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Visiting Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

Saudi Arabia, often thought of as a land of deserts and riches, holds a treasure chest of experiences waiting for tourists to unveil its charm. Recent years have shown a significant shift as the Kingdom embraces tourism like never before. With its doors wide open for global travelers, Saudi Arabia boasts a blend of ancient history, cultural depth, and cutting-edge modernity. This book, "Visiting Saudi Arabia: A Guide for Tourists," is crafted to be your personal compass in navigating the captivating landscape of this Arabian gem.

The Kingdom's transformation, accelerated by the Vision 2030 plan, not only encourages economic diversification but also aims to showcase the vibrant essence of Saudi culture and nature to the world. From the golden expanses of vast deserts to the intricately carved stones of ancient relics, every corner tells a story. This guide ensures that you, as a traveler, are equipped with the right knowledge to immerse yourself fully in the unique experiences the country offers.

However, a journey to Saudi Arabia involves more than just sightseeing. It demands an understanding of its cultural fabric. The Kingdom, rooted in Islamic tradition, holds values and customs that are integral to its identity. The chapters ahead will delve into these elements, ensuring you respect and appreciate the customs, whether it's dressing modestly or partaking in a traditional meal with a newfound Saudi friend.

Beyond the cultural nuances, the practical aspects of your travel are of utmost importance. This guide aims to simplify your journey from start to finish. Whether it's understanding visa processes, choosing the best time to visit, or navigating through diverse modes of transportation, you'll find detailed insights designed to make your travel seamless and enjoyable.

Exploring Saudi Arabia's culinary scene is akin to a voyage of flavors. The Kingdom's expansive repertoire, influenced by its position on ancient trade routes, offers everything from the fragrant biryanis and koobideh of the east to the savory couscous and stews of the west. Dining in Saudi Arabia is often an affair full of warmth and hospitality, deeply embedded in the country's social tapestry.

As you embark on this journey through the pages of "Visiting Saudi Arabia: A Guide for Tourists," let this book serve as both a map and a muse, guiding you through an unforgettable experience, and opening a window into the heart of Saudi Arabia.

CHAPTER ONE: Getting Started: Visas and Entry Requirements

Alright, let's talk essentials. Before you even start dreaming of desert sunsets over ancient ruins or navigating the bustling souks of Jeddah, there's a crucial hurdle to clear: getting permission to enter the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Unlike popping over to a neighbouring country where a passport might suffice, visiting Saudi Arabia requires a bit more preparation in the form of a visa. Think of it as your official invitation to the party. Thankfully, what was once a rather complex process, primarily geared towards business travellers or pilgrims, has undergone a significant transformation. Saudi Arabia is actively welcoming tourists, and the visa procedures have been streamlined considerably to reflect this newfound openness. However, 'streamlined' doesn't mean 'optional'. Getting the right visa is the non-negotiable first step to your Saudi adventure, so let's unpack what you need to know.

The primary gateway for tourists is the aptly named Tourist Visa. Understanding the nuances between the different ways to obtain this visa is key to a smooth start. The most common and often most convenient method for eligible nationalities is the **e-Visa**. This electronic visa system allows travellers from a designated list of countries (currently over 50, covering much of Europe, North America, and parts of Asia and Oceania) to apply online before they travel. The beauty of the e-Visa lies in its predictability; you apply from the comfort of your home, upload the necessary documents, pay the fee, and, if approved, receive your visa electronically, usually via email. This gives you the peace of mind of having your entry permit secured well before you board your flight.

The typical tourist e-Visa grants multiple entries within a one-year validity period from the date of issuance. However, don't mistake the one-year validity for a year-long holiday allowance! The crucial detail is the maximum duration of stay permitted within that year, which usually totals 90 days. This means you can enter and exit multiple times during the year, but the combined number of days you spend in the Kingdom cannot exceed ninety. It's essential to keep track of your days to avoid any complications. The cost for the e-Visa hovers around SAR 535 (Saudi Riyals), a fee that conveniently includes mandatory medical insurance covering potential COVID-19 related health issues and other emergency medical needs during your stay.

