

Saudi Arabia Is Opening Its Doors: But What Will You See Once There?

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Theme: [History](#)

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is opening up to the world. It used to be absolutely impossible to get a visa to enter, unless you were a religious pilgrim (therefore officially a Muslim), NATO military personnel, or a businessman or woman, invited by a local company or by the Saudi government. Even if you secured approval, visas were outrageously expensive, costing several hundreds of dollars. The only loophole was a “transit visa” for those who were going to drive from Oman or Bahrain, to Jordan.

Tourism was not recognized as a reason to visit the KSA. There were simply no tourist visas issued. Full stop.

Then, suddenly, everything changed, at the very end of September 2019. The Saudi government introduced e-visas, for 49 nation nationalities, including the USA, Canada, all nationals of the European Union, as well as the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China (including Hong Kong and Macau).

Everything has been streamlined. The formerly brutal international airports of Riyadh (the capital), Jeddah and Dammam, received incredible facelifts. Now, friendly ladies (still in hijab), speaking perfect English, are processing first-time visitors, taking their fingerprints, photographing them, then welcoming them to Saudi Arabia. There are rating buttons on the walls of the immigration booths: “How are we serving you?” From excellent, to terrible. Riyadh Airport is now clean, well illuminated, and pleasant.

All over the capital city, foreign women are now walking with fully exposed hair: at the airport, in all major hotels of Riyadh, office buildings, even inside the luxury malls.

The Royal Family is sending a clear message to the world: things are rapidly changing: Saudi Arabia is not what it used to be a few years ago. Women can now drive, foreigners (some, at least from the rich countries) can enter the country, and the dress-code for women is getting more and more relaxed.

Words like “the arts” and “culture” have been reintroduced into the local lexicon, after being nearly extinct for decades.

Saudi Arabia has a wide range of problems. They include corruption, the increasing dissatisfaction of the middle classes, the great desperation of the poor, vulnerability of oil prices, cross-border retaliatory attacks by the Houthis in Yemen, the imminent defeat of the Saudi extremist allies in Syria, the prolonged conflict with Qatar, as well as a still undiversified economy based on the export of oil.

After cutting the journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, into pieces, precisely one year ago, the KSA

suddenly drew strong criticism from all corners of the world.

The continuous killing of tens of thousands of innocent Yemeni civilians has evoked wrath in progressive circles worldwide.

The rulers in Riyadh had to re-think many issues. They calculated, and came to the conclusion that the best way to act would be to open up the country, and basically demonstrate to the world that the Kingdom is “not as bad” as many would like to believe.

The risk is great. Could this strategy really work? Or would it backfire?

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Politics aside, Saudi Arabia is a “specific place”, and definitely not to everyone’s liking.

To give it credit where it is due, it counts on some stunning vistas, on endless deserts, dunes and oases producing dates and delicious fruits. It is dotted with castles and forts, and of course, as the cradle of Islam, it has some of the most incredible historic sites.

A few years ago, the National Museum in Beijing, China, exhibited thousands of historic objects and images from the KSA. To those of us who visited, it was a tremendous discovery.

Unfortunately, what can be shown in China, could not always be allowed in Riyadh, Jeddah, Macca and Medina.

For decades, the Saudi extremist Wahhabism has been fighting against everything that is not perceived as holy: music, films, non-religious books, even the images of animals.

This religious extremism has been exported to all corners of the world. Paradoxically and bizarrely, it has been intertwined with Western, particularly North American, “culture”. Extreme capitalism has been thriving all over the Kingdom. More oil, more kitsch.

Tremendous Muslim monuments had been dwarfed by lavish malls, badly designed and overpriced hotels, car culture and cheap US eateries such as Big M, Dunkin Donuts and Pizza Hut.



There is hardly any city planning, or connectivity in the major cities like Dammam, Jeddah and Riyadh, even when compared with the neighboring Dubai, Doha or Muscat.

According to The Independent:

“The destruction of sites associated with early Islam is an ongoing phenomenon that has occurred mainly in the Hejaz region of western Saudi Arabia, particularly around the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The demolition has focused on mosques, burial sites, homes and historical locations associated with the Islamic prophet Muhammad and many of the founding personalities of early Islamic history.”

