

# Saudi Arabia National Day Special

## Centuries of history in the birthplace of Islam

Saudi National Day has been celebrated every Sept. 23 since 1932. The date marks the renaming of the Kingdom of Nejd and Hejaz to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by the royal decree of King Abdul Aziz Al Saud. The new name was taken from the name of his family, the House of Saud, and the day was made into a public holiday by King Abdullah in 2005. Celebrations typically involve displays of the national colors of green and white, as well as folk singing and dancing.

The kingdom is famed as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites. This revolves around the cities of Mecca and Medina in the Hejaz region of the Arabian Peninsula. This makes the area the focal point of the annual hajj pilgrimage, which typically sees over 2 million participants annually. Within these two cities are numerous sites, including museums and landmarks from the earliest days of the history of Islam.

Mecca, whose very name has become synonymous with "a place that attracts many visitors," is the home of the Masjid Al Haram, which contains the Kaaba, toward which Muslims worldwide orient themselves when conducting their daily prayers. The sacred mosque is considered the holiest site in Islam and in 2020 became the largest mosque in the world after several rounds of renovations by the Saudi government.

As well as the black and gold silk-covered Kaaba (Arabic for "cube"), other sites of note in the mosque include the Black Stone, Zamzam Well and the hills of Safa and Marwa. During the third expansion a complex of seven skyscrapers was added, simply known as The Clock Towers. The main tower has clock faces on each side, each one measuring 43 meters across, making them the largest

est in the world. With the addition of a 151-meter spire, it is the tallest building in Saudi Arabia at 601 meters. It stands on the site of the former Ajayad Fortress, an Ottoman construction dating back to the 18th century. The city has also been a crossroads for travelers for centuries, including during pre-Islamic times, and this is recorded at the Makkah Museum in the Al Zahir Palace. The "Exhibition of the Two Holy Mosques" showcases the history of the Masjid Al Haram and the Masjid An Nabawi in Medina. Marble arches, wooden doors and other relics reclaimed during the renovations are on display, and next door at the Kiswah Museum the 670-kilogram silk calligraphic covering that decorates the Kaaba is sometimes

viewable during maintenance.

The home of the Prophet Muhammed during the period known as Hijrah, and his burial site, Medina, occupy important places in Saudi Arabian and Islamic history. The full name of the city in Arabic is Al Medina Al Munawwarah, which means "The Enlightened City," referring to the years the prophet lived and taught there. The Masjid An Nabawi Mosque is a stop for pilgrims, and the single green dome covers the tomb of the prophet. In 1909, it became the first building in the Arabian Peninsula with electric lighting.

Other places of interest in Medina include the Quba Mosque and city market, and the major pilgrimage site of Mount Uhud, the site of a conflict in the

early days of Islam. The wider Medina province also contains many dive sites on the Red Sea coast, as well as the archaeological wonders at Hegra and the Khaybar Fort.

*The article references excerpts from the official Saudi Arabia government tourism website. For more information, please visit <https://www.visitsaudi.com/en>.*



The rocky coast of Tiran Island is a popular dive site in the Red Sea. GETTY IMAGES



The Makkah Royal Clock Tower holds the world's-largest clock. GETTY IMAGES

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