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TOURISE 2025: Emerging Trends Shaping the Future of Travel



The inaugural TOURISE Summit in Riyadh was a landmark event where more than 120+ global leaders, innovators, changemakers, media voices, and industry powerhouses from every tourism industry gathered to discuss the ever-evolving sector. His Excellency Ahmed Al-Khateeb, Minister of Tourism of Saudi Arabia and Chairman of TOURISE, said, "This summit is a launchpad for groundbreaking ideas and bold solutions that will drive our industry forward."

The conversations I had and the sessions I attended made one thing clear - travel is no longer just about flights and hotels. It's about meaning, connection, personalization, heritage, smarter systems, and experiences that genuinely matter.

AI is accelerating faster than the industry can keep up, new traveler behaviors are reshaping demand, and destinations are rewriting their identities to stay relevant. These emerging trends are defining the next decade of exploration.

Cultural, Immersive & Meaningful Travel

The panels explored how AI-powered companions, interactive storytelling, and immersive virtual layers can help travelers engage more deeply with culture rather than just observe it. They want to feel the heartbeat of a place, meet its people, understand its roots, and slow down enough to truly absorb it.

Dr. Miguel Sanz, General Director of the Spanish Tourism Institute and President of ETC, emphasized that communities must be at the center. After building strong tourism economies, destinations now need to ensure locals help shape and benefit from the visitor experience. H.E. William Rodríguez López, Minister of Tourism of Costa Rica, shared how Costa Rica's "Pura Vida" philosophy naturally embodies slow, immersive travel by connecting visitors to local people, biodiversity, and daily life.

Sports, Concerts & Mega Events

Sports tourism has always been influential, but now it is emerging as one of the most powerful engines of global tourism. From the FIFA World Cup to Formula 1, and even pop culture like Taylor Swift's Eras Tour, mega events are reshaping travel patterns, boosting international arrivals, community pride, and reframing global perceptions of host destinations.

H.R.H. Abdulaziz bin Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Sports, spoke about how sports have become a unifying force in Saudi Arabia. Cristiano Ronaldo, now a proud Saudi resident, is bringing global attention, fandom, and economic uplift.



Cruise Travel: Sailing Into Tomorrow

Another major theme that stood out for me at TOURISE 2025 was the remarkable rise of cruise travel. What used to be perceived as a niche or seasonal vacation choice has now evolved into one of the fastest-expanding segments in global tourism.

Chris Theophilides, CEO of Celestyal Cruises, captured the heart of the experience: "Cruising isn't transportation- it's a lifestyle." Lars Clasen, CEO of Cruise Saudi, shared how Saudi Arabia is emerging as an exciting new cruise destination, backed by heritage investment, innovation, and hospitality-driven development.

Wellness Tourism: The Rise of Longer, Healthier Travel

Wellness tourism is shifting in a big way, and this movement is no longer about spas and surface-level relaxation. The sessions showed that this is a far deeper, more scientific, and more emotionally anchored trend. It is driven by burnout, digital overload, chronic stress, and a growing global awareness of longevity and mental well-being.

Ingo Schweder, CEO of GOCO Hospitality, shared his insights on how modern travelers are looking for more than massages and spas - they want health programs, personalized nutrition, recovery therapies, and emotional wellbeing journeys that are rooted in authenticity.

A moment of stillness, a genuine human connection, the scent of a natural space, or the taste of clean, nourishing food can be the greatest indulgence. Wellness, ultimately, is becoming both a lifestyle and a new definition of luxury in travel.

Intelligent, Seamless Journeys

The future of travel is moving toward a frictionless ecosystem, and seamless service is now the minimum expectation. But even as technology takes over repetitive tasks, the real differentiation will come from human warmth, thoughtful hospitality, and experiences that feel genuinely cared for.

Travel infrastructure is becoming more intelligent. Zubin Karkaria, CEO of VFS Global, showcased how AI is revolutionizing visa processing through advanced documentation verification, fraud detection, and the VFID "visa at your doorstep" service, allowing applicants to complete biometrics from home.

The map for travel was drawn at TOURISE, and it's paved with intention, innovation, and deeper connections.

Pooja Amritkar

Ross Veitch on Wego's AI Evolution & Tourism Landscape

Wego stands as one of the Middle East's most influential travel platforms, shaping how millions of travellers search, explore, and book their journeys. Since its launch in 2005, the driving force behind this evolution has been **Ross Veitch, the CEO and co-founder**, with a vision to make travel simpler, smarter, and more accessible for the everyday user.

In this exclusive interview with **Pooja Amritkar** at TOURISE Riyadh, Ross reflects on how technology is changing travel, the trends driving today's bookings, the rise of AI, and what the next five years look like for the tourism landscape.

TOURISE 2025 is focused on technology and travel, and AI is rapidly reshaping industries everywhere. How is Wego integrating AI into its products to enhance the user experience?

AI has been a highlight this week, especially with TOURISE discussion panels and sessions. And since Wego is fundamentally a tech company focused on solving problems for travelers, this is a natural evolution for us. We've been doing machine learning at scale for more than a decade, but we're now fully embracing the new generation of AI tools and capabilities.

Across the company, we're automating everything we possibly can, including finance, operations, customer service, and marketing. And on the product side, AI now allows us to build features of personalization, prediction, and real-time assistance that genuinely enhance the user experience.

Are there any specific AI-driven features users should look out for?

Absolutely. There are major AI systems gaining traction and these platforms allow companies like ours to create and build functionality that users can summon directly from within a chat interface.

Travel, however, requires a lot of specialized abilities, such as shopping, comparing, booking, and the big AI models partner with companies like Wego to add those layers of expertise and functionality. The exciting part is that users can now engage with a conversational interface they're becoming very comfortable with, while the AI layers its intelligence over our travel-specific systems.

There's been a noticeable rise in wellness and slow tourism. Have you seen that shift influence booking patterns on your app?

Absolutely. There was a panel session earlier where we were talking about people traveling specifically for longevity treatments. Some treatments aren't available in one country but are available in another, and people who have the means are traveling to access those services.

Medical tourism has been around for a long time. But I also think that the world is moving faster and faster, and we're more connected than ever before. I think this trend is only going to grow as travelers seek deeper, more restorative experiences, take long breaks where they can truly disconnect, recharge, and rejuvenate.



How do you see the aviation landscape evolving in the Middle East and North Africa over the next five years? And how are low-cost carriers shaping travel patterns?

The aviation marketplace in the Middle East, specifically the Gulf, is very vibrant. There's a lot of competition among the full-service carriers, and for most travelers going to most places, passengers have excellent alternatives among these major airlines.

Riyadh Air is joining the game as well. They've just started their first service to Riyadh-London, and they'll be launching new destinations fairly quickly. On the low-cost side, there are quite a few options like Flynas, flyadeal, Flydubai, and now some European low-cost carriers are entering the Gulf market. So whether you want to travel budget-friendly or full service, you've got plenty of options.

What I'd like to see, especially with respect to India, is more slots opened up for Gulf carriers. I'd love to see the number of daily flights between the Gulf and India expanded.

Which emerging travel trend is exciting you the most right now?

When I was younger, instead of going to university, I went backpacking, and when I had to get back to Australia, instead of flying, I took about six months and went overland. I travelled through the Soviet Union as it was breaking up, then down through Iran, Georgia, Azerbaijan, into Pakistan, through the Wagah border into India. I went down to Goa and spent about a month chilling out there. I think that kind of slow travel, where the journey is as much the goal as the destination, really changes your perspective on the world. You meet a lot of people along the way. I encourage young people to do it while they can. In today's fast-paced world, slow travel is more relevant than ever.