

UAE residents spend \$6.6b a year on overseas holiday trips

Volcanic ash cloud pushes travellers towards East Asia in April

- By Deena Kamel Yousef, Staff Reporter
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- A visitor looks at the Petronas towers and the city from the Kuala Lumpur City Centre observation deck.
- Image Credit: Devadasan/Gulf News

Dubai: The fastest growing travel destinations from the UAE are Thailand, Lebanon, Turkey, the UK, India and Singapore, followed by those with potential growth such as Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, Morocco, Malaysia and South Africa, according to a recent industry study by Dubai-based research company Market Vision.

Among the top holiday destinations preferred by UAE travellers, India, Thailand, Oman, UK, and France make the leisure list with more than 100,000 trips followed by Lebanon, Syria, Germany, Italy and Egypt with 50,000 to 100,000 trips, according to the April report.

UAE residents spend an estimated \$6.6 billion per year (Dh24.2 billion) on international holiday trips, with \$4.0 billion on leisure trips and \$2.6 billion on trips to visit friends and relatives.

In the Middle East the UAE is the largest outbound travel market in terms of expenditure and the second largest in terms of the number of outbound trips after Saudi Arabia.

Top destinations

Last month the top ten travel destinations from the UAE were Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur, Cape Town, Madrid, Moscow, Muscat and Tokyo, according to Irfan Ahmad, CEO of irhal.com, a Dubai-based online travel guide for tourists from the Middle East.

"The Far East appears to be more popular perhaps because of the impact of the volcanic ash clouds in diverting people towards Asian destinations," Ahmad said.

"Short-haul flights to nearby Middle East destinations such as Damascus and Muscat indicate that the impact of the credit crunch is still being felt and people prefer to go to destinations which are perceived to be less expensive."

Emirati and expatriate travellers showed marked differences in their holiday destination selections.

"Emiratis travel as big families, so they require connected rooms, they have heavy bags because they stay for longer durations, and they allocate a higher travelling budget. The travel of an Arab family is a hassle, so they might as well make the most of it," said Dina Al Herais, Vice President of Commercial Operations at Emirates Holidays.

"Emirati travellers are repeaters, so once they find a place they like, they keep going. They can't re-invent the wheel every time."

She estimated that they allocate about Dh70,000 to Dh80,000 for tickets and accommodation.

The top holiday destinations for Emirati travellers in the Middle East were Oman, Lebanon, Egypt, Syria and Jordan, popular for their "cultural affinity" and value for money as well as being Muslim and family friendly places, with no visa hassles, said Market Vision Partner and Director Kumud Sengupta.

In the Far East, Emirati travellers preferred Thailand and Malaysia for medical tourism purposes and India was popular for its wellness programmes and historical ties with the UAE.

Al Herais said that these countries provide lower-income Emirati families with cheaper shopping and accommodation options than Europe.

Emirati travellers also choose classic European destinations including the UK, Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy with Austria becoming more popular due to its marketing efforts.

Sengupta said that the Schengen visa encourages multiple-country visits in Europe, with Switzerland joining the visa system last year.

Travel to Spain is also expected to rise when Emirates launches direct flights to Spain later this year, she said.

Emirates Holidays also reports the popularity of the Indian Ocean islands like Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius among Emiratis for short trips.

Expatriates are attracted to the Levant and Egypt for their historical interest, the Indian Ocean islands for honeymoon and family vacations, and Australia is a quickly growing market as students from the UAE go there to study and are joined later by their parents for the holidays, according to Al Herais.

Holidays to the US and Canada are also choice destinations for visiting families, combined with leisure, she added.

Other popular locations include India, the UK, France, Italy, Turkey, Oman and Morocco.

Different rules

Emiratis and expatriates look at a different set of considerations in choosing their holiday destinations.

"Emiratis rate the image of the holiday destination, good tourist facilities, cultural familiarity, quality of accommodation, variety of shopping and good weather," said Sengupta.

"On the other hand, expatriates rate cost of holiday, accessibility, fun and entertainment, and a variety of things to see and do."

Both groups prioritise safety of the destination and ease of getting visas as the top factors in selecting holiday destinations.

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- \$4b: amount spent by UAE residents on leisure trips
 - \$2.6b: amount spent on visiting friends and relatives
 - Dh70,000: amount Emiratis spend on tickets and stay