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## **IMPACT OF PANDEMIC CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (COVID 19) ON UNITED ARAB EMIRATES TOURISM INDUSTRY**

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### **Abstract:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused such a public health emergency that the drop in economic and tourist activity in most countries, especially in Asia, has resulted in a financial crisis with unquantifiable consequences. Unprecedented global travel bans and stay-at-home orders triggered the most severe disruption in the global economy. Tourism essentially ended in March 2020, with international travel bans affecting over 90% of the world's population and widespread limitations on public meetings and community mobility. The current study looks at the origins and progression of the coronavirus pandemic. Because of its limited mobility and social isolation, tourism is highly vulnerable to pandemic-prevention measures. Based on tourism indicators and their significance, UAE chose as the study's target country. Also, it explored in-depth the effect of the pandemic on the tourism sector. The study highlighted the most critical initiatives to help the tourism and hospitality sectors globally and nationally. Finally, the researcher addressed the tourism industry's response and recovery strategies to ensure that COVID-19 tourists are not exposed.

### **Introduction:**

Traveling is the most exciting way to encounter strangers and discover new locations if the road is free of violence, disease, and disasters. However, the risks can be reduced or eliminated with the correct information and travel diaries filled with remarkable adventures. Pandemics and epidemics are two terrifying news that can happen to travelers or planners (Ansah, 2020). In

these situations, avoiding the disease can be difficult or impossible. Furthermore, the passengers and the people they meet along the way are at risk. Passengers play a critical role in transmitting pandemics and epidemics from one place to another (Muley, Shahin, Dias, and Abdullah, 2020). Because of the discovery of a new coronavirus a few months ago, the world has centered on epidemics.

New coronaviruses bring on epidemics and pandemics. The infectious agents are incredibly contagious and rapidly mutate. As a consequence, unanticipated outbreaks can emerge at any time. Based on research, the virus can transmit from animals to humans (Tiwari et al., 2020). It is a viral disease caused by coronavirus two (2) that causes the severe acute respiratory syndrome. The infection was first exposed in December 2019 in Wuhan, China's Hubei province capital, and has since spread worldwide, especially in Asia, resulting in the ongoing global coronavirus pandemic disaster of 2019-2020. COVID-19 is a highly transmissible respiratory disease that spreads through contact with other infected people. Symptoms include fever, cough, and breathing difficulties (Yang, Zhang, and Chen, 2020). Asymptomatic individuals may also spread the virus, with up to 40% of infected people remaining asymptomatic (Oran and Topol, 2020). Other factors that assist infection include (i) close contact between infected and non-infected individuals; (ii) speed and efficiency of COVID-19 transmission; (iii) vulnerability of immune-compromised individuals with specific underlying health conditions; (iv) airborne transmission (Morawska and Lao, 2020); (v) susceptibility of people over 65; and (vi) interaction with people who have visited places where there are a lot of cases (Peeri, Shrestha, Rahman, Zaki, Tan, Bibi, Baghbanzadeh, Aghamohammadi, Zhang, and Haque, 2020).

Based on statistical evidence, more than 4.6 million cases have been registered across 216 countries and territories, resulting in more than 311,000 deaths, and the number is still counting. Qatar, Bahrain, Aruba, French Guiana, and Israel have the highest infection rates per million inhabitants as of September 29, 2020, with 26,000 infected per million inhabitants (Anton and Almeida, 2020). The exact number of cases remains uncertain because most countries are restricted. With no vaccine to avoid the disease and few medical therapies available, most countries resorted to nonpharmaceutical measures (NPI), such as home quarantine social distancing, lockdown, stay-at-home orders, school/university, and company closures, and bans on large-scale public gatherings for specific periods (Gossling, Scott, and Hall, 2021). These unprecedented challenges have resulted in a temporary closure of many businesses and significantly decreased the demand for companies allowed to continue to operate (Bartik et al., 2020). Almost all restaurants have asked to restrict their business to take-out only. Travel restrictions imposed by the authorities and stay-at-home orders given by the authorities resulted in a dramatic drop in tourism and hotel occupancy, and revenue (Gursoy and Chi, 2020).

