a ridesharing app; it is a movement towards sustainable transportation in Saudi Arabia.

***Rehla*’s impact is significant:**

45,958 kg

of CO₂e emissions avoided

400,000

trips completed

20,000

ridesharing trips logged

20%

increase in ridesharing trips (2023-2024)

59%

increase in new users (2023-2024)

104%

increase in new trip captains (2023-2024)

Expanded to **12**

new cities (2023-2025)



NATURE-POSITIVE TOURISM: THE LINK BETWEEN TOURISM AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

“

Travel is a force for good in so many profound yet hard-to-quantify ways...it teaches the sanctity and majesty of the natural world.⁷⁴

Julia Simpson

President & CEO, WTTC

Nature and Tourism: An Inextricable Bond

The relationship between tourism and nature is profound and undeniable. The travel and tourism sector is fundamentally anchored in the planet's natural capital, drawing millions of visitors each year to experience the world's lakes, beaches, mountains, and national parks. Remarkably, an estimated 80% of the sector's value is derived directly from the natural world.⁷⁵

Nature-based tourism is surging, now representing over half of all global tours, with forecasts suggesting it could generate USD 665 billion annually by 2030.⁷⁶ Wildlife tourism alone contributes approximately USD 343 billion and supports 21.8 million jobs worldwide.⁷⁷

This momentum is not limited to remote landscapes. Urban areas are increasingly embracing nature tourism, which is projected to account for nearly 7% of global tourism spending, a testament to the sector's evolution over the past decade.⁷⁸ “Urban ecotourism” describes a growing movement of nature travel and conservation within city environments,⁷⁹ from national parks and green spaces to nature trails and waterfronts.⁸⁰ With the United Nations estimating that 60% of the world's population will reside in urban areas by 2030,⁸¹ cities are poised to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of nature tourism.

Given this deep dependency, the long-term viability of tourism hinges on robust investments in nature preservation. The sector's future is inseparable from the conservation of its greatest asset: the natural environment.⁸²

Tourism's Toll: The Environmental Impact of Overtourism

Yet, the very growth that fuels tourism's promise also brings significant risks. Human activity across all sectors now

exceeds the planet's regenerative capacity, resulting in an alarming 68% average decline in wildlife diversity and placing one in four species at risk of extinction.⁸³ Coral reefs are especially vulnerable, with projections indicating a dramatic reduction to just 10-30% of their former coverage at 1.5°C warming and less than 1% at 2°C.⁸⁴ These figures are stark, given that coral reefs support at least a quarter of marine species and the livelihoods of millions of people worldwide.⁸⁵

Overtourism has emerged as a major threat to natural landscapes and biodiversity. Currently, 80% of global tourists visit only 10% of destinations,⁸⁶ concentrating pressure on fragile ecosystems. This leads to habitat degradation, resource depletion, and increased pollution, with iconic sites bearing the brunt. For example, the Calanques of Marseille and the Cliffs of Étretat in France have suffered accelerated erosion and ecological decline due to heavy foot traffic.⁸⁷ In Iceland, Fjaðrárgljúfur Canyon was closed in 2019 to allow its ecosystem to recover from visitor damage to the vegetation,⁸⁸ while Maya Bay Beach in Thailand was shuttered after hosting 2.5 million tourists in a single year, resulting in severe impacts on bay erosion, coral reefs, and marine life.⁸⁹

The MENA region, which accounts for 9.5% of global tourist visits, faces its own challenges.⁹⁰ The construction of man-made islands and tourism infrastructure in the Arabian Gulf has damaged habitats, while overfishing and trampling by tourists have further depleted wildlife.⁹¹ The Red Sea, a cornerstone of regional economies, has seen declines in marine biodiversity, prompting a shift toward regenerative tourism practices, including renewable energy and conservation initiatives as part of Saudi Arabia's 'Red Sea Project.' In the Mediterranean, mass tourism has led to a 41% decline in marine mammal populations and a 34% drop in fish populations over the past 50 years.⁹²

Public Demand for Sustainable Tourism

The environmental consequences of tourism have not gone unnoticed. According to a 2021 Economist Intelligence Unit report commissioned by WWF, over 90% of people worldwide express concern about the loss of animal and plant species.⁹³ Social media conversations about nature loss have surged by 65%, especially among users in developing economies.⁹⁴ This heightened awareness has translated into civil protests against unsustainable tourism practices, from demonstrations in 2017 at Plitvice Lakes National Park in Croatia protesting new construction permits for tourism infrastructure amid long-standing worries about environmental and cultural erosion at this UNESCO World Heritage Site⁹⁵ to more recent activism in 2025 at the FFW Travel Talk Conference in the Canary Islands, where calls for urgent action against ecological damage from mass tourism have grown louder.⁹⁶

This groundswell of public concern underscores a clear demand: sustainable tourism development that prioritizes environmental stewardship and aligns travel experiences with the preservation of nature.

Nature-Positive Tourism: Reviving the Planet through Travel

In response to mounting environmental challenges and rising consumer expectations, the ‘nature-positive tourism’ movement has gained momentum. This approach transcends the traditional goal of minimizing harm, instead championing regeneration and restoration in tourist destinations. It is a call to action for the sector to “do good,” not just “do no harm.”

Nature-positive tourism recognizes that a thriving planet is essential for a thriving tourism industry. The principle is simple: “when nature suffers, so does tourism.”⁹⁷ Implementing nature-positive tourism solutions demands innovative strategies to protect and restore the natural world. While governments are beginning to promote these practices, entrepreneurs are leading the charge, creating sustainable business models that prioritize conservation, foster local community engagement, and elevate the visitor experience.

The following case studies illustrate how startups are driving environmental conservation through tourism, delivering positive impact for nature and communities alike.



Jeddah, Saudi Arabia



CASE STUDY



‘NATUCATE’: MERGING ADVENTURE WITH CONSERVATION





In a world increasingly disconnected from nature, the need for authentic conservation experiences has never been more pressing. Many individuals want to contribute to environmental preservation but lack opportunities to engage meaningfully. Traditional tourism often overlooks the importance of education and hands-on involvement in conservation efforts, leaving potential advocates uninformed and disengaged.

Enter *Natucate*, a startup founded by Daniel Kaul,⁹⁸ dedicated to offering immersive nature conservation experiences that promote environmental awareness.⁹⁹ Combining the words “nature” and “educate,”¹⁰⁰ *Natucate* provides a diverse range of travel experiences, including volunteering trips, private wilderness adventures, field training courses, and safaris.¹⁰¹ By partnering with local conservation organizations, *Natucate* curates impactful experiences that allow participants to learn about and contribute to the environment firsthand.¹⁰²

Natucate has garnered international recognition and media coverage from outlets such as CNN, Lonely Planet, and The New York Times.¹⁰⁸ Their successful North Island Conservation Project in Seychelles has not only restored the island’s ecosystem but also attracted participants eager to engage in meaningful conservation work.¹⁰⁹ This success has positioned *Natucate* as a leader in ethical travel and conservation education.

Natucate aligns with several SDGs, particularly SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 15: Life on Land. By providing hands-on conservation experiences and promoting environmental education, *Natucate* contributes to the preservation of biodiversity and fosters a deeper understanding of ecological issues among participants.

