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Travel Guide

Saudi Arabia has excellent infrastructure and has all the amenities, facilities and other features required by modern-day travelers. As with any other country, it is important for visitors to familiarize themselves with basic travel-related information in order to make their stay as pleasant as possible.

Visas

All visitors to Saudi Arabia require visas relevant to their stay in the Kingdom: short-stay, business, residence or work. Visas may be obtained from the Visa Section of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia or one of the Saudi Arabian Consulates in many major cities all over the world.

In the United States, the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia is located in Washington D.C. while Saudi Arabian Consulates may be found in New York, Houston and Los Angeles.

Related Links:

- [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#)
- [The Royal Saudi Embassy in the United States](#)
- [The Royal Saudi Embassy in the United Kingdom](#)
- [The Royal Saudi Embassy in Italy](#)

Business Visas

Saudi Embassies have the power to issue visitors' visas to business people with commercial and industrial interests in the Kingdom. Business visas are usually initiated in Saudi Arabia, with the visa applicant's firm or agent in the Kingdom applying on his behalf to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Once the visa is approved, the ministry instructs the embassy or consulate indicated in the original application to issue the required visa.

Embassy and consular officers are allowed to grant short-visit visas to foreign businessmen without referring the application to the Foreign Ministry, if the applicant works for a large corporation already established in the Kingdom. However, the normal procedure is to go through the ministry.

Religious Visas

Religious visas are issued to Muslims all over the world wishing to perform Umrah or Haj. The Holy Cities of Makkah and Madinah are the center of activities for such visits.

Residence Visas/Work Permits

Work permits for foreigners are applied for by the employer with the proper government bodies - Interior and Labor & Social Affairs Ministries. Anyone who wish to stay in the Kingdom for more than three months must have a residence permit(iqama). This is issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is valid for two years.

Foreign employees dependents are also generally given residence visas, which however don't allow them to seek employment.

Exit visas to leave the Kingdom are required for holders of residence visas.

Customs Regulations

A number of items are not allowed to be brought into the Kingdom due to religious reasons and local regulations. These include alcoholic beverages, pork and pork products, prohibited drugs and narcotics, firearms, explosives, edged weapons and pornographic materials.

Accommodation

There are a good number of excellent hotels in the major cities of Saudi Arabia, specially in Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam, including 5-star international hotel chains. Most of the regional cities also have some good hotels.

It is recommended that reservations be made well in advance, as occupancy tends to be high, specially in the peak summer period.

Travelers who fly Saudi Arabian Airlines may take advantage of its hotel discount arrangements with many top hotels. Hotel bookings may be arranged through the airlines' reservation system.

Alfursan frequent flyer program members are also entitled to discounts as well as free stays and room upgrades depending on their accumulated mileage.



Housing for expatriates is usually in the form of flats/apartments, separate villas or housing in compounds. Employee contracts usually provide for free housing, furnishings, water and electricity. Telephone service, with International Direct Dialing, is widely available. Mobile phones and pagers are also widely used.

Power Supply

Power supply is 110 volts, 60 Hertz AC although it is not unusual for some houses to have 220 volt wiring as well to accommodate certain home appliances. Voltage regulators and surge protectors are recommended to protect appliances and computer equipment from electric current surges and fluctuations.

Transportation

Saudi Arabia has modern transportation facilities and infrastructure. Roads and highways are well paved and stretch extensively all over the Kingdom. Taxis and limousines are ordinarily available in major cities, particularly at airports and shopping malls. These are metered or a suitable fee is agreed upon in advance.

Car rental companies, including international chains, maintain offices in many airports and hotels. Rental arrangements can also be made from abroad. There are also public buses but these are used primarily by local commuters.

Visitors with a valid driver's license from many countries, or those with international driver's licenses, are allowed to drive in the Kingdom. Residents and expatriates, however, are required to obtain Saudi driver's licenses, which are valid for five years.

Communications

The telecommunications system in Saudi Arabia is modern and up-to-date, covering most population centers. Direct Dialing is generally available and international telephone, fax, telex and telegram services are easy to access. The Kingdom's telephone country code is 966 while the main city codes are (01) Riyadh, (02) Jeddah, Makkah and Taif, (03) Abqaiq, Al-Khobar, Dammam, Dhahran, Hofuf, Jubail and Ras Tanurah, (4) Madinah, Tabuk and Yanbu; (6) Hail; and (7) Abha.

Mail is sent to Post Office Boxes, not to street addresses. Letters are franked at the post office but stamps can also be used.

Courier companies are active in the Kingdom but customs duties may sometimes be imposed on goods or items received from overseas.

Internet access has recently been allowed in the Kingdom and improvements are currently underway to enhance the telecommunication infrastructure in anticipation of active Internet usage by the Kingdom's citizens and residents.