International, regional, and local travel restrictions had an immediate effect on national economies, with tourism systems plummeting in weeks. Countries rushed to repatriate visitors, which in the case of critical outbound markets entailed large numbers of citizens from all over the globe. Border closures, airline flight cancellations (Hoque, Shikha, Hasanat, Arif, and Hamid, 2020), airport closures, exit bans, and other restrictions make international travel more complex every day (Bouey, 2020). For example, cruise ships soon became the worst-case scenario for anyone stuck in the global tourism system. By March 26, 2020, at least 25 cruise ships had reported COVID-19 infections, beginning with the Diamond Princess on February 1, 2020

(Mallapaty, 2020). Ten ships remained at sea, unable to find a port that would enable them to dock. Brazil's tourism industry has experienced significant losses, with around 80% of lodging facilities and all of the country's parks and tourist attractions closed. Without government funding, the sector could lose around US\$ 6.2 billion in 2020, as inbound arrivals to Brazil could drop by half (Euromotor, 2020).

Ranasinghe et al. (2020) asserted that the global pandemic of the novel corona has not only brought the entire socio-economic structures to a standstill but has challenged the globalization and international operations of enterprises. Surprisingly, potential repercussions and alternative way-outs are unpredictable. However, for most of the worsened economic sectors to recover quickly and regain jobs and business functions, a sustainable and fresh start is needed (Biwota, 2020). Traditionally, the infection has targeted marginalized communities with food and healthcare insecurity and has been used to target society's needy. Ironically, the novel corona outbreak first attacked foreign travelers, and since tourists brought about the pandemic, it has primarily affected the world's wealth. Management literature revealed that tourism is one of the largest and fastest-growing industries; the expectation is a significant role in recovering socio-economic stability following the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a pivotal contributor to the economies and one of the most critical industries that generate much-needed foreign currency (Manzoor, Wei, Asif, Haq, and Rehman, 2019), especially in the United Arab Emirates economy.

Based on tourism indicators and their significance, UAE chose as the study's target country. Also, it explored in-depth the effect of the pandemic on the tourism sector. The study highlighted the most critical initiatives to help the tourism and hospitality sectors globally and nationally. Finally, the researcher addressed the tourism industry's response and recovery strategies to ensure that COVID-19 tourists are not exposed.

### **Influence of pandemic on UAE tourism industry:**

In the year 2019, the tourism sector of the United Arab Emirates takes a significant part in the economy, having a contribution equating to 11.59% of the country's total GDP (Gross Domestic Product). During the first half of the abovementioned year, reports revealed that about 8.36 million international tourists migrated to the country, posting a positive 3% in tourism volume growth compared to last year (Sandhya, 2019). Thus, the government calculated that in the succeeding year, there would be approximately 20 million tourists. However, an unexpected increase in coronavirus cases spread across numerous countries, including UAE. As a result, the government needed to decline to grant all tourist visas and cancel booked flights (Chmaytelli and Khalek, 2020). From these abrupt changes brought by the COVID 19 pandemic, tourism in the United Arab Emirates declined.

Studies by Kumudumali (2020); Ugur and Akbiyik (2020) detailed that pandemic significantly influenced all travel and tourism industry sectors, which are the following: airlines, transportation, cruise lines, hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions, travel agencies, tour operators, and online travel organizations. Its effect on airlines and transport is evident in the tremendous decrease in scheduled departure flights. Following the government's health protocol, people avoided leaving their homes, more so traveling to another country. From 3.234 million in January 2020 to 0.429 million in July of the same year, the global reduction in flight bookings sums up to 2.8 million. The leading countries with the most drops in the said numbers are the

United States of America, China, and India, with a decrease of 756 thousand, 363 thousand, and 112 thousand flights (Aburumman, 2020) described in Table 1. Although comparatively smaller than that of the three countries, UAE experienced a massive drop of 21 thousand departure flights in the same time frame.

