

TRAVEL

Saudi Arabia Travel Advice: What To Know Before You Go

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I'm a consumer advocate. I write about customer service.

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Sunrise In Disah, in northwestern Saudi Arabia. Authorities are trying to attract more tourists to ...

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When people ask Kami Turkey about his travels to Saudi Arabia, he has two pieces of advice: Don't miss traditional food like *Kabsa*, a mixed rice dish, and *Tharid*, a lamb and vegetable stew, "which are delicious."

"And bring your sunglasses," says Turkey, the head of logistics for an [aquarium supply website](#) in Flint, Mich. Because it's always hot and sunny.

There's been a lot of curiosity about travel to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia lately. Authorities unveiled an audacious plan to build a 75-mile mirrored skyscraper taller than the Empire State Building this summer. The country's tourism minister, Ahmed Al Khateeb, announced the

government would spend a staggering \$1 trillion in the tourism sector over the next decade. New luxury hotels are opening at a fever pitch in the KSA. But questions have also lingered about the safety of visiting the kingdom, even though the country has been open to foreign visitors since 2019.

“The kingdom has undergone remarkable changes in recent years,” says Sean Foley, an expert on Saudi Arabia at [Middle Tennessee State University](#). “Saudi Arabia is an easy country to visit and a rewarding experience for travelers. Getting a visa takes a few minutes and can be done online. The country boasts multiple unique UNESCO world heritage sites and modern infrastructure.”

Tourism in the KSA accounts for less than 10% of the economy, says Frank Harrison, regional security director for North America and UK at [World Travel Protection](#).

"Most tourism focuses on the Hajj, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, and there are very controlled expectations on how long pilgrims can remain in the country," he says. "For those traveling to tourist-focused destinations, there are fantastic diving and coastal adventures into the interior desert."

Visitors who have stayed in some of the areas being developed for tourism, such as Riyadh and Jeddah, report their trips to the kingdom have been remarkable experiences. Turkey says he felt safe and welcome on his two visits to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

"The people are kind and helpful," he remembers.

I contacted KSA officials earlier this week to get details on their plans for tourism funding. I also asked about some of the recent changes in Saudi regulations that have made it easier to visit, what types of tourists they wanted to attract, and overall safety. A representative said the organization would try to respond but that approvals from the Saudi Tourism Authority "can take a little more time."



The Riyadh skyline at night. GETTY

Is travel to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia safe?

Experts say the KSA is safe — to a point.

The crime rate in Saudi Arabia is low, according to [official sources](#). The main risks to tourists are petty crimes, such as pickpocketing and purse snatching, which mainly happen in crowded areas.

This spring, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Tourism quietly ordered the removal of all security checkpoints for vehicles and guests at tourism lodging facilities, according to Michael O'Rourke, CEO of [Advanced Operational Concepts](#), a security consulting firm.

"This mandated change was not the result of an improved security situation or a reduced risk of terrorism," he says. "The removal of these defenses has created a security gap you can drive a heavily-laden truck through."

Last month, the State Department issued an advisory urging U.S. citizens to [reconsider travel to Saudi Arabia](#) because of the threat of missile and drone attacks on civilian facilities. The government advised Americans not to travel within 50 miles of the Saudi-Yemen border. The cities of Abha, Jizan, Najran and Khamis Mushayt are on the no-go list, as well as Abha airport and Qatif in the Eastern Province and its suburbs.

The country is also known for its surveillance of telephone and electronic communications, says Dale Buckner, a travel security expert and CEO of [Global Guardian](#).

"Travelers should assume that communication is monitored at all times," he says. "Hotel rooms may also be subject to surveillance and can be accessed without the consent of the guest. Electronic devices may be screened by customs officials on arrival and departure."

Even if you overlook all of the current security issues, visitors still have concerns stemming from several other recent events. These include the [mass execution of 81 people this spring](#) and the killing of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.



