

Saudi Arabia marks the five-year anniversary of its tourism e-visa this month. As the country works steadily towards its Vision 2030 plan, its era as one of the world's greatest new travel destinations has already begun

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

A New Frontier

In Madain Saleh, monuments carved with intricate designs whisper of a bygone civilisation. Rock formations rise above the desert in curious shapes that resemble elephants, faces, and elegant dancers. They're embedded with pieces of quartz that sparkle in the daylight, while at night, the landscape quietly settles under a velvet blanket of stars. These enchanting scenes are reminiscent of an otherworldly planet in a science-fiction film – and for anyone lucky enough to visit Saudi Arabia's AIUla region and see this sight for themselves, it is wonderfully real.

The ancient desert oasis of AIUla has undergone a major rebirth in recent years. In 2021, after a four-year

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The Anantara Trojena resort in Neom's mountain destination – the Gulf's first outdoor ski resort; Nujuma, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve; Diving at The Red Sea

closure for restoration and revamping, the heritage site was reopened as a year-round tourism attraction.

That same year, the first-ever property by Our Habitas opened there, offering a sustainable luxury escape with access to the UNESCO Heritage Site's living museum. The resort's multiple awards made global headlines, as did another of AIUla's major attractions: Maraya, the largest mirror-covered building in the world. The world's curiosity was piqued as news emerged of concerts being held in this unbelievably Instagram-worthy mirage-like building in the desert, from world-renowned artists such as Alicia Keys, James Blunt, Bruno Mars, Thievery Corporation, Amr Diab, and Andrea Bocelli.

Our Habitas' philosophy – to be a place “where like-minded souls can connect and grow, and dance barefoot in the sand” (reminiscent of Burning Man, where its founders met) – was echoed by the groundbreaking music, wellness, and art festivals that started taking place at AIUla, kicking off with 2018's Winter at Tantora.

Four short years later, AIUla is renowned for its jam-packed events calendar. From 9 February to 2 March 2024, the AIUla Arts Festival returned for its third edition. Azimuth, first held in 2020, will host its fourth edition from 19 to 21 September 2024, with three days of soul-stirring EDM concerts, art, and culture. And in October, the AIUla Wellness Festival – a two- to three-week celebration

of all things holistic, will return for a fourth time, with sound baths; art therapy; yoga, meditation, and fitness sessions; and more. It's the largest festival of its kind in the Middle East, offering travellers from all over the world a journey of physical, spiritual, and sensory transformation.

Rami Al-Moallim, vice president of destination management and marketing at the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU), says the festival is an ode to the area's ancient origins. “AIUla was known as a stopover point for caravan routes between the south and north. People went there to refuel, for food and water, and rest. So it's always been a place that had a sense of revitalisation, giving people life, and health. These are



project leading the way for the kingdom's Vision 2030 plan. In 2019, Saudi Arabia started issuing tourist visas to people from 49 countries, making it possible for travellers from all over the world to visit the kingdom through an easy and efficient online application process.

On 27 September 2024, Saudi Arabia will celebrate the five-year anniversary of the visa's launch – and just over five years away from 2030, the kingdom has already surpassed its target for international tourist arrivals, by a long shot. The country had welcomed more than 100 million tourists in 2023, earning recognition from UN Tourism and the World Travel & Tourism Council for its new position as an emerging global tourism powerhouse.

As a result, Saudi Arabia has upped the ante by aiming to receive 150 million tourists by 2030 – a goal we have no doubt they will reach, and possibly best again. Not only is there a mind-boggling range of new tourism infrastructure being created (with plenty more underway), supported by an investment of more than US\$800 billion, the ever-evolving and strategic approach of Saudi Tourism will likely boost travel to the region as a whole.

Talks for a unified visa for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have been underway, and Saudi Arabia is also scheduled to open the world's largest airport by 2030. Located in the capital, Riyadh, King Salman International →



156%

The increase in international arrivals to Saudi Arabia in 2023, compared to those in 2019



Airport has not yet been designated an IATA code, but once fully up and running, it's expected to be able to receive 120 million passengers a year.

It's a significant jump from the 10 million passengers a year that currently travel through Dammam's King Fahd International Airport – which is also currently the largest airport in the world in terms of overall size. The country's airlines, too, are readying themselves for global impact that will connect more of the world with the region, and more of the region with the world.

Riyadh Air – a new airline owned by the Public Investment Fund (PIF) has signed a series of strategic agreements with major global carriers like Air China, Singapore Airlines, Delta Air Lines, and Turkish Airlines. Meanwhile, flynas has been aggressively expanding its fleet, while also pursuing tie-ups with key operators such as Emirates, Careem, and cutting-edge eVTOL operators. The success of the tourism industry in neighbouring countries such as the UAE isn't just something Saudi Arabia can tap into for customers, but also for partnerships that could enhance the overall appeal of the GCC and wider Middle East.

The CEO of the Saudi Tourism Authority, Fahd Hamidaddin, clearly believes in the philosophy that a rising tide lifts all boats. In a media roundtable at this year's Arabian Travel Market, he shared that appealing to domestic travellers is just as important as the efforts to draw in global visitors.



TOP LEFT: Hot air balloons over Hegra, AlUla

TOP RIGHT: Slope Residences - Trojena NEOM

ABOVE: The St Regis Red Sea Resort



11.5%

The percentage that tourism contributes to Saudi Arabia's entire economy

"Historically, Saudis themselves didn't travel around Saudi before the pandemic. When that hit our borders, locking people in, Saudis were forced to [take a look at travel closer to home]. After the borders opened, we kept seeing year-in-year-out growth of domestic travel," Hamidaddin said, also pointing out that Saudis are among the highest spenders in the world.

