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TWELFTH ISSUE
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CITY AS A DESTINATION

URBAN TOURISM IN THE ARAB REGION

THE INTERVIEW
His Excellency the Director General of Aseer Municipality and Planning Department, talks about the city's efforts with enhancing Tourism

URBAN INSIGHTS
Experts' insights on Urban Tourism Toolkits on Urban Tourism

CITIES IN ACTION
Urban Tourism Projects and Initiatives from across Arab cities

MUDUNUNA

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TWELFTH ISSUE

CITY AS A DESTINATION
URBAN TOURISM IN THE ARAB REGION

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EDITORIAL

FROM HISTORIC ROOTS TO A DYNAMIC PRESENT AND PROMISING FUTURE

By Dr. Ziad Alameddine- Editor in Chief

Some may wonder what defines urban tourism in Arab cities. Is it simply a form of leisure, a conversation between past and present, or a mix that captures the essence and character of the city?

As a matter of fact, the tourism appeal of Arab cities stems from their deep cultural and historical roots. The legacy of the past fuels a lively present and inspires a future full of potential. Urban tourism isn't merely about sightseeing; it is a comprehensive experience shared by both residents and visitors, blending heritage with the rich cultural diversity that has shaped the identity of the region over centuries.

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), urban tourism in Arab cities is among the fastest-growing sectors, driven by their distinctive character, authenticity, and rich cultural and historical heritage. From Madain Saleh in Saudi Arabia to the bustling souks of Marrakesh, the historic mosques of Cairo, the Citadel of Saladin in Damascus, the old quarters of Sana'a, and the ancient cities of Byblos in Lebanon and Petra in Jordan, these sites reflect the depth and diversity of Arab heritage, drawing visitors from around the globe. More than mere destinations on a map, they are living stories of civilizations intertwined over time, capturing the essence of urban tourism as a bridge connecting people to places, and history to the present.

From this perspective, it is crucial to carefully consider both the opportunities and challenges that urban tourism brings to cities across the Arab region. The success of this sector depends on finding an accurate balance between preserving heritage sites and managing various pressures. Beyond its cultural significance, tourism serves as a vital economic and social resource, creating a wide range of employment opportunities. It also nurtures local entrepreneurship, supports traditional industries, and encourages community involvement in shaping the tourism landscape and promoting authentic cultural heritage. In this way, urban tourism evolves from being merely an economic activity to a powerful tool for building sustainable and resilient cities—ones that preserve their cultural identity while confidently embracing the future.

Just as urban tourism serves as a form of cultural diplomacy, the infrastructure that supports it is equally crucial. A successful tourism experience relies not only on cultural attractions but also on the quality of urban systems. Modern airports, efficient public transportation, safe and walkable streets, lively public spaces, and carefully restored historical sites are all vital components of a sustainable and engaging tourism experience.

This publication demonstrates that successful tourism cities are those that embed the visitor's experience directly into city planning. When visitors can move comfortably and safely while enjoying historic and recreational attractions, the city strengthens its position among leading global destinations. The takeaway is simple: tourism planning

must be closely aligned with urban policy. Tourism is not a standalone activity, but a key component of a holistic vision for a vibrant city. In this context and in his interview, H.E. Eng. Abdullah bin Mahdi Al-Jali, Mayor of the Aseer Region Municipality, discusses the municipality's priorities, accomplishments, and its ambitious vision to advance and sustain urban tourism.

In 'Urban Insights', Dr. Catherine Tovey of the World Bank Group (WBG) underscores the powerful economic and cultural impact of urban tourism across the Middle East and North Africa. In her article, she illustrates how tourism can unlock new employment opportunities, preserve heritage assets, and stimulate broader urban growth. Eng. Batoul I. Ajlouni sheds light on the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) and its leading efforts to safeguard Jordan's biodiversity. Additionally, Mr. Ali Radwan Bataineh, the Chairman of Greater As-Salt Municipality Committee, emphasizes the municipality's role in safeguarding the city's heritage center and stresses the need for coordinated efforts by all stakeholders to preserve this cultural legacy for future generations. Moreover, this issue features a review of four toolkits, developed by international organizations, each underscoring the importance of knowledge sharing in supporting municipalities in developing and promoting sustainable development.

This issue of Mudununa also showcases successful strategies and innovative initiatives from Arab cities advancing urban tourism. It highlights the powerful role of cultural festivals in energizing urban tourism and driving local economies, with "Riyadh Season" standing out as a leading example of how large-scale events can reshape a city's global appeal.

The experiences of Marrakech in Morocco and Algiers in Algeria illustrate how protecting historic urban environments goes far beyond preserving cultural identity, and can serve as a powerful foundation for sustainable tourism development. The newsletter also spotlights two standout case studies, Muttrah in Oman and El Gouna in Egypt that shed light on how Arab coastal cities are redefining their future at the intersection of sustainability, innovation, and global tourism.

We also explore the growing role of walking trail projects in some Arab cities, from Dubai's Deira souks to Muharraq's Pearl Trail. Municipalities are crafting cohesive experiences that blend heritage conservation with modern visitor infrastructure. There is further emphasis on the rapid rise of the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) sector, which is increasingly shaping economic growth, innovation, and global connectivity in the region. Cairo and Riyadh have emerged as dynamic centers for business events and knowledge exchange, exemplified by major gatherings such as the World Urban Forum (WUF) in Cairo and the "LEAP" Technology and Innovation Conference in Malham in Riyadh.

Moreover, this issue examines the growing impact of health and wellness tourism, now recognized as an essential pillar of public well-being. It highlights destinations such as the "Ma'in" hot springs overlooking the Dead Sea in Jordan and "Hammam Dbagh" near Algiers, showcasing how centuries-old therapeutic traditions are being revitalized to meet modern tourism expectations.

At the international and regional level, this issue of Mudununa reports on AUDI's newly confirmed membership in Megacity Think Tank Alliance (MeTTA), following its participation in the ninth General Assembly in Seoul, South Korea. The newsletter also highlights the Institute's contribution to the accompanying forum, where it presented research findings on the role of local markets in strengthening economic and social development across Arab cities. In addition, it features the Institute's engagement with representatives of CityNet, during meetings held on the sidelines of the Metropolis gathering in Seoul.

On the local front, the newsletter covers a recent visit by a World Bank Group delegation to AUDI's headquarters, aimed at deepening collaboration, strengthening strategic partnerships, and facilitating the exchange of expertise in shared priority areas. It also highlights the latest episode of the 'Mayor Talks' podcast, in which H.E. Dr. Yousef Al Shawarbeh, the Mayor of Greater Amman discusses the Municipality's vision for developing the city and enhancing the quality of life for its residents.

Finally, the newsletter wraps up with coverage of the 17th webinar, titled "Harnessing Smart Technologies for Effective City Management," which showcased cutting-edge global innovations such as digital twins, artificial intelligence, and advanced spatial and visual data analysis, highlighting their growing role in shaping the cities of the future.

INTERVIEW

MAYOR OF ASEER

HIS EXCELLENCY ENGINEER ABDULLAH AL JALI

In dialogue about Aseer's Ambitious Vision for Sustainable Tourism Development

H.E. Eng. Abdullah bin Mahdi Al Jali is currently the Mayor of Aseer Region and a distinguished Saudi leader, recognized for his expertise in institutional transformation and urban development. Since his appointment as Mayor of Aseer Region in September 2022, he has been at the forefront of driving the region's comprehensive development agenda, guided by a forward-looking and sustainable vision.

Throughout his career, Eng. Al Jali has held several prominent leadership positions, including serving as a member of the Board of Directors of the Aseer Region Development Authority and as Advisor to H.E. the Minister of Municipalities and Housing. His experience spans government operations, infrastructure development, and strategic collaboration with the private sector, equipping him to translate national strategies into impactful regional initiatives.

Renowned for his visionary and results-oriented leadership, Eng. Al Jali has played a pivotal role in advancing urban transformation, promoting sustainable infrastructure, and championing smart city projects. His efforts continue to focus on modernizing municipal services, enhancing citizen well-being, and elevating the overall quality of life across the Aseer Region—contributing to the realization of the Kingdom's national development objectives.



Mayor of Aseer, His Excellency Engineer Abdullah Al Jali

Aseer region in southwestern Saudi Arabia is a national leader in combining tourism development with environmental conservation. Aseer municipality is actively preserving its unique landscapes and biodiversity while enhancing infrastructure to provide visitors with an exceptional experience. Aseer's initiatives include environmental rehabilitation projects, the development of eco-friendly facilities, and the preservation of local heritage while promoting culture. These efforts aim to transform the region into a comprehensive tourist destination that attracts investment opportunities, enhances services, and maximizes its natural and cultural resources.

In this issue of Mudununa, we feature an interview with His Excellency Engineer Abdullah Al Jali, Mayor of Aseer region, who shares the municipality's priorities, accomplishments, and their ambitious vision for sustainable tourism development.

Aseer region has unique tourism assets that make it an attractive destination throughout the year. Could you highlight the most notable attractions in the region and explain the goals of Aseer development strategy?

Aseer region is distinguished by its rich natural and cultural diversity, from the towering peaks of Al-Souda to the beautiful Red Sea coastline, with a temperate climate that attracts visitors year-round. It also features



Stunning views of Aseer, from day to night
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over 4,000 heritage villages, showcasing unique culinary traditions and vibrant folk arts.

Aligned with Vision 2030, Aseer Development Strategy seeks to make the region a global tourist destination, attracting 10 million visitors annually by 2030. The plan involves investments of over 50 billion Riyals, aims to create more than 94,000 jobs, and is expected to contribute 26 billion Riyals to the GDP.

How is Aseer Region Municipality contributing to the growth and development of urban tourism in the region?

