

SAUDI ARABIA'S AMBITIOUS RELIGIOUS TOURISM PLANS



The religious tourism industry in Saudi Arabia is experiencing a positive trend, which began last year after two difficult years in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The industry suffered greatly during this period due to restrictions and preventative measures, resulting in a decline in pilgrims. However, things are looking up now.

This year's Hajj season has some significant changes compared to previous years. The main aim is to return to pre-pandemic levels regarding pilgrims number. The Kingdom has taken various measures to make it easier for pilgrims to be accommodated. Additionally, there are ambitious development programs and plans in place that aim to achieve record numbers by 2030.

In this context, the Ministry of Hajj in Saudi Arabia estimates that it will receive more than two million pilgrims during the current season, according to Minister Tawfiq Al-Rabiah, earlier, stressing the goal of returning the numbers to pre-corona pandemic levels and without any age limit.

The number of pilgrims last year reached 899 353 pilgrims (779 919 pilgrims from outside the Kingdom), in addition to about six million Umrah pilgrims. The number of pilgrims from within the Kingdom in 2021 was only 60,000. This contrasts with 2020, when the pandemic peaked, and only 10,000 pilgrims from inside the Kingdom could come.

With optimism that the numbers of pilgrims will return to their previous state before the Corona pandemic, and at a time when development processes are continuing in the religious tourism sector in particular, the Kingdom aims to reach six million pilgrims present in Makkah Al-Mukarramah in the year 2030, in addition to 30 million Umrah pilgrims during the year.

Accordingly, estimates - reported by local Saudi reports - indicate that the value of potential revenues from Hajj by 2030, and when implementing vision projects and programs, may reach 50 billion riyals (about US\$ 13.3 billion). At the same time, the sector is also the second in terms of job creation. It provides more than 900 thousand jobs.

By 2030, the Kingdom plans to attract 100 million tourists, including 55 million foreign visitors and 45 million domestic travelers. Additionally, the tourism sector aims to create one million jobs in the same timeframe.

According to Fahad Hamidaddin, CEO and board member of the Saudi Tourism Authority, the number of tourists visiting the Kingdom has significantly increased. In June of last year, during the peak of summer, inbound tourism rose by 121% compared to 2019, before the pandemic. The Kingdom received 93 million tourist visits in 2022 and nearly 8 million in the first quarter of 2023.

Religious tourism is a major tributary in the tourism sector in the Kingdom. The number of Umrah visits during the first three months of this year reached 4 million and 100 thousand visitors, according to Hamidaddin.

As Saudi Tourism Minister Ahmed Al-Khatib announced last month, the Kingdom has allocated more than 600 million riyals (about US\$ 160 million) to promote its tourist destinations.

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