Natucate seeks to enhance conservation efforts through tourism. By collaborating with local NGOs and conservation projects, *Natucate* can expand its offerings globally, empowering more individuals to engage in meaningful conservation work while promoting sustainable tourism practices.

***Natucate’s* impact is demonstrated through the following:**

Over **27,000**
endangered species
supported worldwide¹⁰³

Recognized with the 2017 National Geographic World Legacy Award for “Conserving the Natural World”¹⁰⁶

More than **999** adventures¹⁰⁴ offered across
25+ countries in six continents¹⁰⁵

Endorsed as an ethical agency for voluntary work by the Campaign Against Canned Hunting (CACH)¹⁰⁷

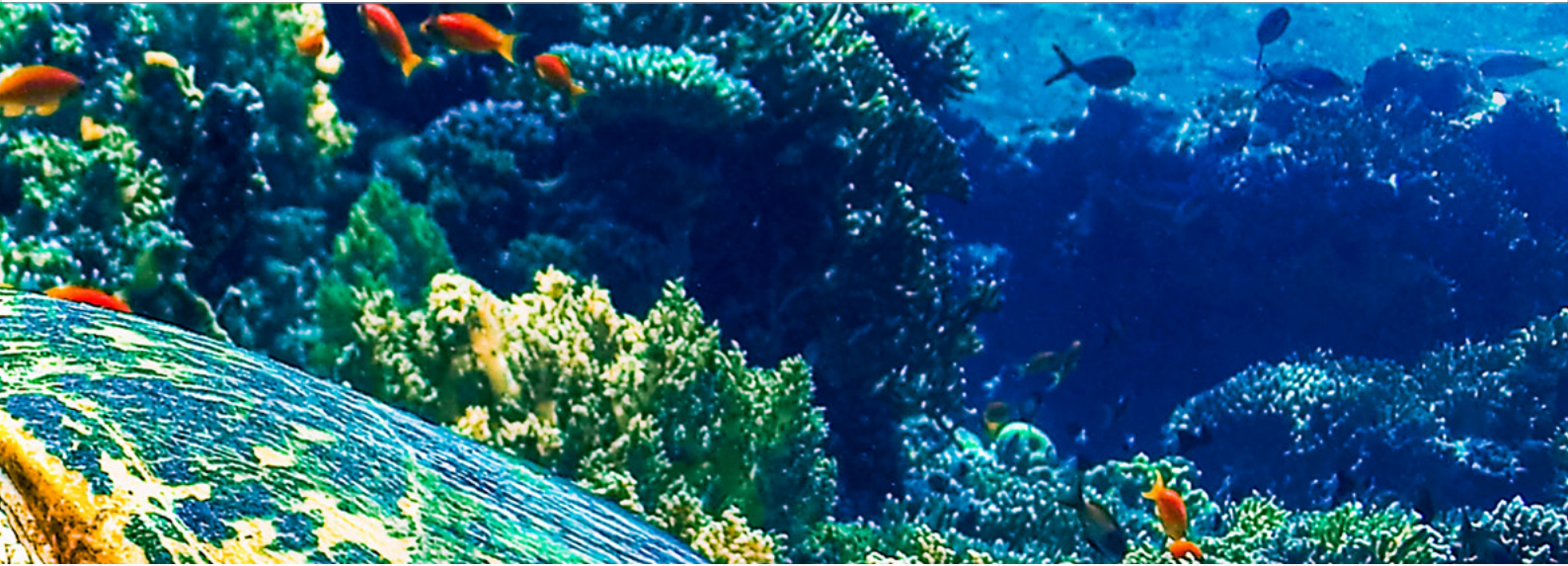


CASE STUDY



‘CORAL VITA’: REVIVING OUR OCEANS





Coral reefs, often referred to as the "rainforests of the sea," are facing unprecedented degradation due to climate change, pollution, and overfishing. These vital ecosystems are not only home to diverse marine life but also support coastal economies and protect shorelines. The urgent need to restore and preserve coral reefs has become one of the planet's greatest environmental challenges.

Coral Vita, an award-winning startup founded by Gator Halpern and Sam Teicher, is dedicated to tackling this issue head-on.¹¹⁰ With a mission to grow resilient corals and transplant them into damaged reefs, *Coral Vita* employs innovative, high-tech methods to accelerate coral restoration.¹¹¹ Their land-based coral farms utilize solar-powered technology and closed-loop systems that mimic natural ocean conditions, allowing them to grow millions of corals in a fraction of the time it takes in the wild.¹¹²

By integrating cutting-edge techniques like micro-fragmentation and assisted evolution, *Coral Vita* can achieve coral growth rates up to 50 times faster than nature, with survival rates reaching 95%.¹¹³ Their approach not only revitalizes marine ecosystems but also engages local communities and stakeholders in conservation efforts.¹¹⁴ *Coral Vita* offers coral restoration as a service, providing scalable solutions for coastal tourism destinations to protect marine ecosystems and enhance the tourism offer.

Following its inception with a USD 1,000 university grant,¹²⁰ *Coral Vita* has garnered significant attention and investment, raising over USD 8 million¹²¹ in Series A funding and

becoming one of the first coral restoration-focused companies to achieve such a milestone. Their work has been recognized globally, and they have established a reputation as a leader in marine conservation.

Coral Vita aligns with SDG 14: Life Below Water, as they aim to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources. By restoring coral reefs and promoting marine biodiversity, *Coral Vita* contributes to healthier ocean ecosystems and supports the livelihoods of coastal communities.

Because *Coral Vita* operates at the frontier of a new industry, expanding into new regions requires close collaboration with local governments and partners to align on emerging restoration protocols.¹²² *Coral Vita* plays an active role in shaping these frameworks and establishing high-integrity standards for the sector. The startup is also helping to create sustainable financing pathways for reef restoration by introducing restoration-as-a-service models and educating stakeholders on the long-term economic value of healthy reefs.

The *Coral Vita* model is highly replicable in other regions facing coral degradation. By establishing partnerships with local organizations and governments, they can expand their restoration efforts globally. Their work offers hope for our oceans and shows that coral reefs can be revived to secure a sustainable future for marine life and coastal communities alike.

***Coral Vita's* impact is impressive:**

Over **100,000** corals grown across 52 species since 2019,¹¹⁵ with 24 types of indigenous coral cultivated¹¹⁶

Featured in prominent media outlets such as CNN, The New York Times, and Forbes¹¹⁸

Recognized with the **GBP 1 million** Earthshot Prize in 2021 for their innovative work in coral restoration¹¹⁷

Successfully partnered with leading tourism destinations, including NEOM in Saudi Arabia¹¹⁹



CASE STUDY



‘HEENAT SALMA FARM’: CULTIVATING SUSTAINABILITY IN QATAR





Industrial and chemical-driven farming practices lead to soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, and a disconnect between people and nature. As the demand for sustainable food sources grows, there is an urgent need for innovative agricultural practices that promote environmental health and community engagement.