Aseer Region Municipality plays a key role in developing urban tourism by managing infrastructure, city operations, and maintenance in ways that reflect the region's identity, natural features, and economic potential. It also focuses on improving the quality of life for residents and creating an appealing environment for visitors, in line with the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030.

How does the Aseer Region Municipality balance preserving cultural heritage with promoting local economic development, while also providing modern amenities and services for visitors?

A key strategic focus for us is ensuring that all projects and investments in the region respect their identity by making use of natural resources. Buildings like commercial centers, enclosed government facilities, and residential units that lack natural light and ventilation do not align with Aseer's pleasant year-round climate, and as a result, they lose much of their



commercial appeal. Buildings that do not comply with the Saudi Building Code (SBC) fail to reflect the region's identity, diminishing the city's beauty and its investment appeal. Conversely, tourism investments should embrace cultural heritage—whether through provided services, cuisine, entertainment, folklore, or outdoor activities—since these elements are what draw both visitors and residents.

What are the key infrastructure investments supporting the tourism sector, and how have they improved the experience for visitors?

Some of the Municipality's key infrastructure projects include expanding the road network, enhancing sidewalks and lighting, tackling visual pollution, landscaping, improving stormwater drainage, and upgrading cleaning, maintenance, and digital services. These initiatives have boosted investment appeal and real estate development, helping the region provide unique experience for both residents and visitors.

How does Aseer Region Municipality incorporate the principles of environmental sustainability into tourism development to balance economic growth with the protection of the environment and local heritage?

City construction and operations inevitably affect the environment, and the most successful cities worldwide are those that minimize this impact. In Aseer region, people and nature are its greatest assets, so everyone must follow rules and regulations. The

Municipality is committed to strictly enforcing these rules and regulations. Moreover, in collaboration with relevant authorities, we have launched initiatives and set guidelines to protect green cover, water, and air quality. Looking ahead, we plan to develop additional standards and regulations, in coordination with all stakeholders, to reduce noise pollution and traffic congestion.

Aseer Region Municipality has launched ambitious initiatives to involve the community, including efforts to combat visual pollution and restore the city's identity. Could you tell us more about these efforts?

The Municipality has implemented several initiatives to tackle visual pollution, such as removing concrete barriers, maintaining sidewalks, clearing abandoned vehicles, and addressing graffiti. The community has also participated in cleaning and tree-planting campaigns through the 'Community Participation' program, which seeks to raise awareness and encourage civic responsibility.

How important are partnerships with public, private, and non-profit organizations in supporting tourism development in the Aseer region? Could you share any examples of such collaborations?

We are proud that Aseer has a highly engaged and volunteer-ready community. Strengthening partnerships is a key pillar for tourism development in the region. Recently, the Aseer Municipality launched a neighborhood association to facilitate agreements and collaborations with donors, volunteers, and charitable organizations, enabling them to contribute to public facilities and services. The community in Aseer also collaborates with the municipal sector on initiatives such as developmental housing projects, afforestation, sanitation, managing public parks and cemeteries, and training local talent. Numerous active partnerships show that Saudi citizens and their inspiring leadership are dedicated to philanthropy, donation, and development, both within the Kingdom and internationally.



Aseer's Jacaranda season draws visitors from around the World
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URBAN INSIGHTS

External Article

CITY TOURISM: UNLOCKING JOBS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND REGIONAL GROWTH



Dr. Catherine Tovey

Urban, Resilience, Disaster Risk Management and Land Practice Manager for the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (MENAAP) region at the World Bank Group. Catherine has been working in international and sustainable development nexus for over 25 years. Catherine holds a PhD from Cambridge University exploring the political economy of collective action to secure access to water services in informal settlements in India. Catherine also worked for the UK Department for International Development. Since joining the World Bank in 2004, she has worked in South Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East and North Africa in various technical specialist and leadership positions.

From ancient Byblos and Carthage to the sacred monuments of Madinah, bustling souks of Marrakesh, and futuristic skyscrapers of Dubai, cities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have long enticed travelers worldwide. These city centers are not only repositories of history and culture, but also vibrant hubs of commerce, spirituality, hospitality, adventure, and innovation that attract tourists from all around the world. In 2023, tourism contributed an estimated 6.7 percent to the Middle East's GDP and 8.1 percent to North Africa's, with the region outpacing global recovery trends from COVID.[1]

Yet, despite this appeal, city tourism in MENA operates far below its potential. Much of the region's tourism remains concentrated in enclave beach resorts or a handful of religious sites. A wide range of UNESCO World Heritage sites, traditional crafts markets and historic quarters that have the potential to serve as economic engines remain underutilized. The World Bank's experience demonstrates that properly developed tourism offers economic benefits reaching far beyond traditional sun-and-sand destinations.

How cities can lead a regional economic transformation

When tourism value chains are well integrated, the sector drives growth in linked local industries, amplifying its impact on jobs and local economies.

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, Travel & Tourism sector in the Middle East is expected to create nearly 3.6 million new jobs over the next decade.[2] This job intensity makes tourism particularly valuable for MENA cities, facing urgent youth unemployment.

City tourism generates employment across the entire skills spectrum, from facilities maintenance and hospitality services to specialized roles for architects, curators, digital marketers, and facility managers. Women represent a significant share of tourism entrepreneurs, often establishing small and medium enterprises in hospitality, handicrafts, and cultural services. As example, Evidence from Southern Albania demonstrates tourism's inclusive potential with over half of thousands of new jobs created went to women, youth, and persons with disabilities.[3] Strategic city tourism development could also extend employment seasons and offer diversified income sources, supporting resilient economies.

Cities serve dual roles as destinations and gateways from which tourism benefits flow to surrounding areas. As logistics hubs providing airport access, hospitality services, and marketing platforms, cities make rural destinations accessible while the same infrastructure enables rural residents to access urban employment and markets. Cities hosting major events such as the World Cup, Hassan II tennis tournament and cultural events such as music festivals attract tourists from beyond national boundaries. Linking these city-focused attractions with nature-based destinations, eco-tourism, and agricultural tourism offers tourists diverse regional experiences.

Realizing this regional potential requires expanding accommodation in secondary destinations, improving connectivity, and investing in marketing regional experiences. A World Bank study showed that a 10 percent increase in tourism demand to underserved regions in Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco could generate between 5 and 19 percent more jobs in hospitality sectors, with spillovers across transport, entertainment, and local services[4]. Local household income multipliers from nature-based tourism ranges from $2 to $5 for every tourist dollar spent, with poor rural households often benefiting disproportionately.[5]

"Cities serve dual roles as destinations and gateways from which tourism benefits flow to surrounding areas"

Learning from success stories

Global experiences reveal four useful principles for tourism-led transformations of the urban environment, while improving livability:

Public investment catalyzes private sector engagement. Albania's government-led restoration of castles, historic sites, and urban infrastructure attracted substantial private investment. Tourism businesses in Southern Albania more than doubled, creating an ecosystem where heritage preservation drives continuous economic development.[6] Entrepreneurs who had migrated abroad returned to invest in hospitality.

The Dual Benefit of Tourism Infrastructure. Tourism investments in visitor amenities in cities enhance quality of life for residents. Promenades, pedestrian paths, public spaces, and accessibility features for historic sites improve daily mobility for residents. Museums, cultural centers, and festivals developed for tourism enrich residents' cultural lives while attracting visitors. Indonesia's strategy to develop new tourism destinations to relieve pressure on Bali drove many spillovers. Government investment in quality infrastructure, skills development, and environmental protection created 1.2 million jobs, trained 84,000+ tourism professionals, mobilized $800 million in private investment, and provided 5.4 million residents access to improved infrastructure. This is a blueprint for MENA countries facing overtourism.

Heritage conservation creates jobs. Traditional building techniques and crafts generate employment for artisans, architects, and craftspeople while maintaining cultural continuity. In Beirut's historic districts, a recently completed World Bank project rehabilitated 12 heritage buildings after the Port of Beirut Explosion. Beyond physical restoration, the

project supported cultural and creative industries, ensuring that heritage preservation contributed to both economic recovery and the social fabric of communities.

Community-Centered approaches prevent displacement. Effective regeneration can embed residents' needs and protect against gentrification and overcrowding. Seoul's successful restoration of Bukchon Hanok Village was founded on strong partnerships between local governments and residents, crafting tailored, sustainable regeneration plans.[7] Such approaches yield greater citizen approval while facilitating private investment opportunities.

An Integrated Vision for the Future

From Aseer's mountain heritage to Tunis' medinas, from Alexandria's waterfront to Amman's citadel, mayors across MENA can transform their cities into economic powerhouses that create jobs, preserve heritage, and catalyze regional prosperity. The question is not whether city tourism can drive transformation, it is which cities will seize this opportunity first. With the right investments in infrastructure, skills, and partnerships, MENA's mayors can write the next chapter in their cities' storied histories, one where ancient souks bustle with entrepreneurs, heritage sites employ local youth, and every visitor becomes an ambassador for the entire region.

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External Article

OFF-THE-BEATEN-PATH: JORDAN'S URBAN-ADJACENT RESERVES



Batoul I. Ajlouni

Architectural engineer by education, entrepreneur and strategist by experience, and a writer and nature enthusiast at heart.

At age 24, Batoul co-founded her CGI company, kick-starting her 30-years of experience in the technology world. She also served as a board member on several organizations, and engaged with national committees in the ICT, education, women and youth, and the environment sectors. Her passion for nature won her a seat on the board of Jordan's premier nature conservation society, RSCN, which she currently chairs. Batoul Ajlouni is the award-winning author of "Ditching Success?"; a memoir about life-choices and new beginnings.

Approach... wheels down... minutes later you are welcomed in Jordan.

