



## **RAS AL KHAIMAH: A DESTINATION OF THE FUTURE**

***Focused on Nature, Sustainability, Accessibility and Responsible Tourism***



Ras Al Khaimah is a truly distinctive destination, offering visitors the opportunity to explore breathtaking natural beauty and diverse landscapes. From the majestic Hajar Mountains to pristine beaches and the Al Wadi Desert and Nature Reserve, the "Nature Emirate" provides a wealth of outdoor adventures and ecological attractions.

Driven by a mission to protect its natural assets while engaging a growing community of responsible travellers, Ras Al Khaimah has emerged as a regional leader in sustainable tourism. As the first destination in the region to earn the EarthCheck Sustainable Destinations Silver Certification, the Emirate goes beyond the basics – demonstrating a deep, industry-leading commitment to sustainability that is both thoughtful and inclusive.

Ras Al Khaimah's sustainability strategy is holistic, integrating economic, environmental, cultural, and social dimensions into the very fabric of its tourism development. Aligned with the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this approach reflects Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority's (RAKTDA) long-term vision to create a thriving, future-focused tourism sector. A cornerstone of this strategy is a partnership with EarthCheck, a global leader in sustainability certification. Through EarthCheck's scientific framework and expertise, RAKTDA has set robust benchmarks tailored to the Emirate's unique environmental context. This partnership empowers stakeholders with data-driven tools to track and enhance their sustainability performance, while also meeting the growing demand for eco-conscious travel experiences.

In recognition of these efforts, RAKTDA's ongoing sustainability programme was awarded 'Middle East's Most Sustainable Project' at the Forbes Middle East 2024 Sustainability Leaders' Summit.



## **A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY**

Created in partnership with **EarthCheck**, the world's leading scientific benchmarking, certification, and advisory group for travel and tourism, Ras Al Khaimah's sustainability strategy goes far beyond promoting recycling or eliminating single use plastic - often the go-to for many. **Sustainability is at the heart of everything it does**; it places all aspects - environment, culture, conservation and liveability - at the centre of its investment and development strategy. This approach is key to its strategy to drive **overall sector growth and attract over 3.5 million visitors by 2030**, underscoring its leadership in conscious tourism and aligning with its identity as a nature destination with a desire to progress, grow and evolve.

The process began with the signing of the "**Sustainability Pledge**" at the 2021 Global Citizen Forum from the Authority and its partners across government and industry, under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Saud Bin Saqr Al Qasimi, UAE Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Ras Al Khaimah, before establishing the benchmarks that progress would be measured against.

In June 2022, the Emirate launched its **Sustainable Tourism Strategy Implementation Plan** which comprised two sustainability programmes rolled out in partnership with EarthCheck:

- **The Destination Certification Programme:** involving a broad range of stakeholders from government authorities, businesses and community representatives, this certification process is a rigorous evaluation based on scientific criteria, benchmarking, monitoring, and auditing across 10 sustainability indicators, including energy and water conservation, waste management and social impact. In 2023, Ras Al Khaimah became the first in the Middle East to earn EarthCheck's Destination Silver Certification, reporting a better performance than regional averages in key areas such as 23% lower energy consumption, 29% lower greenhouse gas emissions and 61% lower in waste output. Additionally, RAKTDA's initiatives delivered significant progress in resource conservation across the tourism sector, achieving a 15% reduction in water usage through the implementation of water-saving technologies and educational campaigns targeting businesses and visitors. Additionally, the sector saw a 30% increase in material re-use, driven by efforts to repurpose construction materials, integrate recycled products into hotel operations, and promote circular economy principles among tourism businesses.
- **Tourism Business Accreditation Programme ('Responsible RAK'):** Launched in early 2023, Responsible RAK aims to unify the sustainability efforts of all hotels and tourism businesses within the Emirate by setting benchmarks across 10 key sustainability metrics, including energy consumption, waste management, water usage, and social impact. As of 2024, 24 hotels, attractions, and tour operators in Ras Al Khaimah had earned the Responsible RAK Silver Certification, which reflects significant progress in sustainable operations.



**Other key elements include:**

**Sustainable Development**

Sustainable, balanced, and focused developments are at the heart of the Emirate's strategies. With this in mind, RAKTDA has applied a **mindful approach to new hotel developments**, consulting with hospitality partners to ensure **thoughtful development and a measured pipeline** to avoid rapid, less well-planned expansion and overcrowding.

As the licensing authority for all new hotel developments, RAKTDA has set guidelines and protocols to regulate sustainability standards and work closely with hotels to ensure sustainable practices. In collaboration with the Public Services Department, RAKTDA has also implemented the **Green Hotels Programme**, a comprehensive waste management strategy across the Emirate's tourism sector under. This initiative monitors waste disposal practices among hotel properties, ensuring proper waste segregation and reduction. Progress is continuously monitored and reported against EarthCheck benchmarks, with key achievements already evident in 2024. These include a partnership with Winnow, a global leader in AI-driven food waste solutions, which has resulted in a 20% reduction in food waste across participating hotel kitchens, significantly reducing the environmental impact of organic waste. Additionally, RAKTDA has encouraged the adoption of digital solutions to minimise paper waste, improving operational efficiency while supporting the Emirate's broader sustainability goals.

