

Groups & incentives

Slow recovery for Middle East groups sector

Réunion delivers unexpected delights

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Designing journeys with Avis

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Memorable, meaningful meetings – aha!

Groups & incentives

Groups and incentive travel continues to evolve. Travel plans have undergone a shift due to the continuing conflict in the Middle East but resourceful planners continue to deliver innovative programmes at great destinations.

Sluggish recovery for Middle East groups sector

TYLIN MOODLEY

WHILE the initial disruption caused by the Middle East conflict has eased, recovery in the groups and incentives sector remains cautious. Although flight schedules have largely stabilised and services have resumed, traveller confidence has been slower to return.



Lance Nkwe

“Our data is showing recovery. A lot of the companies that had no-fly policies in place for the Gulf have removed those. The operational side has recovered well, even if sentiment is catching up more slowly,” said **Lance Nkwe**,

Business Leader for FCM Meetings & Events South Africa.

He told *Travel News* that confidence in transit had recovered substantially. However, confidence in the region as an incentive destination is lower and those who do choose it are opting for shorter trips.

Unpredictable

Janet Aldworth, MD of Sure Voyager Travel, said the unpredictability of the situation meant bookings through the Middle East were still considered high risk.

“At the moment, the situation is completely volatile and unpredictable.



Janet Aldworth



Incentive planners continue to create innovative and exciting programmes. Photo: Unsplash

We at Voyager Travel don’t book groups to go into or via the Middle East at the moment. We can’t take that risk. Until there’s a proper peace deal signed and it runs for a while without any change, then we will not send anybody through the Middle East.”

Carla Napoli, MD of Rewards Incentives and Conference Management,



Carla Napoli

said clients were still nervous and groups were not willing to book with Middle Eastern airlines at the moment.

“Most of the people that had bookings in advance have already changed their bookings and I don’t think anybody that’s making a new booking is using airlines through the Middle East.”

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Delivering the unexpected

AS INCENTIVE travellers increasingly demand experiences that go beyond the predictable, Réunion is quietly becoming one of the Indian Ocean’s most compelling propositions for South African corporates – and the interest is growing.

Réunion occupies a distinctive space among the Indian Ocean islands. There are few destinations where a group can witness an active volcanic eruption at sunrise, share a meal with a Creole family in the highlands and be back at a five-star property for a gala dinner the same evening. That contrast between raw, extraordinary nature and comfort is difficult to find anywhere else in the region.

Réunion is visa-free for South Africans and just a 3.5-hour flight away. Air Austral operates up to three direct flights a week from

Johannesburg.

The island’s credibility as a safe and professionally managed destination means that corporates do not have to worry about a volatile geopolitical situation. Organisations feel confident sending their top performers to a destination that will genuinely impress.

What’s new

The past 12 months have seen meaningful additions to Réunion’s MICE infrastructure. The island now offers a strengthened portfolio of four- and five-star properties with fully integrated conference facilities alongside boutique options for smaller, high-end incentive groups seeking a more personalised experience.

Looking at experiences, immersive cultural programming has become

a key differentiator.

Experiences offered on the island include private cooking sessions with local chefs, guided heritage walks through the multicultural streets of Saint-Denis or exclusive sunset cocktails at the summit of Maïdo 2 200m above sea level.

Groups

Réunion is particularly well-suited to incentive groups of up to 100 people.

The island’s human scale means that experiences remain exclusive and personalised. Logistics are straightforward as distances are short, transfers are manageable and the island’s compact geography means that a group can experience the coast, the highlands and the volcano within a single programme without ever feeling rushed. For incentive planners,



Horse riding is one of the most popular activities for incentive groups. Photo: IRT®Anakoapress

this translates into tighter control over the overall delegate experience.

Support

The Réunion Island Tourism Board works directly with South African incentive houses and event planners, providing access to certified DMCs based on the island, who manage end-to-end

programme design from airport transfers to themed evenings on the volcano.

Dedicated briefing sessions and site inspection support are available on request.

Réunion Island Tourism is represented in South Africa by the French South African Chamber of Commerce and Industry and its partners.

