



Tourist Bubbles and Climate Change in the GCC

Manuela Gutberlet

COP 27 AND CLIMATE ACTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East region, a large swathe of which comprises deserts and semi-arid zones, is a climate hotspot. It is warming almost two times faster than the global average. Intensive exploitation and use of fossil fuels, which lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions, are part of the reason for the warming. Heatwaves as well as extreme weather events such as droughts, dust storms and torrential rains will have disruptive health and socioeconomic impacts.

The 27th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), set to place in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, from 6 November 2022 is a timely opportunity to examine the progress of climate action in the Middle East. This series of *Insights* looks at the key climate threats faced by countries in the region and the mitigation and adaptation measures pledged or implemented so far, including financing challenges. It hopes to identify the implementation gaps in these measures and offer possible solutions.

Cover photo: The view from La Mer North marina, Dubai. In the background is the Burj Khalifa, with its luxury hotels and residences, 1 February 2020, Karim Sabib/ AFP.

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*Manuela Gutberlet**

Tourism development in the GCC is seen as a tool to diversify the economy away from oil and gas and to create jobs for the youth. GCC countries aim to become global leaders in business and leisure travel. This article outlines tourism's contribution to the GCC economies and analyses its impacts on climate change and local communities. It argues that the tourist bubbles that have emerged are unsustainable and concludes with policy recommendations for developing regenerative tourism and community-based tourism.

Tourism, particularly transportation modes such as airlines and cruise liners, is known to be a significant source of carbon emissions. At the same time, the viability of tourist destinations depends highly on the quality of environmental resources, favourable weather conditions and resilient communities. Therefore, not only do destination developers and tourism businesses have a responsibility to work with local communities to mitigate, and adapt to, the long-term effects of climate change, but it is also in their own interest to do so.

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, the tourist season — usually the cooler months between October and April — is likely to be impacted by the effects of global warming, namely, rising temperatures and increasing frequency of heavy sand storms, cyclones

and floods. Climate scientists warned in 2015 that under a business-as-usual scenario of future greenhouse gas concentrations, the Gulf region is likely to approach and even exceed the threshold of survivability for fit humans.¹ Previous tourism research has not fully taken into account the dynamics of fast-growing tourist economies like China² or the GCC countries, where leisure tourism has had substantial impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environments. This article outlines tourism's contribution to the GCC economies and its environmental and other adverse impacts. It concludes with some policy recommendations for sustainable tourism involving development paths such as *regenerative tourism* and *community-based tourism*.

Tourism Development in the GCC

In just a few decades, the GCC countries have transformed themselves from remote traders and pearl diving settlements to global mega-centres of business and trade, fuelled largely by oil wealth. The GDP of these economies grew by 9.5% per year between 1975 and 1980.³ But the need to diversify their economies away from dependence on finite oil and gas reserves and a volatile market for these commodities — particularly as countries across the world are switching to renewable energy — saw these countries turning their attention to tourism. The push towards tourism was also propelled by the need to create jobs for the rapidly expanding young population. The GCC has one of the fastest-growing populations worldwide: with a 7.9% increase annually between 2016 and 2020, the region had 57.6 million inhabitants in 2020, compared with

¹ Pal, J. S., and Eltahir, E.A.B., “Future Temperature in Southwest Asia Projected to Exceed a Threshold for Human Adaptability”, *Nature Climate Change* 6, 26 October 2015.

² Luo, F., Becken, S., and Zhong, L., “Changing Travel Patterns in China and ‘Carbon Footprint’ Implications for a Domestic Tourist Destination”, *Tourism Management* 65 (2018), 1-13.

³ International Monetary Fund, “Table 2: GCC — Basic Economic Indicators, 1975–1995”, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/policy/table2.htm>.

53.4 in 2016.⁴ Tourism was seen as a tool to capitalise on the region's unique landscape and ecosystems and the warm hospitality and culture of the people to promote rapid economic growth while shaping national identities and creating jobs for the young population. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the tourism sector generated approximately [one-tenth](#) of the GDP and supported 1.4 million jobs in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.⁵ However, the majority of employees in the tourism sector are lowly paid expatriates from Asia and Africa. The real social contribution of tourism to the region's social sustainability is, therefore, questionable.