If you happen to have chosen a window seat on your flight into the country, the view of the landscape underneath as you prepare for touchdown seems to lack color and diversity.

The reality on the ground, however, has a different story to tell. Jordan is not short on challenges, most of which are economic, geo-political, or climate related. The results are clearly visible in how the country's urban scene has developed, where roughly 80% of the people cluster on just 20% of the land. The most populated areas fall within the mid to northwestern regions, where rainfall is a little more forgiving in a country struggling with extreme water scarcity and climate change.

The capital, Amman, is what most visitors tend to choose as their hub when traveling in the Kingdom. It is one busy center, with much to offer any urban tourist. Shopping, museums, cafes and restaurants, nightlife, unique city staircases and architecture, and quite a few archaeological sites.... This city has it all.

Although the busiest by far, Amman is one of several urban and semi-urban clusters scattered around the country. Cities and towns with roaring sounds; honks, beeps, sirens, and human chatter, which our ears have somewhat gotten adapted to. This doesn't mean we're unaffected. Our brains are still polluted by all that noise even if we, locals and visitors alike, choose to consciously ignore it.

In today's world, where sustainability is becoming increasingly entrenched in our lives and conversations,

trends in tourism have turned more complex than ever. Travelers are more aware, responsible, and demanding. Many seek alternative destinations that offer eco, adventure, rural, and cultural experiences alongside their urban interests.

Jordan is rich in biodiversity and falls within four bio-geographical zones: Mediterranean, Irano-Turanian, Sudanian, and Saharo-Arabian. Away from all the technical jargon, this translates into the most diverse characteristics in multiple geographic regions of mountains and highlands; escarpments, plateaus and canyons; basalt fields, desert, Badia, and moonscapes; forests and scrublands, sub-tropical areas including the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea; and freshwater oases.

"In today's world, where sustainability is becoming increasingly entrenched in our lives and conversations, trends in tourism have turned more complex than ever"

The country has long realized the value of this unique ecosystem and has been officially protecting its wildlife and biodiversity for over half a century through the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature(RSCN); a local 60-year-old NGO that works in tandem with Jordan's public institutions including the Ministries of Environment, and Agriculture.

Today, RSCN manages over a dozen reserves and special protected areas, many of which are nestled in and around urban fabrics, offering a breather for nature and people alike.

Within a short drive from major cities, the visitor enters worlds of different vibes, with contrasting sights and sounds to those, we city dwellers are increasingly trying to escape. Vibrant natural habitats with a variety of geology and wildlife, and rare species of plants, birds, and mammals, some even globally threatened. Environments that deserve our every effort to protect.

And it's a multi-faceted effort, which RSCN has mastered, and which it bases on the following foundations:

- Protecting nature and biodiversity is key. But conservation can only succeed through strong public-private partnerships, and more importantly, with the buy-in and engagement of local communities; people who have lived on and of these lands.

- Bringing people and nature together through eco-tourism is significant to the understanding of biodiversity and to supporting its protection efforts. Reserves are destinations that offer nature appreciation and unique experiences to visitors, along with sustainable accommodation, hiking trails, adventure where appropriate, even stargazing when possible.

- Bringing people and people together is a way to preserve the country's cultural heritage. Visitors can better appreciate the diverse communities when engaging with the local men and women, and experiencing their authentic crafts, cuisine, and lifestyle.

The manner in which these locations are set up is another important angle toward achieving impact. Reserves are structured as "Protected Areas" that comprise a restricted conservation core, buffer and transition zones, allowing nature, local communities, and visitors to integrate responsibly within designated regions. In addition, local communities are the principal players and beneficiaries of all related activities. Their men and women are the ones who protect the reserves, operate the tourist facilities and programs, and craft unique nature-based products that are sold to visitors with love.

Jordan is blessed with a unique blend of geography and culture, which gives a bit of something for everyone to enjoy. A diverse urban fabric. The landscape variance. Archeology and historic locations, including Petra, which is one of the Wonders of the World, and seven UNESCO World Heritage sites. Sports and adventure. Health and wellness. And nature reserves that integrate conservation, eco-tourism, socio-economic development, and a plethora of top international recognitions and listings. These are extraordinary destinations, a few of which fall within urban clusters that have sprawled around their perimeters over the years, demonstrating how man and nature can together thrive.

External Article

AS-SALT CITY: A MODEL OF LIVING HERITAGE AND URBAN SUSTAINABILITY



H.E. Mr. Ali Radwan Al Bataineh

Deputy Governor of Balqa and Chairman of the Greater As-Salt Municipality Committee. A distinguished leader in local governance and public service development, he holds a management diploma from the University of Baghdad, a bachelor's degree in law from Irbid University, and a master's degree in law from Egypt. Mr. Al Bataineh has held several prominent positions throughout his career, including Assistant Governor of Irbid (2015–2019), Chairman of Al-Sarou Municipality Committee (2017), and Chairman of the Joint Services Council for Irbid Governorate (2018–2019). Since 2019, he has served as Deputy Governor of Balqa, District Governor of Al-Qasaba, and Chairman of the Governorate's Tenders Committee. In 2021, he became Chairman of the Greater As-Salt Municipality Committee, a role in which he continues to advance the city's infrastructure, promote urban tourism, preserve architectural heritage, and support strategic investment and development initiatives.

As-Salt, one of Jordan's oldest and most distinctive cities, is celebrated for its unique architectural and cultural heritage. It harmoniously combines history, authenticity, and contemporary life to form a vibrant urban landescape, exemplifying sustainable urban tourism. It is a city of living heritage, where architectural beauty seamlessly intertwines with daily life, embodying the essence of the place and the depth of its cultural identity. Along its stone streets and historic squares, human history merges with harmonious urban design, creating a distinctive experience that unites authenticity with civilization.

Yellow City is home to more than 657 heritage buildings, showcasing an architectural legacy that traces the city's development across various historical periods. In 2021, As-Salt was added to the UNESCO World Heritage sites as the "City of Tolerance and

Urban Hospitality," honoring its representation of religious and social coexistence values and its seamless embrace of diversity and openness.

Recognizing its historical significance both locally and globally, the Greater As-Salt Municipality prioritizes the preservation of the city's heritage center, viewing it as the core of its historical and cultural identity and a key element of its development vision. Protecting this cultural legacy is a shared national responsibility that requires collaboration among public and private sectors, institutions, and individuals. The municipality plays a central role in safeguarding this heritage and ensuring its sustainability for future generations, making it a strategic priority to balance preservation with urban development.

The municipality views heritage preservation as extending beyond building restoration to include the revitalization of urban tourism and the surrounding economic and social life. This approach enhances the city's attractiveness to both tourists and investors while supporting sustainable development. Over decades, As-Salt Municipality, in collaboration with its partners, has carried out numerous studies and projects focused on preserving architectural heritage and developing the city center, aiming to rejuvenate the urban center and better connect it with surrounding areas. Infrastructure projects have included upgrading service networks in the old city, improving squares, public spaces, walkways, and open areas, and restoring tourist routes while linking them to key facilities. Currently, efforts are underway to establish the first specialized center for the restoration of heritage buildings. This center will serve as a national training hub, developing local expertise and enabling personnel to preserve architectural heritage to the highest standards, positioning heritage as both a driver of development and a foundation for a promising future.

These efforts and initiatives have strengthened the city's appeal to tourists and investors, establishing it as a leading destination for cultural and educational tourism and a growing hub for small and medium enterprises that view heritage as a sustainable economic asset. They have also improved the urban environment for both residents and visitors of the heritage center by enhancing services and promoting the city's tourist character in a way that harmoniously balances modernity with authenticity.

"These pathways are more than just tourist trails; they represent a holistic urban vision designed to connect people with the city and bring its history and memories back to life"

Tourist Trails: The Heartbeat of As-Salt

In 2015, As-Salt Municipality designated the city center as a protected area under specific regulatory provisions. This decision, issued by the Higher Planning Council, was made in accordance with the Villages and Buildings Planning Law no. 79 for 1966, as well as the Law for the Protection of Urban and Architectural Heritage, Municipalities Law, Law of Antiquities, Environmental Protection Law, and Standards and Metrology Law, all of which remain in force.

As part of its urban tourism development, As-Salt has introduced three tourist trails that traverse the city's main development corridors, offering visitors a rich experience that blends heritage, culture, and everyday life:

- The Harmony Trail: Highlighting the city's values of tolerance and coexistence, this route showcases mosques and churches standing side by side, reflecting the harmony among As-Salt's residents.
- The Daily Life Trail: This trail allows visitors to explore the old markets, traditional shops, and historic cafes that continue to preserve the spirit and authenticity of As-Salt.
- The Educational Life Trail: Celebrating Jordan's educational history, this trail passes through As-Salt Secondary School, the country's oldest school, which has long been a center of knowledge and a foundation for fostering national and cultural awareness.

These trails go beyond traditional tourism—they embody a holistic urban vision that connects people with the city and revives its collective memory through direct engagement with its cultural and physical

landscape. They invite visitors to experience As-Salt as a city where history and modern life coexist in balance and awareness.

A Model for Partnership and Development

What has been achieved in As-Salt is the result of collective effort rather than individual action, stemming from strong institutional and community partnerships that unite local initiative, national support, and international cooperation. This integrated approach has positioned As-Salt as a national model for urban heritage management and a leading example of how historic cities can evolve without compromising their identity.

The Greater As-Salt Municipality remains committed to nurturing these partnerships, understanding that the city's future relies on balancing heritage preservation with contemporary development, and on leveraging cultural heritage as a resource rather than a constraint.

As-Salt is more than a city that preserves history—it is a city that shapes the future, guided by its authentic character and human diversity, standing as a beacon of tolerance, renewal, and sustainable urban life in the middle of Jordan.

