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The GCC Event Magazine by Professionals for Professionals
12/10/2026

Tourists Are Optional Weddings Are Not



OPERATIONS:
Who Actually Runs a $500K Wedding

NEW FORMAT:
The Wedding With No Couple

VENUES:
How the UAE Actually Chooses a Wedding Venue



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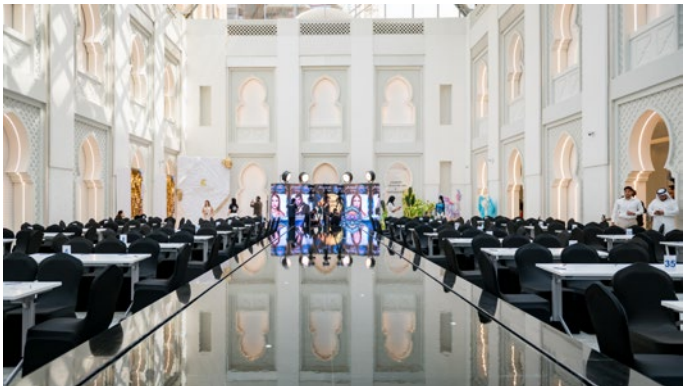
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From the Editor

This issue has a different centre of gravity than the last one.

Issue 2 was written as the shock landed. Issue 3 was written after it settled into a condition. The war that reset the region's calendar in February is still unresolved, and WTTC still projects a 14.5% contraction for the Middle East this year - the only region on earth moving backward. We do not argue with that number.

We simply noticed what kept moving.

A conference is postponed when an airline suspends a route. A wedding is not. The guest list lives within a two-hour drive, the date follows the family calendar, and a postponed wedding carries a social cost that a postponed holiday never does. While the conference calendar absorbed the shock, private celebrations were resized, rescheduled and rebooked - not abandoned. That is why this issue has a wedding on its cover.

Inside, weddings are treated as what they are: a production industry. Who actually holds authority at a $500K wedding when something goes off-script. How the UAE chooses a venue - as a decision about which risk you are willing to carry, not a ranking. What a staged wedding is really for, when it is built as a sales instrument rather than a portfolio shoot. Rajesh Pereira on the technical production behind the bride's entrance. Rhiannon Downie-Hurst on couples who now find their suppliers through AI. Denis Panchenko on where event trends are born. Anup Mohan on how a wedding-photo product grew into a full-cycle event platform.

The rest of the issue holds the same line. Alina Shlyakhtova on Saudi Arabia's new market. Mudi Devendra on running a local DMC in the AI era. Dr James Morgan on engagement technology. Walter Muñoz on the long road from circus act to experience.

One disclosure. This issue reviews EventMania 2026, including Wedding Mania, the Dubai wedding hall I produce. The review says so in its own text. Read it with that in mind.

The market did not break. In weddings, it never paused.
This issue is for the people who build it.

Sergey Larin
Editor-in-Chief, EventMag.Me

A Market That Learned the Rules



In our last issue we argued that the GCC events market did not break. Seven months after the first strike, that is no longer the interesting question. The interesting one is what the market has turned into, and this week supplied a live test. On 6 October, Bahrain opened the first Made in GCC Forum and Exhibition on schedule, with the Crown Prince in the hall. The same week, missiles hit airports in Abha and Riyadh, hundreds of flights out of Saudi Arabia were cancelled, and Lufthansa Group suspended Riyadh service through 16 October. By Friday, Saudi aviation authorities said operations were back to normal.

Nothing about that week was normal. Everything about it was workable. That is the new condition of the market: not recovery, not crisis, but operation under a ceiling.

The ceiling is overhead

October flight schedules put Middle East seat capacity 5.7% below last year, according to OAG, or 2.2 million

fewer seats. The UAE, the region's biggest market, is down 9.5%. In mid-September Emirates told The National it was flying about 95% of its February capacity and expected prewar levels by year-end. The Q3 forecast from STR and Tourism Economics states the practical consequence plainly: summer came in stronger than expected, yet the fourth quarter was not upgraded, because international inbound demand stays depressed until carriers return, a return it assumes by January. In its view, Dubai and Abu Dhabi regain 2025 levels in 2028. Dubai's August occupancy reached 66%, up from about a third in March.

The WEF ranked the UAE first in the world for air transport infrastructure, in a report that also names conflict-driven aviation disruption as the sector's starkest reminder of vulnerability. Both statements are true. The runway is world-class. The sky above it is the constraint.

"The runway is world-class. The sky above it is the constraint."

Same region, different arithmetic

The region's markets are no longer one story. JLL's second-quarter data splits Saudi Arabia in two: Makkah's RevPAR rose 8.7% while Riyadh's fell 23.2% on weaker corporate demand, a segment that, in STR's reading, returns in calmer periods and needs stability to stay, which is exactly what the airport attacks put in question this week. Qatar received 2.338 million visitors in January to August, about 29% fewer than a year earlier, yet August was its best month since February, and Gulf neighbours made up 41% of arrivals. Oman's tourist-visa arrivals grew 6.9% in January to July, with GCC visitors at 36.6%. Bahrain lost its Grand Prix to Malaysia for 2026 and kept it: the race ran at Sepang in early October under Bahrain's name, with Gulf Air as title sponsor. Business sentiment tells the same split. September PMI readings were 55.3 in the UAE, 52.4 in Saudi Arabia and 47.3 in Qatar, which has now contracted seven months running.

What it costs to stay open

The war has become a cost line. Seven Insurance Brokers told AGBI that war-cancellation cover for an event with a $40 million cost base can run to $5 million or more, because reinsurers have excluded certain regional militant groups from standard terrorism cover. International concerts have been cancelled, and STR lists them among the reasons Dubai's autumn leans on domestic and regional audiences. LIV Golf, once an emblem of Gulf sports ambition, filed for Chapter 11 in September with up to $1 billion in liabilities after its sovereign backer stepped back. And from 1 December, a new UAE music-licensing regime covers concerts and comparable commercial events, with fees from Dh1,500 to Dh50,000 depending on the venue. None of these costs is about fear. They are about arithmetic, and they reward organisers who know their own numbers.

Where the demand went

Demand did not vanish. It moved. Flights between Russia and the UAE are heading from about 100 a week in mid-July to roughly 300 by late October, according to the Association of Tour Operators of Russia, although operators report buyers booking close to departure. Abu Dhabi is paying the visa fee for Indian visitors. Qatar and Oman now draw 41% and 36.6% of their arrivals from the Gulf itself. Events show the same pattern: Saudifood in Jeddah drew more than 28,000 professionals against a target above 25,000, and the Doha Jewellery & Watches Exhibition closed with over 34,000 visitors.

FHS World was smaller than its previous edition, about 1,000 delegates against more than 1,600, but it brought 200-plus investors managing $6 trillion and heard governments table their tourism capital commitments: $120 billion from Saudi Arabia, $31 billion from Oman, $27 billion from the UAE and $22.5 billion from Qatar. Smaller room, longer horizon. Brookfield told AGBI that hotel yields work even at today's borrowing costs. Capital is reading this market over a longer span than the headlines are.

"Smaller room, longer horizon."

What it means for those who build events

Three conclusions follow for practitioners. First, plan for the ceiling you can see: the fourth quarter and the first weeks of 2027 will be built on regional guests, not on a return of long-haul flows. Second, price the new line items before the client asks: war cover, licensing, and sponsor dependence belong in the first budget draft. Third, build for the guests who are here. The residents and regional visitors who never left are the market's most reliable audience, and corporate buyers, whose demand returns last, will come back to the organisers who can show them what an event delivered. That is why this issue puts a wedding on its cover: the part of the market closest to the people who live in the region, and the one that never paused.

Conclusion

The GCC events market did not break, and it is no longer waiting to find out what comes next. It has a ceiling, a cost structure, new sources of demand and investors with a longer horizon than the news cycle. That is not recovery. It is an operating model, and the professionals in this issue are the ones writing it.

Tourists Are Optional. Weddings Are Not.



by Sergey Larin Editor-in-Chief, EventMag.Me

Why local celebrations have become the most reliable occupancy engine in UAE hospitality, and why the hotels that saw it early are now fully booked.

When the region's airspace closed this spring, hotel revenue teams watched the inbound pipeline disappear within days. Leisure bookings, incentive groups and conference room blocks were cancelled or pushed to "later". One calendar kept moving: that of local families. Weddings were rescheduled, resized and rebooked, but they were not abandoned. The hotels that understood this early are now filling ballrooms and room blocks in months the market used to write off.

Demand that doesn't need a boarding pass

Inbound tourism depends on three things a hotel cannot control: flights, travel advisories and how the region looks on foreign news. Corporate MICE adds a fourth: the budget committee, which is the first line to freeze in any crisis. A local wedding depends on a single decision made inside one family.

The guest list lives within a two-hour drive. The date follows the family calendar, not airline schedules. When pressure hits, families move the date by weeks, not years, because a delayed wedding carries a social cost that a delayed holiday never does.

That makes the local wedding the closest thing hospitality has to non-cyclical demand. It is booked months ahead, secured with deposits, and unaffected by the headlines that empty the lobby of tourists.

The closed-door wedding is a full-hotel product

The women's celebration at an Emirati wedding is not an ordinary banquet. The ballroom is taken exclusively:

- no open sightlines from the atrium
- no glass the corridor can see through
- no staff wandering in from another function
- women serving on the floor
- women behind the camera
- strict device policies

The party runs well past midnight and winds down by 3am at the latest. The guests relax completely because no one outside can see in, and that privacy is precisely what the family is paying for.

For the hotel, the adjacent space cannot be sold to



anyone else that night, so the real product is exclusivity. The revenue does not stop at the ballroom door:

•Before the event: the bride's side takes suites a day or two early for beauty preparation, fittings and henna.

•On the night: relatives from Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Ras Al Khaimah, Oman or Saudi Arabia check in rather than drive home at three in the morning.

•After: many stay on the following day.

One wedding therefore delivers ballroom hire, F&B at full per-head rates, a room block, suites, spa bookings and late-night services. It all comes in a single booking, often in periods when no tourist would arrive to replace it.

The Arjaan case: repositioning while others waited
Arjaan by Rotana, Dubai Media City, made its move while the strikes were still ongoing. Instead of waiting for inbound demand to return, the hotel rebuilt its marketing around the local wedding client.
By summer, traditionally a dead season for both weddings and hotel occupancy, it was running solid wedding volume. In September it has 20 weddings on the books. That is close to five a week, on dates that would otherwise have depended on a tourism recovery nobody could predict.

The same property gave an entire hall to Wedding Mania on 8 September. For nine hours, Veranda Hall worked as a live wedding venue: fresh florals, ceremonial arches and fully dressed tables. It served wedding professionals by day and more than a hundred brides by evening. A hotel that treats weddings as its core business rather than an add-on puts its own space in front of the couples who will book next season.

The numbers confirm a strategic direction, not an emergency patch. The hotel found a demand segment the crisis could not switch off, and built its commercial model around it before competitors had finished revising their forecasts.

What the product actually requires
Hotels that treat a local wedding as "a banquet with more flowers" lose the family at the first site visit. The requirements are operational and have to be solved before the contract, not on the night:

•a privacy audit of every door, window, service corridor and camera angle

•a confirmed roster of female service staff, not a promise to "arrange it"

•photo and video rules written into the contract

•dedicated set-up windows for the kosha (the bride's stage) and décor teams

•valet and security capacity for hundreds of cars

leaving after 1am
•room blocks with clear release dates
•one package combining ballroom, bridal suite and family rooms, so the family deals with one contact and one invoice

Hotels also need to recognise who actually decides. It is often the mother, the aunts and the women of the family, working with a small circle of trusted planners and kosha designers. That circle runs on word of mouth. A satisfied aunt is the most effective sales channel a hotel will ever have: one well-run wedding sells the next two in the same extended family.

Why the imagery has to be staged

The more private the product, the harder it is to market. No family will allow photographs of a real women's celebration to appear in a hotel brochure. The only way to show the product is to produce it. The couple in these images is exactly that: a staged pair created for Wedding Mania. The "bride" was transformed live during the bridal workshop while the "groom" prepared separately. The couple then moved through the venue's décor locations, with guests following, phones raised. The results are on





this pages:
•the black-and-gold bisht and cathedral veil
•the red-rose heart arch against the Dubai Marina skyline
•the tablescape in olive velvet and blush

These images show a local family what their celebration could look like without exposing anyone's actual wedding. For a hotel entering this segment, a strong styled portfolio is not decoration. It is the sales deck.

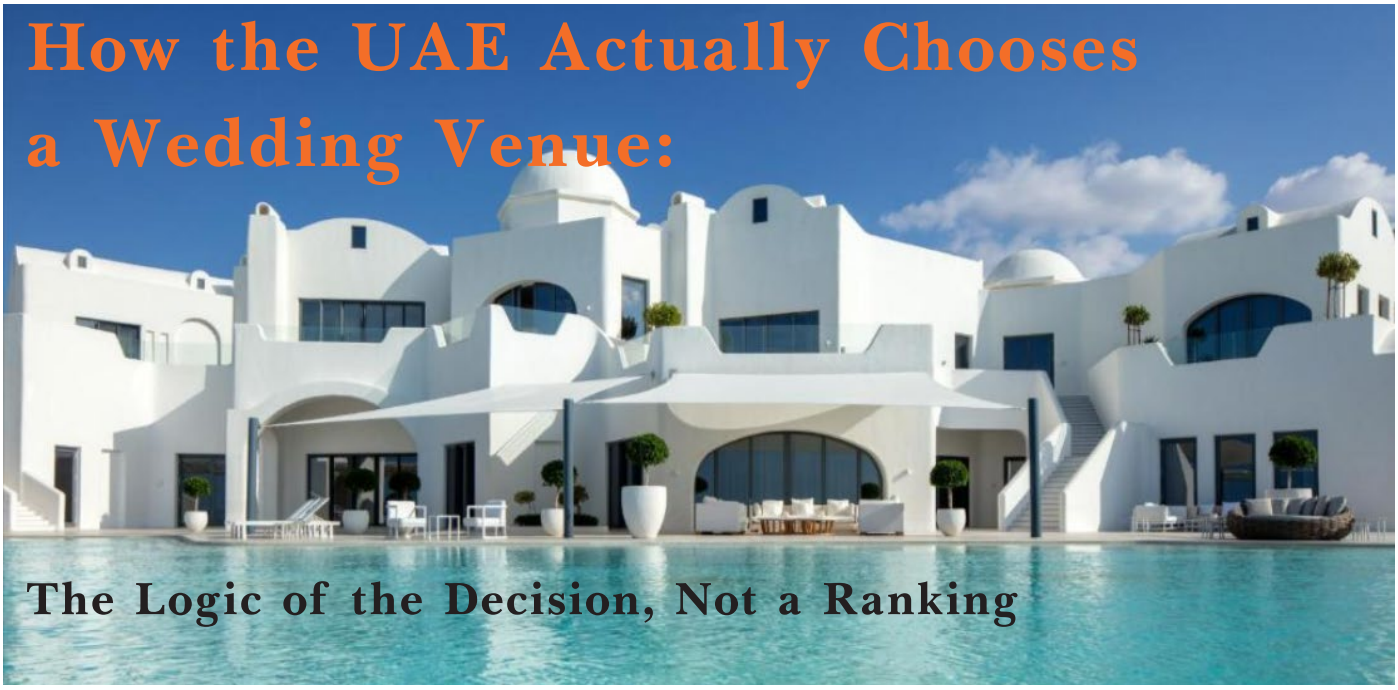
The line the crisis drew

For years, tourism and weddings sat side by side on the same revenue report, as if they were the same kind of income. The spring separated them. Tourism proved to be a cyclical line: strong in good seasons, first to vanish under pressure. Local celebrations proved to be a structural one.

The next disruption will come; in this region it always does. The hotels that invested in wedding infrastructure this year will not start from zero when it arrives. They will have a calendar that fills itself.



How the UAE Actually Chooses a Wedding Venue:



The Logic of the Decision, Not a Ranking



by Sergey Larin

Choosing a venue is not about beauty - it's about which risk you're willing to carry. Over the past decade, the UAE wedding venue market has split into distinct decision logics that rarely get stated out loud, because every property markets itself as universal. In practice, a producer and a couple are always choosing between three axes: privacy versus address status, climate window versus seasonal pricing, and cultural format versus spatial flexibility. What follows is not a ranking but a breakdown of how these axes actually play out across five active UAE venues - including where each one falls short.

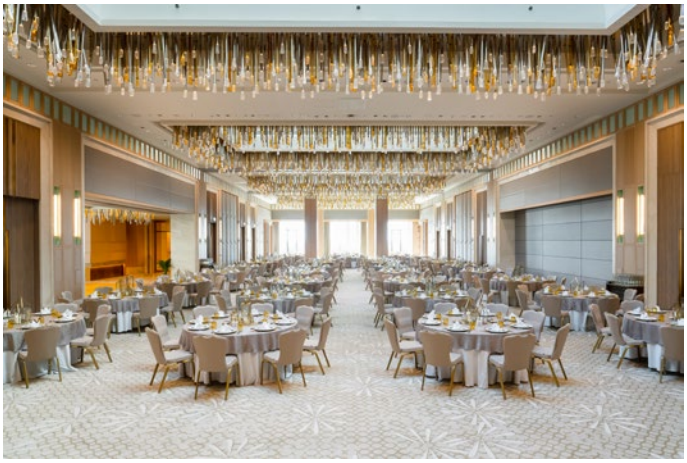
Axis 1: Privacy vs. Address Status

Anantara Santorini Abu Dhabi Retreat and One&Only Royal Mirage are opposite answers to the same question: what matters more, total event seclusion, or an address your guests instantly recognize.

Anantara offers seclusion that borders on absolute: 22 rooms, an adults-only (18+) format, and a physical ceiling of roughly 90–100 guests. That's both the asset and the hard constraint - the venue cannot be "stretched" for a larger wedding no matter the budget, because room inventory doesn't scale. A less-discussed operational upside: the villa's unbroken white facades work as a ready-made surface for 3D projection mapping with no temporary backing structures required - but that same white minimalism means a wedding built around heavy traditional decor (Arabic or Indian) has nowhere to "breathe": the architecture crowds out any ornamental script.

One&Only Royal Mirage is the inverse case: 65 acres, three separate properties, a capacity range of 50 to 700 guests. Here the couple isn't paying for privacy - the grounds host multiple concurrent events across the resort - they're paying for brand recognition and architectural density. A risk producers flag regularly: splitting the Royal Ballroom into three zones raises non-trivial sound isolation and service-logistics questions. What reads as flexibility in the brochure requires its own technical rider in practice.





Axis 2: Climate Window vs. Seasonal Pricing
The Ritz-Carlton Ras Al Khaimah, Al Wadi Desert runs the narrowest operating window of the five. A gated 1,235-acre private reserve delivers something no Dubai property can sell - genuine desert isolation, a falcon delivering the rings, an open-sky majlis tent. But that same open sky turns the venue into a seasonal asset: from May through September, daytime temperatures make an outdoor ceremony physically unworkable, not just uncomfortable. A producer who pitches Al Wadi for a summer date either doesn't know the venue or is knowingly passing the risk on to the guests.

InterContinental Fujairah Resort partially solves this through geography: the east coast runs several degrees cooler than the west, and the Grand Lawn - 650 guests, mountains and ocean in the same frame - functions as a workhorse for large, multi-day Indian weddings with a full resort buyout, at 1.5–2x lower cost than comparable capacity in Dubai or Abu Dhabi. The trade-off runs the other way: for guests coming from Dubai, that's ninety minutes to two hours each way, and part of what's saved on the venue gets absorbed by transport and transfers.



Axis 3: Cultural Format vs. Spatial Flexibility
Mandarin Oriental Jumeira is a test case for what happens when a venue chooses a contemporary aesthetic over an Arabic one. Burj Khalifa in frame is a strong asset for Western and Asian audiences looking for "urban" Dubai rather than an "Arabian fantasy" - but that's precisely why the format sits awkwardly with traditional Arabic or Indian ritual sequences: the minimalist, floor-to-ceiling-glass, 700-sqm ballroom needs a full decor build from zero, unlike One&Only or Fujairah, where the architecture already does part of the work.



What This Means in Practice
The recurring mistake at the briefing stage is picking a venue off a photograph rather than by which of the three trade-offs a couple is actually prepared to accept: a narrow window in exchange for authenticity (Al Wadi), a logistics detour in exchange for budget (Fujairah), or a full decor spend in exchange for a contemporary image (Mandarin Oriental). No property on the UAE market solves all three at once - none does. A producer's job starts with naming the trade-off out loud, not hiding it inside the deck.

Who Actually Runs a $500K Wedding:

The Team Behind the Curtain



by Sergey Larin

Photo by Tariq Nanaa'h

Guests at a wedding see the decor, the lighting, the show, the ceremony. What they don't see is the decision-making chain that holds the entire evening together - and which, in 90% of cases, doesn't match the structure written into the contract.

A large-scale Gulf wedding isn't one vendor and it isn't one team. It's a temporary alliance of at least three parties, each with a different zone of responsibility, different interests, and a different degree of actual power in the moment: the wedding planner, the technical producer, and the venue coordinator. Understanding where each one's authority ends is what separates a wedding that survives a crisis from one where the crisis becomes a story people later tell in whispers.

Three Centers of Decision-Making - and Only One Formally in Charge

The wedding planner is formally accountable for the entire process to the family. But the moment something goes off-script during the event itself, real power shifts elsewhere. The technical producer is the only person who understands what can physically be done with lighting, sound, and show timing five minutes before the bride's entrance if something isn't ready. The venue coordinator is the only person who can approve or block a specific action in a specific space: extending the timeline, changing the guest route, using a zone that wasn't cleared in advance. A planner who hasn't built working relationships with these two figures ahead of time - before the event day - ends up, at the critical moment, holding responsibility without any tools to influence the outcome.

The Real Conflict of Interest

The classic scenario: at the last minute, the family wants to extend the programme - one more entrance, one more show segment. Technically, it's possible. But the venue is bound by time limits from contracts with neighboring events or local noise regulations past a certain hour. The planner is caught between the client's wish, which they're obligated to say yes to, and a constraint they didn't set.

The working model isn't to avoid this conversation with the family upfront by promising flexibility that won't physically exist. Experienced planners in the region spell out the venue's hard limits at the sales stage - not at the moment when it's already too late to explain why not.



