

Saudia Arabia

The Country

Area: 2.250,000km sq.

Capital : Riyadh

Currency: Saudi Riyal

The Home of Islam is as diverse as it is surprising. It is a country with deep roots in tradition yet one that is racing headlong into the future. It is a land of astonishing natural beauty ranging from the sculpted sand dunes of the Empty Quarter to the waters of the Red Sea which offer some of the best diving in the world. Saudi is the world's largest oil producer with annual net export revenues of around \$70billion. Projections based on known reserves suggest that oil will continue to flow for at least the next 70 years.

Population

Currently around 22 million

More than 75% of Saudi's population is concentrated in urban areas, with one-third of the population living in the urban conglomerations centred on Riyadh, Jeddah and Mecca. Around 1.8 million Bedu still claim to live a nomadic lifestyle around the empty quarter. The annual rate of growth is currently around 3%. Around two thirds of the population is Saudi, the remainder being ex-pat workers either from the West (Europeans, North Americans and Australasians (mostly working in professional jobs) or from India and Pakistan working in service industries.

Weather / Climate

From mid-April until October average daily temperatures regularly top 40C with high humidity in the coastal regions year round, it is cooler in the Asif Mountains and Taif. In winter December and January temperatures will drop into the teens during the day and even hit zero in some places overnight. Rainfall is sporadic and occurs mainly in the winter months.

Relocation to Saudi Arabia

Most western ex-pats live on compounds where the local laws do not extend and women can walk around freely.

Virtually all expatriates working in Saudi Arabia rent their property, and many are on employment contracts that include free or heavily subsidized housing, furniture and utilities.

The majority of expatriates live in large compounds, with resort-type facilities. The Mutawwa (religious police) do not enter such areas so it is possible to live a much more relaxed lifestyle than would be possible outside the compound. The compounds vary greatly in size and facilities, from small developments of around six houses and a swimming pool,

to vast complexes including hundreds of houses and apartments, with pools, sports and leisure facilities and convenience stores.

Although most compound accommodation comes 'fully furnished' the definition of this varies, from just basic furniture to full provision of household items such as bedding, crockery and cutlery.

There is a wide range of good quality accommodation available for rent at relatively low cost outside the expatriate compounds, with annual charges starting at around SR15,000 for an unfurnished apartment, inclusive of utility bills. However, given the restrictive laws and customs in the country, and the difficulty of getting to know Saudi nationals socially, this option is likely to be very restrictive and isolating, particularly for families. If you do decide to rent outside the compounds, be sure to get the Arabic rental contract translated.

Riyadh

The political capital at the heart of the country, where the country's religious laws are most strictly observed. A huge amount of development is currently being undertaken at present including the Prince Abdullah Economic City, this is a vibrant city with high tech buildings of glass and steel coexisting together with the mud-brick remnants of the old town.

Jeddah

Situated on the Red Sea Coast, Jeddah is a wonderful old city with a decidedly cosmopolitan atmosphere. It is much more relaxed than Riyadh with few intrusions from the religious police.

Eastern Province

Here is the centre of Saudi Arabia's colossal oil industry. The province has the longest history of Westerners living and working in Saudi and the sprawling towns of Dammam, Al Khobar and Dharan are prosperous and relatively liberal.

Getting Around/Communications

Saudi Arabia has a good telephone service, run by the Saudi Telecom Company (STC). There are three categories of call charges: local, Kingdom and international. International Direct Dialing is available to most other countries. Bills are issued quarterly. Emergency numbers are 999 for the police, 998 for the fire service, 997 for an ambulance and 993 to report a traffic accident.

There are two mobile phone network providers including STC. A number of different price packages are on offer, with local and national calls costing around SR0.50 per minute. International calls can also be made using these networks.

The internal postal service is not always very reliable, but the air mail service overseas is usually fast and efficient, with letters reaching the UK or US in a matter of days. A post office box address is required for incoming mail. Many courier services operate in the country, including TNT, DHL and FEDEX. Customs duties may be imposed on items received from overseas.

Saudi Arabia has four national television channels, including an English language channel which broadcasts films and other programs from Europe and America. There is also a sports channel and an all-news channel. Satellite TV is also widely available with many entertainment, sports and news stations. There are a number of English-language radio stations, and the overseas broadcasting services of other countries can be picked up on short and medium wave radios.

The main daily English-language newspapers are the Arab News and the Saudi Gazette, both of which offer local and foreign news coverage. A wide range of American and European newspapers, magazines and books can also be obtained.

Residence Visa

All entrants to the Kingdom must have a passport with at least 6 months validity remaining. All non GCC entrants must obtain either a business or tourist visa. This can be obtained from the Saudi Embassy in the home country for around 200 Saudi riyals.