TOOLKITS ON URBAN TOURISM

Amid the ongoing demands of urbanization and modern infrastructure delivery, cities are increasingly tasked with steering the complex dynamics of tourism, managing seasonal peaks and visitor pressure, safeguarding heritage, elevating public-space quality, and mitigating environmental impacts. Municipalities therefore need fit-for-purpose tools and resources to capture tourism's economic value while protecting residents' quality of life and cultural identity.

To facilitate knowledge sharing on this subject, this issue of Mudununa presents four toolkits developed by international organizations that deal with various aspects of urban tourism. These have been designed specifically to help municipalities better understand the processes required for urban tourism, while supporting livability, cultural preservation, and inclusive local development.

1

Toolkit 1:
UNESCO World Heritage Centre: Sustainable Tourism Toolkit

2

Toolkit 2:
Understanding and Managing Urban Tourism Growth beyond Perceptions

3

Toolkit 3:
Cultural Routes Management: From Theory to Practice

4

Toolkit 4:
Event Sustainability Management Systems: Requirements with Guidance for Use



UNESCO World Heritage Center, ©2025

https://whc.unesco.org/en/sustainabletourism-toolkit/

Toolkit 1:
UNESCO World Heritage Centre: Sustainable Tourism Toolkit

This modular online resource provides step-by-step "How-To" guidance for site managers and city stakeholders working in and around heritage districts. Developed under UNESCO's World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Program, the toolkit translates best-practice approaches into practical actions, helping destinations identify locally appropriate solutions and build general know-how for tourism management.

Structured as a series of themed guides, the toolkit covers core functions such as understanding tourism at the destination, developing a progressive strategy, and establishing effective governance arrangements, alongside communication with visitors and experience design. Each guide explains why the topic matters, then sets out sequenced tasks and tools that managers can adapt to their context. Selected guides are also available as downloadable PDFs for offline use.

While designed for World Heritage properties, the methods are directly transferable to historic cores and cultural quarters in non-listed cities, offering a common framework for destination planning, partnership building, and visitor-pressure management. The online format allows the material to be expanded and referenced alongside related UNESCO capacity-building initiatives and case materials.



UNWTO (with partners: CELTH, Breda University, NHL Stenden), ©2018

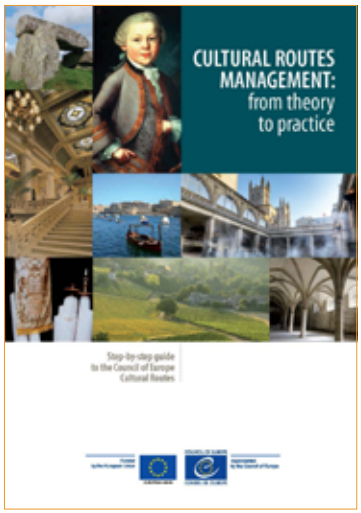
https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/book/10.18111/9789284420070

Toolkit 2:
Understanding and Managing Urban Tourism Growth beyond Perceptions

This evidence-based guide supports municipal leaders, destination managers, and policy-makers in diagnosing and managing rapid visitor growth in cities. Drawing on research across eight European cities, it underscores that urban tourism pressures are often localized and can be mitigated by integrated planning that links tourism to the wider urban agenda, mobility, housing, services, and public space, while centering resident well-being. The report distills 11 strategies and 68 measures that practitioners can adapt to local conditions.

The document is structured to first surface resident perceptions and key drivers of congestion, then to match problems with a practical menu of interventions. Strategies span community engagement, spatial and temporal dispersion, managing seasonality, capacity-aware planning, product diversification, and monitoring frameworks. Short case materials illustrate how cities combine tools such as time-based ticketing, re-routing, visitor communication, and governance partnerships to balance destination vitality with quality of life for residents.

For municipal teams, the guide functions as both a diagnostic and an implementation playbook. It provides a shared language for cross-department coordination (transport, culture, urban planning) and offers clear starting points to set targets, choose indicators, and establish response measures. As a living reference widely cited in urban tourism practice, it aligns city action with broader sustainable development goals and can be applied beyond the original case cities to diverse urban contexts.



Council of Europe, ©2013

https://book.coe.int/en/attachment?id_attachment=1180

Toolkit 3:
Cultural Routes Management: From Theory to Practice

This handbook has been developed to help route managers, municipal teams, and project developers make informed decisions about the design, governance, and operation of cultural routes that link heritage sites, museums, public spaces, and local businesses. Conceived as a step-by-step guide, it translates the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes model into practical actions.

It is structured across parts that move from context and program evolution to the aims and philosophy of Cultural Routes, and then to hands-on management guidance. Dedicated chapters address network governance for sustainable development, new visitor behaviors and tourism strategies, fundraising approaches, and guidelines for Cultural Routes management plans, providing a clear pathway from concept to delivery and evaluation. A glossary and appendices support day-to-day use by practitioners.

The handbook underscores the role of Cultural Routes as tools for socio-economic development, intercultural dialogue, and heritage promotion, and highlights how certification and networked management strengthen credibility and public value over time. For municipalities aiming to curate thematic urban trails and tourism circuits, from crafts alleys to waterfront promenades, the guide offers an adaptable governance and delivery template that integrates culture, mobility, place management, and community engagement.



International Organization for Standardization (ISO), ©2024

https://www.iso.org/standard/86389.html

Toolkit 4:
Event Sustainability Management Systems: Requirements with Guidance for Use

This international standard helps public authorities, DMOs, venue operators, and planners govern and deliver sustainable events and festivals, from waterfront carnivals and cultural seasons to MICE congresses. It provides a requirements-based management system applicable to events of all types and sizes, embedding environmental, social, and economic performance across the full event cycle.

The standard specifies a system architecture covering context and leadership, planning (risks, opportunities, objectives), support (competence, communication, documentation), operation (controls for procurement, mobility, energy, water, accessibility, community engagement), performance evaluation (monitoring, audits), and improvement (corrective actions). This structure enables cities to institutionalize sustainability and align permits and contracts with auditable requirements.

In practice, ISO 20121 functions as both policy framework and implementation playbook: municipalities can adopt it for their own events or require conformity from funded and permitted events, ensuring consistent KPIs (e.g., waste, emissions, inclusion, safety) and transparent reporting. The 2024 revision updates the 2012 edition and can be integrated with related ISO systems (e.g., 9001, 14001, 45001, 50001) to support whole-of-city coordination across suppliers and venues.

CITIES IN ACTION

Project 1



Boulevard City, Riyadh
©2025 Riyadh.sa

The City as a Place of Joy
How Riyadh Season Redefines Urban Experience

Large-scale cultural festivals have become intentional instruments for urban tourism and economic diversification. By channeling visitor demand across hospitality, retail, mobility and public space, they reinforce a city's creative identity while strengthening its international positioning. Globally, these integrated events operate as temporary urban interventions, revitalizing streets and plazas, stress-testing service infrastructure, and advancing longer-term goals for accessibility, safety, and place quality. Within this trend, Riyadh Season stands out in the Arab region as a large-scale global and cultural event , showcasing how initiatives such as these can serve both tourism development and city management.

Initiated in 2019 by the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) under the leadership of His Excellency Turki Alalshikh, Riyadh Season is an annual, city-wide program that reorganizes the capital's cultural map under a single operating framework. Concerts, international sports, exhibitions, and family attractions are sequenced across multiple districts, with Boulevard City and Boulevard World functioning as anchor zones around which other venues and promenades are arranged. Attendance has accelerated markedly: more than 16 million visits were recorded by January 2025, rising to 19 million by mid-February, while the 2025/26 edition exceeded one million visits within its first thirteen days, evidence that the format sustains demand over many weeks rather than a single peak weekend.

Operationally, the Season is designed as an integrated urban ecosystem spanning more than fourteen themed zones. The 2024 iteration expanded capacity in established nodes such as Boulevard City and Boulevard World, collectively accommodating hundreds of restaurants and cafés and over 1,400 retail outlets. A balanced program mix, free public activities alongside ticketed experiences, are integrated through GEA's Enjoy digital platform for listings, ticketing, and access control. This digital spine enables near real-time observation of visitor flows, allowing the operator and public agencies to adjust queueing, staffing, and circulation plans to maintain safety and service standards. Content innovation is part of the operating logic: from esports and global boxing cards to exhibitions and live performances, the calendar attracts diverse audiences and sustains economic circulation across the Season's duration.

Institutional coordination is the backbone of delivery. The Royal Commission for Riyadh City (RCRC) and Riyadh Municipality align permits, sanitation, wayfinding, and crowd and traffic management with the organizer's plans, ensuring that event operations dovetail with city standards for streets, signage, and public safety. Concentrating major activities in pre-serviced districts reduces disruption elsewhere and enhances urban vibrance, while formal inter-agency routines (to perations rooms, shared KPIs, joint communications) provide a governance template that other cities can adapt.

Functioning as a temporary but impactful urban overlay, Riyadh Season converts multiple neighborhoods into themed cultural and commercial precincts, distributing tourism flows across space and time, easing pressure on any single landmark, and encouraging longer dwell times. Consistent reporting of key performance indicators, visitor counts, zones, occupancy and vendor turnover, allows authorities to calibrate mobility plans, security deployment and vendors management in a timely way. The integration of internationally recognized events further amplifies Riyadh's visibility and helps consolidate its position as a regional cultural hub.