**Table 1: Global Reduction in Flight Bookings, 2020**

Country	Flight Reduction (in thousands)	Percentage Worldwide (Approximately)
United States of America	756	27
China	363	13
India	112	4
South Korea	30	1.07
United Arab Emirates	21	0.75

In line with the fall of numbers regarding scheduled departure flights, the UAE experienced its most notable drop on June 1, 2020, wherein the number decreased by 82% compared to the flights on the same day of the year 2019. Having a noticeably lower number of booked flights, airlines in the United Arab Emirates have reduced operational requirements, demanding a reduced workforce. Numerous employees in the tourism industry have lost their jobs. For instance, Emirates had 60,000 staff before the pandemic (Josephs, 2020). The protocols were brought upon by the spread of the virus, and the airlines cut off 10% of the team. Moreover, according to Sir Tim Clark, president of Emirates, there is a high probability of firing up to 15% more staff amid this crisis. The report results in 15,000 aviation crew being unemployed in this particular airline only (Kamel, 2020).

The tourism industry also consists of the accommodation sector, a place to stay for tourists, like hotels and apartments (Sonmez, Apostolopoulos, Lemke, and Hsieh, 2020; Camilleri, 2018). It is the most critical sector of the tourism industry. The availability of lodging in the region reflects a tourism destination, as it is one of the most basic requirements for visitors. Like the state of airlines in UAE amid this pandemic, hotels also face difficulties and immense downturn. As mentioned above, the number of tourists migrating to the country is low, so hotels are greatly affected by this since they have no people to cater to their services. Specifically, several hotels in Dubai recorded a severe decline in the following numbers for the year 2020: average daily rate (ADR), revenue per available room (RevPAR), and occupancy. Compared to the same point in time for 2019, ADR decreased by 20.4%, RevPAR fell by 42.9%, and occupancy dropped by 28.2% (Choufany, 2020; Lavers, 2020). Declines can attribute to government measures, as well as the drop in air travel. However, the coming long weekend provided by Eid-al-Fitr, coupled with local staycation deals and relaxed restrictions, has seen some demand return, particularly in the UAE.

The pandemic effects will be effectively visible on the country's business travel, adventure travel, domestic tourism, and cruise holidays (Dash, 2020). Post lockdown predictions and preparations

would need a better understanding of the current situations. As a result, tourism and hospitality professionals predict that workcations and staycations will continue to remain dominant in the future (Divya, 2020). In light of rising coronavirus infections in the UAE, government bodies have assumed multi-layered and multi-prolonged approaches. The government at the center invoked the national management act, and further activated state disaster response funds for individual statesto tackle the rising pandemic (Iyer, 2020).

### Initiatives of the UAE government to the tourism industry:

In the aspect of the economic catastrophe caused by the COVID-19 health pandemic, a wide range of initiatives have been undertaken, complemented by the UAE’s tourism and hospitality industry’s specific actions. Tourism has evolved into one of the world’s most diverse and fastest-growing economic sectors in recent decades. Several of the country’s long-term goals identify this sector’s value as a source of employment and a promoter of local economic growth, culture, and goods reflected in several sustainable goals.As previously stated, it is an integral part of the national economy of UAE because of its outstanding support to the Gross Domestic Product. Since the pandemic caused a downfall to the travel sector, it significantly impacted the decline of the country’s economy as well. As shown in Figure 1, the GDP of UAE in 2019 was approximately 421.14 billion dollars. It dropped by more than a hundred in 2020, which results in 353.9 billion dollars (O’Neill, 2021). To compensate for the significant loss UAE has gone through, the government deliberated upon strategies to regain strength in the said sector. According to the UAE government’s official portal, they launched numerous initiatives to boost its travel and tourism industry.

