

Rescheduled Dubai Expo hopes to attract 25 million visits



Dubai's delayed expo is now due to open in October

Dubai is gearing up to host the World Expo - a year after it was originally supposed to be held.

Held every five years, expos see hundreds of countries using pavilions to show off the latest in architecture and technology.

Before the pandemic forced the event to be postponed, organisers had expected 25 million visits during the course of the six-month international fair. It will now run from 1 October to 31 March 2022.

However, despite restrictions on travel, and the recent lockdowns in some parts of Europe, Reem Al Hashimy, director general of the Dubai Expo 2020, says they are holding on to the pre-pandemic target.

"The world has gone through these galactical shifts over the last year but now with vaccines being rollout, we believe that situation will settle by October. We believe the situation will be far more positive by then."

It is an optimistic forecast for an event that relies on tourism, when most of the world has cutdown on international travel. But the various in-person conferences and trade shows held in the city over the last few months has made organisers more hopeful.



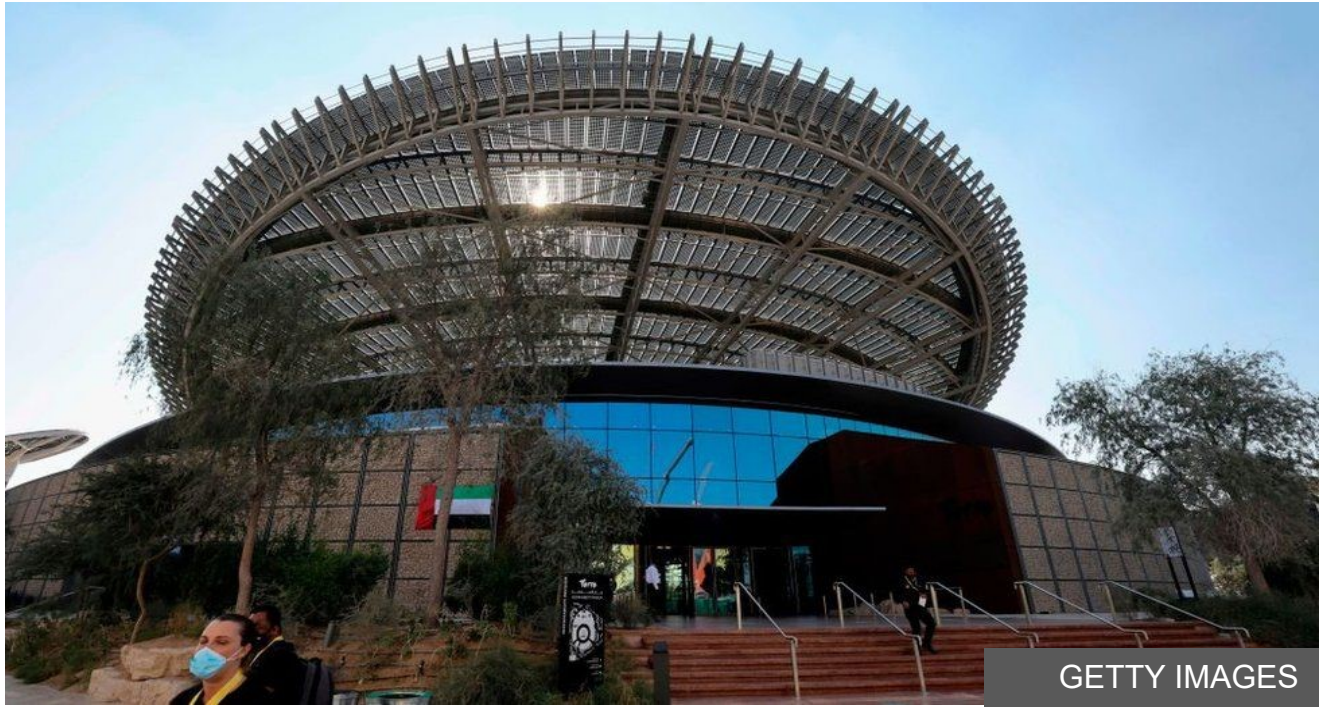
Organisers are also expecting the vaccination rates to gather pace globally during the summer - which would give people the confidence to start making international trips again.