Altogether, Riyadh Season demonstrates how cultural programming can catalyze urban transformation when three conditions are met: unified institutional coordination, digital operational integration, and measurable performance monitoring. While Riyadh's scale and budget are distinct, the underlying method is transferable. Cities across the Arab region, regardless of financial capacity, can adopt the structure without having to replicate the magnitude: begin with a compact cluster of well-served districts; prioritize local cultural curation and low-cost public programming; deploy simple digital tools (QR tickets, timed entry, open data on attendance) to manage queues and formalize coordination between the event operator, municipality, transport police, and sanitation services. By iterating season over season and reporting results transparently, municipalities can turn cultural festivals into reliable instruments of economic revitalization, civic pride, and sustainable urban-tourism development, even on modest budgets.



Riyadh Season
©2025 Riyadh.sa, General Entertainment Authority



Streets of the Casbah, behind Ali la point Museum, Algiers
©2018 Farouk Zouaoui | Wikimedia Commons

Lessons from Marrakech and Algiers
Heritage at the Heart of Tourism

Across the Arab world, the challenges of urban growth, heritage decay, and tourism development have placed historic cores, old cities, medinas, casbahs, at a pivotal crossroads. In this article, we spotlight real-world practices from Marrakech and Algiers, where historic urban landscapes are not only preserved for their intrinsic value but are also leveraged as engines for sustained tourism development.

The city of Marrakech has a rich history, dating back to the 11th century, and playing a central political, economic, and cultural role in North Africa. The medina itself speaks volumes of the city's past, celebrating architectural influences from the East and sub-Saharan Africa. It covers an area of over 600 hectares, housed within 19 historic gates that derive their names from tribes or the goods that would use them. Today, the medina is characterized by its narrow, winding streets, and is bustling with commercial and tourist activity. Therefore, intervening in any form in the medina requires complex planning and strategic actions to ensure that the authenticity of the area remains intact.

In 2014, public authorities of Marrakech launched a project to rehabilitate the area to represent the rich cultural identity of the city that flourished prior to colonialism. The Medina Rehabilitation Programme comprises of 18 worksites, focusing on historic districts and squares, mausoleums, mosques, and fondouks. This rehabilitation was part of a larger

initiative titled 'Marrakech, City of Permanent Renewal'. Some of the key actions in the Programme including the restoration and development of tourist circuits, including the one from 'Dar El Bacha' to 'Ben Youssef' Square, as well as the spiritual circuits including that for the Seven Saints. General rehabilitation of buildings and restoration of facades was carried out for these sites. Another key component focused on the enhancement of historical monuments, as well as the rehabilitation of public squares, piazzas, kissarias, and souikas.

In 2016, another project was launched by the government which focused specifically on rehabilitating traditional foundouks (hotels) of 'Selhem', 'Ziyat', and 'Sidi Abdelaziz', benefiting 125 artisans, and 300 craftsmen. It was launched in alignment with the 'Marrakech, City of Permanent Renewal' project, aiming to promote the city as a flagship tourism destination.

Another city in North Africa, Algiers, is also known for its historic city referred to as the Casbah of Algiers. It was declared a UNESO world heritage site in 1992, and it dates back to the 10th century when it was founded by the Amazigh under the Zirid dynasty. It stands today as a symbol of the city's culture and heritage. Extending over an area of 1.05 square kilometer, on a hill overlooking the capital, and housing nearly 50 thousand people within its Ottoman-era walls, the Casbah has long faced deterioration due to factors such as earthquakes, floods, fires, and neglect.

Initial works to restore the Casbah began right after Algeria's independence in 1962, with efforts intensifying over the years. The most recent project for the restoration of the Casbah was launched in 2012, aiming to restore 'the authentic appearance of the Kasbah and proposing solutions to protect this historical and cultural center and keep part of its population in their homes. This restoration endeavor was led by the Directorate of Public Works of the Wilaya of Algier, in collaboration with the local firm Agence Ali Pacha Mehdi. The project was implemented through two phases, where the first focused on 11 buildings of historical and religious importance as well as some residential buildings. This included the restoration of the Ketchaoua mosque that had been damaged in the 2003 earthquake. The second phase focused on an additional 33 buildings including 5 mosques. Majority of the works were set for completion by 2025 and 2026.

The experiences of Marrakech and Algiers highlight the delicate balance between conservation and development in historic urban cores. Both cities demonstrate that heritage preservation, when strategically planned and locally grounded, can become a powerful driver of tourism and economic vitality. By investing in rehabilitation while respecting authenticity, these initiatives not only safeguard cultural identity but also ensure that medinas and casbahs remain living, thriving centers of urban life. As Arab cities navigate the challenges of rapid growth, such models reaffirm that historic landscapes are not obstacles to modernity but vital assets for a sustainable future.



Jama el Fna Traditional market with Tourists, Marrakech
©2020 Calin Stan | Unsplash

Project 3



El Gouna, Egypt
©2024 Arab News

Revitalizing Mutrah in Oman and El Gouna in Egypt
Sustainable Waterfront Development

Across the Arab region, urban waterfronts and coastal destinations are emerging as focal points for tourism-led development, where cities balance economic opportunity with cultural identity and environmental stewardship. Seaports and coastal towns, once primarily centers of trade and fishing, are now being reimagined as gateways for leisure, recreation, and international tourism. This transformation reflects a broader urban trend: activating waterfronts as dynamic spaces that connect people to heritage, nature, and modern amenities.

In this article, we explore two distinct yet complementary examples, Mutrah in Oman, and El Gouna in Egypt, that illustrate how waterfront cities in the Arab world are navigating the challenges of conservation, sustainability, and innovation to strengthen their place in the global tourism landscape.

The Mutrah corniche is a 3-kilometre waterfront promenade along the harbor in the Mutrah district of Muscat. Originally a fishing village and a hub for trade and commerce, Mutrah has been a place for tourists since ancient times. In the late 20th century, however, following the country's modernization, tourism began to emerge through a formal process.

Today, it houses traditional wooden dhows and fishing boats, offering a picturesque view of the Hajar Mountains, as well as the historic watchtowers and the Mutrah Fort. It also connects a number of heritage and local cultural assets, such as the Mutrah Souq, the Fish Market, old mosques, parks, and traditional café's and restaurants.



Muttrah Corniche, Muscat
©2018 Tatler | Facebook

In January 2016, following the publication of Oman's 5-year plan, a project for development around the ancient port of Mutrah was officially announced. It aims to transform the historic village of Mutrah into a contemporary urban area, while preserving heritage sites to attract tourists and improve urban livability for residents and visitors. A central element of the project was the Souq Al Mina, a new market district situated next to the cruise ship harbor. One of the key elements of the project is its financial model, where it is largely paid for with private-sector-capital. In order to achieve this, it established an investment vehicle, the Waterfront Company, for private investors, which offers up to 49 per cent of shares to interested parties.

Another tourist attraction that is set to be installed on the site is the Mutrah Cable Car, stated to be the longest of its kind, connecting the Mutrah Fish Market on the Corniche to Kalbouh Park. Once completed in the year 2026, it aims to attract a significant number of local and international tourists.

Further south along the Red Sea, El Gouna in Egypt represents a different approach to waterfront urbanism. Developed from scratch in the late 1980s, it was built strategically over a series of islands and artificial lagoons, offering visitors a unique view landscape of sea views and interior canals. The islands are connected by bridges and a well-developed road system, positioning the city as a high-quality tourist destination. The city has been designed to minimize the impact of increasing urbanization and tourism, by reducing waste and promoting renewable energy sources, where solar panels can be seen on many of its buildings.

Overtime, El Gouna has become a prized destination for several international tourists. However, it has also progressed from being a luxury tourism project to becoming a self-sufficient community which is home to approximately 25,000 people, offering them several amenities including hospitals, schools, and universities. It is also the host for several arts and music events, including the well-known El Gouna Film Festival.

The experiences of Mutrah and El Gouna illustrate the transformative potential of waterfront development in the Arab region. While their histories and approaches differ, Mutrah revitalizing a centuries-old port with heritage-led projects and private investment, and El Gouna building a purpose-designed, sustainable city, their common thread is a commitment to balancing tourism growth with cultural identity, environmental stewardship, and urban livability. These cities demonstrate that waterfronts are more than scenic backdrops, they are dynamic platforms for economic development, community engagement, and cultural expression. As coastal destinations continue to evolve, Mutrah and El Gouna offer valuable lessons in how thoughtful planning, innovation, and sustainability can converge to create vibrant, resilient, and internationally appealing urban waterfronts.

Project 4



Deira Heritage Trail, Dubai
©2025 Golden Adventure Tourism

Dubai and Muharraq
Celebrating Culture through Tourist Trails

Across the Arab region, curated walking trails are increasingly used to revive historic districts, disperse visitors beyond single landmarks, and channel tourism spend to local merchants, while improving public space for residents. From Deira's souqs in Dubai to the pearling quarters of Muharraq, municipalities are shaping coherent storylines in the city, pairing conservation with wayfinding, shading, lighting, and interpretation so that heritage becomes legible, walkable, and economically active. Two recent exemplars, Dubai's heritage trails in Deira and Bahrain's Pearling Path, illustrate how city-led routes align tourism with place-keeping and neighborhood vitality.

In Dubai, UAE, through the Tourist Trails in Deira led by Dubai Municipality, the city completed three linked routes in August 2025, stitching together the Gold Souq, the Al Ahmadiya School Heritage Axis, and the Spice Souq Axis. Conceived as short, connected circuits through one of the emirate's oldest commercial quarters, the project refreshes public realm and strengthens the historic retail ecosystem that anchors the district. The works formalize what residents and traders have long practiced, moving between alleys, courtyards, and waterfront, by establishing continuous, comfortable pedestrian routes that foreground the area's cultural identity and merchant life.