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Premier tunes in to groups market

OVER the past 12 months Premier has refined its offering to better meet the requirements of corporate groups, incentive travellers, event planners and leisure groups. This includes the development of more inclusive packages, simplified group enquiry processes and tailored experiences that combine accommodation, dining, conferencing and destination-based activities.

Wayne Neath, Commercial Director for Premier Hotels, & Resorts told Travel News that a major trend within the market was the move away from standardised packages towards personalised, experience-driven programmes.

“Clients increasingly want flexibility, stronger value, local activities and itineraries that offer a genuine sense of place,” he says.

Premier Hotels & Resorts is responding to this with a new collection of curated corporate, leisure, group and incentive experiences that will be unveiled in August.

“Designed to simplify planning

while adding greater value and a stronger sense of occasion, the launch will introduce fresh destination-led packages, distinctive inclusions and new incentive opportunities. More will be revealed in the weeks ahead,” says Neath.

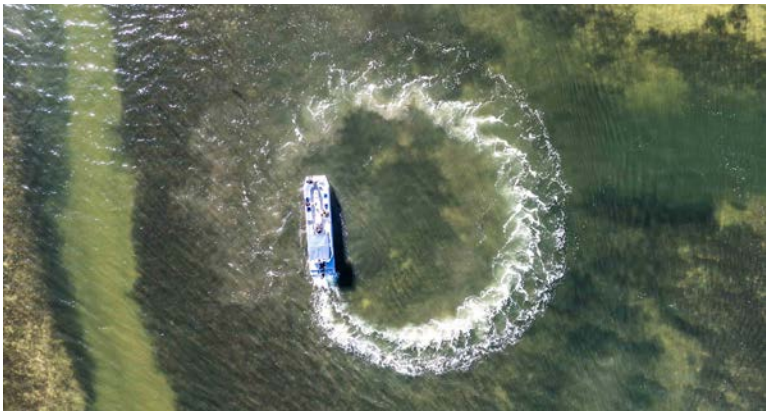
Drakensberg

Premier’s resort portfolio is particularly well suited to groups looking for an itinerary that extends beyond the traditional conference or hotel stay.

Premier Resort Sani Pass at the foot of the Southern Drakensberg provides an ideal setting for executive retreats, incentive trips, team-building events and outdoor-focused group travel.

Its mountain setting creates opportunities for 4x4 excursions up Sani Pass, hiking, nature experiences, golf, wellness activities and visits to nearby attractions.

“The property is especially appealing to groups wishing to combine structured business sessions with adventure and meaningful team engagement,” says Neath.



Guests at Premier Resort The Moorings can enjoy a cruise on the Knysna Lagoon on a ferry, inflatable boat, yacht or kayak. Photo: Premier Hotels & Resorts

Garden Route

Premier Resort The Moorings in Knysna offers a relaxed Garden Route setting on the banks of the Knysna Lagoon. The resort is well positioned for incentive groups, leisure extensions, executive breakaways and touring itineraries. Experiences can include lagoon cruises, visits to the Knysna Heads, forest excursions, golf, dining experiences and explorations of the wider Garden Route.

KZN South Coast

Premier Resort Cutty Sark in Scottburgh on the KZN South Coast is well suited to incentive groups, sports tours, family groups and informal corporate retreats.

In addition to beach activities,

golf and team-building programmes, the resort provides access to the internationally renowned Aliwal Shoal diving area. Diving and ocean-based experiences can be incorporated into incentive itineraries for experienced divers and groups seeking introductory marine adventures. This adds a distinctive experiential element to the destination and creates opportunities for memorable team and incentive travel.

“Whether it’s the mountains, the Garden Route or the coast, Premier’s resort portfolio allows planners to create group and incentive journeys that are productive, rewarding and memorable,” says Neath.

Avis: Designing journeys, not transport

A MEMORABLE conference keynote address. A wonderful game drive. A gala celebration that marks the end of a memorable trip.

It’s often the moments between the highlights that determine whether a group travel experience feels seamless or unnecessarily complicated.

Mobility is becoming an increasingly important part of itinerary planning. Conferences extend beyond convention centres, business and leisure travel increasingly overlap and travellers may arrive on different



Avis offers a range of safari rentals, including the Ford Ranger Luxury Camper. Photo: Avis

flights, extend their stays or move between multiple destinations.

