

Saudi Arabia - Travel facts and figures

Location: Middle East

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is bounded on the North by Jordan, Iraq and Kuwait, on the East by the Gulf, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, on the South by the Sultanate of Oman and Yemen, and on the West by the Red Sea.

Government type: Islamic absolute monarchy

National flag:

National emblem:

Geographic coordinates: 25° 00' N 45° 00' E

Area: 2,149,690 sq km (868,730 sq mi)

Highest point: Jabal Sawda' 3,133 m

Population: 28,146,656 includes 5,576,076 non-nationals (estimate is based on the results of the 2008 census)

Population density: 52 / sq km

Capital: Riyadh, geographic coordinates 24° 39' N, 46° 46' E
Population: 4.700.0000

Local time: GMT + 3 hours

Life expectancy: 76 years

GDP – per capita: \$ 22,850

Value of petroleum exports: (billion \$) 206

Proven crude oil reserves: (billion barrels) 264

Proven natural gas reserves: (billion cu. m.) 7,305

Crude oil production: (1,000 b/d) 8,816

Crude oil exports: (1,000 b/d) 6,962

Visas: A Saudi Arabian visa is a permit issued by the Saudi Arabian visa authorities for entry, exit or transit through Saudi Arabia. Visas are issued according to the applicant's status, purpose of visit and passport type. Tourist visas are only issued to people visiting family or friends.

Currency: Saudi Riyal (SR) bank notes, in Arabic and English, in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 50, 100 and 500 riyals; coins in denominations of 5, 10, 25, 50 and 100 halalahs, with 100 halalahs equal to one riyal; metric system in use.

Language: Arabic is the official language, but English is widely spoken.

Customs: Restrictions

Forbidden items include alcohol, narcotics, weapons, ammunition, pork and pornography. Prescription drugs must be documented. Makkah and Madinah hold special religious significance and only persons of the Islamic faith are allowed entry. Travellers to Saudi Arabia do not have to pay duty on 600 cigarettes or 100 cigars or 500g tobacco; or perfume or cultured pearls for personal use. Duty is payable on cameras and other electronic goods, and refunds on these are available if the articles are re-exported within 90 days.

Reporting Currency when entering or leaving Saudi Arabia.

Saudi regulations require those traveling to or from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to declare all currency, negotiable instruments or precious metal in an aggregate amount exceeding 60,000 Saudi Riyal (\$16,000) (or the equivalent in another currency) to Saudi Customs.

Climate: The climate in June through August, over 42°C midday in the desert, humidity in coastal regions up to 100 percent; elsewhere, mild; possible winter temperatures in the northern and central regions dropping below freezing; rainfall, from none at all for up to 10 years in the Rub Al-Khali (Empty Quarter), to 500 mm a year in the mountains of Asir Province.

Clothing: Lightweight summer clothing in cottons or blends is ideal for most of the year. Sweaters, a light jacket or a shawl may be needed for the cooler evenings.

Religion: Islam is the official religion; other religions are also respected. Ramadan: Ramadan is the holy month of fasting when Muslims abstain from eating, drinking and smoking during daylight hours. As a sign of respect, visitors are also required to refrain from these activities in public between sunrise and sunset.

Public holidays in 2015

July 12
Eid Al Fitr

July 13

Eid Al Fitr

July 14

Eid Al Fitr

July 15
Eid Al Fitr

July 16
Eid Al Fitr

July 17

Eid Al Fitr End of Ramadan

July 18

Eid Al Fitr
 July 19
 Eid Al Fitr
 July 20
 Eid Al Fitr
 July 21
 Eid Al Fitr
 July 22
 Eid Al Fitr
 Sep 20
 Eid Al Adha
 Sep 21
 Eid Al Adha
 Sep 22
 Eid Al Adha. Arafat (Haj) Day
 Sep 23
 National Day. The day of the unification of the Kingdom
 Sep 23
 Eid Al Adha. (Feast of the Sacrifice). Date varies on Lunar cycle
 Sep 24
 Eid Al Adha
 Sep 25
 Eid Al Adha. Date varies on Lunar cycle
 Sep 26
 Eid Al Adha
 Sep 27
 Eid Al Adha
 Sep 28
 Eid Al Adha
 Sep 29
 Eid Al Adha

Friday is the general day of worship and a public holiday.

Weekend: The official weekend holiday for the government and some private businesses is Friday and Saturday.

Calendar: The Islamic calendar is based on the beginning of the Islamic era, and dates from the year of the Hijrah, the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad from Makkah to Madinah. Hijrah years are lunar; one month is the cycle between two new moons. The weekend in Saudi Arabia is Thursday and Friday.

