Luxury in the Middle East: an easy sell?
A market so hungry for luxury that it is simply there for the taking? Or an opaque region, a minefield that’s perhaps better avoided? For many outsiders, the Middle East is defined by one of these two assumptions. But how accurate is either one? This White Paper seeks to answer that question.

Intended as strategic analysis rather than a market primer, it examines key aspects of the market and its consumers – critical elements that should affect the decision-making process of every brand considering entry into or expansion within the region.

The paper has been produced by Chalhoub Group, the leading partner for luxury in the region for five decades, using proprietary research undertaken by the Group’s Strategy & Innovation Unit, together with third-party statistics that are in the public domain.

It will examine the environment for luxury that the region offers – the size and structure of the market and its consumers’ approach to luxury.

It makes the important distinction between the ‘Middle East’ and the six countries of the Gulf Co-Operation Council (GCC), and focuses on the latter. Part of the wider Middle East, the GCC comprises Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and (not considered in any detail in this paper) Oman.

Change is the only constant

The GCC, like the rest of the world, is experiencing social, economic and cultural upheaval, albeit in its own particular ways. It is not just the amount of change, but its speed that makes these times both challenging and exciting for luxury brands.

The GCC is no longer a frontier market; most major luxury brands are now present and consumers are becoming more educated. However, despite consumer enthusiasm for luxury, the market is not as straightforward as it may appear.

Many brands are doing very well in the region, their success due to a deep knowledge of market dynamics, the distribution and retail landscape, and the particularities of consumer attitudes and behaviour. These companies have committed to long-term brand building rather than chasing quick returns, and, crucially, have been able to tap into the local networks that are essential in a business environment built around relationships, trust and loyalty.

A deep understanding of the region is a prerequisite of success – and is all the more important in this age of high media visibility, when failure damages not only the bottom line but also the brand’s equity in consumer’s eyes.
PART I: The GCC – A favourable environment for luxury

It goes without saying that the GCC is an attractive market for luxury brand owners, with a high level of purchasing power that belies its relatively small consumer base.

The region has evolved, from the early days of OPEC-generated wealth in the 1970s, when the population began buying luxury brands abroad, through the ‘bling is king’ 1980s and 90s, when GCC shoppers headed en masse to the bright lights of Europe, and the first signs of a local shopping culture developed, to the rush of growth in the 2000s. This past decade has brought with it a dynamic and increasingly sophisticated retail environment – most recently with a shift of focus from Dubai to other hubs – and increasingly savvy consumers, willing and able to spend significant amounts on luxury.

A positive outlook

While much of the world continues to struggle with recession, the economic fundamentals look relatively favourable in the GCC. The IMF predicts real GDP growth for the Middle East’s oil exporters to be above 6.5% for 2012 and around 3.75% for 2013 – certainly a more optimistic picture than its global GDP growth projection, revised down in October to 3.3% [IMF, 2012].

The government of Abu Dhabi said in October that it will probably beat its own growth estimates made earlier this year, due to the expansion of the emirate’s non-oil industries. Qatar has announced a record budget surplus of $14.8 billion for the fiscal year 2011/2012, four times as large as the previous year’s, attesting to the strength and continued expansion of its economy. The surplus of $14.8 billion for the fiscal year 2011/2012, four times as large as the previous year’s, attesting to the strength and continued expansion of its economy.

The power of youth and money

The Middle East as a whole benefits from a young population, with more than 50% being under the age of 30 [UN, 2010]. In the GCC, the region’s wealthiest countries, the proportions range from 50% (UAE) to 57% (Saudi Arabia). In the UAE, Emirati teenagers spend $100 per month on clothes and accessories, more than six times the global average for their peer group [AMRB, 2011]. This offers tremendous potential for the luxury market, not only in the sheer force of numbers but also in the opportunity for brands to overcome the fickleness of young consumers and build loyalty early.

By venturing into the Middle East 30 years ago with the support and trust of the Chalhoub Group, Louis Vuitton was a pioneer in bringing high-end luxury goods to local consumers. Year after year the increasing enthusiasm of youth has helped us to consistently design the most appropriate product range. Today, with a presence of 14 stores across the Middle East, Louis Vuitton remains the most desired luxury brand appealing to all generations.

Yves Carcelle – LVMH

While there is a high concentration of wealth in the Middle East as a whole, its distribution varies widely, favouring the GCC countries, where GDP per capita in 2011 ranged from Bahrain at $23,027 to the UAE at $65,377 and Qatar at $100,400 [IMF, 2012]. This was well ahead of China ($6,094) and compared favourably with the US ($49,802) and France ($40,690).

