

Dubai and the UAE: the sparking tech success of the Arab world

GITEX GLOBAL got off to a strong start on October 10 at the Dubai World Trade Centre, with impressive speakers tackling AI, the metaverse and beyond. GITEX GLOBAL's 42nd edition made clear to visitors what locals have known since before the pandemic: Dubai is the jewel in the Arab tech world's crown.

As many have pointed out, Dubai strived to keep its border open and vaccinated industriously during the pandemic, as well as introducing visas and other encouraging policies that have attracted an increasingly mobile international workforce. Furthermore, low taxes and light touch regulation created an appealing environment for technology startups, with much of Europe and Asia beginning lockdowns through multiple waves of COVID-19. This sense of openness and willingness to collaborate to nurture and grow the ecosystem was apparent at GITEX GLOBAL with 150,000 attendees from 170 countries. Crucially including 250 government departments showcasing how and where they deploy innovative solutions at scale across the UAE.

"The thing that has really changed is Covid - it has accelerated the ecosystem for three to five years," said Asher Siddiqui, a Dubai-based venture capitalist and former partner at San Francisco-based 500 Startups.

The UAE aims to be the home of 20 unicorns by 2031. As part of this drive, it is

offering 100,000 “golden visas”, which enable entrepreneurs and tech investors to stay in the country for up to 10 years. The UAE has also established a ‘national small-business program’ to help startups get funding, partner with established companies, and market their products overseas.

The city has also been boosted from the UAE’s new diplomatic ties with Israel: the Abrahamic Agreement. Struck in 2020, the accord created opportunities for Dubai to build ties with the more established tech scene in Tel Aviv. The reciprocal culture means that Israeli tech companies looking to expand often choose Dubai for their first regional outpost.

According to Dubai-based Wamda, investments in tech firms in MENA (but excluding Israel), quadrupled last year to \$2.87B, compared to \$654M in 2020, nearly half of which were in the United Arab Emirates. This promise chimes with the fact three tech unicorns are now present in Dubai: Kitopi, a cloud kitchen platform; Vista Global – a private aviation platform, and Emerging Markets Property Group, a company operating a ‘classified listing websites in the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and other countries’.

It’s important to account for the role the wider region plays for Dubai and indeed the UAE: various businesses setting up shop in Dubai see it as a gateway. Swvl Technologies Inc is one example of many. The company recently listed in a deal with a SPAC that valued the Dubai-based tech firm for about \$1.5B, makes ride-hailing service for taxi vans, but its Operations are focused on Egypt.

The role Dubai plays in the global tech ecosystem was further consolidated with the announcement at GITEX GLOBAL of the launch of GITEX AFRICA, taking place in Marrakech in 2023. An event that is set to increase exponentially the size and scale of the ecosystem of Dubai.

Crypto: a global hub

Ralf Glabischnig, founder of Crypto Oasis, an organisation helping blockchain and crypto startups founded in Dubai, has described the city as the fastest-growing hub for crypto globally following his company’s move to the region. Crypto Oasis has claimed to already have helped 200 startups in the region. Further confirmation of this comes from the world’s largest crypto exchange, Binance, who have set up offices in Dubai.

Dubai’s recently announced plan to up the metaverse’s contribution to the economy to \$4B, by 2030, will support the Emirate’s overall growth and improve the lives of residents, experts explained.

Announced in June by Dubai's ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the strategy aims at ensuring that the metaverse increases its contribution to 1 percent of the emirate's overall GDP. Headed by the Dubai Crown Prince Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the strategy is built around five pillars – innovation, government implementation of metaverse technologies and talent development.

While previously Dubai was looked at as a city of the future in the Middle East, international eyes are now seeing that Dubai is a city that is paving the way for where the world goes next, both physically and in the new digital space of the metaverse.

Discover GITEX AFRICA

Article by DAVID JOHNSON