



Saudi Arabia - Language, Culture, Customs and Etiquette

Welcome to our guide to Saudi Arabia. This is useful for anyone researching Saudi Arab culture, customs, manners, etiquette, values and wanting to understand the people better. You may be going to Saudi Arabia on business, for a visit or even hosting Saudi colleagues or clients in your own country. Remember this is only a very basic level introduction and is not meant to stereotype all Saudis you may meet!

Facts and Statistics

Location: The Middle East, bordering Iraq 814 km, Jordan 744 km, Kuwait 222 km, Oman 676 km, Qatar 60 km, UAE 457 km, Yemen 1,458 km

Capital: Riyadh

Climate: Harsh, dry desert with great temperature extremes

Population: 25,795,938 including 5,576,076 non-nationals (July 2004 est.)

Ethnic Make-up: Arab 90%, Afro-Asian 10%

Religions: Muslim 100%

Government: monarchy

Language in Saudi Arabia

Arabic is the official language of Saudi Arabia, but English is widely spoken. It is used in business and is a compulsory second language in schools. Among the non-Saudi population, many people speak Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, and other Asian languages such as Farsi and Turkish.

Arabic is spoken by almost 200 million people in more than 22 countries. It is the language of the Qur'an, the Holy Book of Islam, and of Arab poetry and literature. While spoken Arabic varies from country to country, classical Arabic has remained unchanged for centuries. In Saudi, there are differences between the dialects spoken in urban areas and those spoken in rural areas.



Saudi Society & Culture

Islam

Islam is practised by all Saudis and governs their personal, political, economic and legal lives. Islam was born in Saudi Arabia and thus is visited by millions of Muslims every year. The Prophet Muhammad is seen as the last of God's emissaries (following in the footsteps of Jesus, Moses, Abraham, etc) to bring revelation to mankind. He was distinguished with bringing a message for the whole of mankind, rather than just to a certain peoples. As Moses brought the Torah and Jesus the Bible, Muhammad brought the last book, the Quran. The Quran and the actions of the Prophet (the Sunnah) are used as the basis for all guidance in the religion.

Among certain obligations for Muslims are to pray five times a day - at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening. The exact time is listed in the local newspaper each day. Friday is the Muslim holy day. Everything is closed. Many companies also close on Thursday, making the weekend Thursday and Friday.

During the holy month of Ramadan all Muslims must fast from dawn to dusk and are only permitted to work six hours per day. Fasting includes no eating, drinking, cigarette smoking, or gum chewing. Expatriates are not required to fast; however, they must not eat, drink, smoke, or chew gum in public.

Each night at sunset, families and friends gather together to celebrate the breaking of the fast (iftar). The festivities often continue well into the night. In general, things happen more slowly during Ramadan. Many businesses operate on a reduced schedule. Shops may be open and closed at unusual times.

Family Values

- The family and tribe are the basis of the social structure.
- As is seen in their naming conventions, Saudis are cognizant of their heritage, their clan, and their extended family, as well as their nuclear family.
- Saudis take their responsibilities to their family quite seriously.
- Families tend to be large and the extended family is quite close.
- The individual derives a social network and assistance in times of need from the family.
- Nepotism is considered a good thing, since it implies that employing people one know



and trusts is of primary importance.

Etiquette and Customs in Saudi

Meeting Etiquette

- Men shake hands. Good friends may greet each other with a handshake and a kiss on each cheek.
- Women generally hug and kiss close friends.
- Men and women would not greet each other in public I from outside the family.
- When Saudis greet each other they take their time and converse about general things.

Gift Giving Etiquette

Gifts are not the norm as in many other countries.

- If you are invited to a Saudi's house bring something small as a thank you.
- Flowers do not make good gifts from a man, although a woman could give them to her hostess.
- Never give alcohol unless you are positive they partake.
- Gifts are not opened when received.

Dining Etiquette

Saudis socialize primarily in restaurants and international hotels when entertaining expatriates whom they do not know well. After some time you will be invited to the home.

Entertainment will generally be same-sex only. If both sexes are included, they will be in separate rooms.

If you are invited to a Saudi's house:

- You would usually remove your shoes.
- Dress conservatively.
- Try to arrive at the invited time. Punctuality is appreciated but not crucial.
- Show respect for the elders by greeting them first.



Accept the offer of Arabian coffee and dates even if you do not normally drink coffee. If you are invited for a meal, understand that there will be a great deal of socializing and small talk before the meal is served.

Table manners

- If the meal is on the floor, sit cross-legged or kneel on one knee..
- Eat only with the right hand as the left is considered unclean.
- Try a bit of everything that is served.
- Meals are generally served family-style.
- Honoured guests are often offered the most prized pieces such as a sheep's head so be prepared!
- There is often more food than you can eat. Part of Saudi hospitality and generosity is to shower guests with abundance.
- There is little conversation during meals so that diners may relish the food.

Business Etiquette and Protocol

Relationships & Communication

- You will need a Saudi sponsor (wakeel) to enter the country. The sponsor acts as an intermediary and arranges appointments with appropriate individuals.
- Saudis do not require as much personal space as most western cultures. As such, they will stand close to you while conversing and you may feel as if your personal space has been violated.
- Saudis prefer to work with people they know and trust and will spend a great deal of time on the getting-to-know-you part of relationship building.
- You must be patient.
- Since Saudis will most likely judge you on appearances, dress and present yourself well.

Business Meeting Etiquette

- Appointments are necessary and should be made several weeks to one month in advance if at all possible.
- When meeting with government officials, a firm date will not be settled upon until you are physically in the country.
- Try to schedule meetings in the morning.



- You should arrive at meetings on time, although it is an accepted custom to keep foreigners waiting.
- It is not uncommon to have a meeting cancelled once you arrive.
- Meetings are generally not private until after a relationship of trust has been developed. This means you may expect frequent interruptions. Others may wander into the room and start a different discussion. You may join in, but do not try to bring the topic back to the original discussion until the new person leaves.
- Business meetings start after prolonged inquiries about health, family, etc. Never inquire about a Saudi's wife.

Business Negotiating

- Decisions are made slowly. Do not try to rush the process.
- The society is extremely bureaucratic. Most decisions require several layers of approval. It takes several visits to accomplish simple tasks.
- Saudis are tough negotiators.
- Business is hierarchical. Decisions are made by the highest-ranking person.
- Repeat your main points since it will be interpreted as meaning you are telling the truth.
- Do not use high-pressure tactics.
- Decisions are easily overturned.
- When discussing price, Saudis will often make an initial offer that is extremely low when they are buying. Conversely, when they are selling, their initial offer will be extremely high.
- You may need to compromise on a point if someone's dignity is at stake.
- There is a tendency to avoid giving bad news and to give effusive acceptances, which may only mean 'perhaps'.

Dress Etiquette

- Most Saudis wear long white thobes. You would be expected to wear a suit.
- Dress well if you want to make a good impression.
- Business women should make certain that their collarbones and knees are covered and that their clothes are not form-fitting.

Business Cards



- Business cards are given to everyone you meet, although it may be an idea to be selective if you have few in your possession.
- Have one side of your card translated into Arabic. Be sure to check the translation carefully as there is often confusion with the order of western names.