

Empowering the Voice of Heritage: The Evolution and Impact of Tourist Guiding in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This article explores the development of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia, tracing its historical roots, and analyzing the vital role guides play as cultural ambassadors and educators. It highlights the rigorous training and professional development programs that ensure guides are well-prepared to display Saudi heritage in a way that is both accurate and engaging. In this article, one of the most prominent focuses is on the empowerment and inclusion of women in the profession of tourist guiding. Further investigation into the influence of tourist guides on the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of sustainable tourism is presented in this article. Tourist guides are an essential component of the tourism ecosystem in Saudi Arabia, not only do they serve as guardians of cultural heritage, but they also play a significant role in Saudi Arabia's efforts to become a destination of choice for tourists from all over the world. Underscoring the transformative power of tourism that is directed by expertise, passion, and a profound dedication to heritage preservation is the role that they play in linking cultures and generating positive change.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia tourism; tourist guiding; women empowerment; cultural heritage; UNESCO heritage sites.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Saudi Arabia stands as a crossroads of civilizations, it homes to diverse landscapes ranging from the verdant mountains of Asir to the endless dunes of the Empty Quarter, is rapidly emerging as a global tourism destination, enriched by its deep-rooted heritage and the ambitious vision of its leadership. The essence of Saudi

tourism is not just in the breathtaking natural beauty or the architectural marvels that span centuries but, in the stories, and traditions that each site embodies (Vision 2030. "Projects.", 2024). In this context, tourist guides emerge as the custodians of these narratives, playing a pivotal role in bridging the past with the present, and presenting the rich tapestry of Saudi culture to the world.

The profession of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia is more than a career; it is a calling that demands passion, knowledge, and a deep commitment to cultural preservation and enhancement. Tourist guides serve as the voice of Saudi Arabia's heritage, offering visitors insights into the kingdom's history, traditions, and contemporary life (World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations, 2024). They are the cultural ambassadors who provide a personal connection to the places and experiences that make Saudi Arabia unique, crafting memorable journeys that resonate with visitors long after they return home.

Navigating Cultural Sensitivities: Saudi Arabia's deep cultural heritage requires careful navigation to respect its traditions and customs. Tourist guides are instrumental in bridging cultural gaps, presenting the kingdom's history and societal norms to visitors in an accessible manner. They play a vital role in maintaining the vibrancy of Saudi's historical narrative, ensuring it remains a living part of both the local and global consciousness. Through their storytelling, guides illuminate lesser-known aspects of Saudi culture, offering insights that enrich visitors' understanding beyond standard guidebook entries. This not only enhances the tourism experience but fosters a deep-seated respect for Saudi Arabia's cultural legacy, promoting its safeguarding and appreciation on a wider scale.

This article argues that tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia is not merely a profession but a cornerstone of cultural preservation and promotion. Tourist guides serve as custodians of the kingdom's rich heritage, weaving narratives that bridge the past with the present. Through their expertise, passion, and dedication, they offer visitors insights into Saudi Arabia's history, traditions, and contemporary life. By highlighting the rigorous training and professional development programs that ensure guides are well-prepared to showcase Saudi heritage accurately and engagingly, this article underscores the vital role they play in

shaping visitors' perceptions and fostering a deeper appreciation for the country's cultural tapestry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Significance of Tourist Guiding

The significance of tourist guiding extends beyond facilitating tours; it encompasses the safeguarding of cultural heritage, promoting sustainable tourism practices, and contributing to the economic development of the nation (Cohen, 1985). As Saudi Arabia continues to open its doors wider to the world under Vision 2030, the role of tourist guides becomes increasingly crucial. They are at the forefront of a dynamic sector poised for significant growth, tasked with the responsibility of showcasing Saudi Arabia's heritage in a manner that is respectful, authentic, and engaging (Global Finance Magazine, 2024).

The work in this field is not limited to graduates of tourism and archaeology, as it is not classified as a primary profession but rather additional work. The difference between one guide and another, especially if they are graduates of tourism colleges, is that they possess a greater background through their studies and are more familiar with details. However, if a guide has passion and a love for learning, they can indeed succeed in the profession of guiding. Essential elements such as proficiency in a language other than Arabic, a first aid course, and membership in the Saudi Association for Tourist Guides must be present (Saudi Tour Guide Association, 2024).

This introduction sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of the world of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia. From the historical evolution of the profession to the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, we delve into the multifaceted aspects of tourist guiding. We celebrate the achievements, acknowledge the hurdles, and anticipate the future directions of this essential profession within the vibrant landscape of Saudi tourism and heritage.

Saudi Arabia stands as a crossroads of civilizations, a land where the depth of history merges seamlessly with a rich cultural tapestry, reflecting millennia of human endeavor, trade, and spirituality. The kingdom's heritage, sprawling from the Nabatean tombs of Al-Ula, the lush oasis of Al-Ahsa, the ancient petroglyphs of Jubah and the Shuwaymis in Hail, to the historic quarter of Jeddah, embodies a diverse legacy of civilizations that have thrived on this land. These sites, many recognized by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2024) highlight the country's significance on the global heritage map and underscore its potential as a major player in the international tourism landscape.

In the heart of this historical wealth, tourist guiding emerges as a cornerstone for cultural preservation and tourism enhancement. Tourist guides serve not merely as conduits of information but as storytellers who breathe life into Saudi Arabia's ancient stones and landscapes. They are the voices that weave together tales of the past with the fabric of the present, offering visitors a window into the kingdom's soul. Through their narratives, they illuminate the historical, cultural, and social significance of the sites, enabling tourists to appreciate the depth and richness of Saudi heritage beyond the visual spectacle.