Vulgar luxury malls and 5-star hotels for the super-rich pilgrims are now literally encircling the holiest site in Macca.

But it is not only religious sites that are being ruined.

During this recent visit, I drove to the At-Turaif District in ad-Dir'iyah, some 20 kilometers from Riyadh, once a stunning World Heritage site designated by UNESCO. This location of the first Saudi Dynasty was “undergoing renovation”. Read: entire areas of traditional houses and ancient streets, squares and courtyards have been “rearranged”; destroyed. A modern mall has been erected. I was told that soon, more areas will give way to the fake buildings. Al-Turaif District has already been nicknamed the “Beverly Hills of Saudi Arabia.”

What's next, nobody knows. But one thing is certain: if the rulers of Saudi Arabia want to attract visitors from the West, Russia, China or Japan, in order to diversify its economy, they'd have to offer a bit more than clogged roads, shopping malls, broken sidewalks and kitschy hotels and restaurants.

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Saudi Arabia is extremely rich (although not as rich as Qatar), at least on paper. But it is full of absolute misery, from slums to beggars whose arms were amputated at a young age, so they could evoke the pity of motorists, and generate higher incomes for the mafias that are pimping them.

In many luxury malls, there are sexy, almost pornographic lingerie stores for the upper class wives, while outside, millions of manual workers, mainly from the sub-Continent, Africa and the Philippines, are living in destitution, not unlike that which they left behind in their native lands.

Politically, Saudi Arabia is, together with Israel, the closest ally of the United States.

And it shows. In those proverbial 5-star hotels that cost in Riyadh, double what they do even in Qatar, stereotypical Western 'development-types' are lecturing locals, openly, arrogantly and without any shame.

Visa restrictions have been eased, but mass tourism in the KSA is still hard to imagine. The country is not ready for culture-oriented types, for history connoisseurs, or for people on average budgets.

There is no way of walking here. There is no public transportation to speak of, yet. Even getting a taxi can be an ordeal, as everything is designed for private cars.

The prices are outrageous and the quality of services very, very low. Crime rates high.

It will take some time to convince foreigners to come.

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 But an attempt to bring the world into KSA is there. Changes are in the air.

The National Museum in Riyadh opened its doors. The building is magnificent, although exhibitions are, to put it mildly, very poor. The new National Library is stunning, although the selection of books is very limited. Research centers mainly highlight the activities of the Royal Family. A new mass rapid system is being constructed, but no one knows exactly when it will become operational.

I am interested in this complex country. I want to come back, and understand more; for years I am writing about Wahhabism and the deadly alliance with the UK, and then the US. And, honestly, I have always been fascinated with the deserts and with the people who inhabit them.

Considering my strong criticism of the KSA foreign policy, including my frequent appearances on the Iranian Press TV, I was a bit worried about this visit, but I was holding an "official", not "e" visa, and in the end, nothing bad happened. The people that I met were kind and open with me. Now, I am writing this short essay on board Sri Lankan Airlines, bound for Colombo, alive and well.

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Diversification could prove to be extremely positive for the people of Saudi Arabia. Both Russia and China are now making important inroads, and soon, there will be substantial investment from both countries, in the Saudi oil industry, as well as tourism and other sectors. Chinese and Russian people are curious and daring. They will come. Many will. Saudis know it.

At the National Museum in Riyadh, a receptionist asked where I was from, in English. I answered, "I am Russian". He hesitated for just a few seconds, then smiled and uttered: "Privet! Kak dela?" ("Greetings, how are you doing?") Perhaps he had to learn those few words of greeting in all world languages. Or perhaps not. Maybe he was studying Russian.

The rulers of the KSA are very secretive people. No one really knows which direction the country is going to evolve in the next few years. Could the KSA one day become "neutral"? I don't know.

But one thing is certain: something is moving, brewing and evolving. KSA is not the same country as it was five years ago. In the future, perhaps five years from now, it may become unrecognizable.

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