Money and Contracts: What a Normal Structure Looks Like for a Large Production
For an event at this scale, standard practice is staged payment tied not to calendar dates but to project milestones: concept confirmation, final vendor list, load-in start. This protects both sides - the producer isn't fronting rental and staffing costs uncovered, and the family isn't paying in full for a service that hasn't been confirmed in detail yet.

One clause that often gets written vaguely is the penalty structure for date changes. A large wedding involves dozens of vendors, each on their own schedule; postponing a date a month out isn't "just a new date on the calendar" - it's effectively re-booking part of the team and equipment, often at a higher price because of the short notice.

Permits and Licensing: What Doesn't Make It Into the Pretty Deck
Depending on the emirate or country - Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Qatar - the rules around pyrotechnics, drones, and live outdoor music past a certain hour vary significantly, and requirements can shift from season to season. A drone permit for filming or a show element requires separate approval that needs to be initiated weeks, not days, in advance. A planner who takes this on without direct coordination with the venue and a local production partner risks a last-minute rejection - at the point where the plan can no longer be changed.

Mini Case Study: Three Hours Before the Ceremony
At one of the region's large-scale ceremonies, a final sound system check three hours before start revealed a critical fault in the main channel - the same line meant to carry the live ceremony music. There was no backup system of the same class on-site.

The decision that saved the evening wasn't made by the planner but by the technical producer on-site: an emergency equipment swap through a local partner with whom the production team had a working relationship outside the current contract - a deal made over the phone, not through a formal request chain. The ceremony started twelve minutes late, a delay most guests never noticed.

This illustrates the core principle of operational resilience for a large wedding: the plan defines who's accountable for what on paper. But what actually saves the event in a critical moment is the personal working relationships between people on-site, built long before the crisis ever happened.



The Wedding With No Couple



A staged wedding is not a portfolio shoot. Built properly, it is a sales instrument

by Sergey Larin

The staged wedding is the most undervalued and most consistently misused format in the Gulf wedding industry. Suppliers spend it on portfolio content, when the one genuinely scarce resource in this market is not imagery. It is direct access to a couple who has not yet chosen its vendors.

The problem was never content

Open ten Dubai decorator accounts and try to tell them apart. The same arches, the same lighting, the same pastel palette, the same drone pull-back. Beautiful content is in surplus here; the industry produces it faster than any audience can learn to distinguish it.

A classic styled shoot, even a well-planned one, solves a problem that was solved years ago: it adds two hundred frames to a thousand that already exist.

What it does not deliver is the reason a supplier leaves the office in the first place, a single contact with a real couple. Hence the first rule of the format. A staged wedding without an audience is a cost line.

A staged wedding with an audience is a sales channel.

Three formats that keep getting confused

Styled shoot. A closed production with six to ten suppliers. The product is content and an editorial placement, and Rhiannon Downie-Hurst's guide on page 18 shows how to do that well. What it cannot produce is leads: everyone in the room already works in the industry.

Wedding showcase. The venue dresses the ballroom in full and invites 40–80 engaged couples drawn from supplier lists. The product is a 1:1 demonstration. The couple sees no render and no mood board. They see the room dressed, the real ceiling height, the light at 20:00 and the actual plating of a hot course.

Fake wedding. A full party with wedding dramaturgy and paid tickets for guests. The format matured in Latin America as a B2C product: the event funds

itself, and suppliers get a demonstration in front of several hundred people plus footage with genuine reactions rather than models.

The Gulf uses the first, occasionally the second, and almost never the third. The commercial logic runs the other way: the third format pays for itself, the second sells, the first merely services the ones already sold.

Economics: nobody pays cash, everybody pays something

The format collapses at one predictable point: when there is no producer, only a group of people contributing ideas. One person has to own the budget, the deadlines and the content rights. From there, the contribution table is fixed.

Venue. The room in low season, technical minimum, F&B at cost. In return it takes 100% of the frames with a recognisable interior and first position in the supplier referral chain.

Decor and florals. Stock inventory, not new builds. A new structure is fabricated only when it is already costed into a confirmed upcoming booking.





Bridal salon. Gowns released on a strict basis: credit in every publication, no alterations, returned the same day. Skip that clause and the salon loses stock and declines the second time you call.

Photo and video. The most demanded position and the cheapest to fill, which is exactly why you take volume from it: full package, separate coverage of every supplier's work, delivery dates written into the agreement.

Models. Cast for buyer resemblance, not for following count. The couple in the room should look like the couple who will actually place the deposit.

Cash comes from whoever receives the leads: a ticket that covers F&B in the audience format, a supplier slot fee in the showcase. All of it sits on a one-page agreement: deliverables, deadlines, usage rights, mutual credits, and the right to pull the material if credits are breached. Without that page, a month



later the videographer is still editing and the venue has already run your images as its own.

Gulf specifics: where the format breaks

Terminology. Not "ceremony" and not "wedding" in the announcement. Use showcase, styled experience, wedding preview. Staging a nikah or any religious rite is off the table entirely. That is not a matter of taste; it is a matter of whether you continue working in this market.

One segment per production. Arab, South Asian and expat weddings do not blend. Kosha and zaffa, mandap and sangeet, a beachfront ceremony: three different buyers, three different budgets, three different supply chains. A "universal" staging sells to nobody.

Calendar. The season runs October to April and couples lock suppliers six to nine months out. Production therefore belongs to May–August, when ballrooms are empty and the negotiating position is yours; publication and outreach to the database land in August–September. Ramadan comes out of the schedule completely.

Venue regulations. Alcohol, sound limits, prayer times, rooftop access, open flame and candle rules, all confirmed in writing before the announcement, not after the content calendar has been built.

Assembly: six weeks from concept to publication

Weeks 1-2. Venue and segment first, concept second, never the reverse. A concept written for a hypothetical room gets rewritten three times and exhausts the team before production starts.

Weeks 3-4. Supplier selection and signed one-page agreements. One supplier per position. Two florists on one project is not redundancy, it is a guaranteed credit dispute.

Week 5. Production day or live showcase. A non-negotiable line in the schedule: a dedicated hour of detail coverage per supplier, worked off a list. Without it, half the participants walk away with no usable frame of their own.

Week 6. Delivery, simultaneous publication across every participant, handover of the contact database, outreach to the couples. Scattered posts across a month produce a fraction of the effect of one synchronised release.

What counts as a result

Frame count is not a result. Count instead: contacts captured from couples with a stated wedding date; inbound enquiries within 30 days of publication; editorial placements with credits (a story repost is not a placement); reuse depth, since a properly built package covers three months of feed for each participant plus one piece of venue advertising; and cost per contact measured against your stand at an industry exhibition. If the staging loses to the stand, you produced a photo shoot, not an event.

The bottom line

A staged wedding is not free content. It is an event with a zero cash budget, a named producer, a budget denominated in man-hours and a real buyer in the room. The venue fills a dead month, the supplier leaves with a database rather than an image, and the producer ends up holding a repeatable asset that can be staged season after season and sold as a product in its own right. Everything else is beautiful photography nobody can tell apart from somebody else's.

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How to Plan a Wedding Styled Shoot That Actually Delivers Results

A strategic guide for planners, vendors, and event hotels



by Rhiannon Downie-Hurst

Rhiannon Downie-Hurst ("Rio") is a multi-award-winning entrepreneur and wedding industry consultant in the UAE. In 2012, she pioneered the region's digital bridal market by launching Bride Club ME. Drawing on a background in media sales and marketing at ITP and CPI Publishing, she later established Bride Club ME Business (BCME Biz), a B2B community dedicated to strengthening industry connections. Today, as EventME's wedding columnist, Rio provides strategic, future-focused insights into the evolving GCC wedding landscape.

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Styled shoots have long been a staple in the weddings and events industry, but not all styled shoots are created equal. Too often, they look beautiful on Instagram yet deliver little in terms of long-term visibility, bookings, or meaningful industry positioning.

When planned strategically, a styled shoot can be a powerful business tool: elevating your brand, opening doors to new collaborators, strengthening relationships with venues and hotels, and positioning you as a creative leader rather than just another supplier.

Here's how to plan a wedding styled shoot that works, creatively and commercially.

1. Start With Strategy, Not Aesthetic

Before you choose a colour palette, florals, or tablescape, ask yourself one key question: What is the purpose of this shoot?

Is it to:

- Enter a new market or style category?
- Attract a higher-end or destination client?
- Showcase a venue or hotel in a new light?
- Build relationships with planners or venues you want to work with?
- Gain media coverage rather than just social likes.
- Put forward creative ideas and concepts?
- Creative imagery to showcase what you can do, due to lack of existing conent?

Your creative direction should always support a clear business objective. Without this, even the most beautiful shoot risks becoming just another pretty image lost in the feed.

2. Choose the Right Partners (Not the Biggest Names)

A successful styled shoot is about alignment, not ego.

When curating your team:

- Choose collaborators who share the same creative vision and professional standards
- Prioritise reliability, communication, and mutual respect
- Ensure everyone understands the end goal and their role within it

For planners and vendors, this is an opportunity to work with your



ideal future partners.
For event hotels and venues, this is a chance to collaborate with creatives who understand how to tell your story, not just decorate your space.
Quality over quantity always wins.

3. Think Like a Publisher, Not Just a Creative
If you want editorial coverage, your shoot needs a story, not just styling.

Ask:
• What makes this shoot different?
• Is there a cultural, architectural, seasonal, or experiential narrative?
• Does it reflect a wider trend or shift within weddings and events?
• Can it educate or inspire other professionals or couples?
Editors are looking for intentional concepts, shoots that feel relevant, thoughtful, and well-executed.
The stronger the story, the stronger the media interest.

4. Plan Logistics Like a Live Event
Styled shoots may look relaxed behind the scenes, but the best ones are tightly planned.

Key considerations:
• Clear timelines and call sheets
• Defined set-up and breakdown windows
• Backup plans for weather or delays
• Respect for venue rules, especially within hotels
• A single point of contact managing the shoot flow
For hotels and venues especially, professionalism here is critical. A well-run shoot builds trust and makes future collaborations far more likely.

5. Capture With Purpose
Content is the currency, but only if it's usable. Brief your photographer and videographer properly:
• Identify hero shots vs detail shots
• Capture wide venue shots and close-up styling moments
• Include vertical content for reels and stories
• Think about long-term use: websites, proposals, press, and social
A styled shoot should give you months of content, not just one post.

6. Maximise Exposure (Before You Even Shoot)
Visibility shouldn't be an afterthought.

Before the shoot:
• Agree on tagging, credits, and posting timelines
• Decide where the shoot will be submitted editorially
• Clarify exclusivity periods if required by publications
After the shoot:
• Submit promptly with a strong written narrative
• Share assets with collaborators professionally
• Repurpose content across platforms with intention
A styled shoot is not a one-day project, it's a long-tail marketing asset.

7. Measure Success Beyond Likes
The true value of a styled shoot isn't found in vanity metrics alone.

Instead, ask:
• Did this attract the type of clients I want?
• Did it open conversations with new planners or venues?
• Did it strengthen my industry positioning?
• Did it lead to editorial features or speaking opportunities?
If the answer is yes, the shoot has done its job.

And finally, styled shoots are no longer about showing what you can do, they're about showing who you are as a brand and where you're heading.

When planned with intention, collaboration, and strategy, they become one of the most powerful tools in a planner, vendor, or event hotel's marketing toolkit. Done well, a styled shoot doesn't just create content. It creates credibility.



Why AI Is Redefining Wedding Discovery (Not Replacing It)



by Rhiannon Downie-Hurst

For over a decade, wedding discovery followed a familiar path. Couples searched Google, browsed directories, saved inspiration on Instagram and Pinterest, and shortlisted suppliers based on visibility, reviews, and recommendations. Today, that journey is changing, fast.

Artificial Intelligence is now influencing how couples discover, compare, and choose wedding businesses. But let's be clear: AI is not replacing the wedding industry. It is redefining how authority, credibility, and relevance are recognised and that has major implications for suppliers, planners, venues, and media platforms alike.

Including my own.

At Bride Club ME, we have witnessed this shift first-hand, which is precisely why our platform is currently undergoing significant structural changes. Not to follow trends, but to ensure relevance, visibility, and integrity in a rapidly evolving discovery landscape. The businesses that understand this shift early will dominate visibility in the years ahead. Those that don't risk becoming invisible, not because they lack talent or quality, but because AI doesn't know how to read them.

Discovery Has Shifted From Search to Synthesis

Traditional search engines reward keywords. AI rewards clarity, structure, authority, and consistency. When a couple now asks a question such as, "Who are the best wedding planners for a modern Arab-Western fusion wedding in Dubai?", AI doesn't simply pull a list of websites. It synthesises information from multiple trusted sources, editorial platforms, curated directories, articles, reviews, social proof, and structured data signals, to form a recommendation.

This means discovery is no longer about being listed. It is about being recognised.

The Evolving Role of Directories

Directories are not dead, but their role has fundamentally changed.

The traditional directory model was volume-based: list as many suppliers as possible, sorted alphabetically or by paid placement. AI does not value this noise. It values curation, verification, and categorisation.

Modern directories must:

- Clearly define supplier niches and specialisms
- Maintain accurate, structured profiles
- Demonstrate proof of activity, credibility, and rele-

vance
• Act as trusted data sources, not digital phone books
When a directory becomes intentional rather than exhaustive, it transforms into something far more powerful: a data authority that AI trusts and references.

Editorial Platforms: Where Authority Is Built

Editorial content is one of the strongest signals AI uses to assess expertise.
A real wedding feature, an industry interview, or a thought-leadership article tells AI:
• This business exists beyond social media
• It is being discussed by credible, third-party platforms
• It contributes meaningfully to the industry conversation

For wedding professionals, editorial coverage is no longer about ego or branding alone. It is about machine-readable credibility.

AI reads context. When a business appears consistently within respected industry publications,



that presence signals expertise, not just popularity.

Structured Data: The Invisible Advantage

This is where many wedding businesses unknowingly fall behind. AI does not interpret beautifully written websites the way humans do. It looks for structured data, clear headings, defined services, location markers, categorisation, schema, and relational consistency.

Businesses that invest in:
• Clear service definitions
• Consistent naming across platforms
• Strong website structure
• Aligned bios and descriptions
…are significantly easier for AI to understand, categorise, and recommend.

This is why vague websites, outdated profiles, or inconsistent messaging actively damage discoverability, even when the business itself is exceptional.

Digital Authority Is the New Word-of-Mouth

The wedding industry has always thrived on referrals. AI has become the digital extension of word-of-mouth, aggregating credibility signals at scale.

AI effectively asks:
• Is this business consistently mentioned?
• Are they associated with quality work?
• Do trusted platforms reference them?
• Is their expertise clearly defined?
If the answer is unclear, AI simply moves on.



What This Means for Wedding Businesses

To remain visible in an AI-powered discovery landscape, wedding professionals must shift from promotion to positioning.

That means:
• Investing in editorial presence, not just Instagram
• Choosing curated platforms over mass exposure
• Ensuring consistency across every digital touchpoint
• Communicating expertise clearly, repeatedly, and strategically

AI does not replace relationships. It accelerates them by filtering who gets seen first.

The future of wedding discovery belongs to businesses that understand this new language of authority, and position themselves accordingly. So where do you stand? Are you ready for changes that lay ahead?

Arabian Travel Market:

How ATM should be read by MICE Professionals in the GCC



by Sergey Larin



Arabian Travel Market (ATM) has long moved beyond the format of a classic travel exhibition. Today, it functions as one of the most important strategic platforms for the MICE and business travel industry in the GCC. Its real value is not in presentation, but in how clearly it reflects where the regional market is heading.
ATM is not about inspiration or visual spectacle. It is about positioning, long-term partnerships, and the redistribution of business travel and events flows across the region.

ATM as a market indicator, not a showcase

For professionals working in MICE, ATM should be viewed as a snapshot of the industry's current state rather than a promotional event. It reveals:

- which countries are genuinely investing in MICE infrastructure,
- which destinations are competing for association congresses and large-scale corporate events,
- which formats are considered viable in the medium and long term.

Decisions are rarely made on the spot at ATM. Instead, this is where strategic conversations begin, often turning into confirmed projects 6–18 months later: conferences, incentive programs, roadshows, and international forums.





MICE in the GCC: a strategic language

The GCC no longer treats MICE as an add-on to tourism. This shift is especially visible at ATM.

Discussions increasingly focus on:

- delegate volumes and scalability,
- association requirements,
- logistics, visas, permits, and compliance,
- hybrid and multi-city event models.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Oman now approach MICE as a **tool for economic positioning and international influence**, not simply hospitality. ATM is the environment where these strategies are tested against real market interest.



Who truly benefits from ATM

ATM is not equally relevant for everyone.
It is essential for those who:

- work with international corporate and association clients,
- develop DMC or MICE divisions within hotels,
- build cross-market partnerships,
- focus on scalable, long-term growth rather than one-off events.

For professionals operating strictly within local or short-term event cycles, ATM's practical value is significantly lower.

What hotels and DMCs actually sell at ATM

Hotels at ATM are not selling ballrooms or room inventories. They are selling predictability, capacity, and operational reliability.
DMCs are not selling entertainment concepts, but:

- process control,
- regulatory understanding,
- the ability to operate in alignment with governmental and institutional stakeholders.

This becomes clear when observing the nature of negotiations rather than the visual design of stands.



Networking without illusions

One of the most common misconceptions about ATM is the expectation of immediate results. The GCC MICE market does not function that way.

ATM is about:

- initiating dialogue,
- aligning expectations,
- establishing trust.

The outcomes are delayed - but these relationships are what create stable, repeatable business rather than transactional success.

Why ATM matters now

The GCC MICE market is entering a phase of:

- stronger regulation,
- clearer standards,
- deeper integration into national strategies.

In this context, ATM acts as a **shared professional space** where the industry aligns - implicitly - on future rules and priorities.

Conclusion

Arabian Travel Market is not a tourism event.
It is a working instrument for professionals building MICE businesses in the GCC with a long-term perspective.

For those who read the market rather than simply attend it, ATM offers insights far beyond what is visible on the surface.

Saudi Arabia:
The Pulse of a New Market



by Alina Shliakhtova

Alina Shliakhtova is General Manager of Atravel, with 15 years of experience in the UAE and GCC market. Her company works closely with Saudi Arabia as a destination.

Saudi Arabia right now makes a very strong and ambiguous impression. Our company works closely with this destination, and I can say honestly: this is a country that simultaneously impresses, enchants and confounds. Which is exactly why writing about it as just another promising direction would be wrong. Saudi Arabia is an entirely different product, with a different logic, different infrastructure and fundamentally different operational realities.

The country is in the midst of an enormous transformation, and that is precisely what makes it interesting. There are already impressive destinations: Riyadh, Jeddah, AlUla, the Red Sea, new desert and island resorts. But it is important to understand that the country is developing unevenly. Saudi Arabia today is more a network of strong destination hubs than a fully formed tourism destination in the conventional sense. Between these hubs lie vast distances and a great many blank spots on the map.

Three Destinations - Three Different Products

Riyadh feels like a powerful business centre. The capital, government events, large conferences, exhibitions, corporate events for several thousand people, ballrooms of extraordinary scale. The city lives at high intensity, and the traffic here is such that it absolutely must be factored into any logistical planning. For large-format MICE projects, Riyadh is a strong destination. For the programme side, there is plenty to show: Diriyah is the ancient heart of Saudi Arabia, where the country's story began, and the modern King Abdullah Financial District gives a sense of just how large the ambitions are. A programme can look compact and rich: the conference part at a hotel in the city centre, followed by a visit to the old or the new city, dinner at a good restaurant - and the evening feels both substantial and complete.

Jeddah has an entirely different atmosphere. A port city on the Red Sea coast, historically tied to Hejazi culture, it feels softer and more open than Riyadh. The Hejaz was a crossroads of trade routes, pilgrimage and cultures for centuries, and that can still be felt in the atmosphere of the city, in its architecture and in the way people communicate here. Al Balad is a UNESCO-listed historic district where you can spend hours simply walking through narrow streets. Taibat Museum is another stunning location - less well known, but one that stays with you long after the visit. For groups, a yacht cruise on the Red Sea is a perfectly viable and very beautiful option to include in a programme.





AlUla: A Different Planet

AlUla is a conversation of its own, and perhaps the most emotional part of any Saudi itinerary. A town with archaeological layers six thousand years deep, towering rock formations, fractured sandstone canyons and absolute silence at night. The landscapes recall science fiction - Tatooine, Mars, another planet entirely. But this is real Earth, and here you can not only marvel but also host events.

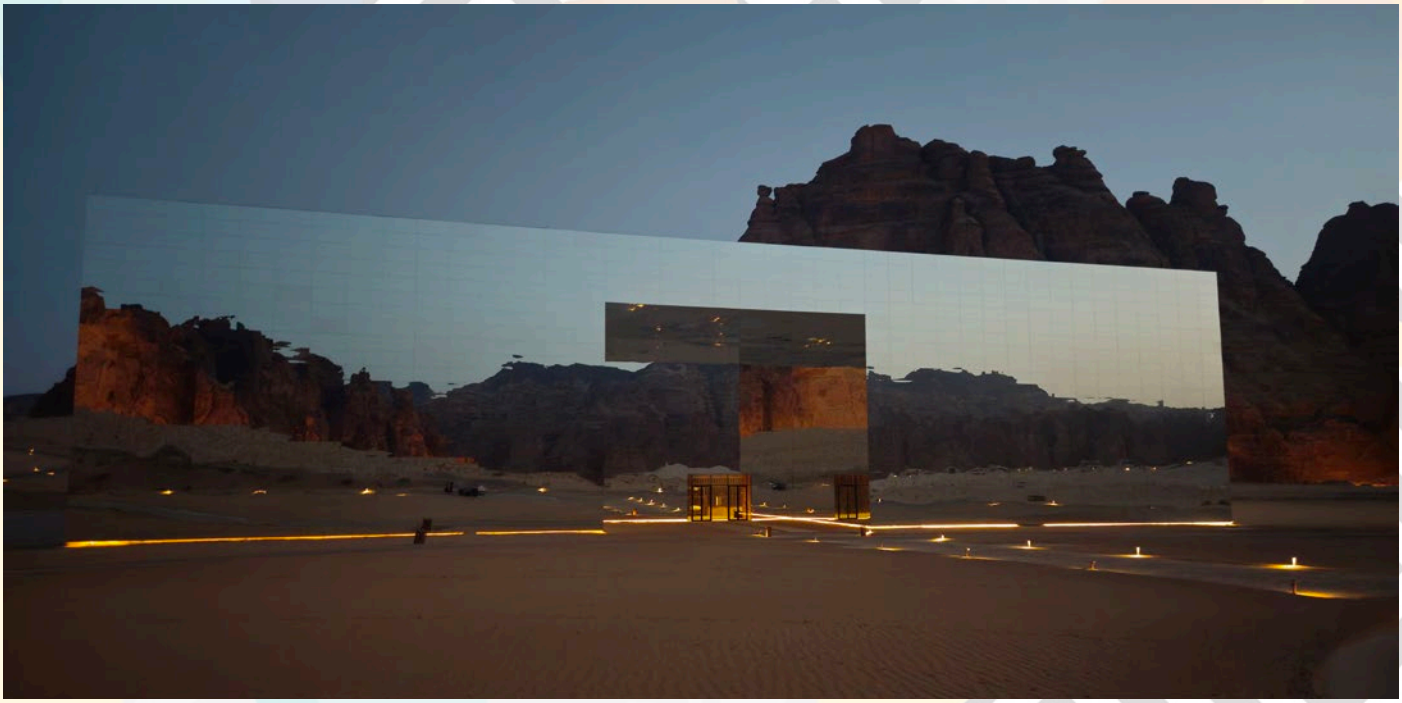
Hegra is Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site. A Nabataean city from the first century BCE: tombs carved into rock faces, caravan routes, singing sands. It is the kind of experience after which many other destinations begin to pale. Nearby stands The Chedi Hegra, a hotel built within the old Hedjaz Railway station dating from 1908. Before this railway existed, the pilgrimage route from Damascus to Medina took forty days; with the train, it took four. Today the historic buildings have been restored and woven into the hotel's concept: the former station has become a restaurant, and a vintage steam locomotive stands inside. Living within the space of a historic railway is an experience difficult to replicate anywhere else.

