



Assessing Saudi Arabia's Tourism Infrastructure and Facilities: Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Tourism Development

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is a key driver of economic diversification and sustainable development, particularly in regions seeking to reduce dependency on resource-based industries. In line with Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has prioritized tourism sector expansion through Vision Realization Programs (VRPs), aiming to enhance infrastructure, attract international visitors, and establish the Kingdom as a global tourism hub. However, the rapid development of tourism infrastructure and facilities raises questions about sustainability, management efficiency, and long-term viability. This study critically assesses Saudi Arabia's tourism infrastructure and facilities, identifying challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism development. Guided by Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) Model and the Destination Competitiveness Framework, the research evaluates the role of hard infrastructure (transportation networks, accommodations, and cultural sites) and soft facilities (hospitality services, digital platforms, and policy frameworks) in supporting tourism growth. A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining secondary data analysis from government reports, policy documents, and industry studies with expert interviews to assess current development strategies and their implications for sustainable tourism. The findings reveal that while Saudi Arabia has made significant strides in improving tourism infrastructure, challenges persist in areas such as regulatory frameworks, sustainability practices, and stakeholder coordination. The study identifies gaps in facility operations, environmental management, and tourism governance, offering recommendations for balancing rapid tourism growth with sustainable resource management. By providing a critical analysis rather than a purely descriptive overview, this research contributes to discussions on tourism infrastructure planning and sustainability in emerging tourism destinations.

Keywords: Tourism, Tourism hard infrastructure, Tourism soft facilities, Tourism facilities management.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a vital driver of economic growth, cultural exchange, and sustainable development worldwide. As nations seek to diversify their economies, tourism infrastructure and facilities play a crucial role in attracting visitors, enhancing their experiences, and ensuring long-term sectoral growth. Saudi Arabia, historically known for religious tourism due to the annual Hajj and

Umrah pilgrimages, is undergoing a major transformation to position itself as a global tourism destination. This shift aligns with Vision 2030, an ambitious national strategy aimed at reducing the country's reliance on oil revenues by expanding key sectors, including travel, tourism, and entertainment [1].

As part of this initiative, Saudi Arabia has launched various Vision Realization Programs

(VRPs) to develop tourism infrastructure, improve visitor services, and promote leisure activities. The government's efforts have led to significant investments in airports, roads, hotels, resorts, and cultural heritage sites. In 2022, Saudi Arabia became the most visited country in the Arab world, surpassing regional competitors such as the United Arab Emirates and Morocco. Despite these advancements, challenges such as sustainability, infrastructure maintenance, regulatory frameworks, and local community engagement remain critical areas for evaluation [2].

This study aims to assess the current state of Saudi Arabia's tourism infrastructure and facilities, identifying key challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism development. It examines hard infrastructure (airports, transportation networks, accommodations) and soft facilities (hospitality services, digital tourism platforms, regulatory policies) to determine the country's readiness to support a thriving tourism sector. Additionally, the research explores best practices in sustainable tourism, offering recommendations to ensure long-term economic, social, and environmental benefits.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to evaluate Saudi Arabia's tourism infrastructure and facilities while identifying challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism development. The research design combines descriptive and analytical methods, focusing on both hard infrastructure (transportation systems, accommodations, cultural heritage sites) and soft facilities (hospitality services, digital platforms, policy frameworks). Data collection primarily relies on secondary data analysis from government reports, policy documents, and industry

publications, along with semi-structured expert interviews with key stakeholders such as tourism policymakers, hospitality managers, and sustainability experts.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, triangulation is applied by cross-verifying findings from multiple data sources, and expert validation is conducted through consultations with professionals in tourism planning and infrastructure development. Ethical considerations are maintained by securing informed consent for interviews and properly citing secondary data sources. However, the study is limited by restricted access to certain tourism-related government statistics and primarily focuses on major tourism hubs such as Riyadh, Jeddah, Makkah, AlUla, and NEOM. Future research should expand the geographical scope and incorporate longitudinal data to track the evolution of Saudi Arabia's tourism infrastructure over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism

Tourism is broadly defined as the act of traveling away from one's usual place of residence for recreation, relaxation, or pleasure. It encompasses activities such as sightseeing, camping, and exploring new cultures. Tourists travel for various reasons, including experiencing different lifestyles, learning about historical heritage, visiting friends and family, or simply enjoying new environments [3]. Some individuals seek warmer climates and sandy beaches, while others pursue adventure in forests, mountains, or deserts.