The role of tourist guides in Saudi Arabia transcends the traditional scope of guiding; it is an act of cultural diplomacy, where each tour becomes an opportunity to bridge cultures and foster mutual understanding. As custodians of the kingdom's narrative, tourist guides play an instrumental role in dispelling stereotypes and presenting the nuanced mosaic of Saudi life and history to the world. In doing so, they contribute significantly to the kingdom's tourism strategy, which aims not only to attract visitors but also to engage them in a meaningful exploration of Saudi Arabia's heritage and identity (Aati, 2020). Tourist guides are key players in the preservation of Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage. They

bring to life the kingdom's historical sites for visitors, advocating for the conservation of these places as dynamic markers of cultural progression. Through educating tourists on the significance of preserving historical landmarks and artifacts, guides inspire responsible tourism and a profound appreciation for these cultural jewels.

This vital connection between tourist guides and cultural preservation is more pertinent today as Saudi Arabia opens its doors wider to international visitors under Vision 2030. The vision's ambitious goals to diversify the economy and develop the tourism sector spotlight tourist guiding as a profession of critical importance. By ensuring that guides are well-trained, knowledgeable, and passionate about their heritage, Saudi Arabia can leverage tourist guiding as a powerful tool for cultural preservation, education, and sustainable tourism development, thereby enhancing the visitor experience and contributing to the global appreciation of its rich heritage (Al-Okaily, 2022).

The History of Tourist Guiding in Saudi Arabia

The history of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia is a narrative of gradual recognition and evolution, reflecting the country's burgeoning appreciation of its cultural heritage and its strategic vision for tourism. Initially, tourist guiding in the Kingdom might have been an informal practice, largely centered around religious tourism to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. However, as the country began to acknowledge the broader value of its diverse cultural landscapes and archaeological treasures, the role of tourist guides gained prominence.

A significant milestone in the history of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia was the UNESCO recognition of several sites as World Heritage Sites. Starting with the Al-Hijr Archaeological Site (Madâin

Sâlih)¹ in 2008, followed by the inclusion of the At-Turaif District in Diriyah ²in 2010, the Historic Jeddah, the Gate to Makkah in 2014, the Rock Art in the Hail Region in 2015, and the Al-Ahsa Oasis in 2018, these recognitions underscored the global significance of Saudi heritage. Each acknowledgment by UNESCO not only highlighted the rich historical narratives and cultural significance of these sites but also underscored the need for skilled tourist guides who could convey these stories to the world (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2024).

The launch of Vision 2030 marked a pivotal turn in the evolution of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia. Under this ambitious plan, the Kingdom aims to diversify its economy away from oil dependency, with tourism identified as a key sector for development. Vision 2030's goals include increasing the number of visitors to Saudi Arabia by developing its tourism infrastructure, promoting its cultural and heritage sites, and enhancing the overall visitor experience. As part of these efforts, the Saudi government has taken significant steps to professionalize tourist guiding, recognizing it as a crucial element in achieving these objectives³.

The Saudi Association for Tourist Guides, which was licensed about three years ago, aims to improve the working environment for tour guides, contribute to conducting studies, and encourage Saudi youth to join this profession (Saudi Arabia's Official Gazette, 2024). This period has seen the establishment of training programs and licensing requirements for tourist guides to ensure they are well-equipped to represent Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage accurately and engagingly (Saudi

Arabia's e-Government Portal, 2024). The Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTNH), now part of the Ministry of Tourism, has been instrumental in setting standards and offering training courses for guides. The introduction of e-visas and the relaxation of entry requirements for tourists under Vision 2030 have further underscored the need for a professional cadre of tourist guides, capable of catering to an international audience with diverse interests and expectations.

Moreover, initiatives like the development of the Red Sea Project and the Qiddiya entertainment megaproject, among others, signify the Kingdom's commitment to expanding its tourism offerings beyond cultural heritage to include eco-tourism, adventure tourism, and entertainment (Vision 2030. "Projects.", 2024). These developments not only broaden the scope of tourist guiding but also highlight the evolving role of guides as ambassadors of a new, diverse Saudi tourism experience.

The number of tourist guides of both genders recently jumped from 300 to 600 guides, indicating that the plan for next year includes doubling this number to 1200 tourist guides, and reaching 4500 tourist guides by the year 2030 (Vision 2030. "Projects.", 2024)."

In sum, the history of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia reflects the country's broader journey towards embracing its past and innovating for its future. From informal beginnings to a structured and vital profession under Vision 2030, tourist guiding stands at the forefront of Saudi Arabia's ambitious tourism aspirations, bridging cultures, and narrating the Kingdom's rich tapestry of history to the world.

¹ 1111 km west of the northwest of Riyadh and about 402 km north-west of the city of Mannah, and specifically in Al-Ala, the cities of Saleh or, also known as the Stone, are one of the historic wonders that have struck the world as an archaeological site.

² The historic Al-Trif neighborhood, one of the heritage areas on the UNESCO World List since 2010, is an architectural icon that reflects the scientific and cultural development of the first Saudi State.

³ <https://cdn.mt.gov.sa/mtportal/mt-fe-production/content/policies-regulations/documents/tourism-regulations/Tour-Guide-Regulations-En-V013.pdf>; The number of tour guides of both genders has recently jumped from 300 to 600 guides, and next year's plan includes doubling this number to 1200 tour guides, aiming to reach 4500 tour guides by 2030.