Dar Tantora is a hotel situated directly inside the old town of AlUla, whose walls are approximately eight hundred years old. There are just thirty rooms, each one unique. Eighty per cent of the lighting comes from candles - around eighteen hundred are lit every day. There is a Star Gaze Sleeping category: a terrace with a bed under the open sky, where you fall asleep looking at the stars. The restaurant Joontos offers an unexpected fusion of Saudi and Spanish cuisine, noted in the Michelin Guide. There is no unnecessary noise here - only an atmosphere that cannot be reproduced anywhere else.

Banyan Tree AlUla is a luxury resort fully immersed in the desert, where villas are carefully integrated into the landscape rather than imposed upon it. Our Habitas AlUla is a warmer, lifestyle-oriented product with a Mexican influence in its concept, where there are no televisions in the rooms on principle: travelling to AlUla to watch television would simply be wrong.

Maraya: A Mirror Building That Is More Than a Building

Maraya means "mirror" in Arabic. It is the largest mirrored building in the world — a fact officially recognised by Guinness World Records. A structure of 9,740 mirrored glass panels that quite literally dissolves into the rock canyon of Ashar Valley. As you approach, you begin to doubt your own eyes: the building seems to vanish, then suddenly materialises again.



But Maraya is not merely a visual landmark - it is a fully operational event venue, and one of the most unusual in the world. It has hosted concerts by Andrea Bocelli, Alicia Keys and John Legend. Inside, there is a five-hundred-seat auditorium, a dedicated conference floor, vast foyers and a stunning twenty-six-metre floor-to-ceiling glass façade that opens fully to reveal panoramic views of the valley. The building contains more than twenty-five spaces of varying capacity, from intimate rooms to large-scale areas for corporate events, dinners and presentations. It is no coincidence that Rolls-Royce and Cartier chose Maraya as the backdrop for their campaigns. Maraya Social, the restaurant inside the building, opens strictly at 12:30 and closes relatively early, making it primarily a lunch option. Prices start from 550 SAR per person, with options up to 700 and 900 SAR - expensive, but this is one of the top dining spots in AlUla. Entry without a prior reservation is not possible. For a group programme, lunch at Maraya Social works beautifully as the conclusion to a morning itinerary - after visiting Hegra or Elephant Rock.

The Red Sea and the Desert: A New Luxury That Doesn't Overpower Nature

The Red Sea is a destination with an extraordinary natural resource: crystal-clear water and some of the richest coral reefs in the world, an underwater realm that leaves you in silent awe. But the infrastructure is still developing in pockets, and comfortable access to the sea is most often linked to controlled resorts. Beyond these zones, public beach culture remains at an early stage.

Logistics on the Red Sea and Shura Island deserve special mention. Transfers are centralised through a single operator, with dedicated Mercedes EVs and a single pick-up point at Turtle Bay. Arranging a transfer independently is not possible - everything goes through the hotel or DMC. Even with all documents in order, delays at checkpoints are possible. For a professional, this is not alarming information but simply a part of planning that needs to be taken into account.

The desert and cliff-side hotels in the Red Sea region deserve particular attention. They embody an entirely new understanding of luxury - not one that conquers nature, but one that integrates into it.
Desert Rock is a hotel whose rooms are literally built into the rock face. This is not a "hotel in a beautiful location" but architecture that has grown from the landscape and submits to it. There is a listening room with vinyl records and Bang & Olufsen, dinner among illuminated rock formations, and at the summit - six hundred steps up to a viewing platform with the Gigi bar and a view that is worth the climb while your legs can still carry you. The feeling is of being on another planet, where rock formations, lighting and the sheer scale of the space become the ultimate luxury.

Six Senses Southern Dunes is not simply a desert resort but a fully realised wellness and longevity destination, designed by Foster + Partners. The central zone resembles a living oasis in the desert: dramatic shade canopies, like giant leaves, create shadow and microclimate. Beneath them lies the spa - in essence the heart of the entire property. The menu includes wellness screening with biomarker analysis, sleep management programmes using sleep trackers and yoga nidra, a biohacking section with infrared therapy and compression systems, and an Alchemy Bar where guests create their own body scrubs from local herbs and spices known since the time of the Nabataeans. The welcome drink here is kombucha, not champagne - and in that, perhaps, lies the entire philosophy. Silence, darkness and stars become part of the experience. When the light pollution disappears, the sky draws closer on its own - and you suddenly understand that sometimes the greatest luxury is not adding more impressions, but removing what is unnecessary.

The new understanding of luxury in Saudi Arabia is especially visible here. The old luxury meant "man conquers nature." The new one increasingly means "man has learned to exist within nature without destroying it." Rocks are not levelled, the desert is not transformed into an artificial city. Architecture defers to the landscape - and that is precisely what makes these places so powerful.

Controlled Access: Limitation or Philosophy

One of Saudi Arabia's systemic features that immediately stands out is controlled access. Many locations simply cannot be reached by turning up unannounced. Ashar Valley, home to Banyan Tree, Our Habitas and Maraya, has security at the entrance checking passes. Dar Tantora sits within a heritage zone and also requires clearance. At KAEC - King Abdullah Economic City - an entry pass through the official website is needed, and Yam Beach charges separately: 70 SAR on weekdays and 100 SAR at weekends. Six Senses and Desert Rock also require advance passes.

At first glance this looks like a limitation, and operationally it does create additional work. But behind it lies a different logic: Saudi Arabia is not building mass tourism. It is building curated destination ecosystems - an environment in which everything is managed and everything is considered. For the right client with the right expectations, this is not a complication but an exclusivity that cannot be created in conventional tourist destinations.



Alcohol, People, Language

Saudi Arabia remains a dry destination. Alcohol is not served in any hotel, any restaurant or at any event. For incentive groups, gala dinners and corporate programmes, this must be factored in early and discussed honestly with the client before planning begins. In central Riyadh, a single legal alcohol shop now operates, but access is restricted to diplomats and some non-Muslim Premium Residency holders - not ordinary tourists. Discussion around limited legalisation in luxury resorts is ongoing, but for now it remains unrealised, and Saudi Arabia will most likely follow a model of "highly controlled luxury enclaves" rather than "Dubai 2.0."

In place of alcohol culture, something different is developing: Saudi coffee, tea rituals, wellness drinks, spa and retreat experiences. For an audience seeking not nightlife but a reset - this is a potentially very compelling destination.

The people deserve a separate mention. The sense of safety is high, and people are open and warm - this is one of Saudi Arabia's greatest strengths, and one that genuinely stays with you. But English drops off sharply beyond major cities and luxury environments. Even basic Arabic proved to be an unexpectedly important tool in many non-standard situations - from negotiating with drivers to resolving issues at checkpoints.

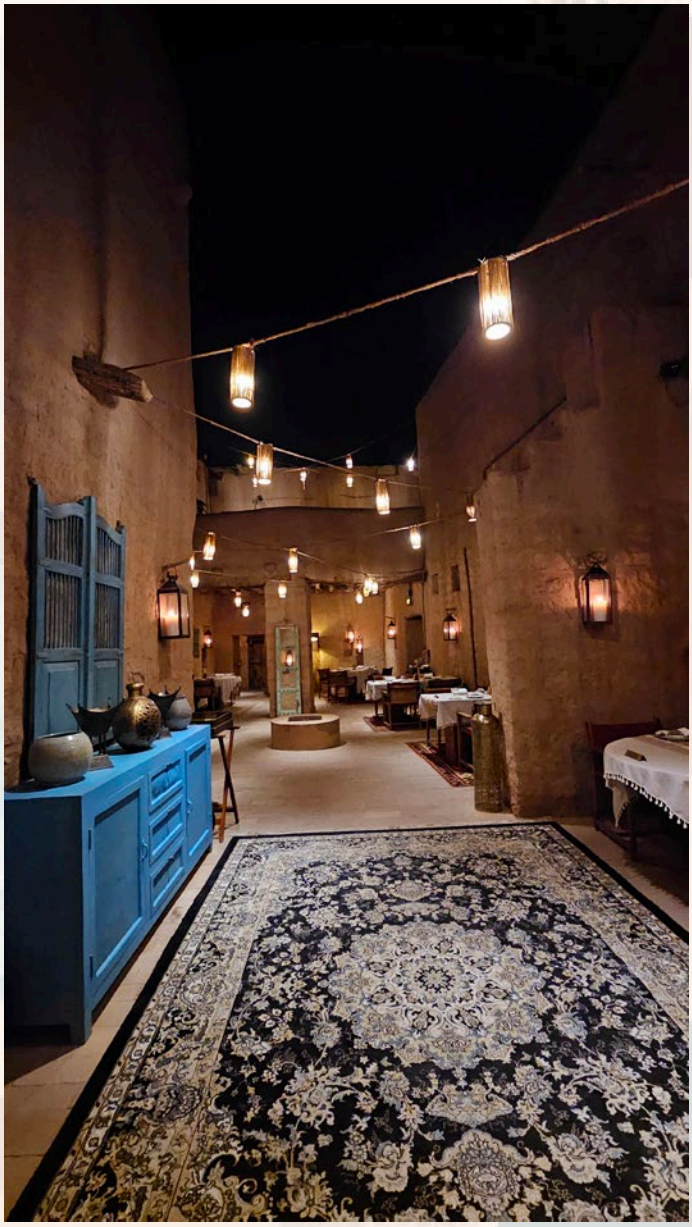


Distances and Logistics

Saudi Arabia is vast. Riyadh to Jeddah is approximately eleven hours by road. Jeddah to the Red Sea coast is five to six hours. The Red Sea to AlUla is another four. For groups and VIP clients, movement between key points is best arranged through internal flights rather than ground transfers. The exception is the Red Sea to AlUla road segment, which is interesting in its own right as part of a programme. One more practical point worth bearing in mind: internet connectivity between cities is not always stable, and for production teams and hybrid events this needs to be planned for in advance.







Who This Destination Is For - And Why It's Worth a Look

Saudi Arabia currently works best for formats where uniqueness and memorability matter more than the number of activities. Incentive programmes, VIP and luxury FIT, corporate trips with an emphasis on cultural experience - this is the audience for which Saudi Arabia is an excellent fit, and this kind of format is particularly well suited to AlUla. For large standard MICE groups, Riyadh and Jeddah are the strongest options, offering scale, venues and infrastructure for major conferences.

The country is in the process of being built. Infrastructure is growing quickly but unevenly. Suppliers are learning to serve the group segment, and transport, catering and equipment are all still developing. But it is precisely here, in this window, that experience working in the region gives a significant advantage: a great deal is resolved through connections, through understanding local specifics and through knowing how the market actually works from the inside.

* * *

To arrive in Saudi Arabia with templates is to leave disappointed. There is no "like Dubai" or "like Oman" here. What exists here is something found nowhere else: a country transforming before your eyes. And if you approach it with the right expectations and the right partners, it delivers an experience that is not forgotten.

The destination is still being written. Come now - and write your own chapter.

Managing a Local DMC in the Artificial Intelligence Era



by Mudi S Devendra

Mudi S Devendra is General Manager of Oasis Incentives and Tours, a MICE destination management company in Muscat, Oman, established in 2020. He has more than 30 years of experience in destination management and incentive travel in Oman and the UAE.



AI can write proposals and design events, but the true differentiator is local knowledge, relationships, and destination expertise, and Oman is a perfect example of this combination. AI is transforming MICE planning, but destinations like Oman prove that local expertise remains irreplaceable.

I have always been a traditional MICE DMC manager. We knew almost everything about our customers, who, in return, had significant authority over the events. This combination created dynamically ever-changing, mesmerizing, challenging, and unforgettable incentive programs.

When the project manager wanted champagne served at midnight, we already knew it before they asked. Hotel General Managers would also remain on standby because everyone involved understood their expectations. Events were real, personal, and instant.

The job has changed

Over the years, the industry has changed. Procurement departments have become increasingly influential. Itineraries are planned in greater detail, budgets are fixed, and every element is documented long before delegates arrive. Therefore, there are maximum predictability and minimum surprises. Now, a junior executive can run an event from A to Z, as there are no longer on-site decisions at midnight. Problem-solving is diminishing and bringing creativity or out-of-the-box solutions are rarely demanded.

DMCs are becoming distanced from agencies, and the bond is often a case-by-case, situational requirement. Today, we need Facebook to remind us of our agents' birthdays. Whilst this evolution is taking place, another transformation is also happening: AI, Artificial Intelligence, in the MICE and Business Tourism industry.

When the RFP is written by AI

Recently, I received an RFP that was almost too perfect. Every requirement was clearly defined and every detail structured. It became apparent that AI had likely played a role in its creation, thus taking much of the DMC staff's thinking capacities out of the equation. Similarly, a proposal was received by the agency within the day. A complete Shakespeare, with the most amazing presentations. Something that a normal day-to-day DMC would need a few days to produce. However, procurement teams value such as highly efficient.

However, AI could only find what's generally available online and websites. When the client reached us to source a WOW Dinner venue, we opened the National Museum of Oman Main Chamber. A formal 4 course sit down dinner, with client gobo projection accompanied by local Omani classical musicians were organized. The guests were blown away by the privately escorted viewing of national museum galleries.

So today, as a manager of a successful DMC, my role has changed and my thinking has changed. In Oman, the answer lies in local expertise. This was reinforced by the latest SITE Global Pulse Survey report, where Local Expertise & Insight and Reputation & Relationships were placed among the highest priorities.

Why Oman still needs a local hand

When I moved from Dubai to Oman almost a decade ago, most MICE programs were centered in Muscat. The Capital City remains an excellent base for conferences, meetings, and corporate events, offering international hotel brands, strong air connectivity, and well-developed infrastructure. The city is clean, well-organized, and highly suitable for corporate programs, providing a reliable foundation for event delivery.

Beyond the capital, Oman opens the door to immersive experiential soft adventure. We introduced incentive planners to the mountains of Jebel Akhdar, the cultural heritage of Nizwa, and the country's dramatic wadis, deserts, and untouched landscapes. The response was immediate and highly positive. Oman offers something increasingly rare in the region: authenticity and raw natural beauty.

From a logistical perspective, the country is easy to operate in. Visa processes are straightforward for many nationalities, the dry winter climate is ideal for travel, and modern highways ensure smooth connectivity between regions. Of all of it, Oman's greatest strength lies in its people. This asset is superbly supported by historic forts, pristine beaches, off-the-beaten-track wadis, and unique cuisine. Such experiences are curated only by selected MICE DMCs through their knowledge, established local partnerships and expertise.

Sustainability is another growing advantage. Entrepreneurs and women-led local Omani organizations are coming forward with outstanding CSR initiatives. As the global MICE industry today is predominantly women-driven, this creates an amazing connection.

For planners considering Oman for the first time, a familiarization trip with the support of an experienced local DMC still remains the best starting point. Today, Sultanate of Oman is a sophisticated destination capable of hosting the most discerning incentive programs. At the same time, it remains a relatively untouched landscape, offering a sense of discovery and a collection of truly awe-inspiring "wow" experiences. As the industry continues to embrace technology, Oman stands out for its unique balance of human intelligence, delivering experiences that delegates remember long after they return home.



No Platform Closes the Deal

How venue sourcing really works in the GCC



In most mature event markets, venue search has collapsed into a single marketplace tab: filter, compare, book, pay. The Gulf has not followed that path. The global platforms largely stop short of the region, destination bureaus publish verified inventory without prices, and a new generation of Dubai-built platforms is only now filling the gap. For a producer building a shortlist in Dubai, Riyadh or Doha, venue sourcing is still a layered operation, and knowing what each layer can and cannot deliver saves days, not hours.

Where the global marketplaces stop

Tagvenue, the most visible venue-hire marketplace internationally, lists more than 22,000 verified venues across six countries: the UK, Ireland, the US, Canada, Australia and Singapore. None of them is in the GCC. The instant-booking model European planners take for granted does not exist here at scale.

Cvent remains the corporate default, but it is an RFP engine for hotel inventory rather than a discovery tool for unconventional spaces. Its Dubai data is useful for scoping: 741 hotels, more than 126,000 rooms, three convention centres. Newer entrants are testing different logic. London-born Find The Venue, now expanding into Dubai, parses a plain-language brief into date, capacity, budget and requirements, ranks venues by fit, response time and live availability, and earns from venue subscriptions rather than from the event. Its Dubai inventory is still thin.

Destination finders: verified, not priced

Visit Dubai's venue finder filters by event requirements and sits alongside a directory of Dubai PCOs and DMCs, which for inbound MICE is frequently the more valuable of the two. Qatar Tourism runs its own Venue Finder, from major hotel brands to one-off locations across the country.

Government venues with direct booking expose a layer no aggregator shows. Dubai Chambers requires a refundable deposit of 10% of the venue cost, payable after DET E-Permit approval and returned after post-event inspection. Permitting is built into the booking, which is the one thing private platforms have not replicated.

The limitation of this layer is structural: it answers "what exists", never "what is free on 12 December, and at what rate".

The Dubai-built layer: Find My Venue and Venue Wise

Two platforms launched in Dubai within the past two years. Both are commission-free. They are built on opposite premises.

Find My Venue was launched in 2025 by Jharna Kalwani and Harsha Khubchandani of Red Velvet Events, planners packaging their own sourcing experience into a product. It connects rather than books: pricing and terms are negotiated directly with

the venue, with no fees on either side, while venues get a dashboard to manage enquiries and track KPIs. Coverage is UAE-only, with GCC expansion announced. Early inventory was built through a free six-month trial for onboarding venues, an effective growth lever and a known risk for response rates and calendar accuracy. Agencies should also weigh one structural fact: the platform belongs to an operating event company.

Venue Wise, founded in 2024 and registered in the UAE, is built for breadth: more than 8,500 spaces across 1,900+ properties in the GCC. The distinction matters: 8,500 is rooms, 1,900 is addresses. Its geography has no regional equivalent: all seven emirates, more than 30 Saudi cities from Riyadh and Jeddah to AlUla, Tabuk and KAEC, plus Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and eight Omani locations. The interface is designed for professional sourcing: search runs at room level, rooms that miss the brief on capacity or layout are flagged separately, one enquiry reaches up to five properties, and a human advisor handles the request.

The dividing line is practical. Find My Venue answers "where in the Emirates will this feel right". Venue Wise answers "where in the Gulf will this physically fit".

Saudi specialists and the reverse check

Saudi Arabia runs on niche and operator models. Venuat focuses on wedding halls across the Kingdom. NOX Venues is not an aggregator but a network of its own sites, including farms, desert camps in Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam, halls and resorts, which makes it a direct route for outdoor formats. For meeting rooms in Riyadh, Meetingselect offers



real-time availability and instant booking.
The most underused sourcing tool is a ticketing platform. Platinumlist's venue directory, organised from ballrooms and arenas to yachts and beach clubs, lists spaces that already sell tickets to the public, meaning permits, audience-facing experience and entry infrastructure are already proven. No venue finder filters for that.

No platform closes the cycle

No platform in the GCC closes the full cycle of find, price, book and permit. The working sequence is layered: destination finders for verified inventory and partner lists, regional platforms for breadth and first response, and direct contact for the real number, because per-person packages, F&B minimums and exclusive-supplier clauses are negotiated in correspondence, not displayed in listings. The platforms shorten the road from brief to shortlist. The road from shortlist to contract still runs through relationships with venue sales teams, which is precisely why the Gulf has not surrendered this category to the global marketplaces.



Designing the Next:

Where Event Trends Are Born



by Denis **Panchenko**
Founder & Creative Director of Celebration Station UAE

Denis Panchenko is Founder and Creative Director of Celebration Station UAE, a Dubai-based event design and décor company. With 14+ years in events, tourism and business management, he holds an MBA from The University of Manchester and lectures on event innovation and experiential design.



Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

When Inspiration Becomes Repetition

There is a moment every decorator recognises: you look at a newly published event and feel you have already seen it. Not the exact celebration, perhaps, but its visual vocabulary - the familiar curve of the backdrop, the same cloud of flowers, the same palette travelling from one mood board to the next. The execution may be beautiful, the materials expensive and the photography flawless, yet the idea itself feels strangely familiar.

We have never had access to more inspiration, but our visual world can sometimes feel smaller. Instagram, Pinterest and international event platforms allow an idea to cross continents within hours. That access is extraordinary. It introduces us to makers, materials and techniques we might never otherwise discover, and it has created a global creative conversation. The complication is that when the same references reach everyone at once, inspiration can quietly become repetition.


Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

Working in the UAE, we meet clients who are informed, well-travelled and visually confident. They arrive with saved images, colour preferences and a clear sense of the atmosphere they want. We welcome those references because they reveal emotion and expectation. The problem begins only when the reference is treated as a finished instruction rather than the beginning of a conversation. For us, the decorator's role is not to reproduce a photograph. It is to understand why the client responded to it. Was it the scale, softness, contrast, movement or light? Was it the intimacy of the room, the confidence of one sculptural gesture, or the way the image made luxury feel effortless? Once that answer is clear, the original picture has completed its task. We can close it and begin designing for the actual architecture, occasion and people in front of us.


Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

This is the difference between copying an appearance and translating an emotion. The first produces a recognisable version

of something that already exists. The second can produce a space with identity. A memorable event should feel as though it could exist only for this client, in this place and at this moment.

That responsibility is especially important now, when an event is often encountered twice: first by the guests who live through it and later by the much larger audience who sees it online. A design may photograph beautifully and still feel empty in person. The camera rewards a focal point; the guest remembers a journey - the anticipation at the entrance, the shift of light, the surprise overhead, the intimacy of the table and the final view when leaving. We have to design for both, without allowing the photograph to replace the experience.

The market may reward speed, but memory rewards identity. The most useful question is therefore not, "Which reference will the client approve fastest?" It is, "What is this event trying to say that no other event needs to say in exactly the same way?" A mood board should be a doorway, not a destination.



Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

The Courage to Leave the Formula

"If the reference is only a starting point, the next step demands courage: we must resist the first obvious solution."

The event industry naturally favours what can be understood, priced and approved quickly. A familiar stage shape is easy to present. A known floral composition is easy to calculate. A venue already has conventional focal points, and the production team knows how to treat them. These efficiencies are necessary, particularly when timelines are tight. The safe answer is not automatically the wrong one; it becomes a limitation when we stop asking whether it truly serves this particular event.

Creative risk is often misunderstood.

It is not carelessness, excess or an attempt to make something strange for attention. The most convincing risks are disciplined. They are supported by research, proportion studies, material samples, structural calculations, lighting trials and a production team able to turn an unfamiliar idea into a reliable environment. The finished result may feel effortless; the process behind it rarely is.

As professionals, we have to challenge ourselves before we challenge a client. Have we chosen this form because it is right for the space, or because we already know how to build it? Are the flowers creating architecture, or are they being added because an empty corner makes us uncomfortable? Must a stage behave like every other stage? Could the entrance begin before the guest sees the venue? Could a ceiling, corridor or overlooked service route become part of the story?

These questions do not necessarily produce a more complicated design. Often they lead to greater clarity. One suspended form can create more tension than a room filled with disconnected details. A deliberate area of emptiness can make the next reveal feel spectacular. One material, used according to its natural behaviour, can transform a familiar palette. Innovation is not measured by how much we add; it is measured by how decisively an idea changes the experience.



Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

The client's trust is part of that process. When a composition is asymmetrical, a scale is unusual or a material is being used in a new way, a polished rendering alone may not be enough. We need to explain the logic. Samples show texture; mock-ups prove proportion; lighting tests reveal reflection and transparency. A floor plan demonstrates that the idea still respects guest movement, sightlines and service.

These practical tools do not weaken imagination.

They allow everyone involved to believe in it.
There are, of course, real limits: safety, budget, installation time, venue rules, climate and the availability of skilled hands. I do not see those limits as the opposite of creativity. They are part of the design brief. A bold concept that cannot be installed securely or experienced comfortably is not resolved. The professional achievement lies in preserving the emotional idea while solving its physical reality.



Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

Not every event needs to be avant-garde, and not every experiment needs to be loud. The risk may be subtle: reducing the palette, changing the rhythm, using light as a material or allowing one sculptural object to stand alone. What matters is that the decision is intentional - and that the team does not retreat to convention simply because convention is easier to explain.

Once we leave the formula, a more interesting question appears: if we are no longer looking only at other events, where should we look?
Creative risk becomes design only when imagination and discipline arrive together.


Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

Looking Beyond Events

When event references stop surprising us, we look outside the event world.

Architecture teaches us to respect proportion, rhythm and negative space. A building derives its power not from occupying every surface, but from considering weight, height, light and emptiness together. The relationship between a curved wall and a narrow opening, or between a monumental volume and one precise line of light, can be more instructive than hundreds of photographs of completed stages. Fashion offers a different lesson: movement. A garment changes with the body, revealing texture and silhouette gradually. That way of thinking can turn fabric from a background material into a structural idea. A pleat can shape a wall. A sleeve can suggest a canopy. The tension of a couture silhouette can inform an entrance, while transparency can teach us how to reveal a room without showing everything at once.


Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

Hospitality design reminds me that a guest does not experience a space as one photograph. A restaurant or hotel unfolds through thresholds, pauses, turns and discoveries. An event can be composed with the same progression: anticipation on arrival, expansion in the main room, intimacy at the table and one final image that remains after the celebration ends. This idea of a guest journey is often more valuable than adding another decorative object.

Nature remains the most sophisticated reference because it rarely depends on perfect symmetry. Branches respond to gravity, flowers open at different speeds and landscapes create depth through irregularity.

Learning from nature does not mean covering every surface in greenery. It means understanding growth, seasonality, imperfection and scale. A floral installa-

tion feels more alive when it appears to gather, lean, climb or disperse rather than simply fill a measured area.

Cinema, theatre and contemporary art contribute narrative. They teach us what to reveal, what to withhold and when to change the atmosphere. A strong installation can behave like a scene: it establishes a point of view, directs attention and creates an emotional before and after. Shadow, sound and reflection can become part of the décor when they support that story rather than compete with it.

The goal is never to copy a façade, runway or landscape literally. A decorator translates principles. Repeated windows might become the rhythm of a ceremony tunnel. The movement of a garment might shape a suspended textile installation. The atmosphere of an old greenhouse might inspire a transparent floral environment made through contemporary fabrication.


Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

In our process, that translation has four stages: observe, abstract, adapt and test. First, we identify what creates the emotion. Then we remove the original object and keep only its principle - perhaps rhythm, tension, reflection or growth. We adapt that principle to the event and its architecture. Finally, the team tests it at the correct scale, under the correct light and with real guests moving around it. This is the point at which inspiration becomes design rather than reference.

In a recent Celebration Station UAE corporate installation, for example, reflective shimmer was not treated simply as a sparkling surface. Its movement, transparency and response to light became the central experience of the photo zone. The material changed as the guest approached, so a branded background became dimensional and alive. We were no longer applying a product; we were designing with its behaviour.



Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

Looking outside our category does more than refresh the mood board. It expands the kinds of questions we are able to ask. And sometimes the freshest answer is not found in something futuristic at all, but in a technique we thought we already knew.
Trends are born when a principle travels from one creative world into another.

The New Is Often an Intelligent Return

The future of décor is not built only from materials that have never existed before. Very often, it begins by looking again at something the industry has decided is old.

Draping, painted scenery, candlelight, mirrored surfaces, theatrical props, ornamental metalwork and traditional floral craftsmanship all carry long histories. None is automatically contemporary or outdated. Relevance comes from proportion, context and combination. A familiar technique can feel entirely new when its scale changes, when its function changes or when it enters an unexpected relationship with the architecture.


Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

Consider draping. Used conventionally, it hides a wall. Reimagined, it can become a pleated ceiling, a sculptural curtain, an architectural frame or a threshold that reveals the room in stages. Its folds can catch light like the surface of a gown, soften

acoustics and alter the apparent height of a venue. The difference is not simply a more fashionable colour; it is a new role for the material.

The same is true of reflection and candlelight. A mirror once used for obvious glamour can dissolve the edge of a room, multiply a floral form or make an installation appear to continue beyond the venue. Candlelight can move from a table accessory to a low landscape that controls depth, pace and intimacy. Painted scenery can meet projection; hand-formed metal can sit beside digital fabrication; classical floristry can be broken into an asymmetrical field that feels almost like a natural habitat.

This is not nostalgia for its own sake. We are not interested in recreating a historic style perfectly unless the occasion demands it. We want to understand what made a technique emotionally powerful and give that power a contemporary reason to exist. The past provides a vocabulary; the designer decides what the new sentence will say.

Heritage-led events make this responsibility especially clear. A cultural symbol cannot be reduced to a convenient theme or a surface graphic. It must be researched, respected and translated into the guest experience. In our own work, that may mean combining a recognisable historic image with transparent materials, precise lighting and modern fabrication. When the relationship is thoughtful, the old and the new do not compete; each makes the other more meaningful.



Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

There is practical intelligence in revival too. Traditional techniques carry hand skills, repair knowledge and an understanding of materials that our industry should not lose. When those skills meet lighter structures, improved engineering and digital production, they can achieve forms that were previously difficult to realise. They can also encourage more adaptable pieces - elements designed to be reconfigured, refinished or used again rather than discarded after one night.

Trends themselves often move in this way. A colour returns with a different temperature. A classical arrangement comes back with a broken silhouette. A theatrical motif reappears at architectural scale. What looks like repetition from a distance may, in skilled hands, be genuine evolution.

This gives decorators a much wider creative field. We are not trapped between copying the past and rejecting it. We can edit it, question it and place it in conversation with the present. The strongest results often feel both familiar and unexpected - as though the guest recognises the emotion but has never seen it expressed in that form.

The past becomes modern when it is given a new purpose, not simply a new finish.

A Studio We Return to: NEBO Decor

These ideas become clearer when we look at studios that consistently build their own visual language. Some catch our attention through a single project. Others draw us back because their thinking continues to challenge. NEBO Decor belongs to the second group. We are genuinely a fan of their work - not because we want to reproduce its appearance, but because it encourages us to think more ambitiously about what decoration can become.

Based in Sevastopol, Crimea, and led creatively by Lilia Kutuzova, with her husband and co-founder Vladimir Kytin directing much of the production work, the studio shows what can happen when imagination and fabrication develop together. What we admire is not one signature palette or a repeatable floral style. It is their refusal to treat a venue as a neutral box waiting to be filled.

In NEBO's work, flowers often operate as architecture rather than an accessory. Ceilings become active surfaces. Transitional areas join the guest journey. A familiar room is reorganised by scale, suspension, reflection or one unexpected object. The result is not decoration placed inside a venue; it is a temporary world with its own logic.

Their restaurant and café interventions are especially instructive. Commercial interiors arrive with fixed

functions, circulation routes and established focal points. The predictable response would be to decorate the most visible wall and stop. In transformations such as Cataleya, the concept extends beyond one photo zone. Florals, sculptural elements and overhead gestures change how the interior is read, allowing the guest to discover the design rather than consume it in one glance. For a decorator, this is an important lesson: the venue itself can become the canvas, and the guest's route can become part of the composition.


Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

Across the wider portfolio, ceilings are repeatedly treated as landscapes rather than afterthoughts. Suspended flowers, reflective forms and illuminated structures establish rhythm overhead, so the guest feels the design before studying any single arrangement. Other projects are controlled by one monumental intervention - including the memorable whale-like installation - which shifts the emotional centre of an already distinctive location. These gestures work because they are not isolated props. They change the perceived scale and meaning of the architecture around them.

That level of imagination demands production discipline. The more unusual the gesture, the more exact the questions become: Where is the load carried? How will the surface behave under heat and light? Can the installation be assembled within the venue's access window? What will be visible from the entrance, the table and the camera? The connection between Lilia's creative direction and Vladimir's production expertise is part of what makes the work convincing. The idea survives contact with reality. This is also why professional admiration should never become imitation. We may look at a NEBO project and admire the suspended scale, the activation of an unexpected surface or the confidence to let one object dominate the room. The useful question is not, "How can I make something that looks like this?" It is, "What assumption did this project refuse - and what assumption should I question in my own work?"

That question sends us back to our first solution. Have we accepted the expected focal point too quickly? Is there another surface, route or perspective that could carry the idea more powerfully? Can the concept unfold as an experience rather than exist as one image? Could the location stop being a background and become an active part of the narrative?

This is what a studio with a genuine point of view contributes to the wider profession. It does more than produce beautiful photographs. It raises the standard of the questions other decorators ask themselves. NEBO Decor's creative signature is not that every project looks identical; it is that each one shows a consistent appetite for transformation.
A creative signature is not one look repeated. It is a way of thinking that remains recognisable even when the style changes.


Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

The UAE as a Global Creative Laboratory
For us, the UAE is one of the most demanding and exciting places in which to put all of these ideas into practice. People arrive here from across the world carrying different cultures, ambitions and definitions of celebration. A destination wedding may need to unite several traditions in one coherent experience. A corporate event may need to express an international brand while still belonging unmistakably to its location.
Here, an event is rarely only a gathering. It is often a statement of identity, achievement and place. Clients come to the UAE expecting distinction. They ask for the biggest, the coolest, the most elegant or the mo-

ment nobody has seen before. That ambition pushes our industry forward, but it also gives us a responsibility: superlatives must be translated into ideas, not simply quantities.


Designs by Denis Panchenko (Celebration Station UAE)

More flowers, a larger screen or a higher stage do not automatically create a stronger concept. A generous budget can still produce visual sameness when it is directed towards familiar symbols of luxury. The greater opportunity is to use the UAE's extraordinary combination of cultures, venues, fabrication knowledge and technology as a laboratory for new visual languages.

Few markets offer such creative contrast. We may work in a desert landscape one week, a glass tower the next, followed by a palace, yacht, private residence or international exhibition hall. Each environment asks for a different intelligence. The desert invites sensitivity to horizon, wind and changing light. A ballroom demands control of scale and sightlines. A restaurant requires the design to coexist with an interior that already has a personality. When the concept responds to those conditions, it becomes inseparable from the memory of the event.

At Celebration Station UAE, we see our responsibility as translation rather than importation. A reference may arrive from Milan, Istanbul, Moscow, Seoul or New York, but the finished environment must belong to this client, this architecture and this moment. That is particularly important in destination celebrations, where guests have travelled precisely because the location is meaningful. The design should not erase the destination; it should reveal it through a new point of view.

The same principle applies to cultural traditions. Bringing several customs together does not mean placing every symbol in the room. It requires listening: understanding which rituals carry emotional weight, where families need recognition and how the sequence of the celebration should unfold. The decorator becomes part designer, part editor and part storyteller, finding a visual language in which different identities can feel present without competing.

Collaboration makes that possible. Transformative work is rarely the achievement of one person standing beside a finished stage. It depends on decorators, florists, fabricators, lighting teams, planners, coordinators and technicians who are willing to solve something unfamiliar together. Creative direction gives the project purpose; production knowledge gives the idea permission to become real.

That partnership will matter even more as technology makes perfect-looking references easier to generate. When thousands of seductive images can appear instantly, the valuable professional skill is no longer finding an attractive picture. It is recognising which idea deserves to enter the physical world - and knowing how to build it safely, beautifully and meaningfully. A visual can promise anything; a professional must understand gravity, budget, guest movement, installation time, climate and the behaviour of materials under real light.

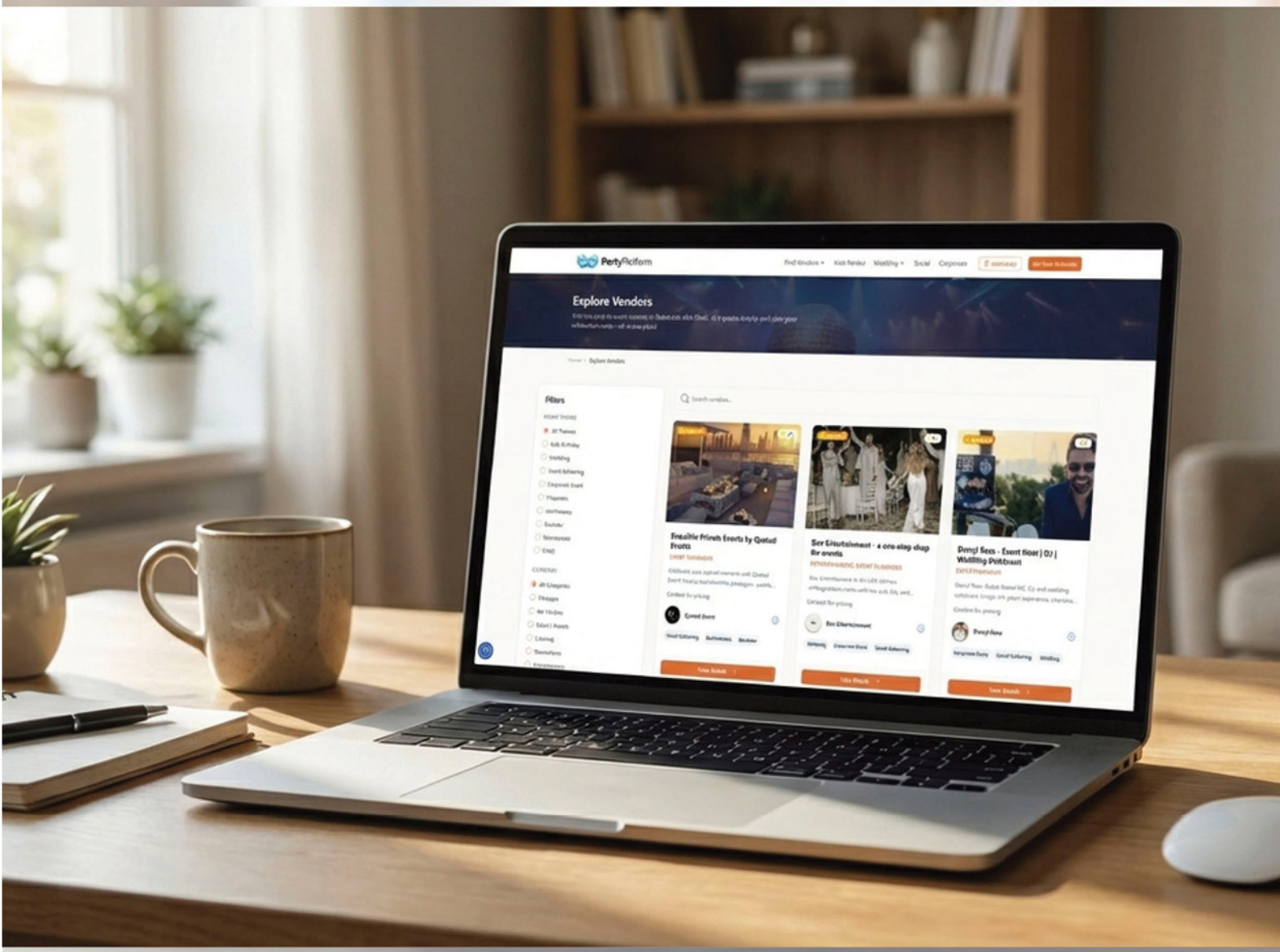
This, to us, is where the UAE can lead. The market already brings the world together. Its next opportunity is not merely to import what the world considers fashionable, but to become a place where new approaches are tested, refined and then carried outward. That requires curiosity beyond our category, respect for craft, investment in production and the confidence to present clients with a point of view.

As decorators, we are not employed only to make spaces attractive. We are entrusted with shaping how important moments are entered, experienced and remembered. A wedding, anniversary, national occasion or corporate milestone deserves more than a fashionable background. It deserves an environment with intention - one that honours the people at its centre and leaves them with a memory that belongs only to them.

The future will not be created by following the next trend more quickly. It will be created by observing more widely, editing more intelligently and producing more courageously. Our task is not simply to predict what comes next. It is to give it form.

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The QR Code Is Doing More Work Than You Think



by Vaishali **Shah**
Founder of Creative ID
and Ananya Cards

Vaishali Shah has 25 years of experience across 500+ events in the UAE, the UK and internationally. She runs Creative ID, a branding and marketing consultancy, and Ananya Cards, a premium event stationery studio, and is based between the UAE and the UK



As a foodie, I scan a lot of QR codes on restaurant menus, and the gap between the good ones and the bad ones is hard to miss. Too often it opens onto a PDF that takes an age to load, the type too small to read, built for a printer rather than a phone. Other times it's the opposite: a menu made properly for the screen in your hand, quick to open, with a line on the dish or the pairing that the paper menu never had room for. Same square, two completely different jobs, depending on whether anyone thought about what happens after the scan.

The same is true on the corporate stationery we produce at Creative ID and the wedding stationery we produce at Ananya Cards. A small square, printed straight onto the card, can carry full event details and sponsor information on a corporate piece, or the story of how a couple met on a wedding one. An RSVP form or a note on dietary requirements sits one scan away, on a piece of card someone is already holding in their hand. Or it can be placed on digital stationery just as easily.

QR codes have stuck around for a reason. Over the last few years, they've become part of how printed material is expected to work, not a passing trend. A code can take on brand colours or an unconventional shape without losing its ability to scan, and a logo can sit at its centre too, worked into the pattern rather than pasted over it. Done well, it reads as part of the identity rather than something bolted on afterwards.

Corporate and MICE events

I put a QR code on my own slides when I spoke at Superwomen Retreat in Dubai, linking straight through to downloadable resources delegates could take away and use in their own businesses. No one had to scribble down a link or hope they'd remember to look something up later. They scanned, and it was already in their hand. At a corporate or MICE event, a code earns real weight for the same reason. Printed onto a delegate's badge, it can lead straight through to their LinkedIn profile or a one-page company summary, useful in a room full of people trying to place a name to a face. On an event card or table sign, it can carry the full programme, adjusted in real time if a session moves, along with sponsor information that would otherwise take up half the printed page.

That last part matters more than it sounds. Sponsors want a return on the space they're paying for, and a code turns a badge or an event card into one of the most effective branded touchpoints on the day: a direct route through to their stand or straight to booking a meeting.

The organisers benefit too. A code on a badge or a card can be tracked, which means knowing who actually engaged with a sponsor's information rather than guessing from footfall. For anyone reporting back to a client or a board after the event, that data is worth having.

It also does something paper alone never could for the guest list itself. A code on an invitation that leads through to a personalised RSVP page can show who responded, and roughly where people dropped off along the way, giving organisers a much clearer read on likely attendance well before the day itself.

Weddings

For weddings, the same idea works. A code on the invitation can lead through to the wedding website or the RSVP form. It can just as easily carry dietary requirements or directions to the venue, without crowding the card itself. On the day, one placed on a table card or a menu can share the story of how a couple met or open a shared album guests can add their own photographs to.

What happens after the scan

A QR code is only as good as what's waiting on the other side of it.

That's the thinking behind what I call a 'signature moment'. Brand truth creates brand difference, and brand difference is what creates feeling in an audience. Feeling is what creates the memory. That's my definition. A QR code is one route to building that moment into a piece of stationery, but only if what's waiting on the other side of the scan is worth the reaction it creates.