According to Goeldner and Ritchie, a tourist is an individual who travels to a location outside their usual residence for at least one

night but not exceeding one year [4]. While tourism is often associated with leisure, it also includes travel for business, education, religious pilgrimages, sports, and medical purposes [5]. These different types of tourism contribute significantly to economic development by generating revenue, creating employment opportunities, and fostering cultural exchange.

Leisure tourism, which involves taking a break from daily life, is considered a major tourism sector. It includes religious tourism, business tourism, sports tourism, and medical tourism, each linked to specific infrastructure and services [6]. The economic impact of tourism is substantial, as it enhances national infrastructure, creates jobs, and promotes cultural integration. Studies indicate that tourism contributes significantly to GDP in many countries. For instance, Aruba (27.64%), the British Virgin Islands (32.96%), the Maldives (38.92%), and Seychelles (25.74%) rely heavily on tourism as a key driver of economic growth [7]. These examples highlight the potential of tourism to stimulate national economies and emphasize the need for effective tourism management strategies.

Suitably Positioning Tourism Complexes

The strategic location of tourism complexes is a critical aspect of tourism planning and design. Proper site selection ensures that tourism facilities provide valuable services while maximizing economic benefits. Location theories primarily focus on minimizing costs and optimizing profitability. These theories can be broadly categorized into four main groups. The first is cost minimization theories, which emphasize reducing production and operational costs to the lowest possible level. The second category consists of market analysis theories, which consider demand factors and market

availability. The third group includes revenue maximization theories, which aim to enhance income generation. The fourth is a rational combination of these approaches, balancing cost efficiency and revenue potential [6].

The application of these theories has resulted in five key location-allocation models. The first is the minimum distance model, which seeks to reduce transportation costs by placing services at a central location to minimize overall expenses. The second is the maximum density model, which positions tourism services in highly populated areas to attract a larger number of visitors. The third is the minimum power distance model, which focuses on reducing travel costs for specific consumer groups by ensuring that services are within close reach. The fourth is the maximum coverage model, which aims to increase the number of tourists visiting a location without necessarily prioritizing population centers [6].

By applying these models, planners can enhance the accessibility and sustainability of tourism complexes. A well-positioned tourism complex attracts more visitors, boosts economic activity, and contributes to the overall growth of the tourism sector. Effective location strategies ensure that tourism infrastructure meets the needs of travelers while also benefiting local communities and stakeholders.

Tourism Hard Infrastructures

Tourism infrastructure is developed through a combination of both private and public sector investments. Private sector infrastructure primarily includes hotel lodging, while public sector infrastructure encompasses essential facilities such as international airports, roads, rail networks, and seaports. Additionally, public investments extend to convention

centers, casinos, museums, and national parks, all of which serve as major economic assets. These infrastructures generate revenue by attracting tourists, creating employment opportunities, and driving growth in the tourism industry [7].

Tourist amenities and utilities, such as picnic areas, gift shops, restrooms, playgrounds, tradecraft workshops, clubs, lecture rooms, restaurants, and classrooms, cater to visitors' short-term needs. However, they do not include overnight accommodations, which are categorized separately. Hotels and motels, for instance, provide lodging for long-term stays and are fundamental to sustaining tourism by offering comfort and convenience to travelers [8].

Infrastructure is broadly categorized into hard and soft infrastructure. Hard infrastructure includes physical facilities, utilities, and transportation networks, such as stadiums, exhibition centers, television towers, ports, cruise terminals, and airports. Soft infrastructure, on the other hand, refers to human resources and institutional frameworks, including healthcare systems, law enforcement, financial institutions, and educational systems, all of which contribute to the tourism sector by ensuring safety, financial support, and skill development. Hard infrastructure can further be divided into three components: facilities, utilities, and transportation networks, each playing a vital role in supporting tourism activities and enhancing visitor experiences.

Facilities as Hard Infrastructure

A facility refers to any structure or installation designed to serve a specific function, providing convenience or services, such as cinemas and stadiums. Tourism hard

infrastructure encompasses five major types of facilities:

1. Recreation Facilities
2. Religious Tourism Facilities
3. Business Tourism Facilities
4. Sports Tourism Facilities
5. Medical Tourism Facilities

1. Recreation Facilities

Tourism recreation facilities consist of infrastructures that provide services and amenities that bring people together and enhance visitor experiences. While private sector investments primarily develop tourism infrastructure such as hotels, restaurants, and shops, the responsibility for offering recreational facilities remains unclear despite their significance for both local populations and tourists. Public infrastructures, particularly in tourist destinations, generate direct and indirect economic benefits. Examples of tourism recreation infrastructure include tennis courts, basketball courts, parking lots, beach facilities, promenades, hiking and cycling trails, concert halls, cinemas, congress centers, skating rinks, ski resorts, football pitches, amusement parks, swimming pools, horseback riding trails, educational trails, and excursion sites [9].