The concentration of private wealth is even more marked, with Saudi Arabia estimated to have 1.265 Ultra High Net Worth individuals (having a net worth of $30 million or more) with a combined wealth of $230 billion, the UAE 810 UHNWIs holding $120 billion, Kuwait 735 UHNWIs with $230 billion and Qatar 300 UHNWIs with $45 billion [Wealth-X, 2012-2013].

Addicted to shopping

Shopping is deeply embedded in the region’s culture, with 90% of nationals saying that they go out shopping ‘regularly’, and 95% whenever they ‘feel like it’[Chalhoub Group, Youth and Luxury, 2010].

Unlike elsewhere in the world, where malls tend to be for the mass market, in the GCC they are a natural environment for luxury, too. And their purpose goes far deeper than the act of shopping: they are a pillar of social life, serving as ‘social clubs’, especially for the young – being one of the few socially acceptable places for even limited mingling between men and women. Moreover, the range of alternative leisure activities is limited and the harsh climate dictates that, for several months of the year, life is spent indoors.

GCC nationals are high spenders, both at home and abroad. Locally, they spend an average of $1,300 monthly on clothing and accessories of which $700 is on ready-to-wear and $500 on shoes. [Chalhoub Group, Consumer Research, 2009 - 2011], compared with $120 and $15 respectively for UK shoppers in the UK [UK Office for National Statistics, 2010]. The pattern is repeated when travelling: in London’s West End, the average transaction value for Saudis is $3,180, the highest of all nationalities; for Kuwaitis it is $2,860, Emiratis and Chinese are equal at $2,065, with Russians $1,000 and Indians $80. Locally, they spend an average of $1,300 monthly on clothing and accessories of which $700 is on ready-to-wear and $500 on shoes.

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Clearly, the outlook for luxury is positive, with Bain & Company’s most recent research predicting growth of 7–9% in the Middle East luxury market in 2011 to 2014, with a particularly strong 2012 at 10-15%. This follows growth in the region of 8% in 2010 to 2011, and 12% the previous year [Bain & Co, 2012].
PART II: The GCC – A distinctive market for luxury

Ever since it emerged as a frontier market three decades ago, the GCC has been of great value to luxury brand owners. Today, as its profile matures, it is worth around $6 billion annually, according to Chalhoub Group estimates.

Distinctive luxury dynamics

The region is marked by several characteristics that set it apart from other global markets. High-end fashion and accessories represent 35–40% of the GCC market (versus 50% globally), beauty 25% (in line with global norms, albeit with a much heavier weighting towards fragrances), hard luxury representing 30–35% (versus 20% globally), and ‘art de la table’ accounting for 5% (compared with 3% globally).

However, to regard the Middle East as a whole, or the GCC in particular, as ‘a market’ is misguided. It is a tapestry of different characteristics, rules and norms, and far from homogeneous.

Markets are not equal…

To begin with, the GCC presents two distinct styles of market: ‘windows’, such as Dubai and Bahrain (and, in the wider Middle East, Beirut), and ‘local resident’ markets, such as Riyadh, Jeddah, Doha and Kuwait. The two are distinguished chiefly by the size of their tourist market and, for this reason, Abu Dhabi currently sits on the cusp.

Overall, the region’s market is in transition, with varying patterns of development – consolidating in the UAE and Kuwait, and expanding in other areas, notably Saudi Arabia. The degree of maturity differs not only from country to country but also from city to city, in terms of both retail infrastructure and consumer attitudes.

Other factors specific to the region constitute important barriers to entry – and, again, differ greatly from one country to another. Of particular note: the legal frameworks covering customs and the censorship of communication, and the extent to which laws are open to interpretation, rather than being consistently applied. Equally, this is a region where business is based on deep relationships, trust and loyalty making networks crucial to success; by definition, these networks are specific to single countries or even markets within single countries.

Retail in different stages of development

The growth in the GCC’s retail space since 2005 has been explosive – a phenomenon impossible to miss – with a 145% increase in the region as a whole, largely driven by Dubai. The rate of growth has now slowed, with Retail International now predicting a 46% increase for 2010–2015. However, this still means adding 5 million square metres to the space, a comparable amount to the period 2005–2010. The drivers of this growth are now shifting away from Dubai, towards Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia in particular.

Today the GCC’s total retail space exceeds 10 million sqm, with great disparities in the space-to-population ratio: Kuwait, with a population of 3.7 million, has 0.63 million sqm of retail space; the UAE, with a population of 5.4 million, has over 4 million sqm, while Saudi Arabia has only 4.4 million sqm of retail space for a population of 28.2 million [2011 population figures/IMF, 2012].

