Trend Report:

What Destinations Are Doing to Attract the China and India Markets?

SAT Insights Unit

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Our Research Approach

This report explores how destinations are integrating local and cultural elements into tourism itineraries, and highlights opportunities for the South African tourism industry to capitalise on this growing trend.

Desktop research was used to identify current digital trends in tourism. The process followed a three-fold matrix to identify recent trends. The matrix assesses the popularity, activity, and freshness of each trend. Freshness relates to the relative newness of an article; Activity – the number of people interacting with an article, including social media postings; and Popularity – the scoring of appeal based on how many people choose an article when given other options in the same category or cluster.

The selection of key trends was based on a relative score of 4 and above, with a high relative freshness.

Source: Trend Hunter, Oxford Economics, SAT Brand Tracker Study, Statssa International Tourism

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Executive Summary: What Destinations Are Doing to Attract the China and India Markets?

Global tourism is experiencing a strategic shift toward market-specific, integrated approaches focused on attracting travellers from China and India. Governments and tourism authorities are increasingly aligning policy reforms, connectivity improvements, targeted marketing, industry collaborations, and customised travel experiences to drive demand and maximise inbound tourism potential from these markets.

Key Highlights:

- **Visa Facilitation & Policy Reform:** Simplified visa processes and digital solutions are reducing administrative barriers, accelerating travel decisions, and enhancing traveller confidence. Temporary visa waivers and visa-free entry schemes are being leveraged to stimulate arrivals from priority markets.
- **Targeted Marketing & Promotions:** Campaigns are increasingly designed around specific cultural preferences, travel motivations, and spending patterns. Digital promotions, cultural engagement, and trade outreach are central to influencing traveller choice and building market awareness.
- **Strengthening Air Connectivity:** Expanding direct flight routes and increasing air capacity improves accessibility and reduces travel friction, enabling smoother flows of inbound visitors and supporting regional tourism growth.
- **Industry Partnerships:** Collaboration with tour operators, airlines, airports, and other trade stakeholders strengthens market access, streamlines bookings, and enhances distribution networks. Joint promotions and themed travel products reinforce engagement and support market penetration.
- **Tailored Travel Products & Experiences:** Tourism offerings are becoming more experience-driven, with packages and itineraries aligned to the preferences and expectations of high-value travellers. Personalised experiences, cultural immersion, and premium travel segments are being prioritised to increase engagement and encourage repeat visitation.

Tourism stakeholders are transitioning from generic promotion to a coordinated, market-led approach that integrates policy, connectivity, marketing, partnerships, and product development. This holistic strategy enhances accessibility, aligns offerings with traveller expectations, and maximises inbound tourism potential in priority markets.

Consumer **Insights**

Market Overview: Chinese and Indian Travellers

China ranks among the world's largest outbound tourism markets, with outbound travel estimated at over 140 million trips and projected to exceed 200 million travellers by 2030. India's outbound travel market is also expanding rapidly, currently estimated at around 27 million travellers and expected to reach more than 35 million by 2030. As these markets continue to grow, they have become key strategic priorities for destinations around the world, including South Africa (Oxford Economics).

China and India share many of the same top long-haul outbound destinations, including the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Germany, Spain, and Italy. However, there are some differences: India's top 10 includes Japan, while China's list features Switzerland and the Netherlands. These destinations represent strong competition in attracting visitors from these high-growth markets (Oxford Economics).

South Africa currently receives over 69 000 arrivals from India and approximately 37 000 arrivals from China (2025), with both markets yet to fully recover to 2019 levels (Statssa International Tourism Report).

According to the SAT Brand Tracker study, Chinese travellers visiting South Africa are primarily motivated by the opportunity to experience a different culture, enjoy beautiful scenery, and benefit from good value for money. The country's warm climate, combined with its renowned food and wine experiences, further enhances its appeal.

For Indian travellers, key motivations include good value for money, beautiful scenery, and the chance to experience a different culture. Additionally, activities such as going on safari and fulfilling a dream of visiting a unique international destination play an important role in shaping their travel decisions. These factors position South Africa as an aspirational, experience-driven destination for the Indian market.