The Role of Tour Guides in Shaping Saudi Identity

Tourist guides in Saudi Arabia play an indispensable role in the nation's burgeoning tourism sector, serving as cultural ambassadors, educators, and storytellers. Their multifaceted role is pivotal in enriching the visitor experience, providing a vital link between the country's historic past and its dynamic present. As the face of Saudi tourism, they carry the responsibility of not only showcasing the country's diverse heritage and landscapes but also interpreting its rich tapestry of cultures, traditions, and stories to a global audience.

Tourist guides act as cultural ambassadors, presenting Saudi Arabia's unique heritage and customs to visitors. They help bridge cultural gaps and foster mutual understanding by sharing insights into the local way of life, including social norms, etiquettes, and the significance of various cultural practices (Rabotic, 2010). Through their interactions, guides contribute to a positive image of Saudi Arabia, demonstrating the warmth, hospitality, and openness of its people. This ambassadorial role is crucial in dispelling stereotypes and building a more nuanced and appreciative understanding of the Kingdom's culture among international visitors.

As educators, tourist guides possess deep knowledge of Saudi Arabia's history, archaeology, and heritage sites, many of which are recognized by UNESCO (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2024). They provide detailed explanations of historical contexts, architectural styles, and archaeological significance, turning a visit into an educational experience. Guides are trained to convey complex historical and cultural information in an engaging and accessible manner, making learning enjoyable for tourists of all ages and backgrounds. Their expertise enhances the educational value of each visit, allowing tourists to gain deeper insights into the historical and cultural fabric of the Kingdom.

The ability to weave narratives around the places they introduce to visitors

sets tourist guides apart as storytellers (Nilsson & Zillinger, 2020). Through compelling storytelling, guides bring to life the legends, myths, and historical events associated with various sites, from the ancient Nabatean tombs at Madain Saleh to the historic streets of Jeddah's Al-Balad district. This storytelling enriches the visitor experience, making each site visit memorable and emotionally resonant. By sharing stories of the past and present, guides create a personal connection between visitors and the places they explore, transforming sight-seeing into a meaningful exploration of Saudi Arabia's heritage.

The role of tourist guides extends beyond mere information dissemination to enhancing the overall visitor experience. By tailoring tours to meet the interests and needs of different visitor groups, guides ensure that each tour is relevant and engaging. They also play a crucial role in ensuring the safety and comfort of tourists, navigating logistical challenges, and offering practical advice on local customs, dining, and shopping options. The personal touch that guides add to tours, combined with their enthusiasm and passion for Saudi heritage, significantly contributes to a positive and enriching visit, encouraging visitors to explore deeper and return in the future (Weiler & Walker, 2014).

Types of Tour Guides in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, like in many countries, there are various types of tour guides catering to different interests and needs of tourists. Here are some common types ("Saudi Commission for Tourism and Heritage", 2024):

- a. **Cultural Guides:** These guides specialize in providing insights into Saudi Arabia's rich history, cultural heritage, and traditions. They often lead tours to historical sites, museums, and cultural landmarks, providing context and explanations about the significance of each site.
- b. **Religious Guides:** Given the significance of Saudi Arabia as the birthplace of Islam and home to the two holiest cities, Mecca

and Medina, religious guides focus on providing spiritual and religious guidance to pilgrims and visitors. They lead tours to religious sites, such as the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, offering explanations about religious rituals and practices.

- c. **Adventure Guides:** Saudi Arabia boasts diverse landscapes, including deserts, mountains, and coastlines, making it an ideal destination for adventure tourism. Adventure guides specialize in leading outdoor activities such as desert safaris, hiking, rock climbing, and diving, ensuring the safety and enjoyment of participants while showcasing the natural beauty of the country.
- d. **City Guides:** In major cities like Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam, city guides offer tours focusing on urban attractions, including modern architecture, shopping districts, and local cuisine. They provide insights into contemporary Saudi culture, lifestyle, and urban development.
- e. **Language Guides:** For non-Arabic speaking tourists, language guides who are fluent in languages such as English, French, or Spanish offer guided tours, ensuring effective communication and facilitating a deeper understanding of the attractions visited.
- f. **Specialized Guides:** Depending on the tourist's interests, specialized guides may cater to niche areas such as eco-tourism, wildlife observation, or archaeological exploration, providing in-depth knowledge and unique experiences tailored to specific interests.

These types of tour guides contribute to enriching the travel experience in Saudi Arabia, offering diverse perspectives and insights into the country's culture, history, and natural beauty.

Training Programs for Tour Guides

Training and professional development for tourist guides in Saudi Arabia are critical components in ensuring that guides

are well-prepared to represent the nation's rich heritage accurately and engagingly (Saudi Tour Guide Association, 2024).

As Saudi Arabia's tourism sector expands, underpinned by initiatives such as Vision 2030, the demand for qualified tourist guides who can offer immersive and informative experiences to visitors is on the rise. Recognizing this, the Saudi government and various organizations have implemented comprehensive training programs and certification processes aimed at enhancing the quality and professionalism of tourist guiding services.

Training programs for tourist guides in Saudi Arabia are designed to equip candidates with a deep understanding of the country's history, culture, geography, and tourism offerings. These programs often cover a broad range of subjects, including archaeological sites, Islamic heritage, local customs and traditions, environmental awareness, and customer service excellence. Additionally, language skills and storytelling techniques are emphasized to enable guides to communicate effectively with international visitors and create engaging narratives around the sites they showcase.

The Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) plays a significant role in organizing and accrediting training courses for tourist guides. These courses are delivered by experienced professionals and academics in the field of tourism and cultural heritage. The curriculum is regularly updated to include the latest developments in the tourism sector, ensuring that guides have up-to-date information and can offer fresh perspectives to visitors (Saudi Tour Guide Association, 2024).

Trends and Strategies for Enhancing the Skills of Tour Guides in Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Tourism, 2024a).

- a. **Cultural Competency Training:** With Saudi Arabia increasingly opening to international tourism, there's likely an emphasis on providing tour guides with

- training in cultural competency. This includes understanding and respecting the cultural norms, traditions, and sensitivities of tourists from diverse backgrounds.
- b. **Language Proficiency:** Given the international nature of tourism, proficiency in languages such as English, as well as other major languages spoken by tourists, is crucial. Tour guides may undergo language training programs to improve their communication skills.
 - c. **Technology Integration:** The use of technology, such as mobile apps, audio guides, and virtual reality, is becoming more prevalent in the tourism industry. Tour guides may receive training on how to incorporate these technologies into their tours to enhance the visitor experience.
 - d. **Interpersonal Skills:** Tour guides need strong interpersonal skills to effectively engage with tourists, address their questions and concerns, and ensure a positive experience. Training in areas such as communication, active listening, and conflict resolution can help develop these skills.
 - e. **Sustainability and Responsible Tourism:** As the global focus on sustainable and responsible tourism grows, tour guides may receive training on how to promote environmentally friendly practices, respect local communities, and minimize the impact of tourism on cultural and natural heritage sites.
 - f. **Continuous Professional Development:** Ongoing training and professional development opportunities are essential for tour guides to stay updated with industry trends, regulations, and best practices. This may involve attending workshops, seminars, or online courses offered by tourism organizations or educational institutions.

For specific information about recent skills development initiatives for tour guides in Saudi Arabia, I recommend reaching out to the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) or other relevant tourism authorities in the country.

To become a certified tourist guide in Saudi Arabia, candidates must successfully complete the prescribed training program and pass a comprehensive examination. The certification process assesses the candidate's knowledge of Saudi heritage, language proficiency, communication skills, and ability to manage group tours effectively. Upon passing the examination, candidates receive a tourist guide license issued by the SCTH, which is a testament to their qualifications and readiness to practice as professional guides (Saudi Arabia's e-Government Portal, 2024).

The certification process also includes periodic assessments and refresher courses to ensure that licensed guides maintain high standards of professionalism and are current with new developments in the tourism sector⁴. This ongoing professional development is crucial for guides to continuously improve their skills and adapt to changing visitor expectations.

The structured training and certification process for tourist guides in Saudi Arabia has a significant impact on the quality of tourism experiences. Well-trained and certified guides are essential ambassadors for Saudi culture and heritage, capable of engaging visitors with informative and memorable tours. Their professionalism and expertise not only enhance visitor satisfaction but also contribute to the positive image of Saudi Arabia as a premier tourist destination. The training and professional development of tourist guides are pivotal in the growth of Saudi Arabia's tourism sector.

⁴ Recognizing the diversity of Saudi Arabia's tourism offerings, the training and certification process allows for specialization in various domains such as cultural heritage, eco-tourism, adventure tourism, and urban tours. Specialized training enables guides to develop

expertise in specific areas of interest, catering to the diverse preferences of visitors and enhancing the overall quality of the tourism experience.

By ensuring that guides are knowledgeable, skilled, and passionate about sharing their country's heritage, Saudi Arabia is setting a high standard for cultural tourism and positioning itself as a leading destination on the global tourism map.

The inclusion and empowerment of women in the tourist guiding profession in Saudi Arabia mark a significant shift towards gender equality in the workforce, challenging traditional societal perceptions and opening new avenues for women's participation in the cultural and economic spheres. This transformative change aligns with the broader objectives of Vision 2030, which aims to increase women's participation in the workforce and promote diversity in various sectors, including tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2024b).

The Mechanisms of Work of A Tour Guide in Saudi Arabia

The mechanisms of work of a tour guide in Saudi Arabia encompass a variety of responsibilities and skills tailored to ensure the smooth and enriching experience of tourists. Here are some key aspects (Ministry of Tourism, 2024b):

- a. **Knowledge of Local Culture and History:** Tour guides in Saudi Arabia need a deep understanding of the country's culture, history, traditions, and customs. They must be able to provide accurate and engaging explanations about historical sites, cultural landmarks, and religious significance.
- b. **Language Proficiency:** Fluency in multiple languages, especially Arabic and English, is essential for tour guides to effectively communicate with tourists from diverse backgrounds. Clear communication enhances the overall experience and ensures that information is understood correctly.
- c. **Safety and Logistics:** Tour guides are responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of tourists throughout the duration of the tour. This includes coordinating transportation, managing schedules, and providing guidance on safety

protocols, especially during outdoor activities or visits to remote areas.

- d. **Interpretation and Storytelling:** A skilled tour guide can turn a visit to a historical site or cultural attraction into a captivating narrative. They use storytelling techniques to engage tourists, making the experience more memorable and meaningful.
- e. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Given the diverse backgrounds of tourists visiting Saudi Arabia, tour guides must demonstrate cultural sensitivity and respect for different beliefs and practices. This includes providing appropriate guidance on dress code, behaviour, and etiquette in various settings.
- f. **Customer Service:** Tour guides play a crucial role in ensuring customer satisfaction by addressing inquiries, resolving issues, and accommodating special requests. They should be attentive to the needs of tourists and strive to provide a personalized and enjoyable experience.
- g. **Continuous Learning and Professional Development:** To stay updated with new developments in the tourism industry and enhance their skills, tour guides in Saudi Arabia often undergo training programs and participate in workshops organized by relevant authorities or tourism associations.

