

## Expert says, Ramadan travel falls short this year

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Ramadan travel from the GCC is up on 2022 levels in many member states, but is still lagging behind the heights enjoyed by the industry in 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic, according to a sector professional.

Olivier Ponti, vice president of insights at London-based global travel data and analytics firm ForwardKeys, revealed outbound flight bookings this year were significantly down, even taking into account the timing of Ramadan four years ago, when Eid al-Fitr fell in June, close to the start of the summer holidays. “As of March 31, outbound flight bookings from the GCC states for the three weeks running up to Eid Al-Fitr, the end of Ramadan, were 38 percent behind where they were in the equivalent period in 2019.

For the three weeks afterwards, they are 67 percent behind,” said Ponti. For the peak Ramadan holiday period - April 14 to 24 - the drop was 32 percent on 2019 figures. While Saudi Arabia fell 44 percent behind, the kingdom’s neighbours all recorded a stronger recovery, with Kuwait 27

percent down on 2019, Qatar 11 percent, UAE 6 percent and Bahrain up 2 percent. Flight bookings to GCC countries made easier reading, although they were still 12 percent behind numbers for 2019.

“The major drag is travel to Saudi Arabia, where flight bookings are 40 percent behind 2019. Bookings for Kuwait are 43 percent behind,” said Ponti, adding that bookings for Bahrain are 16 percent ahead, and 39 percent, 47 percent and 48 percent up on 2019 for Qatar, UAE and Oman respectively. Ramadan is expected to last for 29 days this year, with the Eid Al Fitr break predicted to run from Thursday, April 20 through to Sunday, April 23. Mamoun Hmedan is chief commercial officer and managing director, Mena and India at Wego, the largest online travel marketplace in the Mena region.

He said Wego had recorded more than seven million searches on the platform between March 1 and April 14 from people looking to travel over the Eid break - up 14 percent year on year. Data from Wego previously revealed that airfares to popular expat locations had increased during the holy month. UAE flights to India were up 13 percent year on year, while tickets to the UK increased 32 percent. Hmedan added that the average air fare for the Eid break is around \$409 although he expected that to increase in the coming days. “We are also seeing more family travel during this period as a lot of people travel back home to celebrate with their families,” he said.

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