

Inspiring The Next Generation Of Emirati Tourism Professionals



The tourism industry represents one of the main pillars of economic diversification in the Abu Dhabi 2030 Vision. At the same time, the UAE Vision 2021 aims to increase the number of nationals working in the private sector by tenfold.

However, Emiratis currently account for just 1% of the tourism sector's workforce in the UAE capital, according to the Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority (TCA Abu Dhabi), the entity that manages the emirate's tourism sector and markets the destination internationally.

In this exclusive interview with INSIGHT, Fatima Al Melhi, Industry and Tourist Guide Training Unit Head at TCA Abu Dhabi, takes us through the Authority's multipronged strategy that will entice more Emiratis to join this fast-growing cornerstone of the economy.

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Industry and Tourist Guide Training Unit Head, Tourism &
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The tourism sector is a major driver of growth for the UAE, having contributed 8.5%, or AED 122.6 billion to the country's GDP in 2014. Despite that, Emiratis are said to make up a small percentage of Abu Dhabi's tourism sector workforce. Why do you think that is?

Tourism is a relatively new economic sector for the emirate of Abu Dhabi. While our trading heritage and commercial past attracted many travellers to visit, it is only in the past 10 years that a concerted effort to grow the tourism economy has been undertaken. In this time, tourism was identified as one of the main pillars of economic diversification in the Abu Dhabi 2030 Vision. A priority therefore is to deliver on the 2030 plan's goal of creating a socially cohesive and economically sustainable community.

While developing Abu Dhabi as a world-class and modern tourism destination, it is incumbent on the Tourism & Culture Authority to ensure that the benefits contribute to developing the local community while promoting, protecting and respecting Abu Dhabi's culture and heritage. This includes the development of industry employees.

A growing number of Emiratis are now entering the industry on a number of levels. We will be focusing keenly on Emiratisation within the sector by increasing the number of Emiratis involved in tourism; engaging with the local community in its future development and ensuring that the industry is both inclusive and accessible to all through regulation.

What is the current percentage of Emirati employees in Abu Dhabi's tourism sector?

It is estimated that Emiratis currently make up 1% of Abu Dhabi's tourism sector workforce. This is set to increase over the coming years with

the Authority's proactive support via training and educational initiatives.

We work very closely with key government agencies and key players in the tourism sector to enhance and improve the skill set of Emirati nationals for the purpose of increasing their participation in the tourism sector. This is achieved by raising awareness of the sector's importance, and through increased engagement with Emiratis to build their capabilities.

How do you intend to increase the number of UAE nationals working within the tourism sector?

We will be focusing keenly on Emiratisation within the sector. The tourism industry is delivering on the 2030 plan's goal of delivering a growing number of Emiratis who are now entering the industry on a number of levels. Of course, we want to see more Emiratis in the industry and have a number of innovative schemes – including a Tourism Youth Summer Camp for university students, an Abu Dhabi Ambassadors programme, and other commercial incentive programmes to encourage the development of the private sector.

Our efforts are also to make the sector more attractive. By growing the economic importance of the sector, we expect there will be greater opportunities for the community to become involved.

We have a target to double the number of tourist guests by 2020. In turn, this means that we will attract new hotels, attractions and experiences – these will all need qualified, enthusiastic staff in all areas of the business, including marketing, operations, to services, human resources, as well as direct visitor engagement. So, you see, the tourism sector, like all other economic sectors, is not simply limited to servicing the

immediate needs of the tourist – it is a fully holistic economic ecosystem. It is our responsibility to ensure it is sustainable, and has a fully qualified workforce, in all required specialisms.

One of the initiatives you have undertaken is the Abu Dhabi Tourism Youth Summer Programme, which is a salaried internship open to UAE nationals between the ages of 18 and 21. How successful has this programme been?

The annual Tourism Youth Summer Camp educates young Emiratis about the industry and what it has to offer them. Aimed at identifying and inspiring the next generation of tourism professionals for Abu Dhabi, the three-week programme of lessons, workshops, field visits and work placements enables attendees to gain first-hand insight into the destination's hospitality and tourism sectors and the role they play in the development of the emirate. The programme was launched in 2009 and has engaged more than 500 recruits, many of whom have reported that they are more likely to consider a career in tourism following their participation in the Camp.

What approach are you taking to entice potential candidates to get involved in the hospitality and tourism sectors?

Our Emiratisation programmes are encouraging youth at school and university to consider tourism as a career move. We are raising awareness by presenting at schools and hosting students in one of our five-star hotels for orientation tours. We find that once the students are exposed to such a dynamic sector, their attitudes are positively influenced towards considering joining one of the hotels as a career.