Technically, the Deira trails total about 1.8 km long and comprise roughly 25,800 square meters of improved public realm, supported by an investment of approximately AED 9.5 million. Upgrades include resurfaced pavements, restored façades using

traditional finishes, seating and shade structures, improved lighting and signage, and interpretive elements that help visitors navigate markets and landmarks. The network connects seven traditional markets and benefits more than 500 shops in and around the Grand Souq, translating design improvements into commercial footfall. Crucially, the project complements Dubai's heritage-protection programme and aligns with the Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan, situating the trails within a broader city strategy for compact, walkable centers.

Municipal leadership is explicit. Dubai Municipality acted as the competent heritage authority and delivery body, planning, coordinating, and implementing works in active trading environments while communicating benefits to tenants and traders. The initiative is framed as a model for boosting tourism and local business in historic areas through targeted, auditable upgrades to the public realm.

Meanwhile, in Muharraq, Bahrain, the Pearling Path translates an island economy's history into a 3.5 km urban trail that operates as both an open-air museum and an everyday civic spine. Recognized by UNESCO in 2012 as "Pearling, Testimony of an Island Economy," the serial site links 17 heritage buildings in Muharraq City, three offshore oyster beds, a shoreline segment, and Qal'at Bu Mahir fortress, collectively narrating the social and economic fabric shaped by pearling. The route moves from the seafront toward merchant houses and souq areas, embedding interpretation within living neighborhoods.

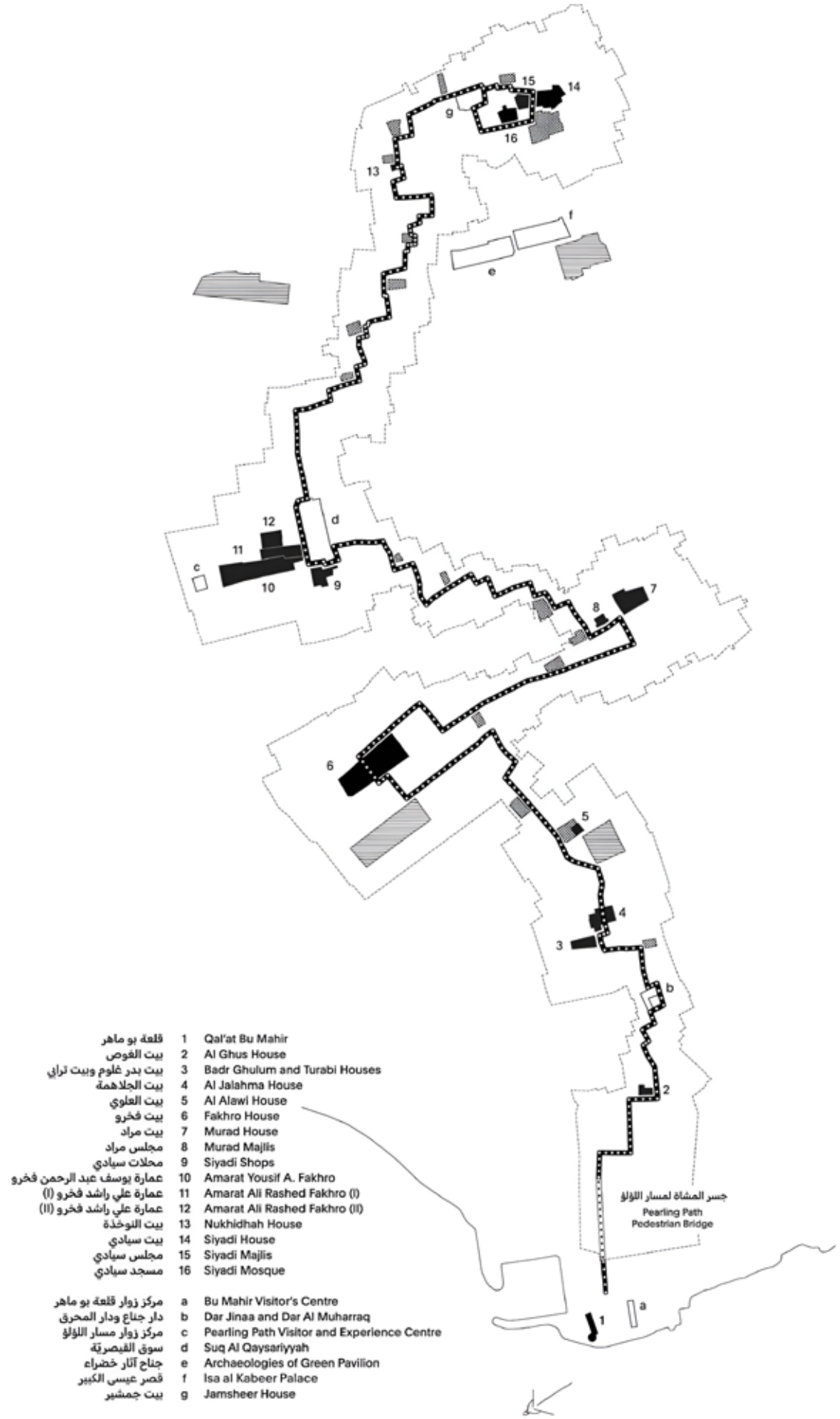
Operationally, the project extends beyond conservation to deliver visitor centres, distinctive pearl-like streetlights for wayfinding, 16 public squares, and a system of multi-storey car parks at the edges, freeing inner streets for pedestrians. Landscape and street-furniture upgrades add shade and seating, and urban moves such as a pedestrian bridge reconnect the path to the waterfront. Together, these interventions elevate legibility and comfort while supporting residents and traders year-round.

Public-sector stewardship anchors the Pearling Path. The Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA) and the site administration unit coordinate conservation, new architecture, and public-realm management, working with local and international partners. Government leadership provides long-term custodianship, aligning culture, mobility, and small-business revival around the souq.

Together, these initiatives show how municipal leadership can turn heritage into an integrated mobility and economic asset. Dubai's compact loops through Deira demonstrate how well-serviced trails channel visitors across many small businesses while preserving local character. Muharraq's longer, UNESCO-anchored route couples meticulous restoration with new civic spaces and legible storytelling that invite everyday use. For Arab cities considering similar efforts, the lesson is clear: define a compelling narrative; harden pedestrian infrastructure (surfaces, shade, lighting, signage); embed governance for maintenance, programming, and merchant engagement; and link the route to citywide strategies and heritage codes. With targeted investment and clear municipal roles, cultural routes can be replicated as practical tools for place-keeping, inclusive tourism, and resilient local economies.



A series of plazas connect the Path's historic sites
©2024 Archpaper



Map describing the north-south Pearling Path route through the historic city
©2024 Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities | Archpaper

Project 5



Cairo, Egypt
©2024 Tamer A Soliman | Shutterstock

LEAP in Riyadh and WUF in Cairo

Global Conferences, MICE Tourism, and Local Impact

Across the Arab region, business tourism and the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) sector are emerging as powerful drivers of urban economic growth, innovation, and international collaboration. From global summits to high-tech expos, cities are increasingly positioning themselves as strategic hubs where commerce, knowledge exchange, and networking converge. Two standout examples illustrate this trend, the World Urban Forum (WUF) in Cairo, Egypt, and the LEAP technology and innovation event in Malham, Saudi Arabia.

The World Urban Forum (WUF), convened by UN-Habitat, is the premier global conference on sustainable urbanization. The 12th session (WUF12) took place in Cairo, Egypt, in November, 2024. This marked the first time the forum returns to the African continent since its inception in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2002.

WUF12 was hosted at the Egypt International Exhibition Center, a state-of-the-art venue capable of accommodating thousands of delegates, exhibitors, and speakers. The forum's theme, "It All Starts at Home: Local Actions for Sustainable Cities and Communities," underscored the importance of grassroots initiatives in achieving urban sustainability. WUF12 provided a platform for Cairo to showcase its rich cultural heritage and urban transformation efforts. The event featured Cairo City Visits and Urban Tours, offering participants immersive experiences that highlighted the city's historical landmarks and modern developments.

By hosting WUF12, Cairo not only enhances its global stature but also stimulates its MICE sector, attracting international visitors and investments that contribute to the city's economic and infrastructural development. WUF 12 attracted of 37,000 visitors from across 182 countries, making it the largest Urban Forum in History. This influx of international attendees contributed to increased demand for accommodation, transportation, and local services, providing a substantial boost to Cairo's hospitality and service industries.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia's LEAP conference, held annually in Malham, Riyadh, exemplifies the Kingdom's commitment to becoming a global leader in technology and innovation. The third edition of LEAP took place in March, 2024, at the Riyadh Exhibition and Convention Center, attracting over 215,000 visitors, 1,800 exhibitors, and 1,100 speakers from around the world. The influx of attendees led to a 99% hotel occupancy rate in Riyadh during the event. The 4-day event also witnessed significant investments, with an economic impact of up to USD 500 million including investments from Amazon Web Services, DATAVOLT, IBM, Servicenow, and DELL Technologies that plans to open manufacturing and order center inside Saudi Arabia. This surge in demand underscores the growing importance of the MICE sector in Saudi Arabia's tourism industry

The success of LEAP drives Saudi Arabia's strategic vision to diversify its economy and establish Riyadh as a central hub for global technological discourse. By hosting such high-profile events, the Kingdom not only boosts its MICE industry but also attracts significant foreign investments, contributing to the realization of its Vision 2030 objectives.

Both Cairo's hosting of WUF12 and Riyadh's annual LEAP conference illustrate the transformative power of MICE tourism in the Arab world. These events serve as catalysts for economic development, knowledge exchange, and urban innovation. As cities continue to invest in infrastructure, policy, and international partnerships, they position themselves as competitive destinations for global business and tourism. The success of WUF12 and LEAP highlights the importance of strategic planning and collaboration in harnessing the full potential of MICE tourism to drive sustainable urban development and economic growth in the region.



