

## Menoufia University Faculty of Arts Department of Geography Geographical Analysis of Desert Tourism in the Eastern Province: A Case Study of Dammam and Al-Ahsa

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### ABSTRACT

The study aims to identify the nature of desert tourism and to examine its spatial dimensions and the economic and social characteristics of its participants, as well as how to develop this unique form of tourism in desert communities in general and in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in particular. A comparison between the Dammam and Al-Ahsa regions highlights many spatial dimensions and challenges for this unique form of tourism, given the inclusion of the Al-Ahsa Oasis in the World Heritage List and in light of the Kingdom's Vision 2030.

Despite the presence of the natural environment surrounding this type of tourism, it does not hold a prominent place on the map of Saudi Arabia's tourism potential, in addition to a lack of adequate awareness of the importance of this type of tourism within the Kingdom's tourism market. The Kingdom's tourism offerings are in urgent need of greater publicity regarding desert tourism to promote Saudi tourism products and establish their global standing.

The study addressed three main topics: the first on the natural and human attractions of wilderness tourism; the second on the field analysis of the sample; and the third on the economic characteristics and challenges faced by tourists.

Among the study's findings was the diversity of objectives among visitors to desert areas; the majority of cases were for the purpose of enjoying the natural surroundings, followed by escaping the hustle and bustle of the city. Additionally, the majority of age groups were young adults, accounting for more than half of the sample cases. Among the most significant environmental impacts of desert tourism are various forms of environmental pollution, as well as the risk of some tourists getting lost in the desert and other hazards.

The study's key recommendations included making Desert tourism a priority among the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's tourism sectors and incorporating it into the Saudi Tourism Authority, as well as working to strengthen environmental oversight by the Ministry of Environment and ensuring the sustainability of tourism resources.

**KEYWORDS:** Desert Tourism; Field Analysis; Socio-Economic Characteristics

### INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world, having become one of the most important sectors in international trade. While it is a modern academic discipline, it is also one of the oldest practices actually undertaken by humans. Its activities and types are as numerous and varied as human activities themselves. Nature-based or eco-tourism is considered the most important and newest form of tourism because it is based on environmental balance, in addition to the well-known economic and social benefits of tourism in general.

Desert tourism is a type of ecological (nature) tourism, with the desert as its setting. It encompasses natural features such as sand dune formations, mountains, dry valleys, and natural oases, as well as human elements represented by the lifestyle and culture of desert peoples, which are in harmony with the desert's natural environment.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is distinguished by a rich and unique natural heritage that includes a variety of landmarks, natural landscapes, and wildlife, as well as wetlands, desert, and coastal areas. This natural heritage provides one of the most important sustainable economic resources for the tourism industry.

Natural heritage is a fundamental element of the tourism industry, and its role within tourism is as a tourist attraction that can be developed to entertain visitors and residents and contribute to the local economy without harming the natural heritage as a resource in itself or local residential communities; in other words, managing and preserving the tourism resource within a framework that achieves effectiveness and sustainability (General Authority for Tourism and National Heritage, 2023).

Desert tourism, rooted in ancestral heritage, is one of the types of tourism that poses a challenge on the Saudi tourism map due to its great importance to many residents of the region; therefore, it must be developed while avoiding its negative impacts on the environment.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest among nations in tourism, both in developed and developing societies, and in its sustainable development. Tourism has become a key driver of economic prosperity due to its importance in diversifying income sources and fostering social development, particularly in terms of cultural exchange among peoples. The characteristics of desert tourism and its participants vary from country to country, reflecting the degree of social well-being across different nations and regions.

### **Study Area**

The Eastern Region is located in the eastern part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, between latitude 29.3° North and latitude 23.3° South. It is bounded to the east by longitude 51°, and to the west by longitude 54°. The region takes the shape of a triangle, with the Arabian Gulf forming its eastern side. The second side is the Kingdom's southern border with the Sultanate of Oman and the former South Yemen, while the third side represents the boundaries adjacent to the Riyadh Region and the Northern Region of the Kingdom.

The region covers an area of 778,479 square kilometers, representing 36.2% of the Kingdom's total area of 2.4 million square kilometers (Eastern Province Chamber, 2023).

Administratively, Dammam and Al-Ahsa fall under the Eastern Province. This region of the Arabian Peninsula was historically known as "Bahrain" and included Al-Ahsa, Al-Qatif, and the island of Awl. Over time, the name "Bahrain" was narrowed to refer exclusively to the island of Awl and its surrounding islands, becoming the modern "State of Bahrain," while the rest of the region separated under the name "Hajar," which was replaced by the city of "Al-Ahsa" since the Qarmatian era in the 4th century AH. The name "Al-Ahsa" is derived from the region's most prominent feature: the proximity of its water to the earth's surface. Wherever one dug, water was found in many places, Al-Ahsa is the plural of "hasa," meaning a spring from which water flows. In 1370 AH (1950 CE), it was named the Eastern Province, and the emirate's seat was moved from the city of Al-Hofuf to the city of Dammam, which is now the region's capital (National Geospatial Platform, General Authority for Surveying and Geospatial Information).

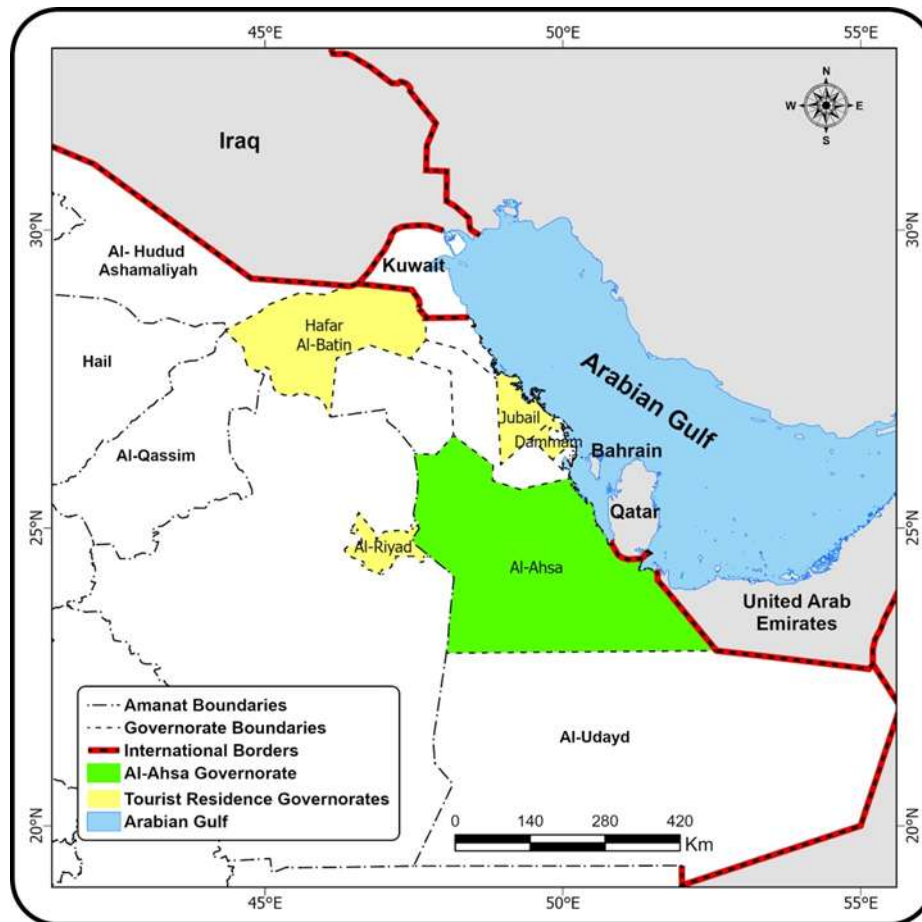


Figure 2: Inbound tourism to the study area

## Research Methods

The research methods employed to complete this study were diverse and included the following:

- 1- Statistical Method: The researcher used this method to conduct quantitative analysis using a computer to calculate the various percentages, averages, and equations in the study.
- 2- Cartographic method: The analyses were presented through a set of computer-generated graphs and maps; the researcher also used ArcGIS software to create the study's maps.
- 3- The field study was presented in detail.

## Chapter One

### Natural and Human Attractions for desert Tourism

#### First: Natural Attractions.

These are the most important factors leading to the establishment and prosperity of tourism, bearing in mind that each of these elements has its own unique advantages in attracting tourists, and that all these elements work together within a single framework that makes it difficult to separate them from one another in terms of their impact on successful and advanced tourism programs (Al-Jawhari, undated, p. 313).

Like all human activities, the tourism industry is influenced by the features of the surrounding natural environment, which has played an important and undeniable role in the distribution of

recreational sites and locations, as well as in determining the duration of tourist stays and the time of year during which these stays occur (Al-Zouka, 1995, p. 101).

**A. Geographical and Astronomical Location:** The location of any place or region on the Earth's surface largely determines its character, relationships, and connections. It also serves as a point from which it interacts with its surroundings and neighbors, and it has both a fixed geographical location and a variable one linked to economic, social, political, and technological relationships and developments (Al-Jawhari, p. 317) .

The Eastern Province enjoys a prime location and is home to a number of major cities known for their tourist attractions, such as Dammam, Jubail, Al-Ahsa Oasis, and Al-Ghafir. Al-Ahsa is distinguished by its size and the diversity of the region's natural resources, as it lies between latitudes  $30^{\circ} 22'$  and  $25^{\circ} 45'$  north and longitudes  $48^{\circ}$  and  $51^{\circ} 40'$  east (Geography of Al-Ahsa Province, 2023). Its geographical location has a significant impact on tourism, as it is bordered to the north by Baqiyah Province, the Arabian Gulf and Salwa Bay to the east, the Empty Quarter to the south, and the Dahna Desert to the west. It is distinguished as the gateway connecting the Kingdom to the Arab Gulf states; It is 190 km from Qatar, 150 km from the city of Dammam, and 328 km from the capital, Riyadh. Its area is 379,000 km<sup>2</sup>, equivalent to 20% of the territory of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Interactive Map of the Al-Ahsa Municipality, 2022) . The Empty Quarter desert covers about three-quarters of the province, while the area inhabited by people and where activities take place accounts for 18% of its total area and consists of the cities of Al-Hofuf and Al-Mubarraz, which are among the ten largest cities in the Kingdom, in addition to four major towns and 22 villages. According to 2017 statistics, Al-Ahsa led the Eastern Province in population with approximately 1,041,863 inhabitants (General Authority for Statistics and Information, General Census of Population and Housing in the Kingdom, 2022), while the city of Dammam, the regional capital of the Eastern Province, is geographically located on the coast of the Arabian Gulf. It is bordered to the north by the cities of Saihat and Qatif and the waters of the Arabian Gulf; to the south by the cities of Dhahran and Al-Khobar; to the east by the waters of the Arabian Gulf; and to the west by the Dahna Desert. Astronomically, it lies between latitudes  $19^{\circ} 26'$  and  $30^{\circ} 26'$  north, and longitudes  $55^{\circ} 49'$  and  $14^{\circ} 50'$  east, as shown in Figure (1), Dammam covers an area of 800 square kilometers and had an estimated population of approximately 1.2 million in 2019, representing 3% of the total population of the Eastern Province and about 5% of the Kingdom's total population (Abdulhussein, 2011, p. 124). Given Dammam's location on the coast of the Arabian Gulf, it features a waterfront that serves as the setting for numerous tourist activities. The region's picturesque sandy beaches are among its most significant assets and serve as a major tourist and recreational attraction.