Several GCC countries have goals of becoming global leaders in business and leisure travel, hosting mega-events like Expo 2020, FIFA World Cup 2022, Formula 1 Grand Prix, and Asian Games. GCC governments are focusing on boosting economic growth by easing procedures for business and foreign investment as well as procedures for tourist and long-term residence visas.

The tourism sector in the GCC is predicted to expand by 6.6% between 2022 and 2026 and is projected to earn US\$26.3 billion in revenue by the end of 2022 although rising fuel prices and a shortage of labour have been challenging business growth in the sector.⁶ Due to tight COVID-19 measures in the GCC region, including border closures, the number of international tourists arriving dropped from 47.7 million in 2019 to 13.3 million in 2020. Breaking down by country performance, the UAE received the highest percentage of inbound tourists in the region in 2020, with 53.3%, followed by Saudi Arabia, with 30.8%.

⁴ GCC-STAT Statistical Center, "GCC Population statistics 2020 [in Arabic]", <https://gcsstat.org/en/statistic/publications/population-statistics-in-gcc-countries>.

⁵ Luomi, M., "Strategic Shifts Needed for Sustainable Recovery in Gulf Aviation and Tourism", The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, Blog post, 19 October 2020, <https://agsiw.org/strategic-shifts-needed-for-sustainable-recovery-in-gulf-aviation-and-tourism/>.

⁶ Arabian Business, "GCC Hospitality Sector to Return to Pre-Pandemic Levels this Year", *Arabian Business*, 3 August 2022, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/industries/travel-hospitality/gccs-hospitality-sector-set-to-return-to-pre-pandemic-levels-this-year-report>.

Bahrain received 6.2% of total inbound tourists in the region, Oman 4.6% and Qatar 4.3% and Kuwait 0.8%. Spending by international tourists dropped by 71% from US\$84.6 billion in 2019 to US\$25.2 billion in 2020. In 2020, intra-regional GCC travel dropped to 3.6 million tourists, compared with 12.6 million in 2019.⁷

In terms of tourist infrastructure, the number of hotels in the GCC increased by 6.3% to 11,178 in 2020, compared with 2015. With 9,101 hotels, Saudi Arabia had the largest number of hotels in the region, most of which are used by pilgrims undertaking the hajj or *umra* (minor pilgrimage).⁸ Apart from full-service national carriers, a number of low-cost airlines have been operating in the region since 2003, when Air Arabia was introduced. Wizz Air Abu Dhabi, launched in 2021, was the latest ultra-low cost airline to take to the skies.⁹

Tourism and Climate Change

Tourism is known to be a carbon-intensive industry: carbon emissions from tourism-related transport constitute 22% of all emissions from transport. Transport-related emissions from international tourism are expected to grow by 45% from 2016 to 2030, while transport-related emissions from domestic tourism are expected to grow by 21% from 2016 to 2030. Worldwide, inter-regional travel represents 80% of all travel, and the predominant mode of travel is air.¹⁰ In 2020 the majority of tourists —70.7% — arrived in the GCC by air, 26% by bus and 3% by ship.¹¹ According to the UN Carbon Offsetting and

⁷ GCC-STAT Statistical Center, “Glimpse at Tourism Statistics in the GCC in 2020 [in Arabic]”, <https://gccstat.org/en/statistic/publications/gulf-tourism-overview>.

⁸ GCC-STAT Statistical Center, “Glimpse at Tourism Statistics”.

⁹ Goinho, V., “Special Report: The Power of the GCC as a Source Market for Global Tourism”, *Gulf Business*, 26 February 2022, <https://gulfbusiness.com/special-report-the-power-of-the-gcc-as-a-source-market-for-global-tourism>.

¹⁰ UN World Tourism Organization and International Transport Forum, “Transport-related CO₂ Emissions from the Tourism Sector”, 2019, <https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development/tourism-emissions-climate-change>.

¹¹ GCC-STAT Statistical Center (2021). Glimpse at Tourism Statistics”.