Alternatively, for citizens of certain countries, or for those holding specific valid visas from other nations, the **Visa on Arrival (VoA)** presents another option. This means you can sort out your visa formalities directly at the immigration counter upon landing at one of Saudi Arabia's international airports. Eligibility for VoA isn't universal; it

typically applies to the same nationalities eligible for the e-Visa. Crucially, it also extends to travellers, regardless of their nationality (provided they arrive directly from the issuing country on a national carrier), who hold a valid USA, United Kingdom, or Schengen visa. There's a specific condition here: the US, UK, or Schengen visa must be a tourist or business type, and it must have been used at least once, evidenced by an entry stamp from the country that issued it. Permanent residents of the UK, USA and EU are also typically eligible for a Visa on Arrival.

The VoA costs slightly less than the e-Visa, generally around SAR 480, also payable by international credit or debit card at the airport and including the required medical insurance. While potentially convenient for eligible travellers making last-minute plans, the VoA does carry a sliver of uncertainty. Unlike the pre-approved e-Visa, your eligibility is assessed upon arrival, and though uncommon for eligible individuals meeting all criteria, entry is ultimately at the discretion of the immigration officer. For most travellers seeking certainty, the e-Visa applied for in advance remains the recommended route.

It's worth noting that while tourism is booming, Saudi Arabia issues various other types of visas, such as those for business, employment, family visits, and, significantly, for religious pilgrimages like Hajj and Umrah. The Hajj and Umrah visas have very specific requirements, application windows, and regulations handled through authorized agents, and they are distinct from the standard tourist visa. This guide focuses squarely on the tourist visa process; if your purpose of visit falls under another category, you'll need to research those specific requirements through official Saudi channels.

Let's delve deeper into the e-Visa application process, as this will be the most relevant path for many prospective tourists. The first commandment is: **use the official portal**. The Saudi government operates a dedicated website, usually found through links on the official 'Visit Saudi' tourism page. Beware of third-party websites that may charge extra fees or, worse, be fraudulent. Stick to the '.gov.sa' domains or the clearly marked official tourism visa platform.

Once you're on the correct site, you'll typically need to create an account using your email address. The application form itself is relatively straightforward, asking for standard personal information: full name, date and place of birth, nationality, profession, and address. You'll need your passport details handy, including the number, issue date, and expiry date. Ensure your passport has at least six months of validity remaining *beyond* your intended period of stay in Saudi Arabia. It's also wise to have at least two blank pages for entry and exit stamps.

The application will require you to input your planned arrival date in Saudi Arabia and potentially provide details about your accommodation, though sometimes a general indication of the city you'll visit first suffices. You'll also need to upload supporting

documents electronically. This typically includes a recent digital passport-style photograph meeting specific requirements (e.g., size, background colour – usually white) and a clear, colour scan of your passport's biographical page. Ensure your scans are legible and meet any specified file size or format requirements.

After filling out the form and uploading documents, the final step before submission is payment. The fee (around SAR 535) must be paid online using an international credit or debit card. Visa and Mastercard are widely accepted. Be aware that your home bank might charge a foreign transaction fee on top of the visa cost. Once payment is confirmed, your application goes into processing. Processing times can vary; while often quick (sometimes within minutes or hours), it's prudent to apply at least a few days, ideally a week or two, before your intended travel date, just in case of any delays.

Upon approval, you'll usually receive the e-Visa as a PDF document via email. Print a copy of this e-Visa, as you'll likely need to present it both at airline check-in and to immigration authorities upon arrival in Saudi Arabia. Before packing it away, double-check all the details on the visa printout – your name, passport number, dates – to ensure everything is accurate. Any discrepancy could cause problems at the border.