As China and India continue to grow as major outbound tourism markets, they remain strategically important for South Africa's tourism sector. Understanding how competing destinations position themselves to attract travellers from these markets offers a valuable opportunity for South Africa to enhance its tourism offerings, strengthen its market positioning, and improve its competitiveness in attracting visitors from these priority markets.

Trend: Visa Facilitation and Policy Reforms

Trend - Countries are increasingly enhancing visa reforms to attract more travellers from key markets such as China and India. These measures include expanding e-visa options, permitting visa-free or visa-on-arrival entry, and introducing group visa schemes to reduce red tape and accelerate processing times. Overall, destinations worldwide are actively reforming visa policies and adopting facilitation measures such as digital processing and visa waivers to simplify entry and capitalise on the rapidly growing travel demand from China and India.

Insight - By reducing visa barriers and streamlining approvals, destinations position themselves to capitalise on the rising outbound travel demand from China and India. This promotes increased tourism arrivals, stimulates economic growth, and creates jobs in their tourism sectors.

South Africa:
- Launched Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) to digitise visa processing.
- Implemented Trusted Tour Operator Scheme (TTOS) allowing approved operators to process group visas for Chinese and Indian tourists.

Philippines:
- Introduced 14-day visa-free entry for Indian tourists.
- Restarted e-visa services for Chinese travellers.

Thailand:
- Introduced visa-free entry for Chinese travellers and temporary visa waivers for Indian visitors.
- Expanded visa exemption programmes and length of stay for key markets.

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Trend: Targeted Marketing & Digital Engagement

Trend - Tourism boards are increasingly moving from broad, generic campaigns to strategically targeted, market-specific marketing focused on key outbound markets like China and India. These initiatives combine cultural relevance, digital engagement, and trade partnerships to attract high-value travellers, leveraging local social media platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu in China, and Instagram and TikTok in India. Destinations are engaging younger, digitally savvy audiences through curated content, influencer collaborations, and customised itineraries.

Insight - The competitive edge in tourism marketing now lies in relevance rather than reach. Destinations that understand the behavioural patterns, digital ecosystems and experience preferences of specific source markets are better positioned to convert interest into bookings. By aligning messaging, platforms and product offerings with the motivations of Chinese and Indian travellers, tourism boards move beyond generic promotion toward precision positioning, turning targeted inspiration into higher-value, experience-led growth.
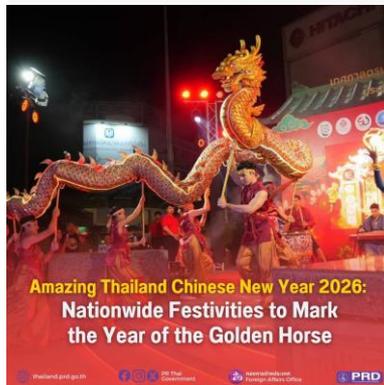
Thailand:
- Thailand is targeting Chinese travellers by hosting a festival linked to the Chinese New Year. The event celebrates Chinese culture while encouraging more visitors from China to travel to Thailand during the festive season.

Australia:
- Tourism Australia runs market-specific campaigns for China and India rather than global messaging.
- Extensive use of Chinese digital ecosystems such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu.
- Partnerships with Chinese OTAs and travel platforms to distribute content and itineraries.
- Targeted campaigns in India across Instagram, YouTube and influencer collaborations.

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Trend: Strengthening Air Connectivity and Infrastructure

Trend - Destinations are increasingly investing in direct air connectivity and visa facilitation to open new travel routes, reduce barriers, and capture growing demand from source markets like India and China. Improved flight options are a key driver of inbound tourism, making it easier for travellers to choose convenient and accessible destinations.

Insight - Strengthening direct air connectivity and simplifying visa processes are becoming critical levers for destinations to attract travellers from markets like India and China. By reducing travel barriers and offering more convenient routes, destinations can significantly increase inbound tourism and influence travellers' destination choices.

Malaysia:
Malaysia is expanding air connectivity with China and India by adding routes from underserved Chinese cities and more than doubling Malaysia–China seat capacity year-on-year. Connectivity with India has also increased through additional services from AirAsia and Indian carriers.

Cambodia:
Cambodia has opened the new Techo International Airport in 2025, featuring a longer runway and modernised facilities designed to accommodate increased international air traffic. The expansion aims to strengthen the country's aviation capacity and support tourism growth, particularly from China and other Asian markets.

