

Dubai holds first 'real life' conference after shutdown

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The image of Reem Al-Hashimi, UAE Minister of State for International Cooperation, is projected on large screens as she speaks at the first post-lockdown "real life" conference in the Gulf city of Dubai

"Don't touch the screen!" warned an organiser as participants attempted to print their badges, via barcodes sent to their phones, at Dubai's first

"real life" business conference since the coronavirus shutdown hit in March.

The glitzy emirate hosts dozens of conventions every year, from political events to technology and lifestyle forums, but for months the virus forced the lucrative sector to move from conference halls to computer screens.

Now, 10 days after reopening its doors to tourists, the city that received more than 16.7 million visitors last year has also restarted its conference business, with an event focusing on the artificial intelligence industry.

In a vast hall at the city's World Trade Centre, until recently converted into a [field hospital](#) for coronavirus patients, it was a full house on Thursday as hundreds of attendees at the AI Everything conference occupied rows of chairs spaced far apart under social distancing guidelines.

Others were outside the hall, listening to the event on screens as they waited for someone to leave their seat so they could enter.

"It's good to be here, face to face with others," said Reem Al Hashimi, minister of state for international cooperation, in one of the opening sessions.

"What this pandemic has taught us is that we need to be conscious and careful, but we also need to live our lives, so finding that healthy proper scientific balance is critical."



Dubai's Crown Prince Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Al-Maktoum (C) attends the conference. Dubai hosts dozens of conventions every year, but for months the virus forced the lucrative sector to move from conference halls to computer screens

The four-hour event looked very different from what the glittering city used to offer pre-COVID—with no crowded foyers or waiters bearing trays of drinks, and packaged energy bars and fruit replacing gourmet buffets.

A badge printing station was set up next to the hall entrance, with organisers in face shields and black suits advising attendees on how to get their credentials without touching anything.

Colourful signs on the floor adorned with smiley faces reminded

participants to "keep a safe distance" and told them "don't forget your mask".

Dubai is betting that pent-up demand for tourism, and a quick adaptation to life under COVID-19, will see its tourism industry bounce back quickly after the painful shutdown, billing itself as a safe destination with the resources to ward off the virus.

The reopening comes even as the United Arab Emirates, made up of seven sheikhdoms including Dubai, battles coronavirus infection rates that have climbed to more than 55,800 with 335 deaths.

However, the field hospital at the World Trade Centre discharged its last patient on July 8 and closed its doors before turning the wards back into event halls bearing the slogan "Restart Dubai".

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