**B. Climate:** Tourism is closely linked to the climatic characteristics of the region being visited; indeed, it is the variation in seasonal climates that largely determines the timing and duration of tourist visits. Climate is one of the most important natural factors influencing tourism, and weather is a key factor in deciding when to take vacations (Robinson, 1976). The climate, with its various elements—temperature, relative humidity, rainfall, and wind—directly affects the human body and one's social and spiritual life. Therefore, we find that the climate humans accept and function in is a warm, sunny one with moderate winds, as the human body and psychological state are influenced by the surrounding climate (Darwish, 1999, p. 146).

Because the Al-Ahsa region lies between the latitudes, a continental desert climate prevails in the province, as is the case in most of the Kingdom's territory. This local climate is characterized by high temperatures and prevailing drought during the summer months, with

temperatures dropping during the winter months; the average outdoor thermal comfort range is between  $-24^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $+33^{\circ}\text{C}$  (Annual Climate Reports for Al-Ahsa, General Authority for Meteorology and Environmental Protection, 2023). The period during which tourist traffic to Al-Ahsa Governorate is expected to increase is between January, February, and March; thereafter, tourist travel is expected to cease, with activity resuming in November and December as temperatures begin to drop.

As for Dammam's climate, it is characterized as a hot, humid desert climate in the summer and a cold, dry climate with little rainfall in the winter. Summer temperatures reach around  $46^{\circ}\text{C}$  with high humidity, while in winter temperatures drop to around  $8^{\circ}\text{C}$  with little rainfall (Annual Climate of Dammam, 2023).

We conclude that the season with the most moderate temperatures in the study area is winter, and therefore it is the most suitable season for human comfort and tourist enjoyment.

**B. Landforms:** Like all human activities, the tourism industry is influenced by the characteristics of the surrounding natural environment, which plays an important and undeniable role in the distribution of recreational sites, as well as in determining the length of a tourist's stay and the time of year during which that stay occurs (Al-Zouka, p. 101). The natural features of the Earth's surface are among the most important elements of tourist attraction worldwide, and their importance lies in:

- The topography is reflected in the road network according to the degree of slope; there are mountain, plain, and plateau roads, and each type determines the mode of transportation used.
- Topography constitutes a tourism product; mountaineering tourism is linked to mountainous terrain, benefiting from the principle that temperature decreases with altitude and vice versa.
- Sand formations are associated with safari tourism, or sand tourism, just as resorts are associated with beach tourism; thus, tourism is linked to the topography.
- The association of the Earth's natural surface features with tourism and recreation stems from the fact that many of these features offer scenic beauty, with their varied colors and shapes, the presence of water elements, and the diversity of their and wildlife on the one hand, and the association of these features with various types of water sports and means of recreation and entertainment on the other (Al-Jawhari, undated, p. 314). This means that the more diverse and varied the surface features are, the greater the tourist attraction (Ghanem, 2003, p. 505). The Eastern Province possesses numerous natural geographical features that constitute elements of tourist attraction, and thus the types of tourist sites are diverse, as they can be divided into mountains, lakes, oases, springs, and nature reserves.

**Mountainous Sites:** There are five groups of mountain ranges distributed across the four cardinal directions of Al-Ahsa Governorate, with some scattered throughout the governorate. The most famous of these is Jabal Al-Qara in Al-Ahsa Oasis, located 12 kilometers east of Al-Hofuf and covering an area of  $14\text{ km}^2$ . It is one of the archaeological sites that contributed to Al-Ahsa's inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List, as it contains numerous caves and caverns connected to one another by passages. These caves help moderate the climate during the hot summer months due to the natural thermal insulation of their rocks. Jabal Al-Qara was formerly known as Jabal Al-Shabaan, and Abu Muhammad Al-Hamadani described it as one of the three towns of Hijr, alongside Al-Mashqar and Al-Safa. To the northwest of Jabal Al-Qara lies a rocky hill known as Ras Al-Qara or Ras Al-Jabal, which tourists use for climbing. In the Al-Qaw neighborhood lies Mount Abu Hasees, which overlooks the village of Al-Tuwair. Locals used to visit it in the summer to relax in its caves, rest, and sleep away

from the scorching sun. Nearby is Mount Kenzan, which witnessed one of the victorious battles of the Kingdom's unifier, King Abdulaziz, in 1915. (Al-Saud et al., 2010, p. 15).

**Lake Al-Asfar:** This lake is located east of the city of Al-Hofuf. It was formed by spring water and rivers that flowed into it after irrigating the palm groves, creating the largest body of water in the Arabian Gulf region, covering an area of 240,000 m<sup>2</sup>. The depth of the lake varies depending on rainfall and water levels. The volume of water flowing into the lake in summer is estimated at 9 million m<sup>3</sup> over a surface area of 19.2 km<sup>2</sup>, while the volume of water flowing into the lake in winter reaches 59.5 million m<sup>3</sup>, covering an area of 48 km<sup>2</sup>. Lake Al-Asfar is home to tamarisk, shan, and fern trees and is the only lake in the Kingdom where a complete natural ecosystem thrives. The lake serves as a resting stop for various migratory birds that cross from north to south twice a year (World Heritage Centre, 2023).

**Springs:** The junction of the Ain al-Jawhariya spring with the irrigation and drainage project Throughout history, agriculture in the Eastern Province—particularly in Al-Ahsa—has flourished thanks to a large number of natural springs whose waters flowed year-round. The number of springs in Al-Ahsa is estimated at 195, most of which originate in the Al-Hofuf area to the east, and some originate from east of Al-Mubarraz, which consists of two sections: one located in the northern part of the province and the other in the southern part. The springs supplied the agricultural area with water through a network of canals and streams that formed the traditional irrigation system until the establishment of the irrigation and drainage project. Subsequently, some of these springs were converted into swimming pools, and were equipped with technologies that help them supply water to the irrigation canals after their flow levels declined.

Among the most important of these springs are: Ain Umm Sab'ah: Located north of the city of Al-Mubarraz, it is so named because its waters flow into seven rivers. It is a hot spring whose waters treat rheumatic diseases and neuralgia due to their sulfur content. During the Ottoman era, the Turks built a dome over it to serve as a bathing facility. Ain Al-Khudud: Located south of Ain Al-Hagel, it is the largest of the springs and is situated in the center of Al-Hofuf. It serves the eastern part of Al-Ahsa Oasis. Its flow is estimated at 20,000 gallons per minute, and the width of its channel exceeds 20 meters. Ain Al-Jawhariyah is located near the village of Al-Bataliyah and is a medium-sized spring.

**Ain Al-Hara:** Located north of Al-Mubarraz, its flow is estimated at 20,000 gallons per minute, irrigating the palm groves of Al-Batalia, Al-Shu'ba, and Al-Mubarraz. It is named for the heat of its water, which flows through a single channel. Ain Al-Haal is located in the center of the palm groves of Al-Hofuf and is considered one of the largest springs in the region; Its flow is estimated at approximately 22,500 gallons per minute. Ain Al-Bahiriya: Located west of Al-Hofuf in the Al-Saifa area, its waters irrigate the orchards of Al-Hofuf. It is one of the oldest springs in Al-Ahsa. Ain Mansour and other springs are known for therapeutic tourism (Al-Saud, others; previously cited reference, 16) .

**C. Wildlife (Biodiversity):** The Kingdom's wilderness is home to a rich biodiversity by global standards, as it shelters thousands of plant and animal species. At least 505 bird species and more than 100 reptile species have been recorded in the Kingdom, and more than 70 species of mammals. More than 200 species of birds migrate through the Kingdom each year, stopping to feed as they travel between their breeding and wintering grounds (Al-Ahsa Municipality, Official Website, Saturday, 19/3/1441 AH), which has contributed to the development of ecotourism.

**Human Resources:** Tourism relies on the human role in utilizing natural resources and developing their use in a way that makes them suitable for serving society. Human resources are represented by the human element, as humans are the goal and creators of development, as well as transportation and historical factors, including archaeological sites, facilities, and hospitality services (Stephen, 2002, p.132 Cultural factors: The Eastern Province is distinguished by the presence of numerous cultural heritage sites—695 sites, constituting 9.1% of the total 7,624 heritage sites in the Kingdom (Eastern Province Chamber, Tourism Investment in the Eastern Province, Center for Studies and Research, Economic Affairs Sector, January 2011, p. 14).

**A. Handicrafts:** The region has been a member of UNESCO's Creative Cities Network in the field of crafts and folk arts since November 2015; it is the third Arab city to join the network and the first in the Gulf region. Handicrafts in the Eastern Province vary from pottery, weaving, carpet-making, basketry, pearl diving, and boat-building. Al-Ahsa is unique for its rural industries, which rely primarily on palm trees for the most famous handicrafts, in addition to leatherwork. Those engaged in leather crafts are called kharraz, who prepare, clean, and tan the hides before crafting them into buckets, shoes, bags, leather belts, and straps. The craft of weaving bashot is one that the people of Al-Ahsa have preserved to this day, producing a special type of bashot called the Al-Ahsa style, which is woven by hand. There is also the process of pearl diving in the deep sea, a collective effort carried out by sailors on specialized vessels.