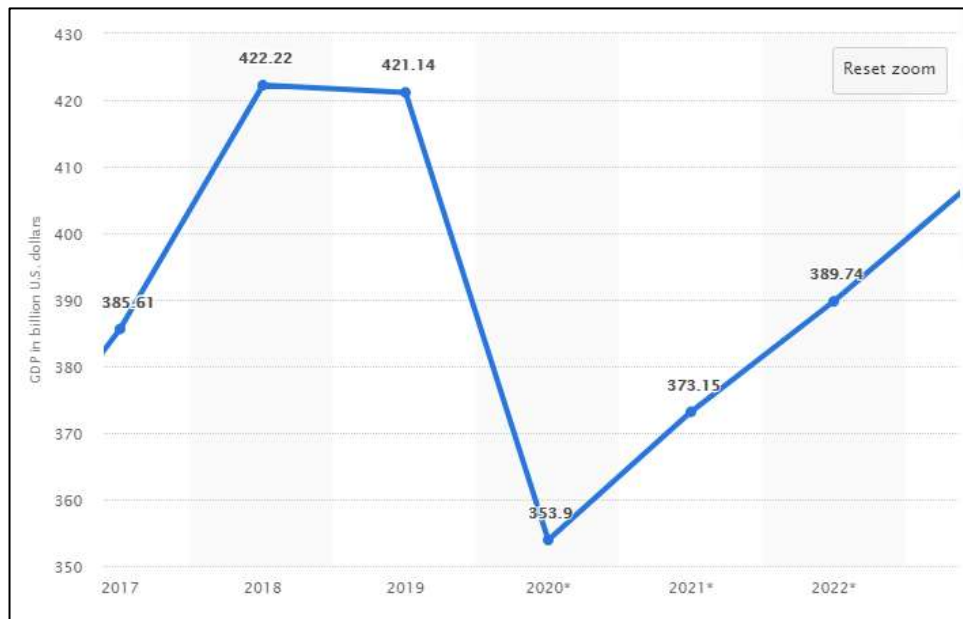


Figure 1: United Arab Emirates – Gross Domestic Product 2017-2022 (O’Neill, 2021)

The country must persevere in hosting tourists worldwide to withstand this difficult economic situation. As part of the UAE Nation Brand, they started a new unified tourism identity that enticed travelers by utilizing the diverse areas of interest the country has to offer (Alfaham,

2020). This initiative aims to brand UAE as a single destination with a great variety of ideal experiences locally and globally while showcasing their inspiring story across the world. The critical factor to this strategy, approved by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, is unity. Destination operators will work in unison with the authorities, partners, and tenants to maximize business prospects and develop world-class destinations and luxurious hospitality projects. It has organized several events and activities for each season to draw visitors from the UAE, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and other parts of the world (Sadaqat, 2020). In UAE, for instance, each tourist attraction has its own exceptional story and urged them to return. Standing up at the top of Burj Khalifa in Dubai, one can see the sparkling features of a first-class tourist hub and realize they are in front of a priceless tourist gem that should not ignore. Thus, reinforcing the United Arab Emirates' accomplished position in the field of tourism.

Also, the UAE Cabinet approved the establishment of the Emirates Tourism Council to improve the tourism portfolio by developing a tourism plan in line with the nation's priorities and the UAE Centennial and bringing together all relevant local authorities departments (Albawaba, 2021). This council will be in control of: (i) suggesting and revising tourism-related policies and laws, as well as national tourism growth plans, (ii) supporting the growth of tourism industries, (iii) attracting tourism investments, (iv) suggesting economic incentives to encourage the growth of the sector, (v) establishing a comprehensive national tourism information database and, (vi) supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) involved in the tourism sector. Like the new unified tourism identity initiative, this also demands integration and cooperation between the relevant authorities. Specifically, the departments concerning tourism from Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah are involved in the council.