Now, who exactly is eligible for these tourist visas? As mentioned, the list of nationalities eligible for the e-Visa and Visa on Arrival system currently includes around 50 countries. This list includes the USA, Canada, all EU Schengen Area countries, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, China (including Hong Kong and Macau), Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Kazakhstan, and a few others. Because visa policies can and do evolve, it is absolutely essential to verify the current list of eligible nationalities on the official 'Visit Saudi' portal or through a Saudi embassy or consulate *before* making any travel plans. Don't rely on old information or assumptions.

Beyond nationality, the passport itself must meet standards. As previously noted, at least six months' validity beyond your planned stay is the standard requirement. Your passport should also be in good condition; severely damaged passports might be rejected. Ensure you have enough blank pages – while one might suffice, having two is safer.

For those hoping to use the Visa on Arrival based on holding a US, UK, or Schengen visa, remember the specific conditions. It can't be just any visa; it generally needs to be a multiple-entry tourist or business visa. More importantly, it must have been used at least once to enter the issuing country/region. You'll need the entry stamp in your passport as proof. Permanent residency in the UK, US or EU is another route to VoA eligibility for citizens of countries not on the standard e-Visa list, but you'll need to present your valid residency card. Always double-check these specific requirements close to your travel date, as regulations can be fine-tuned. Some airlines might also

perform checks at departure to ensure you meet the VoA criteria, so have your documents ready.

A component bundled into both the e-Visa and VoA fee is mandatory medical insurance. This isn't just a formality; it provides crucial coverage during your visit. The primary highlight is coverage for COVID-19 related medical costs, a legacy of the pandemic era but still a valuable safety net. Beyond that, the insurance typically covers emergency medical expenses up to a certain limit, including emergency evacuation if necessary. While you hope never to need it, knowing it's there provides peace of mind. You should receive details about the insurance policy and how to access assistance along with your visa confirmation. Keep this information accessible during your trip. Note that this mandatory insurance is for emergencies; for comprehensive travel coverage (trip cancellation, lost luggage, etc.), you'll still want your own separate travel insurance policy.

Let's recap the costs. The e-Visa sits at approximately SAR 535, while the Visa on Arrival is around SAR 480. These fees are payable in Saudi Riyals, but the transaction is done online (for e-Visa) or at the airport counter (for VoA) using an international credit or debit card. Cash is generally not accepted for visa fees. Remember that these fees are non-refundable, even if your travel plans change or, in the unlikely event for eligible candidates, your VoA is denied. Factor this cost into your trip budget.

Understanding the difference between visa validity and allowed stay is critical. Your multiple-entry tourist e-Visa might be valid for a full year from the date it's issued. This means you can enter Saudi Arabia any time within that year. However, the total number of days you can actually spend *inside* the Kingdom during that one-year period is capped, usually at 90 days. This is a cumulative total. So, if you visit for 30 days, leave, and come back later within the same visa validity year, you'd have 60 days remaining from your 90-day allowance. Exceeding this limit constitutes overstaying.

The consequences of overstaying your visa in Saudi Arabia are severe and absolutely best avoided. The authorities take immigration rules very seriously. Overstaying typically results in hefty daily fines that accumulate quickly. Beyond financial penalties, you risk being detained by authorities and eventually deported. A deportation order from Saudi Arabia often comes with a ban on re-entry, not just to the Kingdom but potentially to other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries as well. Plan your departure carefully and ensure you leave on or before the date your permitted stay expires. If unforeseen circumstances arise that might delay your departure, contact the Saudi authorities (the General Directorate of Passports, known as 'Jawazat') immediately to understand your options, though extensions for tourist visas are generally not granted.