**B. Historic Mosques:** These are key attractions for religious and historical tourism in the region. Among the most famous historic mosques is the Jowathi Mosque: Located about 20 km northeast of Al-Hofuf, it is the second mosque in Islam where Friday prayers were held after the Prophet's Mosque. It was built by the Banu Abd al-Qays, who inhabited Al-Ahsa during that period, and is mentioned in many historical books. (General Authority for Tourism and National Heritage, Saudi Seasons, 10/25/1439)

**Historic Palaces:** Mahairis Palace is located in northern Al-Mubarraz on the highest hill in the city, 14 km north of Al-Hofuf. It was constructed in 1794 during the early Saudi era and is a military fortress featuring a watchtower (Al-Ahsa News, 2023).

**Ibrahim Palace:** Also known as Ibrahim Fortress, named after Ibrahim Pasha, the Ottoman commander who ruled the Al-Ahsa Governorate at the time, the palace is located north of Al-Hofuf on a 16,500 m<sup>2</sup> site. It was built in 1556 and served as the main headquarters of the Ottoman garrison in Al-Ahsa, which was then part of Basra. Its architecture blends local provincial designs with Ottoman and military styles. The area surrounding the palace has been restored to serve as a venue for events and festivals under the supervision of the General Authority for Tourism and Heritage and is open to visitors.

**Sahoud Palace:** Located in the Al-Hazm neighborhood of Al-Mubarraz on an area of 1,750 m<sup>2</sup>, it was built in 1800 to defend the city, protect agricultural lands, and monitor seasonal Bedouin camps. It is constructed of dried mud, clay, and wooden forms. It features six circular towers and a rectangular tower built above the entrance, used for surveillance. The palace is surrounded by a low defensive wall, which was fortified by a parallel moat.

**Archaeological Museums:** The museum houses 1,400 artifacts dating back to 5,000 BC, as well as tools and artifacts from the Stone Age found at the Ain Qanas and Al-Dossariyah sites. It is one of the oldest museums in the Kingdom, having opened in 1983. It includes the Al-Ahsa National Museum: Located in the Al-Salhiya neighborhood of Al-Hofuf, it was founded

in 1983 and showcases the history of Al-Ahsa across various historical eras, as well as the region's folk heritage (General Authority for Tourism and National Heritage, 2023).

**C. Traditions and Customs of the People of Al-Ahsa:** Completion of the Quran: Education in Al-Ahsa, like in other regions, relied on the “mutawwa’,” who focused primarily on teaching the Holy Quran, followed by the Hadith and writing. Study took the form of circles, with each group at the same level learning together. After a boy or girl completed the Quran, they would wear their finest clothes and be paraded through the homes of their relatives, followed by a group of boys, and sweets would be distributed (Wikipedia, September 6, 2019).

- The Wedding Bath in Al-Ahsa: “Al-Ghusula” is the common term for a trip to the pools, including Ain Umm Sab’a, for swimming and washing the body, and is associated with wedding ceremonies.
- The Mashrati or Abu Tabila: This is a Ramadan tradition unique to Al-Ahsa for over 1,200 years. When it is time for suhoor, a man called the Mashrati or Abu Tabila begins beating drums. He is a man who has inherited this profession for generations and calls people to suhoor on Ramadan nights in the Al-Ahsa region, specifically in the old towns such as Al-Hofuf, Al-Mubarraz, Al-Siyasib, and Al-Mukabbal.
- Al-Qarqian: It is celebrated in the middle of Ramadan in the Arab Gulf states and Iraq. In Saudi Arabia, however, only the Eastern Province has celebrated it since ancient times. Locals prepare for this day by buying nakhij (the seeds of certain vegetables such as chickpeas, watermelon, and pumpkin, which are boiled, salted, and dried) and sweets, as well as new children’s clothes. The children carry bags to fill with sweets and nakhij they receive from their rounds through the neighborhood, where doors are left open to welcome the children as they sing Garqian songs.

### **Section Two: Field Analysis of Sample Cases**

The importance of studying and analyzing the characteristics of tourist demand lies in the detailed information it provides about the nature and characteristics of the tourism market in terms of the origin and destinations of the trip, the demographic characteristics of tourists, income, travel patterns, modes of transportation used, tourists’ preferences, and the challenges they face, as well as the challenges faced by operators of licensed facilities for local travel companies. The questionnaire focused on the following aspects.

First: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample of desert Tourists:

The demographic characteristics of the sample consist of several elements, including the gender, age, marital status, and educational background of the field study sample. This analysis will be addressed in the following presentation:

**1- Gender Composition:** An analysis of the 230 sample cases revealed that males accounted for more than half of the sample (54.3%), while females accounted for 45.7%. Across the two study regions, males constituted the primary demographic group in the sample, with the highest proportion in the Dammam region at 58.6%. In contrast, the proportion of females in Al-Ahsa was 49.4%, higher than in the Dammam region, where they accounted for approximately 41.1% of the total sample. Table 2 and Figure 3 provide further details. The field study concurred with the findings of the General Authority for Statistics (Population Characteristics Survey, 2017, p. 20) regarding the high male-to-female ratio of 135 males per 100 females in the Kingdom. The Eastern Province also has the highest sex ratio in favor of males among Saudis alone, according to the Population Census, at 104 males per 100 females.

This is also attributed to the social conditions of Saudi society and the difficulty women face in going out.

Total Sample		Al-Ahsa		الدمام		Case
Total	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%54.3	125	%50.6	60	%58.6	65	Male
%45.7	105	%49.4	59	%41.4	46	Female
%100	230	%100	119	%100	111	Total

Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher.

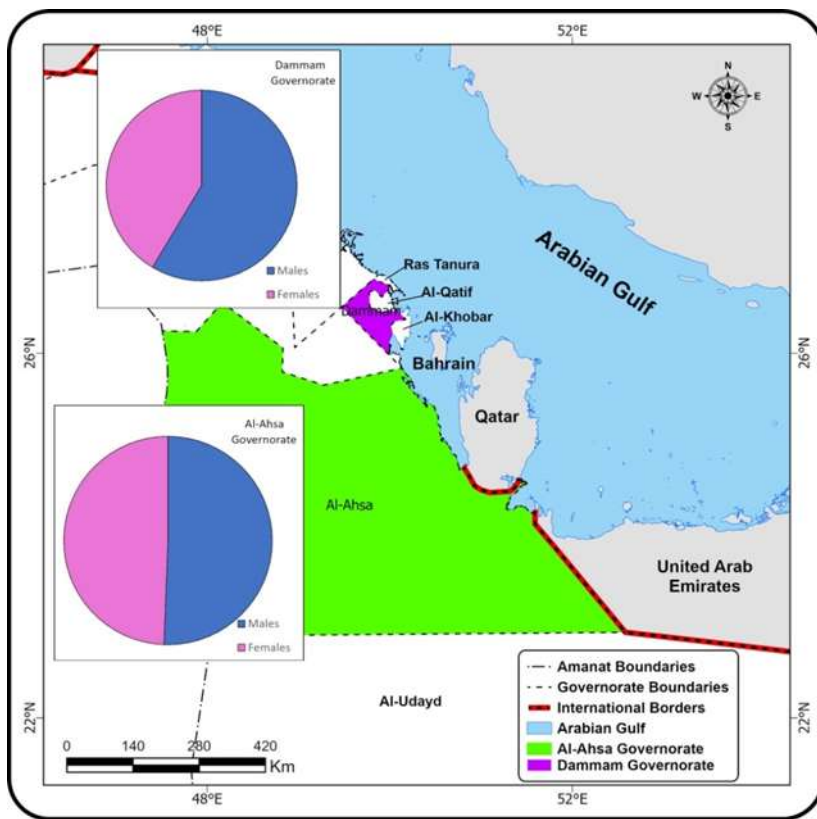


Figure 3: Compositional Analysis of the Sample

**2-Age Demographics:** Understanding tourists’ motivations for visiting a destination, their level of satisfaction, enhancing shopping effectiveness, and identifying tourists’ needs and preferences based on age, gender, and income are key components of success and effective planning. Some studies have shown that the most frequent visitors to tourist areas in the city of Jeddah are those under 40 years of age, accounting for 64%, while the least frequent are those under 20 years of age. Table 3 and Figure 4 illustrate the following facts:

Table 3: Age composition of the sample in the study area in 2024.

Age Distribution			
Total Sample	Al-Ahsa	Dammam	Case

%	Total	%	العدد	النسبة	العدد	
%14	32	%9.2	11	%18.9	21	Under 20 years
%68.3	157	%73.9	88	%62.2	69	20 to 40 years
%10.4	24	%10.1	12	%10.8	12	40–60 years
%3.3	17	%6.2	8	%8.1	9	60 years and older
%100	230	%100	119	%100	111	Total

Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher.

- The 20–40 age group accounts for 68.3% of the total sample, representing more than half of the cases in the sample.
- The under-20 age group accounted for 14% of the total, meaning that these two groups together accounted for 82.3% of the total sample.
- The 40–60 age group accounted for 10.4% of the total sample.
- The 60 and older age group accounted for 3.3% of the total sample.

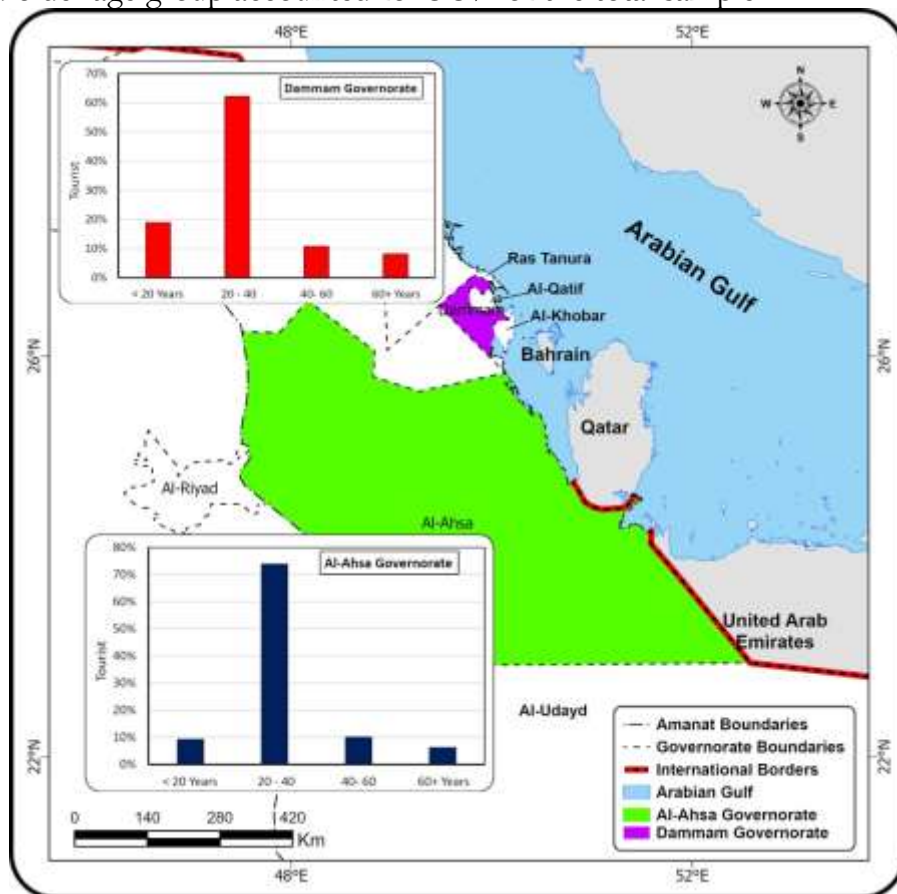


Figure 4: Age distribution of domestic tourists in the study area

**Based on the indicators of significance:**

The under-20 age group accounted for the highest percentage in the Dammam region, representing nearly one-fifth of the sample cases (18.9%). The number of sample cases in the 20–40 age group increased in both regions, accounting for more than half of the sample cases, This is because this group of young people has the mobility and flexibility to engage in this