Heenat Salma Farm emerged as a pioneering center for regenerative agriculture, education, and wellness. Established in 2018 by the Caravane Earth Foundation, the farm transformed a conventional agricultural site into a model of sustainability.¹²³ By emphasizing chemical-free farming and biodiversity, *Heenat Salma Farm* serves as a living laboratory for interdisciplinary studies and immersive nature-based experiences.¹²⁴

The farm has gained recognition as a wellness hub, offering a variety of visitor experiences, including farm-to-table culinary classes, biodiversity tours, and wellness packages.¹²⁹ With over 20 unique visitor experiences,¹³⁰ *Heenat Salma Farm* attracts both locals and tourists, providing fresh farm-to-kitchen products and supporting local artisans through its store.¹³¹

Heenat Salma Farm aligns with several SDGs, particularly SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production and SDG 15: Life on Land. By promoting biodiversity, sustainable agriculture, and community engagement, the farm contributes to a healthier ecosystem and a more sustainable food system.

Heenat Salma Farm fosters partnerships with local organizations and educational institutions, offering a transformative space that inspires similar initiatives worldwide while promoting sustainable practices and community involvement in agriculture.

***Heenat Salma Farm's* impact is showcased through the following:**

Over **4,000** trees planted, including 1,200 date palms, of which 625 are already producing. The plantation also features a diverse range of fruit and specialty trees such as tamarind, eucalyptus, fig, mulberry, and more

Recognized with **1st place** in the Tourism and Hospitality category at the 2024 Qatar Social Responsibility Awards¹²⁶

Home to **140** crop varieties and Qatar's only organic seed bank, preserving over 40 organic seed varieties¹²⁵

Certified by the Ecological Farming Control Organisation (ETKO)¹²⁷ and partnered with notable institutions like Qatar University and the Gulf Organization for Research and Development (GORD)¹²⁸



ACHIEVING SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: HOW STARTUPS TRANSFORM LIVES AND LOCAL ECONOMIES



WOMEN LEADING CHANGE: EMPOWERMENT AND INNOVATION IN TOURISM

“

Half of the world's population are women. And yet, we still make up a fraction of leadership positions, of business owners...and still too small a part of the overall workforce. That needs to change.¹³²

**H.H. Princess Reema bint
Bandar Al Saud**

Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to
the United States of America

“

Women's economic empowerment boosts productivity and increases economic diversification and income equality. When more women work, economies grow.¹³³

Basmah Al-Mayman

Regional Director for the Middle East, UN Tourism

Female Entrepreneurship: Transforming the Tourism Sector

Tourism stands as one of the world's fastest growing industries, and with its expansion comes a surge of opportunity for female entrepreneurs. Today, women own more than one-third of travel companies,¹³⁴ a testament to their pivotal role in shaping the sector's future. Across the tourism landscape, women are launching innovative startups, from immersive tour experiences and tech-enabled travel platforms to boutique accommodations and culinary ventures, each bringing fresh perspectives and unique offerings to travellers worldwide.

This entrepreneurial momentum is especially pronounced in the GCC countries, where women-led startups now account for over 40% of new businesses.¹³⁵ The UAE and Saudi Arabia exemplify this trend: in 2022, the UAE saw a remarkable 68% increase in female entrepreneurs,¹³⁶ with over 25,000 women managing 50,000 projects valued at AED 60 billion (USD 16.3 billion).¹³⁷ In Saudi Arabia, nearly 140,000 commercial licenses were issued to women in 2021—a 112% increase since 2015.¹³⁸ According to Monsha'at, the Kingdom's Small and Medium Enterprises General Authority, 45% of SMEs, including early-stage startups, are now women-led, underscoring the growing influence of female founders in the sector.¹³⁹

This wave of entrepreneurship extends deep into tourism-related industries. In 2024, nearly half of all accommodation and food service businesses in Saudi Arabia were owned by women, totalling an impressive 59,800 establishments nationwide.¹⁴⁰ Recognizing

these achievements, the World Bank's 'Women, Business and the Law' 2022 report ranked Saudi Arabia as one of the region's top performers and improvers, with a score of 80 out of 100 – far above the MENA average of 53.¹⁴¹

A Positive Ripple Effect: Social Impact and Community Empowerment

The empowerment of women through tourism entrepreneurship creates a powerful ripple effect across communities. Many female founders prioritize social impact, offering training and job opportunities to marginalized women who might otherwise be excluded from the workforce. This is especially critical in regions where women face lower labor participation rates and often engage in unpaid family work, performing over 75% of such duties.¹⁴²

Beyond economic inclusion, female-owned tourism startups are redefining the travel experience for women. With women comprising 67% of international solo travellers and 88% of solo female travellers report feeling unsafe while on the road,¹⁴³ safety remains a top concern. By creating women-friendly accommodations, tours, and facilities, these entrepreneurs empower female travellers to explore confidently, enriching tourism experiences and contributing to a safer, more equitable travel landscape for all.

The following case studies spotlight women-led startups and female-focused travel services that exemplify the richness and diversity of tourism today. Through their commitment to inclusion and innovation, these ventures are not only driving economic growth but also advancing women's empowerment, proving that when women lead, the entire sector thrives.





CASE STUDY

A close-up photograph of a woven basket filled with vibrant pink roses. The basket's rim is decorated with colorful threads in shades of pink, blue, and white. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting.

‘5BOGOTA’: EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH TRAVEL IN COLOMBIA





In Colombia, tourism has the potential to thrive, yet outdated perceptions and gender biases often hinder progress. Many view the country as unsafe and unwelcoming, while women in the tourism sector face significant challenges in gaining recognition and opportunities. The need for a platform that showcases local talent and fosters a positive image of Colombia is crucial for both tourism and community development.

5Bogota, a women-led tour company founded by a mother and her two daughters, is transforming the travel landscape by connecting local hosts with travellers.¹⁴⁴ This innovative startup employs an all-female team of local guides, emphasizing the vital role women play in reshaping perceptions of Colombia as a safe and accessible destination. Through their unique '5 Senses' experiences, *5Bogota* invites travellers to explore Bogotá through taste, smell, texture, sound, and color, offering immersive cultural experiences that highlight the richness of Colombian life.

The startup has gained significant traction in the tourism market, with its unique offerings attracting both local and international travellers. By focusing on authentic experiences and community engagement, *5Bogota* has positioned itself as a leader in promoting sustainable tourism practices in Colombia.

5Bogota aligns with several SDGs, particularly SDG 5: Gender Equality and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. By empowering women in tourism and promoting local culture, *5Bogota* contributes to a more inclusive and equitable industry while enhancing economic opportunities for communities.

The *5Bogota* model focuses on enhancing tourism offerings through local women empowerment and cultural experiences. Similar models can be developed globally to foster partnerships with local women and communities, promoting sustainable tourism and gender equality in the industry.

***5Bogota's* impact is showcased through the following:**

Over **555** tours conducted, showcasing the talents of local women¹⁴⁵

Recognized by the Culture Trip as the Best Cooking Classes in Bogotá¹⁴⁷ and featured in the Telegraph¹⁴⁸

Generated more than **USD 16,000** for local workers, directly benefiting the community¹⁴⁶

Received a Certificate of Excellence from TripAdvisor, reflecting high customer satisfaction¹⁴⁹



CASE STUDY

‘WOVOYAGE’: REDEFINING SAFETY IN WOMEN’S TRAVEL





As more women express a desire to explore the world, safety concerns often deter them from traveling alone. In India and beyond, the lack of female-friendly travel options can make it challenging for women to embark on solo adventures, leaving them feeling unsupported and vulnerable.