They also passed a new UAE residency policy allowing international university students to invite their families to visit the country provided that they have sufficient income to afford suitable accommodation. The goal is to achieve moral stability, which will benefit the country's education sector and improve its position as a top global work and study destination (Paul, 2021). The flexibility of family sponsorship will give more than 77 universities and tens of thousands of students the ability to make a long-term commitment that would encourage them to start their entrepreneurship journeys in the UAE. Diversifying the economy and attracting global talents to at least 50% are also key outcomes, and this decree will help achieve this goal (Sircar, 2021). Aside from education, the cabinet agreed to adopt a circular economy policy to achieve sustainable transportation and consumption, clean production, and efficient waste management while still preserving its environment and generating new economic opportunities (The National News, 2021).

Amid solid efforts to boost tourism after the resumption of economic activities, the public has been encouraged to practice appropriate hygiene, mask-wearing, ensure social distancing, and avoid gatherings unless critically required (Sharma, 2020; Tiwari 2020). For resuming tourism activities to revive the sector, governments at various levels have initiated check-ins with relevant COVID-19 adverse reports, encouraging minimum days to stay at hospitality establishments (Cond'e Nast Traveller, 2020), implementing all precautionary measures following the instructions and guidelines. Sajjad (2020) acclaimed that wise leadership effort in the UAE, and prudent steps are adopted to accelerate economic recovery in record time. Further,

companies also benefited from the state's facilities postponing the banks' obligations besides facilitating the procedures and delaying charges.

### **Response and recovery strategies of the tourism industry:**

The pandemic had a significant impact on people's lives and the UAE's economy, especially in the tourism sector. As already discussed, the UAE leaders and authorities have formulated their proposals to overcome the global epidemic's problems and following a range of policies and initiatives aimed at resuming their economic operation as soon as possible while adhering to sanitary security measures. However, these will not be sufficient and effective if not for the employees' cooperation and assistance. The tourism industry developed response strategies to complement government interventions to support their current situation. Apart from the previously stated decline in UAE airlines and hotels, recovery strategies will introduce for them.

Airlines in the UAE, such as Emirates, have suspended operations to assist in the combat against the virus. It was at the pandemic's height when most people were unsure of what steps to take, but citizens have since adjusted and are more aware of the requisite behavior. As a result, the airlines reopened and began accepting flight reservations again. Unlike in the past, the carrier must concentrate on its consumers, staff, and communities' health and safety. The airline implements enhanced biosafety measures which include the following: adhering to formal aircraft cleaning procedures, disinfecting of lavatories every 45 minutes, wearing of personal protective equipment for cabin crew and airport employees, placing security barriers at check-in and immigration desks, and distributing free hygiene kits (Emirates Public Relations, 2020). At the airport, all passengers and staff will expect to wear gloves and masks. Also, undergo thermal scanning to determine their temperature. Foods and drinks are delivered in bento-style boxes to reduce interaction between the crew and passengers. The packages will include sandwiches, drinks, snacks, and desserts. A study by Saed, Upadhya and Saleh (2020) investigates the airlines' promotional activities and their impact on Dubai's brand image. The results show that the national carrier's promotional activities and in-flight services significantly impact Dubai's branding image. The study finds an interesting correlation between a national carrier's promotional efforts and the branding of destinations and provides enhanced co-branding recommendations.

Aside from that, Emirates is the first airline in the industry to provide free COVID-19 coverage to its travelers. It ensures that if a passenger contracts the virus while flying with Emirates, the carrier will pay medical bills up to EUR 150,000 and quarantine costs of EUR 100 per day for 14 days (O'Hare, 2020). Emirates, headquartered in Dubai, is the safest airline in the world due to its efforts in response to the pandemic. According to the Safe Travel Barometer, which is the world's most comprehensive solution to COVID-19 health guidelines and travel experience, intending to influence people's decision-making and actual travel journeys in this new normal. The safe travel score is a Covid-19 rating initiative created in the aftermath of the pandemic and is the industry's first of its kind. Its rating mechanism considers safety and hygiene practices at all points in a traveler's path and even in the hospitality industry. For instance, the UAE has enabled tourist entry visas for Israeli passport holders to facilitate inbound travel before the two countries' mutual visa waiver agreement takes effect. This advancement came from the UAE signing a contract to formalize relations with Israel, the first of its kind signed by a Gulf Arab

State. As the UAE enters peak season, this agreement will help the economy rebound from the pandemic’s effects by raising the number of tourist visitors (Sojern, 2020).

