

ASIA · HISTORY · DESERT · ARCHITECTURE · CULTURE · ROAD TRIPS · DIVING



Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia only opened to leisure tourists in 2019, and much of it still feels freshly unwrapped. AlUla's sandstone canyons hide the tombs of Hegra, carved by the same Nabataeans who built Petra; Diriyah's mud-brick ruins tell the story of the first Saudi state; and Jeddah's coral-stone old town looks out on Red Sea reefs.

**The UK Foreign Office (FCDO) advises against all travel to parts of Saudi Arabia.**
Read the latest FCDO travel advice before planning a trip. Your travel insurance may be invalid if you travel against FCDO advice.
FCDO advice last updated 21 October 2026.

 CAPITAL Riyadh	 CURRENCY Saudi riyal (SAR) £1 ≈ SAR 5.01	 LANGUAGE Arabic, English	 BEST TIME Nov–Mar
 DAILY BUDGET £60–£300 £££ Expensive	 PLUGS Type G 230V · UK plugs fit	 FLIGHT FROM LONDON 6h 30m direct ~£400–£800 return	 TIME ZONE UTC+3 standard time

Saudi Arabia is huge, so a first trip usually links three or four hubs by domestic flight. Riyadh, the capital, has the restored At-Turaif district of Diriyah, the National Museum and desert escarpments within a day's drive. Jeddah, on the Red Sea, has the UNESCO-listed Al-Balad quarter and the country's best seafood. The north-west is the showpiece: AlUla's sandstone canyons, Hegra's rock-cut tombs and the Elephant Rock formation. Add the green, terraced Asir mountains around Abha in the south-west, or the vast Al-Ahsa oasis in the east. Mecca is closed to non-Muslims, as is the area around the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.

Travel here is easy in some ways and demanding in others. Roads, airports and hotels are modern, Uber and Careem work in all the main cities, and the country is investing heavily in tourism, but distances are enormous and summer temperatures in the mid-40s make June to September punishing. Costs are moderate: fuel and local food are cheap, while AlUla's hotels and guided tours are expensive. It suits history lovers, road-trippers and anyone curious about a society changing fast; women can travel independently and drive. Many visitors are surprised by the friendliness of everyday encounters, the late-night café culture and the sheer variety of landscapes, from red dunes to misty mountains.

Top 5 highlights

- 1

HISTORY

Hegra, AlUla

Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site holds more than 110 monumental tombs carved by the Nabataeans around the 1st centuries BC and AD, including the lone Qasr al-Farid. Visits are by timed, ticketed tour from AlUla.
- 2

ARCHITECTURE

Historic Jeddah (Al-Balad)

A UNESCO-listed quarter of coral-stone merchant houses with carved wooden roshan balconies, souks and old mosques, once the gateway for pilgrims arriving by sea. Visit in the cooler evenings, when the souks come alive.

3

HISTORY

At-Turaif, Diriyah

On Riyadh's north-western edge, the mud-brick palaces of At-Turaif, seat of the first Saudi state in the 18th century, have been restored as a UNESCO site, with Bujairi Terrace's restaurants across the wadi.

4

ARCHITECTURE

Rijal Almaa

A village of multistorey stone towers trimmed with white quartz, set in a deep valley of the Asir mountains about 50km west of Abha. Its museum and painted interiors showcase the region's colourful al-qatt al-asiri decoration.

5

NATURE

Al-Ahsa Oasis

One of the world's largest oases, with well over two million date palms, springs and canals around Hofuf. Explore the cool, wind-carved caves of Jabal Al-Qarah and the old souks of this UNESCO-listed landscape.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

Riyadh

≈ 7 million people

The fast-growing capital is a city of glass towers, malls and a new metro, but also Diriyah's restored mud-brick heart, the National Museum and the Masmak Fortress.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Jeddah

≈ 3.8 million people

The Red Sea port is Saudi Arabia's most relaxed and cosmopolitan city, with the coral-stone tower houses of Al-Balad, a long Corniche and good diving offshore.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Mecca

≈ 2.4 million people

Islam's holiest city, home to the Grand Mosque and the Kaaba, receives millions of pilgrims every year. Entry is restricted to Muslims, so non-Muslim visitors cannot go.

Ranked by urban-area population where available. Figures are rounded estimates, and sources define city limits differently, so rankings of similar-sized cities can vary.

When to go to Saudi Arabia

Best time: **Nov–Mar**.

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

Aug

Sep

Oct

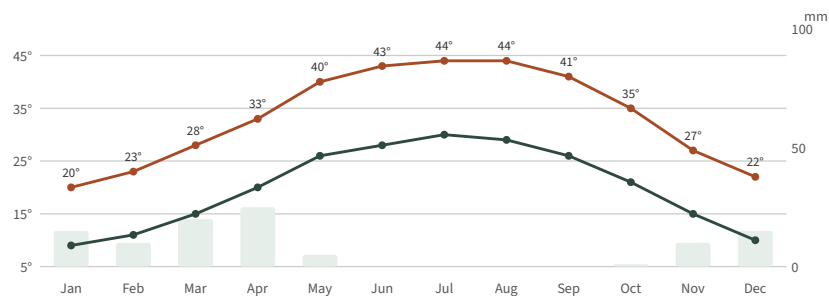
Nov

Dec

■ Best ■ Good ■ Mixed ■ Poor

Average climate in Riyadh

— High °C — Low °C ■ Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

Jan–Mar, Oct–Dec	Riyadh Season A months-long winter entertainment programme across Riyadh, with concerts, theatre, boxing and football events, food halls and themed zones such as Boulevard World.
Sep	Saudi National Day On 23 September cities turn green with flags, fireworks, drone shows and parades marking the kingdom's unification under King Abdulaziz in 1932.
Dec	MDLBEAST Soundstorm One of the Middle East's biggest music festivals, staged over several days each December on a desert site outside Riyadh, with international DJs and headliners.