RAKTDA also actively supports the **Barjeel Green Building Regulations**. Launched by Ras Al Khaimah Municipality, this is a flagship initiative under the RAK Energy Strategy 2040 which was launched under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi, UAE Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Ras Al Khaimah and aims to reduce energy and water consumption in new buildings by 30%. As a tourism authority, RAKTDA is committed to promoting Barjeel's implementation among hotels and other tourism facilities, recognising the significant impact that sustainable building practices can have on resource conservation and operational efficiencies in the hospitality sector. The key areas of focus include energy resource conservation, leading to long-term savings in hotel operations; water resource conservation, reducing the environmental footprint of high-demand sectors like hospitality; incorporation of renewable energy, supporting greener hotel operations; use of sustainable building materials, reducing construction waste and enhancing building performance; and creating healthier sustainable environments for guests and occupants in the tourism sector.

An example of sustainable development in practice is **Wynn Al Marjan Island**, the region's first integrated resort scheduled to open in 2027, which is being developed to the highest standards of sustainability. Wynn Resorts is known for its pioneering approach to sustainability and energy efficiency, with a target of achieving 50 percent renewable energy by 2030 and net zero by 2050. It has already implemented robust waste management programs at its properties, diverting between 26 percent and 100 percent of waste from entering landfills, as well as reducing water consumption and investing in new waste-to-energy solutions.

Furthermore, Ras Al Khaimah is embracing innovative transportation solutions to enhance sustainability and connectivity within the Emirate. In 2024, RAKTDA and Ras Al Khaimah Transport Authority (RAKTA) signed a



Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Skyports, the leading provider of infrastructure for the Advanced Air Mobility industry, to introduce the Emirate's first **electric Vertical Take-off and Landing (eVTOL) air taxi system** in 2027. This cutting-edge air mobility solution aims to reduce ground traffic congestion, lower carbon emissions, and provide efficient transportation for residents and tourists alike.

### **Natural Conservation**

A sanctuary of natural beauty, the Al Wadi Nature Reserve is an expansive 1,235-acre protected desert. Home to over 50 species, including Arabian Oryx, gazelles, and desert foxes, as well as a fragile ecosystem home to desert vegetation, flowers and trees, it thrives as a haven for wildlife and conservation enthusiasts, offering a unique glimpse into the region's rich biodiversity and natural heritage.

### **Cultural Conservation**

Ras Al Khaimah's integrated approach also includes cultural conservation, highlighting its historical significance with over 80 archaeological sites. In addition to being the most fortified Emirate, with multiple forts due to its importance as a trade route, Ras Al Khaimah is home to **four culture and heritage sites which are on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List**. The Authority has established a long-term investment plan to protect and enhance these plus other cultural projects in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities and Museums (DAMS), Al Qasimi Foundation and Marjan. RAKTDA and its partners are working to develop management and design guidelines for the conservation of 20 priority cultural sites with the aim of upholding their integrity of the sites, according to UNESCO guidelines.

This includes **Suwaidi Pearls**, the only pearl farm in the UAE which still cultivates local pearls, all done by hand to preserve the Emirate's culture and traditions, as well as the four sites on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List:

- **Al Jazeera Al Hamra** is the last-surviving pearl fishing village of its kind in the Arabian Gulf comprised approximately 500 houses that were home to Al Zaabi tribe. To this day, it remains mostly untouched, invoking feelings of stepping back in time. A testimony to the architecture and settlement planning of the past, the village includes all of the traditional elements of a former Gulf town, including a fort and watchtowers, mosque, souq and extensive courtyard houses of various designs. There is a mix of dwelling styles – from small, simple houses, courtyard homes, two-storey buildings to a large courtyard residence that belonged to a wealthy pearl merchant. The site has been a favoured filming location for popular Hollywood movies, such *The War Machine*, starring Brad Pitt and *6 Underground*, starring Ryan Reynolds. As part of the Emirate's cultural conservation strategy, Ras Al Khaimah has invested in a phased restoration programme at Al Jazeera Al Hamra, with the aim to preserve the history of the archaeological site while making it accessible to visitors to discover first-hand accounts of the local culture.
- **Dhayah Fort** is an 18th-century fortification and archaeological site, and the only remaining hilltop fort in the UAE. The fort encapsulates the different systems of land and sea use, which were typical for the northern part of the Oman Peninsula in the past. It dates to the Late Bronze Age (1600 – 1300 BC)



when locals used it for settlement and fortification. The twin-peaked golden mud-brick fortress, built during the 19th century and restored in the late 1990s, was where the 1819 battle between British troops and local Qawasim tribes took place. The restored fort has reopened to the public with a new ticketing centre, information boards, and new illuminated wooden handrails installed for enhanced safety. The surrounding Dhayah area has been settled for thousands of years, resulting in its immense local historical significance. Its diverse landscapes include a lagoon protected by a sandbar, with an early Islamic harbour settlement, palm gardens and fort, mountain villages, terraced field systems, hill fort, gravel plain and prehistoric tombs.