Exterior view of the new terminal in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. GETTY

Saudi Arabia is changing — slowly

The Saudi government has taken major steps to welcome tourists to the KSA. Earlier this month, tourism officials [liberalized their entry requirements](#) in a move aimed at encouraging more visitors. The new regulations offer residents of Gulf states an option to apply for an eVisa through its [online portal](#). Residents of the U.K., U.S. and the EU can also apply for a visa on arrival.

"Under Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, there have been many moves to modernize, and the attraction of Western tourists seems to be an earnest priority," says John Gobbels, chief operating officer of air

medical transport and travel security company [Medjet](#). "But that does not mean things have changed overnight. Disrespecting their laws and moral codes can still have serious repercussions, and people need to take that into very serious consideration before deciding to travel there."

Shelley Ewing, president of **Tier One Travel**, says not all visitors are welcome to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

"Saudi Arabia has a strict rule that forbids all LGBTQ+ activity. For your own safety, travel to Saudi Arabia is not recommended if you are a member of the LGBTQ+ community," she says.

Ewing says there are potential dangers for women visiting Saudi Arabia, particularly if they don't adhere to Saudi's strict moral laws, which include dressing modestly at all times, covering shoulders and knees, and wearing a robe-like dress, called an abaya when entering mosques.



Edge of the World, a natural landmark and popular tourist destination near Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

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Travel advice for visiting Saudi Arabia

If you're interested in visiting Saudi Arabia, here are a few expert tips.

There are rules — *lots* of rules

"Public displays of affection, profane language, and photographing government buildings and local residents without permission are just a few examples of activities that are illegal," says Narendra Khatri,

principal of [Insubuy](#), a travel insurance company. “Also, you must remember to dress modestly, in loose-fitting clothes that do not expose your knees and shoulders. Dressing like a typical Westerner can invite unwanted attention from the authorities.” He says while some of these laws may only result in fines or warnings, the Saudi Arabian legal system can result in accused individuals being held without charge for long periods of time, with limited access to legal representation.

Mind your medications

"Alcohol consumption is currently prohibited, as are some prescription medications," says Dan Richards, CEO of [Global Rescue](#), a provider of medical, security, evacuation and travel risk management services.

"Travelers should carefully research Saudi Arabian laws before their trip. Even if a medicine is legal, always keep it in the original container and have a copy of a prescription."

Visit November to March

"Those are the best months to visit Saudi Arabia since the weather is nice and tolerable," says Mahmood Khan, a tourism professor at [Virginia Tech](#). During the summer, daytime high temperatures routinely hit 120 degrees, making it impossible to do anything outdoors. It also helps if you like staying up late. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia comes alive after sunset. Khan says the best time for shopping is late at night.



Camels in the desert in Saudi Arabia. GETTY

Should you visit the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?

So should you visit Saudi Arabia? The answer is complicated. The kingdom is literally investing trillions of dollars to attract tourists like you.

"Right now, traveling to Saudi Arabia should be for the adventurer, the open-minded and the well-traveled," says Tiffany Bowne, founder of [Lounge Couture](#), a luxury travel agency. "If you are trying to see a place before it's been built up and commercialized, now is that time. It's not quite ready yet for the masses. Once a little more infrastructure, more hotel openings and tourism support services catch up, then it will be ready for all types of travelers."

I've traveled extensively in the Middle East, and whenever I mention Saudi Arabia, I get a curious response — a mix of admiration and hesitation. The admiration part is easy: Any country with a trillion-dollar tourism budget and 75-mile skyscrapers *has* to be seen.

Much of the hesitation part is Saudi Arabia's human rights record, which the Saudi government evidently is hoping the new hotels and giga projects will make us forget. Whether that works remains to be seen.



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[Christopher Elliott](#) is the founder of [Elliott Advocacy](#), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that empowers consumers to solve their problems and helps those who can't. He's the author of... **Read More**