How much does Saudi Arabia cost?

SHOESTRING £60 per person / day ≈ SAR 301 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £140 per person / day ≈ SAR 702 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £300 per person / day ≈ SAR 1,503 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
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Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

Food to try

Kabsa The national dish: long-grain rice cooked with chicken or lamb in a broth spiced with cardamom, cinnamon, dried lime and black pepper, often topped with nuts and raisins.	Mutabbaq A Hejazi street snack of paper-thin dough folded around minced meat, egg and leek, or banana and cheese, then griddled crisp; best in Jeddah's Al-Balad.	Saudi coffee and dates Pale, cardamom-spiced qahwa poured into small cups from a dallah and always offered with dates; take it with your right hand and gently shake the cup when you've had enough.
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Getting around

Domestic flights on Saudia, flynas and flyadeal are the practical way to cover the distances. The Haramain high-speed railway links Jeddah and Medina, and other lines run from Riyadh east to Dammam and north to Qassim and Hail. Uber and Careem work in the main cities, and Riyadh's metro opened in 2024–25. For AlUla and the Asir mountains, hire a car; driving is on the right and fuel is cheap.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE



G

230V — UK plugs fit

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Telephone: **911** (ambulance, fire, police)

If you do not have a Saudi SIM card, call **112** in an emergency.

Source: FCDO “Getting help”

DIALLING CODE

+966

TIME ZONE

UTC+3 (standard time)

TAP WATER

Varies — bottled or filtered is safer

DRIVING

On the right

TIPPING

Not obligatory, but 10–15% in restaurants without a service charge is appreciated, and small tips for drivers, porters and guides are customary.

ETIQUETTE

Dress modestly in public, with shoulders and knees covered for everyone; abayas are optional for foreign women. Avoid public displays of affection, and don't eat or drink in public during Ramadan daylight hours.

MAIN AIRPORTS

King Khalid International Airport (RUH), Riyadh; King Abdulaziz International Airport (JED), Jeddah; AlUla International Airport (ULH), AlUla

Visas & entry for Saudi Arabia

Shown for a British passport.

Visa required — apply before you go

You must get a visa to visit Saudi Arabia. The type of visa you choose depends on your reason for travelling and how long you want to stay.

If you overstay your visa, you could face large fines, detention and deportation. You could be banned from returning to Saudi Arabia.

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations



See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

Tetanus

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

Dengue

Hepatitis B

Measles

Meningococcal disease

Rabies

Typhoid

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

A yellow fever certificate is only required if you arrive from (or transit through) a country with yellow fever risk — not if you fly direct from the UK.

MALARIA

Very low risk of malaria

- There is a very low risk of malaria in the south western provinces of Saudi Arabia, along the border with Yemen including Asir province below 2,000m: awareness of risk and bite avoidance recommended.
- There is no risk of malaria in the cities of Jeddah, Makkah (Mecca), Medina, Riyadh, and Ta'if, or in Asir province above 2,000m: bite avoidance recommended.

Public holidays in Saudi Arabia

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Mon 22 Feb 2027	Founding Day Holiday
Tue 9 Mar 2027	Eid al-Fitr Holiday
Wed 10 Mar 2027	Eid al-Fitr Holiday
Thu 11 Mar 2027	Eid al-Fitr Holiday
Fri 12 Mar 2027	Eid al-Fitr Holiday
Sun 14 Mar 2027	Eid al-Fitr Holiday (observed)
Sat 15 May 2027	Day of Arafah
Sun 16 May 2027	Eid al-Adha Holiday
Mon 17 May 2027	Eid al-Adha Holiday
Tue 18 May 2027	Eid al-Adha Holiday
Wed 19 May 2027	Eid al-Adha Holiday (observed)
Thu 23 Sep 2027	National Day Holiday

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in Arabic

ENGLISH	ARABIC	SAY IT
Hello	السلام عليكم	as-sa-LAAM a-LAY-kum
Thank you	شكراً	SHUK-ran
Please	من فضلك	min FAD-lak
Excuse me	لو سمحت	law sa-MAHT
How much is this?	بكم هذا؟	bi-KAM HAA-tha

Know before you go

- Hegra and many AlUla sites can only be visited on booked, timed tours through the official Experience AlUla platform, and winter slots sell out, so book tours, flights and car hire together.
- Most sockets take UK three-pin plugs, though older buildings may have two-pin ones. The grid runs at 60Hz, which phone and laptop chargers handle fine.
- Alcohol is not available to tourists, and Ramadan changes everything: daytime opening is limited, but evenings come alive with iftar feasts and late-night markets.