These mechanisms of work enable tour guides to fulfil their role as ambassadors of Saudi Arabia's cultural and natural heritage, contributing to the positive reputation of the country as a tourist destination.

Changing Societal Perceptions

The entry of women into the tourist guiding profession has played a pivotal role in changing societal perceptions about women's capabilities and roles in public life. Historically, the tourism sector, particularly tourist guiding, was dominated by men, reflecting broader gender norms and restrictions on women's employment. However, as Saudi Arabia embarked on a

journey of social and economic reforms, the tourism sector emerged as a key area for promoting gender inclusivity.

Just a few years ago, many jobs were considered "taboo" for Saudi women. However, with Saudi Arabia's direction towards Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Program for 2020, along with a policy of openness and encouragement for women to participate in the labor market and enter new fields, and granting them some rights that were previously denied, Saudi women have found new work areas, including the field of organization and tourist guiding.

The empowerment of women through their inclusion in the tourist guiding profession has had a positive impact on gender equality in Saudi Arabia. It not only provides women with meaningful career opportunities but also challenges traditional gender roles, showcasing women's ability to lead and excel in areas previously considered male-dominated.

Several factors have contributed to breaking the monopoly men had on the profession of tourist guiding, with many Saudi women joining the field driven by passion and work. Vision 2030 has accelerated the process of women's empowerment and expanded their opportunities to compete for influential positions. Additionally, the openness permeating society and the vitality brought about by new transformations, along with the revitalization of the tourism sector, which necessitates the integration of women into its many details and leveraging their role and presence to fulfill various tasks (Saudi Arabia's e-Government Portal, 2023).

This shift has broader implications for societal attitudes towards women's participation in public and professional life, contributing to a more inclusive and diverse workforce. It also enhances the tourism experience for visitors by offering a

more comprehensive understanding of Saudi culture from diverse perspectives⁵.

The government and various organizations have supported initiatives to train and license female tourist guides, recognizing their potential to contribute uniquely to the tourism experience. Women guides bring diverse perspectives, deep cultural insights, and a nuanced understanding of Saudi heritage, enriching the narrative and making tours more relatable to a wider audience, including families and female travelers.

Saudi Females Pioneers in Tour Guiding

Saudi Arabia has consistently demonstrated its need for female tour guides, and through various situations and jobs, society has recognized women's ability to compete, excel, and succeed.

There are unique stories in this field, but they were the first light on the long road to empowering women in it. Abeir Abusuliman holds the title of the first Saudi female tour guide, her passion led her to work as a guide and introducer to the secrets of old Jeddah. Her linguistic skills, holding a degree in English Literature, aided her in this endeavor, and she was among the first to obtain a license to work as a guide later (E3rafaktar, 2023).

She also contributed to opening the training field in front of female students at the College of Tourism Guidance in the Kingdom, to train them on how to conduct these tours. Saudi tour guide Mariam Al-Harbi was able to steal the spotlight in the tourism field, which was exclusively for men, by winning the "Best Tour Guide in the Kingdom" award for 2017, making her the first Saudi woman to receive this title.

Several female guides have become pioneers in the field, breaking stereotypes, and inspiring others to follow in their footsteps. These women have successfully navigated challenges, combining their passion

⁵ The ability to innovate and achieve the desired success has motivated a number of Saudi women to participate in the tourist guiding course organized by the Tourism Authority in Asir. They affirmed their ability to embark

on this activity, which is no longer limited to men, and expressed to "Okaz" their confidence in presenting a bright image of the Saudi woman.

for Saudi heritage with professional skills to deliver compelling and engaging tours. Their stories of perseverance and achievement have been instrumental in encouraging more women to consider careers in tourist guiding. One notable example is Rasha Al Agha, who became one of the first licensed female tourist guides in Saudi Arabia. Her journey into the profession was driven by a deep-seated love for her country's history and a desire to share its rich cultural narratives with the world. Rasha's success has paved the way for other women, demonstrating that tourist guiding is a viable and rewarding career path for women in Saudi Arabia (Radio Sawa, 2024).

Salma Al-Qahtani, a tourist guide in Asir, that ancient artifacts have occupied her thoughts since childhood, which motivated her to realize her dream of becoming a tourist guide for these eternal archaeological landmarks. She says, "Among these artifacts, I find myself a peace ambassador reaching towards the horizon, concerned with the culture, history, and authenticity of the Asir region's environment." Regarding her beginnings, she says, "When the acceptance door for Saudi female guides opened, I submitted my file to the National Tourism and Heritage Authority in Asir and joined a training course that included 26 trainees." About the future, Al-Qahtani says: "My goal is to establish a tourism company to organize tourist trips from inside and outside the Kingdom to introduce the Arab and foreign visitor to my country's heritage". Al-Qahtani invited young women who have a passion and love for heritage to pursue a tourist guide license, to work in this distinguished field (Okaz Newspaper, 2023).

