



Saudi Minister of Tourism Ahmed Al Khateeb opens the 26th General Assembly in Riyadh.

Tourism at a Turning Point

At the 26th UN Tourism General Assembly in Riyadh, a clear message emerged. Tourism is entering a new era shaped by technological progress, renewed resilience and a stronger sense of shared responsibility. Delegates from more than 150 countries gathered to mark the organization's 50th anniversary, yet the atmosphere was anything but ceremonial. The focus was on what comes next and how the sector can move forward with purpose. During the opening ceremony, Secretary General Zurab Pololikashvili reflected on tourism's expanding role in global development. He reminded delegates that cooperation remains essential, stating, "Tourism is a powerful force for good because it brings people together, supports peace, and creates opportunity." His remarks captured how the sector has matured from a soft power instrument into a driver of economic diversification and international understanding. Artificial intelligence featured prominently throughout the Assembly. Discussions centered on how AI is already influencing the way visitors plan trips, how businesses operate and how destinations respond to real time pressures. New frameworks were introduced to help governments and smaller enterprises

adapt more confidently. The UN Tourism Artificial Intelligence Challenge further illustrated this shift, with finalists presenting solutions designed to improve efficiency while reinforcing the essential human element that defines the travel experience. Natalia Bayona, Executive Director of UN Tourism, stressed the importance of keeping this balance intact. Speaking to young innovators, she said, "Tourism is the most human economic sector and technology must strengthen, not replace, the human spirit that makes it unique."



The UN Tourism 26th General Assembly convenes global leaders in Riyadh.

Her message underscored a broader point that technology has value only when it elevates people and expands the opportunities available to them. The Assembly also marked a significant leadership transition. The incoming Secretary General, Shaikha Al Nowais, announced her intention to widen access to skills, education and professional pathways. "The future of tourism must be built on education, youth empowerment and innovation that benefits every region," she said. Her comments signaled a shift toward a more inclusive, talent driven agenda for the years ahead. Across the various sessions, a common narrative surfaced. Tourism is entering a transformational decade in which destinations that invest in sustainability, digital readiness and strong governance will advance more quickly than those that hold to past models. The Riyadh Declaration on the Future of Tourism reflects this ambition by setting out a unified roadmap for long term growth. As the General Assembly drew to a close, the momentum in Riyadh made one conclusion clear. The sector is preparing for a future defined by adaptability, responsible innovation and collaboration at scale. With renewed clarity and a rising generation of leaders, tourism is positioning itself to play an even more decisive role in shaping global progress.

FACES OF CHANGE



**ZURAB
POLOLIKASHVILI**
Secretary General
UN Tourism

What was your central message in Riyadh?
This anniversary is not only a milestone. It is a reminder that tourism has become a strategic force for peace, stability and economic opportunity. When countries cooperate, the sector becomes stronger and more resilient. Tourism connects people, opens doors for young talent, stimulates investment, and helps communities rebuild after crises. As we look ahead, our task is to ensure that this progress continues and that every region benefits from the growth we are seeing. The future of tourism depends on our collective ability to work together and maintain the spirit of unity we witnessed in Riyadh.

"Tourism is a powerful force for good because it brings people together, supports peace, & creates opportunity."

"Tourism is the most human sector, & technology should strengthen, not replace, the spirit that makes it unique."



NATALIA BAYONA
Executive Director
UN Tourism

How is AI changing tourism today?
AI is already transforming how people plan, book, and experience travel, but its real value lies in strengthening human talent. Tourism is the most human of all economic sectors. Technology should enhance that, not replace it. Our work focuses on giving entrepreneurs, governments and businesses the tools they need to adapt and compete. From online academies with AI tutors to microtraining programs for workers in taxis, hotels and communities, our goal is to close the digital divide. Innovation must translate into opportunity, and AI can help the sector become more inclusive, efficient and future ready.



**SHAIKHA
AL NOWAIS**
Secretary General Elect
UN Tourism

What will guide your leadership in the coming term?
My focus is to expand access to education, skills and opportunity so that everyone has a place in the future of tourism. Young people, in particular, deserve the chance to shape this sector and contribute to its growth. Tourism has the power to improve lives, but only if we ensure that innovation and investment reach all regions, not only the most developed ones. I believe in a tourism ecosystem that values talent, supports communities, and builds sustainable pathways for long term progress. The work ahead is clear. We will push for a sector that is more inclusive, more prepared and more ambitious.

"The future of tourism must be built on education, youth empowerment & innovation that benefits every region."

FACES OF CHANGE



CHARLES FERNANDEZ
Minister of Tourism
Antigua and Barbuda

What sets Antigua and Barbuda apart in today's tourism market? Antigua and Barbuda has expanded well beyond the traditional sun and beach model. Our yachting sector is growing rapidly, supported by a new department dedicated to marketing this pillar of our economy. At the same time, we are building a year round calendar of authentic experiences, from Carnival and Art Week to Culinary Month and major sporting events. Travelers want culture, cuisine and genu-



ine connection, so our strategy focuses on showcasing the real Antigua and Barbuda. We also remain a strong destination for high end investors. Opportunities exist in hotels, marinas and

premium dining. Our economy is stable, our crime rate is the lowest in the region, and the country is safe, peaceful and welcoming. Tourism accounts for over sixty percent of our GDP, and our Citizenship by Investment Program functions within a unified regional framework to ensure transparency and long term viability. Our goal is sustainable growth that protects our natural assets while creating opportunity for future generations.