To make the experience more realistic, we have launched the



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'Khebraty Programme', an initiative which creates a part-time job for university students at one of the hotels in the Emirate. The Authority's industry development training plan builds long-term destination competitiveness by supporting the delivery of world-class service standards through a human resource pool of well-trained, committed and dedicated professionals.

We also have an Industry and Tourist Guide Training Unit which oversees training and accreditation and industry awareness. The Unit's mandate is to collaborate with stakeholders to raise the level of professionalism within Abu Dhabi's tourism industry, and is also responsible for promoting compliance of the tourism regulatory framework

by sharing best industry practices, assessing training needs, and organising training programmes to address them.

The Unit's key roles are to identify Abu Dhabi tourism industry manpower development needs and to conduct professional development programmes to entice UAE nationals to seek employment within the tourism sector.

Would you say there are common misperceptions among Emiratis about the tourism sector in general? If so, how can these views be corrected?

There is certainly a degree of the unknown, and a misconstrued perception that the tourism industry

is not as important as other sectors of the economy. The Abu Dhabi Ambassadors Programme, a major aspect of our Emiratisation strategy, plays a pivotal role in challenging these misconceptions and realising the Authority's vision of improving the emirate's visitor experience through increased interaction with locals.

TCA Abu Dhabi introduced the Ambassadors Programme in 2008 to encourage Emiratis to be advocates for tourism within their own sector of work. The programme aims to expand participants' knowledge in tourism and culture nationally and internationally, polishing their skills and boosting their confidence in approaching Abu Dhabi visitors.

Abu Dhabi Ambassadors Programme consists of essential training workshops covering hospitality, heritage and tourism over three months, in addition to specialised workshops on the subjects of how to deal with the media and the public, etiquette and protocol fundamentals, and the principles of organising tours in cooperation with a leading company.

The Programme also includes field trips to some of Abu Dhabi's major tourism attractions such as Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and Al Ain city's oases. The Programme concludes with several tests that qualify the participants to receive the title of Abu Dhabi Ambassador.

More than 650 Ambassadors from all walks of life have graduated from the Programme, from university students to government employees and even celebrities, who participated in a special edition of the Programme.

Additionally, more than 250 university students from across the Emirate of Abu Dhabi are selected to act as Qasr Al Hosn Festival Ambassadors during the Festival. The Qasr Al Hosn Ambassadors Programme sees the ambassadors interact with visitors to help narrate the Emirate's rich culture and history across the various festival touch points, and serves to pass down the Fort's importance through the generations.

Abu Dhabi TCA also makes considerable effort in training its existing employees, working with renowned institutions to improve their skills and knowledge. Can you tell us more about your manpower development strategy?

We believe human capital is the Authority's most valuable asset to achieve its goals and strategies. The process of training and preparing

employees is one of the fundamental functions of our Human Resources department in relation to employees' performance levels and productivity.

To this end, a 'Learning Map' has been developed to evaluate employee competencies and identify training methods and techniques required to develop a group of experienced and qualified employees.

The Learning Map charts employees' skills to identify positions suitable for their educational and practical experience. It is flexible across all levels of the organisation and guides effective and efficient employee performance in delivering the duties and assignments of the Authority. The Map is annually reviewed and ensures the process of training and career development is continuous.

Having identified training as key to upgrading Abu Dhabi's tourism services, the Authority has implemented a comprehensive tourism training plan as part of its overall industry professional development strategy such as training workshops and seminars as well as research initiatives in collaboration with local and international educational institutions.

Recent subsidised courses for employees and industry professionals have been run in collaboration with University of Lausanne, Cornell University, the School of Events, Tourism & Hospitality at Leeds Beckett University, and the School of Hotel & Tourism Management at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. All courses have been run in Abu Dhabi.

The plan also identifies and designs adequate training opportunities for UAE nationals thereby enabling them to take up key tourism sector roles as tourism guides. Participation is free for UAE nationals.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

We are in the process of developing a Tourism Investment Promotion Department within the Authority which is dedicated to matching business investment opportunities with potential partners, for government, government related entity (GRE) and private sector partners, attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to Abu Dhabi and identifying investment opportunities for built assets and service provision. The department will act as a catalyst to attracting local entrepreneurs and SMEs into the Emirate's tourism sector.

The Authority has also launched a platform for Emirati entrepreneurs that focuses on bolstering Abu Dhabi's leisure offering by supporting home-grown ideas and business start-ups.

'Rowad Al Seyaha', for example, has been designed to offer Emirati entrepreneurs, both experienced and aspiring, the chance to develop their ideas for potential business start-ups. A first of its kind for the leisure market, the initiative focuses on developing creative leisure business ideas in Abu Dhabi, and has gained support from a number of government entities, including The Khalifa Fund, Abu Dhabi Municipality, Department of Economic Development and the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi – who will be offering guidance to the successful projects.

- Interviewed by Heba Hashem