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Saudi Arabia to allow alcohol sales in select venues ahead of major global events

Licenses will be limited to luxury hotels, resorts, and international gatherings as part of broader tourism and economic reforms

Friday, May 16, 2025



Saudi Arabia is taking a significant step toward opening its doors to international tourism and global events by issuing licenses for the sale of alcoholic beverages in select locations. The move, set to begin in 2026, comes as the kingdom prepares to host major international gatherings, including the World Expo 2030 and the FIFA World Cup in 2034. The initiative is part of a broader strategy to attract more visitors and enhance the experience for tourists, business travelers, and expatriates.

The new licensing program will allow about 600 venues across the country to serve alcoholic drinks such as wine, beer, and cider. Spirits and beverages with an alcohol content above 20 percent will remain prohibited. The licenses are being granted

primarily to five-star hotels, distributors, luxury resorts along the Red Sea, the Sindalah Island project, Neom city developments, expatriate residential compounds, embassies, and selected international events. These locations have been chosen for their appeal to foreign visitors and their ability to maintain strict controls over alcohol distribution and consumption.

Saudi authorities have emphasized that alcohol will remain banned in retail stores, open public spaces, private homes, and for personal production or consumption. The government aims to ensure that access to alcoholic beverages is limited to controlled environments catering mainly to non-Muslim visitors and residents. This approach mirrors similar policies already in place in neighboring countries such as Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Both nations have seen positive results from regulated alcohol sales in designated areas, which have contributed to increased tourism and international business activity.

The decision marks a notable shift for Saudi Arabia, which has long enforced a complete ban on alcohol as part of its adherence to Islamic law. However, officials say the change is necessary to meet the expectations of international guests attending high-profile events and conferences. By offering limited access to alcoholic drinks in secure settings, Saudi Arabia hopes to compete more effectively with other destinations in the region that already cater to global travelers’ preferences.

Preparations for this policy change are underway as part of Vision 2030, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s ambitious plan to diversify the Saudi economy beyond oil. Tourism is a key pillar of this vision, with investments pouring into new resorts, entertainment complexes, and cultural attractions designed to draw millions of visitors each year. The upcoming World Expo in Riyadh and the FIFA World Cup are expected to bring unprecedented numbers of tourists and participants from around the world.

Industry experts believe that allowing alcohol in select venues will make Saudi Arabia more attractive for international conferences, sporting events, and cultural festivals. Organizers of these events often cite access to familiar amenities as a factor when choosing host countries. By aligning its policies with those of its Gulf neighbors while maintaining strict controls, Saudi Arabia aims to balance tradition with modernization.

The rollout of alcohol licenses will be closely monitored by government agencies responsible for tourism and public safety. Training programs for staff at licensed venues are being developed to ensure compliance with regulations and responsible service practices. Security measures will also be put in place to prevent unauthorized distribution or consumption outside approved locations.

As Saudi Arabia moves forward with this initiative, it signals a willingness to adapt longstanding policies in pursuit of economic growth and global engagement. The coming years will test how well the kingdom can manage this transition while preserving its cultural values and legal framework. For now, officials remain focused on preparing for an influx of visitors eager to experience a changing Saudi Arabia on the world stage.