type of tourism, along with an interest in venturing into the wilderness to experience the lifestyle of their parents and grandparents, and a desire to participate in wilderness sports, including car drifting and outdoor gatherings. The study concurred with the findings of the General Authority for Statistics in its report on demographic characteristics, which stated that Saudi society is characterized by a broad base of middle-aged groups.

The number of cases in the 40–60 age group in the two study areas decreased to less than 11%; this group consists of older adults who face difficulties with mobility and travel. The number of cases in the 60+ age group also fell to less than 9%, and the number of cases in the Dammam area was 2% higher than in Al-Ahsa.

### 3- Marital Status:

The marital status of desert tour tourists reflects specific characteristics. The field study revealed that more than half of the sample consisted of married individuals, ranking first at 51.4%. This reflects the preference for group travel in this context, as it is linked to families and relatives, and also because most tourists prefer long stays in the desert, which requires the presence of families in groups. The percentage of singles was close to 46%, as some travel with friends or relatives to engage in off-road driving. The percentage of divorced individuals was the lowest at 3%, and there were no widows in the sample. As for the spatial differences between the two study areas, we note the following:

Table (4) Marital Status of the Sample Population in 2024

Marital Status of the Study Population						
Total Sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Status
Total	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%51.4	118	%58.9	70	%43.2	48	<b>Married</b>
%46	106	%38.7	46	%54.1	60	<b>Single</b>
%2.6	6	%2.5	3	%2.7	3	<b>Divorced</b>
100	230	%100	119	%100	111	<b>Total</b>

Source: Field study and percentages calculated by the researcher

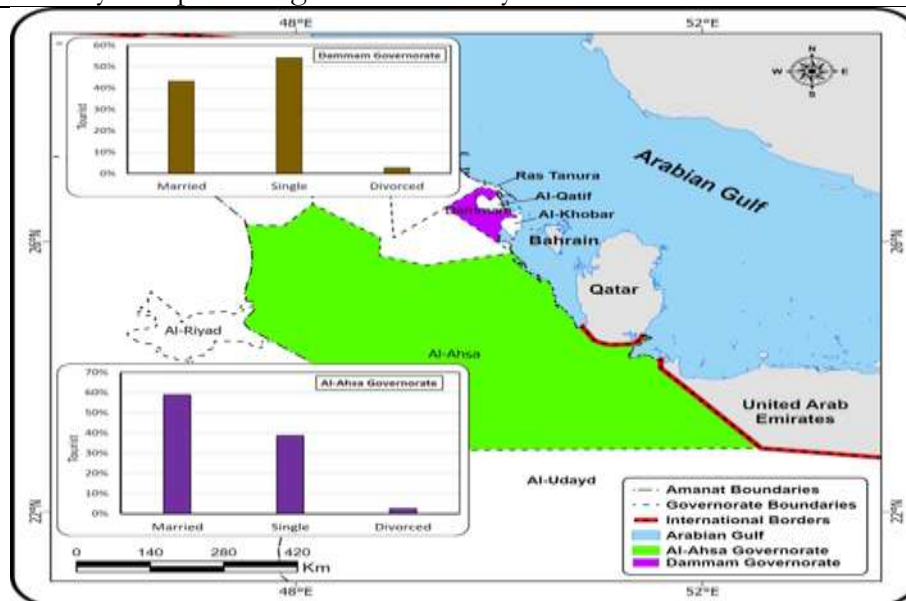


Figure (5) Marital Status of desert Tourists in the Study Area

1- The percentage of married desert tourists in Al-Ahsa Oasis was higher than in Dammam Province, accounting for 58%—more than half of the sample. In stark contrast, the percentage of single tourists in Dammam exceeded half of the sample, accounting for 54.1%. This may be attributed to the Al-Ahsa region’s adherence to specific customs and traditions and a preference for traveling with family, whereas young people in Dammam prefer to travel without Married couples seek to escape the hustle and bustle of Dammam, the capital of the Eastern Province, and engage in sports and racing.

2- The percentage of single tourists in the two study areas, Dammam and Al-Ahsa, was roughly equal, accounting for a negligible 3%. Field analysis also revealed that there were no widowed individuals among the sample, with the two regions showing no difference in this regard.

**4- Educational Status:** Based on the hypothesis that tourism awareness increases with higher levels of education, and also due to the educated tourist’s understanding and knowledge of the importance of tourism, some studies conducted in Taiwan indicated that approximately 58.4% of incoming tourists hold postgraduate degrees, followed by tourists with a university degree at 42.6%.

Total Sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Status
Total	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%1.3	3	%2.5	3	-	-	Elementary
%1.7	4	%1.7	2	%1.8	2	Middle School
%26.1	60	%18.5	22	%34.2	38	High School Diploma
%60	138	%65.5	78	%54.1	60	Bachelor's Degree
%10.8	25	%11.8	14	%9.9	11	Graduate Degree

Source: Field study and percentages from the researcher’s work

Table 5 shows that: The study sample consisted of tourists whose educational background ranged from elementary school to postgraduate level; there were no illiterate tourists or those who could read and write. The largest share was held by those with a university degree, who accounted for more than half of the tourists’ educational levels (60%) of the total study sample. In contrast, the percentage of those with an elementary or preparatory school education fell below 2% of the total sample. Both study areas showed a high percentage of university graduates, but Al-Ahsa had the largest share, accounting for more than half of the tourists’ educational backgrounds (65.5%), while the percentage in Dammam was 54.1%

Tourists with a secondary school qualification ranked second, accounting for approximately 26.1% of the total sample. Dammam had the largest share at 34.1%, while the proportion of tourists with a secondary school qualification in Al-Ahsa was close to one-fifth.

The number of educational cases among primary school-aged tourists was limited to the Al-Ahsa region alone, accounting for 2.5%, and was not present in the Dammam region, while cases of illiteracy and those who could read and write were absent from the sample.

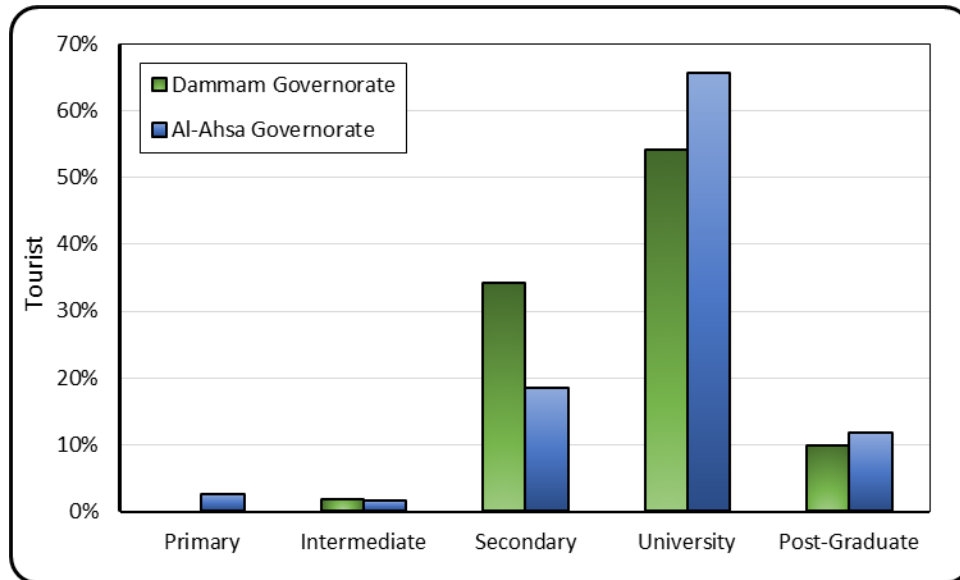


Figure 6: Educational Referrals for Desert Tourists in the Study Area

### Section 3: Economic Variables and Issues in the Sample Cases

**Employment Status:** Employment status reflects both income level and educational attainment, as the two are closely interrelated. Employment status generally reflects the number of years an individual has spent in education, and educational attainment reflects income level. There is a positive correlation between higher income and participation in tourism; as income rises, individuals are better able to fulfill their desire to travel to destinations far from their places of residence. Table 6 and Figure 7 illustrate the following:

sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Status
Total	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%13.5	31	%12.6	15	%14.4	16	Unemployed
%39	90	%40.3	48	%37.8	42	Employee
%30.4	70	%28.6	34	%32.4	36	Student
%6.2	15	%10.9	13	%1.8	2	Housewife
%7.4	17	%6.7	8	%8.1	9	Retired
%3	7	%0.8	1	%5.4	6	Other
%100	230	%100	119	%100	111	Total

Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher.

The main occupational groups were employees and students, ranking first at 69.3% of the total sample. This is attributed to the seasonal nature of tourism, with travelers preferring to travel during school breaks—particularly the mid-year break in the winter and spring, when the weather is mild—and on weekends. followed by the “unemployed” category in second place at 13.5% of the sample cases; this percentage may be attributed to single women. The percentages for housewives and retirees were lower, with neither exceeding 10% of the total sample cases.

At the regional level, the following was observed:

The percentage of employees was higher than that of other categories in both regions, with Al-Ahsa leading Dammam by approximately 2%. The opposite was true for students, whose percentage rose to 32.4% in Dammam, the percentage of housewives in Al-Ahsa increased by 10.9%, and the percentage of retirees was similar across the two study regions.