Wovoyage, founded by Rashmi Chadha,¹⁵⁰ is an innovative online travel platform dedicated to creating a “global sisterhood”¹⁵¹ of travellers. The platform connects female travellers with female guides, drivers, and safe accommodations, fostering a supportive network within the travel community.¹⁵² Wovoyage offers women-friendly tour packages across 10 countries, ensuring that every journey is tailored to meet the unique needs of female explorers.¹⁵³

In 2024, Wovoyage launched an app featuring built-in SOS services for emergencies, online chat groups for community support, and 24/7 assistance from expert female guides.¹⁵⁴ The platform also partners with “Wovoyage Certified Hotels,” which are either owned or managed by women, ensuring safe stays in accessible locations.¹⁵⁵ Additionally, Wovoyage’s “Wowheels” service provides women-only carpooling for budget-friendly, same-day trips.

Wovoyage has established itself as a trusted name in women-centric travel, attracting a growing community of female travellers seeking safe and enriching experiences. The platform’s partnerships with reputable tourism organizations further enhance its credibility and reach. The platform has received recognition from various tourism boards, including the Japan National Tourism Organization and the “Incredible India” campaign.¹⁶⁰

Wovoyage aligns with SDG 5: Gender Equality by empowering women in tourism and providing safe travel options. By creating a supportive environment for female travellers, Wovoyage contributes to a more inclusive and equitable travel industry.

Wovoyage is a movement that empowers women to explore the world confidently, proving that with the right support and community, every woman can embark on her own adventure. By establishing partnerships with local female guides and accommodations, the Wovoyage model can be replicated globally, promoting safety and empowerment for women travellers everywhere.

Wovoyage has made significant strides:

Operates in **10** countries across two continents¹⁵⁶

Trusted by over **100,000** women travellers¹⁵⁸

Offers **25+** tour packages specifically designed for women¹⁵⁷

Employs **35+** women guides, providing job opportunities in tourism¹⁵⁹

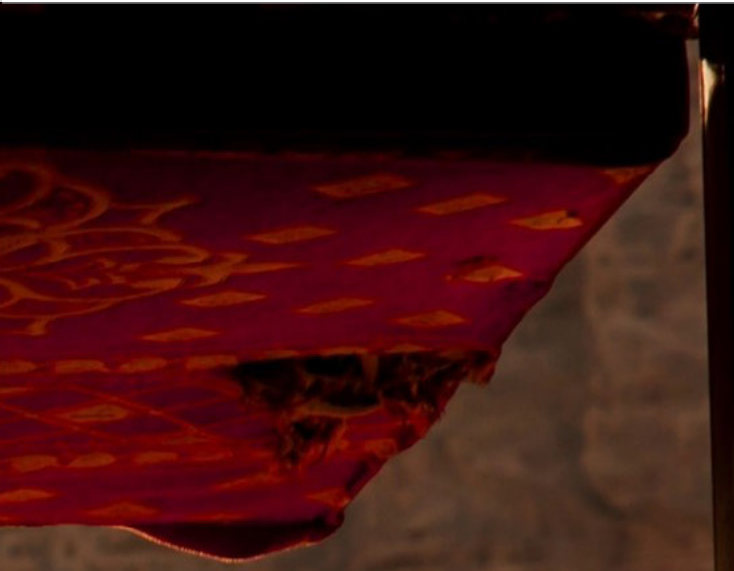


CASE STUDY



‘ASHWAG HANDMADE’: CRAFTING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN THROUGH ARTISTRY AND TRADITION





In Saudi Arabia, traditional crafts are at risk of fading away, and many talented female artisans struggle to find opportunities to showcase their skills and earn a sustainable income. The challenge lies in preserving these cultural practices while empowering women and promoting the beauty of Saudi heritage in a modern marketplace.

Founded by art teacher Ashwag AlSughayyir, *Ashwag Handmade* is an online platform that honors Saudi heritage through handmade cultural products crafted by local female artisans. The startup not only sells its unique items online but also collaborates with physical stores across Saudi Arabia to reach a wider audience. By focusing on traditional techniques such as Sadu weaving, beadwork, and embroidery, *Ashwag Handmade* creates a supportive environment for women to monetize their talents while preserving their cultural heritage.

The startup has gained significant recognition in the market, being selected as a business partner by the Turquoise Mountain Foundation and KSA's Royal Institute of Traditional Arts. *Ashwag Handmade* was also a finalist in the TDF Grow Handicrafts and Souvenirs Accelerator in 2024, highlighting its potential in the tourism sector.

Ashwag Handmade's impact is evident:

Over **7,000** cultural products sold as of 2025

Engaged **10+** local female artists in production and trained **50+** female artists in traditional crafts

Ashwag Handmade aligns with SDG 5: Gender Equality by empowering women through economic opportunities in the arts. Additionally, it supports SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production by promoting sustainable practices and preserving traditional crafts.

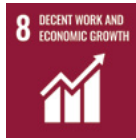
As a small handmade manufacturing business, *Ashwag Handmade* faces challenges with cost control and spending efficiency, common in artist-driven ventures focused on craftsmanship. The niche nature of the business, coupled with the high costs of compensating female artists, often makes it difficult to achieve sufficient profits. Consequently, pricing may be prohibitive, limiting accessibility for many potential customers.

Ashwag Handmade looks to promote local crafts and empower women. Its approach can be adapted globally to preserve cultural traditions and create economic opportunities for communities.

Ashwag Handmade is more than just a business; it is a movement that celebrates Saudi heritage, empowers women, and preserves traditional crafts, proving that art can be a powerful tool for social change and cultural pride.

20% profit increase from 2023 to 2025

Recognized for its quality craftsmanship, including collaborations with global brands including, Cartier, Audi, and Chevrolet



INCLUSIVE GROWTH: COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT THROUGH TOURISM STARTUPS



Tourism is one of the world's most important economic sectors. For women, rural communities, indigenous peoples, and many other historically marginalized populations, tourism has been a vehicle for integration, empowerment, and generating income.¹⁶¹

António Guterres

Secretary-General of the United Nations

Unlocking Opportunity: The Imperative of Community Empowerment

Despite remarkable progress, the challenge of poverty remains urgent and pervasive. According to the World Bank, nearly 700 million people worldwide – representing 8.5% of the global population – continue to live in extreme poverty, with less than USD 2.15 a day.¹⁶² The root causes are complex, spanning social inequality, weak institutions, limited access to education, and persistent unemployment. In response, the UN SDGs place community empowerment at the heart of their agenda, calling for the eradication of poverty, the reduction of inequalities, and the creation of decent work opportunities, especially for marginalized groups.

Startups as Engines of Inclusive Growth

Startups are uniquely positioned to catalyze sustainable development within their communities. Their close ties to local populations enable them to craft tailored solutions that address specific challenges, generate jobs, and promote local goods and services. By embedding ethical sourcing practices, startups elevate community health, well-being, and the resilience of local ecosystems.

