



Saudi Arabia

المملكة العربية السعودية

Includes →

Riyadh.....	243
Dir'ayah	250
Hejaz.....	250
Jeddah.....	250
Taif.....	256
Yanbu	256
Al-Ula	257
Madain Saleh	259
Asir	261
Abha	261
Farasan Islands	265

Best Places for Culture

- Madain Saleh (p259)
- National Museum (p243)
- Dir'ayah (p250)
- Old Jeddah (p253)
- Camel Market & Races (p250)

Best Places for Nature

- Asir National Park (p264)
- Al-Soudah (p264)
- Diving at Yanbu (p256)
- Farasan Islands (p265)
- Red Sands (p250)

Why Go?

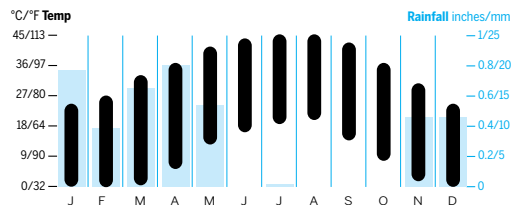
The birthplace and spiritual home of Islam, Saudi Arabia is as rich in attractions as it is in stirring symbolism. It is also one of the most difficult places on earth to visit.

For those who do get in, rock-hewn Madain Saleh is Arabia's greatest treasure. Other wonders abound, from the echoes of TE Lawrence along the Hejaz Railway to the mud-brick ruins of Dir'ayah. Jeddah, gateway to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, has an enchanting old city made of coral, while the Red Sea coast has world-class diving. Elsewhere, this is a land of astonishing natural beauty, particularly the plunging landscapes of the Asir Mountains in the Kingdom's southwest.

Best of all, there are few places left that can be said to represent the last frontier of tourism. Whether you're an expat or a pilgrim, Saudi Arabia is one of them.

When to Go

Saudi Arabia



Nov–Mar Cooler temperatures make daytime weather bearable and nights surprisingly chilly.

Apr–Oct Temperatures above 40°C, high humidity along the coast; Ramadan; April sandstorms.

Year-round Red Sea diving has excellent visibility all year, but in summer morning dives are best.

AT A GLANCE

- ➔ **Currency:** Saudi riyal (SR)
- ➔ **Money:** ATMs widespread, credit cards widely accepted
- ➔ **Visas:** Only business visas (no tourist visas)
- ➔ **Mobile Phones:** GSM phone network widespread

Fast Facts

- ➔ **Official name** Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- ➔ **Capital** Riyadh
- ➔ **Area** 2,149,690 sq km
- ➔ **Population** 26.5 million
- ➔ **Country code** 966

Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	SR3.9
Bahrain	BD1	SR9.9
Euro zone	€1	SR4.9
Kuwait	KD1	SR13.1
Oman	OR\$1	SR9.7
Qatar	QR1	SR1.03
UAE	Dh1	SR1.02
UK	£1	SR5.7
USA	US\$1	SR3
Yemen	YR100	SR1.74

Resources

- ➔ **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com/saudiarabia) Includes the Thorn Tree bulletin board.
- ➔ **Saudi Arabian Information Resources** (www.saudinf.com) Includes helpful addresses.

Daily Costs

Saudi Arabia isn't a budget destination. Eating well for SR50 to SR75 per day is rarely a problem, but few budget hotels accept Westerners – expect to pay at least SR500 for a double in a decent midrange hotel. It is, of course, easy to pay much more than this for both food and accommodation; a more realistic midrange budget, once you factor in transport, is around SR1000 per day.

ITINERARIES

One Week

Begin in Riyadh, with a couple of days exploring the modern architecture, **Masmak Fortress**, **National Museum** and the nearby **camel races**. On the third day, factor in an afternoon at **Dir'ayah** and camp in the Red Sands. Fly to Al-Ula and spend a day amid the wonderful Nabataean ruins of **Madain Saleh**, with extra time for one or two stops along the **Hejaz Railway**. Fly down to **Jeddah**, Saudi Arabia's most beguiling city, and lose yourself in the souqs and coral houses of Old Jeddah and a stroll along the corniche.

Two Weeks

With an extra week, allow for a couple of days' diving around **Yanbu**, then head for the hills (especially in summer) of pretty **Taif**; make it a weekend if you want to catch the camel races. Fly or drive to Abha and use it as a base for exploring the **Asir Mountains**, especially **Jebel Soudah** and the hanging village of **Habalah**. Other options to round out your second week include **diving** in the Red Sea from the **Farasan Islands** or, if the security situation permits, a foray to wonderful **Najran** in the Kingdom's far southwest.

Essential Food & Drink

- ➔ **Mezze** Truly one of the joys of Arab cooking and similar in conception to Spanish tapas, with infinite possibilities.
- ➔ **Fuul** Mashed fava beans served with olive oil and often eaten for breakfast.
- ➔ **Shwarma** Ubiquitous kebab- or souvlaki-style pita sandwich stuffed with meat.
- ➔ **Baby camel** Among the tenderest of Saudi meats, it's a particular specialty of Jeddah and the Hejaz.
- ➔ **Red Sea seafood** Fresh and varied and at its best when slow-cooked over coals or baked in the oven; try *samak mashwi* (fish basted in a date puree and barbecued over hot coals).
- ➔ **Khouzi** A Bedouin dish of lamb stuffed with rice, nuts, onions, sultanas, spices, eggs and a whole chicken.