Send someone through to a page that's slow to load or simply says "thank you for scanning", and the moment's been wasted. Send them somewhere useful and well branded, and the code becomes another one of the touchpoints doing real work for you, whether that guest is a wedding guest or a delegate at a conference.

Practical notes for organisers

• Decide the destination before the design and make it a page built for that specific piece rather than a general homepage. That's what makes the results measurable afterwards.
• Test the scan at actual print size and in the lighting the room will actually have, not just on a screen at your desk.
• Give the scan a reason, not just a destination. "Scan for your table" or "scan for the story behind this dish" does more work than a code with nothing to explain it.
• Keep a fallback for guests without signal or a smartphone in hand. Printed information should never fully depend on someone being able to scan it.
• Brief sponsors on what the code should actually do for them.
• If tracking scans is possible, use it, and keep watching after the event itself. For merchandise or passes people hold onto, scans in the weeks that follow show whether an item's still doing its job.

None of this replaces the paper itself. The events getting real use from a QR code pair it with good design rather than swap one for the other, and a guest or a delegate still notices the well-made piece in their hand first, before they ever reach for their phone. That's the standard we hold codes to on every piece of stationery that leaves the studio, corporate or wedding, and the same one that shapes brand work at Ananya Cards and Creative ID: what does this do once it's actually in someone's hand.



The Architecture of Emotion: How Narrative Thinking Transforms Luxury Events



by Gauri **Chadha**
Co-Founder & Creative Director
The Big Night Events

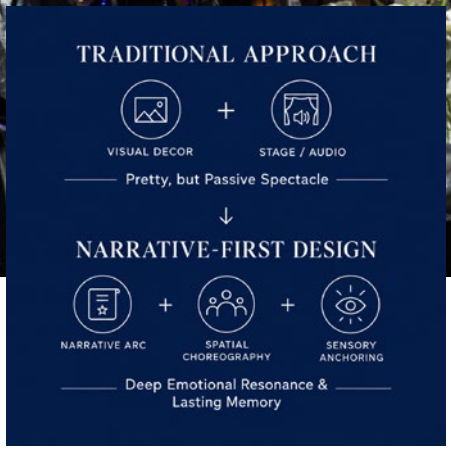
Gauri Chadha is an award-winning filmmaker (Hollywood and Bollywood) and Co-Founder and Creative Director of The Big Night Events in Dubai. With Kunal Rupani, she runs The Big Night Events, Wild Child, I Do Weddings and Paw Party

Beyond Decor: How Storytelling Creates the "WOW" Effect

In high-end luxury event design, we have reached a point of aesthetic saturation. Stunning floral installations, imported crystal, and state-of-the-art LED walls are no longer surprises; they are baseline expectations. When everything is magnificent, nothing stands out on visuals alone.

True impact, the kind that produces a genuine, breath-snatching "WOW" does not come from spending more on decor. It comes from narrative thinking.

Coming from a background in filmmaking, I approach event design not as spatial styling, but as worldbuilding. Decor is simply the set design; production is merely the lighting rig. Storytelling is the invisible thread that breathes life into both.



TRADITIONAL APPROACH vs. NARRATIVE-FIRST DESIGN

When you apply narrative thinking, you stop asking "What should this room look like?" and start asking:

- What is the protagonist's journey through this space?
- How do we build tension, reveal plot points, and resolve the evening?
- What feelings are guests carrying home when the lights go down?

Narrative thinking transforms an event from a passive visual display into an active, unfolding story where every guest feels like a central character.

Signature Case Study: Project Neon Arcade

To see narrative thinking in action, let us break down a signature luxury production executed by The Big Night Events team.

The Case Profile

- Client Brief: A high-profile milestone birthday celebration. The host wanted an immersive "Neon Arcade" concept, vibrant, high-energy, nostalgic, yet executed with high-end luxury sophistication.
- Production Constraint: A strict 24-hour setup window from load-in to showtime.

The Challenge

The core risk with themes like "arcade" or "retro gaming" is that they can easily tip into childish or tacky territory. The objective was to elevate nostalgic pop culture

into a chic, world-class experiential playground. Compounding this challenge was the tight 24-hour setup window, leaving zero room for structural or technical trial-and-error when installing complex kinetic equipment.

The Creative Approach: Kinetic Nostalgia
Rather than leaning on static arcade props, we transformed the spatial architecture into a living, responsive canvas:

 Act I: The Chromatic Prelude: Guests entered through a matte-black tunnel with sharp neon vector lines, shifting the atmosphere from the outside world into a high-contrast digital universe.
 Act II: The Immersive Arcade Corridor: A curated mix of classic arcade games, like flanked by high-end lounge seating, custom cocktail bars, and rich saturated neon lighting.
 Act III: The Kinetic Sky Reveal (The WOW Moment): Overhead, suspended across the entire main space, sat a matrix of 1,000 synchronized Orbs. At the climax of the evening, the lower lights dim, the soundtrack swells, and the celestial canopy of 1,000 illuminated orbs which was taken 5 meters high above the guests heads cascading in waves of color and light that move to the beat of the music.

Execution Logic
Pulling off a complex 1,000 orb kinetic reveal within a 1-day setup window required extreme technical pre-planning:

1. Pre-Engineered Rigging Grids: Because on-site time was limited to 24 hours, the ceiling grid for the 1,000 overhead orbs was pre-assembled and pre-programmed in a warehouse environment days prior. On setup day, it was lifted in synchronized modular blocks .
2. Dynamic Color Mapping: Instead of harsh, uncalibrated neon, the color palette was tightly controlled. Warm magentas, electric blues, and vivid ambers were mapped to soft textures, preventing visual fatigue while maintaining electric energy.

3. Interactive Audio-Visual Sync: The kinetic orbs were programmed to react live to the music tracks and key birthday reveal moments, ensuring the physical space felt alive and responsive to the crowd's energy.

The Outcome
 Flawless Technical Execution: The 1,000-orb kinetic overhead show executed without a single glitch despite the 24-hour build turnaround.
 Elevated Aesthetic: Successfully bridged the gap between retro fun and luxury event design.
 Peak Emotional Peak: The overhead reveal created an immediate collective surge of energy, with the host and guests completely surrounded by a floating ocean of light.

3. The Psychology of Emotional Memory: Designing for the Mind

The Peak-End Rule
Psychological research shows that human memory does not record every minute of an experience equally. The brain judges an event almost entirely by two moments: the peak (the most intense emotional point) and the end.

In luxury event design, you do not need twenty spectacular moments; you need one perfectly engineered emotional crescendo like the ceiling activation of 1,000 lighting orbs and an unforgettable finale. Strategic restraint makes the peak moment hit significantly harder.

Sensory Anchoring
Visual memory is volatile, but smell and sound bypass the analytical brain and trigger instant emotional recall. By custom-blending an ambient scent for an event space or creating a bespoke musical refrain that repeats at key narrative shifts, you create a sensory anchor. Months later, encountering that same scent or chord progression will instantly transport the guest back to that specific evening.

From Spectator to Participant
True luxury is interactive, not passive. When guests feel they are simply watching a show, they remain detached. When you give them subtle agency interactive arcade elements, bespoke personalized touches, or structural reveals they transition from passive observers to co-creators of the experience.

Final Thought
Luxury is no longer defined by opulent displays or lavish budgets. Modern luxury is defined by how deeply an experience makes you feel. When you combine cinematic narrative structure with precise operational execution, you build more than an event, you create an indelible memory.

From the Circus Act to the Experience

How My Understanding of Entertainment in the UAE Has Changed



by Walter Muñoz

Walter Muñoz is a circus artist and live entertainment professional. His career began in 2003, with more than a decade in the UAE and the Middle East across stage shows, festivals, hospitality and technology-integrated productions.

Walter Muñoz is a circus artist and live entertainment professional whose career began in 2003, with more than a decade of professional activity in the UAE and the Middle East. Over the years, he has worked across stage shows, festivals, hospitality and technology-integrated productions, adapting his work to different audiences, cultures and formats. From this experience, he reflects on how his own understanding of entertainment has evolved, and on the role artists, technology and human connection can play in the experiences of the future.

When you arrived in the UAE, what did you find, and what did you have to learn to work with that audience?

When I arrived in the UAE, the market already had sophisticated productions and mainly stage-based shows. I also started encountering entertainment formats that were closer to roaming and street entertainment, with international artists working directly with the audience.

My first experience was JBR/The Walk Carnival in 2016, where I worked for approximately one month doing shows and roaming. For me, it was interesting to observe that although there were artists from different parts of the world, some members of the audience were still not completely familiar with that kind of direct interaction. In some cases, there was some hesitation about when to approach, participate or simply watch.

That made me rethink my own show. Over time, I understood that every country and every culture has a different way of connecting with entertainment. Every time you change your audience, you have to understand again how to communicate with those people and what works for them. When I arrived in the UAE, I had to go through that process again and adapt the way I connected with the audience.

I always tried to take my work towards a more universal language, with more physical comedy and body language. In a country where you can have many different cultures within the same event, I understood that you cannot always rely on language or specific cultural references.

Over time, I also saw that the adaptation worked in both directions: artists learned to understand the audience better, and the audience became increasingly familiar with these international entertainment formats and with the possibility of participating in them.





How did you see the relationship between audiences and artists change over the years?

I think one of the most interesting changes was that interaction with artists became increasingly natural. At the beginning, in certain contexts, some members of the audience could enjoy the show but still not be sure that they could also become part of it. Over time, that relationship changed.

In my experience at Riverland Dubai Parks & Resorts in 2018, for example, entertainment was already part of the concept of the park. People went there expecting to encounter artists and activities. But what was interesting for me was seeing how that familiarity gradually moved into other contexts. Over the years, it became increasingly normal to find artists and roaming performers in malls, festivals and different types of events.

I also saw this in a cultural context such as Ramadan. In 2022, I worked throughout the entire celebration period at Salt, Kite Beach. It was particularly significant for me because it coincided with a period of changes in everyday life in the UAE: that year also saw the official weekend change from Friday-Saturday to Saturday-Sunday. Within that context, I noticed how a celebration that traditionally had a more local and contained approach to entertainment was also incorporating international entertainment offerings. Working there throughout Ramadan, I was able to see that openness first-hand.

The following year, in 2023, I saw it clearly again during Street Fest at Dubai Hills Mall, between September and October. The audience was much more accustomed to encountering artists and roaming performers, and the interaction happened much more naturally.

I think this shows that the evolution did not happen only among artists. The audience also learned how to engage with entertainment and understand that they could participate in it.

If I had to summarise it: in 2016, audiences watched and often hesitated about whether they could approach; today, they arrive expecting to participate.

What changed in the way you created a show as you gained more experience?

The pandemic was one of the moments that put that ability to adapt to the test the most. Suddenly, a fundamental part of our work (proximity and interaction) was no longer possible in the same way. We had to adapt formats and protocols, but also find new ways to connect with the audience.

In my case, I developed a show around distancing and hygiene protocols, using that situation as part of the comedy. It worked because it talked about something people were experiencing every day. For me, it was a concrete example of something I already understood about artistic work: an artist can plant a seed in the audience, something that can grow differently within each individual.

From there, I paid even more attention to the possibility of creating a connection that did not necessarily end when the act ended. Over the years, the question also changed. At first it could be very simple: "Let's do something different. Let's do circus." Circus was at the centre of everything.

With experience, I started asking myself a different question: "What do I want the spectator to feel?" Circus is still my tool and my disciplines are still the same, but I began thinking about what I could generate with them depending on the context: surprise, humour, participation, energy, connection or simply a moment that the person remembers.

So the act stopped being the final objective and became a tool to achieve something more. For me, that is the difference between simply doing circus and using circus to build an experience.



How did your relationship with clients change as your understanding of entertainment changed?

Over the years, the way I relate to clients also changed. At the beginning, when a company hired you, you mainly received instructions about what they needed, and your job was to respond to that request as well as possible.

With experience, I began to understand that many of the questions that used to appear on the day of the event needed to be asked much earlier. I need to know who the audience is, what type of event it is, what space we have, what will be happening around us, what other artists or activities will be there, what the technical requirements are and, above all, what the client wants to achieve through the entertainment.

That changed the conversation. It is no longer simply about "we need an artist," but about understanding what the client wants to create for people and what format can work best to achieve it.

I also learned that professionalism does not start when you step onto the stage. It involves preparation, communication, safety, knowing the space, coordinating with technicians and other artists, and anticipating any needs before the event. As an artist, I also have to understand that the organiser already has many things to solve. My job should make the event easier to deliver, not add more problems or last-minute work.

And part of that professionalisation is also knowing your own limits. If a client needs something that is not my speciality, I prefer to recognise that and recommend someone who can do it well. For me, being part of an experience also means understanding when my work adds value and when it is better to find the right person.

How did technology change the way you work as an artist and understand the show?

In Dubai, technology is increasingly present in events: drones, screens, mapping, lighting, effects and many other elements are part of productions. That also changed the way I work. A juggling act is already technically demanding on its own, and when you integrate it into a production at this level, you cannot wait until you arrive on stage to see how everything works. The music is prepared beforehand, and it is essential to work in advance with the lighting and sound technicians so that everyone understands the flow of the show.

An experience that clearly showed me this evolution was 3BK at Burj Khalifa, where I worked for two seasons, in 2021 and 2022, with my LED juggling show. The space had a full LED ceiling and my performance had to work together with the projections, lighting, smoke and music. Even the colour of the clubs was important to prevent them from disappearing visually against the projections. But the most interesting part was not simply having all those elements, but making them work together: having a light accentuate a moment in the routine without making the juggling more difficult, having a lighting change accompany an explosive moment, or having smoke appear at the right moment so that it became part of the atmosphere rather than simply being another effect.

To achieve that, all the elements have to be connected from the preparation stage. Music that begins more softly, an effect that develops progressively and ends together with a change in rhythm, lighting and other effects can completely transform what the audience is experiencing. When different disciplines are planned together, they stop being independent elements and start functioning as one experience.

That requires everyone involved in the experience to have a common vision and understand what each element is doing within the show. When that connection exists, technology does not compete with the artist and the artist does not compete with the production; they enhance each other and create an experience that neither could create separately.

How is this evolution reflected in what you are doing now, and where do you think entertainment is heading?

On October 15, I will start a brunch project at Atlantis that takes this evolution one step further. It involves roaming among the guests, encouraging them to have fun and capturing moments that they can later share on their social media and on the venue's channels.

In recent years, we have seen an increasingly close relationship between entertainment and social media. Venues are looking to create special moments that attract more guests, with games and themes that encourage people to participate and post content. And for me, that is the most significant difference: before, I created the entertainment and people filmed it for their social media; now my job is to help them create their own content.

For this, we will work with props, games and different themes that will change each weekend, with interaction between other artists and the venue. The goal is to capture moments when people are genuinely having fun. Something I also already implement in my work is that, in addition to having a good time, each person can take something tangible with them: a photo, a memory or a souvenir from the entertainment.

It is no longer only about performing an act, but about becoming part of the experience and helping people live it and take it with them.

I think we are moving towards a point where we will no longer be able to separate the show so easily from everything around it. Technology will continue to advance and we will see increasingly immersive productions, with new forms of lighting, projection, artificial intelligence, drones and other resources. But for me, the important question is not how far technology can go, but what we want to make people feel with it.

There is a risk when technology starts developing for its own sake and the objective becomes simply to surprise because something is technically possible. We could end up creating experiences that are visually impressive but emotionally empty. That is where the role of the artist becomes even more important: someone has to interpret, make decisions, understand the audience and give intention to everything that is happening.

That is why I do not think the future is about choosing between the human and the technological. I think we are moving towards an increasingly close symbiosis between technology, artist, emotion and audience. Technology will change the way we create and probably also the way we relate to shows, but the need to connect with other people will not disappear.

That is why I believe the real luxury in the coming years will not be having more technology, but having a person. When anyone can buy drones, mapping and artificial intelligence, what cannot be copied is an artist who looks at you, reacts to you and makes that moment something that cannot happen exactly the same way twice. If an experience works exactly the same without the artist, perhaps it is not an experience, but decoration. And perhaps that is the next challenge for those of us working in entertainment: not only asking what we can do, but what is worth doing.





Behind the Magic:
Why technical production makes or breaks a wedding



by Rajesh W. Pereira,
CEO, Matrix AVE

Rajesh W. Pereira is CEO of Matrix Audio Visual & Entertainment (Matrix AVE), which he founded in Dubai in 1999. He has delivered live events across the UAE for more than two decades. Matrix AVE took part in EventMania 2026.

When guests attend a wedding, they remember the emotions. The bride's entrance. The father's speech. The first dance. The spectacular lighting that transforms a ballroom. The crystal-clear sound during the vows. The seamless transition from ceremony to celebration.

What they rarely notice is the technical production working quietly behind the scenes to make those moments possible.

As someone who has spent more than two decades delivering live events across the UAE, I've learned one simple truth: the success of a wedding is often determined long before the first guest arrives. It begins with meticulous planning, technical expertise, and an understanding that every piece of equipment must work flawlessly under pressure.

Every Venue is Different

One of the biggest misconceptions is that every ballroom or outdoor venue can simply "plug in" a wedding production.

In reality, every venue presents its own technical challenges. Ceiling heights, power availability, rigging limitations, access routes, loading docks, acoustic characteristics, and existing infrastructure all influence how a production is designed.

A venue walkthrough isn't just about deciding where the stage should go. It is about identifying potential challenges before they become costly problems on the wedding day.

Sound is More Than Volume

Guests often assume that good sound simply means loud speakers. Professional audio is actually about clarity, consistency, and coverage.

The vows must be heard equally by guests sitting in the front row and those seated at the back of the ballroom. Background music during dinner should enhance conversation rather than overpower it. Live musicians and DJs require carefully balanced systems that prevent distortion and unwanted feedback.

Microphone selection, speaker placement, digital mixing, and room acoustics all play an essential role in delivering an enjoyable experience.

Lighting Creates Emotion

Lighting is perhaps the single most powerful tool in transforming a venue.

Warm ambient lighting creates intimacy during dinner. Intelligent moving lights energise the dance floor. Pin spotting highlights floral arrangements and wedding cakes. Colour temperatures influence how skin tones appear in photographs and videos.

Professional lighting designers don't simply illuminate a room; they guide the emotional journey of the evening.

The right lighting can make a familiar ballroom feel completely unique.

Video Has Become Essential

Modern weddings increasingly incorporate large LED screens, projection systems, live camera feeds, and cinematic content.

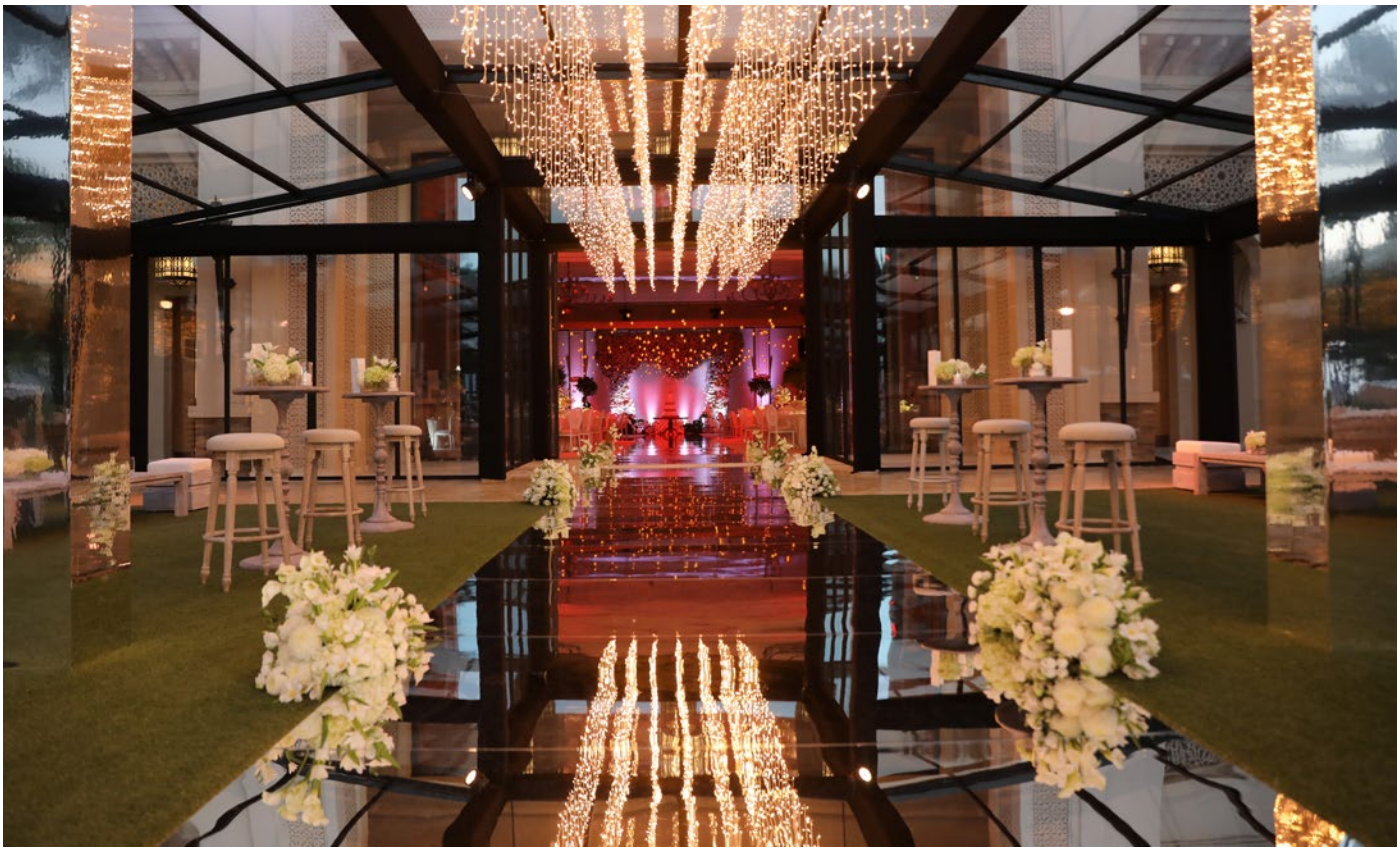
Guests expect to clearly see speeches, same-day edits, family videos, and live performances regardless of where they are seated.

This requires careful planning of screen sizes, viewing angles, signal distribution, backup playback systems, and camera positioning. A single failed connection can interrupt one of the most memorable moments of the celebration.

