

## Hong Kong welcomes wealthy Middle Eastern tourists to boost tourism

- A Monitor Desk Report

Date: 25 March, 2025



Dhaka: Hong Kong is aiming to attract wealthy travelers from the Middle East and Southeast Asia as part of its efforts to boost visitor numbers.

The Grand Hyatt has quickly embraced this trend, introducing the Quran in rooms, adapting its saunas and steam rooms, and adding alcohol-free options to minibars.

Additionally, Chinesology, a high-end restaurant at the International Financial Center, now offers 20 Chinese dishes and two halal-friendly tasting menus, with prices ranging from HK\$880 to HK\$1,388 (\$113-\$179) per person. The restaurant is located near offices of UBS Group AG and Millennium Management.

The moves are part of the government's push to boost visitor numbers,

which are yet to reach levels seen before the 2019 protests.

Tourism revenues are also being dented by Chinese travelers spending less on average than they used to due to economic woes in the mainland.

Authorities have been pressing the hospitality sectors to adapt to needs of tourists from the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Chief Executive John Lee asked businesses in October to enhance measures for “creating a friendly environment” for Muslim visitors, including for hotels to provide more prayer rooms.

Such efforts will be put to the test as Hong Kong prepares to host a slew of conferences this week, including the third edition of the government-organized Wealth for Good in Hong Kong Summit on March 26.

“Beyond immediate tourism benefits, these initiatives serve Hong Kong’s broader economic interests by diversifying its visitor demographics, a very important factor for building resilience in the tourism sector,” said Fazal Bahardeen, the Chief Executive Officer at CrescentRating, a Singapore-based firm that focuses on halal rating and accreditation services for travelers.

Hong Kong’s tourism board has also created a website called Travel in Luxe Hong Kong to respond to demand from many Middle East visitors for high-end experiences. These include helicopter sightseeing tours, finding help to arrange private pool parties at a local water park and VIP shopping services.

Since Lee’s October speech, Hong Kong, which is home to about 300,000 Muslims whose presence in the city traces back to the early 19th century, has seen the number of halal-certified restaurants increase by 80% to around 180, according to the Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong, the main entity representing the interests of the Muslim community in the city.

In addition, numerous city officials have visited the Gulf in recent years to deepen ties and attract investments, with ultra-rich families from the region being targeted as Hong Kong seeks to reinforce itself as a wealth-management hub.

There’s been “a significant” increase in tourists coming from the Middle

East and ASEAN markets, said Ann Foo, the director of sales and marketing at the Grand Hyatt Hong Kong. Last year, the hotel hired Egyptian Chef Mahmoud Abbas, who has been in charge of a halal-certified all-day dining restaurant.

Since May, CrescentRating has certified 53 hotels, three touristic attractions and one shopping mall as Muslim-friendly. The Grand Hyatt received a rating of five in a scale that goes up to seven, alongside the Hong Kong Ocean Park Marriott Hotel and the Kowloon Shangri-La, among others.

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