



RISE OF HYPER- EXPERIENTIAL ENTERTAINMENT IN GCC MALLS

Trends Report | June 2025



Across the **Middle East**, particularly in the GCC region, malls are rapidly transforming from traditional retail complexes into **hyper-experiential leisure ecosystems**

These spaces are no longer defined by anchor stores or food courts, but by **technologically immersive, emotionally engaging, and socially shareable experiences**

This pivot is reshaping both consumer expectations and the economic logic of mall development along with the role of brands in catering towards customer experiences

Malls are becoming **curated destinations** where visitors can feel, play, learn, and perform, often all within the same visit. Some of the more non-mainstream, forward-thinking examples include



The Storm Coaster: The world's fastest indoor rollercoaster, built inside a luxury mall, not as an amusement ride adjunct but as a centerpiece attraction



House of Hype: A phygital store that blends fashion retail with NFT galleries, avatars, digital wearables for the metaverse offering entertainment through self-expression



Muvi Cinemas' MX4D Experiences: Not just 4D cinema, but full-motion seats, scent, wind that turn passive viewing into an embodied multi-sensorial experience



TEKZONE: A sophisticated digital park concept featuring kinetic games, interactive projections. This is a digital-first theme park layered with social, educational, and competitive elements

Several powerful trends are fueling this evolution:

Digital Saturation + Physical Hunger:

Gen Z and Gen Alpha are digitally fluent but crave tangible, real-world experiences that complement their digital personas, not replace them

Tourism and National Vision Plans:

Initiatives like Saudi Vision 2030 and Dubai Tourism Strategy 2025 prioritize lifestyle and entertainment as economic pillars

High Footfall = High Fidelity Data:

These immersive spaces allow operators to collect incredibly rich behavioral data- dwell time, interaction rates, pathing etc. allowing them to refine experiences with near real-time feedback



Thus, the future of experiences in malls is not store-led, but *story-led*

01

SPATIAL STORYTELLING BECOMES ESSENTIAL:

Architecture and interior design are being used narratively. Expect to see malls designed like mini theme parks, where zones are based on mood, culture, or digital themes, not merchandise categories

Dubai Mall's Chinatown Zone (Dubai):

Instead of organizing this section by brands or product types, it tells a cultural story. Designed to evoke the feeling of being in a traditional Chinese marketplace, it uses lanterns, murals, scents, and architecture to immerse visitors in a distinct mood and narrative - one of cultural celebration rather than commercial categorization



02

ENTERTAINMENT ANCHORS REPLACE RETAIL ANCHORS:

In the past, flagship department stores drew traffic. Now, it's immersive worlds. Expect mall developers to prioritize partnerships with experience-first brands and content studios

Ibn Battuta Mall – Themed Courts (Dubai, UAE):

Instead of a major retailers, this mall attracts visitors with its six culturally themed courts (e.g., Persia Court, Egypt Court), each beautifully designed to reflect a different region Ibn Battuta traveled. These spaces are free to explore, turning the mall into a cultural and architectural attraction without charging for entry



03

HYBRID MONETIZATION MODELS:

Experiences may have free entry but paid for upgrades, like in gaming. Malls may adopt microtransaction ecosystems, where you pay to enhance your journey, customize avatars, or unlock exclusive rooms

Time Out Market (Lisbon, Dubai, and others):

While entry is free, the market is designed as a curated experience where visitors can choose to “level up” their visit — for example, by attending chef-led tastings, exclusive workshops, or private dining pop-ups. It mimics a tiered experience model, much like premium features in free-to-play games



04

EXPERIENCES ARE THE PRODUCT:

The experience itself must be seen as the core offering—not an add-on. Entertainment brands need to design for repeatability, not just spectacle, ensuring consumers return for different outcomes or evolving narratives

Museum of the Future (Dubai, UAE):

This isn't just a one-time museum visit. It's designed as an ever-evolving experiential journey, with immersive storytelling zones that update with new themes, technologies, and interactive elements. The focus is on emotional engagement and curiosity, encouraging visitors to return as the "story of the future" unfolds over time



05

THE RISE OF THE 'RETAILTAINMENT' FORMAT:

Product launches, seasonal campaigns, and brand activations will increasingly need interactive storytelling—think pop-up museums, avatar-based fitting rooms, or story-led product trail

THAT Concept Store (Mall of the Emirates):

This high-end concept store blends fashion retail with art installations, pop-ups, and workshops. They frequently collaborate with local artists and global brands to create immersive, story-led activations- like an AI-driven fitting room experience or curated lifestyle “zones” that change with themes and seasons



06

STRATEGIC CO-LOCATION:

Being adjacent to or partnered with immersive experiences boosts footfall. Expect cross-promotions between brands and entertainment zones, like discount bundles, themed menus, or branded quest

Reel Cinemas x Guy Fieri's Kitchen (Dubai Mall):

This collaboration places a bold, experiential dining brand within a cinema complex. Guests can enjoy themed food tied to blockbuster releases (like superhero burgers or fantasy desserts), enhancing both the cinema and dining experience. It's not just about location- it's about narrative synergy





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