Tourism in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Although tourism, in general, has been a widely researched area for many years, unfortunately, insufficient number of studies has been conducted on this subject in the context of Saudi Arabia. The main endeavor of this study is to find the awareness about tourism in Saudi Arabia, amongst both Saudi and non-Saudi nationals in the capital city Riyadh. The survey among 130 nationals was conducted through personally administered questionnaire. Out of which, 62% of the participants were Saudi’s and 38% were non-Saudi’s. From our observation, we concluded that foreigners are more aware about local tourist places than Saudi Nationals.

Key words: Awareness, IUOTO, Tourism, WTTC, WTO.
1. Introduction

Tourism is generally referred to the travel undertaken for recreational, leisure, or business purposes, usually of a limited duration. Tourism is commonly associated with trans-national travel, but may also refer to travel to another location within the same country. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines tourists as people "traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes".

Tourism has recently become a popular global leisure activity. Tourism can be domestic or international, and international tourism has both incoming and outgoing implications on a country's balance of payments. Today, tourism is major source of income for many countries, and affects the economy of both the source and host countries, in some cases it is of vital importance. Tourism brings in large amounts of income into a local economy in the form of payment for goods and services needed by tourists, accounting for 30% of the world's trade of services, and 6% of overall exports of goods and services. It also creates opportunities for employment in the service sector of the economy associated with tourism.

The service industries which benefit from tourism include transportation services, such as airlines, cruise ships, and taxicabs; hospitality services, such as accommodations, including hotels and resorts; and entertainment venues, such as amusement parks, casinos, shopping malls, music venues, and theatres. This is in addition to goods bought by tourists, including souvenirs, clothing, and other supplies.

Additionally, it has been observed over a period that there are plenty of people who aspire to work in such an industry, as it provides them the honor of revealing what, where, and how the glorious kingdom of Saudi Arabia has contributed to the rich history of the gulf, and the world as a whole. Tourism has become the world's largest industry with consistent annual increase in growth. Tourist's worldwide travel grew to an average rate of 4.3% per annum between 1990 and 2000. However, this extraordinary industry has led the World Tourism Organization (WTO) to predict that by the end of 2020 the number of tourists arriving to different destinations would increase by 200%.

The history of Saudi Arabia, as a state, began with its foundation in 1933 by Abdul aziz Al Saud, although the history of what was to become Saudi Arabia goes back to the beginnings of human habitation in Arabia up to 20,000 years ago. The government of Saudi Arabia has an Islamic monarchy, and Islam is only religion practiced by locals in the country. Saudi Arabia is also referred as "The land of two holy mosques" which refers to holy mosques in Mecca and in Al -Medina.
The kingdom of Saudi Arabia is popular for its enormous geographical area and extent. It is the largest country in the Middle East. Seven countries and three seas surround Saudi Arab, with Jordan and Iraq surrounding it on the north and in the northeast Kuwait, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates on the east, Oman on the southeast, and Yemen on the south. The king Fahad Causeway also links it to Bahrain. Additionally, the Persian Gulf lies in the northeast, and the Red Sea to its west.

Saudi Arabia is a country that has a rich history and an outstanding diversification of resources. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia has the most natural resource amongst all countries and hosts best scenic locales, acknowledged by those who are frequent travellers. Such places include the coastal area of the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf, the desert that spreads throughout, and the beautiful mountains found in both the northern and southern areas. There are many cultural and historical places carrying nostalgic remarkable stories from the past, such as Madain Saleh in the Hijaz, the original Najd settlement in Diriyah, apart from many other breathtaking historic sites. Furthermore, it is suggested that the amazing sites of Saudi Arabia should be seen or acknowledged for the purpose of pleasure apart from enriching the feeling of nationalism and to elevate the pride that Saudis treasure regarding the history and true heritage of their country. However, since Saudi Arabia is a land that has many historical, cultural, and amusing sites to offer, enhancing its tourism industry and taking full advantages of the lands spectacular sites would be a great opportunity to increase the number of tourists.

As indicated by "Saudi Tourism Information and Research Center", the statistic has showed that there were about 33.5 million domestic trips in 2009. The statistics also revealed that these travelers had different purposes, where 14.1% of the domestic trips were leisure trips, 32.1% were for visiting their family and friends, and 48.8% were for religious purposes. In addition, the same statistics showed that there were approximately 13.3 million international trips to Saudi. Among them, 47.1% were for religious drives, 20.8% came to visit family and friends, and 14.7% represented business trips. Additionally, they have also indicated that tourism accounts for about 9% of Saudi Arabia's GDP. However, the Saudi government has promising plans to increase the awareness by introducing new marketing strategies. These governmental efforts have estimated to create new job opportunities reaching 1.5 to 2.3 millions jobs by the end of year 2020.