Dubai:
Dubai International Airport, one of the world's busiest aviation hubs, is expanding capacity and infrastructure while investing in Al Maktoum International Airport to support additional international routes and capture growing passenger demand from key outbound markets including India and China.

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Trend: Partnerships with Travel Industry Networks

Trend - Destinations are increasingly leveraging strategic partnerships with international tour operators, airlines, airports, and travel trade networks to expand market access and streamline inbound tourism from high-priority markets like China and India. By formalising accreditation systems and strengthening joint promotions, tourism authorities are reducing administrative barriers, improving distribution channels, and enhancing collaboration across the travel value chain.

Insight - By formalising accreditation systems and strengthening joint promotions, tourism authorities are reducing administrative barriers, improving distribution channels, and enhancing collaboration across the travel value chain.

Thailand:
Tourism Authority of Thailand hosts collaborative airline partnership meetings with 50+ carriers (including Air China, Cathay Pacific, Qatar Airways, etc.) to expand connectivity and joint marketing aimed at stimulating global arrivals, including from China and India.

South Africa:
South Africa's Trusted Tour Operator Scheme accredits Indian and Chinese operators to simplify group visas, already helping thousands secure visas efficiently and supporting tourism recovery.

Abu Dhabi:
The Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi has partnered with international tour operators, hotel groups, and travel platforms (e.g., Almosafer), using campaigns like the Expedia Sunshine Pass to attract visitors from India, Saudi Arabia, Europe, and beyond.

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Trend: Product Experiences Tailored to Preferences

Trend - Destinations are increasingly designing customised travel products and themed experiences that align with the cultural preferences, travel motivations, and spending patterns of key source markets such as China and India. Rather than promoting generic sightseeing, tourism boards are curating festival-linked events, shopping experiences, heritage activities, and quality travel segments to better resonate with specific traveller profiles and drive repeat visitation.

Insight - Destinations that align their tourism products with the cultural preferences, travel motivations, and spending behaviours of key markets such as China and India are better positioned to drive engagement and repeat visitation. By shifting away from generic sightseeing and instead curating festival-linked events, shopping experiences, heritage activities, and premium travel segments, tourism boards can create more relevant, experience-driven offerings that resonate with specific traveller profiles and maximise visitor value

Thailand

Thailand hosts the Amazing Thailand Chinese New Year 2026 campaign to attract Chinese travelers, celebrating the Year of the Horse and 51 years of diplomatic ties. Led by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, key events in Bangkok's Yaowarat Road, Hat Yai, Nakhon Sawan, and Suphan Buri offer cultural festivities designed to engage and welcome visitors from this vital market. Additionally, the board launched the "Healing is the New Luxury" campaign to appeal to the growing number of Indian travelers seeking wellness and luxury experiences in Thailand.

Specific **Examples**

Abu Dhabi - Expands Global Tourism Partnerships

The Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi has strengthened its global tourism outreach by partnering with international tour operators, hotel groups, and digital travel platforms such as Almosafer. These collaborations aim to attract visitors from key source markets including India, Saudi Arabia, Europe, and other international regions by improving travel packages, distribution networks, and promotional visibility. In addition, multi-channel marketing initiatives such as the Expedia Sunshine Pass campaign help enhance Abu Dhabi's global brand presence, promote its cultural and leisure offerings, and encourage international travelers to choose the emirate as a preferred destination.

Source:
https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/government-news/dct-abu-dhabi-forges-strategic-partnerships-to-drive-tourism-growth-across-key-international-markets-cnruflv1?
https://www.mediaoffice.abudhabi/en/tourism/department-of-culture-and-tourism-abu-dhabi-expands-partnership-with-expedia-group-to-drive-international-visitor-growth-to-emirate/

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Philippines - Visa-Free Entry for Visiting Indian Nationals

Indian passport holders travelling to the Philippines for tourism or business may enter visa-free for up to 30 days through any port of entry, including airports and seaports, provided they hold a valid visa or permanent residence permit from the US, Japan, Australia, Canada, Schengen countries, Singapore, or the UK. They must also have a passport valid for at least six months beyond their stay, a return or onward ticket, and no negative record with the Philippine Bureau of Immigration. This visa-free entry cannot be converted to a longer stay or other visa types. For stays over 30 days, Indian travellers must apply for a visa at a Philippine embassy or consulate. The Bureau of Immigration retains the right to refuse entry as deemed necessary.