LEAP event, Riyadh
©2025 LEAP

Project 6



Hammam Meskhoutine, Guelma
©2017 Photo Algerie

Dead Sea–Ma'in in Jordan and Guelma in Algeria
Health & Wellness Tourism

Across the Arab world, urban landscapes are embracing wellness and health tourism as a driver for public health, sustainable economies, and cultural renewal. Mineral-rich springs and coastal corridors, once considered leisurely escapes or sites of folklore, are now recognized as essential urban infrastructure, designed for recovery, movement, and learning. Under municipal stewardship, these wellness corridors support ecological conservation and year-round economic activity, translating ancient traditions into contemporary well-being strategies. The Dead Sea–Ma'in hot springs in Jordan and the steaming travertine cliffs of Hammam Debagh (Hammam Meskhoutine) near Algiers exemplify how ancient bathing cultures can be reimagined as contemporary wellness destinations.

The Dead Sea–Ma'in corridor exemplifies the integration of wellness tourism with natural heritage, encompassing the world's lowest shoreline and hyper-thermal waterfalls in Madaba Governorate. Hammamat Ma'in, renowned for therapeutic thermal waters ranging from 45–60°C, features a resort cluster with approximately 100 rooms, spa complexes, and public promenades. Jordan's commitment to wellness was elevated in 2023, when the UNWTO designated the country as a regional hub for medical and wellness tourism, culminating in a global forum held at the Dead Sea. Infrastructure here organizes visitor flow, safe floating zones, mud therapy areas, and lifeguarded bathing, enabling consistent, year-round programming supported by interpretation and day-visitor services.

Strategic leadership is provided through frameworks led by the Ministry of Tourism & Antiquities, with participation from health agencies, municipalities, and private partners. Standards for environmental protection, service quality, and workforce skills are established nationally and implemented locally, ensuring a replicable, sustainable model of health tourism.

While Jordan's approach demonstrates national-scale coordination and destination branding, other Arab cities and regions are adopting more localized, municipally anchored strategies. Guelma's Hammam Debagh in Algeria offers a complementary perspective, blending site-specific management with community-driven stewardship and cultural linkage.

Hammam Debagh, with its dramatic thermal cliffs and travertine formations, constitutes a living heritage landscape in eastern Algeria. The municipally developed Hammam Chellala complex, launched in 1976, combines hotel and bungalow lodging, hydrotherapy, public hammams, as well as a public garden, creating a wellness hub. Operations are designed for safety and hydro-ecological care: access is channeled to managed mineral pools, promenades, and defined routes, supported by signage and lighting. This concentrated use protects sensitive areas and supports both overnight stays and day visits, providing year-round economic spillovers to local SMEs and facilitating interpretation of Roman-era remains.

Municipal authorities and the Guelma wilaya tourism directorate guide the project's management, regulating visitor access, maintaining operational standards, and partnering with private sector actors. Their focus remains on ensuring tourism revenue generation is balanced with environmental protection and cultural preservation.

As illustrated by Ma'in and Guelma, diverse models exist for integrating wellness and health infrastructure within urban tourism policies. Jordan foregrounds coordinated national policy, medical standards, and large-scale partnerships; Guelma highlights municipal stewardship and hybrid public-private management grounded in unique landscapes. Cities seeking to replicate these successes should invest in hydro-ecological safeguards, visitor management systems, clear municipal bylaws, and direct economic linkages that support local communities. With effective public leadership, wellness destinations across the region can achieve lasting health benefits and foundational roles in resilient, future-ready cities.



Ma'in hot springs, Jordan
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OUR NEWS

EPISODE 2 OF 'MAYOR TALKS' PODCAST HOSTS H.E MAYOR OF GREATER AMMAN

The Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) continues its "Mayor Talks" podcast, where mayors from across the Arab world share their experiences in city governance and reveal their visions for the future of urban development.

In its second episode, the podcast hosted the Mayor of Amman, H.E. Dr. Yousef Al Shawarbeh, who outlined the Municipality's vision for city development and enhancement of residents' quality of life. He also highlighted efforts in digital transformation, speeding up municipal services, fostering partnerships with the private sector, and driving innovation in urban planning.

This podcast series is part of AUDI's ongoing efforts to use modern media platforms to facilitate knowledge and expertise exchange among Arab cities, showcasing the most inspiring municipal and urban practices and reflecting their vision for a more efficient and prosperous urban future.



Episode 2 of "Mayor Talks" Podcast hosts H.E Mayor of Greater Amman
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AUDI IS A MEMBER OF MEGA CITIES THINK TANKS ALLIANCE

The Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) officially announced its membership in the Megacities Think Tanks Alliance (MeTTA) during its ninth General Assembly meeting held in Seoul.

AUDI's membership underscores its leading role in supporting Arab cities and strengthening their presence on international platforms dedicated to urban development and the exchange of knowledge and expertise.

Reacting to this membership, H.E. AUDI Director General Dr. Anas Almughairy, described it as a strategic move to expand its network of international partnerships. "Joining MeTTA will enhance the exchange of expertise and help formulate sustainable urban policies grounded in knowledge and scientific research," he said.

Dr. Almughairy added that the partnership opens new opportunities for Arab cities to actively engage in global discussions on the future of cities and to develop innovative solutions to contemporary urban challenges.

The membership aligns with AUDI's ongoing efforts to foster international cooperation and promote sustainable development across Arab cities.



AUDI Officially Joins Mega Cities Think Tanks Alliance
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AUDI SHOWCASES STUDY FINDINGS ON LOCAL MARKETS IN ARAB CITIES DURING THE METTA FORUM

The Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) participated in the (MeTTA) Forum in Seoul, presenting a study findings on the role of local markets in driving economic and social development across Arab cities.

The presentation, led by Dr. Montaser Hiyar, Director of the Capacity Development and Training at AUDI, underscored the vital role of markets in Arab cities as drivers of economic growth and social cohesion. The Institute's presentation examined practices from over 15 Arab cities, focusing on the following key aspects:

- Fostering a strong urban identity and promoting community cohesion
- Connecting rural and urban economic activities
- Leveraging technology and encouraging private sector participation

Furthermore, the forum also highlighted how municipalities can promote the sustainability of these markets and amplify their positive impact on Arab communities.



AUDI Showcases Study Findings on Local Markets in Arab Cities During the MeTTA Forum
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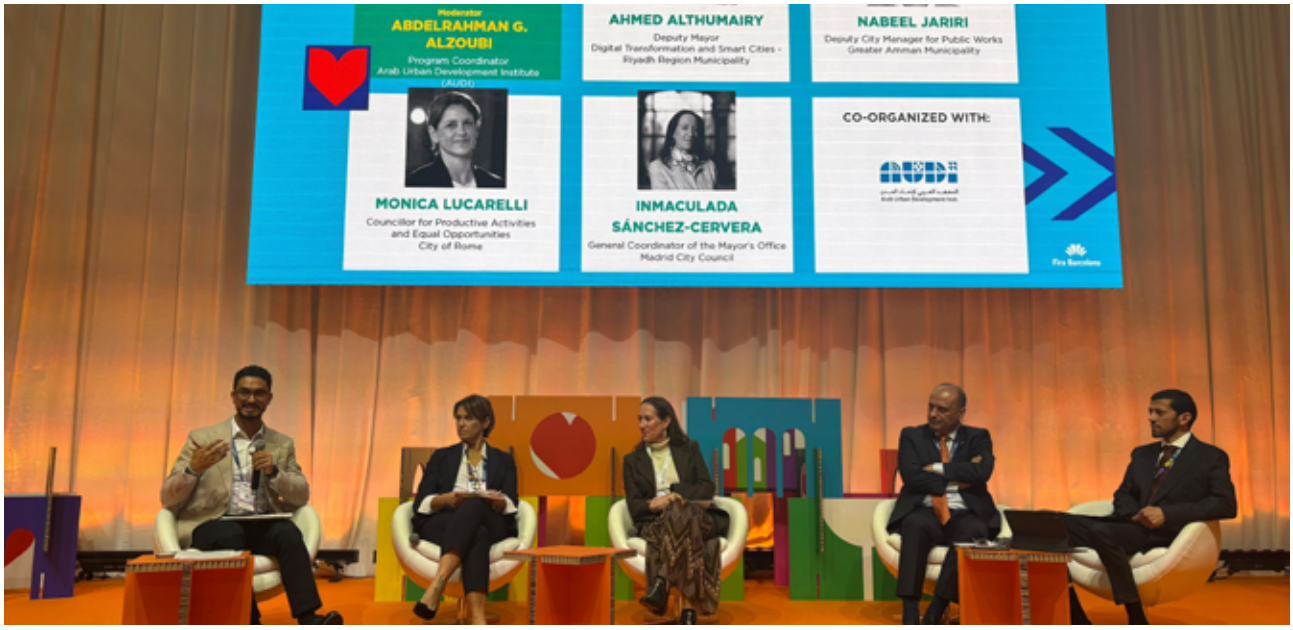
AUDI CONCLUDES PARTICIPATION IN SMART CITY EXPO WORLD CONGRESS 2025 IN BARCELONA

The Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) concluded its participation in the Smart City Expo World Congress 2025 in Barcelona (SCEWC 2025), held in Barcelona, Spain, from November 4–6, 2025. The congress is one of the world's leading events on cities and urban innovation and serves as a platform that contributes to empowering cities in addressing current and future urban challenges through enhancing social innovation and activating strategic partnerships.

As part of its participation, AUDI organized a thematic roundtable titled "Arab European Cities Dialogue: A Pathway to City-to-City Cooperation." The roundtable, moderated by Eng. Abdelrahman Alzoubi, Coordinator of the Cities Dialogue Forum Program at AUDI, brought together an elite of decision-makers and urban development experts from Riyadh, Amman, Rome, and Madrid. Discussions highlighted the growing importance of city-to city cooperation and urban diplomacy in fostering innovation, knowledge exchange, and sustainable, inclusive urban growth.

