# Middle Eastern tourism boom accelerates as Saudi Arabia surpasses Turkey in summer arrivals



Saudi Arabia has joined the ranks of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Jordan in witnessing a remarkable surge in tourism, overtaking Turkey in arrivals and revenues during a booming summer season. According to preliminary data from the second quarter of 2025, Saudi Arabia's tourism revenues soared to $13.6 billion, fueled by the arrival of over one million Umrah pilgrims since June. This growth is part of a broader regional trend, where these four Middle Eastern nations are outperforming competitors by reducing visa barriers, strategically investing in hospitality infrastructure, and promoting a rich cultural and entertainment agenda.

Saudi Arabia’s tourism expansion aligns closely with the goals of its Vision 2030 initiative, which aims to diversify the national economy away from oil dependence. The Kingdom has focused on large-scale projects such as the Red Sea development, Amaala, and expansion of the heritage sites in Al-Ula, targeting affluent travellers and drawing on its religious significance. Data from the Saudi Central Bank confirms a 10% year-on-year increase in international tourism spending for the first quarter of 2025, highlighting the Kingdom's strengthened global tourism profile. Additionally, the introduction of Nusuk's digital visa processing system has facilitated a 30% rise in Umrah visa holders, demonstrating the government's commitment to modernising and expanding pilgrimage capacity.

The UAE continues its established role as the Gulf’s tourism hub, recording 9.88 million international visitors in the first half of 2025—a 6% increase over the previous year. Dubai alone maintained hotel occupancy rates above 80%, supported by ongoing public-private partnerships and the Dubai Economic Agenda (D33). The emirate’s appeal combines luxury shopping, desert safaris, cultural institutions, and international exhibitions, with expanded airline connectivity streamlining travel. Abu Dhabi complements this with cultural landmarks and major events such as motor races and music festivals, while Sharjah focuses on eco-tourism and heritage, underpinning the UAE's broad tourism strategy.

Qatar has capitalised on the legacy of the FIFA World Cup by maintaining high visitor numbers—2.6 million arrivals in the first half of 2025 with an average hotel occupancy near 75%. The country has repurposed its stadiums into cultural venues and bolstered its aviation connectivity, solidifying Doha’s status as a transit and stopover hub. Investments continue across its cultural and heritage offerings, including carefully preserved districts that blend traditional and modern experiences. Reports from Qatar Tourism underline the nation’s diversified marketing and hospitality expansion as integral to sustaining post-World Cup tourism growth.

Jordan has experienced one of the most impressive tourism recoveries in the region, with arrivals reaching 1.25 million by July 2025 and tourism revenues rising nearly 12% year-on-year to $3.67 billion in the first half. Its success is credited to a combination of historical and natural attractions such as Petra, the Dead Sea, and Wadi Rum, alongside improvements in airport infrastructure, and targeted promotional campaigns in Europe and Asia. These efforts illustrate how a smaller destination can thrive by leveraging unique cultural assets and effective marketing.

In stark contrast, Turkey faced a challenging season, with inbound visitors in July 2025 falling 5% year-on-year to 6.97 million, marking the first summer decline since the pandemic. The Turkish tourism ministry and external analysts attribute this to the strengthening lira, which has made travel costs significantly higher for foreign tourists amid high inflation. This currency appreciation, though aimed at macroeconomic stability, has reduced Turkey's price competitiveness, driving potential visitors to alternatives in the Gulf and Levant. Despite Turkey’s historical prominence and diverse attractions spanning Istanbul’s iconic landmarks to Mediterranean resorts, the 2025 seasonal contraction signals the risks associated with macroeconomic factors and competitive regional positioning.

The divergent trajectories of these Middle Eastern tourism markets underscore several strategic lessons. The quartet of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Jordan have benefitted from a comprehensive approach encompassing diverse tourism experiences, substantial capital investments, liberalised visa policies, year-round cultural programming, and currency positioning favourable to value-conscious travellers. Conversely, Turkey's struggle highlights the delicate balance required between maintaining economic stability and preserving an accessible and attractive tourism market.