As economic engines, startups stimulate growth, innovation, and competition. They create employment for youth, women, and families, driving a ripple effect that extends far beyond their immediate operations. Notably, OECD research shows that young firms in member countries account for nearly half of all new job creation, despite representing only 20% of total employment.¹⁶³ This underscores the transformative impact startups have on job growth and local talent empowerment.

Expanding Opportunity Beyond Formal Employment

Startups also unlock income opportunities for productive families: those who may not operate as formal businesses, but create local products such as crafts, traditional clothing, and food from home. By promoting these cultural products and experiences to tourists, startups provide families with platforms to market their offerings, supporting local sourcing and income generation for those often excluded from the formal economy.

Championing Sustainable and Ethical Sourcing

Through strategic partnerships with local communities, startups strengthen local sourcing and drive economic benefit. They champion ethical sourcing practices that safeguard community well-being and preserve resources, both domestically and internationally. For example, startups can implement fair payment policies in their supply chains, upholding labor rights and ensuring workers receive a living wage. By collaborating with farmers to adopt eco-friendly methods, they promote sustainable agricultural practices that reduce environmental impact while enhancing crop yields.

The following case studies showcase how innovative tourism models, rooted in sustainability, community empowerment, and cultural authenticity, are transforming travel into a powerful engine for inclusive economic growth and environmental stewardship across diverse regions.



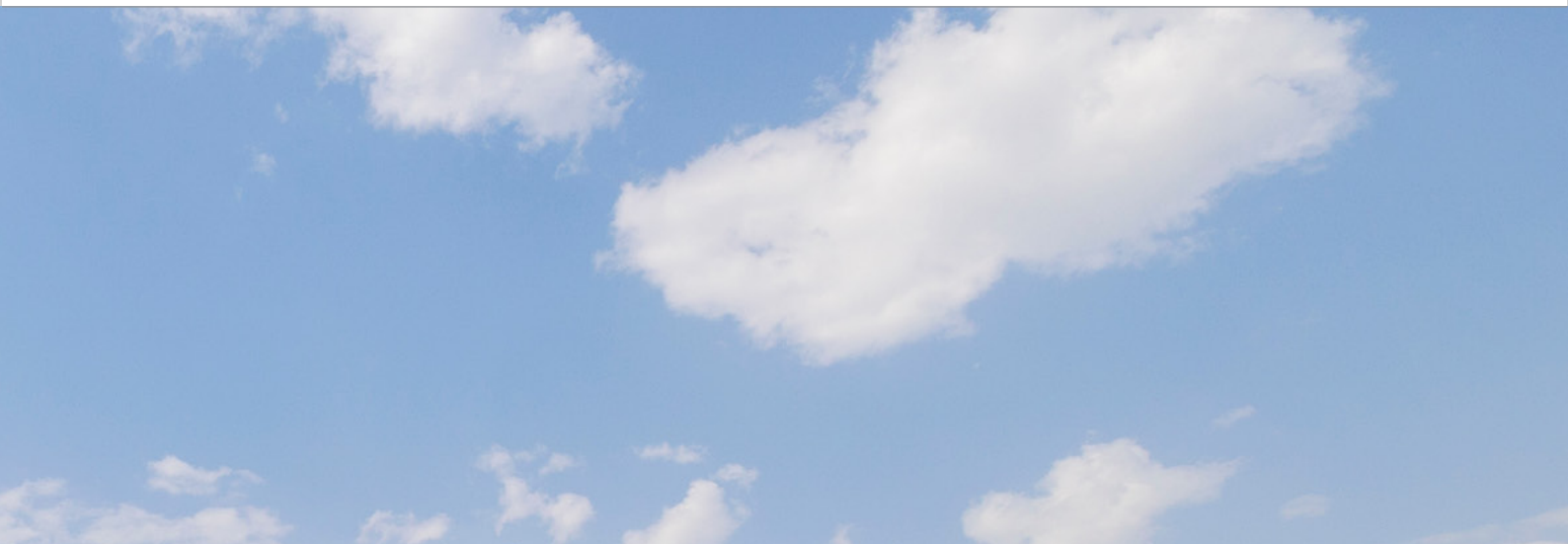
'Edge of the World,' Riyadh, Saudi Arabia



CASE STUDY

‘ADVENTURE ECOTRIPS KENYA’: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH ECO- TOURISM





In Kenya, the beauty of nature and rich cultural heritage often go unnoticed by travellers, while local communities struggle with declining livelihoods, particularly in fishing, due to overexploitation of resources. The challenge lies in promoting sustainable tourism that not only showcases the country's natural wonders, but also uplifts and empowers local communities.

Adventure Ecotrips Kenya, founded by Noel Milanya, is dedicated to creating eco-friendly travel experiences that immerse visitors in the stunning landscapes and vibrant cultures of Kenya.¹⁶⁴ By offering a variety of adventures such as biking, hiking, safaris, and kayaking, the startup collaborates closely with local communities to ensure that tourism benefits them directly.

One of their standout offerings is the Nam-Lolwe Kayaking Excursion at Lake Victoria. Inspired by a local fisherman facing declining fish stocks, Noel and his team trained local fishermen to become certified kayaking guides, providing them with an alternative livelihood.¹⁶⁵ This eco-friendly, non-motorized kayaking tour not only supports local fishermen, but also promotes sustainable tourism practices.

The startup has established itself as a leader in eco-tourism, attracting travellers interested in sustainable experiences. By collaborating with local communities, *Adventure Ecotrips Kenya* ensures that its tours are not only enjoyable but also beneficial to the people and environment of Kenya.

Adventure Ecotrips Kenya aligns with SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth by providing sustainable income opportunities for local communities. It also supports SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, promoting eco-friendly tourism practices that protect natural resources.

The *Adventure Ecotrips Kenya* model shows how tourism can drive community empowerment. Applying this approach through community partnerships in other regions can address similar challenges and enhance the livelihoods of local populations while promoting sustainable tourism.

***Adventure Ecotrips Kenya* has gained recognition for its innovative approach:**

The Nam-Lolwe Kayaking Excursion won 2nd place in the 2024 Social Entrepreneurship in Tourism Competition in Berlin, highlighting its impact and potential¹⁶⁶

The initiative has successfully trained local fishermen, creating new income opportunities and fostering community engagement¹⁶⁷



CASE STUDY

‘EISH’HA TOURS’: ELEVATING SAUDI TOURISM THROUGH LOCAL EXPERIENCES



In Saudi Arabia, the tourism sector is rapidly evolving, yet there remains a gap in providing truly immersive experiences that capture the country's rich culture and traditions. Many travelers seek meaningful interactions with local communities, but conventional tour operators often overlook these connections. At the same time, the need to embed environmental sustainability in tourism has become increasingly urgent.

Eish'ha Tours is a pioneering operator dedicated to offering high-end travel experiences for both local and international discerning guests. The startup curates a wide variety of activities, ranging from city tours and sea adventures to exhilarating desert dune excursions.

What sets *Eish'ha Tours* apart is its strong commitment to community engagement and environmental protection. By arranging family-hosting experiences, guests share meals and traditions with local households, enriching their journey while generating income for families. The startup also prioritizes

hiring independent local guides, ensuring visitors gain genuine perspectives from those who know the regions best.