**6-Frequency of tourist trips (number of desert tour guides).**

There is diversity across all categories of desert tour groups in the two study areas, but it was clear that the largest category was the sample consisting of 6–8 individuals, which accounted for the largest share (30.8%) of the total sample—more than a quarter of the cases. followed by groups with 2–4 members, which accounted for approximately 28.2%, and immediately after that, groups with 4–6 members, which ranked third.

However, there were spatial differences between the two study areas: in Al-Ahsa Oasis, the 2–4-person household category accounted for 33.6%, while households with 6–8 members were the most common in the Dammam region, and the proportion of tourists accompanied by 10 or more people was similar in both study areas.

Total sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Group Size
Total	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%28.2	65	%33.6	40	%25.2	25	2–4 people
%27	26	%28.6	34	%25.5	28	4–6 people
%30.8	71	%23.5	28	%38.4	43	6–8 people
%8.2	19	%10.9	13	%5.4	6	8–10 people
%4.2	10	%3.4	4	%5.4	6	10 or more people

Source: Based on field research; percentages are from the researcher’s work.

Since wilderness tourism typically involves traveling in groups, and it is difficult for individuals to venture out alone in these remote areas, tourists prefer to go with friends, relatives, and family members—a preference that is also influenced by the large family size typical of Saudi society.

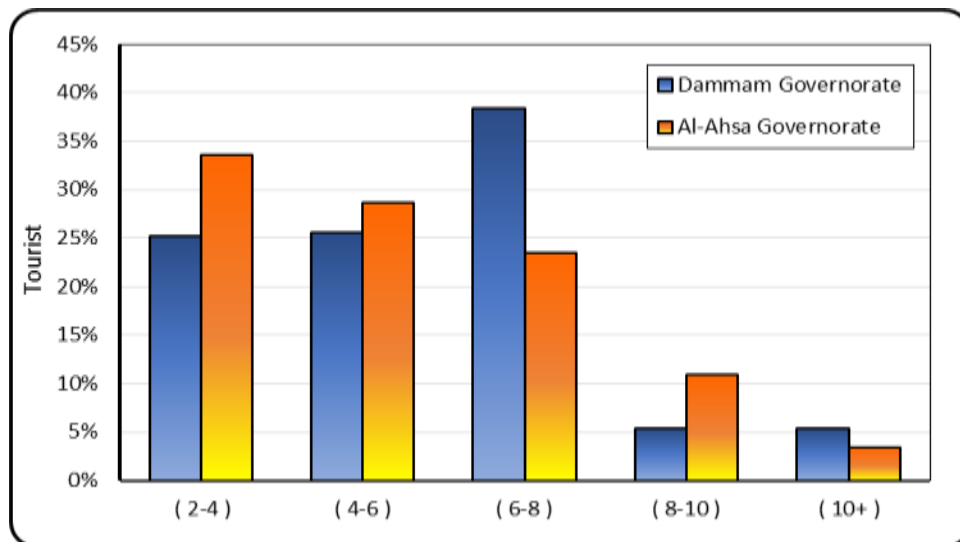


Figure 7: Number of tour guides for the study area

**Fourth: Purpose of the Trip (desert Tourism)**

There is no doubt that the percentage of visitors whose sole purpose was desert tourism in the study areas has decreased. This is due to the variety of tourist attractions in the region; consequently, some visitors may come for one, two, three, or perhaps even more purposes, as illustrated in Table 8 and Figure 8 below:

Table (8) Reasons for Preferring the Desert in 2024						
Total sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		The Situation
Total	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	
%10.7	57	%12.3	34	%10	23	Cultural Heritage (The Lives of Our Ancestors)
%23.6	125	%21.7	60	%25.7	65	Escaping the hustle and bustle of the city
%31.4	166	%34.4	95	%28	71	Enjoying the atmosphere and nature
%12.9	68	%13.4	37	%12.3	31	Relaxation
%1.7	9	%1.1	3	%2.4	6	Engaging in literary pursuits
%3.6	19	%3.6	10	%3.6	9	Engaging in sports
%3.2	17	%3.2	9	%3.1	8	Hunting
%12.9	68	%10.1	28	%15.8	40	Engaging in other hobbies and activities
%100	529	%100	276	%100	253	<b>Total</b>

**.Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher**

According to the field analysis: the factor of enjoying the atmosphere and nature accounted for more than a quarter of the sample (31.4%), followed by the desire to escape the hustle and bustle of the city, which accounted for more than a fifth of the sample (23.6% of the total), and together these two factors accounted for more than half of the sample (55%). However, other purposes were less important to tourists, as the percentage of travelers who preferred the countryside over other locations to pursue certain literary hobbies was low, at about 1.7%, due to the niche nature of this hobby, which is generally practiced by a small number of people. The practice of certain sports and hunting was also low, at 3.2%.

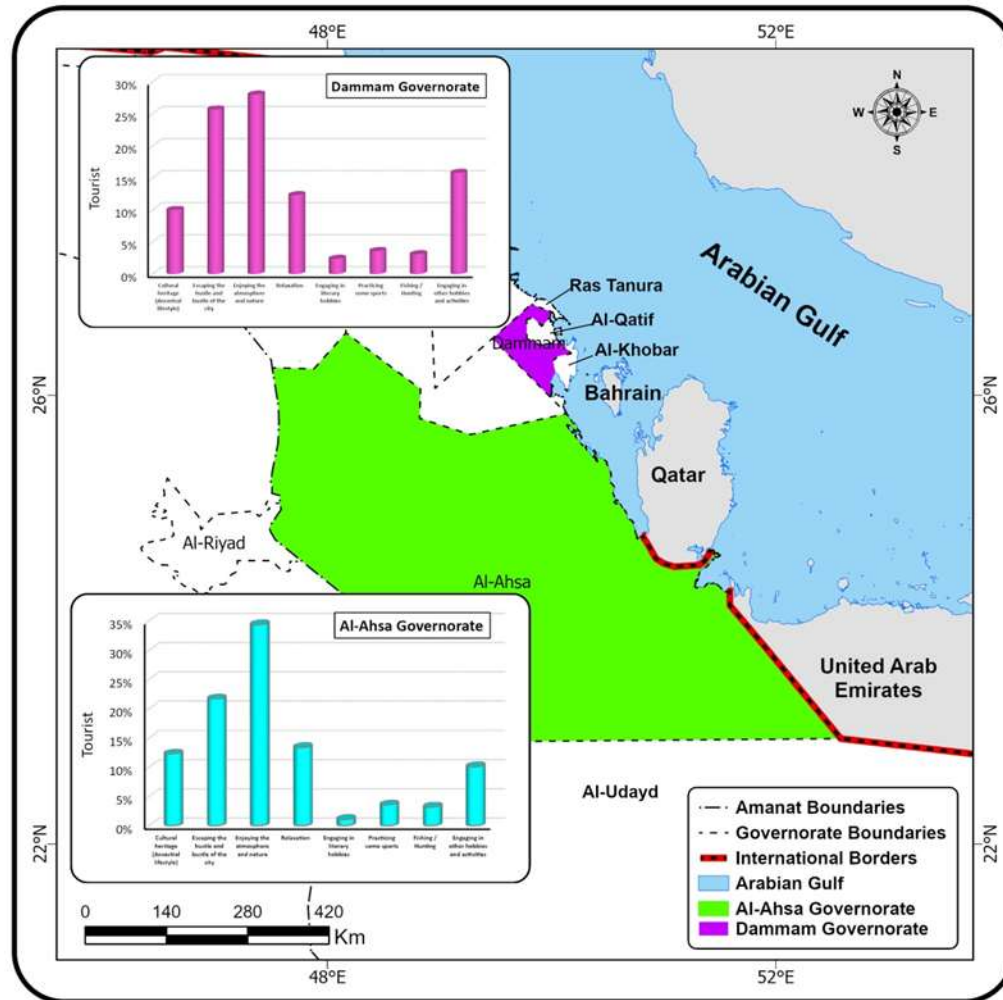


Figure 8: Reasons for Preferring the Countryside Among the Study Sample

The two sample regions align with the overall findings in terms of the high percentage of visitors to the countryside who seek to enjoy the atmosphere and escape the hustle and bustle of the city; however, the percentages vary from one reason to another as follows:

- **Enjoying the scenery:** Al-Ahsa Oasis accounted for the largest share, with 34.4% of desert tourists visiting for this purpose. In contrast, the Dammam Governorate accounted for 28%. This may be attributed to Al-Ahsa Oasis's distinctive natural beauty and vast green areas; as previously mentioned, it has been designated a World Heritage Site.

- **Escaping the City's Hustle and Bustle:** Dammam Governorate stood out with a higher percentage of desert tourists for this reason, accounting for 25.7%, while Al-Ahsa Oasis accounted for 21.7%. This may be because Dammam is the capital of the Eastern Province, characterized by its bustling nature and the presence of all government offices, and it is also an area frequented primarily by residents of the Eastern Province.

- **Recreation:** Al-Ahsa Oasis is more popular among desert tourists seeking recreation than Dammam Province, accounting for 13.4% compared to Dammam's 12.3%. This is due to the oasis's stunning natural beauty.

- **Engaging in hobbies and other activities:** Among the most popular activities are barbecuing and cooking in various forms. As some respondents mentioned in the

questionnaires, other hobbies include drifting (driving in very fast circles) and others. However, the percentage of tourists visiting the region for this reason is 15.8% in Dammam Governorate, compared to 10.1% in Al-Ahsa Governorate.

- **Cultural heritage (the way of life of the ancestors):** Cultural heritage refers to their original way of life and the lifestyle of the Bedouin ancestors of the Arabian Peninsula’s inhabitants. For this reason, it is a heritage that many still follow, even though it accounts for only 12.3% in Al-Ahsa Oasis, compared to 10% in Dammam Province. The reason for the higher percentage in the oasis is that it is an area that has largely retained its customs and traditions and has not changed as much as the regional capital.

- **Engaging in certain literary hobbies, participating in sports, and going hunting:** The proportion of respondents who went to the desert for these activities was less than 5% for each activity out of the total sample in the two study areas.

- **It is evident from the preceding discussion that there is diversity** in the reasons for preferring desert tourism, with some reasons predominating and others overlapping at times; however, from the researcher’s perspective, cultural heritage is the foundation, even if the percentages above suggest otherwise, and the reason is nostalgia for the same ways of life enjoyed by their ancestors.

