

An international acceleration programme positions AIUla as a living laboratory for the future of tourism



Paris, June 22 2026 – Following their meeting during VivaTech 2026, Jean-Yves Le Drian, Chairman of the French Agency for AIUla Development (AFALULA), Roxanne Varza, Director of STATION F, and Nicolas Houzé, Chairman of Groupe Galeries Lafayette, announce the launch of a start-up acceleration programme bringing together start-ups from around the world. The initiative aims to support innovations that will shape the future of tourism in AIUla, a world-class destination for cultural heritage, arts, nature, wellness and luxury located in north-west Saudi Arabia.

Supported by the Royal Commission for AIUla and co-led by AFALULA, this programme aims to identify and support the most innovative start-ups and scale-ups to accelerate AIUla's revitalisation.

The programme positions AIUla as a living laboratory for the future of cultural and sustainable tourism, building on the significant success already achieved with a destination development

model that integrates community and authentic experiences, ensuring inclusive growth and deep cultural engagement.

Through this “**Future of Tourism**” initiative, **ten start-ups from France and abroad** will take part in an intensive **three-month programme hosted at STATION F**.

Alongside the programme’s partners, they will work on concrete use cases to address several key challenges:

- enhancing the attractiveness and engagement of international audiences with diverse expectations;
- continuing to improve the operation of heritage and cultural sites, and ensuring conservation and commercial maximisation while preserving heritage;
- optimising visitor flows, logistics operations and human resources management, across the broader tourism ecosystem;
- developing new AI-driven services to elevate the visitor experience.

The programme will conclude with a **Demo Day at the end of November 2026**, after which two start-ups will be selected to deploy a **Proof of Concept (PoC) in AIUla**.

Operational rollout starting this summer

The programme timeline includes:

- opening of the applications, internationally, at the **beginning of July**;
- selection of ten start-ups at the **beginning of August**;
- beginning of the acceleration programme in **September** at STATION F;
- announcement of two winners following the Demo Day in **November**;
- deployment of their solutions in AIUla **from December onwards**.

A partnership bringing together complementary expertise

This programme leverages the complementary expertise of three key partners:

- **AFALULA** is responsible for its design and implementation in collaboration with programme partners, and in alignment with the aspirations and needs of AIUla.
- **STATION F** brings its international network and expertise in designing and delivering worldwide innovation programmes.
- **Galleries Lafayette** brings its expertise in customer experience and hospitality, shaped by over 130 years of family history, where innovation and excellence have always been at the core of its identity. The Group draws on the unique know-how of its Boulevard Haussmann flagship in Paris - one of the most visited department stores in the world, welcoming 35 million French and international visitors each year - as a living laboratory for innovation and premium experiences.

A shared vision

Through this partnership, AFALULA, STATION F and Galleries Lafayette are aligned with RCU objectives: positioning AIUla as a leading hub for tourism innovation by bringing together the most promising entrepreneurial talent from around the world.

Jean-Yves Le Drian, President of AFALULA:

“This partnership reflects our ambition to make AIUla a leading hub for tourism innovation. By bringing together key players from entrepreneurship, innovation and retail, we are creating a unique environment to support the development of solutions addressing the major challenges of the tourism of tomorrow. This initiative will strengthen AIUla’s attractiveness while supporting sustainable development and long-term value creation.”

Roxanne Varza, Director of STATION F:

“Travel and tourism are incredibly dynamic sectors when it comes to innovation, and we are thrilled to launch our very first programme in this field! Through this partnership with AIUla and the Galeries Lafayette Group, international startups will come to STATION F to imagine and design the travel experiences of tomorrow.”