Real Examples

Over the years, we've encountered challenges that only become apparent once a production begins. At one luxury resort in Jebel Ali, we delivered a wedding celebration for more than 600 guests at an outdoor location. Just two hours before guests arrived, strong winds severely damaged the wedding backdrop and lighting setup. Working against the clock, our production team redesigned the entire backdrop and lighting configuration, maintaining the intended visual impact while ensuring every structure was safe, secure, and fully compliant with venue regulations. Because contingency planning had been built into the production schedule, the event proceeded without guests ever knowing adjustments had been made.

On another occasion, at a five-star ballroom in Palm Jumeirah, Dubai, a last-minute increase of nearly 150 guests required changes to the room layout just hours before doors opened. Audio coverage, LED screen sightlines, and lighting positions were quickly recalculated, allowing every guest to enjoy the same experience despite the revised floor plan. These situations reinforce an important lesson: flexibility and preparation are just as valuable as the equipment itself.





Power and Safety Cannot Be Overlooked

Behind every spectacular wedding lies a carefully engineered electrical distribution system.

Professional event teams calculate power loads, distribute electrical circuits correctly, provide protection against overloads, and ensure every cable is safely routed to minimise risk.

Outdoor weddings introduce additional considerations including generators, weather protection, cable management, and contingency planning.

Safety is not visible when everything works, but it is always present.

The UAE Environment Adds Another Layer

Weddings across the UAE and wider GCC often take place in unique environments that demand additional technical planning. Beachfront ceremonies, desert celebrations, garden receptions, and rooftop venues all present challenges very different from those found inside a traditional ballroom.



Summer temperatures regularly exceed 40°C, while humidity along the coastline can affect electronic equipment, LED displays, and power distribution if systems are not properly protected. Outdoor productions frequently require silent generators, weather-resistant cabling, cable protection ramps, and backup power solutions positioned well away from guest areas to minimise both noise and visual impact.

Dust, sand, and sudden coastal winds are also realities that experienced production teams plan for. In many cases, success depends less on the equipment itself and more on understanding how local environmental conditions influence every technical decision.

Rehearsals Make the Difference

The smoothest weddings rarely happen by chance.

Professional production teams rehearse entrances, speeches, entertainment cues, special effects, lighting changes, and video playback well before guests arrive.

Every cue is timed. Every transition is tested.

Every department from audio and lighting to video, stage management, entertainment, and venue operations works together using detailed production schedules and communication systems.

Preparation removes uncertainty.

Always Have a Backup Plan

In live events, technology can fail. The difference between an amateur setup and a professional production is not whether problems occur, but how quickly they are resolved.

Experienced production companies build redundancy into their systems:
- Backup microphones
- Spare cables
- Secondary playback devices
- Additional lighting fixtures
- Alternative power supplies

Most guests never realise a problem has been prevented because the solution was already waiting behind the scenes.

Investing in Experience

When couples allocate their wedding budget, technical production is sometimes viewed simply as equipment rental.

In reality, they are investing in planning, engineering, creative design, logistics, experienced technicians, safety, and peace of mind.

The latest sound system or lighting fixture alone does not create an unforgettable wedding. It is the expertise of the people designing, operating, and coordinating every technical element that transforms technology into emotion.

Five Questions Every Couple Should Ask Their Technical Production Partner

Before confirming your production supplier, ask:

1. Have you previously worked at our chosen venue?
2. What backup equipment will be available on-site if something fails?
3. How will power be distributed safely, particularly for outdoor celebrations?
4. Will there be a dedicated technical manager or show caller coordinating the event?
5. Have you carried out a full technical site inspection before finalising the production design?

The answers to these questions often reveal far more than a quotation alone and provide valuable insight



into a company's level of preparation and experience.

At its heart, a wedding celebrates two people beginning a new chapter together. Technical production should never overshadow that story, but it should ensure every guest experiences it exactly as intended.

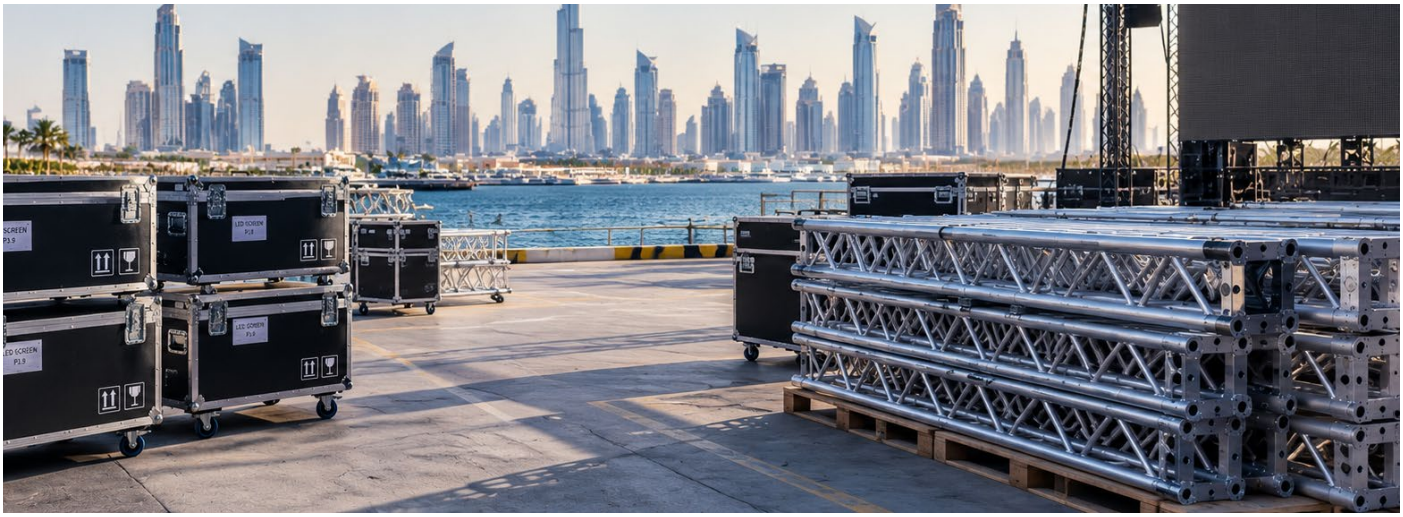
The finest productions are often the ones guests never consciously notice. They simply feel immersed in the moment, with every speech heard clearly, every entrance perfectly timed, and every memory beautifully illuminated.

When everything works perfectly, the technology becomes invisible. What remains is the emotion and the magic of that present moment.



Importing Equipment into the GCC:

The Invisible Problem That Breaks a Show Before You've Even Reached the Venue



When a system fails on stage - as happened in the case of the automated LED portal covered in the previous issue - there's a team, a protocol, and a fallback scenario. That's a managed risk: it gets rehearsed. Far less often does anyone prepare for a failure that happens two weeks before the event, at a port or a customs warehouse, where the decision isn't made by the producer or the technical director, but by an official stamping an ATA carnet.

This is a subject almost nobody writes about, even though it's the one that most often determines whether the show happens as promised at all.

Why This Happens Specifically in the GCC

The region runs on a temporary-import model for equipment: a significant share of specialized gear - robotic systems, certain classes of LED screens, specific stage equipment - isn't physically manufactured or stocked locally in sufficient volume. It's either rented from a limited pool of local suppliers or brought in project-by-project through an ATA carnet - a temporary-import document that, in theory, simplifies the process, but in practice hinges on the human factor of a specific customs shift.
The difference between "equipment cleared customs in 48 hours" and "equipment sat for ten days" can come down to how busy the port is at that moment, how precisely the paperwork was filed, and whether the broker is familiar with that specific type of cargo. For a producer, this means one thing: the timeline the logistics company quotes is an optimistic scenario, not a guarantee.

Dubai vs. Doha vs. Riyadh: Not One Market, but Three

A mistake teams working across multiple Gulf countries at once make regularly is carrying a logistics model from one city to another without recalculating it.

Dubai remains the point with the widest choice of local suppliers and the most well-worn customs procedure - risk here is minimal for most standard equipment. Doha is a market with a narrower pool of local vendors: specific gear is more often brought in from outside, and timelines need a larger buffer, especially during peak event periods (year-end, major international forums). Riyadh and Jeddah are a fast-growing market where demand for certain classes of equipment already outpaces local supply: what can be rented in a week in Dubai sometimes needs to be booked a month out - or shipped in from

the UAE - in Saudi Arabia.
A producer planning the technical side of an event in Doha or Riyadh on Dubai timelines is building in a risk they'll find out about too late.

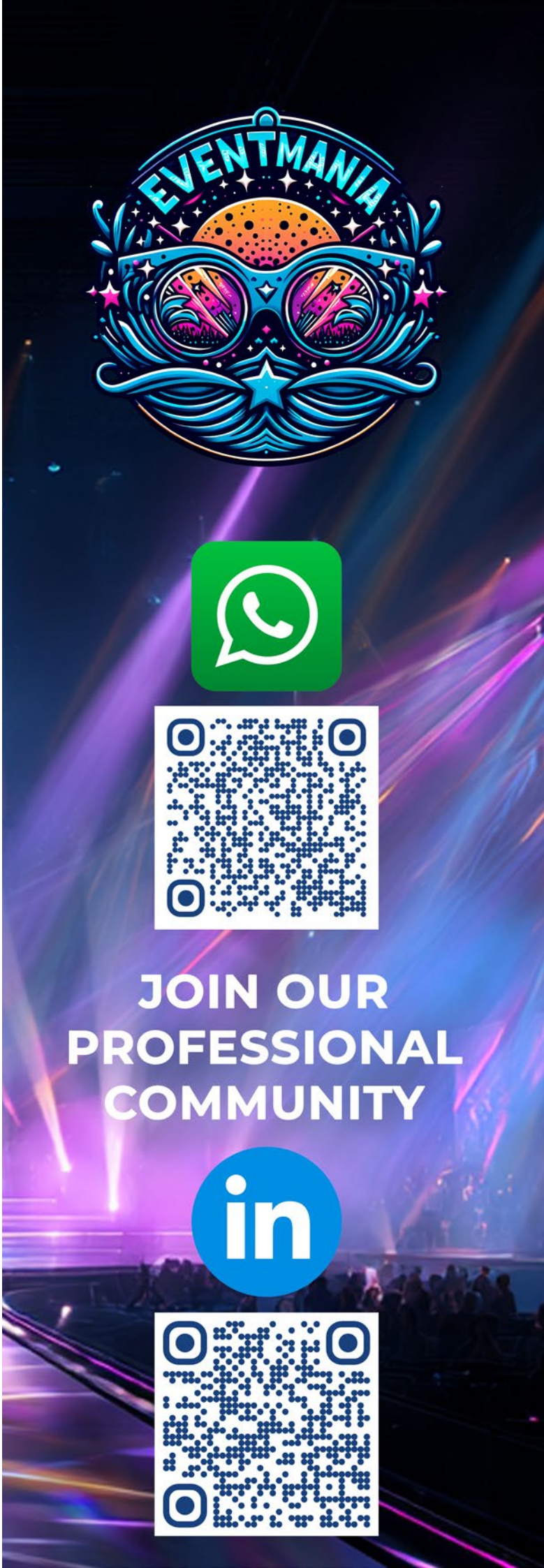
What Happens When the Technical Team Refuses to Travel Without Equipment Insurance

Experienced technical producers in the region have long since developed a rule they rarely say out loud to the client: don't confirm final load-in until the critical equipment is physically sitting in a warehouse in the country of the event. Not "in transit," not "at customs, should clear tomorrow" - physically on-site.

The reason is simple: once the venue contract is signed and dates are confirmed to the client, the producer has no room left to maneuver. A technical director who agrees to load-in on "the logistics company's word" is transferring the risk of the entire event onto a process they don't control.

A Practical Equipment-Reservation Checklist
- Build in customs buffer time at 2–3x whatever the logistics company quotes - especially the first time working a specific route or cargo type
- Require confirmation of the equipment's physical arrival at the local warehouse as a separate project milestone, rather than relying on an "in transit" status
- Keep a second local supplier for critical equipment as a formal fallback - even if the contract with the primary one is already signed
- When working in a Gulf country that's new to the team, build in a separate time budget to scout the local rental market rather than carrying over timelines from another city
- Write a clear decision point into the contract with both the logistics company and the technical production team: a deadline after which the backup scenario activates automatically, rather than waiting for "just a couple more days"

The technology that makes an impressive reveal on stage is the result of work that didn't start at load-in - it started at the port. This is almost never mentioned in post-event case studies. And it's almost always the thing that decides whether the show happens at all.



The Event App Ecosystem in the GCC



by Sergey Larin

What actually saves budget, and what's just marketing wrapping

Every year, a new wave of event-tech platforms hits the market promising to "transform" registration, networking, and analytics. Every year, most producers in the GCC keep closing out logistics in a WhatsApp group and a shared spreadsheet. And importantly, not because they're technologically behind. Because in the specific conditions of this region, that's often the working solution.

The difference between a producer who burns budget on an app for nothing and one who picks the right tool isn't knowledge of the platform market. It's understanding which task technology actually removes friction from, and which one it just adds another layer to that ends up being administered manually anyway. What follows isn't a ranking or a list of recommendations, but a breakdown of specific solutions that genuinely work in the region, and the conditions under which they're justified.

Registration and Badging: The Local Player vs. the Global One

Cvent and Eventbrite remain the default choice for organizers looking for a recognizable name. But at venues like Dubai World Trade Centre, the core work of registration and badging for major exhibitions has for years been done by local operators, for example ADITUS (formerly Info Salons Middle East), which grew specifically out of contracts with DWTC and other regional exhibition centers. The difference isn't in the dashboard interface, it's that a local operator is physically deployed on-site, works with an Arabic-speaking audience, and prints badges on the spot at a scale of tens of thousands of visitors a day, something a global SaaS platform without a local team on the ground can't provide.

For a closed corporate event or a gala of 200–300 guests, the choice reverses: full exhibition-grade infrastructure is overkill, and a solution like NOFA Solutions (a Dubai-based on-site registration operator with experience across 500+ GCC events) handles the job without overpaying for functionality that won't be needed.

Networking Matching: Case-Study Scale Isn't a Guarantee of Your Scale of Results

Swapcard is the largest example of AI matching in the region: the platform runs on a three-year contract with Dubai World Trade Centre, and at GITEX its engine produced 391,341 connections and 4,508 confirmed meetings between visitors and exhibitors across an audience of over 100,000 people. Grip is another notable player with the same type of technology, working with SXSW, Clarion, and RX.

The key mistake a mid-size event organizer makes is reading these numbers as a promise of comparable impact at their own event. Swapcard's and Grip's

statistics come from events with tens of thousands of participants and a diverse pool of profiles; it's exactly that density that makes the matching algorithm statistically meaningful. At a conference of 80–120 people, the same tool most likely just automates what a moderator would have done more accurately, by hand, for less money.

The Regional Alternative: A Platform Built Out of MENA

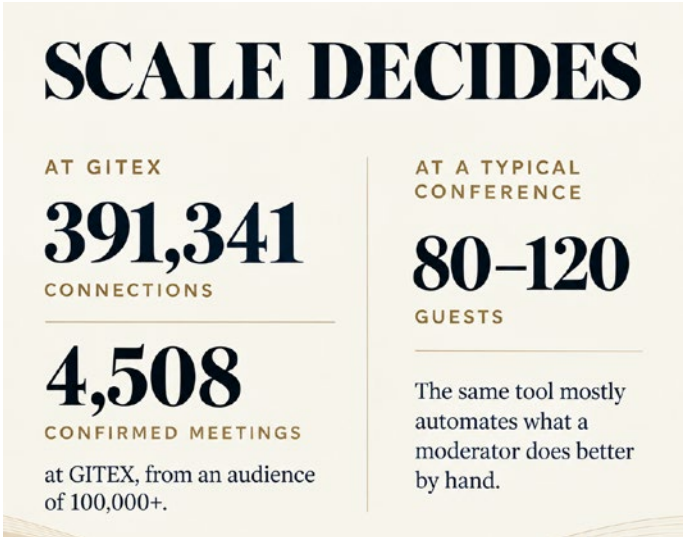
Eventtus, a company originally from Cairo with an office in Dubai JLT, differs from Cvent and Swapcard in that it was built from the start around the specifics of the region: local payment gateways, ticketing, networking features, and a mobile app tailored to an audience that uses events in Arabic and English at the same time. That doesn't mean the solution is automatically better than global competitors (it's narrower in functionality), but for an organizer for whom working with a local audience out of the box matters more than customizing a Western platform, it's a genuine alternative worth comparing directly, not something to skip past by default in favor of the more hyped name.



AI Planning Tools: Where It Works Now, Where It Works Only Partway

Generating running orders, draft budgets, first-pass vendor briefs: this is where general-purpose AI tools are already delivering real time savings for producers, especially at the first-draft stage that then gets refined by hand. This is routine, structured work, and it's where AI is genuinely good.

Where AI still remains a demo rather than a working tool is automatic decision-making during a



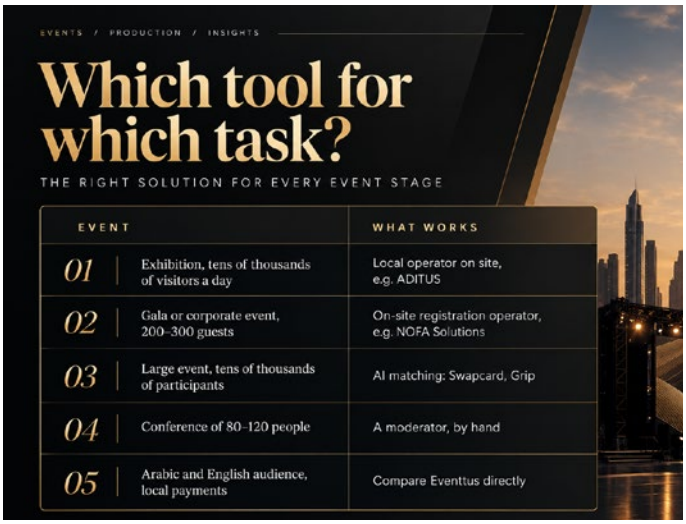
force-majeure situation, and any task that requires understanding of local context: cultural specifics, the relationship with a particular venue, informal agreements that aren't written down in any brief.

The Practical Takeaway

Before signing off on the budget for yet another event-tech platform, a producer should ask themselves three questions:

At what scale of event was the vendor's statistic produced, and does it match the scale of your project?
Does this require the guest to do anything more complex than scanning a QR code?
Does the vendor have genuine local presence on-site, or is support limited to the time zone of headquarters?

If the answer to even one of these is no, what's in front of you probably isn't a tool built for your task; it's someone else's case study, nicely repackaged.



The Rise of Engagement Technology



by Dr James Morgan

Dr James Morgan is Managing Consultant at James Morgan Associates and Principal Consultant for Tourism and Hospitality at Jadarah Business Consulting, Riyadh. With 30+ years in events and hospitality, he has repeatedly been voted among the world's 100 Most Influential People in the Event Industry (Eventex).



The global events industry has invested heavily in event technology over the past decade, but a subtle shift has been taking place over the last 5 years, globally. The concept is becoming more apparent in the GCC with the conversation moving beyond registration platforms, mobile apps and event management systems towards technologies that actively shape how audiences participate and engage during live experiences. Discussions on this topic at the world's only dedicated expo, Event Tech Live as well as Informa's Middle East Event Show and Saudi Event Show increasingly reflects this evolution.

This article covers what engagement technology is, how it can help improve audience engagement and offers a 5-step plan to create an Event Engagement Plan. But what is Engagement technology? Think of a collection of digital, immersive and AI-powered tools that encourage audiences to actively participate during a live event that influences behaviour, stimulates interaction and creates memorable shared experiences.

Participation Technologies: Giving Every Delegate a Voice

Today's attendees expect to contribute rather than simply listen at conferences. Live polling, moderated Q&A, audience voting, collaborative whiteboards and gamification are transforming conferences into two-way conversations. Information flows from stage to conference audiences and meeting delegates and back to create dynamic conversations that improve engagement, knowledge sharing and attendee satisfaction. Slido is used widely in the Middle East. For example, Saudi's renowned King Abdullah University of Science and Technology has incorporated Slido as default polling service within the KAUST Webex platform for meetings.

Breaking Language Barriers Through AI

International events increasingly attract multilingual audiences, making accessibility just as important as interaction. AI-powered translation platforms such as Wordly is regularly used by the Riyadh Exhibitions Company's upcoming Saudi Agriculture expo and Saudi Build expo conferences, delivers real-time interpretation in 67 languages. This enables their international conference audience to participate confidently from their phones regardless of their native language. Multilingual engagement is rapidly moving from a premium feature to an expected standard.

Immersive Technologies: Turning Visitors into Participants

Immersive technologies are transforming exhibitions and cultural events from places people visit into experiences they actively explore. Interactive LED environments, projection mapping, holographic displays, augmented and mixed reality, spatial audio and haptic technologies allow audiences to engage with content rather than simply observe it. At

GITEX Global 2025, examples included holographic mesh LED, smart-glass mixed-media installations and motion-based VR simulation experiences. Companies such as Dubai-based Artnovi and Option 1 Events are demonstrating how immersive storytelling encourages longer dwell times, deeper emotional connections and greater social sharing. In many cases immersive enhancement creates an emotional connection to a simple story being told which engenders behaviour change, an ROI element that has become a key performance indicator for event success.

AI Is Creating a Different Event for Every Visitor

Artificial intelligence is becoming the invisible layer connecting the event experience. AI-powered recommendation engines personalise agendas, suggest networking opportunities and recommend exhibitors based on visitor interests and behaviour. For expos, AI networking platforms such as award-winning Grip being used by Dubai-based DMG Events analyses visitor data to deliver personalized networking, meeting recommendations and suggestions for stage content sessions via their AI powered match making function that enhances business outcomes.

Measuring Engagement and Measuring Impact

Attendance figures alone reveal very little about the quality of an event. Today's organisers are increasingly measuring behavioural outcomes including engagement rates, audience sentiment, booth dwell time and movement patterns. Dallas-based Zenus provides anonymised insights into how visitors move through venues, interact with content, and measure their emotions as they visit exhibitor booths. At Dubai's Coca-Cola Arena, they deployed AI enabled IoT sensors that passively captured aggregate foot traffic and dwell time during a multi-day technology summit. This approach validated engagement patterns and spatial layout efficiency without collecting any personally identifiable information.

