

Saudi Polo Federation

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Q. Let's start off with the first question. Do you plan on bringing any other exciting sporting events besides equestrian events to AIUla, just on the back of the success of the polo and endurance back to back, but what else do you have in mind or in store?

ABDULRAHMAN AL TURAIRAI: I think sport is one of the most important sectors we are targeting, so as you mentioned, we had done some race last month. It was the third season actually, and currently we are hosting the second season of polo, and the priority for equestrian, it comes because the artwork we have in Al-'Ula shows the history between the residents of this area and civilization and the horses, but yet equestrian is not the only sport we are targeting.

We hosted Saudi Tour from the 1st to the 5th of February, and also in our destination marketing strategy, there is a lot of adventure when you plan to come to AIUla, so if you are coming next month you can enjoy the hot air balloon, you can enjoy the zipline, you can enjoy biking. There is a lot of sports here, which when anyone come to do any sport here, you will enjoy such amazing cultural landscape.

Q. As you said, there's a lot going on, whether it's this weekend, you've got Desert X, we've got the polo. I'm sure there are plenty more other events going on. Where do you see AIUla in 10 years? Do you see it being a capital of culture or entertainment or arts, sports? Where do you see it being in 10 years?

ABDULRAHMAN AL TURAIRAI: Last April we revealed our first master plan, which we call "A Journey Through Time," which is concentrating on the main heritage area for 20 kilometers starting from the Old Town in the south up to Hegra to the north and delivering this plan. We have three milestones. The first one will be 2023, the second one will be by 2030, and the third one will be by 2035.

We see AIUla as a tremendous destination for tourists and for art and also for culture. If you look at a history for this civilization, longer than 7,000 years, and people were here in AIUla for more than 200,000 years.

Do you want to add something?

FEMALE SPEAKER: What we're doing here is really reviving what AIUla's legacy, which is like a cradle of creativity from the artists who carved the Nabataean tombs to the statues of the Leonides, now we're bringing back that art for the future of AIUla, and that is going to be through revival of ancient handicrafts, through amazing cross-cultural dialogues like the Desert X exhibition and even Alicia Keys tonight, having acts like that come in and perform in AIUla really opens up this destination to dialogue and cultural exchange.

From a cultural perspective, in 10 years' time, we will be seen as a destination to go to that inspires and creates and excites and brings artists here.

From a sporting perspective, we're not going to be that destination that brings massive spectator sporting events, so things like the cycling, like the polo, like the ecotrail that is coming in just a few weeks' time is going to be where we're at. It's about sports that appreciate and are set in the environment as opposed to in a football field. So that's why we have things like cycling and something that's really inclusive for the community, that people can do and enjoy and become proud of that AIUla is part of.

Q. On that note and in regard to the community, what is the impression that the Saudi people have had on events going on in AIUla? Like we know it's attracting whether regional or international visitors, it's seen as this beautiful destination that people really want to attend and visit, but what is the reaction of, look, Saudi is not necessarily just people from AIUla but people from across the kingdom?

ABDULRAHMAN AL TURAIRAI: I think people are getting excited when they see our innovation plans, especially in the Old Town and the data, and how these places became uplifting and look charming. I feel in the other side that people among the kingdom, they feel pride that this destination is the home of the eldest Arabian civilization, so they are very proud about it, and we are believing a lot in the planning of development of this city and the value it brings to the kingdom.

Q. Can you talk about how all the developments are

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really helping the people of AIUla and specifically progress -- what opportunities has it opened?

ABDULRAHMAN AL TURAIRAI: I think empowering people was in the core for all our plans. We started earlier in 2018 with the first phase of a scholarship program, wherein we send 21 boys and girls to Paris to study in Ferrandi, which is a Michelin-starred school. Also we have the first group of Hammayah, which is 2,500 people from AIUla to enhance the awareness of the value of the heritage and nature.

Also we had what we call Rawis, which is a storyteller. We have 30 storytellers between the four main heritage sites, which is the Old Town, Dadan, Ikmah and Hegra.

So there is a lot of programs for the students. They were the center of our development. But it's not about only the direct jobs. We just opened in the last October Vibes, which is an entrepreneur hub to empower the small and medium businesses that we need to be an important part from the ecosystem in AIUla.

Q. Looking into the future, what do you have planned for AIUla as a destination in the summer when it is quite hot and we don't get to enjoy the weather that we do now?

FEMALE SPEAKER: We'll be a year-round destination for now on, so this is what the vision is for AIUla. It's an internationally globally recognized destination. It's been off the radar for visitors for so many years, and now we want to share this amazing place with the world. So year-round people will be able to come, go to the heritage sites. They'll be able to do early morning hikes and sunrise/sunset experiences, and there will be some great arts and cultural experiences during the day, for example, the Maraya. We now have the "What Lies Within," an absolutely stunning display of Saudi contemporary art, so something like that that people can enjoy indoors. We'll be having more of those sort of experiences, in addition to things like Adris Aldeera (phonetic), whether art workshops. We now have a whole precinct called Al Jadedah (phonetic), which there will be more indoor activities and spaces for people to enjoy.

But also I think AIUla is a much more pleasant place than somewhere like Riyadh. It's actually fine to be going outdoors and experiencing the cool shadow of the palm trees and walking through the oasis from the Heritage Trail down to Old Town. It's really not -- it's really a place that can be enjoyed all year-round.

Q. Last question, looking ahead, what's the development plan logistically for international visitors

in terms of opening up any new flights or any new accommodations to open up here? What are the logistical infrastructure plans or development plans that you have for international tourists?

ABDULRAHMAN AL TURAIRAI: I'll start and then hand over. We worked firstly on increasing the capacity of the airport so now the airport can host 15 airplanes and can host up to 400K passengers per year. Last year, almost a year ago, we had the invitation from Gakar (phonetic) as an international airport. We started last November with our first commercial flight from Dubai and Kuwait, and last month we received a flight from France, and I expect more destinations to be opened directly to AIUla. It's a very, very good location actually, so the flight to Paris is around four hours and a half, so this is added point, I think.

There is a lot going in development when it comes to accommodation. We opened in Q4 Habitas and Banyan Tree. We are close to opening a boutique hotel in the Old Town, and other development yet to come.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I was just looking for this information about the community in terms of upon completion in 2035, we'll have created 38,000 new jobs for a population that will be 130,000 people by then, and we'll contribute 120 billion SAR to the kingdom's GDP.

So I think in terms of the benefits to the community, they're already seeing it. They're out there being the hospitality workers, they're out there being traffic managers. There's many, many new areas that the locals can work in, so that's a really big part of the vision for the whole journey through time master plan is for the community and about the community. I think that's a really important --

ABDULRAHMAN AL TURAIRAI: You have the permanent jobs, you have the temporary jobs, and you have the business opportunities.

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