Government-funded tourism recreation infrastructures are typically categorized into the following eight types:

- Public parks
- Public playgrounds
- Public beaches
- Historical sites
- Nature reserves
- Public restrooms
- Picnic areas
- Public parking spaces [10]

2. Religious Tourism Facilities

Religious tourism is divided into three types:

- Spiritual tourism
- Sacred tourism
- Faith tourism

These categories further fall into two main subtypes:

1. Pilgrimage Tourism – Traveling for religious or spiritual purposes, such as the Islamic Hajj to Mecca, Jewish pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Christian pilgrimages to the Vatican, and Buddhist pilgrimages to Bodh Gaya.
2. Religious Sightseeing Tourism – Traveling to visit religious monuments, sacred sites, and artifacts for cultural and historical appreciation [11].

Religious tourists are highly motivated travelers, often willing to spend more than other types of tourists due to their strong connection to their faith and spiritual beliefs.

3. Business Tourism Facilities

Business tourism involves travel for work-related activities where individuals continue to receive their salaries while engaging in business affairs away from their primary workplace. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), business tourists are defined as individuals “traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for business, leisure, and other purposes.” Key activities associated with business tourism include:

- Business meetings
- Conferences
- Congresses
- Exhibitions

- Incentive travel

Business tourism is considered a modern form of tourism, primarily undertaken by highly educated professionals with high income levels. It is further categorized into:

- Primary Business Activities – Work-related tasks such as consultancy, inspections, and attending official meetings.
- Secondary Business Activities – Leisure activities such as dining, recreation, shopping, sightseeing, and networking [12].

4. Sports Tourism Facilities

Sports tourism involves traveling to attend or participate in sporting events. It includes both:

- Active Participation – Individuals who travel to engage in sports activities themselves.
- Passive Participation – Spectators who travel to watch sports competitions.

Sports tourism requires independent motivation, meaning that participation must be voluntary and not part of a pre-arranged event sponsored by an external entity [13].

5. Medical Tourism Facilities

Medical tourism, also referred to as cross-border healthcare, is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the global tourism industry. It primarily involves individuals from underdeveloped nations traveling to developed countries to access superior healthcare services. Medical tourism generally involves traveling for:

- Elective surgery

- Fertility treatments
- Dental care
- Cosmetic surgery

This sector has gained significant global attention as healthcare services become increasingly commercialized. As a result, medical tourism has become an essential component of international tourism markets [14][15].

Closely related to medical tourism is wellness tourism, which focuses on maintaining and enhancing personal well-being. Unlike medical tourism, which is reactive and pursued in response to specific health conditions, wellness tourism is proactive, aiming to prevent health issues. It involves activities such as:

- Spa treatments
- Holistic healing
- Mindfulness retreats
- Traditional hydrotherapy and mineral baths

The difference between medical tourism and wellness tourism is outlined in Table 1 [16].

The difference between Medical and Wellness Tourism, table (1).

Understanding the Difference Between Wellness Tourism and Medical Tourism	
REACTIVE	PROACTIVE
Medical Tourism	Wellness Tourism
Travel to receive treatment for a diagnosed disease, ailment, or condition, or to seek enhancement.	Travel to maintain, manage, or improve health and wellbeing.
Motivated by desire for lower cost of care, higher quality care, better access to care, and/or care not available at home.	Motivated by desire for healthy living, disease prevention, stress reduction, management of poor lifestyle habits, and/or authentic experiences.
Activities are reactive to illnesses, medically necessary, invasive, and/or overseen by a doctor.	Activities are proactive, voluntary, non-invasive, and non-medical in nature.
<small>Source: Global Wellness Institute</small>	
<small>Global Wellness Tourism Economy – November 2018</small>	

Every destination, worldwide, has a unique wellbeing enhancement aspect to offer in regards to wellness tourism, figure (1).



Figure 1: Every destination, worldwide, has a unique wellbeing enhancement aspect to offer in regards to wellness tourism.

