

An Unsung Economic Powerhouse

An Interview with Julia Simpson, President and Chief Executive Officer, World Travel and Tourism Council

EDITORS' NOTE Julia Simpson is President and Chief Executive Officer of the World Travel and Tourism Council. She spent 14 years in the aviation sector on the Board of British Airways and Iberia and as Chief of Staff at International Airlines Group. Before joining British Airways, she was senior adviser to the UK Prime Minister. She held a number of key positions in the UK government and public sector, including Director at the Home Office and Department for Education and Employment; Assistant Chief Executive at the London Borough of Camden; and Head of Communications at the Communication Workers Union. Simpson is on the Board of the London Chamber of Commerce.



Julia Simpson

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The mission of the World Travel and Tourism Council (wttc.org) is to maximize the inclusive and sustainable growth of the travel and tourism sector by partnering with governments, destinations, communities, and other stakeholders to drive economic development, create jobs, and reduce poverty while fostering peace, security, and understanding in the world. It is a membership organization representing the global travel and tourism private sector. From the outset, its members realized that hard economic facts were needed to help governments and policymakers truly understand the value of travel and tourism. Therefore, research into the growth, trends and challenges of travel and tourism underpins WTTC's work.

How do you define the role of the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC)?

Travel and tourism is an unsung economic powerhouse. Pre-pandemic, our industry created one in ten jobs on the planet and contributed one in ten dollars to the global economy. So, our role is to explain the economic value of this great sector to governments. We are growing – but more than ever we are growing responsibly. While many countries recognize our value, a lot of developed economies take the industry for granted.

Will you highlight the history of WTTC and how the organization has evolved?

Over 30 years ago a group of great CEOs including Bill Marriott, James Robinson, and Colin Marshall went to see the former United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. They asked, why didn't the U.S. government recognize our

economic and social worth? Kissinger noted how fragmented the travel and tourism industry was, which meant its immense value often went unrecognized. So, a small group of leaders formed WTTC with likeminded CEOs from across the world who represented all aspects of our business. Today we have Chris Nassetta from Hilton, Tony Capuano from Marriott, Elie Maalouf from IHG, Sébastien Bazin from Accor sitting alongside Pierfrancesco Vago from MSC Cruise, Manfredi Lefebvre from Abercrombie and Kent Travel Group,

Greg O'Hara from Certares, Audrey Hendley from American Express, among many others. The list of luminaries comprises almost 200 top leaders.

We are now invited to G20s and G7, COP and hold our own world class Global Summit. We get the U.S. government to speed up visas. Saudi Arabia has thrown its weight behind our groundbreaking work on sustainability. We support a sector that will be worth \$11 trillion this year, growing at almost double the rate of global GDP.

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Will you provide an overview of WTTC's initiatives?

Data is our DNA – Economic, Social and Sustainability. We are the oracle. We have products like Hotel Sustainability Basics – a universally recognized environmental verification scheme for small hotels. We have research on AI – the opportunities and challenges; on decarbonizing oceans; on social impacts from COVID; on how to implement destination stewardship in popular destinations. We are thought leaders with practical solutions.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead WTTC and made you feel it was the right fit?

It matters. It brings joy. It brings wealth. It breaks down prejudice. I worked in aviation for 14 years. The sector is made up of great people. I have a small but brilliant team who are agile, creative, and make stuff happen. And I have one of the most influential and interesting boards ever, led by Greg O'Hara.

Do you feel there is an effective awareness of travel and tourism's value and economic impact?

Awareness has certainly improved over the years, but there's always more to be done to showcase just how significant the industry is. Travel and tourism is often undervalued, yet it contributes more than \$11 trillion to the global GDP and supports nearly 350 million livelihoods worldwide. That's no small feat, and we are committed to helping more people, and most importantly governments, recognize these vital contributions.

Will you highlight the talent and expertise of WTTC's workforce?

The WTTC team is truly exceptional, filled with professionals who bring expertise across travel and tourism, policy, sustainability, and economic research. Their dedication to our mission is what drives our initiatives and partnerships, all with a shared vision for a thriving, sustainable future for our industry. It is an honor to lead such a talented and committed group.

What has made the travel and tourism industry so special for you?

For me, travel and tourism is about so much more than economic value; it's about people. The way this industry inspires, connects, and empowers individuals and communities is absolutely unique. I've seen firsthand how tourism can change lives, preserve cultures, and drive social progress, and it is this impact that makes it a privilege to contribute to its growth.

What are your priorities for WTTC as you look to the future?

Looking ahead, my priorities will focus on accelerating our path towards net zero and sustainability, championing digital transformation to enhance traveler experiences, and advocating for policies that ensure travel and tourism remains resilient in the face of global challenges. By continuing to push for responsible growth, WTTC will remain a key player in shaping a sustainable, inclusive future for tourism. ●