While mega-malls still feature strongly – driven by the concept of shopping-as-entertainment, they were the key to the original retail boom – patterns are beginning to change. Given the danger of saturation (in Dubai, for example, there has been definite cannibalisation of older malls), new concepts are being developed, such as district or neighbourhood malls, which target specific groups of residents. Nevertheless, super-sized destination malls continue to be developed, as a key to the region’s growth.

Mega-malls

Thierry Oriez – President and CEO - Christofle

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PART III: GCC Consumers – A unique approach to luxury

Over the years, from its position within the market, Chalhoub Group has done extensive research to identify the region’s consumers. They are far from being a homogenous group: GCC nationals differ from one country to another, and even within certain countries; the expatriate population is drawn from many different countries and cultures and is present in different proportions throughout the GCC; tourists have varying degrees of impact in different destinations, and each nationality has different attitudes to luxury, and distinct buying patterns. Moreover, the GCC has a small but growing online consumer base, also with its own particularities.

NATIONAL CONSUMERS: sharing common bonds

More than in the rest of the world, the younger generation consumers have known wealth since birth and are already experienced consumers of luxury. The Chalhoub Group survey, Youth and Luxury 2010, conducted on 1,300 GCC locals aged 15-29, revealed that they share certain key characteristics. Driven by conflicting aspirations, on the one hand, they are searching for individual expression and personal style while on the other they are bound to strong social codes and traditions.

This apparent contradiction is manifested in their enthusiasm for customised or limited-edition pieces, which provide “unique” products yet from well-known and respected brands.

More than in most societies, the desire for renowned brands stems from the great influence friends and family have on luxury purchases: 80% of GCC youth admit seeking a friend’s opinion, 65% admit seeking a spouse’s opinion when buying luxury. This is not a distant influence but an influence that is integral to the shopping experience itself. Nationals shop in ‘clans’ – 70% with friends and 40% with mothers and sisters [Chalhoub Group, Youth & Luxury, 2010].

The same, yet different…

Emirati nationals are aspirational, deep into design, the latest trends and a wide range of brands and prices – and yet more than 80% of young Emiratis want a brand that is ‘very visible and always recognisable’.

Moreover, there are marked differences between Dubai and Abu Dhabi: Dubai nationals are indulgent, with 80% saying that they check the main stores regularly and 56% of young Dubai women saying that a dream luxury is to have ‘unlimited access to luxury brands’ – far more than the GCC average of 54%. On the other hand, nationals living in Abu Dhabi are elitist, viewing luxury as an exclusivity that only a certain social class can afford. (Indeed, they dislike even mingling with the general public when they shop, preferring malls with discrete ‘luxury’ areas and separate entrances.) For 43% of young Abu Dhabi women, a dream luxury is to “have something named after them”.

Kuwaiti nationals are assertive consumers, with 92% choosing a brand simply because they ‘like it’ (versus a GCC average of 60%). Versatile in brand knowledge and consumption, they are savvy shoppers who expect a sophisticated shopping experience. It is revealed that Kuwait has a strong community of fashion and style bloggers. Young Kuwaiti women are very socially active and associate luxury with exclusivity – only for those of a certain class. Young Kuwaiti men are mature internet users, price-aware and knowledgeable; they feel that luxury is ‘a lifestyle; it cannot be bought’.

Saudi Arabian nationals are driven by strong contradictions. While they yearn for individual expression 97% look for ‘something unique’ when purchasing luxury products – they are strongly attracted to anchor labels and shop within a limited set of brands, also needing ‘shopping guidance’ and strong relationships with the sales staff. Saudi Arabia’s two major cities are markedly different: Riyadh consumers are more conservative and view luxury as ‘special to own’, whereas Jeddah consumers are more fashion and trend-oriented, with 93% shopping when new products arrive and 80% influenced by singers and TV stars.

Qatari nationals yearn for individual expression, yet, like Saudis, tend to purchase from a narrow and accepted set of brands. Young Qatari men and women differ greatly: the women are sheltered while men are highly image-conscious and crave excitement. For 80% of young Qatari women, family values are ‘highly important’ (against a GCC average of 37%), and 66% favour brands with which they grew up. Conversely, 62% of young Qatari men give high rating to the notion of change (against a GCC average of 43%) and 54% say that they are highly influenced by sport celebrities, compared with the GCC average of 33% [source for all the above: Chalhoub Group, Youth & Luxury, 2010].