Source:
https://www.reuters.com/world/india/philippines-offers-indian-nationals-visa-free-travel-boost-tourism-2025-06-07/?
https://newdelhipe.dfa.gov.ph/index.php/newsroom/announcements/951-ajacssuk

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Armenia - Grants Conditional 180-Day Visa-Free Entry to Eligible Indians

Armenia has introduced conditional visa-free access for eligible Indian passport holders, allowing stays of up to 180 days within a year. The measure is designed to boost tourism, attract business travellers, and strengthen economic and cultural ties between Armenia and India.

The visa-free facility typically applies to Indian citizens who hold valid visas or residence permits from select countries (such as the US, UK, Schengen states, or GCC countries), although travellers must still meet standard entry requirements, including proof of accommodation, return or onward tickets, and sufficient funds.

The policy positions Armenia as an increasingly accessible destination for Indian travellers seeking alternatives to traditional European routes. With its historic monasteries, scenic Caucasus landscapes, and growing reputation as a digital nomad and investment hub, Armenia is aiming to expand its footprint in the competitive outbound Indian travel market.

Source:
https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/no-visa-no-paperwork-needed-for-indians-armenia-opens-doors-to-tourists-and-business-travellers-from-india-expatriates-across-gulf-us-europe-for-180-days/articleshow/128460450.cms

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Thailand - Strengthens Airline Partnerships to Boost Tourism

Tourism Authority of Thailand hosts collaborative airline partnership meetings with 50+ carriers (including Air China, Cathay Pacific, Qatar Airways, etc.) to expand connectivity and joint marketing aimed at stimulating global arrivals, including from China and India.

Source:
https://www.tatnews.org/2025/07/tat-strengthens-airline-partnerships-to-boost-inbound-tourism/?

Thailand - Extended Visa-Free Stay for Indian Travellers to 60 Days

Thailand has doubled the duration of visa-free entry for Indian passport holders, allowing stays of up to 60 days. The move is aimed at boosting tourism, encouraging longer holidays, and strengthening travel ties between the two countries. Popular destinations such as Bangkok, Phuket, Pattaya, and Krabi are expected to see increased arrivals as a result of the extended stay period.
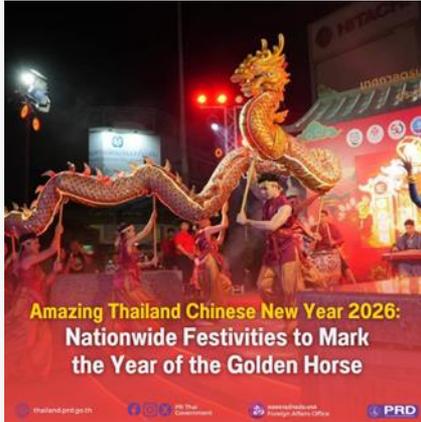
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Thailand - Amazing Thailand Chinese New Year 2026 campaign

The Amazing Thailand Chinese New Year 2026 campaign marks the Year of the Horse and 51 years of diplomatic relations between Thailand and China, with nationwide celebrations aimed at boosting travel to key provinces. Led by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), the initiative blends cultural heritage with contemporary entertainment to position Thailand as a leading Lunar New Year destination outside mainland China.

Major festivities take place in Bangkok's Yaowarat Road with nightly illuminations and cultural activities at Siam Paragon, while Hat Yai hosts vibrant street performances and light displays in the south. Traditional celebrations are also featured in Nakhon Sawan and Suphan Buri, offering heritage-rich processions and exhibitions. The campaign is projected to generate 42.23 billion baht (approximately USD 1.33 billion) in tourism revenue, representing 13% year-on-year growth, supported by an estimated 1.25 million international arrivals and 2.3 million domestic trips, thereby spreading economic benefits across both primary and secondary provinces.