The goal of this paper is to increase the awareness and utilization of there facilities to see the natural wonders and man-made wonders that the kingdom has to offer. Both local and expatriates need to be aware and lured to see what can be seen and to explore new areas that will provide education, excitement, and moment of leisure. Tourism is one of the main ways through which country can highlight its identity to the world.
2. Review of Literature

The Arab world has been acquainted with travel (tourism) for a very long time, mainly in the form of trade caravans and pilgrimages. Therefore, tourism is an age-old practice in the Arab world that, over recent years, has seen, in comparison with the rest of the globe, the emergence of new forms of tourism that have modified the links between the worlds of culture and development. Tourism has become a major phenomenon, economically, socially and culturally, and has brought both risks and opportunities for culture and development, based on its skillful management.

Tourism System is defined as a set of inter-related elements (Bertalanffy, 1968). Mill and Morrison (1985, p. xix), contended that "a system is like a spider's web-touch one part of it and reverberation will be felt throughout". Skyttner (1996, P. 35) defines a system as "a set of interacting units or elements that form an integrated whole intended to perform some function". The tourism system approach has the advantage of taking a broader outlook instead of being myopic and isolated approach. It aims to examine, define and synthesize various angles from an overall perspective (Tosun and Jenkins, 1998). Mill and Morrison (1985), Leiper (1990), Burns and Holden (1995) and Middleton and Hawkins (1998) analyze tourism as a system.

The tourism industry can be defined as "the sum of the industrial and commercial activities that produce goods and services wholly or mainly for tourist consumption" (Weaver and Oppermann, 2000, p. 47). There are various definitions proposed for tourism and it is difficult to find a basis of approach for defining tourism. Leiper (1979) and Ryan (1991) agreed that there are three viewpoints in defining tourism: economic, technical and holistic. Ryan (1991) added the experiential viewpoint, which focuses on the motives. From this point of view, it can be "argued that the attitudes, expectations and perceptions of the holidaymaker are significant variables in setting goals, influencing behavior and determining final satisfaction" (Ryan, 1994, P. 294). From the economic viewpoint, tourism can be construed as an economic activity. Ryan (1991, p. 5) defined it as "a study of the demand for supply of accommodation and supportive services for those staying away from home, and the resultant patterns of expenditure, income creation and employment". This definition identifies tourism as an industry. From the holistic viewpoint, there are many definitions (Leiper 1979; Ryan 1991; Sharpley 1999). The definition most widely identified and used is that produced in 1963 by the United Nations Conference on International Travel and Tourism in Rome that was adopted by the International Union of Official Travel Organization (IUOTO) in 1968. It used the phrase "visitors" to describe "any person visiting a country other than that in which he has his usual place of residence, for any reason other than following an occupation remunerated
from within the country visited”. This definition fails to take into account the domestic tourist. A holistic definition that embraces both the factual and theoretical perspectives of tourism by Jafar (1977, p. 8) is a “study of man away from his usual habitat, of the industry which responds to his needs and the impacts that both he and the industry have on the host socio-cultural, economic and physical environment”.

The World Travel and Tourism Council (2001) stated that travel and tourism for the Middle East is expected to generate US$ 84.4 billion of economic activity (total demand) in the year 2001, growing to US$ 159 billion by 2011. Travel and tourism economic activity in the Middle East is expected to grow by 5.4% per annum between 2000 and 2010. In 2000, the industry's gross output was estimated to be US$ 23 billion, rising to US$ 59 billion by 2010 (WTTC, 2000). The travel and tourism industry is the world's largest employer. In 2001, travel and tourism industry employment in the Middle East was estimated to have 3,279,700 jobs or 8.2% of total employment. By 2011, this would grow to 4,830,700 jobs, 8.3% of total employment.

Travel and tourism industry jobs account for 5.5% of total employment in the Middle East in 2001 and are forecast to rise to 1,997,500 jobs or 3.7% of the total by 2011 (WTTC, 2001).

According to Ahmad (1992), Saudi Arabia is yet to be recognized in the annals of contemporary research in international tourism. The annual pilgrimage to Makah is a rite of spiritual renewal for the 1000 million Muslims (followers of Islam) worldwide. He discusses the modernization of the pilgrim infrastructure undertaken by the Saudi Arabian government which enables Makah receive and accommodate the hundreds of thousands of Muslims who arrive during the three prescribed days of the Hajj. Current infrastructure expansion plans are huge to accommodate more and more pilgrimages. Mintel (2003) describes Saudi Arabia as possessing much unexplored potential and “outstanding cultural, heritage and natural sites” it cites the cities like Riyadh, Jeddah, Makah and Medina as tourist sites. Madain Salah, is alleged to surpass the huge rock tombs of Petra and aljouf is home to antiquities linked to the origin of Nabataea and Assyrian cultures. There are many parks and the Asir national park covers over a million acres in the Asir region which offers comparatively green countryside, a mild climate and many leisure facilities. Other natural resources and scenic sites are those of red sea and Arabian gulf coasts. However, many established landmarks have led to the development of various projects as part of drive towards modernization. Wildlife reserve is under threat, despite a policy of public exclusion (Seddon and Khoja, 2003) which needs revision, if ecotourism opportunities are to be maximized (Seddon, 2000).