- **Shimal** is a Bronze Age settlement with significant archaeological findings, including 100 prehistoric tombs, settlements, and a medieval palace. Its archaeological remains are outstanding for the Wadi Suq Period (2000-1600 BC), the Late Bronze Age Culture (1600-1300 BC) and the Middle Islamic Period (13th-16th century AD). Shimal comprises the largest prehistoric cemetery of megalithic tombs in Southeast Arabia. Its monumental burial structures of the Wadi Suq period are not only unique for their size, but also include a variety of architectural types not found outside of the Emirate.
- **Julfar** – an old port city – is situated beside the outwash wadi fans of Wadi Bih and Wadi Haqil. The trading town of Julfar represents one of the very few existing Islamic towns in the Gulf and Southeast Arabia. It stands out for having remained continuously inhabited and historically significant from the beginning of the Islamic period.

### **Attractions with Purpose**

Under its strategy, all upcoming attractions will be purpose built with sustainability standards and processes. An examples of this is **Saij Mountain Lodge by Mantis**, which is set to in 2025. Rooted in conservation, Mantis is a leading, conservation-focused hotel group with eco-lodges that are respectful of the environment and communities in which they operate.

### **Accessible Tourism**

In parallel, the Emirate is embracing **accessible tourism** and pivoting towards more inclusive and sustainable travel. People with disabilities and special needs spend approximately USD \$8 billion on tourism services annually, and the World Health Organisation estimates the number of people with disabilities will double to 2 billion by 2050. While many tourism businesses in Ras Al Khaimah have already embraced accessibility, the Authority has its eyes set on ensuring Ras Al Khaimah becomes a truly accessible and inclusive destination. As a result, the Authority has engaged with Sage Inclusion, a global accessible travel specialist, to undertake the largest assessment of its kind in the Middle East. This comprehensive 12-week audit covered over 50 hotels, 10 attractions, Ras Al Khaimah International Airport, and ground transportation, evaluating accessibility across five disability categories - allergies, mobility, vision, hearing, and cognitive. The initiative aims to elevate Ras Al Khaimah as a flagship destination for accessible tourism, ensuring that every visitor can fully enjoy and explore the Emirate.



### **Community and Liveability**

Beyond attracting visitors, RAKTDA is dedicated to **enhancing liveability and making the Emirate an exceptional place to live, work, and thrive**. This includes engaging with the local community, staging events such as the RAK Art Festival, the RAK Half Marathon, Ras Al Khaimah Championship and various other sporting events. Reflecting these efforts, Ras Al Khaimah was ranked among the top ten cities for expats in the InterNations City Ranking 2024. It was also named the world's best city for expats to get started abroad, second for working overseas, and fifth for ease of settling in.

The Authority is also ensuring that tourism development benefits local communities. The Emirate's tourism sector currently employs over 6,000 people and is projected to triple by 2030, increasing the workforce to approximately 25,000 employees. Recognizing this, RAKTDA is committed to empowering Emirati talent with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel in various roles and prepare them for a successful career in the sector.

One of its flagship initiatives is the **Emirati Hospitality Programme (EHP)**, implemented in partnership with Career Lab and Les Roches University. The programme aims to equip UAE Nationals with the knowledge and skills to become successful frontliners in Ras Al Khaimah hospitality sectors. The programme supports career growth and provides tailored opportunities for Emirati talent to advance their careers in hospitality. In 2024, EHP created more than 10 work placement opportunities for young Emirati who successfully passed the programme and were integrated successfully in the sector.

Additionally, entities within the tourism sector are actively engaged through training programmes and internships tailored by RAKTDA and participation in career fairs in collaboration. These initiatives not only create awareness about the tourism sector and its opportunities but also offer national talent the chance to network with industry leaders, explore career opportunities, and acquire the skills needed to succeed in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Further emphasising its commitment to fostering an excellent workplace culture, RAKTDA was certified as a **Great Place to Work®** for the fourth consecutive year in 2024, receiving accolades in categories such as Best Workplaces in the Middle East, Best Workplaces in Hospitality in the GCC, and Best Workplaces for Women in the GCC.

### **WHAT'S NEXT?**

RAKTDA understands that sustainability is not a one-time agenda. It's a continuous process that requires a long-term commitment. Therefore the Authority is dedicated to continuing to enhance the Emirate's sustainable credentials for the long term:

- Year 1-4: **EarthCheck Gold certification**
- Year 5-9: **EarthCheck Platinum certification**
- Year 10-14: **EarthCheck Master certification**



### **About Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority (RAKTDA)**

The Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority (RAKTDA) was established in May 2011 under the government of Ras Al Khaimah. RAKTDA aims to develop the Emirate's tourism infrastructure and establish Ras Al Khaimah as a world-class destination for leisure and business travel, creating sustainable investment opportunities and enhancing the quality of life for its residents. In order to achieve its goals, the Authority has a government mandate to license, regulate and monitor the Emirate's tourism and hospitality industry.

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