There many other alternative term used as synonyms for the term medical tourism such as health tourism making this notion more inconsistent and confusing, sometimes used in place of wellness tourism. Health tourism sometimes used to mean medical tourism and sometimes employed as subset of medical tourism and wellness tourism. These three terms' definitions are not to describe the attributes of the destination the travelers visiting, but based on the characteristics and motivations of the travelers themselves.

Wellness tourism is more greatly backed compared to medical tourism in many countries' promotional materials most precisely their national tourism websites. The domination of spas vividly witnessed in wellness tourism promotion in countries with other diversified wellness-related properties. Distinctive local tourism properties and diversified peculiar wellness-related properties varies from country to country and seems to be increasing over time necessitating more state-of-the-art promotional approaches such as national tourism websites and yet to come avant-garde promotional

notions. Medical tourism and health tourism promotion tends to be more private sector-driven compared to wellness tourism which is more of public and governmental sector-driven. Generally, the national governments sectors role in tourism promotion is more significant than the private sectors role. The countries with the most well developed medical tourism and wellness tourism sectors services and well-promoted brand images are those where the national governments have already established themselves as leading players in promoting their sectors-driven medical, health and wellness services [17].

Utilities as Hard Infrastructures

Utilities play a critical role in infrastructure development and can be categorized into four main types: form utility, place utility, time utility, and possession utility.

1. Form Utility – Achieved by transforming customer needs and preferences into valuable products and services.
2. Place Utility – Ensures easy access to goods and services at convenient locations.
3. Time Utility – Makes products and services available to consumers when they are needed.
4. Possession Utility – Occurs when consumers derive satisfaction from acquiring and using specific goods or services.

Understanding these four utility types enables decision-makers to select the most suitable options for their needs. Although various tourism-related utilities exist, this research focuses on four key types, which represent broader categories of tourism infrastructure:

1. Telecommunications Infrastructure

The demand for advanced telecommunications infrastructure has increased significantly, driven by the transition from 4G (fourth generation) to 5G (fifth generation) mobile networks. Telecommunications infrastructure includes, but is not limited to:

- Telephone wires and cables
- Internet services
- Satellites
- Mobile network towers
- Radio broadcasting systems
- Power and energy transmission networks

The continuous development of telecommunications technology enhances connectivity, making tourism destinations more accessible and improving service efficiency.

2. Energy Infrastructure

Energy infrastructure is fundamental for national development and is traditionally powered by coal, gas, and nuclear plants. However, modern energy projects focus on renewable sources such as solar, wind, and geothermal power. The primary energy infrastructures include:

- Traditional Energy Sources: Electric power grids, nuclear plants, gas pipelines, and fossil fuel-based power plants (coal and gas).
- Renewable Energy Sources: Hydro-electric power, biofuels, and solar power, which are increasingly integrated into national energy frameworks.

These infrastructures ensure reliable power supply, which is essential for tourism and other industries.

3. Water Infrastructure

The constant supply of clean and potable water is a fundamental necessity for communities and tourism destinations. Water infrastructure varies based on geographical and environmental conditions. Key components include:

- Main water distribution lines
- Wells and pumping stations
- Water treatment plants
- Septic tanks and stormwater drains
- Dams and levees

Ensuring a sustainable water supply is crucial for maintaining public health and supporting tourism-related activities [18]

4. Waste Management Infrastructure

Effective waste management is essential for maintaining cleanliness and preventing environmental hazards in urban areas, roads, cities, and tourism hubs. Waste management infrastructure involves the collection, treatment, and disposal of waste to prevent the spread of diseases and maintain a healthy environment. This includes:

- Landfills and treatment plants
- Recycling facilities
- Storage and hazardous waste transport
- Wastewater treatment plants

Proper waste management also extends to rivers, lakes, and oceans to prevent contamination. Pollutants such as soaps, food scraps, and solid waste must be filtered before wastewater is reintroduced into natural or artificial water bodies for reuse. Sustainable waste management infrastructure ensures long-term environmental protection and public health [18]

Types of Hard Infrastructures

Transportation networks, classified as hard infrastructure, are essential for connectivity and economic development. They are broadly categorized into five main types:

Maritime or Water Transportation

Maritime transportation refers to the movement of goods and passengers via sea routes. It includes both pre- and post-shipping activities. The steam engine revolutionized maritime transport, replacing traditional wooden ships with iron and steel vessels. The rapid expansion of global trade has increased the demand for efficient maritime transport. While developed nations primarily use ferries and cruise ships, some regions, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and parts of the Caribbean, still rely on smaller passenger vessels for local travel. (Mary R. Brooks, 2003) [20].