If a woman is arriving alone then she must be met by her sponsor or husband. She must have confirmed accommodation and is not permitted to drive. All visitors must have a return ticket.

Residence permits

The visas required to live and work in the Kingdom are organized by your prospective employer

Cultural Information

Modern Saudi Arabia is a paradox: one of the most insular societies on earth, yet only around two thirds of the population is Saudi.

Islam is more than the state religion , its an all encompassing way of life in Saudi. Officially all Saudis are muslim, the practice of other religions is forbidden.

Expat women in Saudi Arabia face a much different experience than their male counterparts. For some, wearing an abaya and headscarf, not being allowed to drive and abiding by the rules that govern interaction among the sexes are just a formality. For others, they turn out to be a source of great frustration, even deal breakers. Any woman considering a move to Saudi Arabia, should really do her research, talk with other women in the cities where she may be living, and, if married, discuss the positives and negatives at length with her husband (Note: unmarried couples are not allowed to live together in Saudi Arabia).

Some points to note:

North American and Western women do NOT have to cover their faces, and won't lose their jobs or be sent to prison or get deported for that. As with every woman living in Saudi, they have to wear a loose black "over - whole" called "Abaya" over their regular clothes when they leave the housing compound.

Nurses CAN leave the compound on their own unescorted to go shopping, making visits or socialize; there are NO restrictions on their movement around town.

As for women walking behind men, this is really a Saudi tradition that does NOT apply to Western women!

Working and living in Saudi Arabia is an adventure, a challenge, a life experience and a new way of living. You need to go with an open mind, be willing to adapt, ready to accept changes and contribute professionally to those changes. Saudi is not the place to run away from your problems. It's hard enough to try to adapt to a new culture, a new job, new friends, a new hospital system and a new life.

Because of the low cost of living and small monthly expenses not only you will be able to save money, you will have golden opportunities to travel around the world and visit new places you did not know existed. Socially, your agenda could get busy, like going on a desert walk or enrolling in tennis lessons, scuba diving, volleyball tournaments, barbecuing and many other events.

Another interesting thing to do is shopping! Especially for gold, silver and other jewellery. Prices are reasonable and affordable. Designs are more than your imagination could take and could be a real bargain.

The weekend is Thursday and Friday. Business firms and banks are open on Thursday morning. Almost all banks offer 24-hour ATM card service. Most shops and companies begin their workday at 9:00 and close around 1:00PM or 2:00PM. They then re-open at 4:00PM or 5:00PM and the shops stay open until 10:00PM or 11:00PM. All places of business will close five times a day for prayer. The prayer times change daily and are published in the local newspaper. During Ramadan, the shops are closed (grocery stores are open) during the day, open at 9:00 or 10:00PM and close at 1:00 or 2:00AM.

The stores carry a wide variety of American / European foods and household items. Be advised that US goods are more expensive than in the States. Try eating food produced from the local economy, it's good and very reasonable.

SOUQ (or souk) is the Arabic word for market. Here you will find some items typical of the region, e.g., handicraft and gold. Also there are items imported from India, Pakistan, the Far East and Europe. Many items, especially gold, are less expensive. The souk is where you will find fabrics, clothing, shoes, spices and household items.

Be sure to ask for a discount in all small retail shops. The only shops with fixed prices are groceries stores, the European / American stores (such as British Home Stores) and some shops in the large malls. However, no one is offended if you ask for a discount and sometimes you will be surprised. The traditional souks still expect the customer to haggle over the price. Don't be inhibited. Take your time, keep cool, and enjoy tea if it's offered. Bargaining is a social event.

Returns and exchanges are not allowed in many stores. Few stores have dressing rooms for women to try on clothes. If you ask before you buy it, you may get permission to return it if it does not fit. Please bear in mind that clothing sizes do vary between European and US standard sizes.

Education and Schools

Saudi Arabia has very well-developed education provision at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, and free education, books and health services are available to all Saudi nationals.

The children of expatriates are not eligible to enter state schools, but there a number of private international schools based on the British or American systems. Depending on the school, education is provided up to age 14, 16 or 18.

International school fees are quite high in Saudi Arabia, around SR 25,000 annually for each child. Many employers include free or subsidized education for the children of their employees.

Currency & Cost of Living

At time of writing the pound is worth around 7 Saudi Riyals and the US dollar is currently worth 3.7 Riyals. The currency is pegged to the US dollar.

The cost of living is much lower than elsewhere in Europe and other GCC countries like Dubai. Rents and food costs have remained static and cars and fuel are obviously cheaper due to the proximity of the huge oil reserves.

Useful Links

www.saudinf.com

www.saudi-american-forum.org

www.expatexchange.com