

# ASIA: UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

## **1. What is the latest spa and wellness news in your country?**

A current hot topic of discussion in the UAE is the training and licensing of workforce (namely spa therapists) employed in the spa industry. There is a major initiative to regulate and ensure the individuals with the right skill set and training are working in the spa industry. The UAE has a large number of spas in operation and this will impact business decisions for all operating spas. The industry leaders in the region are preparing to empower their employees and they welcome this change. Time and effort needs to be invested and standards established for this to become a reality.

Major concerns on the minds of all operators are to fill the talent gap, to provide value for money without compromising on service delivery and to continue planning for success in volatile business environments.

## **2. The industry is buzzing about wellness technologies. How do you see spa and wellness establishments in your country using wellness technologies now and in the future?**

UAE hotels' robust occupancy levels and consistent efforts to maintain tourist traffic by tourism authorities have both contributed to increased investor confidence. Owners and operators are eager to invest in new technology all over the industry. Operators are making conscious efforts to use technological advancements to create USPs and woo consumers. Technological advancements are now being embraced all over and have a lot of scope in future in the fields of medico-cosmetic treatment delivery, sales and marketing and consumer-related data tracking, to acquire and retain customers.

The UAE is witnessing a rapid rise in diseases of affluence such as obesity and diabetes, which increases pressure on an understaffed healthcare workforce. This has led the UAE to adopt Telehealth in a big way. The UAE government embraced Mhealth networks, remote

patient monitoring and Telehealth solutions to improve healthcare access and quality.

“Diveguard” pool disinfectant systems designed for the Middle Eastern climate are being used for swimming pools. The product’s special formulation helps to maintain the pH levels of water at 7.4-7.5 without using acids, thus making it safe for human skin.

### **3. What is happening in your country in terms of wellness tourism?**

The UAE boasts one of the largest spa markets in the world and the UAE wellness products and services sector is estimated to generate revenue of \$3 billion by 2015 (Colliers Spa Market Review 2014). This solid base has made it feasible to create, innovate and operate new concepts and to offer value-driven services to all the different segments of consumer.

Most upscale spas are within established hotels, followed by midscale stand-alone spas. There is a great potential for developing more wellness destinations with the opening up of projects in other emirates.

Consumers are pressed for time and spas need to focus on adapting and reinventing services to keep these consumers engaged. Male spa consumers are getting more comfortable with spa wellness and trends show solid growth in this sector.

Overall, the beauty and wellness industry experienced growth due to various factors, including but not limited to high disposable income, fascination for malls and shopping and increased utilization by male consumers.

There is a great interest in medico-cosmetic services in the Middle East, and many people travel to Europe for such services. The UAE accounts for \$2 billion in healthcare travel to Germany annually. This is one segment that needs to be tapped into. A lot of outbound medical wellness tourism is to locations in Asia. With further development of the Dubai Healthcare City free economic zone, an additional segment of tourists will be targeted. The UAE has potential for developing into a world-class wellness destination.

Dubai is building 22 hospitals as part of its plans to attract 500,000 medical tourists a year. Talks are on to provide medical visas and packages. It is preparing to roll out medical

tourism packages covering procedures from sports medicine to cosmetic surgery. From September 2014 Dubai Health Authority will seek applications from hospitals in the emirate to participate in medical tourism packages, which will include the cost of treatment, visa, hotel stays and even recreation activities for accompanying family members. The project aims to become a major center for medical tourism in time for the 2020 Expo.

#### **4. Please provide one sentence that best describes the latest developments in your country for each of these categories:**

**Hotel spas:** Continues to be a strong revenue generator and demonstrates maximum growth in all the emirates. Dubai has announced its plan for Mall of the World, a 48 million square-foot project. It will include: the world's largest shopping mall, with a total of eight million square feet of floor space; 100 new hotels and serviced apartment buildings containing 20,000 hotel rooms; the largest indoor family park in the world; a cultural district including a theatre district modeled on New York's Broadway; Dubai's largest event centre, accommodating 15,000 people; a three million square-foot wellness district catering to medical tourists, and a temperature controlled, covered retail street network covering over seven kilometers.

**Destination spas:** There is a major wellness destination project taking shape in Ras Al Khaimah. With its hot springs, mountains and lush green fields, Ras Al Kahimah is trying to encourage the development of wellness retreats and create a niche for itself in the region's competitive hotel and tourism industry.

**Hot spring spas:** Hot springs are the least developed segment in the current market, as guests prefer traditional Hammam and Rhassoul over hot springs. There are some properties promoting hot springs in Ras Al Khaimah.

**Wellness living communities:** With the growth in obesity and obesity-related medical issues like depression and heart disease, this is one area that needs immediate attention. Wellness communities will encourage healthy lifestyle habits and eventually build a healthy generation — prevention being better than cure. Dubai's Government offered gold rewards last year to participants in its slimming competition and this year it launched an initiative to create obesity awareness among children with the slogan "Your Child in Gold". Regular initiatives by authorities to create awareness and tackle these lifestyle issues are positive signs for support and development of such communities in the region. Currently, around

60 percent of the male population and 66 percent of the female population in the UAE is overweight or obese (The National,UAE 2014).

**Corporate or employee wellness programs:** Operators need to customize their offerings and encourage wellness-driven MICE retreats. MICE trips to neighboring emirates will save travel time for companies and also provide time for social and emotional bonding among the employees, and encourage healthy lifestyles.

## **5. Fast-forward five years and tell us what you think the spa and wellness industry in your country will look like.**

Dubai is the leading emirate and has established its reputation internationally. The other emirates are promoting structured growth to develop the hospitality industry in the Middle East and to set international benchmarks. The UAE's vision of a long-term structured development strategy for tourism will only lead to more development opportunities for hospitality and wellness projects. The spa and wellness industry is flourishing in the UAE and with the growth in tourist numbers, it is turning out to be one of the fastest growing spa destinations in the world

A synergy between medical and wellness tourism, technology driven services and an established board for certification and affiliation of the spa professionals are the main issues now facing us.

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