When you arrive at a Saudi international airport like Riyadh (RUH), Jeddah (JED), or

Dammam (DMM), you'll proceed to the immigration hall. Look for counters designated for foreign nationals or specific visa types (e.g., e-Visa holders). Have your passport and a printed copy of your e-Visa (or proof of eligibility for VoA, like your qualifying US/UK/Schengen visa and entry stamp) ready. The immigration officer will check your documents, likely take your fingerprints and a digital photograph (biometrics), and ask a few basic questions about the purpose of your visit, how long you plan to stay, and perhaps where you'll be staying. Answer politely and truthfully. Once processed, your passport will be stamped with an entry date, officially starting the clock on your permitted duration of stay.

After immigration, you'll proceed to baggage claim and then customs. Saudi Arabia has strict rules about prohibited items. Alcohol is completely illegal to possess, consume, or import. The penalties are severe. Narcotic drugs also carry extreme penalties, including capital punishment. Pork products are forbidden for religious reasons. Be mindful of membawa certain types of published materials or media that could be deemed offensive to Islamic values or politically sensitive. It's always best to err on the side of caution. If you are carrying large amounts of currency (usually over SAR 60,000 or equivalent), you must declare it. Prescription medications should be in their original packaging with a doctor's prescription. If in doubt about any item, check the official Saudi customs website or declare it upon arrival.

Throughout your stay in Saudi Arabia, you are legally required to carry identification. While carrying your original passport everywhere might feel risky, you should at least have clear photocopies of your passport's biographical page and your Saudi visa page (or e-Visa printout) with you at all times. You might be asked for identification by police or other officials, particularly at checkpoints or when entering certain buildings. Some hotels might also ask to hold your passport during your stay, though providing a copy is often sufficient.

A few special cases are worth mentioning. If you're just passing through Saudi Arabia with a long layover, you might wonder about a **Transit Visa**. Historically, transit procedures could be cumbersome. However, Saudi Arabia has introduced a convenient **Stopover Visa**. This free visa allows travellers flying on Saudia (the national carrier) or Flynas (a major low-cost carrier) to stay in the Kingdom for up to 96 hours (4 days). This visa can be applied for when booking your flight tickets through the airlines' websites and allows you to break up a long journey and get a taste of Saudi Arabia. It's an excellent option for a short exploration.

Citizens of other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, UAE) enjoy visa-free travel to Saudi Arabia, requiring only their national ID cards or passports for entry. However, if you are a resident (but not a citizen) of a GCC country, you generally need to follow the standard visa procedures based on your own nationality, although some professions might have had special considerations in the past – always verify current rules.

A common question relates to travel history, specifically **Israeli stamps** in a passport. Officially, Saudi Arabia states that entry eligibility is not based on stamps from other countries. The Kingdom does not have formal diplomatic relations with Israel, but in line with opening up for tourism and evolving regional dynamics, the previous automatic denial associated with Israeli stamps is largely considered a thing of the past for most tourist entries. However, entry is always ultimately at the discretion of the immigration officer on the ground. If you have concerns, consulting the nearest Saudi embassy is advisable, though anecdotal evidence suggests it's generally not an issue for tourists entering via standard procedures.

If you are travelling with **minors** (children under 18), ensure they have their own passports and visas. If a child is travelling with only one parent, or with someone other than a parent, it's highly recommended to carry a letter of consent signed by the non-travelling parent(s), notarized if possible, authorizing the trip. Airlines may also have their own requirements for children travelling alone or with one guardian.

Finally, and this cannot be stressed enough: **visa and entry requirements can change**. Geopolitical situations, public health concerns, or internal policy adjustments can lead to updates in eligibility, fees, procedures, or required documentation, sometimes with little notice. Before you book flights or accommodation, and again shortly before you travel, your most reliable sources of information are the official Saudi government websites – particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the General Directorate of Passports (Jawazat), and the official tourism portal (Visit Saudi). You can also contact the Saudi embassy or consulate in your country for the latest, authoritative guidance. Relying on outdated forum posts or third-hand information is a recipe for potential disappointment or entry issues. Doing this bit of homework ensures your Saudi journey begins smoothly, paving the way for the incredible experiences that await.

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