Great Technology Amplifies Great Event Design

Technology should never become the attraction. The most successful events begin with a clear understanding of audience needs and overarching event objectives before selecting technologies. Even the most sophisticated AI, immersive environments or engagement platforms cannot compensate for poor content, uninspiring speakers or weak event design. Technology is most effective when it becomes almost invisible, quietly removing barriers and enabling richer human interaction.

The Biggest Challenge Is Technology Adoption

Many organisers invest significantly in engagement technology only to discover that attendees fail to use it. Successful adoption depends on understanding audiences, making participation effortless and immediately valuable. You need a clear engagement plan. The first interaction should be frictionless, delivering a clear benefit, whether through personalised agendas, AI networking or exclusive content. Speakers and moderators must actively encourage live participation, while exhibitors should invite visitors to interact rather than simply observe. Visible participation encourages others to join, turning engagement into a shared experience rather than an individual activity. But how do you design an Event Engagement Plan? Here is a simple EEP approach to consider.

The Event Engagement Plan

Let's conclude this article with a Five Step Event Engagement Plan that aligns with overall event objectives:

1. Define Objectives & KPIs: establish what engagement needs to achieve and how success will be defined.
2. Design the Engagement Technology Stack: identify the right combination of technologies for an audience to support the event objectives and desired audience behaviours.
3. Build the Measurement Framework: determine how engagement data will be captured, integrated and connected to event KPIs and ROI.
4. Evaluate Engagement Outcomes: assess performance against agreed objectives to understand what generated meaningful audience engagement and value.
5. Optimise & Evolve: turn engagement intelligence into strategic recommendations that improve future event design, technology investment and audience outcomes.

Immersive Technology in the GCC:

Two Different Products Under One Label

How event technology starts solving real business problems



by Sergey Larin

AYA Universe, teamLab Phenomena, Infinity des Lumières, ARTE Museum Dubai and TODA all run on the same technical foundation - projection mapping, motion sensors, generative visuals. But for an event organizer, these are not five versions of one product. They are two fundamentally different business models, each with its own negotiation logic, timelines and risks.

Model One: The Attraction That Sometimes Rents Out

AYA Universe, teamLab Phenomena, Infinity des Lumières and ARTE Museum Dubai are built around the paying visitor. That is their core revenue stream, and their entire operating model - hours, staffing, content - is optimized for public footfall, not private events. Renting these spaces for a corporate event is possible almost everywhere, but it sits outside the core business, and that shapes the terms.

AYA Universe
Wafi City Mall, Dubai
40,000 sq ft
12 immersive zones
Ticketed digital entertainment park

In practice, this means a narrower booking window - usually before opening or after public closing - full buyouts negotiated individually rather than published as a standard rate, and content that is almost never customizable: you get the existing installations as they are, because adapting curated content to a client's brand is not part of these venues' operations, it's the exception to them. For an organizer, this means building in a longer lead time, not expecting branded visuals inside the installations, and confirming exclusivity terms before locking in a date, not after.

ARTE Museum Dubai sits inside this model, but with a different accent. It is the Dubai venue of a Korean immersive-art brand that opened its first site in Jeju in 2020 and now operates in South Korea, Chengdu, Las Vegas, Dubai and New York, with more than 12 million visitors worldwide by the operator's own count. Its roughly 2,800 sqm are built around a single theme, Eternal Nature, and the experience adds scent and a tea bar to the usual image-and-sound layer - a sensory dimension that works well for a networking evening and is hard to reproduce in a ballroom. Unlike its ticketed neighbours, ARTE actively addresses the trade: its own materials list corporate receptions, product launches, incentive groups, press events and DMC programmes alongside buyouts and customized group experiences. For an organizer, that signals a sales team used to the request. The framework, however, does not change: the theme is fixed, so the question to put into the brief is what "customized" covers - the format of the evening, or the content on the walls.

ARTE Museum Dubai
The Dubai Mall, Downtown Dubai
2,800 sqm (30,000 sq ft)
opened February 2024
Immersive art museum
theme: Eternal Nature

The location is the second argument. ARTE shares The Dubai Mall with Infinity des Lumières, and sits steps from Burj Khalifa and the Dubai Fountain - which makes it easy to fold into a DMC or incentive itinerary without a separate transfer, and makes the mall the one address in the city where two ticketed immersive venues can be inspected on a single site visit and quoted against each other.

TODA - Theatre of Digital Art
Souk Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai
360° projection venue
reopened April 2025
Bookable space for private a
nd corporate events

Model Two: The Technology That Is the Service

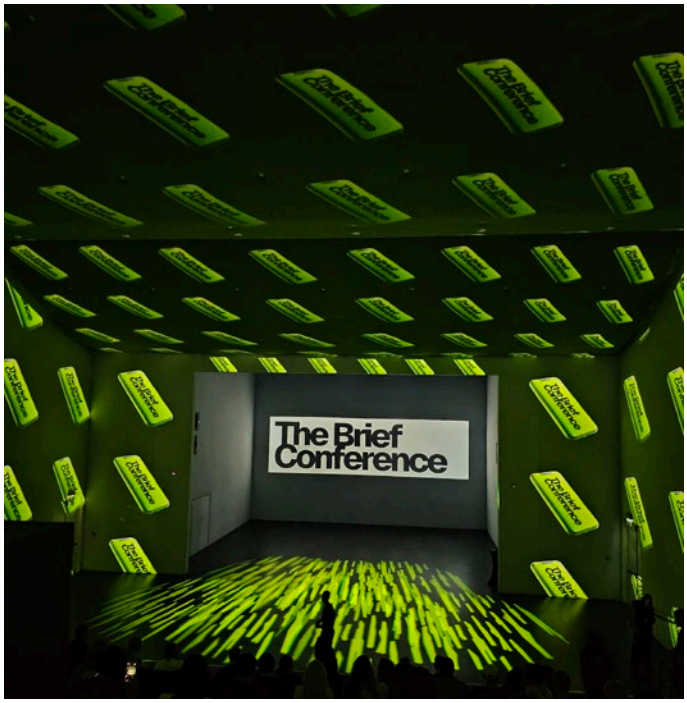
TODA is built the other way around. Full space buyouts, live performances and brand activations are not a side function - they are the core business, especially since the venue's 2025 relaunch. That changes the operating logic: content on the 360-degree projection system is swapped in for the client's brief, hours are more open since the venue isn't primarily serving walk-in footfall, and negotiations start from the event itself rather than as an exception to a daily public schedule.

teamLab Phenomena
Saadiyat Cultural District, Abu Dhabi
17,000 sqm · opened April 2025
World's largest purpose-built
digital art museum

The price of that flexibility is the absence of a pre-built, recognizable installation brand. AYA Universe, teamLab, Infinity des Lumières and ARTE also sell a name and a reputation - the guest is coming to see something specific they already know about. TODA sells the ability to build any experience from scratch, without a curator's media weight behind it.

Where Organizers Get It Wrong

The most common sourcing mistake in this segment is negotiating with a ticketed attraction as if it were a rental venue: requesting full content customization, expecting daytime slots during peak tourist season, or assuming a fixed corporate rate card. None of these hold, because they run against the venue's core business model - these spaces were not designed



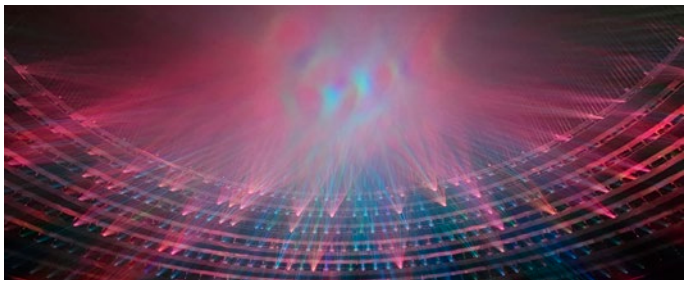
as event venues, and treating them as one means talking to a department for which the request is an exception, not a process.

Infinity des Lumières
The Dubai Mall, Level 2
2,700 sqm · 130 projectors, 58 speakers
Middle East's largest digital art center

The reverse mistake is walking into TODA expecting a teamLab-level wow factor without investing in original content. The technology there is neutral: it amplifies whatever the organizer feeds into it, and it does not compensate for weak creative with a curator's brand recognition the way the destination venues do.

The Practical Takeaway

The first question when sourcing an immersive venue isn't how impressive it looks - it's whether it's a ticketed product or a service venue. That answer determines the available booking window, content flexibility, pricing logic, and whose reputational capital ends up carrying the event.



The Premagic Story:

From wedding photos to full-cycle event marketing



by Anup Mohan, Co-founder & CEO, Premagic

Anup Mohan is Co-founder and CEO of Premagic, an event technology company that grew from a wedding-photo sharing tool in India into an attendee-content and event marketing platform, used at events including Informa's Middle East Event Show.



India is known for big fat weddings. Mine was no exception. We had a huge number of relatives, friends, and three photographers covering every angle. And yet, weeks after the wedding, the people struggling the most weren't my wife and me. It was our relatives, desperately trying to get hold of their photos.

That problem stuck with me. The technology we built to solve it was genuinely novel at the time: a fast, simple way to distribute event photos to the people who needed them. Before long, we had an opportunity we hadn't anticipated: an invitation to exhibit at GITEX Global, the world's largest tech show.

Attendees at GITEX loved receiving their photos quickly. But the organisers came back with a different ask: could we make attendees share those photos on social media?

It sounds like a simple request. But it stopped me in my tracks, because I realised I'd heard that ask before, just in a different context. Before founding Premagic, I was a marketer. In my previous two roles, I built advocacy and marketing solutions for brands - getting people talking and creating organic reach through real voices. What GITEX was describing wasn't just a product feature request. It was advocacy marketing. And we were sitting on the perfect mechanism to deliver it.

From that conversation, Premagic evolved from a photo distribution tool into a post-event advocacy marketing platform. We built for one clear goal: get attendees to share their own authentic event moments, and let that content do the marketing work.

As we opened up new geographies and worked with more organisers, the same pattern kept showing up: the more personalised the content, the more likely attendees were to share it. That insight pushed us toward building AI Avatars, personalised, stylised attendee content that felt genuinely theirs. The more personal it felt, the further it travelled.

We also started recognising that post-event was only part of the opportunity. Organisers were struggling to drive registrations. Pre-event marketing was expensive and often generic. And we already had the tools to solve it differently. We built personalised "I'm Attending" advocacy posters giving registered attendees something worth sharing with their own networks. Every attendee became a registration driver for the next person.

What started as a post-event tool had naturally grown into something bigger on its own terms. Pre-event to build buzz and drive



registrations. During the event to capture and distribute moments in real time. Post-event to extend the experience well beyond closing day. A complete end-to-end event marketing platform that organisers can run as a campaign across every stage.

What started as a post-event tool had naturally grown into something bigger on its own terms. Gradually, Premagic expanded across the event lifecycle: pre-event advocacy to drive registrations, real-time content distribution during the event, and post-event sharing to keep the conversation going.

Why this works differently in the GCC

The GCC is a market that runs heavily on trust and relationships. I've experienced that firsthand while building Premagic in the region. Meeting someone, having a conversation and understanding the person behind the company can completely change a business relationship.
The same applies to event marketing. A post from an attendee, speaker or exhibitor carries something a brand advertisement cannot manufacture: personal trust.

Every confirmed participant has a professional network filled with people an organiser may already be paying to reach. Activate enough of those people, and the event moves from something your audience sees advertised to something everyone around them seems to be talking about.

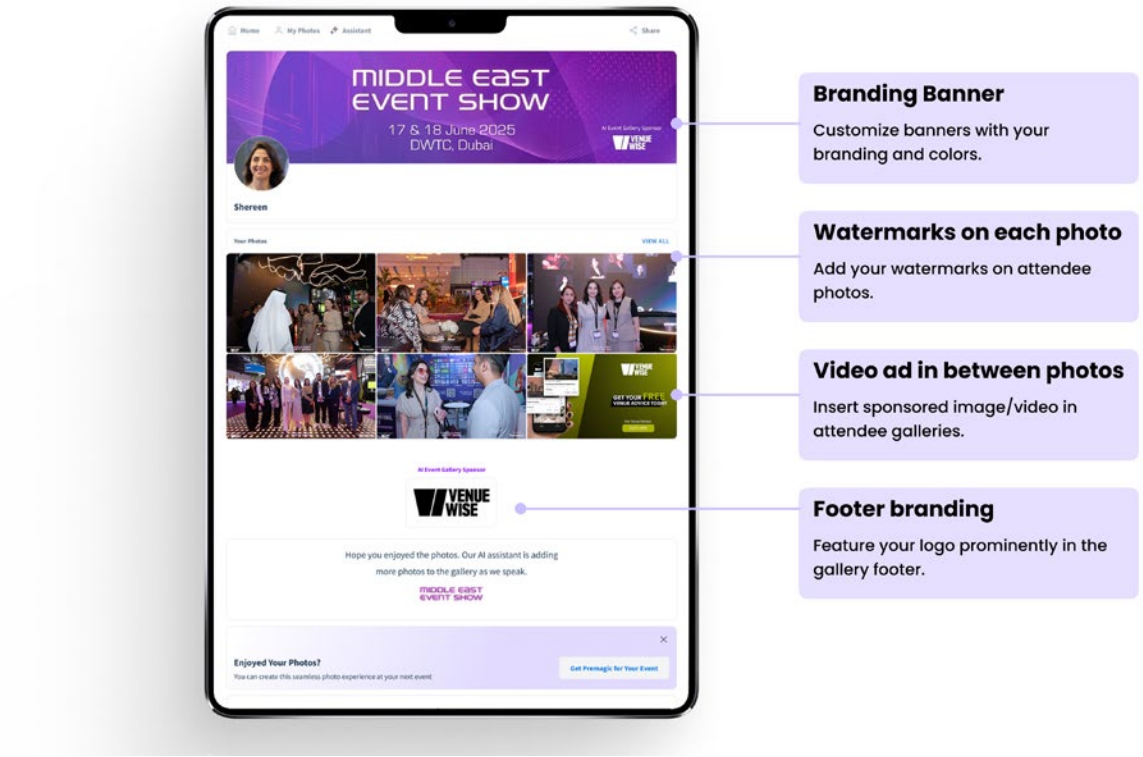
The test that proved the model: MEES 2025

The Middle East Event Show 2025, run by Informa Connect, gave us one of the clearest demonstrations of what this model could become commercially.

It started as a post-event opportunity. Photo distribution was placed on the sponsorship deck as a standard deliverable. A sponsor came on board, purchasing it as an AI Event Gallery package. Their branding was embedded into every attendee photo, placed in the gallery footer, and carried as a native video ad inside the gallery experience.

What happened next was the real story. Attendees didn't just download the photos. They shared them. Branded content moved into their networks organically, with no paid push behind it. The sponsor got visibility that outlasted the event and travelled further than a banner ever could. Tens of thousands of branded photos distributed. Thousands of unique advocates pushing that content into their own networks.

The success at MEES 2025 led Informa to add the format to their standard sponsorship deck for



future events, bringing Premagic into more of their shows. A repeatable commercial model that an organiser of Informa's scale builds into their offering says more than any single metric. What this means for event marketing

Paid acquisition continues to get more expensive. Meanwhile, events already have an overlooked distribution network sitting inside their attendee lists.



Imagine seeing a polished advertisement for GITEX Global. Now compare that with someone in your professional network posting that they're attending, sharing why they're excited and inviting others to join them. Which one are you more likely to pay attention to?

That's the opportunity we see in attendee advocacy. People don't need more ads. They want to know what people like them are doing.

MEES 2026: taking it full lifecycle

This year, we're returning to MEES with a bigger brief. Sponsor visibility will run across the full lifecycle, from pre-event "I'm Attending" content to real-time sharing onsite and the post-event gallery. The principle stays the same: put sponsor visibility inside content attendees already want to share.

We're also proud to be shortlisted as a finalist for Best Use of AI at an Event at the Middle East Event Awards 2026. The recognition means a lot, but what matters most is continuing to prove that this model works at scale.

What the journey taught me

None of this followed a perfect roadmap. We followed the questions organisers were asking and kept building toward the answers. The wedding problem gave us the technology. GITEX gave us the marketing insight. MEES gave us the commercial proof. And somewhere along the way, a tool built to help people find their wedding photos became a platform designed to turn attendees into one of an event's most powerful marketing channels.

That's Premagic today. And we're still building.



Your face. On the cover.

Dreamed of seeing yourself on the cover of an industry magazine?

EventMania makes it happen in seconds.

1. **Scan the QR code**
2. **Upload your photo**
3. **Get your personal cover**
4. **Share it and tag @eventmania.dubai**

No photoshoot. No editors. No waiting.
We repost the best ones.

Avatar Studio technology: Premagic

Where the Person in the Room Still Matters Most



Why live event technology still needs professional judgment in the room



by Abdullah Ghassan Alazem, Industry Thought Leader

Abdullah Ghassan Alazem is an Industry Thought Leader focused on live event execution, stakeholder trust and event management advisory, with experience in corporate and public-sector event environments.

I have learned not to trust an event tool too early.

In planning, a system can look solid. The guest list is loaded, the agenda is uploaded, suppliers are confirmed, and the team is briefed. Everyone is working from the same information, and it feels under control.
Then the guests arrive.
That is where the real test starts.

Registration says the process is fine, but the desk feels slow. A speaker is marked confirmed, but backstage they look uncertain.
A senior guest asks for a small change, and that change quietly touches protocol, timing, and the client's comfort. It stops being just an update.

On site, the pressure is rarely operational. It is reputation, relationships, timing, and trust, moving at the same time. A ten-minute delay is nothing in one room and a real problem in another. A message might need to go out immediately, be handled quietly, or not be sent at all. Sometimes the client does not want an explanation. They want to see that the right person has command.

I saw this clearly during a major economic event in Riyadh, where the arrival time for a senior guest was moved closer to opening. Nothing in the system looked broken. The agenda, seating plan, and team notes were still in place. But in the room, the change touched protocol, speaker timing, client comfort, and the first few minutes of the event. The right call was to keep one person leading, adjust the flow quietly, and give the client only the update they needed. Most guests did not notice anything.
That was success.

None of this is an argument against technology. I use it for registration, reporting, communication, guest management, scheduling, and post-review.



Complex events are harder to run without good tools. The best of them give the team one shared view and avoid confusion.

But the tool is not the event. Some of the best calls on site are simple. One communication path. One person leading. One quiet change backstage. One direct word with the client. No extra layer. No new process.
The hall gives off signals that never make it into a report. You can see a queue forming before it turns into a complaint. You can feel attention starting to drop. You can tell that a speaker needs encouragement before the audience notices anything is wrong.

That is why tools need to be planned, not just bought. Every tool should enter an event with a clear reason, a clear owner, and a backup the team can fall back on without debate. People should know exactly what the screen can and cannot tell them.
Training has to include the hard version, not only the clean run-through. The badge printer stops. A guest arrives late. A room changes at short notice. The client asks a difficult question. The team needs to have practiced where to look, who to tell, what to fix quietly, and when to take action.

Stakeholder management is where this shows up most clearly. In corporate and government events across the GCC, how something is communicated often matters as much as the update itself. A late message creates tension. An unnecessary one creates concern. The same message delivered by the wrong person can make a manageable issue feel bigger. A tool can help you send the update. A person still has to decide whether it should be sent, when, and by whom.

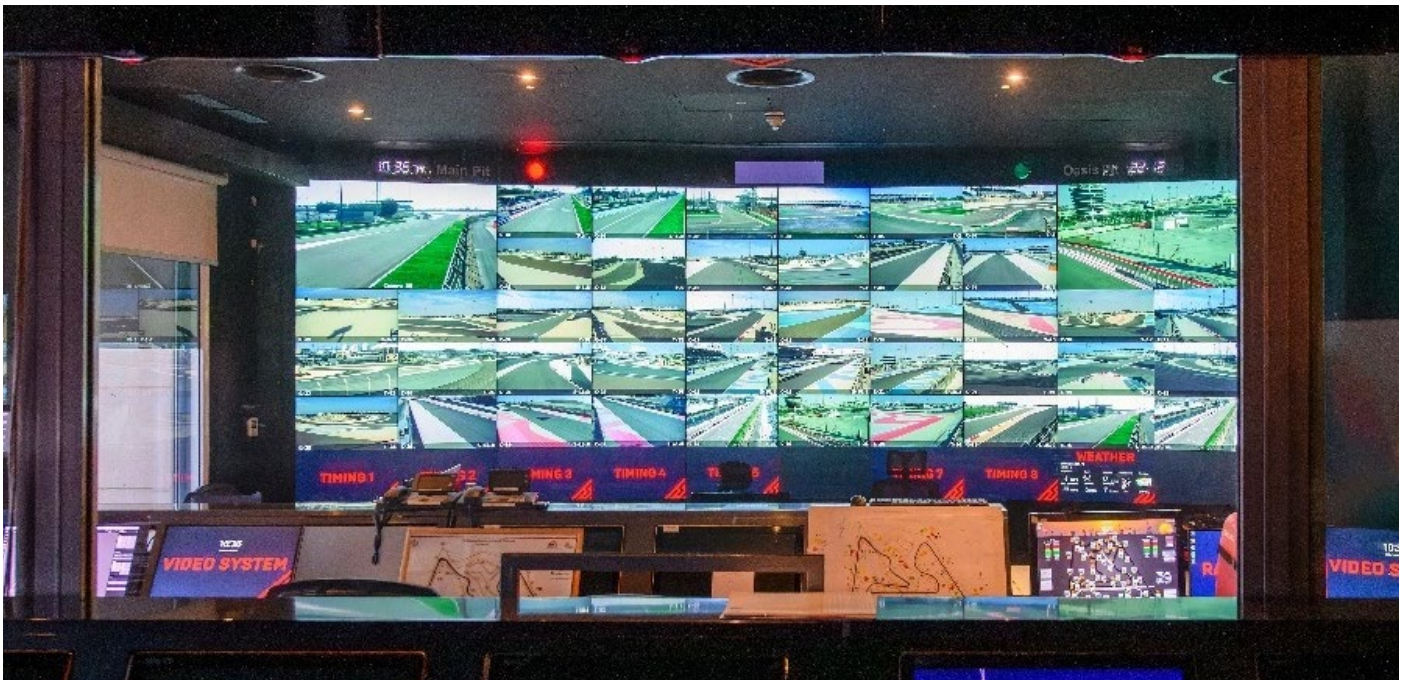
Prioritization matters just as much. Live events create noise, and not every issue needs the same response. Some issues require immediate action. Some can be handled by the team without involving the client. Others are best fixed quietly while the program continues. The skill is knowing the difference in real time.