Aviation

Transportation is a critical component of the travel and tourism industry. The growth of international tourism is directly linked to advancements in air travel. Air transport allows travelers to cover long distances in a short time, making it the preferred mode for international travel. This increasing demand necessitates the expansion of airports and the modernization of existing facilities. Infrastructure projects in this sector include new airport construction, runway extensions, air traffic control improvements, and the maintenance of existing ground facilities.

Bridges

Bridges facilitate connectivity and ease the movement of travelers. The three main types of bridges—beam bridges, cable-stayed

bridges, and arch bridges—play a crucial role in transportation networks. Regular maintenance and the construction of new bridges are necessary to support growing travel demands.

Railways

Railway infrastructure consists of tracks, stations, tunnels, and bridges. It is categorized into passenger railways and freight railways. While freight railways dominate in terms of volume, passenger railways are becoming increasingly valuable as tourism grows. Railway infrastructure development involves track extensions, maintenance projects, and the upgrading of facilities to enhance efficiency.

Roadways

Road transportation includes highways, streets, and supporting facilities such as traffic signals, signage, ramps, and tollgates. Infrastructure projects in this sector involve road construction, resurfacing, and maintenance. Many countries implement toll systems to fund road maintenance and expansion. Roadway infrastructure includes roads, bridges, tunnels, and public transit systems.

Transportation networks play a vital role in tourism, as advancements in transport technology contribute to the sector's growth. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in 2017:

- 57% of all overnight tourists traveled to their destinations,
- 54% used road transportation,
- 37% traveled by car,
- 2% used trains, and
- 4% traveled by maritime transport.

Air travel has seen the most significant growth in recent years, becoming the fastest-growing transportation infrastructure. (Hanna Brusiltseva & Olena Akhmedova, 2019) [21].

Tourism Soft Infrastructures

Soft infrastructure refers to tourism-related services that contribute to a safe, attractive, and enjoyable environment. These services are managed by personnel and include essential facilities such as the internet, telecommunications, security, and healthcare. Among these, healthcare—particularly first aid services—is highly valued by tourists and should be prioritized by governments to enhance tourism experiences. Insufficient soft infrastructure, including inadequate healthcare, financial services, and security, negatively impacts tourism demand.

Soft infrastructure also encompasses economic institutions such as banks, schools, universities, and law enforcement agencies. Governments must ensure that workplaces serving tourists are comfortable, secure, and well-managed. Essential soft infrastructure services include:

- **Cleaning and Waste Management:** These services maintain hygiene in commercial and industrial institutions, including drainage and air-conditioning maintenance. Waste management involves collection, transportation, disposal, and monitoring, contributing to public health.
- **Security and Law Enforcement:** These services safeguard businesses, assets, and people. They include physical security measures such as fences, reception services, CCTV surveillance, access control systems, and emergency response mechanisms.

As tourism evolves, the industry increasingly requires well-trained professionals. Tourism organizations seek skilled tour guides to enhance visitor experiences. In the future, a high school diploma may become the minimum educational requirement for entry-level tourism jobs.

Advancements in information technology (IT) have revolutionized tourism services, integrating digital communication methods such as email, mobile applications, and video conferencing. This shift reduces the need for physical office operations, making the tourism industry one of the fastest-growing employment sectors.

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the tourism industry is expected to create at least 98 million new jobs in the coming decades. Currently, tourism accounts for approximately 8.2% of global employment, making it a key driver of economic growth in both developed and developing countries (Cerovic, 2012) [23].

Tourism Facilities Management.

Facilities refer to any designed, constructed, or installed infrastructure intended to serve a specific function, offering convenience or services. Transportation facilities, for instance, exemplify hard facilities, while educational facilities represent soft facilities. Facilities management encompasses the operation, maintenance, improvement, and adaptation of an institution's buildings and infrastructure. The integration of these functions creates an environment that effectively supports an organization's primary objectives. Efficient management of facilities ensures that buildings and operations function optimally, providing a cost-effective and value-driven approach that enhances institutional performance. Properly implemented facilities

management strategies enable organizations to create suitable environments that support their core operations, generating economic benefits and promoting sustainable development. The goal of facilities operations and maintenance management is to deliver quality services while optimizing operational costs to protect institutional assets [24].