Nicolas Houzé, Executive Chairman of the Galeries Lafayette Group:

“The identity of Galeries Lafayette has always been shaped by a bold ability to reinvent itself and stay ahead of evolving consumer behaviors. It is this long-standing relationship of trust with entrepreneurs that we aim to harness in service of AIUla’s future, by giving the most ambitious startups the means to disrupt the codes of hospitality and tourism. Supporting these talents in meeting the expectations of an international clientele is fully aligned with our strategic vision for this exceptional destination, and strongly resonates with the deep-rooted presence we are building in the Middle East. By combining our expertise, we are paving the way for a truly new kind of tourism experience.”

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About AFALULA

Created to support its Saudi partner, the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU), in transforming the region into a world-class cultural and tourism destination, the French Agency for AIUla Development (AFALULA) was established following an intergovernmental agreement signed between Saudi Arabia and France in April 2018. The Agency is structured around specialized divisions: architecture, urban planning and development, culture and archaeology, tourism, innovation, human capital, infrastructure and environment, agriculture and botany, the equestrian sector, and security

<https://www.afalula.com/>

<https://horizon-afalula.com/>

About Galeries Lafayette

A French leader in department stores and renowned worldwide, Galeries Lafayette has been an undisputed specialist in fashion and experiential retail for over 130 years. Its mission is to make every visit a unique experience and to offer its French and international customers an ever-evolving selection of brands, ranging from accessible labels to premium and luxury names. Operating across fashion and accessories, home décor, food, and dining, the Galeries Lafayette brand shines through a network of 48 stores in France — including 17 company-owned stores and 31 franchises — as well as eleven existing and upcoming international stores, its e-commerce platform galerieslafayette.com, and its outlet business, Galeries

Lafayette L'Outlet. For more information, visit galerieslafayette.com, or follow Galeries Lafayette on Facebook and Instagram (@galerieslafayette).

About STATION F

STATION F is the world's largest startup campus, founded by Xavier Niel in 2017. Located in Paris, the 50,000 m² campus accompanies over 1,000 start-ups each year across more than 30 acceleration programmes. The startup community is already home to several notable successes, including four unicorns: Hugging Face, Alan, Profound, and Pasqal. Collectively, companies based at STATION F raised more than €1.5 billion in 2025.

<https://stationf.co/>

About innovation driving tourism in AIUla

Since its establishment, the French Agency for AIUla Development (AFALULA) has placed innovation at the heart of its mission to co-create the tourism of tomorrow. Supporting the development of an exceptional tourism destination, reflecting the richness of AIUla's heritage lies at the core of AFALULA's purpose. Innovation is considered a key driver of impact, supporting both heritage preservation and the stimulation of the local ecosystem. This long-standing ambition is reflected in the ongoing experimentation of high-impact pilot projects (Proofs of Concept), for instance: water consumption reduction solutions developed by the startup Luniwave, or the reinvention of cultural experiences through gaming and immersive entertainment.

About AIUla

Located 1,100 km from Riyadh in northwestern Saudi Arabia, AIUla is a place of extraordinary natural and cultural heritage. This vast region spans 22,561 km² and includes a lush valley, imposing sandstone mountains, and ancient cultural sites dating back several millennia to the Lihyanite and Nabataean kingdoms. The most renowned and recognized site in AIUla is Hegra, the first Saudi site to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Covering 52 hectares, Hegra was the main southern city of the Nabataean Kingdom. It features more than 140 well-preserved tombs, many with elaborate facades carved into the surrounding sandstone outcrops that enclose the fortified urban area. Current research also suggests that Hegra was the southernmost outpost of the Roman Empire following the Roman conquest of the Nabataeans in 106 AD. Beyond Hegra, AIUla is also home to the ancient city of Dadan, capital of the Dadanite and Lihyanite kingdoms, considered one of the most developed cities of the first millennium BCE in the Arabian Peninsula. The region also includes Jabal Ikma, an open-air library containing hundreds of inscriptions and writings in several languages, recently listed in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. In addition, AIUla's historic Old Town, a true labyrinth of more than 900 mudbrick houses built as early as the 12th century, was selected by the World Tourism Organization as one of the Best Tourism Villages in the world in 2022.

For more information, please visit experiencealula.com