In addition, Dr. Ziad Alameddine, Director of the Urban Policy Research Program at AUDI, participated in a specialized thematic roundtable and highlighted that true urban transformation begins in residential neighborhoods. He emphasized that participatory greening initiatives not only make cities more livable but also build trust and a sense of belonging among residents.

Of note, AUDI's participation in SCEWC 2025 is part of a global dialogue aimed at advancing urban development and fostering stronger city-to-city partnerships.



AUDI moderates the session 'Arab European Cities Dialogue: A Pathway to City-to-City Cooperation'
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AUDI HOSTS CITY LEADERS FORUM DURING ASIA PACIFIC CITIES SUMMIT 2025

The Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) recently organized the City Leaders Forum at Expo Centre Dubai, as part of the 2025 Asia Pacific Cities Summit and Mayors' Forum (APCS). The event, held on October 28, brought together over 150 participants from more than 100 cities worldwide to discuss innovative approaches to urban development.

In his opening remarks, H.E. Dr. Anas Almughairy, Director General of AUDI, highlighted AUDI's vision for supporting Arab cities and empowering decision-makers to address urban challenges. The forum was moderated by Dr. Montaser Hiyari. Director of the Capacity Development and Training at AUDI, who facilitated a lively discussion on practical experiences and innovative policies and solutions to urban challenges.

The City Leaders Forum provided a platform for participants to share best practices and expertise, with a focus on improving the quality of life for citizens in the Arab region and beyond.

The forum centered on major pillars such as digital transformation, the future of urbanization, economic



AUDI Hosts City Leaders Forum During Asia Pacific Cities Summit 2025
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development leadership, quality of life, and environmental approaches to urban renewal. The discussions culminated in five key forward-looking visions that will shape the next phase of urban transformation:

1. Adopting locally tailored, integrated and comprehensive strategies that reflect each city's unique context, while reinforcing adaptive governance and expanding the authority of local governments.

2. Promoting inclusive, community-centered approaches to tackle critical challenges such as water scarcity, food security, and environmental sustainability.

3. Striking a balance between long-term climate resilience and essential public needs through coordinated planning and well-structured financing systems for city management.

4. Putting people at the core of digital transformation, ensuring that digital governance and smart city efforts use data responsibly and ethically to serve the public good.

5. Building stronger economic resilience by prioritizing strategic investments in infrastructure and human capital, supported by effective public-private partnerships.

At the forum's conclusion, participants stressed that quality, transparency, and long-term sustainability should outweigh short-term priorities. They underscored that effective leadership requires the engagement of all stakeholders—officials, innovators, and local communities alike—to create cities that are both inclusive and resilient.



AUDI Hosts City Leaders Forum During Asia Pacific Cities Summit 2025
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AUDI MEETS WITH CITYNET TO BOOST URBAN COLLABORATION

On the sidelines of the Metropolis meetings in Seoul, a delegation from the Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) met with CityNet representatives to discuss urban collaboration.

CityNet, with over 150 Asian city and local government members, partners with UN-Habitat and UNDP to advance sustainable development goals and foster urban initiatives and capacity-building programs among cities and its members.

During the meeting, both parties explored ways to strengthen cooperation and share expertise between Arab and Asian cities in sustainable urban development, including potential joint initiatives and projects aimed at improving urban quality of life.

AUDI's delegation highlighted the importance of such cooperation in advancing joint efforts toward more sustainable and innovative cities in the future.

This meeting reflects AUDI's ongoing commitment to forging strategic partnerships with regional and international organizations and expanding collaboration in urban management, social innovation, and the circular economy.

AUDI's delegation underscored the high value of Arab-Asian cities partnerships through enhanced communications channels and a dedicated platform for urban collaboration.



AUDI Meets with CityNet to Boost Urban Collaboration
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AUDI DIRECTOR GENERAL MEETS WITH THE WORLD BANK DELEGATION

His Excellency Dr. Anas Almughairy, Director General of the Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI), welcomed a delegation from the World Bank Group (WBG) at AUDI's headquarters on 25th Septmber 2025 . The delegation, composed of urban development and planning experts, discussed ways to enhance cooperation and advance shared priorities.

During the meeting, AUDI's Director General discussed potential cooperation with member Arab cities, including promoting collaboration on urban policy research and utilizing economic and development studies conducted by the World Bank in the Arab region. The Institute also expressed its readiness to support the World Bank in establishing a regional knowledge hub dedicated to development in Arab cities.



AUDI Director General meets with a delegation from the World Bank Group to Strengthen Urban Development Partnerships
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AUDI STRENGTHENS GLOBAL COOPERATION DURING A VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES

A delegation from the Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) has completed a visit to the United States aimed at deepening global cooperation with international partners and learning from global best practices in developing municipal processes and local leadership and Arab cities local leadership.

The visit began in Washington, D.C., where the delegation met with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). Discussions focused on developing career pathways in municipal processes to build the skills and efficiency of local leaders. The two sides also explored opportunities for collaboration in research and development (R&D), local governance, and the use of digital solutions and smart technologies to enhance municipal services. Another key topic was expanding the participation of Arab cities in international networks dedicated to urban innovation.

In Boston, the delegation visited the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University, where they met with the City Leaders Initiative team. The discussions centered on designing a tailored leadership program for mayors and senior municipal officials in Arab cities, as well as exchanging experiences on evidence-based policymaking and explored joint opportunities in training and knowledge exchange to support the goals of AUDI's 2030 strategy.

Through this visit, AUDI reaffirmed its commitment to building strong global partnerships and empowering local leaders to adopt innovative and sustainable urban practices—an effort that aims to enhance the quality of life and drive progress across Arab cities.



Left to Right: Dr. Montaser Hiyari, Director of Capacity Development & Training (AUDI); David Margalit, Executive Director (Bloomberg Center for Cities); Dr. Anas Almughairy, Director General (AUDI); Bulbul Kaul, Senior Director: Strategy and Impact (Bloomberg Center for Cities)
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AUDI HOLDS WORKSHOP ON 'PROJECT SCOPING AND TERMS OF REFERENCE'

The Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) organized at its headquarters, a workshop titled "Project Scoping and Terms of Reference". The workshop focused on flood mitigation and stormwater drainage and was held in collaboration with the Najran Municipality as part of AUDI's ongoing efforts to strengthen institutional capacities and promote effective urban planning practices across municipal authorities.

The workshop aimed at enhancing participants' skills in preparing and drafting municipal project scopes in a structured and technical manners supporting more efficient project implementation and the achievement of development objectives.

Key topics covered during the training included:

- Local and international requirements for project terms of reference
- Defining the general framework of municipal projects
- Developing a clear and comprehensive scope of work
- Establishing consensus on the final project scope



AUDI Holds Workshop on 'Project Scoping and Terms of Reference'
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AUDI ORGANIZES TRAINING PROGRAM TO UPSKILL MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY'S PERSONNEL

The Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI), in partnership with Muscat Municipality, conducted an extensive training program consisting of multiple workshops from October 6 to 16, 2025. The initiative aimed to strengthen municipal staff capabilities in developing effective development strategies and advancing urban management practices.

This program reflects AUDI's ongoing commitment to strengthening municipal capacities in Oman, empowering local professionals with the expertise and tools needed to tackle urban challenges and enhance the quality of life in cities.

The workshops covered key areas, including:

- Developing Municipal Processes Strategies: Participants learned how to design practical municipal strategies, manage performance effectively, allocate programs and projects based on key performance indicators (KPIs), and create the strategy's implementation program.
- Modern Trends in City Planning: The workshops explored the best global practices in smart and sustainable urban planning, community involvement in urban decision-making, and the creation of flexible urban policies aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



AUDI Organizes Training Program to upskill Muscat Municipality's Personnel
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Cities in Action: Webinar Series

HARNESSING SMART TECHNOLOGIES FOR EFFECTIVE CITY MANAGEMENT

As part of its ongoing commitment to promoting inclusive urban planning across the Arab Region, the Arab Urban Development Institute (AUDI) held the 17th session of its "Cities in Action" series, bringing together a wide range of specialists and professionals in urban development.

Dr. Abdulla Difalla, the webinar moderator and professor of urban planning, opened the session with an overview of the "Cities in Action" series, underscoring its role in fostering discussions among specialists and urban development experts across the Arab region.

The session began with a presentation delivered by Dr. Mohamed Abdel Aziz Abdel Hamid, Professor of Urban Planning and Consultant in Urban Planning and Modeling on "Smart Technologies in City Management," highlighting leading international models such as digital twins, artificial intelligence (AI), and spatial and visual data analysis.

Dr. Abdel Hamid underscored how state-of-the-art technologies are boosting city efficiency and agility, leveraging tools like decision-support systems, cloud-based dashboards, and AI-powered analytics. He highlighted that merging AI with geographic data—known as GeoAI—is opening exciting new avenues for urban planning, even as challenges around data accuracy and algorithm reliability remain.

He concluded by stressing that the future of city management lies in integrated smart systems that unite digital analytics, community engagement, and robust cybersecurity, ultimately improving quality of life in Arab cities.

At the conclusion of the session, Dr. Abdulla Difalla expressed his appreciation to the attendees for their active engagement and meaningful contributions. He commended Dr. Abdel Hamid for his valuable insights and his role in shedding light on such a topic. Dr. Difalla also underscored the importance of sustaining such discussions through ongoing sessions, which serve to strengthen cooperation and knowledge exchange among urban development professionals.



Cities in Action Webinar 17: Harnessing Smart Technologies for Effective City Management
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