



The Kingdom Center Tower anchors the business district of Riyadh and is home to the Four Seasons Hotel, shops, offices and apartments. The oil-rich kingdom welcomed a record 62 million visitors in 2021, half from outside the country. SAUDI ARABIA MINISTRY OF TOURISM

Tourism boom in Saudi Arabia sparks lifestyle evolution



ROCHELLE LASH
Hotel Intel

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is inching toward a more liberal society, always balancing Islamic culture, human rights and its shifting status as a political frenemy of many countries.

What was I doing in that controversial hotbed? Definitely not talking about politics or religion. I attended the 22nd World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) Global Conference in Riyadh, the capital city, where 3,400 government and industry leaders exchanged views on sustainability, technology and more.

Julia Simpson, WTTC president and CEO, noted that 70 per cent of Saudi Arabia's population is 30 or younger and their "incredible passion for hospitality, part of their natural DNA, will help open the kingdom to the world."

The new Jareed Hotel in Riyadh is a shining example of the neo-hospitality scene that is booming as the kingdom gradually moves toward a more open society.

Tourism already is in high gear. The oil-rich kingdom welcomed a record 62 million visitors in 2021, half from outside the country. They came to experience Saudi's six revered UNESCO archeological sites, wondrous modern architecture, holy cities and eye-popping hotels, all with backdrops of brilliant sunshine, striking desert landscapes and the beautiful waters of the Red Sea.

Politics and religion aside, AMC cinemas and Netflix are popular. Minarets and mosques abound, announcing the call to prayers and, if you have your earbuds in, an app will send notifications. Uber is fast and cheap, the Riyadh subway is slated to roll in 2023 and gas pumps are at around 85 cents a litre. A new carrier, Riyadh Air, was announced this month, aiming to rival the world's best. The nearest tourist camel ride is about 60 kilometres from downtown at Thumamah National Park, which also has skateboarding and ATV rentals.

The prayers and fasting of Ramadan continue until April 20, but then, Riyadh's entertainment calendar will be filled year-round with concerts, sports and food fests. For families, Riyadh Season is a two-month autumn extravaganza, with an amusement park, parades, horse races and fireworks. The 2022 edition featured appearances by soccer superstar

Lionel Messi and chart-topping rockers Imagine Dragons.

For party people, the 2022 music mega-spectacle MDL-BEAST Soundstorm (a wordplay on Middle East) attracted more than 600,000 to a three-night rave starring Grammy winner Bruno Mars and rapper-producer DJ Khaled. Alcohol and drugs are not part of the culture, but people danced until dawn, decked out in rock finery, from ripped jeans to crystal-studded abayas. It's on again in December.

Jareed Hotel: The deluxe boutique property, set back from Riyadh's high-octane strip known as The Boulevard, is a microcosm of 2023 life in a classy neighbourhood — lots of cafés for remote work or simply hanging out. Nearby, there is a Bentley dealership and treasures by Cartier and Chanel.

The Jareed sports a glossy design and avant-garde art that would fit in fashion-forward Miami, Milan or Istanbul. The lobby glows with golden walls and a shimmering chandelier. The welcome includes delish dates and traditional Arabic coffee (half-roasted and boiled, it's an acquired taste).

"Our Arabic heritage is subtle, but meaningful," said Yasser Galal el Din, vice-president of hospitality at Jareed Hotels. "A lot of our artworks and furniture are by Saudi artists and we serve Middle Eastern dishes at breakfast."

The Jareed's highlights include spacious accommodations with Egyptian cotton sheets and luxurious travertine bathrooms. Some have large terraces.

In keeping with Islamic values, the Jimam Spa has separate sections for men and women, each with a hot tub, steam room and treatments. The hotel partners with fitness clubs next door, and the men's has a swimming pool.

Dining out: Seated Bedouin-style on fancy carpets, my group feasted at Najd Village, where a spread of Arabic dishes included roast lamb, camel stew and desserts made with dates.

Middle Eastern, contemporary and chic Huqqa Riyadh is in a sparkling outdoor promenade lined with gardens and fountains. The cuisine is a treat, but Huqqa also is known for its open-air hookah lounge.

