

Tourism Resilience in Times of Geopolitical Tension: Digital Innovation, Cultural Exchange, and Regional Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region

By

Dr Bhavna Mahadew

**Law Lecturer, University of Technology, Mauritius & IORAG ECPN Steering Committee
Member: Internal Stakeholders**

1st May 2026

Tourism in the Indian Ocean region is undergoing a significant transformation shaped by global uncertainty, technological change, and shifting traveler expectations. The work of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), particularly through its Tourism and Cultural Exchanges agenda and the IORA Action Plan 2022–2027, provides a timely framework to address these challenges. A key contemporary issue that has emerged is the need to build resilient, inclusive, and adaptive tourism systems capable of withstanding external shocks, including geopolitical tensions such as those involving Iran.

Recent tensions linked to Iran highlight how conflicts—even those occurring outside the immediate Indian Ocean Rim—can have far-reaching consequences for global tourism. Tourism is highly sensitive to perceptions of risk, and instability in one region often affects traveler confidence in neighboring or connected areas. For IORA Member States, this underscores the importance of resilience as a central policy priority. Rather than viewing tourism as a fragile sector, there is a growing recognition that it must be designed to absorb shocks, adapt quickly, and recover sustainably.

One of the most immediate impacts of geopolitical tension is the disruption of connectivity and travel flows. The Indian Ocean is a critical corridor for international air and maritime routes. Any instability affecting surrounding regions can lead to increased fuel prices, altered airline routes, and reduced tourist mobility. For many IORA countries — especially small island developing states and coastal economies — this can translate into declining visitor numbers and economic strain. In this context, IORA’s emphasis on regional cooperation and policy coordination becomes crucial. By sharing information, aligning strategies, and developing contingency plans, Member States can mitigate the effects of such disruptions and maintain stability in their tourism sectors.

Closely linked to resilience is the role of digital innovation. The global tourism landscape has been rapidly transformed by digital technologies, a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In times of geopolitical uncertainty, digital tools become even more important. Real-time communication platforms, data analytics, and digital marketing allow destinations to respond quickly to changing conditions and manage traveler perceptions effectively. For example, clear and transparent communication can counteract negative perceptions associated with conflicts like those involving Iran, reassuring tourists about safety in unaffected destinations. IORA’s focus on capacity-building and knowledge-sharing is essential in helping Member States harness these technologies and bridge existing digital divides.

Another critical dimension is the diversification of tourism markets and products. Over-reliance on a limited number of source markets makes countries particularly vulnerable to external shocks. Geopolitical tensions can disrupt travel from certain regions, making it necessary for destinations to pivot toward alternative markets. IORA’s initiatives can support this process by facilitating market intelligence sharing and promoting collaborative marketing strategies. Additionally, diversifying

tourism offerings—such as eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and wellness tourism—can attract a broader range of visitors and enhance resilience.

The promotion and preservation of cultural heritage remain central to sustainable tourism development. In an era of globalization and uncertainty, cultural tourism offers a unique value proposition by providing authentic and meaningful experiences. However, it must be managed carefully to avoid commodification and degradation. IORA's Tourism and Cultural Exchanges agenda emphasizes the importance of safeguarding cultural assets while promoting intercultural dialogue. Community-based tourism models are particularly effective in this regard, as they empower local populations, ensure equitable distribution of benefits, and enhance the authenticity of visitor experiences.

Geopolitical tensions also highlight the importance of intra-regional tourism. When long-haul travel declines due to global instability, regional travel often proves more resilient. Strengthening tourism flows within the Indian Ocean Rim can therefore serve as a buffer against external shocks. Initiatives such as simplified visa regimes, improved regional connectivity, and joint tourism packages can encourage travelers to explore destinations within the region. This aligns with IORA's objective of fostering closer cooperation among Member States and creating a more integrated regional tourism market.

Environmental sustainability is another critical aspect of tourism resilience. Many IORA countries are highly vulnerable to climate change, which poses long-term risks to tourism infrastructure and natural attractions. While geopolitical tensions such as those involving Iran represent immediate and visible disruptions, climate change is a slower but equally significant threat. Integrating sustainability into tourism planning—through eco-friendly practices, conservation efforts, and climate adaptation strategies—is essential for ensuring the sector's long-term viability. IORA provides a platform for sharing best practices and developing coordinated approaches to these challenges.

Capacity-building remains at the heart of IORA's efforts to strengthen tourism across the region. Many Member States face limitations in terms of skills, infrastructure, and institutional capacity. Through training programs, technical assistance, and knowledge-sharing initiatives, IORA helps countries enhance their ability to respond to both immediate crises and long-term challenges. The leadership of Kenya as Chair of the Core Group on Tourism (CGT) demonstrates the importance of coordinated action in implementing these initiatives. By translating policy into practice, the CGT plays a vital role in advancing the objectives of the IORA Action Plan.

Finally, tourism serves as a powerful tool for cultural diplomacy and peace-building. In times of geopolitical tension, fostering people-to-people connections becomes even more important. Cultural exchanges, festivals, and collaborative heritage projects can promote mutual understanding and counteract narratives of conflict. For the Indian Ocean region, this represents an opportunity to position itself as a zone of cooperation and cultural richness, despite global uncertainties.

In conclusion, the contemporary challenge of geopolitical tension—illustrated by developments involving Iran—highlights the urgent need for resilient and adaptive tourism systems in the Indian Ocean region. Through its Tourism and Cultural Exchanges agenda and the IORA Action Plan 2022–2027, the Indian Ocean Rim Association provides a comprehensive framework to address these challenges. By embracing digital innovation, promoting cultural heritage, strengthening regional cooperation, and investing in capacity-building, Member States can transform uncertainty into opportunity. In doing so, they can ensure that tourism remains not only an engine of economic growth but also a force for cultural connection and regional stability in an increasingly complex global landscape.