

Saudi Arabia expands tourism focus beyond luxury market, eyes broader appeal

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Dhaka: Saudi Arabia is shifting its tourism strategy to include more affordable travel options, moving beyond the ultra-luxury resorts that have defined its early tourism push, according to Tourism Minister Ahmed Al-Khateeb.

Speaking on the sidelines of the UN Tourism General Assembly in Riyadh, Al-Khateeb said the kingdom is developing a wider range of destinations targeting middle- and upper-middle-income travelers, alongside expanding accommodation options for religious pilgrims.

"We started with luxury destinations for high-end travelers, but now we're focusing on building destinations for the middle class and upper middle class," Al-Khateeb said. "We will not overlook this important segment."

Tourism is a key component of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 economic diversification plan, which seeks to reduce Saudi Arabia's reliance on oil revenues and transform the country into a global leisure and business destination. The kingdom aims to draw 150 million visitors annually by 2030, with about one-third expected to come from overseas.

Until now, Saudi Arabia's tourism landscape has largely centered on exclusive Red Sea developments, where rooms can cost upwards of USD 2,000 a night. To broaden its appeal, Al-Khateeb said 10 new resorts will soon open on the Red Sea's Shebara Island, offering significantly lower prices than current luxury offerings, though he did not disclose specific rates.

Religious travel remains a cornerstone of Saudi tourism policy. The minister said the government plans to nearly double the number of pilgrims visiting the holy cities of Mecca and Medina to 30 million annually by 2030, supported by a major increase in hotel capacity.

Saudi authorities are also working to attract more visitors from neighboring Gulf countries. A proposed Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) joint visa, similar to the European Union's Schengen system, is expected to be rolled out by 2026 or 2027, Al-Khateeb added.

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