Tourist guide Sarah Issa expressed her passion for tourism and exploring archaeological sites, which led her to join tourist guiding. Issa finds no difference between the work of men and women as tourist guides, indicating that she feels no embarrassment in working in this field. She confirmed that her family encourages her

to join this rich field. Issa added, "I fear the lack of attention from specialists in the tourist guide, who bears the responsibility for the success of the tourist trip and presenting a positive image of his country to the tourist, as the guide is the main source of information that tourists obtain about the civilizational, historical, cultural heritage, and the customs, traditions, and social life experienced by the inhabitants of these tourist areas (Okaz Newspaper, 2023).

Mahboubia Al-Juhani, the first tour guide in Yanbu, western Saudi Arabia, works as a director for the women's branch of a national travel and tourism institution, offering a unique experience that broke many taboos. She started designing tourism programs in the field of diving, which Yanbu is famous for, Yanbu safari program, mountain climbing programs, and special programs for rural tourism there. Manal Al-Surur is the first tour guide fluent in sign language in the southern region. The Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage in the Asir region granted her a license along with a group of guides after completing a 5-day training and qualification program for tour guides organized by the National Center for Human Resources Development "Takamul" at the Commission (Sapq News, 2023).

As for the guide Maha AlHussein, she hosted more than 16 tourists in her home in Riyadh, where she began the idea while experimenting with one of the applications serving travelers in 2019. She tells "Independent Arabia" that she hosted a Japanese tourist in her home after seeing the tourist's desire to come to Riyadh and look for accommodation for three days. Her family welcomed the idea and agreed to host the tourist, who experienced staying with a Saudi family, tasting Najdi food, and learning about the customs and traditions of the region. After that, she hosted tourists from China, New Zealand, Australia, America, Spain, and Japan (Okaz Newspaper, 2023).

The inclusion and empowerment of women in the tourist guiding profession in Saudi Arabia represent a significant step forward in achieving gender equality and diversifying the workforce. By breaking down barriers and challenging stereotypes, female tourist guides are reshaping societal perceptions and contributing to the dynamic growth of the tourism sector. Their stories of success and leadership not only enrich the cultural tourism experience but also inspire future generations of women to pursue their passions and ambitions in the tourism industry and beyond.

The profession of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia, amidst its rapid growth and significant contributions to the tourism sector, encounters several challenges that test the adaptability and expertise of guides. These challenges, ranging from cultural sensitivities and language barriers to the evolving expectations of modern travelers, necessitate a strategic approach to ensure the profession not only thrives but also enhances the overall tourism experience in the kingdom. At the same time, these challenges present unique opportunities for growth, innovation, and the elevation of the tourist guiding profession within the context of Saudi Arabia's tourism boom under Vision 2030.

Challenges Faced by Tourist Guides in Saudi Arabia

Tourist guides must handle cultural sensitivities to respect local norms while providing an enriching experience for guests. This entails knowing and explaining the importance of religious places, cultural standards, and social etiquette to visitors from various backgrounds. linguistic hurdles: Because Saudi Arabia has a global audience, linguistic hurdles can be a big obstacle. Tourist guides must often be multilingual or have excellent communication mechanisms in place to cater to tourists from all over the world, ensuring that language difficulties do not detract from the tour's quality (Velasquez, 2005).

To address cultural sensitivities, ongoing training programs for tour guides emphasize the value of cultural knowledge and courteous communication. These programs provide guides with the information and skills needed to bridge cultural gaps, ensuring that tours are conducted in a way that honors Saudi Arabia's legacy while being accessible to a worldwide audience. To suit modern tourists' growing expectations, tourist guides and tour operators are encouraged to create novel and individualized tour experiences. This entails incorporating technology, such as virtual reality or mobile apps, and emphasizing storytelling that highlights the distinctive qualities of Saudi culture, history, and natural beauty.

Tourist guides significantly contribute to sustainable tourism efforts in Saudi Arabia. They advocate for practices that respect both the environment and local traditions, guiding tourists towards supporting sustainable activities and local enterprises. This focus on sustainability helps direct tourism benefits to local communities and conservation projects, ensuring tourism development is both environmentally and culturally beneficial. Guides' deep local knowledge enables them to spotlight initiatives that tourists can support, thus ensuring tourism serves as a force for positive cultural and natural heritage preservation.

Tourist guides play a pivotal role in amplifying the economic benefits of tourism, extending their influence far beyond the immediate tourism industry. They serve as conduits to local businesses, advocating for traditional markets, artisan workshops, and authentic local dining experiences. This not only enriches the tourists' experience but also funnels financial advantages towards smaller, community-centric enterprises (Weiler & Black, 2015). By guiding tourists towards less explored attractions and immersing them in the local culture and crafts, guides contribute to a more balanced distribution of tourism revenue, bolstering the sustenance of local artisans, vendors, and small business owners.

Moreover, the growing demand for knowledgeable tourist guides fosters job creation and opens avenues for professional enhancement within the tourism sector, fueling economic progress and expansion. The drive towards professionalizing tourist guiding, emphasizing quality and sustainable practices, positions Saudi Arabia more competitively on the global tourism stage, drawing in visitors with a keen interest in immersive cultural and educational travel experiences.

Looking ahead, the tourist guiding profession in Saudi Arabia finds itself at a crossroads of tradition and progress, steered by technological advancements, the swift growth of the tourism industry, and a steadfast dedication to presenting the kingdom's extensive cultural heritage to an international audience. As Saudi Arabia further broadens its horizon to welcome global visitors, the tourist guiding field is anticipated to transform, creating new pathways for cross-cultural interactions and instigating constructive shifts within the tourism sector. This conclusion section delves into the anticipated future trajectories for this essential profession against the backdrop of Saudi Arabia's lofty tourism aspirations.

