

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Saudi Arabia positions itself as luxury destination as tourist visas open

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The historic town of Jeddah. Image credit: Saudi Commission for Tourism & National Heritage

By STAFF REPORTS

Saudi Arabia has opened to tourism for the first time, as it positions itself as a luxury destination set to welcome more than 100 million annual visitors by 2030.

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In the next decade, the Middle Eastern country hopes that tourism will contribute to 10 percent of its gross domestic product, up from 3 percent. It is expected to become a leading luxury travel destination, as affluent travelers develop an appetite for truly unique experiences.

"Opening Saudi Arabia to international tourists is a historic moment for our country," said Ahmad Al-Khateeb, chairman of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, in a statement. "Generous hospitality is at the heart of Arabian culture, and we look forward to showing our guests a very warm welcome.

"To visitors we say: be among the first to discover and explore the treasures of Arabia," he said. "To investors we say: become part of the fastest-growing tourism sector on earth."

New world

While Saudi Arabia has previously been open to business and religious travel, this is the first time leisure visitors will be welcomed.

To mark this milestone, the country is touting its five UNESCO World Heritage Sites that encompass a range of landscapes and cultural touchpoints. These include the Gate to Mecca in historic Jeddah and the world's largest oasis, Al-Ahsa.

The country's airport is expected to increase its capacity by 150 million passengers to meet the expected travel demand. Other investments are being made to improve Saudi Arabia's infrastructure and develop heritage, cultural and entertainment sites.



Four Seasons looks to open new location in Saudi Arabia amongst news of tourist visa. Image credit: Four Seasons

Luxury hospitality brands are also making investments in Saudi Arabia, particularly by the Red Sea.

The country is already home to a series of five-star hotels including locations from brands such as Four Season, Ritz-Carlton, Rosewood and InterContinental. But top locations such as the Holy City of Makkah, also known as Mecca, Jeddah and Saudi Arabia's capital of Riyadh will likely see an increased presence from additional luxury brands and hoteliers after the visa is instated.

In October 2017, Four Seasons announced a second property in Saudi Arabia. The hospitality brand currently operates a property in Riyadh and will add a hotel in Mecca, through a development partnership with Jabal Omar Development Company ([see story](#)).

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