At the Jareed, the sumptuous (pork-free) breakfast features eggs Florentine, chia pudding or banana French toast, plus such delicacies as shakshuka, ful madames (fava bean stew) and spicy variations of labneh, falafel and hummus.

Popular with locals, Morini at the Jareed is a branch of the Italian flagship in New York. It's a Mediterranean-inspired ris-

IF YOU GO

Saudi Arabia: visitsaudi.com
World Travel & Tourism Council: wtcc.org
Jareed Hotel: 966-11-400-4141, jareedhotels.com; Prince Turki Bin Abdulaziz Rd. (The Boulevard), Riyadh. From about \$480 Cdn, suites from \$740.

torante serving grilled octopus, beef carpaccio and braised beef ribs, followed by tiramisu and homemade gelato.

The Living Room is Jareed's lifestyle hub for artistic mocktails, barista coffee or formal tea. Fashionistas recently flocked to a Versace pop-up, the Lamborghini crowd roars in for Wagyu burgers, and the giant-screen TV draws sport fans.

TRAVEL BRIEFS

Fat cat claws its way to top attraction

Tourists are storming the ramparts of an ancient Polish city famed for its cathedral and castle — but they're racing for selfies with a fat cat, not photographs of medieval landmarks. Visitors to Szczecin, on the Oder river near the German border, are flocking to the sedentary spectacle of a chunky stray named Gacek. The Daily Telegraph reported. The cat, whose name means "long-eared bat" in Polish, has lived on the streets for almost a decade and has built up a considerable social media following during that time, with his own Facebook and Instagram pages. And now the celebrity feline has become the city's No. 1 attraction, based on reviews posted on Google Maps, scoring five out of five stars and outranking the Gothic town hall, St. James Cathedral and the renowned renaissance Pomeranian Dukes' Castle. "I came all the way from Lancaster U.K. to see Gacek," wrote one reviewer named Roy. "We chatted for a while. It was good." Another said it "was worth travelling three hours to feel ignored by him." One person said an audience with the black-and-white cat was "life-changing." Gacek lives independently in a wooden shelter built for him by shopkeepers in the city's Kaszubska Street, the newspaper reported. His fame spread about three years ago after a local broadcaster posted a story on YouTube.

Bali puts brakes on motorbike tourists

The Indonesian holiday island of Bali is banning tourists from using motorbikes after "disorderly" visitors caused a series of colli-

sions. In the absence of adequate public transport, many visitors rent motorbikes to get around. But now they will have to rely on vehicles provided by travel agents, the island's governor has declared. According to local police, more than 170 foreigners broke traffic laws between late February and early March. A Russian tourist riding under the influence of alcohol crashed into a local man last month, sending him to hospital, while one Ukrainian and one Russian died in a collision in January, reports said. The number of Russian and Ukrainian visitors to Bali has surged since the easing of pandemic restrictions. The Momocle reported, with complaints about their conduct also increasing.

Singapore soars again as world's top airport

Singapore's Changi Airport has soared to a record 12th title as the world's best airport. It slipped to third place last year, behind Qatar's Doha International and Tokyo's Haneda, but won the title at the 2023 World Airport Awards — the most since the honours began in 1999. As well as overall top spot, it took the award for best airport dining, best airport for leisure amenities and best airport in Asia. Lee Seow Hiang, chief executive of Changi Airport Group, saluted the staff "who stood firmly together to battle the challenges of COVID. We thank them for their dedication to serve Changi's passengers and the perseverance to keep Singapore connected to the world." The only Canadian entry in the top 20 was Vancouver International, which snuck in at last place. Rounding out the top 10 were Doha Hamad, Tokyo Haneda, Seoul Incheon, Paris CDG, Istanbul, Munich, Zurich, Tokyo Narita and Madrid Barajas. Changi. The World Airport Award rankings, compiled by air travel research firm Skytrax, are based on passenger satisfaction surveys covering categories including check-in, arrivals, shopping and more. Montreal (45), Toronto Pearson (64) and Calgary (92) also made the top 100 rankings.

Andre Ramshaw, for Postmedia News

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