The kingdom already has a satisfactory accommodation stock of 7,068 hotels & 41,000 rooms which is half that of the total volume for the GCC collectively. Most rooms are in
Mecca and international chains control over 80% of five star properties. Another 50,000 hotel rooms and 74,000 apartments are planned in order to meet the projected demand. Communication facilities are good and there are 22 regional and 4 international airport, Jeddah & Riyadh being the busiest as well as ever expanding road networks & extensive motorway system which is expected to connect most regional centers by 2015 (Kirby,2003).

Saudi Arabia thus exhibits its strengths& weaknesses as a tourist destination, the former indicative of scope for further expansion and positive future for tourism in Saudi Arabia.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research objectives

Tourism is considered as one of the most essential facets in the world. Thus, the main objective of this research is to determine the preferences and interests of Saudis and foreigners regarding their tourism needs. The objectives are as under

- To determine the preferences of Saudis and foreigners in Saudi Arabia in terms of their tourism needs.
- To identify the factors that attracts Saudis to local and international tourist destinations
- To identify the factors that discourages Saudis to local and international tourist destinations
- Identify the reasons behind the lack of awareness about Saudi tourism.
- Create a new image & individualism for Saudi Arabia and reposition it in a tourism perspective.

3.2. Hypothesis

H1: If awareness about tourism destination of Saudi were increased by advertising and marketing strategy the number of tourists both local and foreigners will increase.

H2: If the government eases visa restriction, the number of visitors will increase in Saudi Arabia.

H3; If hotels enhance the communication facilities, general services, food, and rest rooms there will be more attraction towards tourism in Saudi Arabia.

H4: If hotels, airlines and travel agencies increase their promotional activities, it will increase the number of visitors to various destinations.

H5: If the Government opens tourism information outlets in malls and shopping areas, tourism awareness will increase automatically.

3.3 Data

The collection of data from the sample was done in a research survey through a personally administered questionnaire. Researcher distributed 150 questionnaires to the varied
respondents residing in the capital city Riyadh and received 130 completed questionnaires out of 150, which contains 86.66% response rate that is good enough for research purpose. The reason for adopting the personally administered questionnaires is that this approach has higher response rate, as respondent's queries can be spot answered. The chosen sample was from a population of adults from age 18 to above 44, including male and female. The sample included respondents from varied classes within the society with different educational background. We used random sampling technique to achieve our objectives of our research.

4. Results and Discussions

Out of the 150 questionnaires distributed to Saudis and foreigners in Saudi Arabia particularly in capital city Riyadh, 130 completed and usable questionnaires representing the response rate of about 87% were returned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>characteristics</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>25-34</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>35-44</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Above 44</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>130</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma or its equivalent</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors or its equivalent</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters degree</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D. Holders</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudis</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Saudis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Arabs</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Foreigners</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>130</td>
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Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondent. Majority of the respondents (40%) were in the age group of 25-44. 29% were within the age of 18-24, 12% within the age group of 25-34 and 19% were above 44. This is a clear indication about the respondents that they are matured enough and who know about the tourism and need great deal of awareness in Saudi Arabia.

About 55% of respondents were females and 45% of respondents were male. In general, the study gives a favorable picture concerning the level of education of the respondents. 14% of the participants were high school students, 52% with bachelor's degree, 28% participants had master's degree, and 6% were Ph.D. holders. This is an indication that the respondents are composed of highly educated people.

Regarding the nationality distribution 62% of participants were Saudis and 38% were non-Saudis (20% were Arabs and 18% were other nationalities) almost two third were Saudi nationals, which, is an indication to actually understand the level of awareness among the Saudi Nationals about tourism and their future expectations.

From the chart it is clear that out of 130 respondents, 9 has visited the northern region (Tabuk, Arar, Alula-Madian saleh), 11 visited the southern region (Asir, Jazan-Farsan Island, Najran, AlBaha), 20 visited the east region (Dammam, Khobar), 80 visited the west region (Makkah, Medina, Jeddah, Taif) and 10 participants have visited the central region (Qassim, Hail). The northern, southern, the central regions drew very little visitors in comparison to the coastal areas of the east and the west. Based on the observations done above, it can be concluded that the most visited region is the west (80 participants) representing Makkah, Medina, Jeddah & Taif. These are the typical tourist locations for religious reasons of Hajj and Umrah. There is a wide difference in the percentage of visitors between the East and

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West regions and the other Saudi regions. Reasonable advertising and marketing strategy can help increase the awareness about tourism in Saudi Arabia that supports our H1 (If awareness about tourism destination of Saudi was increased by advertising and marketing strategy, the number of tourists both local and foreigners will increase).