Expatriate consumers: diverse and influential

Adding another level of complexity to the mix, expatriates have a significant presence in the GCC market and significant wealth. As with everything in this region, there is more than meets the eye. First, contrary to many assumptions, Westerners are not necessarily the most important luxury consumers among expats; Indians, Iranians and other Arabs play a very significant role. Each group has its own cultural norms, references and attitudes to luxury.

Second, the presence of expatriates varies enormously from one country to another – 30% in Saudi Arabia, compared with 85% in the UAE, for example – and the mix of nationalities differs in each.

Third, their approach to a given category will widely differ: while Arab expats favour reputation and choice as key criteria to select a store, Asians respond to location and range of sizes while atmosphere and service will be paramount for Western Europeans.

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Riyadh nationals are conservative while Jeddah nationals are fashion and trend-oriented

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Dubai nationals are indulgent while Abu Dhabi nationals are elitist
TOURIST CONSUMERS: a growing influence

In a region where tourism was virtually unheard of 15 years ago, the change has been dramatic. Led by “the Dubai phenomenon”, tourism has become important to the entire GCC, although its impact is still extremely varied. It remains virtually non-existent in Qatar, for example.

Rapid growth will continue, with numbers for the Middle East as a whole expected to almost double by 2020, to 101 million [UNWTO, 2012].

Passenger traffic to the Middle East grew by 17% for the year-to-date August 2012 compared to the same period in 2011, versus 4.6% globally. Within the GCC, Qatar saw a 21% increase, Abu Dhabi 20% and Bahrain 11%. Even for Dubai, already a mature destination, the increase was over 13% [IATA, 2012].

Without question, the UAE remains by far the most significant destination for luxury tourism, with 11.2 million visitors in 2011 [Dubai Statistics Authority, 2012], making it unique in the region as a market for luxury retail.

‘The Middle East region has proven to be a growth platform attracting a variety of local as well as international shoppers and consumers. Puig has been committed to the area for many years through our partnership with Chalhoub, and we continue to see a strong potential for the region going forward when developing our brands both in fashion as well as in perfumery. In this sense we foresee the implementation of strong local initiatives and the continued strategic importance of the region for Puig’.

Marc Puig – Chairman & CEO – PUIG, SL

A change in the mix

Due to its geographically strategic location between East and West, the Middle East benefits from a wide variety of tourism: from short-haul travel from Iran and India to stop-over tourism for long-haul trips between Africa, Asia and Europe as well as religious tourism to Saudi Arabia.

In line with global trends, source countries are gradually changing, with a shift from the UK and Europe to China, in particular, with Russia continuing to grow and tourism within the GCC remaining very important and also growing. This too has significant implications for luxury retail.

Chinese tourists to Dubai increased by 111% between 2007 and 2011, with a 27% year-on-year increase from 2010 to 2011 [DTCM, 2012]. In Abu Dhabi, numbers rose by 89% in H1 of 2012 compared with a year previously [TCA Abu Dhabi, 2012]. The relatively small number of Chinese tourists belies their importance: among visitors to Dubai, they have the highest average per capita expenditure, followed by British and Kuwaiti tourists [MasterCard, 2012].

While the Chinese are grabbing much of the attention, Russian tourist numbers also continue to grow, with Dubai reporting an increase of 22% in 2011 over 2010 [DTCM, 2012]. During Dubai Shopping Festival 2012, Russians spent a total of $122 million, followed by Saudis ($106m), Britons ($93m) and Chinese ($83.5m) [Visa, 2012].

Yet the UAE still predominantly relies on regional tourism – GCC nationals account for one third of tourists in Dubai. Among GCC nationals, the UAE remains by far the most favoured regional destination (although Bahrain attracts many Saudi weekend visitors due to its ease of road access). The number of Saudi hotel guests in Dubai increased by 66% and Kuwaitis by 25% from 2010 to 2011 [DTCM, 2012]. During Eid el-Adha in November 2012, Dubai was expecting to receive 1.5 million visitors from other GCC countries, with one million tourists expected from Saudi Arabia alone [DEPE, 2012].

Religious tourism is a phenomenon specific to Saudi Arabia and, with strong support from the Saudi government, is growing rapidly – from just over 10 million in 2010 to 17 million in 2011 [UNWTO, 2012]. Revenue from tourism in 2010 was $17.6 billion, according to the Saudi Commission for Tourism & Antiquities.

A digital future?

The GCC countries were late adopters of the internet and, although use has increased, it varies widely: penetration stands at 86% in Qatar, 74% in Kuwait 71% in the UAE and only 49% in Saudi Arabia [Internet World Stats, 2012].