Having established itself as a trusted name in premium tourism, *Eish'ha Tours* continues to attract a growing clientele seeking unique and culturally rich travel. The startup has successfully navigated Saudi Arabia's regulatory framework, upholding the nation's high standards for tourism operators.

Aligned with global development goals, *Eish'ha Tours* advances SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth by creating job opportunities and empowering artisans, while contributing to SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production through sustainable practices and waste management.

Looking ahead, *Eish'ha Tours* aims to further expand its offerings by deepening partnerships with communities and artisans. By promoting authentic, responsible tourism, the company connects travelers with the heart of Saudi culture, proving that journeys can be both luxurious and sustainable.

Eish'ha Tours has already achieved significant milestones:

Organized **300+** unique experiences and served over **1,000** clients as of 2025

Engaged **50+** local guides, creating sustainable employment opportunities

Supported **100+** artisans and family businesses through community-driven initiatives

Increased trip volume by **20%** from 2024 to 2025, with a projected **40%** growth for 2026



CASE STUDY

‘FAIR VOYAGE’: TRANSFORMING TRAVEL INTO A FORCE FOR GOOD





In the world of travel, many tourists are unaware of the negative impacts their adventures can have on local communities and the environment. Exploitation of local workers, particularly in popular destinations like Mount Kilimanjaro, highlights the urgent need for ethical travel practices. Travellers often seek meaningful experiences but lack access to platforms that prioritize sustainability and community welfare.

Fair Voyage, founded by Alexandra Pastollingg, is a purpose-driven online travel agency dedicated to help transform travel into a force for good.¹⁶⁸ Inspired by her experiences on Mount Kilimanjaro, Alexandra created *Fair Voyage* to promote ethical climbs and sustainable tourism. The platform now provides customized trips across multiple destinations, developed by specialists in sustainable travel. This ensures that each journey benefits local communities while minimizing environmental impact.¹⁶⁹

Fair Voyage curates socially and environmentally responsible suppliers, partnering with organizations like Travelife to help them achieve certification.¹⁷⁰ The startup empowers local

communities by creating itineraries that support environmental and cultural conservation projects, linking travellers with ethical local entrepreneurs.

The startup has built a strong reputation in the eco-tourism sector, attracting a diverse clientele interested in sustainable travel. With a dedicated team of 30 senior advisors and local travel experts, *Fair Voyage* continues to expand its offerings while maintaining a commitment to ethical practices.¹⁷⁶

Fair Voyage aligns with SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production by promoting sustainable tourism practices that benefit local communities and protect the environment. The startup also supports SDG 13: Climate Action through its commitment to carbon neutrality, offsetting the impact of all trips booked through its platform.

Fair Voyage seeks to enhance their tourism offerings through ethical practices. By partnering with local suppliers and prioritizing community engagement, it sets a model that can be adapted worldwide, driving sustainable tourism and strengthening local economies. *Fair Voyage* empowers travellers to make a positive impact, proving that with thoughtful choices, travel can indeed be a force for good.

Fair Voyage's impact is substantial:

Operates in **35+** countries across six continents¹⁷¹

Awarded the Travelife Partner Award for sustainability and qualified as KPAP Partner company (a Tanzanian non-profit recognized as the Global Winner of the WTM World Responsible Tourism Awards 2022)¹⁷³

First B Corp certified full-service travel agency in Switzerland¹⁷²

Contributed to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and co-founded the Good Travel Alliance¹⁷⁴

Global Shortlist – National Nominee for Switzerland at the World Summit Awards 2019¹⁷⁵



SAFEGUARDING IDENTITY: TOURISM'S ROLE IN CULTURAL AND HERITAGE PRESERVATION

“

Tourism allows people to experience some of the world's cultural and natural riches and brings people closer to each other, highlighting our common humanity. Indeed, one might say that tourism is itself one of the wonders of the world.¹⁷⁷

António Guterres

Secretary-General of the United Nations

“

Tourists today are increasingly thoughtful about where they go, how they get there and how their journey impacts the world. They're more drawn to authentic, meaningful experiences that offer a deeper connection to people, culture, and the environment.¹⁷⁸

Zoritsa Urosevic

Executive Director, UN Tourism

Culture and Heritage: The Heartbeat of Global Tourism

Across the world, travellers are drawn to cities and regions steeped in history and culture, immersing themselves in local cuisines, vibrant performances, and the rich tapestry of heritage sites, art and craft markets. While “culture” and “heritage” are often used interchangeably, they hold distinct meanings: heritage refers to the treasures and traditions passed down through generations, while culture embodies the living, evolving expression of those legacies in the present.¹⁷⁹

Cultural tourism, defined as travel motivated by the desire to experience a destination's tangible and intangible cultural attractions,¹⁸⁰ is a powerful economic engine. In 2024, this dynamic sub-sector was valued at USD 1.1 trillion and is projected to reach USD 2.6 trillion by 2035, growing at a robust compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.1%.¹⁸¹ The global heritage tourism market, including cultural, natural, and intangible heritages, was estimated at USD 608.8 billion in 2024, with forecasts indicating growth to USD 843.5 billion by 2033, at a CAGR of 3.5%.¹⁸² In Africa and the Middle East, demand for heritage tours is expected to grow at a CAGR of 4.7% from 2025 to 2030, underscoring the region's immense potential to attract global visitors.¹⁸³ These figures highlight not only the popularity of cultural and heritage tourism, but also the urgent need to balance growth with the preservation of local identity.

Tourism's Impact: Navigating the Challenges of Overtourism

As tourism flourishes, local cultures and heritage sites face mounting pressures. Overtourism can displace residents, disrupt traditional lifestyles, and erode authenticity.¹⁸⁴ Cities such as Venice and Kyoto have witnessed profound transformations in their cultural landscapes due to surging visitor numbers, prompting UNESCO to place Venice on its “heritage danger list” in 2023.¹⁸⁵ The consequences of overtourism ripple through communities, straining public services, causing congestion, and raising living costs, often disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable.¹⁸⁶

Safeguarding Cultural Integrity: A Shared Responsibility

Preserving the cultural integrity of historic areas is essential for protecting local communities and fostering long-term economic value in cultural and heritage tourism. Responsible tourism practices can help safeguard cultural assets, from iconic sites and traditional cuisines to artisanal crafts and performing arts, while actively engaging communities in celebrating and sustaining their heritage.

Governments around the world are taking action. In Saudi Arabia, the Royal Commission for Al-Ula launched “Hammayah,” a training program empowering locals to

become guardians of their culture.¹⁸⁷ Mallorca's sustainable tourism tax supports preservation initiatives, while Kyoto has implemented measures to manage visitor numbers and establish codes of conduct for tourists.¹⁸⁸

Entrepreneurial ventures are also stepping up to preserve local culture and heritage by curating authentic experiences for travellers. By forging partnerships with local communities, startups capture and share generational knowledge, ensuring that tourism supports cultural conservation while providing meaningful, memorable journeys. Their commitment to

the responsible use of cultural assets not only enriches the visitor experience but also strengthens the social fabric and economic resilience of host communities.