I see the risk most clearly when a tool arrives too late to be trusted. It looks impressive in the demo, but the team has never run it under real conditions. The client expects control, and the process has not been tested. Late tools just create late pressure.

A well-prepared tool does the opposite. It cuts down unnecessary calls and messages, keeps people working from the same picture, and gives whoever is leading a clearer view of the floor. It also helps the team review what worked after the event.

So for me the answer was never less technology. It is better use of it. Choose the tool early. Test it properly. Train the people who will actually use it. Keep the process simple enough to survive real pressure. Then keep experienced people close to the decisions when the doors open.

The person in the room knows what it means.



Own Your Event's First Impression:

Inside MICEtribe's Bet on Full-Service Event Technology



by Randy Gad

Commercial Growth Manager (Sales and Marketing) at MICEtribe, a Dubai-based event execution partner for registration, badge printing, check-in, payments, hardware and on-site crews.
Founded in 2016, MICEtribe is the Registration Partner of EventMania.



Ask any organizer in the Gulf what actually keeps them up the night before doors open, and the answer is rarely the content. It's the registration list that hasn't synced. The badge printer that jams at hour two. The crew member who missed the briefing. The check-in line growing faster than it moves. None of these failures is dramatic on its own - together, they decide whether an attendee's first impression is seamless or chaotic.

MICEtribe was built on a simple observation: that chaos rarely comes from one bad vendor. It comes from stitching together too many disconnected tools to run a single event - a registration platform here, a badge printer there, a separate staffing agency, a separate payments provider - with the organizer left to project-manage systems that were never built to talk to each other.



One Platform, Not Five Vendors

MICEtribe's answer is to put the full event lifecycle on one system. Its cloud-based software covers registration and landing pages, invitation and approval workflows, badge printing and self-service kiosks, access control and session check-in, and seating management, alongside mobile and browser-based event experiences. Communication runs through WhatsApp, email, and SMS from the same platform that handles payments, ticketing, lead capture, networking, and live analytics — with API and webhook integrations so it connects to whatever else an organizer already relies on. Software alone doesn't run an event, though. Someone still has to be on-site when the printer jams. MICEtribe backs the platform with the equipment, a trained on-site crew, printed badges and consumables, and a dedicated project manager who

owns the event end to end. Instead of hiring one company for the platform, another for staffing, and a third for printing, organizers work with a single team from the first planning call to the last badge scanned at the door.

Pricing That Scales With the Event, Not Against It

The platform flexes with event size rather than forcing every organizer into the same pricing tier. Smaller events pay as they go; higher-volume organizers subscribe for a lower effective rate per registration. A fifty-person internal briefing and a five-thousand-attendee exhibition run on the same system - without either one paying for capabilities it doesn't need.

Over a decade in, that model holds at serious scale. MICEtribe's client roster includes FIFA, TED, Qatar Energy, and the Geneva Motor Show - organizations with no tolerance for a badge printer failing at the wrong moment.



Government entities, universities, and corporations across the region run on the same platform, from single-day conferences to multi-day productions with thousands of attendees.

Built From Inside the GCC, Not Adapted for It

MICEtribe runs from Dubai, with branches across Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Estonia - positioned inside the GCC's event industry rather than serving it remotely. That regional presence shows up in the details: local crews who know the venues, support that runs on the region's working hours, and a platform designed around the Gulf's event calendar rather than retrofitted from another market. As the region's events sector keeps expanding, that on-the-ground presence carries as much weight as the technology itself.



MICEtribe sums up its philosophy in five words: own your event's first impression. It's a modest line for an ambitious standard - that the moment an attendee registers, checks in, or walks through the door should feel effortless, regardless of the complexity running behind it. Whether it's a fifty-person corporate briefing or a global sporting event, the target is the same: the technology stays invisible, and the experience is the only thing anyone remembers.

In an industry where a single event can make or break an organizer's reputation, that consistency isn't a nice-to-have. It's the whole point.

Learn more or start planning your next event at plan.micetribe.com.

EventMania 2026
Same Numbers, Sharper Room



Third edition, a standalone wedding stream and the empty seats

On 8 September the third EventMania Festival took place at Arjaan by Rotana DMC in Dubai. In a year when many industry events across the region scaled down or were postponed, it held its participant numbers. It also grew sideways: Wedding Mania, a dedicated wedding stream, filled an entire hall for the first time.

What was cut, and what was not

Holding scale in a soft market meant choosing what the room does not need. The cuts went to everything that does not affect the quality of the conversation at the table: décor, show elements and part of the outward marketing budget. Three things stayed untouched: the venue, the line-up of speakers and the food. "People forgive a modest stage," says Larin. "They do not forgive bad logistics and a hungry room."

The evidence that the audience improved comes from three indicators rather than from atmosphere. The share of decision-makers among registrants rose: owners and directors came, not assistants sent on reconnaissance. Participants began arranging repeat meetings on their own, without the organisers. And more companies returned deliberately rather than out of habit.

Two halls, one coffee break

SkyLight Gallery served as the main stage: official opening, Event Maze across 40 tables, the show programme and the keynote block. Veranda Hall belonged entirely to Wedding Mania. By day it ran a B2B programme, the Beyond the Beauty panel and workshops for professionals; in the evening it switched to a B2C programme for brides, with The Modern Dubai Wedding panel and hands-on masterclasses.

The two audiences were deliberately brought together at a shared coffee break on the ground floor, which produced the most concrete result of the day. A decorator from the B2B stream started talking to a representative of a wedding media partner who works with brides directly. Within fifteen minutes they had agreed a joint content project: filming a real wedding that shows the preparation process, not only the finished result. The decorator reaches brides without an advertising budget; the media partner gets exclusive content. "Links like this are not born in separate programmes," Larin says. "They are born in the coffee queue."





Event Maze: three minutes and a gong

The speed-networking format is built on three-minute rounds. In the first year participants did not grasp the mechanics: they split up, ignored the clock and held up everyone behind them. The fix was rules and volunteers who control the direction of movement and the time spent at each table. Three minutes is enough to introduce yourself and make a first impression. What still wastes them is the exchange of business cards, since every participant receives the full contact database with phones, emails and social links.

Larin tracks direct conversion into contracts over a three-month horizon by asking participants to confirm deals that began at Event Maze. The figure is incomplete, and he considers it more important than reach anyway. In his definition a round that worked is not one where cards were swapped; it is one where, a month later, one side writes to the other unprompted. Collaborations are also visible on social media, and the first ones came from Miral Destinations, Ja Resorts and Celebration Station with Royal Wedding.

The mechanics were left alone on purpose. About 70 per cent of the speakers were new. "Repeated faces kill the sense of novelty," Larin says. "The second wind of a festival comes from new topics and new people, not from new mechanics."

Wedding Mania: the Dubai wedding in one hall

Running for the first time as a standalone stream, Wedding Mania was open from 11:00 to 20:00. More than a hundred brides attended; more had registered, but for a first dedicated edition the turnout speaks for itself. Beyond the Beauty brought together the people who build weddings from the inside: décor, florals, production, stationery. The Modern Dubai Wedding spoke to couples about budgets, regional uncertainty, technology and family expectations.

Three workshops were built to be acted on. Keyury Desai walked through a complete bridal transformation, one look for the ceremony and a second for the evening. Vaishali Shah showed which luxury details guests actually notice and which go unseen. Aarefa A. explained what a Pinterest image really costs and how much work stands behind it. The surprise of the day was the staged couple: the "bride" was transformed live during the workshop, the "groom" prepared separately, and then they set off on a shoot across the venue's décor locations with guests following, phones raised.

The hall worked as a venue in its own right, with fresh flowers, décor installations, dressed tables and ceremonial arches. The most photographed spot was a heart-shaped arch overlooking Dubai Marina. Ready-made bachelorette packages drew particular interest, filling a gap the market clearly has, and couples learned their first-dance steps on the floor. The longest queue of the day formed for neither a photographer nor a decorator. It formed for the palm reader.





Larin is explicit about the strategic question. Wedding Mania is both a diversification and a test. It separates from EventMania when its audience no longer needs the corporate event next door to justify the trip. Today wedding planners still come partly "along with" the rest of the event market. The lesson of this edition was about language: a corporate buyer thinks in quarterly budgets and KPIs, a wedding supplier in one deal and one couple's emotion. Next year moderators will be briefed to translate between the two registers inside a single panel.

There were empty seats at the tables, and the organiser said so in the press release instead of cropping them out of the photographs. Larin's reasoning: everyone in the room saw them, and hiding the obvious costs trust in the figures that are harder to verify. His diagnosis is systemic. In the UAE free or nearly free registration for B2B events is treated as an option, not a commitment. From the next edition the networking zone will require a refundable deposit, returned on attendance, and participants will be



assigned seats "as in a cinema". This will not solve the problem completely, he admits, but it turns a surprise on the day into a manageable percentage.

The empty chairs also gave an organiser something he rarely has at his own event: time. Larin sat down at the tables and learned more about participants than in a year of emails. One idea from those conversations is already taking shape: a joint session on the future of event arenas, in which venues that now compete for the same pool of events appear as participants in one panel rather than rivals. It is at the preliminary stage, and the format will be settled as programme planning for Doha begins.



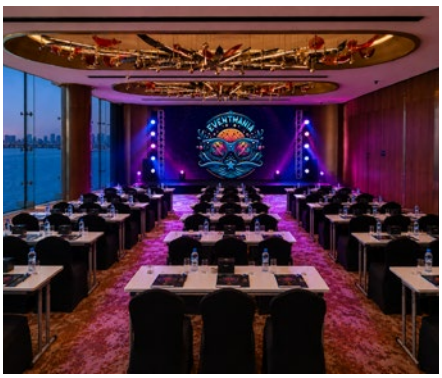
Next stop: Doha

EventMania Doha takes place on 1 November 2026. Why Qatar rather than Saudi Arabia or Bahrain? Saudi Arabia grows faster in volume, but entry requires a local partner with serious administrative weight. Bahrain does not yet offer critical mass for the Event Maze format. Qatar is compact enough for a full test launch at a sensible cost, where a first-time mistake does not damage a reputation for years. "It is a choice for managed risk, not for the biggest market," says Larin.

The round-and-gong mechanics travel unchanged because they are built on time, not on cultural codes. What changes is the mix of supplier and buyer categories, reflecting a different balance between government and private event clients, and the registration calendar, because Qatari B2B decisions on participation come later than in Dubai. That shift has already been made. The criterion for each next market is the same: a trusted partner on the ground who understands the format, and a local industry mature enough to be worth competing in.

The founder's own role is changing with the scale. Part of the panel moderation has already been handed to outside hosts, and Larin will leave the stage entirely once the festival runs in two cities at once. One thing he has never outsourced in three years is the final assembly of the programme: the placement of speakers, topics and timings across halls. "I can see where two similar speakers will kill each other's dynamic," he says, "and where an unexpected pairing of topics will create the accidental energy people come back for."

A note on independence. EventMag.Me and EventMania Festival share an owner, and this is stated openly in every EventMania press release. Participation in the festival gives a company the opportunity to be featured in the magazine. It does not guarantee a favourable story: the criteria for publication are the same as for any other submission to the editorial team.



VIZUALIFE
Architectural Visualisation · Dubai

Established in Dubai on 30 June 2022, Vizualife runs a projection studio where architects, designers, developers and clients walk through a future home or development at life size, 1:1, before construction begins. Proportions, layouts and circulation can be checked and changed early, with live visualisation and VR walk-throughs. Its Event Power Panel, held at the studio for architects, designers and industry professionals, showed the approach in practice.

EventMania 2026 takeaway: "For Vizualife, it was a valuable opportunity to introduce a different way of experiencing space and to connect with people who believe in turning ideas into immersive experiences."

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NIKITA MENSHOV
Host, Master of Ceremonies, Actor · Dubai

Nikita Menshov has worked on stage for more than 15 years as host, MC, presenter and actor, and has been based in Dubai for the past four. An improviser by training, he hosts so that an event feels real rather than read from a script. He has performed in more than 12 countries, hosted and voiced the opening of the Rolls-Royce boutique in Dubai, and premiered his own improvisation show, "How We Got Here", in May 2026.

EventMania 2026 takeaway: "This is my second year at EventMania, and once again, I've really enjoyed the people, the energy and the level of expertise here."

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MATRIX AVE: 27 Years of Bringing Events to Life
Audio-Visual, Staging, Entertainment · Dubai

Founded in Dubai in 1999 by Rajesh Pereira, Matrix Audio Visual & Entertainment has been bringing events to life across the UAE for 27 years. It covers sound, lighting, staging, LED screens, trussing, projection, décor and branding for conferences, gala dinners, product launches and weddings. One project it points to is a corporate event at the Sky Bubble, Meydan Hotel, where the team carried a single Arabic-inspired story across three levels, from the moment guests stepped off their buses to the final moment.

"EventMania 2026 reminded me how much opportunity begins with a genuine conversation. I left with new connections, fresh ideas and a stronger sense of what we can create together as an industry."

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VILORA Flowers & Decoration Studio
Floristry and Event Décor · Abu Dhabi

VILORA was created in Abu Dhabi by a florist with more than 15 years in the trade. It works on weddings, engagements and family celebrations and never from a template: each client gets an individual approach that combines contemporary aesthetics with the elegance of Eastern traditions. For EventMania on 8 September the studio travelled from Abu Dhabi to Dubai with three floral arches of its own.

EventMania 2026 takeaway: "It was a wonderful day full of new connections, inspiration and exciting opportunities for VILORA."

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NELLY'S CAKES STUDIO
Luxury Custom Cakes · Dubai Marina

Founded by Nelly, a master pastry artist with more than 24 years of experience in the Netherlands, the studio now works from Dubai Marina, making bespoke wedding and celebration cakes entirely by hand and from scratch. It also makes Zefyr, edible flower bouquets of soft meringue in six flavours. Its most celebrated commission was a Disney-inspired castle cake, 1.5 m deep, 2.5 m wide and 1.8 m tall, built over six to seven weeks for a wedding in Rotterdam.

"EventMania is the best place to meet new market entrants and connect with established companies face to face, rather than over the phone."

nellys-cakes.ae · +971 58 575 5045 · info@nellys-cakes.com · Shop 11 & 12, Dorra Bay Tower, Dubai Marina

HEART OF BLESSINGS
Wellness and Leadership Coaching · Dubai

Founded by Ruhi Sachar in Dubai in 2019 as a lifestyle coaching and meditation centre, Heart of Blessings has extended into the corporate and events market, with a focus on the people behind the scenes: entrepreneurs, leaders and planners who work under pressure while taking care of others. Its tools are breath, sound and meditation, and its own system, CLEAR® (Corporate Leadership Emotional Alignment Regulation).

"EventMania 2026 was another step in bringing that approach into the corporate, events and wedding ecosystem."

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LINCIA ROSARIO
Global Emcee and Speaker ·
UAE, Qatar, Oman, India, Australia, Europe

With 14 years on stage and 1,500+ events across corporate, luxury wedding, sporting and celebrity formats, Lincia Rosario has taken the microphone in six regions. Her defining chapter was hosting for 31 consecutive days during the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, a contribution recognised by the Supreme Committee of Qatar. She was named Best MC at the WOW Awards Asia 2023–24 in both the Corporate and Wedding categories.

"EventMania reinforced something I've always believed this industry is built on: relationships."

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EUNOIA MOBILITY
Accessible Mobility · UAE

Operating since 2025, Eunoia Mobility provides accessible transport for individuals, families and organisations across the UAE, with a focus on People of Determination, wheelchair users, older adults and people with visible or non-visible disabilities. Wheelchair-accessible vehicles and trained Mobility Champions cover journeys to weddings, conferences, hotels and airports, planned from boarding to return. It works with organisers and venues so that accessibility is part of the guest experience from the beginning.

EventMania 2026 takeaway: "The best events are designed for participation, not simply attendance."

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ARTE MUSEUM DUBAI
Immersive Art · The Dubai Mall, Downtown Dubai

Arte Museum Dubai opened in February 2024 as the first venue of its kind in the Middle East. It occupies about 2,800 sqm (30,000 sq ft) inside The Dubai Mall. Its installations are built around a single theme, Eternal Nature, and combine projection, sound and scent. The venue is the Dubai site of a Korean immersive-art brand that opened in Jeju in 2020 and now operates in South Korea, Chengdu, Las Vegas, Dubai and New York. By the operator's own count it has welcomed more than 12 million visitors worldwide.

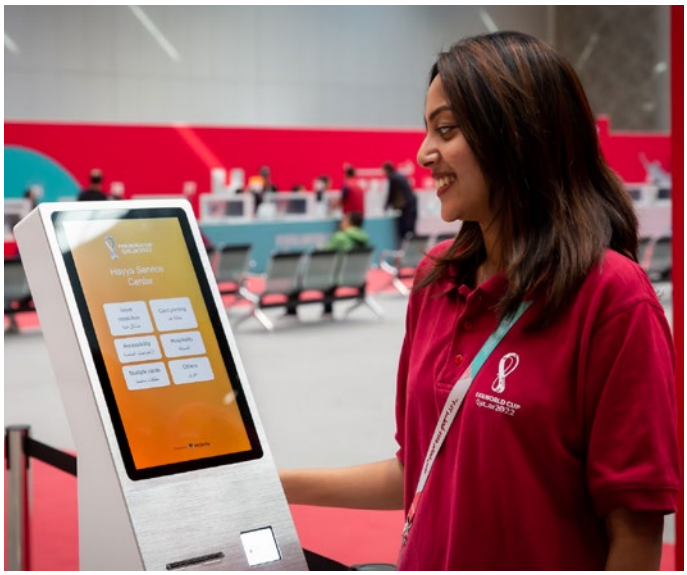
Alongside daily visitors, the museum works with the trade. Its programme covers corporate receptions, product launches, incentive groups, press events and DMC itineraries, as well as buyouts and customised group formats. The location puts it a short walk from Burj Khalifa and the Dubai Fountain, so it fits into a city programme without a separate transfer.

MICEtribe
Registration and On-Site Technology · Registration Partner of EventMania

Since 2016, MICEtribe has grown from an R&D-Labs spin-off into an event execution partner running events across the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Estonia. Registration, badge printing, check-in, payments, hardware and trained crew sit under one roof. Its projects include 500,000 fan check-ins at FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and pre-registration and on-site operations for a 40,000-strong trade audience at Food Africa 2025 in Cairo.

EventMania 2026 takeaway: "This region isn't short on ambition, it's short on infrastructure that can keep up with it."

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Your First Dance, Your Story

How to choose your song, enjoy the preparation and create a moment that feels entirely your own.





By Talina Gonzalez,
Founder, Cali Collective

Choose a song that feels like you

Today's couples have endless inspiration, from romantic favourites like Die With a Smile by Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars to Lover by Taylor Swift and Until I Found You by Stephen Sanchez. But rather than choosing what's popular, find a song that means something to both of you.

I had the pleasure of working with Diane and Steven, aka DJ Call Me Steven, and they were an absolute joy!

They ambitiously chose two dances, including the iconic The Time of My Life from Dirty Dancing. It's an energetic number, especially challenging for beginners, but they embraced every moment. And yes, they even mastered the famous lift!

What impressed me most wasn't just the choreography, but their dedication. They practised consistently at home, supported each other through the challenges and approached every lesson with patience, laughter and genuine enthusiasm.

Watching them learn together reminded me why I love what I do. Their dance wasn't about perfection. It was about their connection, their personalities and celebrating a moment that was entirely theirs.

Give yourselves time

Dancing as a couple involves more than remembering steps. Rhythm, timing, lead and follow, musicality, posture and, most importantly, trust all come together to create something that looks and feels natural.

I recommend starting around three months before your wedding, although six months can be beneficial for more ambitious choreography. Your experience, schedules, song choice and commitment to practice all influence the preparation needed.

At Cali Collective, every journey begins with a 30-minute consultation. We explore foundational movements, discuss your vision and consider practical details, from your wedding attire and dance-floor size to your song, schedule and preferred style.

This is where the choreography truly begins: not with steps, but with understanding you as a couple.

For many couples, 90 seconds to two minutes creates a beautiful first-dance moment. Others prefer a longer performance. Both can work wonderfully, provided there's enough time to prepare.

Practise until you stop thinking about the steps

Ideally, couples should practise once or twice a week between lessons. Consistency builds confidence, and confidence creates the freedom to enjoy the moment.

I sometimes encourage couples to experiment with other dance styles during practice, perhaps salsa, swing or tango. Changing the music, rhythm and mood challenges coordination while keeping the experience playful.

In Dubai, where demanding careers and frequent travel can interrupt wedding preparations, starting early provides valuable breathing room.

But don't just practise the choreography. Practise how you want to look and feel.

My background in ballroom dance has taught me the importance of posture, hand placement, eye contact, styling and elegance. These details transform movements into something beautiful and effortless.

Filming your practice can also help you see what your guests will see. And remember the practicalities: rehearse in your wedding shoes, consider how your dress moves and familiarise yourselves with the dance-floor space.

Ultimately, your guests won't remember whether every step was perfect. They'll remember the way you looked at each other, the joy you shared and how genuinely yourselves you were.

At Cali Collective First Dance Choreography, we don't just teach steps. We help you find yours





EMIRATES FASHION WEEK · 15TH SEASON

PARTNER LOUNGE

NOVEMBER 20, 2026

THE PLAZA — UPTOWN DUBAI, DMCC

Create your own branded Partner Lounge at Emirates Fashion Week: a private space to meet industry professionals, VIP and international guests, backed by a 43-metre screen, magazine editorial and targeted invitations.

21,000 sq.m	43 m	~1,000	70 / 30
new destination built for major international events	central screen at the venue	guests	local UAE / Middle East, Asia, Africa, CIS

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Access to the EFW guest database: we invite the professionals, VIPs and investors you want to meet.

PRIVATE MEETINGS & PRESENTATION

A refined setting for dialogue, a dedicated presentation moment and lead collection for your follow-up.

MAGAZINE EDITORIAL

Dedicated material in Emirates Fashion Magazine telling your brand story to an international audience.

SOCIAL & MEDIA REACH

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Tailored to your format

From a 2 sq.m corner to a lounge zone
Branding and equipment agreed separately

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