This means mobility can

no longer be treated as a logistical requirement at the end of the planning process. The right mobility

solution provides greater flexibility, simplifies complex itineraries and helps travel professionals respond confidently when plans change.

Avis Southern Africa supports these diverse travel requirements through a range of mobility solutions tailored to different traveller profiles and journey needs. Effective mobility is not simply about providing a vehicle – it is about matching the right solution to the needs of each journey.

These include car rental, van rental, safari vehicle

rental, luxury vehicle rental and chauffeur-driven services. For travellers who prefer not to self-drive, Avis Chauffeur-Driven Services offers economy and luxury vehicle options with professional chauffeurs while Point-to-Point provides a convenient economy transfer solution.

For travel agents and event planners, reliable and flexible mobility by Avis simplifies logistics, accommodates different schedules and traveller needs, and helps create a more seamless overall experience.

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Constance – Indian Ocean incentive experts

WITH the recent addition of Constance Le Chaland in Mauritius, Constance Hotels and Resorts has strengthened its offering for the meetings and incentive travel market.

The new resort on Mauritius's south-eastern coast is suitable for groups with greater emphasis on personalised, experience-led group travel.

Opened in February this year, it is only 5km from Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport and offers generous accommodation, varied dining, wellness facilities and access to Blue Bay Marine Park as well as cultural and nature-based experiences, **Nadine Comarmond**, Head of MICE for Constance Hotels & Resorts, tells *Travel News*.

The addition broadens the group's Mauritius portfolio, giving organisers another option for incentive programmes, combining accessibility with a variety of leisure experiences.



Nadine Comarmond

Island options

Among the Constance collection, Constance Ephelia in the Seychelles and Constance Belle Mare Plage in Mauritius remain particularly well suited to group and incentive travel.

"This is because of their scale, varied accommodation and choice of indoor and outdoor venues," says Comarmond. "Both can

welcome small, medium and larger groups for meetings, private dinners, themed events and leisure programmes."

Constance Belle Mare Plage is especially appealing for golf incentives, offering two 18-hole championship courses, The Legend and The Links.

Le Chaland now provides an additional Mauritius option, not only for its easy access to the airport but also for its private villas and its proximity to Blue Bay and Mahébourg, where visitors can experience local culture and attractions such as the Mahébourg Market.

Meanwhile Constance Ephelia combines extensive facilities with the beautiful beaches of the Seychelles, tropical landscapes and nature-led activities, including kayaking, windsurfing, ziplining, cliff climbing, snorkelling and diving. Guests can also enjoy tennis, squash, yoga and spa treatments.



Constance Ephelia's Presidential Villa has a private infinity pool with uninterrupted views of the ocean. Photo: Constance Hotels and Resorts

Tailored programmes

Rather than offering standardised packages, Constance focuses on creating programmes tailored to each group's objectives, profile and expectations.

"Our teams work closely with organisers from the initial brief to departure, ensuring a seamless experience and lasting memories," says Comarmond.

Experiences can include private beach dinners, wine tastings, golf days, spa and wellness programmes, water sports, cultural excursions, nature discovery, team-building activities and conservation-led experiences. Personalised menus, welcome amenities, dedicated coordination and exclusive use of selected venues further distinguish each programme.

"Programmes remain rooted in the culture and beauty of the destination," she adds.

This approach also reflects changing expectations among corporate and incentive travellers, according to Comarmond.

"South African corporate and incentive clients remain value-conscious but value is increasingly assessed through the quality, originality and depth of the overall experience," she says. "Groups are seeking flexible itineraries, distinctive food and beverage concepts, authentic destination discovery, wellness, downtime and nature immersion. Above all, personalisation is now expected with travellers favouring programmes that balance collective experiences with individual choice."

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Sports incentives a powerful force

FEW experiences bring people together like sport. It unites different cultures, destinations and personalities, making it one of the most powerful and memorable rewards for groups and incentive travellers.

A sports incentive is often an emotional journey – winners get to immerse themselves in the most iconic cities and beautiful towns around the world, soaking up the local atmosphere, vibe, culture and cuisine. They feel the rush of pure emotion while they cheer their favourite team, watch that crowning moment of sporting glory or jump to their feet as the most advanced race cars on the planet roar past their shaded grandstand.