The following case study illustrates how an innovative tourism model, rooted in sustainability, cultural authenticity, and community engagement, is transforming travel into a force for cultural preservation and inclusive prosperity.



'Al Masmak Palace,' Riyadh, Saudi Arabia



CASE STUDY

‘HIDO’: CONNECTING TRAVELLERS TO THE HEART OF SAUDI CULTURE





As Saudi Arabia's tourism landscape evolves, there is a growing need for authentic experiences that showcase the rich cultural heritage of the country. Tourists often seek genuine connections with local communities, but traditional tourism models frequently overlook the unique insights and hospitality that locals can provide. This gap leaves visitors wanting more meaningful interactions during their travels.

Enter *Hido*, a pioneering platform founded by Wojoud Al Ubaid, dedicated to connecting tourists with local hosts across culturally significant areas like Riyadh, the Sudair Region, and Al Qassim Province. *Hido* offers a diverse range of activities that immerse visitors in Saudi culture, including family hosting, guided tours, cultural participation in local events, and small group activities such as cooking classes and traditional weaving sessions.

By facilitating these authentic experiences, *Hido* not only enriches the tourist experience but also empowers local families and individuals to share their culture and earn additional income.

The founder's innovative approach earned her the Misk Foundation Spark Award in 2021, recognizing her contributions to entrepreneurship in the tourism sector.

Hido has established itself as a trusted platform for tourists seeking authentic Saudi experiences. By collaborating with the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology to engage local communities and university students, *Hido* continues to expand its network of local guides and hosts, enhancing its offerings and promoting economic inclusion.

Hido aligns with SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth by creating economic opportunities for local families and promoting inclusive tourism practices. The platform fosters community engagement and empowers individuals to participate in the tourism economy.

By connecting travellers to the heart of Saudi culture, *Hido* proves that authentic experiences can transform tourism into a powerful force for community empowerment and cultural appreciation.

Hido's impact is evident:

83% of the team is female, promoting gender equality in the workplace

Engaging **50+** local guides, host families, and travel enthusiasts

Over **500** active platform users and **40+** local experiences available

Targeting **5,000** local experience bookings and **25,000** active users by 2025

OVERCOMING BARRIERS: STARTUP SUCCESS STRATEGIES IN THE MENA REGION

Every year, nearly 50 million startups are launched worldwide,¹⁸⁹ a testament to the entrepreneurial spirit driving global innovation. Yet, beneath this promising picture lies a sobering reality: most startups encounter formidable obstacles that threaten their growth and sustainability. More than 66% fail to achieve positive returns,¹⁹⁰ and only half survive beyond five years.¹⁹¹

In the MENA region, the stakes are especially high. With two-thirds of the population under 30, the market is primed

for digital solutions and disruptive ideas. This demographic dynamism offers a fertile ground for entrepreneurs, but realizing their potential requires more than ambition; it demands a supportive ecosystem that addresses persistent barriers.

By understanding and tackling these challenges head-on, stakeholders can cultivate an environment where startups not only survive but thrive, driving sustainable development and inclusive prosperity across the region.

CHALLENGES AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

The Funding Challenge: Bridging the Capital Gap

A comprehensive analysis of 111 failed startups reveals a striking reality: insufficient funding is the leading cause of failure.¹⁹² For entrepreneurs worldwide, securing adequate capital remains a formidable hurdle, creating a persistent gap that stifles innovation and growth. Limited access to financial resources and microloans continues to constrain startup expansion across industries. Notably, a 2023

McKinsey study found that travel startups have captured just 1% of global funding across all sectors over the past 15 years,¹⁹³ a significant indicator of the sector's uphill battle. The challenge is even more pronounced for women entrepreneurs: in the MENA region, they receive only 6% of all private equity and venture capital, underscoring the urgent need for more inclusive funding mechanisms.¹⁹⁴

Mitigation Strategies for Funding Barriers



Empowering Startups: Enhancing Access to Capital

Both private and public sector stakeholders, including individual investors, financial institutions, and government bodies, must collaborate to expand access to financial resources and microfinance, especially for early-stage startups. Building robust networks of angel investors, seed funds, and venture capital is essential. Governments can further catalyze growth by offering tax rebates, startup grants, and innovative funding products such as guarantees, subsidized loans, and co-investment schemes that de-risk and broaden investment opportunities.



Building Sustainable Ecosystems for Startup Growth

Support for early-stage startups should focus on cultivating self-sustaining ecosystems, rather than relying solely on short-term funding. These ecosystems must prioritize mentorship, networking, and market access, transforming startups into compelling investment prospects with strong business cases that attract sustained investor interest.



Creating Inclusive Funding Opportunities for Female Entrepreneurs

Both public and private entities should foster environments where female entrepreneurs can thrive. This includes launching specialized programs that channel funding to women-owned startups. Empowering female founders generates powerful ripple effects, as women are statistically more likely to reinvest in their communities and families, amplifying the impact of every dollar invested.¹⁹⁵

The Skills Gap: Equipping Young Entrepreneurs for Success

A critical barrier facing young entrepreneurs is the shortage of essential skills, technological expertise, and industry knowledge. According to a World Economic Forum study, nearly 40% of employers in the MENA region cite skill gaps as a major obstacle to business growth.¹⁹⁶ Many young people struggle to acquire the competencies needed to succeed in today's dynamic job market, with several MENA

countries lagging behind the global average in attracting skilled professionals.¹⁹⁷ Without these foundational skills, entrepreneurs face significant challenges in launching, managing, and sustaining their ventures. In an increasingly tech-driven and competitive landscape, equipping the next generation with the right skills is not just important; it's imperative.

Mitigation Strategies for Skills Development



Modernized Curricula and Hands-on Learning

Educational institutions, especially universities, must take the lead in equipping students with entrepreneurial and technological skills. By embedding these competencies into curricula and partnering with business leaders and government agencies, academic programs can remain aligned with evolving market needs. Such collaboration enriches learning and creates practical opportunities like internships and apprenticeships, guided by industry professionals.



Partnerships with Industry Experts and Technology Specialists

Incubators and accelerators are vital support hubs for aspiring entrepreneurs. By forging ongoing partnerships between startups, industry experts, and technology specialists, these programs enable founders to continuously acquire the specialized knowledge and technical expertise needed to navigate their entrepreneurial journey.



Regional Incubator and Accelerator Platform

Incubators and accelerators across the MENA region should join forces to create unified platforms that connect entrepreneurs with a broader network of experts, investors, and peers.¹⁹⁸ This collaborative approach accelerates knowledge transfer and provides access to resources, especially those aligned with sustainability goals. Dedicated incubators for female entrepreneurs can offer tailored support, empowering women and fostering greater diversity in the startup ecosystem.