Denman (2020) reported that hotels in UAE had done their part by reopening their services while imposing limitations on capacity, facilities, and staff-to-customer contact. The Fairmont Ajman, for example, began running at 30% capacity. Their safety measures include opening the pool but requiring social distancing, ensuring the sunbeds are two meters away from each other, operating restaurants for only a few hours, and limiting dining options to ala carte menus. Aside from the given safety and health protocols, technology, primarily an app and chat service, focuses on the Four Seasons Hotel Abu Dhabi and Dubai’s operation. It will minimize physical interactions while staying connected to their clients. Hilton mainly enhanced its cleaning and disinfectant protocols. In line with that, they created a Hilton CleanStay, in partnership with Lysol and Dettol Cleaning company makers. It comprises placing a room seal on guestrooms after a thorough cleaning to guarantee that individuals have not accessed the room. Part of the new programs are: (i) removing unnecessary amenities unless requested; (ii) utilizing digital check-in and contactless arrival; (iii) placing disinfecting stations with wipes and disinfectant around the premises; (iv) cleaning areas most likely touched like elevator and comfort rooms hourly; (v) encouraging the use of face masks; and (vi) allowing spacings between tables and chairs (Hilton, 2020). A study by Gursoy and Chi (2020) indicated that a large proportion of restaurant customers, 64.17%, and most hotel customers, 70.42% believe that various technologies in service delivery will be necessary for the COVID-19 environment to minimize human-to-human contact. It will suggest that technology integration and adoption into hospitality operations will likely be integral in the future.

The room offers for purposes other than tourist accommodation has been one solution used in all health emergencies as a recovery strategy. After the UAE closed all of its economic sectors and the health sector was on the verge of failure, the industry adopted this response strategy during COVID-19. During the worst of the pandemic, the UAE hotel association gave the government the option of various hotels’ medicalization. Specifically, beds were made available, and hundreds of COVID-19-infected patients remained and treated. Other hotels provided temporary lodging for staff from vital economic sectors, and state security forces are mandatory to move across the territory to work where the government required them.

**Table 2: The UAE hotel chains take initiatives against COVID-19**

Hotel	Program Name	Areas of action against COVID-19
Fairmont Hotel	All Safe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety and security for guests and employees</li> <li>• Offers Covid-19 PCR testing onsite for your added convenience                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has dedicated facility for testing</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Four Seasons Hotel	Lead with Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on providing care, confidence, and</li> </ul>



		comfort
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allowing guests to engage with our employees with control</li><li>• Limiting face-to-face interactions while maintaining the highest levels of services</li><li>• Flexibility when planning future travel and visits</li><li>• A safe workplace for our employees</li></ul>
Hilton Hotel	Clean Stay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure the safest and most enjoyable experience</li><li>• Providing guests peace of mind</li><li>• Flexibility for members to enjoy their points and status for longer</li><li>• Providing a safe and relaxing to stay</li></ul>