**Fifth: Economic Aspects of desert Tourism**

**1. Income:** Various economic studies illustrate the correlation between income level and tourism demand. The higher an individual’s income level, the greater the incentive to travel, because tourism demand depends on the portion of an individual’s income allocated to spending on leisure and tourism. The following table and Figure 8 show the income categories for the sample cases:

Total sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Price Range (Riyals)
Total	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%11.7	27	%10.1	12	%13.5	15	2,000–4,000
%10.4	24	%7.6	9	%13.5	15	4,000–6,000
%45.3	95	%51.3	61	%38.7	34	6,000–8,000
%6.5	15	%9.2	11	%3.6	4	8,000–10,000
%26.1	60	%21.4	26	%30.6	34	10,000 and up

Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher.

Based on the field analysis, there is diversity in the income categories of domestic tourists. The category of 6,000–8,000 riyals accounted for nearly half of the tourists (45.3% of the total), ranking first, followed by the category of over 10,000 riyals in second place, accounting for more than one-fifth of desert tourists (26.1% of the total sample). Thus, these two categories together accounted for 71.4%, or nearly three-quarters of the sample, which is consistent with the average wage and salary of 7,372 riyals (General Authority for Statistics, Employment and Wages Survey, 2017, p. 26), The study also confirms the higher wage rates in the over 10,000 riyal category, based on the average monthly income statistic for the Eastern Province of 17,872 riyals, which is the highest monthly income in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (General Authority for Statistics, Household Income and Expenditure Survey, 2018, p. 55).

Meanwhile, the income brackets of 2,000–6,000 riyals ranked last. The two study regions (Dammam and Al-Ahsa) showed a higher proportion of income in the 6,000–8,000 riyal bracket, with Al-Ahsa surpassing more than half of the sample (51.3%) falling into this category.

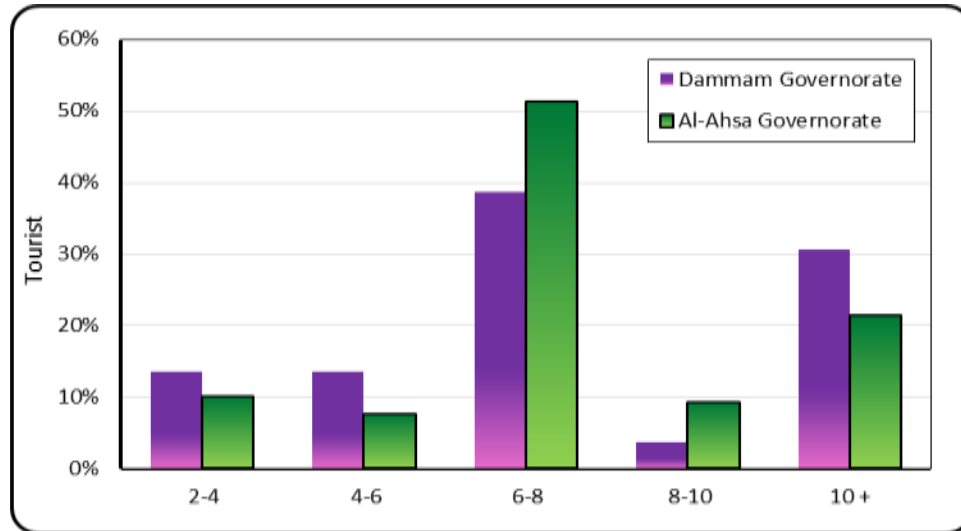


Figure (9) Monthly Income of the Sample Cases

The same trend was observed in the increase in income for the two study areas in the category exceeding 10,000 riyals, but Dammam led the way with a rate of 30.6%, while the percentage of desert tourists’ income fell to less than 14% in the remaining categories.

2-Tourist Expenditure: Given the multitude of factors affecting the cost of the trip and the tourists’ expenditures in the sample—which include goods, food, and accommodation arrangements such as camping and others—it was possible to classify tourist expenditure into four categories, as shown in Table (10) and Figure (9) below:

The spending category of (1,000–2,000) riyals accounts for the largest proportion of the sample cases at 66.9%, followed by the category of (2,000–4,000) riyals, which constituted a quarter of the sample cases at 25.6%. The spending percentage dropped to less than 2% of the sample cases in the category of (6,000 riyals and above).

As for the study area, it became clear that:

The 1,000–2,000 riyal category was the highest-spending group in the Al-Ahsa region, accounting for nearly three-quarters of the sample cases, and constituted about 62.2% in Dammam. In contrast, the Dammam region had the highest percentage of the (2,000–4,000 riyals) for desert tourists, while the percentage fell below 10% of the sample cases in the remaining categories.

Total sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Category
Number	Percentage	Number	Number	Percentage	Number	
%66.9	154	%71.4	85	%62.2	69	Less than 1,000–2,000

%25.6	59	%24.4	29	%27	30	2,000–4,000 riyals
%5.6	13	%3.4	4	%8.1	9	4,000–6,000 riyals
%1.7	4	%0.8	1	%2.7	3	6,000 riyals or more
%100	230	%100	119	%100	111	Total

Source: Field study; percentages are based on the researcher’s work.

3. Accommodations for desert tourism in Al-Ahsa Oasis: Accommodations for desert tourism consist of camping sites equipped with desert air conditioners and barbecue grills. Table 11 shows that most desert tourism trips are to mountainous areas. Some tourists also preferred safe desert destinations, making the Riyadh-Al-Aqeer route the most frequented for desert tourism, followed by the Dammam route; however, the percentage of desert tourists in the Al-Asfar Lake desert area was lower at 8.1%.

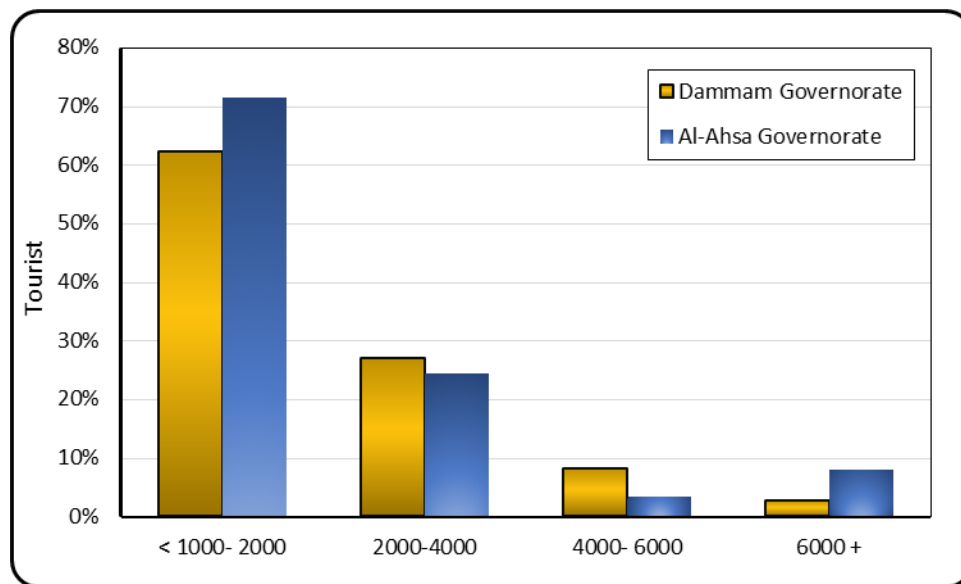


Figure 10: Average Spending by Inbound Tourists in the Study Area

Al-Ahsa		Status
Percentage	Frequency	
%21.8	38	Riyadh Road
%13.8	24	Dammam Road
%22.4	39	Al-Aqeer Road
%12.6	22	Ring Road
%8.1	14	Bar Al-Asfar Lake
%21.3	37	Other

100	174	Total
.Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher		

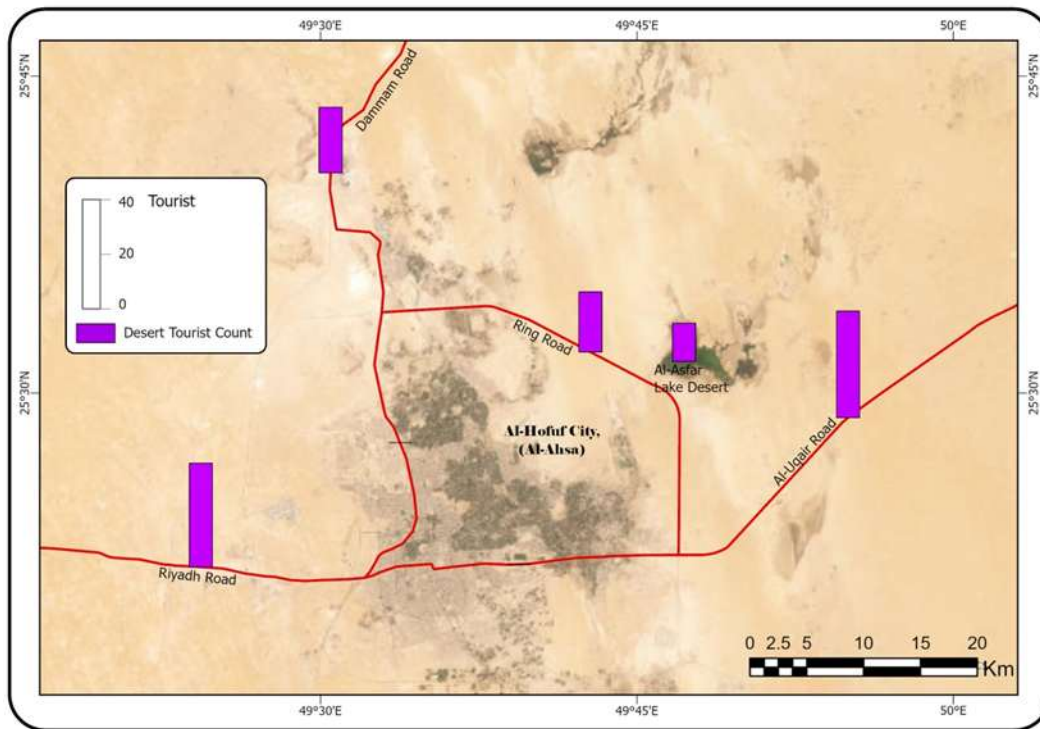


Figure (11) Destinations for desert tourism in Al-Ahsa Oasis

While tourists prefer to visit licensed desert tourism sites in the two study areas (Dammam and Al-Ahsa)—accounting for more than three-quarters of the sample—the Dammam area slightly exceeds Al-Ahsa. However, the percentage of tourists visiting licensed off-road tourism sites in Al-Ahsa Oasis is 26% higher—more than a quarter of the sample—which may be due to the nature of Al-Ahsa Oasis.