No wonder sports incentives are wildly popular.

“We design our travel offerings around maximising the sporting experience for the guest. By focusing on the sports that South Africans love, exploring the iconic destinations they wish to visit and making it as simple and safe as possible to get



Illana Pereira

right into the action, we elevate the travel experience into something completely immersive, expressive and thrilling beyond belief,” says **Illana Pereira**, Managing Executive of Tourvest Destination Management (TDM) Sports & Events.

Through its three sports tour operating brands, TDM Sports & Events has specialised in group and incentive travel for over 30 years – taking groups of friends, families, corporate

groups and incentive groups right to the heart of the action.

It offers a wide variety of sporting codes and major sporting events locally and abroad. These include cricket, rugby, Formula 1, MotoGP, Grand Slam Tennis, major golf tournaments and football.

“One of the most important trends globally is the growing desire for travel to various destinations to experience sporting events. This particularly relates to incentive travel as it combines the love of sports with a desire to reward incentive winners with new and exciting destinations in unique and magical ways.

“Our in-depth knowledge, expertise of the destination, absolute passion for sports and track record of delivering world-class incentive programmes assures our guests of unforgettable memories every time they travel,” Pereira adds.

SA Rugby Travel and SA Cricket Travel, the official fan travel companies of the South African Rugby Union

(SARU) and Cricket South Africa, are part of the TDM Sports & Events division, lending credibility and trust to every group or incentive programme they run.

SA Rugby Travel offers Springbok supporter packages for major events, including the Nations Championship Northern Hemisphere Series in Europe where South Africa will face Ireland, France and Italy, and

the Nations Championship Finals Weekend in London, hosted by Springbok legend **Bismarck du Plessis**, and the 2027 Rugby World Cup in Australia.

SA Cricket Travel offers official Proteas travel packages for Australia’s and England’s tours to South Africa with both series featuring three One-Day Internationals and three Test Matches.



Can anything compare with being among the fans cheering the Springboks on, live from the stands? Photo: SARU

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Memorable, meaningful meetings – aha

DEMAND for South Africa's diverse landscapes, wildlife and cultural heritage continues to shape the incentive travel market, local and international, and aha Hotels & Lodges is building on these strengths by creating experiences that extend well beyond the conference room.

Over the past year, the group has focused on strengthening its offering for groups, conferences and incentive travel by combining professional meeting facilities with authentic South African experiences, **Deidre Broodryk-Ward**, Sales and Marketing Executive for aha Hotels & Lodges, tells *Travel News*.

"Our approach has been to offer more than just a venue and accommodation," says Broodryk-Ward. "We want to provide destinations where teams can connect, collaborate, celebrate achievements and create lasting memories."

Curated

A key priority has been enhancing curated experiences that allow planners to create incentive programmes that are meaningful and memorable. At aha Lesedi Cultural Village in Johannesburg, delegates can immerse themselves in South Africa's cultural heritage through traditional

performances, storytelling and local cuisine.

Safari properties continue to play a central role in the group's incentive offering. At aha Ivory Tree Game Lodge in Pilanesberg, the 'Bush and Business' offering combines conferencing with Big Five game drives, bush dinners and outdoor experiences.

A recent addition to Ivory Tree Lodge is a new state-of-the-art conference venue.

Broodryk-Ward says the new venue provides guests with the opportunity to combine productive meetings in a world-class setting with the tranquillity, adventure and inspiration of the African bush.

Diversity

The group offers a variety of different properties able to cater for varying group



Deidre Broodryk-Ward



Lesedi Cultural Village is located within the Cradle of Humankind. Photo: aha Hotels & Lodges

requirements, according to Broodryk-Ward.

For international incentive groups, aha Skukuza Safari Lodge offers modern conferencing facilities in the heart of the Kruger National Park.

"Skukuza Safari Lodge was a particular highlight during the G20 period," she says. "It demonstrated how world-class facilities, African hospitality and an iconic wilderness setting can come together to create a truly unforgettable event experience."