Facilities management within the tourism sector focuses on maintaining infrastructure to enhance service delivery and visitor satisfaction. The British Institute of Facilities Management defines facilities management as the coordination of an organization's physical workplace, employees, and operational tasks. This integrated approach encompasses human resources management, health and safety, contract management, engineering and maintenance services, real estate management, financial oversight, change management, and utilities supply management. Similarly, the International Facilities Management Association (2003) describes facilities management as the practice of aligning the physical workspace with the organization's people and processes. The discipline integrates principles from business administration, architecture, behavioral sciences, and engineering into a comprehensive management framework.

In the tourism industry, facilities management primarily addresses maintenance challenges. In developing countries, tourism-related infrastructure projects, including road construction, museum development, and zoological park facilities, are expanding. However, inadequate maintenance has led to the deterioration of existing infrastructure, particularly roads. Despite ongoing governmental maintenance efforts, the poor state of infrastructure remains evident. Continuous investment is required for the rehabilitation of tourism facilities, and raising

awareness about quality management among tourism service providers is essential at both national and international levels. Experts attribute poor-quality outcomes to negligence, lack of awareness, or ineffective improvement initiatives.

Tourism facilities management professionals require specialized training to ensure effective oversight of tourism-related infrastructure. Local communities benefiting from tourism must also be educated on sustainability practices to preserve essential facilities. Governments play a crucial role in maintaining an economic environment that fosters tourism development, supported by private sector investment. Providing staff with opportunities to visit various tourism locations enhances their expertise and understanding of tourism management practices. Integrating effective tourism business management strategies is crucial, as facilities management contributes significantly to the competitive advantage and overall performance of tourism enterprises. Strengthening facilities management practices in the tourism sector is essential for achieving long-term sustainability and industry growth (Zaharah Binti Manaf & Mohammad Najib Bin Mohd. Razali, 2005) [25].

Tourism operations encompass all activities and services conducted within tourism areas, including project management, leisure and recreational facilities, food and beverage services, trading, and accessibility provisions. Operations management in the tourism industry involves a broad range of knowledge and skills, including finance, marketing, corporate social responsibility, consumer engagement, workforce management, and employee motivation and retention. Additionally, tourism operations management entails product and service development, supply chain management, logistics, risk

management, and staff recruitment and training. These elements collectively contribute to the efficient functioning of the tourism and hospitality sector, ensuring sustainable growth and enhanced visitor experiences (Tourism Business Planning; A Workbook, 2008) [26].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is experiencing rapid growth in its tourism industry, driven by its Vision 2030 initiative, which includes thirteen Vision Realization Programs (VRPs). These programs aim to diversify various aspects of life for Saudi nationals, expatriates, and visitors. Travel, tourism, and entertainment are key priority sectors under Vision 2030's economic diversification strategy. The Saudi government seeks to increase domestic household expenditures on leisure and entertainment while transforming the country into a major global travel destination and tourism hub.

In 2022, Saudi Arabia became the most visited country in the Arab world, surpassing other regional destinations. It was followed by the United Arab Emirates, which recorded 14.8 million tourists, and Morocco, which welcomed 11 million visitors. The VRPs, presented by the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA) on April 24, 2017, encompass thirteen strategic programs designed to enhance various economic and social sectors. These programs include:

- Quality of Life Program
- Financial Sector Development Program
- Housing Program
- Fiscal Balance Program
- National Transformation Program
- Public Investment Fund Program
- Privatization Program

- National Companies Promotion Program
- National Industrial Development and Logistics Program
- Strategic Partnerships Program
- Hajj and Umrah Program
- Human Capital Development Program
- Saudi Character Enrichment Program

These VRPs play a crucial role in enhancing tourism infrastructure and facilities, although certain aspects of the industry still require further attention. Vision 2030 is built on three primary themes: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. Each of these pillars contributes to the Kingdom's broader goal of economic transformation, reinforcing Saudi Arabia's position as a leading global tourism destination ([Saudi Vision 2030, 2023](<https://www.my.gov.sa/wps/portal/snp/content/saudivision>)) [27].

Hard Tourism Facilities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Transportation is a key hard tourism facility in Saudi Arabia, encompassing aviation, bridges, railways, and road networks. However, maritime or water transportation is not widely used by Saudi citizens, leading to limited government investment in this sector. As the Kingdom experiences a significant boom in its tourism industry, authorities are expected to develop maritime transportation to accommodate international tourists who seek such travel options.

