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IMMERSIVE CHARM

As world renowned shopping hubs, both the UK and Ireland are competitively updating their variety of experiences. Panayiotis Markides examines how these destinations are utilising their cultural attributes to magnetise the MENA guest



The MENA region is growing as a popular feeder market for the UK, according to regional commercial manager - Middle East and Central Asia, British Airways, Paolo De Renzis, British Airways. As such, the airline is proactively ensuring that the UK is as easy to reach as possible.

The number of flights from the region to London Heathrow have increased by 40 per cent in the last five years, as De Renzis informed *TTG*. Indeed, inbound visitors to the UK from the UAE have surged three per cent between January and November 2012 and the same period in 2013, according to recent estimates by VisitBritain.

To welcome this increase in MENA arrivals, manager - GCC markets, VisitBritain, Anniq Labuschagne told *TTG*: "We are encouraging UK suppliers to focus on the experiences that appeal to visitors from the GCC region."

And with equal eagerness for Middle Eastern patronage, the UK and Ireland's industry stakeholders are adapting their offerings and highlighting their shopping and cultural appeal to cater to the unique demands of this market.

RETAIL AND RECREATION

The UK and Ireland's hospitality industry is satisfying the trend for personalised, culturally immersive experiences with an emphasis for MENA guests on bespoke shopping orientated trips.

Director, global sales and marketing - Middle East, Preferred Hotel Group, Nabil Hassanieh explained: "For the MENA traveller, the quality of services offered at the hotel needs to extend to leisure activities taking place within the destination itself. Our city hotels as a result are investing in concierge services to continue to grow in popularity with MENA travellers."

The Preferred Hotel Group's Lancaster London hotel offers a 'Shopaholic' package, targeted at visitors from the MENA region, while its renowned property, The Wellesley promotes a 'Ladies in Luxury' package. Also in London, The Goring hotel showcases its history and its close proximity to the capital's celebrated shopping streets to attract visitors.

The need to provide the most exclusive experience to guests and to use a central London location as an advantage is imperative,

director of communications, InterContinental London Park Lane, Patty Kahn revealed: "From personal shopping with Liberty London, to VIP shopping in the lesser-known boutique areas of Marylebone or Belgravia, or guided art and museum tours, our concierge are always on-hand to create a range of private experiences."

Reflecting this personalisation trend, PR and marketing manager - Europe, COMO Hotels, Chris Orlikowski commented to *TTG*: "We partnered up with FLORIS to give guests the chance to create their own unique perfume."

The UK's aptitude for personalisation is indeed widespread. In Manchester, Radisson Blu Edwardian, Manchester, is such an example that attracts the MENA market as it is near to the city's commercial district, luxury shopping streets and convention centre.

Meanwhile, in Ireland, The Merrion hotel sits directly opposite the seat of the Irish Parliament and for shopping enthusiasts, marketing manager, The Merrion, Sarah Glavey highlighted that Dublin's Grafton Street and Henry Street are nearby, bursting with Irish and international fashion outlets.

Hassanieh also spoke about shopping packages at Preferred Hotel Group's Dublin property, The Fitzwilliam: "Guests enjoy full VIP service when visiting department stores by only showing their key." Additionally, an on-hand concierge team ensures reservations at some of the city's leading restaurants - including those with waiting lists, VIP private visits or premium seats at the theatre.

QUINTESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES

Capitalising on a distinctive heritage, the UK and Ireland's hospitality sector is flavouring its offerings with cultural touches.

Orlikowski noted: "We believe that especially the younger generation of Middle Eastern travellers is more and more gravitating towards chic contemporary luxury hotels such as The Halkin by COMO and Metropolitan by COMO that offer bespoke experiences to immerse guests into the local culture." One such experience COMO offers is privately guided art tours around Mayfair's galleries.

To showcase British culture, the Corinthia London takes guests on day trips to Petworth Estate in West Sussex - an historic late 17th Century mansion. PR manager, Corinthia London, Orla O'Donovan informed: "These day trips offer a unique and British experience for GCC guests travelling to London, enabling them to swap views of the London Eye and River Thames, offered by the hotel's idyllic city-centre location and close proximity to popular tourist and shopping sites, with an historic English country escape."

As the UK and Ireland aim to welcome more MENA arrivals, the destinations within are unveiling a wealth of shopping attractions and cultural options to meet the discerning requirements of Middle Eastern visitors.