In Pilanesberg Game Reserve, aha Shepherds Tree Lodge provides an exclusive retreat suited to executive

groups seeking privacy, personalised service and luxury safari experiences.

KwaZulu-Natal offers aha Alpine Heath Resort & Conference Centre, a Drakensberg setting for conferences, team-building retreats and incentive stays. Alternatively, aha Gateway Hotel in Umhlanga combines business convenience with easy access to Durban's beaches, attractions, shopping and cultural experiences.

Across the portfolio, groups are offered Big Five safaris, guided walking safaris, conservation-focused experiences, cultural encounters, curated tasting

experiences, bush dinners, mountain adventures, wellness offerings and scenic excursions.

Ultimately, the group's focus is on creating journeys that leave delegates with more than successful meetings.

"South Africa remains one of the world's most compelling incentive destinations because it offers incredible diversity, exceptional value, warm hospitality and experiences that simply cannot be replicated elsewhere," says Broodryk-Ward. "Our role is to bring those experiences to life and create journeys that guests remember."



The Avis Mobility Hub

AVIS has a new Mobility Hub in Centurion that brings together Avis Car Rental, Car Sales and Leasing in one convenient location.

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"The launch of our new Centurion Avis Mobility Hub is an important step in how we continue to evolve the way we serve our customers. By bringing Car Rental, Car Sales and Leasing together in one location, we are making it easier for customers to



Anda Peter

access the solution that best suits their needs at different stages of their lives. Ultimately, it is about creating greater convenience, choice and a more seamless experience for our customers," says **Anda Peter**, GM: Marketing, Sponsorships and Events at Avis Southern Africa.

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Sluggish recovery for Middle East groups sector

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Adjustment

Having rerouted groups during the height of the conflict, incentive travel planners say new bookings still largely avoid Middle Eastern airlines.

“There wasn’t a loss of business; there was a movement of business. Prices have gone up, airfares have gone up and that’s affecting budgets. We’re finding a lot more travel to Indian Ocean islands for this particular year,” said **Raoul Canetti**, MD/Owner of U-Connect.



Raoul Canetti

Nkwe said the shift towards local, high-value incentives for South African clients had largely been driven by cost. “Rising airfares have prompted corporates to rethink their approach to incentive travel, especially on the long-haul side. What

we are seeing is an appetite for value-based incentives – keeping the programme local with added benefits.”

Smaller groups

Canetti said, with travel costs expected to remain high, corporates would likely consider smaller groups. “I don’t see airfares coming down and if anything will change, it might be corporates reducing numbers. I think our incentives might get a little smaller, or corporates might consolidate, and rather than having two or three tours, they might just have one.”

The 2027 Rugby World Cup in Australia is a welcome alternative for incentive travel next year.

“A lot of the incentives are going to Australia and luckily that doesn’t have to go via the Middle East. The Middle East conflict doesn’t slow business down as much as we would expect because I believe it will all go to Australia next year. I think a lot of companies are pushing that,” said Canetti.

Risk planning

The conflict has changed how corporates assess and manage travel risk with safety considerations now playing a greater role in planning incentive trips.

“Before, the Gulf was



Here’s to great incentives! Photo: Pexels, Gustavo Lagar

regarded as a safe transit point. Now, people are looking at risk much more closely because the situation changed so quickly,” said Aldworth.

She said it was important to have more detailed discussions with clients before bookings were confirmed. “As an operator of incentives and groups, you carry a lot of responsibility for these people. You must have the conversation with them: ‘This is the reality and this is what I can and can’t do for you’.”

Where clients still choose to travel through the region, she said Voyager Travel required them to formally acknowledge the potential risks and release them from any of the responsibility.

Many corporates have also tightened their own travel policies.

“A corporate makes a decision on behalf of their top achievers and they have to make sure that safety comes first. A lot of big corporates have their own safety and risk management departments and they’ll set out a corporate

policy. Clients are then dictated to by what their corporate policies stipulate,” said Napoli.

According to Nkwe, companies now assess the risks of transiting through a region separately from travelling to it.

“Transit risk is now assessed separately from destination risk and programmes are also being designed with much more flexibility built in, including changeable tickets. That flexibility costs more but clients now consider it well worth it.” ■



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