Regarding the type of preferred tourist sites, most of the respondents liked beaches and historical places. Therefore, as Saudi Arabia in enriched with seas and historical places, Government should develop these areas with affordable as well as luxurious hotels and resorts to attract more and more tourists. At the same time, hotels, airlines and travel agents should work together and play important role in promoting and distributing information about the Saudi tourism. They should also emphasize on providing good services and other recreational activities that support our H3 (If hotels, airlines and travel agencies increase their promotional activities that will increase the number of visitors to various destinations). And, H4 (If hotels will enhance the facilities, services, food, and rest rooms there will be more attraction towards tourism in Saudi Arabia).

From the 49 non-Saudi respondents in Riyadh, 19 participants claimed that the process of obtaining a tourist visa is easy but 30 participants claimed exactly opposite. There is a definite need for the Saudi government to ease the visa process like other Arab countries to give the opportunity for foreigners to see the Saudi as a tourist destination. The above figure aligns with H2 (If the government will ease visa restriction. The number of visitors will increase in Saudi Arabia).

Fig 1: Showing availability of information about Tourism in Saudi Arabia.

Regarding the availability of information about tourism in Saudi Arabia, 7 participants out of 130 said there is information about tourism in Saudi Arabia. In addition, 29 respondents thought it is somewhat available, the majority (60) said it is barely available and 34 respondents, which represented less than half of the total said it is not available at all.
These figures clearly show that there is less information that is currently available to highlight the attractions that the kingdom of the Saudi Arabia has at present. These results confirm our H5 (If Government will open tourism information outlets in malls and shopping areas tourism awareness will increase).

In addition to above results, we also included some questions regarding some historical places to check the awareness of our respondents about them. For example, Jabal Al Baloum, 97% of respondents did not know about the mountains and only 3% have heard about it. Forests are rare in Saudi Arab but there is one forest named as Raghdan Forest in Baha 85% is not aware about it. It is not surprising that people are aware of the historic sites in the Red sea port of Jeddah but 72% of respondents are not aware about Jeddah historic wall and gates. The famous attraction in Jubail Island is dolphin but 10% of our sample is aware about it and 90% are not.

From our observation and Data analysis, we infer that foreigners as well are local are not aware about various historical places of Saudi Arab.

5. Limitations

Limitations are obstacles or constraints that hinder researchers while undertaking research process. In our research, geographical location in the central region was our main limitation because it was difficult to get fair idea about the level of awareness about of the entire Saudi Arab. We mainly focused on the locals and non-locals living in the capital city Riyadh. Regarding the methodological constraints, secondary data about tourism in general is available but tourism in Saudi Arab is not sufficient. Even the domestic tourism research data was inadequate and insufficient; the collection of primary data was a big challenge as the attitude of male towards the female researcher is not positive in Saudi Arab, as, it is uncommon for any woman to conduct research in public places like malls and restaurants. Hence, the time consumption was more relatively for conducting interviews and filling up the questionnaires for our research.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Saudi Arabia is a unique tourist destination & its authorities have only recently turned their attention to the matters of tourism development. The paper investigated various reasons about awareness of tourism among Saudis and foreigners in Saudi Arab, particularly in capital city Riyadh. The research indicated that Saudi Arab is in many ways one of the treasures of the world. Within its large geographical area marked by desert, mountains and the sea is a land that is rich in beauty and natural resources. These treasures are gifted to plants to grow, animals to live and humans to enjoy. This paper has explored ways to enable Saudis and foreigners to enjoy the various tourists destination of Saudi Arab. From our observation, the
government as well as airlines, hotels and travel agents has to work in tandem to develop and improve the infrastructure of various tourist spot and to encourage foreigners to visit these places by providing best facilities and ease the visa processing for the foreigners.

Intensified marketing is necessary with scope for greater collaboration between the public and private sector. The focus of promotion should be on neighboring GCC countries initially and then beyond in the longer term. Questions of safety and security, as well as religious and cultural sensitivities, will need to be resolved if leisure tourists from other parts of world are to be attracted in significant number.

Finally, with well managed and developed tourism in Saudi Arab, Saudis as well as foreigners will get an opportunity to see rich heritages and resources within Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the Kingdom will become famous more than just its deserts, oils, and religious places. It will definitely take its places among the most interesting and popular tourist location in the Mediterranean and Gulf region.

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