Source:
https://thailand.prd.go.th/en/content/category/detail/id/2078/iid/473764
https://www.tatnews.org/2026/02/amazing-thailand-chinese-new-year-2026-hatyai-elevates-southern-thailands-cross-border-gateway/

Thailand – Tailored to Chinese Preferences

Thailand has developed campaigns and curated experiences aligned with Chinese travel interests, particularly around major festive periods such as Chinese New Year. These initiatives highlight cultural performances, heritage sites, shopping promotions, and premium travel segments, ensuring offerings match Chinese travellers' preferences for festivals, culinary experiences, and culturally immersive activities.

Photo : Facebook/ Thailand Festival

Sources:
https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/612914
https://thailand.prd.go.th/en/content/category/detail/id/48/iid/465041
https://thailand.go.th/issue-focus-detail/tat-partners-with-chinese-streaming-platforms-to-promote-thai-gastronomy-tourism-through-international-documentary

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Australia - Come and Say G'Day campaign

Tourism Australia's multi-million-dollar Come and Say G'Day campaign is a prominent example of tailored experience positioning across digital and social media platforms. As part of its broader global marketing strategy, the campaign has been localised for key source markets, including China and India, to drive travel consideration and boost visitor numbers. In China, it was launched with customised advertising and targeted promotional content aimed at inspiring travellers to choose Australia as their next holiday destination.

For the Indian market, the campaign places strong emphasis on cultural relevance, featuring Indian personality Sara Tendulkar as a brand ambassador to enhance engagement and strengthen appeal among Indian travellers.

Source:
https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/travel/sara-tendulkar-joins-130-million-tourism-campaign-as-brand-ambassador-for-this-country/articleshow/123095393.cms?

Macau - Leverages Social Media to Promote Tourism

The Macau Tourism Board has actively used WeChat, Weibo, Douyin and Xiaohongshu, among other platforms, to promote Macau's culinary experiences and immersive travel products to Chinese travellers. Content includes themed series like the "Macau Double Itinerary" to spotlight local gastronomy and culture, which have generated tens of millions of impressions across Chinese social platform

Source:
https://www.dst.gov.mo/en/about-us/press-release/4fdb383b74134c1b8c36c1d1654e358c.html

Malaysia — Expanded Routes & Capacity

Malaysia is strengthening air connectivity with both China and India by expanding routes and increasing airline capacity. New services from previously underserved Chinese cities and a significant rise in seat capacity on Malaysia–China routes, more than doubling year-on-year, are helping to improve accessibility for Chinese travellers. Connectivity with India has also expanded through additional services from carriers such as AirAsia and Indian airlines, supporting the restoration of pre-pandemic flight capacity and reinforcing tourism flows between the two markets.

Source:
https://airguide.info/malaysia-boosts-air-links-with-china-and-india/?
https://www.ttgasia.com/2025/11/06/malaysia-airlines-expands-china-network-through-strategic-partnerships/

South Africa

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South Africa - Trusted Tour Operator Scheme (TTOS)

The South African Department of Home Affairs launched the Trusted Tour Operator Scheme (TTOS) in January 2025 as part of efforts to reform the visa system and drive job creation in the tourism sector. With an initial focus on key source markets China and India, the scheme aimed to cut red tape that had limited South Africa's share of tourists from these major economies, which made up only a small percentage of arrivals despite their substantial outbound travel numbers.

In partnership with the Department of Tourism, the Presidency and Operation Vulindlela, the scheme allows vetted tour operators from these countries to register and submit group visa applications, supported by a dedicated team to ensure faster and more efficient processing. Modelled on the success of the Trusted Employer Scheme, the TTOS is positioned as an economic enabler to boost tourism growth and unlock thousands of potential jobs. The initiative marked a significant step towards modernising and digitally transforming the visa system, with the long-term aim of achieving fully automated and secure online visa processing.