MIROSLAV BORSHOSH
Minister of Tourism
Republic of Bulgaria

How would you describe Bulgaria's tourism potential today? Tourism remains one of Bulgaria's most important economic pillars because it creates jobs across regions where other sectors may not reach. It also plays a central role in keeping young people in the country by offering modern and dynamic career paths. The adoption of the euro and entry into the Schengen area will strengthen our competitiveness by improving convenience for travelers and building con-

fidence among international partners. Germany is one of our most important source markets, and we are working closely with major operators to rebuild and expand air connectivity. Beyond sea and ski tourism, Bulgaria is developing cultural and heritage tourism, medical tourism, spa & wellness, boutique wine tourism, and authentic local experiences. Our wineries produce high-quality, small-batch wines that pair naturally with our landscape and culture. Sustainability is

also a priority. Tourism depends on preserved nature and cultural heritage, and we are seeing growing global recognition of Bulgaria as a responsible and forward-looking destination.



THORIQ IBRAHIM
Minister of Tourism & Environment
Republic of Maldives

How does Maldives stay competitive in luxury tourism? Maldives has more than 50 years of experience refining a model built on privacy, service excellence and natural beauty. Our one island one resort concept remains unique in the world. Luxury travelers appreciate the seamless journey, from personalized arrivals to dedicated seaplane transfers and high end culinary and wellness offerings. At the same time, we balance growth with responsibility. Mal-

ddives has been an early global voice on climate change, and we continue to invest in sustainability. Resorts are built with coastal protection, water conservation and waste treatment



systems. More than half have integrated renewable energy, and our national target calls for at least 33% of electricity be generated through renewable energy by 2028. We also offer strong opportunities for foreign investment, including long term leases of up to 99 years, expanded concessions and new atolls designated for development. Our vision is a resilient, sustainable and world leading luxury destination rooted in Maldivian hospitality.



LUSINE GEVORGYAN
Head of Tourism Committee
Republic of Armenia

How is Armenia shaping its tourism strategy for long term growth? Armenia is positioning itself as a dynamic crossroads of tourism, where visitors can enjoy diverse, year-round experiences built on authenticity, culture and natural diversity. Our strategy focuses on developing products that highlight Armenia's strengths, including heritage travel, outdoor adventure, religious tourism, wellness and gastronomy. We continue to improve quality stan-

dards and develop new routes that connect regions, allowing visitors to explore lesser known areas and support local communities. Infrastructure upgrades, targeted marketing and stronger air connectivity are helping us reach priority markets in Europe, the Gulf and Asia. At the same time, we are committed to sustainability and balanced growth. Armenia is investing in skills, training and community based tourism so that local people benefit directly from the sector.

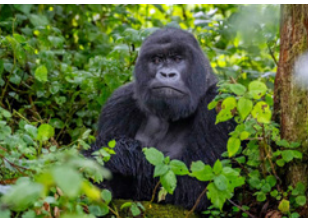
By building a competitive offer that reflects our traditions and landscapes, we aim to position Armenia as a welcoming, experience driven and future focused destination for global travelers.



IRENE MURERWA
Chief Tourism Officer
Rwanda Development Board

How is Rwanda positioning itself in the global tourism market? We have rebuilt our tourism sector by focusing on unity, resilience and a clear long term vision. Today, Rwanda is known for conservation and community based tourism. Gorilla protection has become a symbol of national transformation. Through the Kwi-ta Izina ceremony, we tell the story of how gorilla populations recovered and how local communities now benefit directly through jobs, training and revenue sharing.

This model has created strong ownership among residents and has attracted high end lodges such as One&Only, Singita and Wilderness. Our visibility is growing through global partnerships, major media coverage and participa-



tion in international markets. We also aspire to expand our Middle East routes beyond Dubai, with a potential Riyadh-Kigali service as a strong next step, while building on the growing networks of Qatar Airways, KLM, Brussels Airlines and Turkish Airlines. Rwanda maintains an open visa policy to make travel seamless. Our goal is to offer meaningful, conservation driven experiences that show how tourism can rebuild a nation through inclusion, accountability and purpose.



H.E. THEON ALI
Ambassador-Designate
of Antigua and Barbuda to
Qatar & Deputy Head of
Mission in the UAE

What is your main takeaway from the UN Tourism General Assembly? My time at the UN Tourism General Assembly in Riyadh reinforced a vital lesson. The future of travel will depend on genuine partnership, responsible innovation and a shared commitment to sustainability. For Antigua and Barbuda, this means building meaningful alliances that support resilient growth across the tourism value chain. Our expanding collaboration with

GCC countries is an example of how dynamic markets and small island nations can create synergy rooted in authenticity, environmental stewardship and high quality service. We can use smart tools to deliver smoother, more personalized journeys for visitors, but technology must serve a larger purpose. The real goal is to build a tourism model that gives back more than it takes, protects fragile ecosystems, empowers communities and respects cultural identity. By sharing knowledge,

accelerating skills and investing in sustainable infrastructure with our global partners, we can raise the standard of tourism and ensure a future where destinations thrive for generations.