Looking ahead, Middle East tourism appears set for continued expansion, with Saudi Arabia progressing rapidly through Vision 2030 projects, the UAE enhancing its luxury and cultural sectors, Qatar solidifying its aviation and event-hosting roles, and Jordan capitalising on its heritage appeal. Turkey faces a critical juncture where policy adjustments could help mitigate competitive pressures and sustain its market share.

Overall, the current landscape reveals a shift from a single dominant destination to a more distributed, competitive regional tourism mosaic, reshaping the economic and reputational fortunes of these Middle Eastern nations.

### 📌 Reference Map:

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2. <https://arab.news/rkvwb> - Saudi Arabia’s international tourism spend in the first quarter of 2025 reached SR49.37 billion ($13.16 billion), a roughly 10% year‑on‑year increase, according to data published by the Saudi Central Bank. The surge contributed to a larger travel account surplus of about SR26.78 billion, underscoring the Kingdom’s expanding role in Vision 2030’s diversification of the economy through tourism. The report situates Q1 performance within broader trends of rising inbound travel, improved visa access, and greater investment in hospitality, illustrating Saudi Arabia’s strengthened global tourism profile.
3. <https://arab.news/4hx3m> - Saudi Arabia welcomed over 1.2 million Umrah pilgrims since the season began in June 2025, with entrants from 109 countries. The season was launched via Nusuk’s digital visa processing, enabling permits and bookings through a mobile app, and ministry data show a 30% rise in Umrah visa holders and a 27% increase in visa issuances versus the previous year. The figures reflect growing international demand for religious travel and the Kingdom’s expanded capacity to accommodate pilgrims, reinforcing Saudi Arabia’s status as a leading hub for religious tourism in line with Vision 2030.
4. <https://mediaoffice.ae/en/news/2025/august/03-08/dubai-international-visitors> - Dubai welcomed 9.88 million international overnight visitors in the first half of 2025, a 6% year‑on‑year increase, according to data published by the Dubai Department of Economy and Tourism. The press release highlights Dubai’s hotel performance, noting an average occupancy of 80.6% and 22.24 million room nights in H1, with ADR and RevPAR also rising. It attributes the momentum to public‑private partnerships and sustained marketing under the Dubai Economic Agenda (D33), reinforcing Dubai’s ambition to position itself as a leading global city for business and leisure travel.
5. <https://www.qatartourism.com/en/news-and-media/sector-statistics/tourism-reports> - Qatar Tourism’s sector statistics show international visitors reaching 2.6 million in the first half of 2025, with GCC travellers comprising the largest share and Europe the second. The data indicate 57% of visitors entered by air, 33% by land, and 9% by sea, with an average full‑market occupancy of 71% and 5.23 million room nights sold. The quarterly reports illustrate Qatar’s year‑round tourism strategy, diversification of source markets, and ongoing hospitality investments aligned with Qatar’s Tourism Strategy 2030, providing a solid baseline for future growth in the country’s tourism sector.
6. <https://arab.news/c72x7> - Jordan’s tourism revenues rose 11.9% year on year in the first half of 2025 to around $3.67 billion, according to data from the Central Bank and Petra. The report notes 1.51 million visitors in the first quarter, with June receipts showing a modest decline but continuing positive momentum overall. The resurgence is linked to renewed air connectivity, Europe‑ and Asia‑driven marketing, and airport infrastructure improvements, with Jordan’s iconic sites such as Petra, the Dead Sea and Wadi Rum driving demand. The piece situates Jordan within a broader regional tourism rebound and ongoing promotional efforts.
7. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-foreign-visitor-arrivals-drop-5-july-2025-08-22/> - Turkish tourism data for July 2025 show 6.97 million inbound visitors, according to the Turkish tourism ministry as reported by Reuters. The figure marks a 5% year‑on‑year contraction from July 2024, reflecting the impact of elevated prices on travel demand. The report notes Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, Poland, and the Netherlands among the leading source markets. Analysts point to currency volatility and macroeconomic pressures that are shaping travel affordability and demand, illustrating Turkey’s continued appeal alongside mounting price challenges that influence seasonal visitor patterns in the region.