Aviation is the primary hard tourism facility in Saudi Arabia. The country has four major international airports: King Khaled International Airport in Riyadh, King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah, King Fahd International Airport in Dammam, and Prince Mohammad bin Abdulaziz

International Airport in Madinah. In addition to these, there are 22 domestic airports serving various regions across the Kingdom. To facilitate air travel for nationals, expatriates, and visitors, Saudi Arabian Airlines (SAA) operates a fleet of approximately 140 aircraft, carrying around 15 million passengers annually. Approximately one-third of these flights are international, with two million Muslim pilgrims transported to the Kingdom each year.

Saudi Arabia witnessed a 287% increase in tourism between January and July 2022, making Saudi tourists among the largest in the Middle East. This surge was particularly noticeable following the resumption of the Hajj pilgrimage after the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of Vision 2030's economic development plan, the Kingdom continues to implement strategic tourism projects. One such initiative is the Red Sea Project, which aims to develop 50 luxury hotels across 22 islands, with the first phase expected to welcome visitors by early 2023.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Saudi Arabia have experienced fluctuating international tourist arrivals between 2019 and 2022. Figure 14 illustrates the monthly tourist flow rate during this period, highlighting Saudi Arabia's growing position as a regional tourism hub (Tourism Outlook 2023 [28]).

The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Saudi Arabian international tourists' arrival flow rate per month between 2019 and 2022, figure (2).



Figure 2: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Saudi Arabian international tourists’ arrival flow rate per month between 2019 and 2022.

Saudi Arabia boasts a modern and well-constructed highway and road network, facilitating seamless travel within and outside the Kingdom. The Saudi Public Transport Company (SAPTCO) is the most renowned and affordable provider of public bus services. SAPTCO operates a fleet of over 2,000 buses, transporting more than three million passengers annually across major urban centers such as Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Madinah, and Makkah, as well as other cities and towns.

In addition to buses, various taxi services operate across urban areas, providing transportation links to airports, marketplaces, hospitals, and public facilities. Since there are no fixed fare tariffs, taxi fares are typically negotiated before trips. Furthermore, international car rental companies offer services at airports and hotels, with some allowing bookings to be completed abroad. The Kingdom follows a left-hand driving system for its road infrastructure.

Saudi Arabia also features ten international road routes, utilized by nearly 500,000 travelers annually. During the Hajj pilgrimage, SAPTCO significantly expands its services, deploying over 15,000 additional buses to accommodate the transportation needs of

millions of pilgrims traveling to and from Makkah. The Kingdom's extensive 100,000-mile-long road network not only facilitates travel but also plays a vital role in economic trade.

Bridges

Bridges in Saudi Arabia exemplify state-of-the-art road construction techniques, particularly through engineered tunnels and highways. One notable infrastructure is the Al-Hada Mountain Road, which reduces the travel distance between Taif and Makkah by approximately 30 miles. This road features the world's first solar photovoltaic-powered highway tunnel, a technology also used in the mountainous Abha region of the Asir Province.

Among the Kingdom’s most iconic bridges is the King Fahd Causeway, which connects Saudi Arabia to Bahrain. Spanning 15.5 miles, it is the second-longest causeway in the world. The causeway consists of five bridges, supported by 536 concrete pylons, and features seven embankments in the shallow waters of the Arabian Gulf. One of these embankments serves as an artificial island, housing customs and immigration offices, a mosque, restaurants, and other facilities. Since its completion in 1986, the King Fahd Causeway has significantly enhanced trade and strengthened cultural and social ties between Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and other Gulf nations.

Another major causeway is the planned Saudi-Egypt Causeway, which spans more than nine miles over the Red Sea, linking Saudi Arabia’s coastline with Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula. This project aims to strengthen connections between the eastern Asian and western African parts of the Arab world.



Railway System

Saudi Arabia's railway system is managed by the Saudi Railway Organization (SRO). During the 1990s, SRO transported approximately 500,000 passengers and 2 million tons of goods annually.

The first railway line, connecting Dammam (Arabian Gulf port) to Riyadh (the capital city), spans 449 miles and includes two stop stations: Hofuf and Abqaiq. The second railway line, the Dammam-Riyadh route, extends 556 miles, passing through Haradh, which lies at the edge of the Empty Quarter desert.

Future expansion plans include extending the railway system to connect Jubail Industrial City with Makkah, Jeddah, and Madinah. Another proposed railway line aims to link mining areas in northern Saudi Arabia to Riyadh, thereby improving industrial and logistical connectivity. The development of these new railway projects is expected to be spearheaded by private sector investments as part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative.