Reduction Scheme for International Aviation, all GCC countries with major airlines have confirmed their participation in the scheme, pledging to offset any emission growth beginning 2021 through the purchase and cancellation of carbon credits.¹²

The top carbon-intensive form of tourism transportation is space travel. The UAE seeks to establish itself as a regional hub for civil and commercial space activities. Following the establishment of the Mohammed bin Rashid Space Centre in Dubai in 2006, the UAE Space Agency was launched in Abu Dhabi in 2014. The first UAE astronaut travelled to space aboard the International Space Station in 2019. In February 2021, the UAE became the first Arab nation and fifth country to reach Mars, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the Gulf state.¹³ In the same year, the UAE government began working with Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin to bring space tourism flights to the country by exploring the possibility of developing a spaceport in the UAE desert.¹⁴ Space tourism can be seen as the logical development of time-space compression, whereby greater distances are bridged within increasingly shorter time spans. It is argued that just 1,000 space launches would have the effect of increasing the global temperature by up to 1⁰ or even of doubling the current global temperature rise,¹⁵ posing tremendous responsibility on the few who can afford and benefit from such an exclusive travel mode.

Another form of travel that is carbon-intensive is cruise travel. In the past 15 years, the Arabian peninsula has developed into a cruise hub, with Dubai as its home port. Given that the cruise industry is one of the most polluting sectors of the travel industry, Cruise Lines

¹² Luomi, M., "Strategic Shifts Needed for Sustainable Recovery".

¹³ UAE—US United (UAE Embassy in Washington, DC), "UAE Space Exploration", n.d., <https://www.uaeusaunited.com/story/uae-space-exploration>.

¹⁴ US Department of Commerce, "United Arab Emirates — Country Commercial Guide", 26 July 2022, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/united-arab-emirates-space>.

¹⁵ Peeters, P. (2015). Why Space Tourism Will Not be Part of Sustainable 'Tourism', *Tourism Recreation Research* 43, 540–543.

International Association (CLIA) argues for pursuing net-zero carbon cruising by 2050 across the global fleet.¹⁶

In the current neoliberal context of deregulation, tourism, stakeholders are not compelled to respect the physical and environmental limits of a destination or its social and cultural limits. The aggressive marketing of tourist destinations driven by the profit motive has resulted in overtourism, creating tensions with communities that suffer the various consequences of tourism.¹⁷ Mega-tourism developments have in fact led to the creation of “tourist bubbles”, i.e., enclosed, self-contained spaces that offer exclusive club-like luxury infrastructure for tourists to the exclusion of others. These bubbles not only promise tourists an escape from the pressures of their everyday lives but also shield them from the harsh realities of the host society by creating a constructed authenticity. Examples include tourist resorts, cruise liners, and airports that offer food, short-term accommodation and vast shopping and entertainment options.¹⁸ There are a large number of tourist bubbles in the GCC, notably in Dubai: Dubai airport, ranked number one globally in August 2022,¹⁹ luxury international hotel chains like the Palazzo Versace Hotel in Dubai, Dubai’s Burj Khalifa and the yet to be completed Dubai Creek Tower, man-made exclusive islands like “The World” in Dubai, mega-theme parks, planned artificial green cities such as the “Red Sea project” in Saudi Arabia, the “Moon Resort” in Dubai, and the aforesaid spaceport in the UAE desert. When construction on the Dubai Creek Tower is completed, Dubai will have the two tallest towers in the world, located close to the Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary.

¹⁶ Cruise Lines International Association CLIA, “Environmental Sustainability”, 2021, <https://cruising.org/en/environmental-sustainability>.

¹⁷ Higgins-Desbiolles, F., Carnicelli, S., Krolikowski, C., Gayathri, Wijesinghe G., & Boluk, K., “Degrowing Tourism: Rethinking Tourism”, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 2019; Gutberlet, M. (in production, 2022), *Cruise-Tourism and Overtourism in Emerging Destinations on the Arabian Peninsula* (Routledge).

¹⁸ Gutberlet, M., “In a Rush: Time–Space Compression and Its Impacts on Cruise Excursions”, *Tourist Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019), p. 29.

¹⁹ OAG Aviation Worldwide Limited, “Busiest Global Airports in the World in August 2022”, <https://www.oag.com/busiest-airports-world>.

Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are among the top 10 countries globally that have high ecological deficits. A national ecological deficit means that a country is importing biocapacity through trade, liquidating national ecological assets or emitting carbon dioxide waste into the atmosphere.²⁰ Some of the immediate threats from climate change in the region are scarcity of food and water, loss of coastal areas, disturbance to ecosystems and loss of biodiversity, and adverse effects on human health. These threats call for governments in the region to prioritise adaptation measures before it is too late. For the tourism industry, it is critical that they explore the concept of sustainable tourism.²¹

Sustainable Tourism

The concept of sustainable tourism has gained importance within the tourism sector since the increase in mass tourism in the West in the late 1960s and especially since the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. According to the UN World Tourism Organization:

Sustainable tourism is a development that considers its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the tourism industry, the environment and host communities. There should be a balance between economic, social and environmental impacts while creating income for local communities. Sustainable tourism also

²⁰ Biocapacity refers to the ecosystem's capacity to produce biological materials used by humans and to absorb the waste material that they generate. See Global Footprint Network, "National Footprint and Biocapacity Accounts", World 2018, https://data.footprintnetwork.org/?_ga=2.211897876.1483107960.1662207208-1774918213.1662207208#/.

²¹ Mushtaque, A., and Choudri, B.S., "Climate Change in Oman: Current Knowledge and Way Forward", *Education, Business and Society: Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues* 5, no. 4 (2012): 228–236.

requires inclusion, the informed participation and involvement of different stakeholders including communities.²²

Rethinking Tourism, the Economy and Inequalities: A Destination for All or Enclosed Bubbles?

The fast-expanding tourism industry's long-term costs of increased carbon emissions and their effects on climate change and societies may outweigh the short-term gains from tourism for the inhabitants of the GCC region. There needs to be a pause and serious consideration of the consequences of the overconsumption of tourism and leisure products and services. The 2021 Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism stressed that “a just transition to net-zero before 2050 will only be possible if tourism's recovery accelerates the adoption of sustainable consumption and production, and redefines our future success to consider not only economic value but rather the regeneration of ecosystems, biodiversity and communities.”²³

There are some signs of the adoption of more regenerative, community-based approaches to tourism worldwide. Regenerative tourism involves shared responsibilities between travellers and tourism stakeholders in the destination. It focuses on contributing to the needs of the local community and improving their quality of life and well-being. It also helps communities and tourism destinations to continuously renew themselves.²⁴ Some researchers advocate systemic change involving various forms of “degrowth” of the economy to reduce the impacts of

²² UN World Tourism Organisation, “Sustainable Development”, n.d., <https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development>.

²³ United National World Tourism Organisation, “The Glasgow Declaration: An Urgent Global Call for Commitment to a Decade of Climate Action in Tourism”, 2021, <https://www.unwto.org/news/the-glasgow-declaration-an-urgent-global-call-for-commitment-to-a-decade-of-climate-action-in-tourism>.

²⁴ Postma, A., “Regenerative Tourism: The Next Step in Sustainable Tourism”, CBI, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands, 23 November 2021, <https://www.cbi.eu/news/regenerative-tourism-next-step-sustainable-tourism>.

climate change. But degrowth would be unrealistic; in the words of one writer, degrowth without curbs to population growth would only result in “an equality of scarcity, not of abundance”.²⁵

Oman has launched Vision 2040, which officially supports sustainable lifestyles for all and a sustainable environment but details are not clear.²⁶ In the UAE, Abu Dhabi is promoted as a “tourist destination for all”. The emirate has launched two initiatives to develop talent for and localise the tourism sector. However, neither sustainable tourism nor regenerative tourism development is mentioned in promotional efforts by the Department of Culture and Tourism.²⁷ The transformations needed for a transition to sustainable tourism call for tourism authorities to have local multi-stakeholder engagement for effective policy development and good governance. However, there is little sign of local engagement in most of the aforesaid projects.