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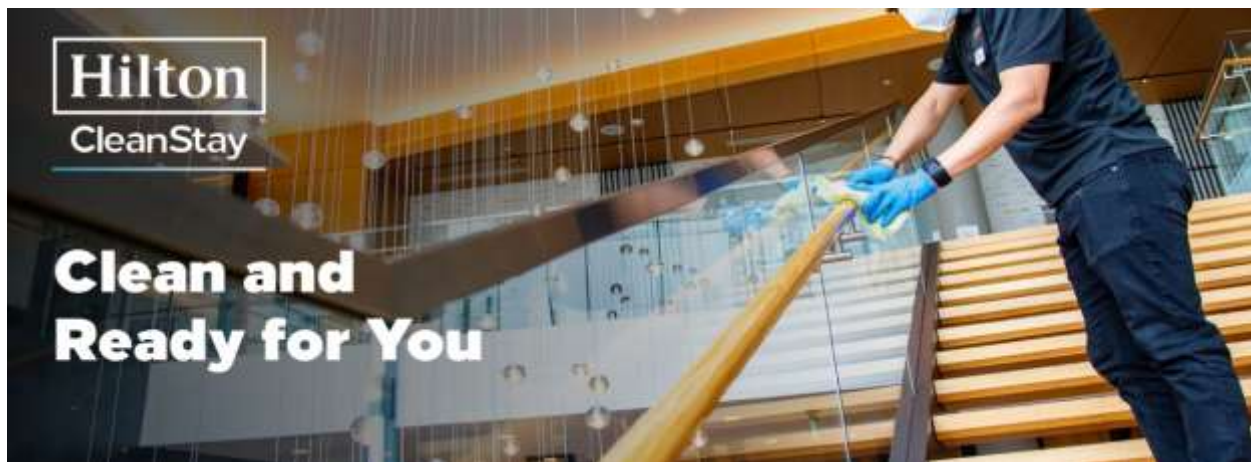
Other rehabilitation steps implemented, such as the redirection of hotel marketing and sales schemes and discount packages, are common in all health emergencies. Three chains have assigned program names to the infection control initiatives they are presenting. As shown in Table 2, Fairmont has given it the name “All Safe,” Four Seasons has “Lead With Care,” and Hilton has named it “Clean Stay.” Several of these services can find on each chain’s website, displayed in Figures 2–4.



**Figure 2: Fairmont Ajman. Source: <https://www.fairmont.com/ajman/>**



**Figure 3: Four Seasons Hotel Abu Dhabi. Source: <https://www.fourseasons.com/>**



**Figure 4: Hilton. <https://www.hilton.com/en/corporate/cleanstay/>**

These campaigns aim to attract and restore tourist interest, which is one of the top priorities. The hotel industry has implemented sanitary initiatives, and these campaigns seek to demonstrate the development of social distance in the workplace and leisure spaces and improvements in accommodations. However, these steps and promotions can only be successful if the government and the hotel industry work closely. With proper mobility steps, the opening of borders and airports, the abolition of quarantine periods, and other acts that obstruct tourist enjoyment, the government's help is needed. Also, the hotel industry is responsible for the welfare of visitors who stay at its establishments. Pandemics, as a result, have a significant influence on the hospitality and tourism sectors in the medium-long term (Davahli, Karwowski, Sonmez, and Apostolopoulos, 2020). Nonetheless, because of its global expansion, the latest pandemic appears to be more severe and daunting than previous ones. Nobody knows when it will manage and when there will be a vacuum.

### **Conclusion:**

This unprecedented public health emergency has now turned into a devastating economic crisis for the entire world, including the tourism and hospitality industry. The recovery must gradually take place in tandem with other sectors' recovery to combat the outbreak and restore economic efficiency. So, the proposed interventions introduce in response to changing circumstances. As a result, ensuring visitors' and employees' well-being has become a top priority for stakeholders' tourism and hospitality industry. Simultaneously, to recoup business losses and re-establish a positive reputation, substantial publicity and promotional campaigns should launch locally and globally. Another strategic approach for attracting potential clients will be to promote flexible services. Providing flexible rates, cancellation policies, and a relaxed work environment would help ensure the tourism and hospitality industry's long-term viability.

The tourism industry is one of the first to feel the effects and one of the hardest hit. Hundreds of activities have been canceled since the outbreak began. It will also have a direct impact on the UAE tourism industry and growth. Furthermore, it is critical and will play a vital role in the global economic recovery following the pandemic. Based on research, response and recovery strategies are viable solutions in the face of disruption. They can include various benefits such as increased financial benefits, measurability, ease of transition, and increased participation.

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