Soft Tourism Facilities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

1. Communications

Saudi Arabia boasts an advanced telecommunications network covering nearly all urban areas, ensuring seamless connectivity for tourists. High-speed internet, long-distance calling, fax services, mobile networks, telex, and telegraph facilities are readily available. The Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC), one of the world's largest telecom operators, provides extensive coverage, alongside Mobily, a key provider of mobile phone services.

2. Electricity

Tourists in Saudi Arabia benefit from a well-developed electrical infrastructure. The Kingdom operates a unified directory inquiry service accessible by dialing 905 for electricity-related assistance. Standard electrical outlets provide both 110V and 220V power, allowing tourists to use their electronic devices, such as electric shavers and hair straighteners. To prevent voltage fluctuations from damaging appliances, tourists can access alternating current (AC) adapters, voltage converters, and regulators.

3. Healthcare

Saudi Arabia offers an extensive healthcare system comprising both public and private hospitals and health centers staffed by highly experienced physicians and specialists. These facilities provide high-quality curative, preventive, and rehabilitative healthcare services, ensuring tourists have access to medical care when needed. Essential medicines and pharmaceuticals are widely available. Religious tourists visiting for Hajj or Umrah are required to receive vaccinations as mandated by the Ministry of Health, whereas general tourists are not subject to these requirements. The Kingdom guarantees medical coverage for all visitors, enhancing the overall tourism experience.

4. Tourism Law and Regulations

Saudi Arabia's tourism sector is regulated by a robust legal framework that supports its growth and development. On November 2, 2014, Royal Decree No. M2 was issued to facilitate and regulate the expanding travel and tourism industry. The Kingdom is a unique tourist destination due to its rich historical and cultural heritage, including over 11,000 registered archaeological sites. These

sites affirm the presence of ancient civilizations dating back to the Stone Age and pre-Islamic periods.

The country's diverse natural landscapes, rare wildlife, vibrant cities, and a variety of sporting activities cater to different types of tourism, including religious, business, medical, and recreational tourism. Visitors can experience the renowned Saudi hospitality, which extends across all regions of the Kingdom.

The Tourism Law consists of 19 articles and is enforced by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA). The SCTA oversees all tourism-related services and professions, such as travel agencies, recreational services, tour operators, guides, and accommodation providers. Any individual or business wishing to operate in the tourism sector must obtain a valid license from the SCTA, ensuring compliance with the provisions of the law.

With the introduction of the e-visa system, Saudi Arabia has opened its borders to international travelers, allowing them to explore its vast historical, cultural, and natural attractions. This initiative has significantly boosted the country's travel and tourism industry, making it a key player in global tourism.

CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia has experienced significant growth in tourism, particularly in religious tourism, with a notable increase in the monthly arrival flow rate between 2019 and 2022. By July 2022, the arrival rate had surged by 287%, positioning the Kingdom as a leading destination in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. Saudi Arabia has successfully implemented various tourism

infrastructure projects—both hard and soft—as part of its Vision 2030 economic development plan, aiming to further enhance the sector.

Recommendations

1. **Enhancing Religious Tourism:** The ongoing expansion of the Grand Mosque should be leveraged beyond Hajj and Umrah by hosting additional religious and historical events throughout the year.
2. **Cost Reduction for Local and GCC Visitors:** Offering discounted fees for residents and GCC visitors could boost domestic tourism and encourage frequent travel within the region.
3. **Infrastructure Development:** Accelerating the completion of transportation projects, such as high-speed train networks and improved air connectivity, will facilitate easier movement for pilgrims and general tourists.
4. **Investment in Business and Leisure Tourism:** Encouraging foreign direct investment (FDI) in the tourism sector and offering incentives for international businesses to set up in Saudi Arabia will enhance the country's attractiveness for corporate travelers.
5. **Diversification into Sports and Medical Tourism:** While religious and business tourism dominate, the development of sports and medical tourism should be prioritized to expand the sector's contribution to the national economy.
6. **UNESCO Heritage Expansion:** Doubling the number of Saudi archaeological sites registered with

UNESCO will enhance cultural tourism and global recognition.

7. Sustainable Growth: The government should continue to promote sustainable tourism by balancing large-scale infrastructure development with environmental preservation and responsible tourism practices.

Through these efforts, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 aims to position the country as a leading global tourism destination. The ambitious target of reaching 30 million Umrah pilgrims and attracting 100 million domestic and international visitors by 2030 remains achievable with continued investments, policy reforms, and strategic infrastructure development.

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