Indeed, a report released this year by Almosafer – one of the region's leading travel brands – showed that Saudi travellers have a strong appetite for the country's increasingly diverse range of tourism offerings, with more than 40 per cent of total bookings coming from the domestic sector. Deloitte's Insight Report 2024, created in partnership with *Business Traveller Middle East*, echoed this observation, noting also that the government's tireless efforts to activate giga-projects that expand

the variety of activities on offer are playing a significant role.

One such project is The Red Sea. It was created to not only help diversify the country's economy, but also to protect the 1,800km coastline replete with islands and pristine waters full of thriving marine life. The project will boast 50 resorts, 8,000 hotel rooms, and 1,000 residential properties by the time it is fully complete in 2030.

The first of these opened in November 2023, when the Six Senses Southern Dunes welcomed its first guests. The St. Regis Red Sea followed, opening in January 2024. In May 2024, Nujuma, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve – one of only seven Ritz-Carlton reserves in the world – became the third. All three have set new standards in luxury tourism, sustainability, and more – and with prices upwards of US\$2,640 per night, Nujuma is also the most expensive hotel in the Middle East.

One particularly notable project, currently on-track for completion in 2026, is Trojena. Located in the mountains of Neom – a mega-city in the Tabuk region – Trojena will be the first outdoor ski resort in the Middle East. The mountain range boasts some of the highest peaks in Saudi Arabia, rising between 1,500m to around 2,600m above sea level.

With a naturally moderate climate that makes it a refreshing destination year-round, the weather at Trojena reaches sub-zero temperatures in the winter, making it an ideal location for alpine and adventure sports.

This natural climate is the reason Trojena is able to create a ski resort. "If it weren't for the fact that we have [these temperatures] here, we wouldn't be able to produce snow," says Clark Williams, Neom's director of marketing and communications. Although the area does get some natural snow too, the amount of it is minimal, so Trojena has its own team of snowmaking technicians. Their snowmaking system isn't just one of the most advanced in the world, it's also sustainability-minded, using 100 per cent renewable energy.

Once open, Trojena will boast at least 15 hotels, with more than 3,620 rooms and serviced apartments. There will be 42,000 sqm of retail and dining outlet space, a 3,000-seat mountainside amphitheatre, 36km of ski slopes (for at least three months of winter snow skiing), and more than 100 indoor and outdoor activities throughout the rest of the year.

Among the properties set to open, there is one from Anantara Hotels and Resorts, two from Marriott International – including Saudi Arabia's first W Hotel, and a JW Marriott – one from Raffles Hotels & Resorts, one from GHM Hotels' The Chedi brand, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, and one from Ennismore's 25hours brand. Trojena will also host a series of exciting events, with the 2029 Asian Winter Games already confirmed.

Trojena's facilities will no doubt be impressive, but the nature is still at the heart of it all. "The hero is the environment; it's an unspoiled and untouched environment. What we've done is put unbelievable new architectural assets, that had never been done before, into that environment," says Williams.

"Once people are able to visit, they can come to a place that no one's ever really been to before," adds Williams. "It's uncharted."

Like the rest of his team at Neom, Williams is honoured to be able to raise the bar, explaining that the company is all about redefining livability. "The first reaction that I consistently still get today, [when people see images of Trojena for the first time], is that it looks like something out of a sci-fi movie. But here, it comes to life. It might sound cliché, but we are genuinely excited about making intense visions and amazing dreams possible," he says.

Williams believes that Trojena will be popular with international tourists as well as people looking to own a second home in an exceptional environment. And as someone who has been living there himself while the project comes together, Williams can attest to how unique it really is. "I live up there now, at 1,900m. Some

nights, I have to pinch myself because in my cabin, I can sit outside and literally walk 300m, to get to a cliff face that allows me to see 40km into the distance, to the Gulf of Aqaba," he says. Williams' hikes in the area are almost meditative, he says, with even the fresh scent of Trojena's plants creating a sensory escape to another world.

This genuine excitement for what is to come is a sentiment shared across all of Saudi's tourism developments. It's the feeling of being part of something revolutionary – passion-led work that isn't only going to have a major impact on the tourism industry, but may even reshape it entirely.

Displaying a common trait among outstanding leaders, the people leading the kingdom's tourism industry are eager to keep learning and growing, with diverse and flexible teams that share the same bottom line: to help diversify the country's economy by doing incredible things. "I think all of us are relatively new to this industry," Hamidaddin humbly said of himself and his team. "We can never claim we're experts. We're learning every day, and we're acting as sponges to learn from everybody," he added.

Hamidaddin explained that they see their jobs as custodians of the country's authenticity; to preserve as well as share its land, its people, and its culture and history, with the world. At the same time, they're creating thousands of jobs, with more roles for the youth, for women, and for the low-skilled – with plenty of chances for everyone to grow.

In a time where "many sectors are losing jobs to machinery and automation", as Hamidaddin puts it, it's a mission they take seriously. "For us, tourism is way more than just another economic sector that has a loud voice and brings the world's attention to Saudi," he says. "It will solve our biggest threat; it will create hope." ■

TOP: Maraya, a multi-purpose events venue at AlUla, has now teamed up with LiveNation Arabia

BELOW: The historical village of Rijal Almaa in Aseer province

BOTTOM: A beach villa at Nujuma, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve

