

SAUDI TOURISM OPENS KINGDOM TO THE WORLD



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Hotel Intel

Saudi Arabia is inching toward a more liberal society, balancing modern mores and Islamic law while being a political frenemy of many western countries, including Canada.

What was I doing there? Definitely not talking politics or religion. I attended the 22nd World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) Global Summit in the capital city of Riyadh, and took time out for a look at life.

I found that although alcohol is banned and modest dress is requisite, tourism is on a meteoric upsurge, and some of Riyadh's culture is rich, vibrant and even free-spirited.

We could call it Saudi Arabia 2.0. The kingdom's hospitality scene is booming as the controversial country opens its vast territory to foreigners.

Part of the country's outreach was its hosting in the fall of the WTTC summit, which assembled 3,400 delegates — a who's who of the tourism industry drawn from governments, corporations, non-profits, hotels and media.

WTTC sessions covered sustainability, technology, conservation, health, cruises and more. Speakers included actor Edward Norton, an environmental advocate; supermodel Elle Macpherson, a wellness entrepreneur; and Ban Ki-moon, former United Nations secretary-general.

WTTC president and CEO Julia Simpson noted: "Saudi Arabia is set to become a major tourist destination with the fastest growth in the Middle East over the next decade."

Tourism minister Ahmed Al Khateeb and Princess Haifa Al Saud, deputy tourism minister,



IF YOU GO

Saudi Arabia tourism:
visitsaudi.com
World Travel and Tourism Council: wtcc.org

wowed the WTTC crowd with details of Vision 2030, a plan for trillions of dollars' worth of heritage and hospitality "giga-projects."

The Saudi goal is to expand tourism from the current 62 million visitors a year, including Muslim pilgrims, to 100 million by 2030. And where there will be tourists, there will be hotels.

The upcoming collection will be paragons of dazzling architecture and design, a blend of avant-garde style and Arabic soul that is sure to rattle the pages of Architectural Digest and Wallpaper magazines.

The areas around two awe-inspiring UNESCO World Heritage Sites are developing at warp speed. Diriyah Gate will be home to brigades of international chefs and nearly 40 new hotels that

Grand Hyatt The Red Sea will feature a striking coral-bloom design to blend with the natural environment. Saudi Arabia's tourism scene is booming, with an ambitious expansion plan. RED SEA GLOBAL/HYATT HOTELS

will be integrated into the desert landscape of sand-brick castles on the outskirts of Riyadh.

The ancient sites around AlUla and Hegra, 1,000 miles northwest, rival Petra in Jordan for archeological influence, according to Smithsonian magazine. On its vibrant neo-tourism side, AlUla has wellness and arts festivals, exquisite earth-friendly hotels like Habitas and Banyan Tree, and has hosted concerts by the likes of Alicia Keys and Andrea Bocelli. The exhibit Fame: Andy Warhol in AlUla runs until May 16.

The massive Red Sea Project will spawn exquisite beach resorts with eco-conscious construction throughout a precious archipelago already known for scuba diving around coral reefs.

The northwest Neom region is the site of two of the most ambitious schemes, both in embryonic stages. The Line will be a futuristic 175-kilometre-long mega-city, but is experiencing pushback from some environmentalists and Indigenous tribes. The mountain-

ous area of Trojena is to be a ski resort and the host of the 2029 Asian Winter Games, even without a snow-sports tradition.

Hotel plans: CEOs of hospitality multinationals, including Keith Barr of IHG and Sébastien Bazin of Accor, told the WTTC of plans including ultra-exclusive projects of stunning beauty with a focus on sustainability.

Marriott International CEO Anthony Capuano spoke of plans for premier brands such as St. Regis, Edition and Ritz-Carlton Reserve for the Red Sea Project; a Luxury Collection hotel, Edition and Moxy within Diriyah Gate; as well as expansion in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Hyatt CEO Mark S. Hoplamazian forecast a huge expansion in Saudi Arabia, including Park Hyatt Riyadh Diriyah Gate and Jabal Omar Hyatt Centric Makkah (Mecca). For the luxury-wellness crowd, Miraval The Red Sea will be the first of its brand (an Oprah favourite) overseas.

Chris Nassetta, president and CEO of Hilton, said: "Hilton has operated in the kingdom for more than 25 years ... and now is helping to shape an exciting future in exciting destinations." Plans include the urban Motto by Hilton, the luxury Waldorf Astoria Diriyah and the Hilton Al Khobar King Fahd Causeway.

Hotel user guide: In spite of considerable modernization, Saudi hotels still have lifestyle differences compared to those in the West. Men and women dine together and gather socially for mocktails; restaurant patios and outdoor cafés are particularly popular. Hotels have separate male/female spas and fitness areas. If a hotel has only one pool, the hours might be split, or often it is reserved for men.

The service I experienced was gracious and warm. Saudi hoteliers are thrilled that foreigners are interested in their country, and I found them to be endlessly helpful.



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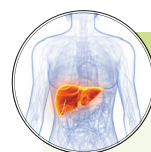
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I have indigestion & bloating	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I'm tired all the time	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My liver could need some help	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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