**Table 12 — Preference for Licensed versus Unlicensed Places in 2024**

Total sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Status
Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%81.7	188	%76.6	85	%86.6	103	Unlicensed venues
%18.3	42	%23.4	26	%13.4	16	Total
%100	230	%100	111	%100	119	Status

Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher

**4. Length of Stay:** The study divided the length of stay into three categories:

- 92.6% of the sample spent fewer than 5 tourist nights in the country.
- 6.1% of the sample spent between 5 and 10 tourist nights.
- 1.3% of cases spend between 10 and 15 tourist nights.

**In terms of the two study regions:** Both regions showed a high proportion of cases in the sample with stays of less than 5 nights, with the Al-Ahsa region accounting for the largest share—95.8% of the total sample—due to tourists’ preference for extended stays in rural areas far from noise and urban centers. This pattern is also seasonal. In contrast, the Dammam region ranked first for tourists spending 5–10 nights in the desert, accounting for approximately 9.9% of the sample cases. The percentage dropped to below 2% in both the Dammam and Al-Ahsa regions for stays of 10–15 nights, despite higher spending rates, and also due to the risks associated with this type of tourism, as well as the Tourism Promotion Authority’s failure to provide necessary security services in Desert areas.

Total sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Status
Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%92.6	213	%95.8	114	%89.2	99	Less than 5 nights
%6.1	14	%2.5	3	%9.9	11	5–10 nights
%1.3	3	%1.7	2	%.9	1	10–15 nights
%100	230	%100	119	%100	111	Total

Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher

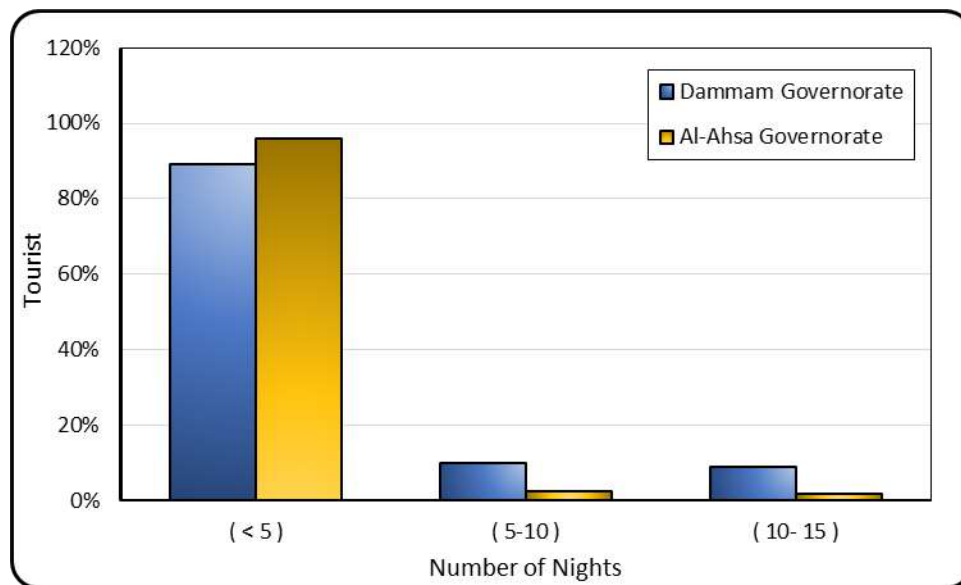


Figure (21) Length of Stay for the Sample Cases

5. Mode of Transportation to desert Areas:

The table shows that the vast majority of desert tourists prefer to travel to desert destinations in their own cars (98.7%), while the percentage of those using buses is very low, at less than 1%. Although this indicates

As the standard of living for Saudi tourists rises, this type of tourism also requires special vehicles known as four-wheel-drive vehicles, which can carry camping gear and passengers

and navigate sandy and mountainous terrain as well as unpaved roads; these are preferred by most desert tourists. Additionally, some engage in drifting and racing.

Total sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Means of transport
Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%98.7	227	%99.2	118	%98.2	109	Private car; Own car
%0.9	2	0.8	1	%0.9	1	Bus
0.4	1	-	-	%0.9	1	Other
%100	230	%100	119	%100	111	Total

Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher

As for the distance traveled by rural tourists: Rural tourists prefer to stay away from the city and enjoy nature and tranquility; therefore, they prefer seclusion in rural areas. Through field analysis, it was observed that more than a third of rural tourists prefer distances of less than 20 km (37.8%), followed by those traveling between 20 and 30 km, who accounted for approximately 25.6%—meaning a quarter of the sample—and a similar number of desert tourists traveled distances ranging from 30 to 40 km.

As for the study area:

Table 14 and Figure 11 reveal the following: It was observed that distances of less than 20 km represent the optimal geographical range for this type of tourism, attracting over one-third of the sample (37.8%), followed by distances of 20–30 km at 25.6%, while the distance ranges of 30–40 km and 40 km and above are comparable, with the percentages of cases being 17.8% and 18.7% of the total cases, respectively.

The majority of respondents in the Dammam sample preferred to be located at least 40 kilometers away from the city (27.9%), followed by those preferring a distance of 30–40 kilometers (24.3%). The percentage of respondents who preferred to be located less than 20 kilometers from the city was 21.6%. This is attributed to the desire to escape the hustle and bustle of the city and enjoy the wilderness.

The situation differed in Al-Ahsa Oasis, where the number of respondents who preferred to travel less than 20 km from the oasis to wilderness areas accounted for more than half of the sample (52.9% of the total sample). The number of respondents who preferred to travel farther from the oasis—at distances ranging from 30 to 40 km—decreased, and 40 km or more.

Total sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Distance from residence
Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%37.8	87	%52.9	63	%21.6	24	Less than 20 km
%25.6	59	%25.2	30	%26.1	29	20–30 km
%17.8	41	%10.9	13	%24.3	28	30–40 km

%18.7	43	%10.9	13	%27.9	30	40 km or more
	230		119		111	Total

Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher

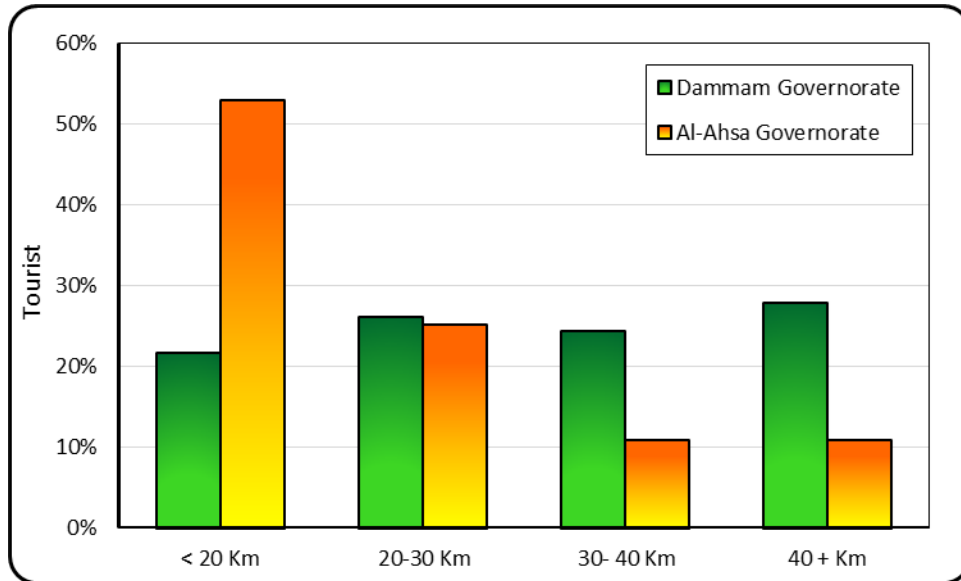


Figure (13) The distance traveled by tourists to the desert in the study area

**6. Seasonality in desert Tourism:** The tourism season refers to the period that sees an influx of tourists and a boom in related activities and services. This varies in terms of time and place, depending on the nature and characteristics of the tourism product (.). It is well known that desert tourism is subject to what might be called seasonal fluctuations, as its activities are characterized by seasonality, much like many other geographical and economic phenomena influenced by various factors, foremost among which are income levels, purchasing power, price levels, prevailing social traditions and customs, events, holidays, and others. These factors vary in their level of influence during specific periods or seasons, differing in the length of time of occurrence

These fluctuations result in shifts between negative and positive trends during certain periods; however, the pattern of desert tourism is strongly linked to the climate, as illustrated in Table 16 and Figure 13.

Total sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Season
Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%59.5	197	%64.8	107	%54.2	90	Winter
%3.3	11	%0.6	1	%6.1	10	Summer
%28.7	95	%29.1	48	%28.3	47	Spring
%8.4	28	%5.4	9	%11.4	19	Autumn; Fall (US)
%100	331	%100	165	%100	166	Total
						Season

Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher

Saudi Arabia is characterized by hot summers and mild winters; consequently, high temperatures pose a particular challenge to this type of tourism due to its direct dependence on the weather. As shown in the table, desert tourism occurs throughout all four seasons, though the proportion of tourists varies. The percentage of desert tourists who prefer to travel in the winter season ranked first among the seasons, particularly during mid-year school breaks, accounting for more than half of the total sample (59.5%). This was followed by the spring season, which accounted for more than a quarter of the sample (28.7%), due to the mild climate, spring holidays, and weekends. This means that these two seasons together accounted for more than three-quarters of the sample (88.2%), and that desert tourism is most frequent in the winter and spring seasons, due to the distance from the hot summer weather; although summer visitors account for 3.3%, they mostly rely on air conditioning in some licensed camps. The two study areas generally follow the same pattern as the sample, but with some spatial differences, as shown in Figure (18) and Table (17):

-Winter: The highest share of desert tourists was in Al-Ahsa Oasis at 64.8%, whereas Dammam Governorate was lower at 54.2%, due to the reasons mentioned earlier.

-Spring: Al-Ahsa ranked second with the highest share at 29.1%, while Dammam accounted for 28.3% of the total sample.

