

Saudi Arabia aims to strengthen its tourism sector

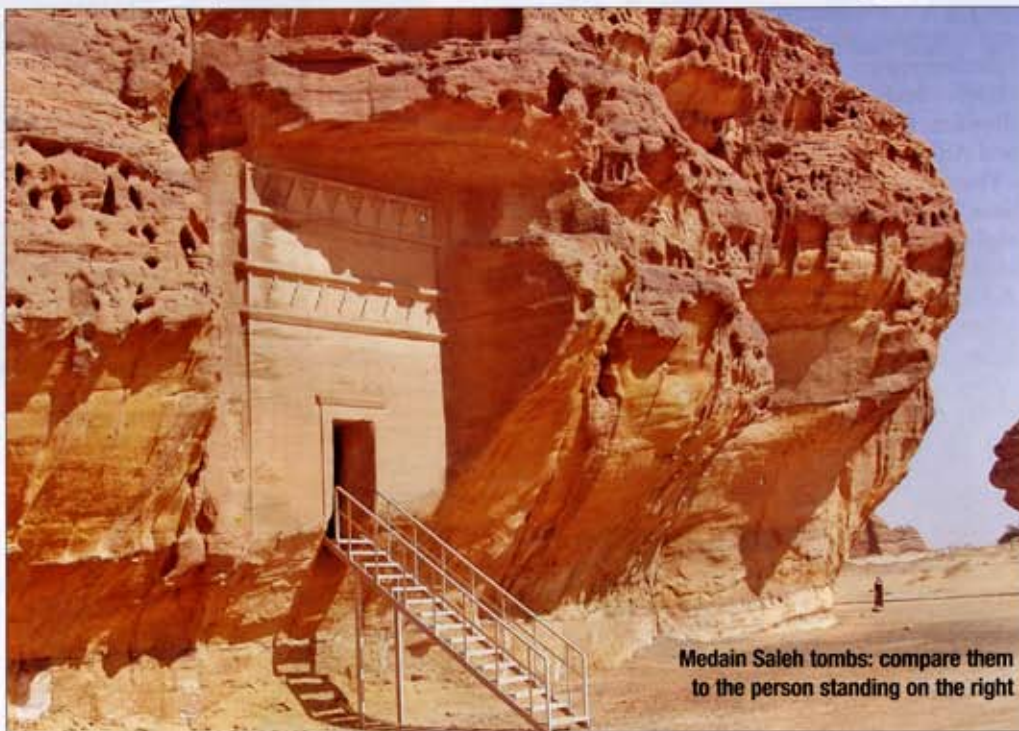
UNWTO World Tourism Barometer figures indicate that for 2007 the Middle East clocked up 46 million international tourist arrivals, with Saudi Arabia being one of the leading destinations of this growth

by Brian Salter

COUNTRIES the world over are promoting tourism opportunities. With cheaper travel and better communications than ever before, even Antarctica last year had five times the number of tourists it did just ten years ago.

So the decision by Saudi Arabia eight years ago to promote its own tourism industry by removing obstacles, providing facilities and incentives to investors, preserving historic sites, and coordinating efforts amongst concerned authorities, was timely. It set up the Supreme Commission for Tourism (SCT) by Royal Decree, giving it the task of building and organising the tourism sector across the Kingdom.

Until very recently, the overriding numbers of tourists within Saudi Arabia were the Saudis themselves, closely followed by pilgrims coming to the birthplace of Islam to perform their religious duties at the two most important Islamic sites on earth – Makkah and



Medain Saleh tombs: compare them to the person standing on the right

Medina al Munawwarat. Foreign tourism was virtually unknown, except for the expatriate workers who came to live in Saudi Arabia. Yet it's only in the past few years that foreigners have been allowed to travel more than about 50 kms from their workplace without special written permission. Saudi Arabia has

for some time been keen to move away from its reliance on oil as its main income earner. So as well as exploiting its natural abundance of minerals, it was felt that by developing tourism, a new channel for national income could be created with the support of private sector investment in various projects

and programmes.

The SCT is taking its job seriously, having prepared, sponsored and supported a myriad of tourism events. In the first three months of this year, for example, there is the Jazan Winter Festival, the Hail international motor cross rally, Aviation Club events at Thumamah Airport and

spring festivals in Baha and Al-Jouf.

And in a further move aimed at strengthening the tourism sector, the SCT started in the middle of last year to issue group visas through tour operators for foreigners wishing to visit the Kingdom. The visas can be obtained for a maximum period of 60 days, but still special conditions apply, not least that tourists must come in groups of no fewer than five members, whilst the minimum age for women if they are not travelling with close relatives is 30.

At present, there are 18 licensed tour operators bringing foreigners to the country and when the first tourist ship, carrying 121 Germans, visited the Kingdom a few months ago, representatives from the SCT, foreign ministry, passport department, border guards and the Saudi Ports Authority turned out to receive them on their arrival in Jeddah.

Interest has come from all quarters, even from as far away as Australia, where the likes of Intrepid Travel organised 15 day tours right across the country. But as sales

manager Caroline Pearce says, numbers have been disappointing. "Not many operators go to Saudi Arabia so we were hoping that there would be more interest from travellers," she says. "We get a lot of interest in the tour, but not many bookings. But with UAE so close and becoming more and more popular as a stop-over and holiday destination, in addition to the large expat community - we are sure that Saudi Arabia will have more interest in the future."

Probably the biggest obstacle, though, to modern day tourism within Saudi Arabia is the country's conservative traditions, so the tourism industry is likely to remain strictly regulated for the time being, with adventurous foreigners wanting to break away from organised parties to "do their own thing" being strongly discouraged. The country's tourism industry has come on in leaps and bounds in the past few years. But it still has a long way to go. ■

Brian Salter is a journalist and author who has worked in the Middle East for the past 10 years