Integrating Technological Innovations

The incorporation of technology into the tourist guiding sector is not only imminent but also presents thrilling opportunities to enrich the visitor experience. Technologies like augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) are set to revolutionize how historical sites and cultural narratives are experienced, offering immersive encounters that were once beyond imagination (Bucher, 2018). Tourist guides utilizing these technologies can provide tours that meld the tangible aspect of visiting a historical location with digital reconstructions of past events, notable figures, or everyday life scenarios from yesteryears. This fusion of actual and virtual experiences promises to make the cultural heritage of Saudi Arabia more accessible and

appealing, especially to the tech-savvy younger travelers.

Embracing these technological tools not only amplifies the guides' capacity to communicate but also deepens their engagement with tourists across multiple dimensions. Moreover, tourist guiding career stands as a catalyst for positive evolution within the tourism industry, championing sustainable and ethical tourism practices. Positioned at the forefront of promoting respectful engagement with cultural and natural sites, guides underscore the significance of conservation and reverence. Their influence motivates tourists to embrace responsible tourism practices, contributing to the enduring sustainability of Saudi Arabia's trajectory of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia is on a path of significant transformation, highlighted by a future brimming with possibilities for expansion, innovation, and cultural interconnectivity.

As the kingdom advances its tourism sector and integrates emerging technologies, the essence and influence of tourist guides in sculpting the visitor experience are set to become more pronounced. Their endeavors not only enhance the cultural encounters of those journeying through Saudi Arabia but also stand as a vibrant testament to the unifying power of cultural heritage. Through their commitment, tourist guides in Saudi Arabia symbolize a beacon of progress towards a future where tourism is recognized for its capacity to bridge cultural divides and cultivate a sense of global unity.

Comparative Analysis

The evolution and impact of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia can be examined through a comparative lens with other countries or regions that share similar cultural heritage and tourism dynamics. For instance, a study by Li and Xu on tourist guiding in China highlights the crucial role of guides in bridging cultural gaps and enhancing visitor experiences (Li & Xu, 2020). Similarly, research by Smith et al. on tourist guiding in Morocco underscores

the importance of guides as cultural ambassadors and educators, particularly in the context of preserving heritage sites and promoting sustainable tourism (Smith, 2019). Comparing these findings with the Saudi Arabian context reveals several lessons and innovative approaches that could be adapted or replicated:

a. Professional Development Programs:

Both China and Morocco have implemented rigorous training and certification programs for tourist guides, ensuring they are well-prepared to showcase cultural heritage accurately and engagingly. Emulating these programs in Saudi Arabia could enhance the professionalism and expertise of tourist guides (Smith, 2019).

b. Empowerment of Women: In countries like Nepal and Jordan, efforts have been made to empower women as tourist guides, contributing to gender equality and diversity in the profession. Drawing inspiration from these initiatives, Saudi Arabia could implement similar programs to encourage the active participation of women in the tourist guiding industry (Boulanger, 2017; Khadka & Bhattarai, 2018).

c. Use of Technology: Countries such as Japan and South Korea have leveraged technology, such as audio guides and virtual reality experiences, to enhance the tourist guiding experience and appeal to modern travellers. Integrating innovative technologies into tourist guiding practices in Saudi Arabia could attract a wider audience and enrich visitor experiences (Kim, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2021).

d. Community Engagement: In destinations like Peru and Kenya, community-based tourism initiatives have empowered local communities to actively participate in guiding tourists, fostering a sense of ownership and cultural authenticity. Adopting similar community engagement models in Saudi Arabia could promote sustainable tourism practices and support local livelihoods (Andrés & Prüggl, 2016; Njogu & Njoroge, 2014).

By drawing lessons from international contexts and adapting innovative approaches, Saudi Arabia can strengthen its tourist guiding industry, enhance cultural exchange, and promote sustainable tourism development.

METHODS

This study employs a multi-method approach to explore the evolution and impact of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia, with a focus on empowerment, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism. The methodology consists of the following components.

Literature Review

A comprehensive review of academic literature, government reports, policy documents, and industry publications related to tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia and comparable international contexts. The literature review serves to establish a theoretical framework, identify key themes and trends, and contextualize the study within existing research.

Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a purposive sample of tourist guides, industry experts, government officials, and other stakeholders involved in the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia. Interviews will explore topics such as the role of tourist guides as cultural ambassadors, the effectiveness of training and professional development programs, challenges faced by guides, and opportunities for empowerment and innovation. Thematic analysis will be employed to identify patterns, insights, and emergent themes from the interview data.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis will be conducted to compare the evolution and impact of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia with other countries or regions with similar cultural heritage and tourism dynamics.

Existing literature, case studies, and empirical evidence from international contexts will be analyzed to identify lessons learned and innovative approaches that could be adapted or replicated in the Saudi Arabian context.

Document Analysis

Official documents, policies, regulations, and strategic plans related to tourist guiding and tourism development in Saudi Arabia will be analyzed to understand the institutional frameworks and support mechanisms in place. Document analysis will provide insights into government initiatives, industry standards, and future directions for the tourist guiding industry.

