

Q&A INTERVIEW

Tourism, Reimagined

Saudi Arabia's rise as a market for real estate and tourism, and Red Sea Global's role in building local capability and sustainability along the Kingdom's Red Sea coast.

EDITED HIGHLIGHTS OF A LONGER INTERVIEW

FORMAT: Q&A | SECTOR: TOURISM & HOSPITALITY | MARKET: SAUDI ARABIA | SUBJECT: RED SEA GLOBAL

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JOHN PAGANO · RED SEA GLOBAL

What does Saudi Arabia represent as a tourism destination for US and other foreign visitors?

Saudi Arabia is a vast country with a reasonably sized population. Unlike other developed regions, Saudi Arabia's tourism infrastructure — aside from religious tourism — was virtually non-existent. We recently opened our first resorts designed to showcase the nation as a true tourist destination, with more resorts set to open in the coming months and years. Saudi Arabia's climate varies by region. While Riyadh is hot, the Red Sea coast has a different microclimate that is more akin to Southern Europe. This allows for a more uniform distribution of visitors throughout the year to the country. The Red Sea offers a range of activities, including snorkeling, diving, hiking and environmental education.

What is Red Sea Global doing to ensure projects remain sustainable and concentrated on ecological conservation?

Our various development projects have embedded sustainability in everything we do. We focus on developing projects in harmony with nature. For example, we have thriving coral reefs, which we aim to protect and enhance. Instead of rushing into development, we spend significant time with scientists and partners at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology. We conduct extensive surveys and marine spatial planning simulations to map out development areas before assigning conservation values. Our goal is to increase the net conservation value of our sites by 30% over the next two decades compared to leaving nature untouched. This approach drives our decisions, such as choosing not to develop on a favorite nesting site for the critically endangered hawksbill sea turtle to avoid accelerating the species' extinction. We aim to limit the number of visitors to the Red Sea destination to no more than one million per year and only develop less than 1% of the 28,000 square kilometers in the area. We aim to learn from past mistakes in places such as Spain and Italy; we aim to develop strategically without overexploitation. We are also working with local communities to create employment, career progression and educational opportunities.

What is being done to enhance the lives of the local community in the Red Sea region and the nation?

Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in educating its population, with a large emphasis on sending its young talent to top universities around the world. Women, while previously underrepresented in the workforce, are now significant contributors. The Kingdom aims to create one million new jobs in tourism by 2030. Our agreements with universities and vocational training programs ensure we have skilled personnel. We launched the Red Sea National Academy for vocational training and have developed in-house capabilities to manage the entire development process. Additionally, the entrepreneurial spirit in Saudi Arabia is rising, supported by initiatives such as the non-profit group Misk Foundation and the Small and Medium Enterprises General Authority or Monsha'at. Saudi Arabia is actively fostering a culture of innovation; the drive to diversify the economy is evident and opportunities for entrepreneurs and other partners are endless.



John Pagano
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