Electricity: The electrical system is based on 110/220 volts AC, 60Hz. Plug types A, C, D, G all used

Credit cards: All major credit cards are accepted, as are travellers cheques (best carried in US Dollars or Pounds Sterling) in main hotels, stores and larger shops, but in traditional souks, cash is mostly used and bargaining power is increased with the ready availability of currency. ATM machines are available. Banking hours are generally Saturday to Wednesday from 8am to 12pm, but some are also open between 4pm and 8pm. All major credit cards are accepted at shops, hotels and restaurants in Saudi Arabia. Travellers cheques are also accepted and ATMs are widely available. There are no taxes, so shopping is good value.

Business hours: Government offices are open Saturday through Wednesday from 7:30 am to 2:30 pm; private businesses from 8:00 am to noon and 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm; general banking hours are from 8:00 am until noon and from 5:00 pm until 8:00 pm and markets and shops are open from 8:00 am until 10:00 pm.

Health: While tap water is safe for drinking, a variety of locally bottled mineral water is widely available. Medical facilities are generally of a high standard, but treatment is expensive. Health insurance is essential.

Hotels: All types are available throughout Saudi Arabia. Most tourist cities will also have very affordable and spacious short-term furnished rental apartments (shigka-maafroosha). The owners generally loiter in hotel lobbies. Often, they will approach civilized-looking people and make an offer. Prices for shigka-maafrooshas and small hotels are always negotiable to a great degree. Smaller hotels will only accept cash, normally in advance.

Larger, more expensive hotels are abundant in all major cities. You can expect to pay \$200 for a weekday night at a

good hotel in any of the big Saudi cities. In exchange, you usually get excellent service and the ability to work around some restrictions (eg. restaurants that stay open through prayer hours and daytime room service during Ramadan).

Facilities for the physically challenged: Most hotels and public places provide facilities and make special arrangements for physically challenged visitors.

Social conventions: The Saudi culture is based on Islam and the perfection of the Arabic language. The Saudi form of Islam is conservative and fundamentalist, based on the 18th century revivalist movement of the Najdi leader Sheikh Muhammad Ibn Abdel-Wahhab.

This still has a great effect on Saudi society, particularly on the position of women, who are required by law only to leave the home totally covered in black robes (abaya) and masks, although there are regional variations of dress.

Shaking hands is the traditional form of greeting. Invitations to private homes are unusual, so entertaining is usually in hotels or restaurants and although the custom of eating with the right hand persists, it is more likely that knives and forks will be used.

Restrictions: Women are expected to dress modestly and it is best to do so to avoid offence. Men are advised to not wear shorts in public or go without a shirt. The norms for public behavior are extremely conservative and religious police, known as Mutawwa'in, are charged with inflicting these standards.

Customs regarding smoking are the same as in Europe and non smoking areas are indicated. During Ramadan, Muslims are not allowed to eat, smoke or drink during the day and it is illegal for a foreign visitor or traveller to do so in public.

Photography: Frankly speaking photography is not permitted. Be careful to ask permission of the relevant authority before photographing people or any building.

Mobile telephony: International roaming agreements exist with some mobile phone companies. Coverage is mostly good.

Traffic system: Driving in Saudi Arabia is on the right-hand side.

Taxis: Moderate bargaining is needed.

Getting There: All major airlines flying to Riyadh and the national airline Saudi Arabian Airlines (SV)

Saudi Arabia airports: King Khalid International Airport (RUH) – Riyadh
King Abdul Aziz International Airport (JED) - Jeddah

Getting Around: The road network is constantly being upgraded and expanded and, on the main routes, much of it is of the highest standard. The corniche that winds down the escarpment between Taif and Mecca is as spectacular a feat of engineering as may be seen anywhere, as is the King Fahed Gateway that links Saudi Arabia to Bahrain. However, standards of driving are erratic, particularly in the Eastern Province. As foreigners are tolerated rather than welcomed in Saudi Arabia, it is best to drive with extreme caution at all times. Women are not allowed to drive vehicles or ride bicycles on public roads. Non-Muslims may not enter Mecca or the immediate area; police are stationed to ensure that they turn off onto a specially built ring road, known amongst expatriates as the 'Christian Bypass'.

By Air: There are many domestic airports and air travel is by far the most convenient way of travelling around the country. Saudi Arabian Airlines connects all main centres. Arabian Express economy class connects Jeddah with Riyadh in just over one hour and Riyadh with Dhahran in just under one hour. A boarding pass should be obtained the evening before departure. There are special flights for pilgrims arriving at or departing from Jeddah during the Hajj.

Internet country code: .sa

Telephone dialing code: + 966