While 84% of GCC national internet users visit brand websites, the use of e-commerce is low, with only 26% of this group buying products online. Online shoppers show a strong preference for local online retailers rather than international, and buy mainly fragrances (70% in the UAE and Qatar) and clothing (50% in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia) [Chalhoub Group, GCC Digital, 2012].

In contrast, by international standards, engagement in social media is very high, with 89% of national internet users saying that they regularly access Facebook and YouTube [Chalhoub Group, GCC Digital, 2012]. The high social media penetration rates are driven in large part by cultural taboos: Facebook offers a means to bypass restrictions about socialising in person; YouTube’s particularly strong presence among the region’s youth is fuelled by the need to partake in open lifestyles and communities, albeit from afar, which often stand in stark contrast to their familiar immediate surroundings; Twitter provides a virtual outlet for opinions in a politically-sensitive region.

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By 2011, Dubai had become the world’s No. 1 targeted city by retailers, ahead of London, Paris or New York, with 82% of the world’s leading luxury brands present. In 2009, more new retailers entered Saudi Arabia than any other country in the world, and in 2012 it was the 10th most targeted destination globally for retailers, ahead of Hong Kong, with Kuwait also rising from 13th place in 2011 to 12th this year [CBRE].

In line with industry specialists, Chalhoub Group anticipates that growth in the Middle East will remain strong, driven by fashion, still under-represented in high potential markets like Saudi Arabia, and fashion accessories, already much stronger than anywhere else in the world, particularly in shoes. This growth will be fuelled by resident-based GCC markets (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Abu Dhabi) in the mid-term, and potentially supplemented by the untapped markets of Egypt and Iran in the longer term (the former made up of an emerging middle-income consumer base, the latter by a beauty-conscious, trend-following society).

‘Over 50 years ago my parents, Michel and Widad Chalhoub, envisioned the Arabian Gulf potential for luxury products with a strong commitment to our inherited values of respecting our partners, providers, customers and employees. We built up our Group based on delivering excellence in service. Our entrepreneurial spirit encourages us to constantly push the boundaries of our expertise, our know-how and our customer understanding without ever failing to question how we add value to these markets’.

Anthony Chalhoub – Co-CEO Chalhoub Group

A rapidly evolving market, the GCC offers great opportunity for brands to achieve levels of recognition and respect that may even be greater than what they enjoy in their home markets. Some brands have already achieved this – not simply by following the obvious path but rather by working with local partners to create and expand opportunities. Making long-term strategic commitments and leveraging insights into the region’s nuances have proven to be effective in minimising risk and opening the door to the greatest possible return on investment.

One thing that has been constant and will never change is the need for brands to connect, both rationally and emotionally, with their consumers, tapping into their sensibilities, ‘speaking their language’ and offering an outstanding level of service.

Middle Eastern consumers cannot be taken for granted simply because of their level of income and lifestyle; the picture is far more complex. Luxury brands need to create deep, intimate and relevant connections to engage and retain these consumers. For this, there are no short-cuts.

‘The Middle East countries are a market of great opportunities for luxury, a dynamic, fast growing market with different stages of maturity. The customer base is wide and diverse, increasingly knowledgeable, rapidly evolving, extremely demanding, and with diverse behavior, expectations, and aspirations. Such customers are looking for a unique shopping experience.

It is a market which requires know how, expertise, and knowledge of constantly changing specificities. As a leading partner of luxury in the Middle East we are thrilled that it is becoming one of the great destinations of luxury in the world’.

Patrick Chalhoub – Co-CEO Chalhoub Group
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CBRE, 2012
The Chalhoub Group is the leading partner for luxury in the Middle East since 1955. As an expert in retail, distribution and marketing services based in Dubai, the group has become a major player in the fashion, beauty and gift sectors regionally.

By blending its expertise in the Middle East with its intimate knowledge of luxury and a keen perception of the markets and consumers, the Chalhoub Group thrives to build successful brands in the region, and offers a unique experience and service to its clients and customers through expert and passionate teams committed to the Group’s values of respect, excellence and entrepreneurial spirit. With a growing workforce of more than 8,500 people, implemented in 14 countries, as well as the operating of over 450 retail outlets, the group’s success is attributed to its most valued asset of highly skilled and dedicated teams. Professionalism and passion are what fuel the Chalhoub Group’s competitive edge in today’s market.

By being committed to implementing sustainable practices into their business, the Chalhoub Group has been awarded in 2013 the CSR Label from the Dubai Chamber of Commerce.

For more information
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