Synthesis and Interpretation

The findings from qualitative interviews, comparative analysis, and document analysis will be synthesized to develop a comprehensive understanding of the evolution and impact of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia. Data triangulation will be employed to validate findings and enhance the credibility of the study. Theoretical frameworks, such as cultural heritage preservation and sustainable tourism development, will be used to interpret the findings and draw conclusions.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the research findings, policy recommendations and practical strategies will be formulated to enhance the empowerment, professionalism, and inclusivity of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia. Recommendations will be tailored to address identified challenges and capitalize on opportunities for improvement in the tourist guiding industry.

This methodology integrates qualitative research methods, comparative analysis, and document analysis to provide a comprehensive examination of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia and generate actionable insights for stakeholders in the tourism sector.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

There will be many opportunities for growth, innovation, and cultural exchange in the future of Saudi Arabia's tourist guiding industry, which is undergoing a period of profound change. The importance of tour guides and the role they play in shaping visitors' experiences will grow as the kingdom develops its tourism industry and adopts new technology. In addition to enriching the cultural encounters of tourists in Saudi Arabia, their efforts are a living testimony to the power of shared heritage to bring people together. A future where tourism is acknowledged for its ability to unite people across cultures and generations is within reach, thanks to the dedication of Saudi Arabia's tour guides.

Tourist guides play a crucial role in the story of Saudi Arabia's booming tourism industry. These cultural keepers guide the kingdom toward its lofty goals of becoming a world-renowned tourist destination by drawing on their knowledge, enthusiasm, and storytelling skills to preserve the country's rich history and culture. Their work goes beyond just facilitating; they are creators of immersive experiences, bridges across realms, and advocates for a profound respect for the complex tapestry of Saudi heritage, customs, and contemporary innovations. Gender parity and social transformation are broader goals of Vision 2030, and the advancement of women and their active participation in this sector is a step in the right direction.

Looking ahead, the field of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia is filled with possibilities. An improved work environment is on the horizon thanks to modern technology and the growing number of the kingdom's tourist projects. Guides to Saudi Arabia's tourism attractions will always be vital representatives of the kingdom's rich cultural heritage, representing the welcoming nature and national pride that are fundamental to Saudi Arabia character. Guides to Saudi Arabia's tourist attractions are more than just storytellers; they are

ambassadors for the kingdom's future in the global tourism industry, brimming with positive change and cultural exchange.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evolving role of tourist guides in Saudi Arabia embodies a profound narrative of heritage empowerment and cultural diplomacy. As explored in the article, these individuals are more than mere conveyors of historical facts; they are pivotal in shaping the global perception of Saudi culture and heritage. By highlighting their rigorous training, professional development, and particularly the increasing inclusion of women in their ranks, this article underscores the tour guides' central role in both preserving Saudi's rich history and promoting sustainable tourism practices. As Saudi Arabia continues to open its doors wider to the world under Vision 2030, the impact of these cultural ambassadors is invaluable. They not only enrich the visitor experience but also foster global connections and cultural exchange, reinforcing the kingdom's commitment to becoming a leader in global tourism. Through their stories, Saudi tourist guides are weaving a vibrant tapestry of tradition and modernity that invites the world to discover the kingdom's past, engage with its present, and anticipate its promising future.

Recommendations for Future Studies

- a. Longitudinal Study on Empowerment of Women: Conduct a longitudinal study to track the progress of initiatives aimed at empowering women in the tourist guiding profession in Saudi Arabia. Explore the long-term impact of gender equality programs, barriers to women's participation, and strategies for overcoming challenges.
- b. Impact Assessment of Training Programs: Conduct an impact assessment of training and professional development programs for tourist guides in Saudi Arabia. Evaluate the effectiveness of current training initiatives in enhancing the quality of tourist guiding services, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting sustainable tourism practices.
- c. Cross-Cultural Competence in Tourist Guiding: Investigate the development of cross-cultural competence among tourist guides in Saudi Arabia. Explore how guides navigate cultural sensitivities, communicate effectively with diverse audiences, and foster intercultural understanding in the tourism context.
- d. Technology Integration in Tourist Guiding: Explore the integration of technology, such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and mobile applications, into tourist guiding practices in Saudi Arabia. Assess the impact of technological innovations on visitor experiences, engagement with cultural heritage sites, and the role of tourist guides as storytellers.
- e. Community Engagement and Sustainable Tourism: Investigate the role of community engagement in promoting sustainable tourism practices in Saudi Arabia. Explore community-based tourism initiatives, partnerships between tourist guides and local communities, and the socio-economic benefits of involving communities in tourism development.
- f. Tourist Guide Certification and Standards: Examine the certification processes, standards, and accreditation systems for tourist guides in Saudi Arabia. Compare certification requirements with international best practices, assess the alignment with industry standards, and identify opportunities for enhancing professionalism and quality assurance.
- g. Tourist Guide Well-being and Job Satisfaction: Investigate the well-being, job satisfaction, and professional challenges faced by tourist guides in Saudi Arabia. Explore factors influencing guides' job satisfaction, mental health, work-life balance, and opportunities for career advancement in the tourism industry.
- h. Tourist Guide Perspectives on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Explore tourist guides' perspectives on the United

Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their role in advancing sustainable tourism in Saudi Arabia. Investigate guides' awareness of SDGs, integration of sustainability principles into guiding practices, and contributions to local communities and environmental conservation efforts.

These recommendations aim to guide future research efforts in advancing our understanding of tourist guiding in Saudi Arabia and addressing emerging challenges and opportunities in the tourism sector. By exploring these topics, researchers can contribute to the development of evidence-based policies, practices, and interventions to support the empowerment, professionalism, and sustainability of tourist guiding in the Kingdom.

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