The tourism sector needs to consider mitigation of and adapting to climate change as a top priority. The climate crisis can be seen as an opportunity to rethink human–nature interactions and the decarbonisation of tourism and its entire value chain, including food and drink and entertainment venues. Strategic policies are needed that would encourage behavioural patterns that are less carbon-intensive. Building a climate-resilient tourism sector should include the introduction of carbon taxes.²⁸ These measures would have to be part of a comprehensive and

²⁵ Philipps, L., “The Simple Life is the Luxury of the Rich: How Much Stuff Is Just Enough?” *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2021, <https://mondediplo.com/2021/02/11degrowth>.

²⁶ Oman Vision 2040, “Pillars and Priorities”, n.d., <https://www.oman2040.om/mahawer-en.html>.

²⁷ Department of Culture and Tourism, Abu Dhabi, “Human Capital and Emiratisation Development”, n.d., <https://tcaabudhabi.ae/en/what.we.do/tourism/industry.initiatives.emiratisation.aspx>.

²⁸ Chancel, L., and Piketty, T., “Carbon and Inequality: From Kyoto to Paris”, Paris School of Economics, November 2015, <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/ChancelPiketty2015.pdf>; One Planet Network, “Tourism Climate Action: Climate Change & Tourism”, n.d., <https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/programmes/sustainable-tourism/glasgow-declaration/climatechange-tourism>

judicious package of carbon pricing and other measures to tackle climate change for a region that still depends heavily on oil and gas as the main source of revenue.²⁹ The following steps are worth considering:

- Developing national and regional GCC policy frameworks for climate change adaptation and resilience that integrate sustainable tourism.³⁰
- Establishing an equitable climate adaptation fund to support major initiatives that include developing sustainable tourism.
- Encouraging the banking sector to come up with innovative forms of financing to support projects that lead to less carbon-intensive tourism.
- Providing incentives for companies in the tourism sector that opt in for more environmentally and socially sustainable practices.³¹
- Establishing indicators for tracking and monitoring the adoption of alternative business models in the tourism sector and the effects of such transition on tourism employment and social stability.
- Nature-based solutions (NbS) will be crucial in addressing the challenges related to climate change, such as regenerating ecosystems and supporting nature's ability to capture carbon. Since NbS relate to human, social and natural capital, not just

²⁹ Belaid, F., "Implications of Poorly Designed Climate Policy on Energy Poverty: Global Reflections on the Current Surge in Energy Prices, *Energy Research and Social Science* 92 (2022).

³⁰ World Tourism Organization, "Recommendations for the Transition to a Green Travel and Tourism Economy", 2021, <https://webunwto.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2021-05/210504-Recommendations-for-the-Transition-to-a-Green-Travel-and-Tourism-Economy.pdf>.

³¹ Luomi, M., "Strategic Shifts Needed for Sustainable Recovery".

material and financial capital, improving the measurement of these forms of capital is important.³²

- Since transportation plays a major role in climate change, alternative modes of transportation should be financed for the tourism sector. The long-planned GCC railway project, which aims to link the capitals of the Gulf states, could lead to a less carbon-intensive mode of regional travel while also serving as a source of job creation.

Aggressive tourism growth and marketing strategies in the GCC region need to be evaluated against the potential for emissions reductions compatible with a net-zero future. Due to their energy-intensity, some forms of tourism will simply no longer be feasible. Net-zero carbon emissions should be a planning imperative for everyone involved in tourism if the sector is to be sustainable in the long run.³³ Innovative ideas are needed beyond switching to renewable energy or undertaking token measures such as greening tourism destinations with palm trees. And, instead of promoting mindless consumption of tourist products, including staying in luxury hotels carved out on man-made islands or skiing on artificial snow, people should be encouraged to respect our natural habitat, architectural heritage and the cultural heritage of indigenous communities like the bedouin, with their pastoral ways. And, schools should be the starting point for inculcating such respect. ♦

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³² Seddon, N., Chausson, A., Berry, P., Girardin, C.A., Smith A., and Turner, B., “Understanding the Value and Limits of Nature-based Solutions to Climate Change and Other Global Challenges”, The Royal Society Publishing, January 2020, <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rstb.2019.0120>.

³³ Scott, D., and Gössling, S., “Destination Net-zero: What Does the International Energy Agency Roadmap Mean for Tourism?” *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 30, no. 1 (2022): 14–31.

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