Leveraging the Gig Economy

The gig economy, characterized by flexible, project-based work, offers startups a powerful way to access global talent and bridge skill gaps. Governments and businesses can promote the benefits of this model, making it easier for startups to onboard remote talent with the precise skills they need to grow and compete.¹⁹⁹

Navigating Regulatory Complexities in the MENA Region

While the MENA region has made notable progress in improving the ease of doing business – achieving a record number of regulatory reforms according to the World Bank’s Doing Business 2020 study²⁰⁰ – significant challenges remain. Bureaucratic hurdles and complex registration procedures continue to impede startup formation. Moreover, the patchwork of legal and regulatory frameworks across MENA countries complicates cross-border expansion, leading to inconsistencies in taxation, employment laws, intellectual property rights, and registration processes. These disparities can stifle growth, waste resources, and create confusion for entrepreneurs.

Mitigation Strategies for Regulatory Barriers



Fostering a Supportive Regulatory Ecosystem

Streamlining registration processes is essential to encourage entrepreneurship, allowing startups to focus on innovation. This can be achieved by reducing waiting times, enhancing government efficiency, eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy, digitizing submissions, establishing one-stop shops for services, and lowering incorporation fees. A business-friendly regulatory environment will attract foreign investment, empower local enterprises, and drive sustainable economic growth.



Establishing Cohesive Regional Legislation

MENA countries should consider adopting cross-border trade agreements and developing unified legislative frameworks for business operations.²⁰¹ Such harmonization will facilitate regional expansion, enabling startups to scale, increase revenues, and access a wider talent pool.



Creating Innovation Zones and Regulatory Sandboxes

Innovation zones and regulatory sandboxes offer startups the freedom to test new concepts and products without the constraints of existing regulations.²⁰² These environments nurture creativity and innovation, allowing entrepreneurs to refine their ideas in a supportive setting before scaling to broader markets.

CALL TO ACTION: SCALING IMPACT FOR A SUSTAINABLE TOURISM FUTURE

This white paper has explored six key environmental and socio-economic themes shaping the future of tourism, revealing both challenges and opportunities on the path to sustainability. Through case studies, we have seen how startups leverage innovation, technology, and community engagement to deliver solutions that benefit people and planet. Yet, progress is uneven: only 15% of tourism-related UN SDGs are on track for 2030, a stark reminder of the work ahead.

The way forward is clear: coopetition, not isolation. Startups and large companies must embrace a mindset where cooperation and healthy competition coexist, creating an ecosystem where authenticity meets scale. Startups bring the human connection and experiential depth travelers crave; larger players provide data, infrastructure, and global reach to amplify these experiences. Together, they can unlock new markets, accelerate innovation, and deliver on the promise of Vision 2030 and global sustainability goals.

Success depends on an enabling environment. Investors, regulators, educators, and industry leaders must work together to provide resources, networks, and support. Entrepreneurs must embed sustainability and long-term value into their operations and design thinking. Strategic partnerships, investment in AI and digital skills, and access to data and connectivity will be critical to scaling authentic experiences without losing their essence.

The call to action is urgent: move beyond fragmented efforts and embrace collaboration as the cornerstone of growth. With bold ideas and the right ecosystem, tourism can become a powerful force for good driving inclusive growth, cultural exchange, and sustainable development for communities and nations worldwide.



'Al Masmak Palace,' Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

10 Actions to Catalyze Startups' Contributions to Sustainable Development in Tourism



For Ecosystem Players*

1. Catalyze blended and impact-linked capital

Expand seed and early-growth funding with guarantees, co-investment, and outcomes-based incentives

2. Adopt common, lightweight sustainability standards

Help startups measure what matters with practical KPIs for carbon, circularity, nature, and inclusion, integrated into procurement and destination management

3. Create regulatory “fast lanes”

Use sandboxes and streamlined licensing to test new models in mobility, accommodation, nature restoration, and community-based experiences

4. Open doors to anchor customers

Large hotel groups, venues, and destination managers can accelerate adoption through green procurement frameworks and multi-year offtake agreements

5. Invest in skills where the jobs will be

Pair accelerators and universities with industry to deliver hands-on training in data, AI, regenerative design, and sustainability management, especially for women and youth



For Innovation Leaders**

1. Build sustainability into your DNA

Design products and services with environmental and social impact in mind from the start

2. Solve real challenges

Focus on ideas that reduce emissions, restore nature, and empower communities while meeting traveler needs

3. Use technology wisely

Start with simple digital tools to improve efficiency and customer experience, and scale up as you grow

4. Build partnerships and tap into networks

Connect with accelerators and public tourism sector leaders, align with industry partners to pilot your solutions, and build partnerships to enhance your brand visibility

5. Track and share your progress

Measure what matters, like carbon savings or community benefits, and communicate it to build trust

*Investors, regulators, incubators, accelerators, educational institutions and private and public sector leaders

**Existing startups and aspiring entrepreneurs shaping the future of tourism



'Wadi Al-Disah,' Tabuk, Saudi Arabia

APPENDIX

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AUTHORS AND CONTACT

Tourism Development Fund



Badr Alherbish

Chief Strategy Officer



Sarah Alaoudah

Associate Director
Strategic Impact

EY



Hanadi Musharrafiyeh

Partner
Climate Change and Sustainability Services



Anshul Dubey

Partner
Climate Change and Sustainability Services



Nadim Baalbaki

Partner
EY Parthenon



Mohamed ElAref

Partner
Business Consulting



Mythili Madapati

Senior Manager
Climate Change and Sustainability Services



Mehaira A Dagig

Assistant Manager
Climate Change and Sustainability Services

Reviewers



Qusai A. Al-Fakhri

Chief Executive Officer
Tourism Development Fund



Gloria Fluxà Thienemann

Chair of Sustainability Committee &
Vice Chair at WTTC; Vice-Chairman &
Chief Sustainability Officer at Iberostar Group



Gloria Guevara Manzo

Interim President & CEO
World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC)

*Contact

Sarah Alaoudah
salaoudah@tdf.gov.sa

Hanadi Musharrafiyeh
Hanadi.Musharrafiyeh1@sa.ey.com



'Wadi Hanifah,' Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

TDF

TDF, established under the National Development Fund, is dedicated to enabling and accelerating the growth of Saudi Arabia's tourism sector while embedding sustainability at its core. With USD 4 billion in capital, TDF aims to facilitate local and international investors' access to high-potential tourism investments across key destinations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

TDF Grow

TDF Grow is TDF's in-house, non-financial arm dedicated to supporting micro, small, and medium-sized start-ups. TDF Grow is committed to addressing the most significant challenges facing SMEs by offering tailored support, funding accessibility, and valuable resources that empower entrepreneurs to thrive in Saudi Arabia. In alignment with the National Tourism Strategy and Vision 2030, TDF Grow plays a vital role in diversifying the economy, creating job opportunities, and enhancing the visitor experience. It focuses on fostering innovation and development through services designed to tackle the challenges at every stage of the tourism startup life cycle from Inspiration/Ideation to Early Stage and Growth/Maturity, equipping entrepreneurs with the skills and networks essential for their success.

EY

The global EY organization is a professional services firm with over 700 locations in more than 150 countries. The EY sustainability services team, known as Climate Change and Sustainability Services (CCaSS), has 4,300+ professionals located internationally. The CCaSS team works with clients to improve their business operations in the triple bottom line context: environmental, social and economic performance. The global EY organization has been recognized as a leader in ESG and sustainability consulting across various platforms and publications, including Verdantix, IDC MarketScape and Sustainability Magazine.