

Interviews with Leaders - Mr. Haitham Mattar, CEO at RAKTDA

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Source: RAKTDA

Summary

HVS interviews Mr. Haitham Mattar, CEO of RAKTDA, who has contributed to the growth of the Emirate's tourism through various sustainable development and diversification strategies in recent years.

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1. What makes Ras Al Khaimah a unique destination?

Ras Al Khaimah is a unique destination that offers nature based adventure and cultural experiences that are distinct in the UAE and the region. Everything we do is focused on how we compliment the other Emirates and add value to the UAE as a whole, particularly with our 45-minute proximity from Dubai International Airport, beautiful pristine white sand beaches that stretch across a 64km coastline and a unique desert and mountain terrain.

Our competitive edge and charm comes from what we promise our travelers which is an authentic and accessible Arabian experience.

Ras Al Khaimah prides itself on being the outdoor adventure capital of the UAE. It is home to Jebel Jais, the UAE's tallest mountain, which rises to 1,934 metres above sea level. It features the region's first commercial Via Ferrata, offers world-class rock climbing, mountain biking and hiking, and is home to Jebel Jais Flight, the world's longest zip line certified by Guinness World Records.

In terms of culture, in Ras Al Khaimah we have all three Emirati tribal traditions – coastal, desert and mountain – living in beautifully preserved, authentic environments in a place where visitors come face to face with Arabia's historic past, through archaeological sites, museums and a largely unchanged rural life.

2. What were your strategies to increase the annual number of visitors over the last few years?

Under the leadership of His Highness Sheikh Saud Bin Saqr Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Ras

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Ras Al-Khaimah

Al Khaimah, RAKTDA set ambitious targets with our first tourism strategy, "Destination Ras Al Khaimah 2019" which we launched three years ago. It set out a clear roadmap for growing our tourism in the years ahead, and was the product of extensive research into consumer insights.

The strategy enabled us to lead our industry and many stakeholders to deliver our common goals through 2019 and beyond. We are on track to receive 1 million visitors by the end of 2018 and 3 million by the end of 2025, focusing on key tourist segments beyond the traditional leisure market seeking sun and sand.

In recent years we have fostered sustainable tourism growth via a progressive schedule of new product launches, hotel inventory expansion and the hosting of major international cultural and sporting events in the Emirate.

RAKTDA has identified sustainable tourism as a major pillar of our tourism strategy. Not only do we work to protect and conserve our assets in a sustainable way, but we have launched a number of initiatives to achieve our targets for visitor arrivals, employment creation, and contribution to GDP.

Our vision is to continue to develop a compelling destination for visitors seeking authentic culture and nature-based Arabian experiences. Through our promotional activities across our global representational offices, and through our collaboration with trade partners, Ras Al Khaimah is being presented for its rich heritage, stunning landscape and emerging adventure tourism products, that each complements an all-rounded tourism destination.

3. Why should investors consider investing in Ras Al Khaimah hospitality market?

The Ras Al Khaimah hospitality market is growing strength to strength, and continues of great potential to investors due to the significant rise in the number of international and domestic visitors, and commendable growth in hotel performance across many metrics.

RAKTDA reported a 14% increase in international visitors during the first six months of 2018 as compared to the same period last year. International markets accounted for 66 percent of visitor arrivals from January to June 2018, with significant increase in visitors from Russia, Germany and the UK.

Hotel Performance also remained strong in the first half of 2018 with occupancy rates consistent at 73.3 percent and average room rate increasing 5.5 percent versus the same period last year. Moreover, guest nights increased 10.1 percent, RevPAR increased by 5.8 percent and Room Rev increased by 11 percent from January to June 2018, when compared to the same period last year. Ras Al Khaimah had the second highest ADR and RevPAR (USD 134.5) and third highest occupancy (77.5 percent) in the region.

Supply of hotel keys is a major focus moving forward to support the increasing popularity of the destination with both international and domestic tourists. Plans are already in place to add 5,600 rooms to the 6,500 currently available in the Emirate with the introduction of major Global Brands including Marriott, Movenpick, Sheraton, Anantara, Rezidor, Intercontinental, Hampton by Hilton and Crowne Plaza over the next three years. The aim is to further grow to over 12,000 hotel rooms by 2022 to accommodate the ever-growing number of visitors.

4. What are your future plans for the Emirate's tourism sector?

With international arrivals to the Emirate rising by 14% in the first half of the year, we are on track to exceed our projection of 1 million visitors by the end of the year. Our focus remains on sustainable development with new

products and accommodation to meet the growing demand. This will form an integral part of our Destination 2019-2021 strategy which will be released in Q4.

Jebel Jais remains core to our proposition as we look to capitalise on the global adventure tourism industry and secure further interest from investors in this growing segment. With the right investment and the use of best practice to develop sustainable tourism, we envision a globally recognized destination attracting 3 million visitors and contributing 3.5 billion AED to the Emirate's GDP by 2025.

The development of sustainable tourism best practices and use of sustainable tourism standards will be one of the key priorities in our next strategy. We are already working on the development of a luxury camp project in Jebel Jais and are in talks with hotel operators and investors for this unique, eco-tourism project which complements the array of adventure tourism attractions that the Emirate is becoming globally known for.

We are also further strengthening its MICE, sports and events offer in 2018 and beyond. The first half of the year saw the first Arabian Hotel Investment Conference (AHIC) hosted in Ras Al Khaimah and the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO) will bring delegates from the UK for their annual conference in November. Prestigious global sporting events are also increasingly being attracted to the Emirate as we are host the Grand Final of the European Tour Challenge Tour, also known as The Road to Ras Al Khaimah, at the end of October, marking a significant milestone for golf in the Emirate.