Shopping

There is a superb range of shopping opportunities in the major cities of Saudi Arabia. World class brands are widely available, from reasonably-priced electronic items from the Far East to high-priced fashion goods from Europe. Locally-crafted gold jewelry is relatively inexpensive and of premium quality.

There is also an extraordinary range of different food types and brands available in supermarkets and stores that cater to the diverse tastes of expatriate community. Food is plentiful and basics, such as bread and sugar, are relatively inexpensive.

Business Hours

Government offices are open from 7:30 a.m. till 2:30 p.m.; private businesses from 8:00 a.m. till noon, and from 4:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.; general banking from 8:00 a.m. till noon and from 5:00 to 7:00 PM; markets and shops are open till 9:00 p.m. Government offices and private businesses are closed Thursdays and Fridays.

Prayer Times

All Muslims are obliged to pray in the direction of the Holy City of Makkah five times a day. The times of prayer are: dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and evening, with the exact times published daily in Saudi newspapers. At these times, facilities and offices in the public and private sectors stop work and people gather in public places to pray in groups.

Time Zone

All of the Kingdom is under one time zone, which is GMT plus three hours.

Currency/Exchange Rate

The Saudi currency is the Saudi Riyal(SR) with the rate of exchange pegged at approximately 3.75 Saudi Riyals (SR) to the U.S. dollar. One Saudi Riyal is equivalent to 100 halalas. Coins come in denominations of 5, 10, 25 and 100 halalas.

The Saudi Riyal is fully convertible and there are no existing currency regulations or restrictions.

Health Care

There are many modern public and private hospitals with the latest state-of-the-art medical equipment and experienced medical specialists and staff. Most prescription drugs are widely available.

Media

Many international newspapers and magazines are available in the Kingdom. There are a number of local newspapers in Arabic: Al-Jazeera(Riyadh), Al-Riyadh(Riyadh), Al-Nadwa (Makkah), Al-Madina(Jeddah), Okaz(Jeddah), Al-Bilad(Jeddah) and Al-Yom(Dammam); and in English: Arab News(Jeddah), Riyadh Daily(Riyadh) and Saudi Gazette(Jeddah).

Numerous radio and TV programs in Arabic, English and other languages are available through local radio and TV channels as well as through cable and satellite networks. Many hotels carry the major 24-hour satellite news channels.

Climate

Weather conditions in Saudi Arabia can vary dramatically from one region to the next. The Rub Al-Khali ("Empty Quarter") is characterized by extremely hot and dry conditions but the verdant Asir highlands just nearby are relatively cold and moist.

Oftentimes in many regions of the Kingdom, the difference between daytime and nighttime temperatures can exceed 50 degrees (F) during the summer. In the winter, overnight low temperatures approach the freezing mark at areas with higher elevations.

Geography

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupies four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula-865,000 square miles. This is an area about the size of the United States east of the Mississippi River. Geography is varied. Forest, grasslands, rugged mountain ranges and vast deserts all characterize the Saudi landscape.

The People

Most native Saudi Arabians are descended from the land's indigenous Arab tribes. Saudi Arabia's population is estimated at 16.9 million.

Religion

The official religion of Saudi Arabia's is Islam, which also forms the basis of the Kingdom's legal system. There are two major religious holidays; Eid Al-Fitr, celebrating the breaking of the annual Ramadan fast; and Eid Al-Adha, celebrating the pilgrimage to Makkah.

Friday is the weekly day of rest and worship.

The Calendar

Saudi Arabia follows the Islamic(Hijri) calendar, which is based upon the lunar cycles and dates from the Prophet Muhammad's flight from Makkah to Madinah.

The Islamic year(AH) averages 354 days and recedes by about 11 days a year against the Gregorian calendar. The first day of the Hijri calendar is 1 Muharram.

The Hijri Calendar Months

| | | | | | |
|----------|---------|---------|---------|--------------|---------------|
| Muharram | Safar | Rabi I | Rabi II | Jumada I | Jumada II |
| Rajab | Shaaban | Ramadan | Shawwal | Dhu al-Qadah | Dhu al-Hijjah |

Government

The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz is the Head of State and Prime Minister, assisted by an appointed Council of Ministers. All Saudi Arabians have the right of direct petition to the monarch, the regional governors or other government officials. These petitions are most often received during the regular public audiences (Majlis). Restrictions Certain items are forbidden in the Kingdom including alcohol, narcotics, weapons, ammunition, pork and pornography. Prescription drugs must also be documented.

Two of the Holiest Cities in Islam, Makkah and Madinah, are in Saudi Arabia and hold special religious significance. As such, only persons of the Islamic faith are allowed entry.

World Role

Saudi Arabia is a founding member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the United Nations, League of Arab States, Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and numerous other international organizations.

The Kingdom is a substantial contributor to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Saudi Arabia is a major provider of aid to developing countries. The Kingdom's ratio of development assistance to gross national product (GNP) is the highest in the world, averaging 5.5 percent, and Saudi Arabia ranks second after the U.S. in overall assistance.