Dubai Expo is being billed as the biggest event to be held in the Arab world. For the UAE, the showpiece event comes at a time when it is trying to recover from one of its worst recessions in five decades.

Last year, the economy contracted by 6.6% even as the government announced a series of reforms to attract investment and help businesses. Some of those steps have started to show results with the International Monetary Fund upgrading the growth outlook for the UAE to 3.1% for 2021.

The authorities are pinning their hopes on the World Expo to attract tourists in large numbers that would help accelerate economic recovery. Billions of dollars have been poured into the project since the UAE won the bid to organize the international fair in 2013.

Dubai World Expo: Key facts



- More than 190 countries are taking part, in the first such event to be held in the Middle East
- The expo is expected to boost Dubai's economy by \$33bn (£24bn) and to create up to 300,000 jobs
- The site covers 4.3sq km, or 613 football pitches, and the expo will have its own metro station
- Uber will be testing flying cars during the event
- Some 90% of the materials used to in construction will then be used to create permanent buildings afterwards

The spectacle is particularly crucial for the Middle East's financial hub - Dubai - as its economic model relies heavily on sectors that are driven by consumer spending, like hospitality, luxury retail and travel.

While most experts think it might be challenging to achieve 25 million visits, there is a broad consensus that millions will attend the event, which could have a significant impact on the economy.



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Dubai has spent \$8.2bn on the expo

"Even if the event is partially successful it has the potential of reviving the economy and taking it back to the pre-pandemic levels" says Scott Livermore, chief economist for the Middle East at Oxford Economics.

More than 190 countries will participate in the Expo - showcasing innovations around the themes of sustainability, mobility and opportunity.

In February, the Tokyo Olympics committee announced that they would go ahead with the event in July regardless of how the Covid-19 situation evolves. Like the Japanese, the Dubai Expo organisers also have no plans of postponing or cancelling the event.

'We are applying all the necessary safety measures as mandated by the WHO and following other best practices to allow the event to take place in a safe environment' says Ms Al Hashimy.

She also adds that there is a need for people to converge to discuss the next steps to tackle global challenges like the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Expo offers that platform.



The UAE aims to be one of the first to vaccinate most of its population and return to normalcy

Dubai is famous for being home to the tallest building in the world and its white sand beaches. It has transformed itself from a desert backwater port into a thriving financial and tourism hub within a generation. But the World Expo is the most ambitious project for the country. The event is also at the heart of UAE's plans for diversifying its economy - away from oil.

Dubai also been one of the few cities to keep its economy open since July last year when most of the world was under lockdown.

Covid-19 cases remained low during the second half of 2020 but daily infections in the country quadrupled to almost 4,000 a day towards the end of January this year, primarily due to the influx of tourists into Dubai during the winter holiday season.

The infection rate has fallen since then after authorities tightened restrictions at indoor venues but steered away from imposing a lockdown. To prevent another wave, fresh restrictions have been issued for Ramadan that starts next week - a month during which Muslims fast from dawn to dusk.

Despite the recent wave, the UAE has managed to rollout the vaccines at a rapid pace, with more than 62% of the population inoculated. It ranks second globally behind Israel for doses administered per 100 people.

The UAE aims to be one of the first countries to vaccinate most of its population and return to complete normalcy. This would also help in positioning it as a safe tourist destination. 'If the UAE is able to achieve herd immunity then that would be a big positive for the Expo as it would be able to attract many more tourists, especially during the second half of the event' says Mr Livermore.

By Sameer Hashmi and Ian Rose
BBC News, Dubai

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