Source:
https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/home-affairs-announces-trusted-tour-operator-scheme-boost-tourism-china-and?
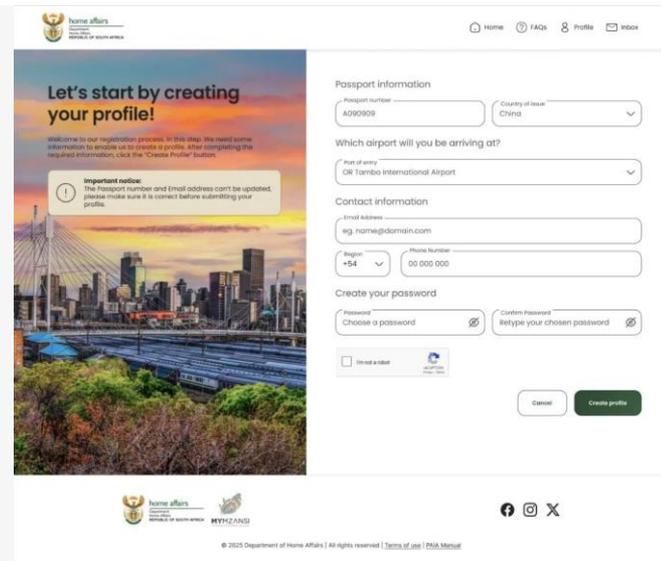https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/home-affairs-digital-trusted-tour-operator-scheme-27-may-2025?
https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/home-affairs-announces-trusted-tour-operator-scheme-boost-tourism-china-and
https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/home-affairs-expands-digital-trusted-tour-operator-scheme-further-boost
https://www.tourism.gov.za/AboutNDT/Ministry/News/Pages/Visa_innovation_delivering_real_tourism_growth_and_jobs_for_South_Africa.aspx?

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South Africa – Introduces Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA)

South Africa introduced a new Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) system aimed at digitising and streamlining visa applications. The platform allows travellers to apply online, submit biometric information, and receive faster approvals, replacing traditional paper-based visa processes. The system will integrate with facial recognition technology at key entry points such as OR Tambo International Airport and Cape Town International Airport to improve efficiency and strengthen border security. Initially launched for G20 delegates from China, India, Indonesia, and Mexico, the ETA will later expand to tourists from these countries and eventually become the main digital visa platform for all travellers requiring visas to visit South Africa.

Sources:
https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/minister-leon-schreiber-presents-new-electronic-travel-authorisation-tourism

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Indonesia — Plans for New International Links

Cambodia has officially opened the new Techo International Airport in Phnom Penh (2025), featuring a longer runway and upgraded, modern facilities to accommodate more international flights. The expansion is aimed at boosting tourism, especially from China and other parts of Asia. The country is also working on strengthening air connectivity with India, including proposed direct flights between Phnom Penh and New Delhi. This forms part of a wider tourism strategy that includes visa-free entry initiatives and targeted marketing campaigns.

Source:
https://itsme.co.id/en/214/travel/indonesia-expands-air-connectivity-to-attract-foreign-tourists?
https://aviationweek.com/air-transport/airports-networks/indonesia-looks-airport-growth-outside-usual-hubs
https://expatindonesia.id/2025/indonesia-plans-new-flight-routes-to-boost-tourism-connectivity/
https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/india-and-indonesia-air-connectivity-expands-as-airasia-indonesia-plans-direct-flights-boosting-the-tourism-sector/

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Cambodia — New Airport Infrastructure

Cambodia has officially opened the new Techo International Airport in Phnom Penh (2025), featuring a longer runway and upgraded, modern facilities to accommodate more international flights. The expansion is aimed at boosting tourism, especially from China and other parts of Asia. The country is also working on strengthening air connectivity with India, including proposed direct flights between Phnom Penh and New Delhi. This forms part of a wider tourism strategy that includes visa-free entry initiatives and targeted marketing campaigns.

Source:
https://www.sita.aero/pressroom/news-releases/cambodia-opens-a-new-chapter-in-air-travel-with-technology-driven-techo-international-airport/
https://www.techoairport.com.kh/news/kti-celebrate-christmas

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UAE – Expanding Global Aviation Hub

Dubai International Airport, consistently among the world's busiest, continues expanding capacity and infrastructure (including investments at Al Maktoum International Airport) to support new international routes and accommodate rising passenger volumes from markets including India and China.

Source:
https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/dubais-dxb-airport-forecast-to-handle-nearly-100-million-passengers-this-year-2026-02-11/?
https://www.thefirstgroup.com/en/news/dubai-sets-sights-on-building-the-world-s-busiest-airport-at-al-maktoum-international/
https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/dubai-international-airport-surpasses-95-million-passengers-in-2025-gears-up-for-35-billion-expansion-to-meet-soaring-global-travel-demand-you-need-to-know/

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