

Connecting People, Cultures and Destinations: Strengthening Tourism Cooperation Across the Indian Ocean

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15th September 2026

Tourism has increasingly become more than a driver of economic growth. It is also a means of bringing people and communities together, promoting mutual understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, and strengthening connections between countries and regions. In an increasingly interconnected world, tourism and cultural exchanges can make an important contribution to sustainable development, resilience and people-to-people cooperation. Recent international discussions have placed renewed emphasis on these dimensions of tourism. The BRICS Tourism Ministers' Meeting held in India in 2026 highlighted the importance of cooperation in tourism and the opportunities presented by greater connectivity, innovation, sustainability and exchanges among emerging economies. These priorities are particularly relevant to the Indian Ocean region, where tourism is closely connected with cultural heritage, maritime history, biodiversity and the livelihoods of millions of people.

For the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Tourism and Cultural Exchanges constitute an important area of cooperation. Guided by the IORA Action Plan 2022–2027, the Tourism and Cultural Exchanges priority area seeks to support Member States through capacity-building, knowledge-sharing and cooperation, while promoting cultural heritage, digital innovation and tourism resilience. The Core Group on Tourism provides an important mechanism for advancing these objectives and strengthening collaboration among Member States. The Indian Ocean region possesses an extraordinary tourism and cultural heritage potential. From historic ports and trading cities to UNESCO heritage sites, traditional crafts, music, cuisine, festivals and living cultural practices, the region reflects centuries of interaction among peoples and civilizations. The movement of people, goods and ideas across the Indian Ocean has created a shared historical space in which diverse cultures have influenced and enriched one another.

This shared heritage provides a strong foundation for greater tourism cooperation. Rather than viewing destinations individually, there is considerable potential to promote the Indian Ocean as a connected tourism and cultural space. Multi-destination tourism routes, cultural circuits, maritime

heritage trails and thematic tourism products could encourage visitors to explore the region across national borders while highlighting the distinctive identity of individual destinations. Such cooperation could be particularly valuable for smaller economies and island destinations. Greater regional visibility, joint promotion and improved connectivity can help diversify tourism markets and create opportunities for local businesses, communities and young people. Cooperation can also support the development of tourism products that move beyond traditional models and place greater emphasis on cultural experiences, heritage, nature, wellness, gastronomy, creative industries and the blue economy.

At the same time, the future of tourism will increasingly be shaped by digital innovation. Digital technologies are transforming how travellers discover destinations, plan journeys and engage with cultural experiences. They are also creating new opportunities for tourism authorities, museums, heritage institutions, creative practitioners and local communities to reach international audiences. For IORA Member States, cooperation in areas such as digital tourism platforms, virtual cultural exhibitions, digital heritage documentation and the sharing of tourism data and best practices could contribute to greater regional visibility. Capacity-building in digital skills can further ensure that smaller tourism enterprises and local communities are able to participate in these emerging opportunities.

Cultural heritage also deserves particular attention. Across the Indian Ocean, many cultural traditions are living and evolving forms of heritage, transmitted from one generation to another through language, music, dance, crafts, cuisine, storytelling and community practices. Safeguarding this heritage is not only about preserving the past; it is also about ensuring that communities are able to maintain and transmit their cultural identities while benefiting from sustainable tourism opportunities. International efforts to strengthen the protection of intangible cultural heritage reinforce the importance of this approach. For IORA, greater cooperation in documenting, promoting and sharing knowledge on living heritage could complement tourism development while supporting cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue.

Tourism resilience is another increasingly important consideration. The experience of recent global disruptions has demonstrated the need for tourism destinations to strengthen their capacity to respond to economic, environmental and other external challenges. Climate change, natural disasters, changing travel patterns and other disruptions can have significant consequences for tourism-dependent economies, particularly small island developing states. Sharing experiences and best practices on tourism resilience can therefore become an important component of IORA cooperation. Member States can learn from one another in areas such as destination management,

sustainable infrastructure, crisis preparedness, diversification of tourism products and the development of more resilient local tourism enterprises.

In this context, capacity-building remains central to the work of IORA. The exchange of expertise and experiences among Member States can help strengthen institutional capabilities while ensuring that cooperation responds to the diverse circumstances of the region. Partnerships with international organizations, tourism institutions, cultural organizations, academia and the private sector can further enhance these efforts. The growing interest in tourism cooperation within broader international groupings also presents opportunities for IORA. Many IORA Member States participate in multiple regional and international frameworks, creating possibilities for sharing experiences and building synergies across different platforms. The objective is not to duplicate existing initiatives, but to ensure that the Indian Ocean perspective contributes to, and benefits from, wider international efforts to promote sustainable, inclusive and resilient tourism.

Looking ahead, IORA can play an important role in strengthening the connections between tourism, culture and sustainable development. The region's shared maritime history and cultural diversity provide a unique foundation for cooperation, while emerging technologies and changing tourism trends offer new avenues for collaboration. The opportunity is to move beyond viewing tourism simply as the movement of visitors from one destination to another. Tourism can be a means of connecting communities, creating economic opportunities, strengthening cultural understanding and showcasing the rich heritage of the Indian Ocean.

By promoting knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, cultural heritage cooperation, digital innovation and tourism resilience, IORA can continue to contribute to a more connected and sustainable tourism landscape. Ultimately, the strength of Indian Ocean tourism lies not only in the beauty of its destinations, but also in the people, cultures, traditions and shared history that connect them. Strengthening these connections can help ensure that tourism remains a powerful instrument for sustainable development, mutual understanding and regional cooperation across the Indian Ocean.