

Saudi Arabia National Day Special

Beautiful scenery, rich culture, storied history await visitors

The modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia took its current name in September 1932, beginning the most recent chapter of a story that can be traced back to the earliest civilizations of the Arabian Peninsula. As well as playing a key role in the origins of the Islamic faith and being host to many of the religion's most sacred sites, Saudi Arabia is also well known for its vibrant culture and diverse and breathtaking landscapes, from the Asir Mountains in Abha to the beaches of the Red Sea and the shifting sands of the Empty Quarter.

Saudi Arabia has made tourist visits easier with its eVisa program in place from September 2019. Visitors from many countries are being welcomed to the kingdom with unprecedented accessibility and appropriate biosafety measures in place. Important information is always written in both Arabic and English. Some places, mosques for example, require visitors to dress modestly.

Riyadh is the capital and visitors will find a blend of modern and medieval in the centuries-old city. Al Masmak Fortress is a well-preserved clay and mud-brick citadel that played a pivotal role in Saudi Arabia's founding story. More than 3,700 antiques can be seen at the Saudi National Museum, documenting over 1,000 years of Arabian history. The Souq Al Zal market might be a place to find antiques and handicrafts, while the Riyadh Park Mall and Kingdom Centre are modern shopping venues. The Diriyah area boasts the UNESCO World Heritage Site of At-Turaif, the original seat of power of the Al Saud family.

A 90-minute ride from the capital is the enigmatically named Edge of the World, a 300-meter-high cliff. Part of the Tuwaiq escarpment, the area is well-known for

hiking as well as spectacular views. It is also possible to camp there and even spot a fossil or two. The clear desert skies outside the big cities of the Arabian Peninsula make for a sunset and stargazing experience that is hard to find elsewhere.

Many are surprised to hear that Saudi Arabia is a destination for a beach vacation, but the country's location along the Red Sea holds an abundance of opportunities. The port city of Jeddah is the main hub for these activities. Many well-established and reputable dive operators help to show off the coral reefs and shipwrecks of the Red Sea. Snorkeling is also a popular option for those with less experience with deep water who still want to explore the underwater sights available.

Thousands of years of history are preserved in Jeddah's many museums, including Al Tayebat City Museum, which was constructed using traditional Hejazi architecture and is surrounded by antique stores. Al Balad in the heart of the city is home to many street food stalls, allowing a chance to sample many different types of Saudi food. Kebabs, hummus and flatbread are typical Middle East cuisine, but *kabsa* (a rice and meat dish), *jarraesh* (crushed wheat porridge mixed with meat and seasoning) and *hashi* (young camel meat) originated in Saudi Arabia. Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2014, the area is almost an open-air museum offering a glimpse of Old Jeddah with its many markets, historical sights and architecture. Abu Enaba Street in particular is known for every door having a unique design, consequently it is popular with photographers.

Other seaside destinations include the diving mecca of Yanbu, known as the "Pearl of the Red Sea." Its history dates back to 500 B.C., with the ancient and

mysterious Minaeans, and its 300 natural springs helped it become a popular trade spot. Stretches of sandy beaches can be found at King Abdullah Economic City, Al Wajh and Umluj.

Al-Ula, in the northwestern part of Saudi Arabia, showcases both desert scenery and 7,000 years of human civilization. Hegra is a UNESCO World Heritage Site where you can see an 18th-century fortress, Hijaz Railway Station, the ancient capital of Dadan and rock inscriptions at Jabal Ikmah. The tombs of Hegra were constructed by the Nabataeans, the ancient civilization responsible for building Petra in neighboring Jordan. With 111 preserved tombs carved into sandstone, visitors can easily find solitude among the sights to reflect.

In the east of the country is the city of Dammam, sitting on the Persian Gulf. The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (also known as Ithra, the Arabic word for "enrichment") is here, with its distinctive design inspired by the shape of oil-bearing rock formations. Inside is a museum, a cinema, one of the largest libraries in the region and a theater that once hosted a show put on by the Shizuoka Performing Arts Center. The city also boasts the largest seaport on the Persian Gulf, another diving and snorkeling destination, the tranquil Half Moon Bay, and the Al-Khobar waterfront with its historic water tower and King Fahd Causeway.

Also on the coast is the Al Ahsa Oasis, the largest self-contained oasis in the world. The UNESCO World Heritage Site is well known for its *khalasah* date farms, the recently restored seventh century Jawatha Mosque (the site of the second-ever Friday prayers), the Souq Al-Qaisariya market with over 7,000 square meters of shops and Yellow Lake, a sandy



The Edge of the World cliff offers visitors panoramic views. GETTY IMAGES



Left: Camel served with almonds, pine nuts and rice is a traditional Saudi food. Right: Elephant Rock in Al-Ula GETTY IMAGES



area accessible only by four-wheel-drive vehicles and a popular spot for kayaking and bird-spotting. Al Qarah is 75 meters above the oasis, providing a view of the entire area as well as a glimpse into the past lifestyle of the area. Winding pathways lead into a series of caves and information about the people who lived there can be found in the Land of Civilizations museum.



Dhee Ayn village in Al-Baha is known for its historic architecture and archeological significance. GETTY IMAGES



Giant umbrellas provide shade in Medina. GETTY IMAGES



The ruins of Al Uqair Fort sit on the shores of the Persian Gulf. GETTY IMAGES

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