

The Telegraph

Will Saudi Arabia ever realise its beach holiday dream?

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Saudi Arabia wants to triple its tourism receipts by 2030 Credit: Getty

If you have been flicking the channels in the recent weeks of lockdown, you may have noticed it. The advert that seeks to draw viewers to a Middle Eastern destination. There are hints of Jordan to its desert vistas – and enticing footage where the sea washes on to a sandy shore. Then comes the last line – in gentle voice-over. “Welcome to Arabia,” it says.

This, of course, is Saudi Arabia – a place that, even by the surreal standards of 2020 and 2021, is an unusual candidate to be soft-selling itself as a touchy-feely holiday option. In some ways, it needs no introduction – but in others, it certainly does.

This is the country for which the United Nations “[Universal Human Rights Index](#)” currently lists 144 separate concerns – including 18 regarding discrimination against women. A country that the libertarian Cato Institute ranks as 151st on the planet for personal and economic freedoms. A country that accrued dreadful headlines in October 2018 when the dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in its consulate in Istanbul; a silencing act where some of the members of the assassination team had links to the de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman.

Visible in his office in Riyadh via a Zoom window, Ahmed Al-Khateeb has work to do. A former banker, he is now the first ever Saudi minister of tourism. And his task is enormous. Aside from what might politely be described as “reputation management”, he is responsible for the tourism element of “Vision 2030” – the grand scheme to diversify the Saudi economy, and wean it off its dependence on oil, by the end of the decade.

“Tourism contributes about 10 per cent of global GDP,” he says. “But in Saudi Arabia, we are still at around three per cent. So, we have a long way to go.” He says these goals can be achieved because Saudi Arabia is an untapped travel destination, and people are curious.

The country has rock-hewn wonders to rival Petra Credit: Getty

“Before September 2019 [when tourist visas were introduced], we were a closed country,” he continues. “Today, citizens of 39 countries can apply to visit in five minutes. At the moment, we are the 22nd most visited country globally. We intend to be in the top five by 2030, and we have plans to get there.”

On this, he has a point. Saudi Arabia is colossal – the planet’s 12th biggest country, at 830,000 square miles. It has 1,100 miles of Red Sea coastline, much of it undeveloped. It is home to five Unesco World Heritage Sites – including Mada’in Salih, a Nabataean rock site of similar style to

Petra. It has surprising geographic diversity, rearing up from desert dunes to misty mountains, including the Asir and Faifa ranges in the south of the country.

“Nobody believes that Saudi Arabia has green mountains,” Al-Khateeb smiles. “I have been to the south several times. I love this region – its food, its culture. We want to promote it.”

Vision 2030 will involve the creation of two new coastal “cities” – Amaala and Neom – to rival the resorts of Jordan and Egypt on the Red Sea. Another project, Qiddiya – which Al-Khateeb calls “the biggest entertainment city ever” – will emerge on the edge of Riyadh.

Most intriguing, perhaps, is the Diriyah Gate Development. Set on the west side of the capital, Diriyah (and the mud-brick buildings of its Al-Turaif district) is the most prominent of the Unesco sites. It was the original home of the royal family (and the capital from 1744 to 1818). Al-Khateeb understands its significance.

“We will build hotels around the historical site, but will maintain the look and the feel of the old city. We won’t mix historic with modern.”

Yet the issue remains – can any of this transcend Saudi Arabia’s appalling record as an abuser of its own people? When I ask if it is possible to overcome matters like the killing of Khashoggi, he stonewalls the question. “We don’t link tourism with politics,” he counters. “Tourism is, tourism is... we have treasures in Saudi Arabia...” And he returns to his list of national attractions.

When I inquire about its human-rights policies – Amnesty International lists torture as punishment, torture in police custody and the criminalisation of protest as 10 of the key violations – his response is pure denial. “Saudi Arabia takes human rights very seriously,” he answers, then changes the subject to money. “In 2019, foreign direct investment in Saudi Arabia doubled. People are happy to come and invest.”

Is Saudi Arabia really ready, I ask, for beach tourism – something that tends to involve swimwear and bare skin? Will this be possible in a country of strict dress codes and traditions? He insists it will. “We know what travellers are seeking,” he replies. “We will have private and public beaches. On the public beaches, we will do our best to respect the tastes of visitors. For private beaches, we will leave it to the resorts as to what they offer.”

This suggests a certain relaxation of rigidity – but does he expect, I ask, western women to travel to a country where women are so stifled, in the law and the home? “We have started a lot of reforms,” he says. “We have begun a journey. Women are now driving.” This is correct – Saudi women were granted permission to drive in June 2018, but just over one month ago, Loujain al-Hathloul – an activist who had campaigned for this very basic right – was sentenced to five years in jail. She has been imprisoned since 2018.

A devil’s advocate might argue that tourists regularly visit destinations of unpleasant politics. Russia is openly beating opponents of the Putin regime in the street; China has Uyghur Muslims in internment camps – but St Petersburg and Beijing will feature in post-pandemic travel itineraries. Can Saudi Arabia move beyond its desperate image? “Around 1.6 billion people travelled during 2019,” Al-Khateeb says. “They travelled to enjoy themselves, to experience a culture – to discover. Saudi Arabia has a lot to offer.”