

Saudi Arabia has opened the door to tourism. Whether tourists should go remains up for debate

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 1, 2019

22 COMMENTS

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Saudi dancers perform during the launch of a new tourist visa regime at a dinner at historic Diriyah in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on Sept. 27, 2019.

STEPHEN KALIN/REUTERS

When Kyle Hyndman went to North Korea in 2007, he saw it as a chance to see what life was like for citizens there. He got it.

“Because we treated our guide pretty well, she actually gave us quite a long leash,” the Vancouver lawyer recalls of the government-mandated local handler who heavily controlled where the small tour group out of Beijing could go.

And while Hyndman says the tour provided some insight into the lives of the country’s residents, it required him to reconcile his desire to connect with the locals with the fact that any misstep could have negative ramifications for people long after he’d left.

“You are giving foreign money to a government that’s probably going to use it for nefarious purposes, but you are also exposing local people to the rest of the world, in a way that they just couldn’t get any other way,” he says. “It was actually really eye opening for me and hopefully for them, too.”



A tomb at the Qasr al-Bint Necropolis in Mada'in Saleh, Saudi Arabia, on Dec. 11, 2015.

BRYAN DENTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

It’s the kind of balancing act people may have to perform if they accept a new tourism invitation from Saudi Arabia.

The Kingdom, which is widely viewed as one of the most conservative countries in the world and has historically only been accessible for business and religious travellers, recently announced that it will now offer visas to tourists. In late September, a tourism campaign launched on social media touting the country's cultural and historical sites.

The country has come under intense international scrutiny in recent years. The death of journalist Jamal Khashoggi last year, as well as the country's severe restrictions on women's rights has raised questions about the safety of tourists who accept the offer. There is also a question of what, if any, responsibilities they have when they do go.

In recent years, travellers have found themselves with similar decisions to make about Zimbabwe, China, the United States and others.



A renovated place of interest at the historic city of Diriyah, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is pictured in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Sept. 27, 2019.

STRINGER/REUTERS

“Saudi Arabia’s up to some pretty terrible things to their own people and their neighbouring countries and that all would weigh on me for sure,” Hyndman

says when asked if he'd visit. "You have to just balance that with the positive impacts [of a visit] and hope that that interchange will actually lead to more change."

Dr. Laurel Besco, an associate professor in geography at the University of Toronto, agrees. Conscious decision-making is critical, she says, adding that tourists always have an obligation to do their research before travelling. That research should include an understanding of what is deemed respectful to the culture being visited in terms of behaviour and dress, and carrying themselves accordingly, she says.

Finding ways to directly help local businesses, charities, NGOs in the countries you're visiting could also allow travellers to make a difference. There may be opportunities to help on the ground, but often it may mean learning what you can while there and making your efforts to help once you're home. "If you choose to go to these places, look for areas to visit and to spend your money that are actually supporting the local populations," she says.

Tour guides at the ancient ruins of Mada'in Saleh, in northwestern Saudi Arabia, on Feb. 1, 2019.

TASNEEM ALSULTAN/THE NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Hyndman also suggests supporting small businesses instead of government enterprises whenever possible. "If there are opportunities to interact with individuals rather than government officials, do that," he adds. "It's not just about whether you go, it's also about how you go."

Twenty years ago, Karen Green's travels took her to places that made her parents worry, including a stay in Israel while rockets were whizzing overhead. Today, the Chatham, Ont., writer and mother of two says she'd think twice about a trip to a spot such as Saudi Arabia, but wouldn't rule it out.

"I would never excuse atrocities or anything like that, but I also think that pulling back the curtain as much as possible is always a good thing and I think that these countries can exist the way that they do because they exist in a vacuum," she says.

The Ula desert near the northwestern Saudi Arabian town of al-Ula.

FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

For those looking to take advantage of Saudi Arabia's offer, Samuel Spencer, a travel adviser at Virtuoso Agency Ocean & River Cruises in Alberta, reminds

travellers that Canadian travel advisories should be taken into account. A travel agent who specializes in the region you're visiting will ensure that they are top of mind, along with the political climate of countries that may be less than hospitable to some travellers.

"LGBTQ+ clients, for example, should be aware that several countries still regard homosexuality as illegal, and may refuse entry to same-sex couples or may impose restrictions on tourists, such as a requirement to have two beds in hotel accommodations, etc," he says,

Better to know what you'll be facing long before you get there.

The Elephant rock in the Ula desert near al-Ula.

FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

All of it has to be taken seriously, but also with a dose of reality, Green says, pointing out that you don't have to go all the way to Saudi Arabia to find governments doing terrible things.

"We have our own unique shame here as well," she points out. When she shared Canada's history with missing and murdered Indigenous women with

an international friend, it was a reminder that Canada has work to do, too.

“As much as it hurts to admit it, it’s so good for other people to remind us that that happens here because it helps us fix it as thoroughly and quickly as we can.”

Besco agrees, adding that we shouldn’t simply leave Canada and pick up a responsibility to push back against oppression abroad.

“Finding those places where you can make a positive contribution starts at home.”

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