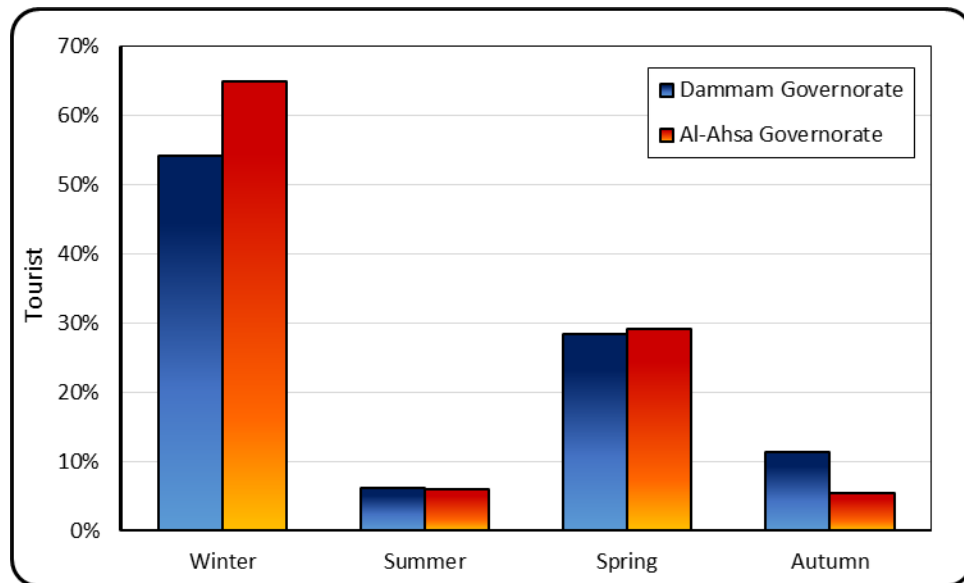


Figure (14): Fall Semesters in the Study Area

### 7. The Preference for Shopping Malls Among the Sample Group:

Tourist shopping constitutes one of the most significant economic returns for desert tourism; therefore, it represents a key pillar of tourism programs. Here, recreational desert tourism is combined with shopping tourism, as evidenced by the immediate response to the retail map for tourist goods; in fact, some of these stores carry everything necessary for desert tourism, including camping equipment, essential food items, and more.

Total sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Type
Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
%63.5	146	%60.5	72	%66.7	74	Gas stations

%26.5	61	%25.2	30	%27.9	31	<b>Shops</b>
%1.3	3	%0.8	1	%1.8	2	<b>Online marketing</b>
%8.7	20	%13.4	16	%3.6	4	<b>Other</b>
%100	230	%100	119	%100	111	<b>Total</b>
Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher						

The questionnaire included three main shopping venues for tourism supplies: gas stations, stores, and online shopping, as well as other venues. Table 18 and Figure 19 reveal the following:

Gas stations are the most popular shopping locations, preferred by more than half of the sample (63.5%), perhaps due to their proximity to tourist destinations. More than a quarter of the sample (26.5%) preferred shopping at stores, while the percentage for e-commerce was low at 1.3%.

As for the study area: it became clear that more than half of the sample cases preferred shopping at gas stations, and the Dammam area surpassed Al-Ahsa by a margin of 6.5% of cases; the percentage of cases shopping at stores was similar in the Dammam and Al-Ahsa areas.

**Sixth:** Problems with domestic tourism: The vast majority of cases in the sample encountered problems whilst travelling within the country, which is a significant indication of the need for greater oversight of the areas frequented by tourists. Table 19 and Figure 20 illustrate the following:

There is a range of problems faced by desert tourists, specifically a lack of services near desert tourist sites, a lack of security, and a lack of recreational facilities. The field study revealed that the most common problem faced by tourists is the lack of services near desert areas (32.8%), followed by a lack of attention to hygiene (26.2%), whilst a lack of security and recreational facilities ranked third and fourth respectively. Other issues accounted for 8.9% and included insects, reptiles and predators.

Total sample		Al-Ahsa		Dammam		Status
Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	
32.8	157	%72.3	86	%64	71	<b>Lack of service centers in the area</b>
14.1	67	%31.9	38	%26.1	29	<b>Lack of security</b>
26.2	125	%59.7	71	%48.6	54	<b>Cleanliness issues at the site</b>
17.9	86	%41.2	49	%33.3	37	<b>Insufficient entertainment facilities</b>

%8.9	43	%11.8	14	%26.1	29	<b>Other</b>
%100	478	100	258	100	220	<b>Total</b>

**Source: Field study; percentages calculated by the researcher**

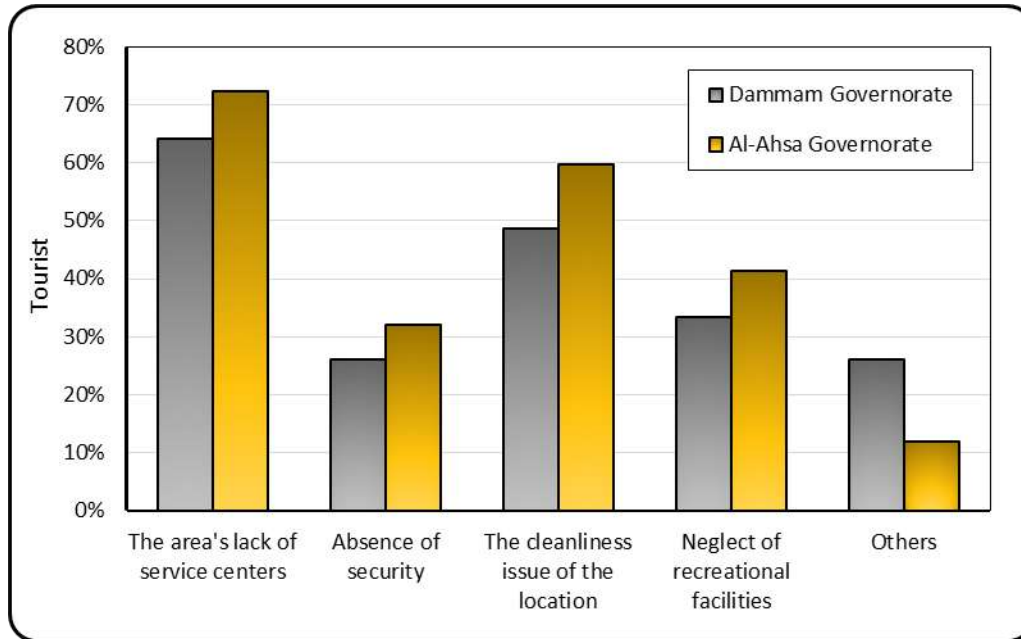


Figure 15: Problems faced by tourists in desert tourism in the study area

**Seventh: Proposals for developing desert tourism in the Dammam and Al-Ahsa region:**

A survey of tourists visiting the Al-Ahsa region for desert tourism has yielded a number of proposals, including:

Proposals for the development of the Al-Ahsa Oasis through a survey of visitors.
1- Increase international publicity regarding this form of touris
2- Provide more campsites, recreational facilities, toilets and cleaning staff
3- Promote and advertise opportunities for off-road tourism experiences
4- Address the issue of stray dogs
5- Improving roads and pavements and providing facilities for food and supplies
6- Establishing free campsites for citizens, providing nearby health centres and setting up services
7- An excellent project – if implemented, it would cater to the high demand for desert tourism
8- Ensuring the cleanliness of the area
9- Providing essential services that no one can do without
10- Providing private seating areas.
11- Afforestation of the desert to create a park for all generations
12- Ensuring security and raising visitors’ awareness of the importance of wilderness parks.
13- Organisation under the auspices of government bodies
14- Security and safety for visitors
15- Paying close attention to its upkeep and cleanliness, as this is lacking in Al-Hasa

16- Making use of the sites, issuing licences for them, and increasing domestic tourism destinations
17- Development, prosperity and awareness campaigns
18- Inclusion within the Kingdom's tourism sector and prioritisation of these areas
19- Provision of campsites at reasonable prices, without overcharging
20- Environmental conservation.
21- Attention to facilities, guidance regulations and provision of travel essentials
22- Organising affordable, well-equipped safari trips whilst protecting the environment, including trees, animals and other wildlife
23 -Developing the presence of animals such as horses and others
24-Establishing a local market in these areas to sell fresh vegetables, milk and other local produce
25- Provide recreational facilities such as paragliding and others
26- Dispose of waste in rubbish bins and do not bring bricks (blocks) for cooking; if necessary, they must be taken away after use. Install awareness and guidance signs by the relevant authority.
27- The tourism sector should focus on wild areas rich in natural beauty
28- Support campsites with native trees and plants to help restore wildlife, and require all owners of permanent campsites to plant native trees to help revitalise wild areas.

**Opinion polls of tourists visiting the Dammam area, including the following:**

<b>Proposals for the development of the Dammam coastline</b>
1. Safari trips in nature reserves
2. Provision of services, electricity and leisure facilities
3- The provision of fully equipped campsites with tents and recreational facilities such as sand buggies and the like
4- Enjoyable, high-quality tourism without excessive costs
5- Focus on expanding camping areas and ensuring the availability of commercial centres nearby – cleanliness and clear signage indicating exit routes – equipped toilet facilities
6-Creating well-maintained and clean green spaces for leisure
7-The presence of off-road equipment suppliers
8-The provision of services at the campsite locations
9-Establishing breakdown and rescue centres for motorists
10-Providing tarmac roads
11-Providing as many shops as possible to meet all requirements
12-The presence of (fully equipped toilets)
13- Focusing on land cultivation and reclamation.
14- Providing more recreational facilities to attract visitors
15- Increasing the number of campsites and providing camping essentials at affordable prices, whilst raising public awareness of the importance of cleanliness and leaving the site in a better condition than it was found.
16-Focusing on developing tourist attractions such as the countryside in winter, autumn and spring, and diversifying leisure activities such as providing bicycles, quad bikes, equipped

barbecue areas and sufficient lighting for sitting out until late at night; ensuring road safety and providing safety and surveillance equipment for the safety of families and children.
17-Establish a dedicated platform for communication between those interested in the countryside and private sector organisations.
18-Provide licensed facilities with services at nominal prices.
19-Ensure supervision by the relevant authorities.
20-Increase recreational facilities, service provision and the availability of tour guides.

## **Eighth: Study Findings and Recommendations**

### **A. Study Findings**

1. The study revealed that the Al-Ahsa and Dammam regions possess outstanding tourism potential. This natural potential is characterised by the diversity of the landscape and the variety of natural, marine, desert and oasis environments found within them, as well as their human potential, represented by customs, traditions, Bedouin culture, handicrafts, historical heritage and other aspects. However, the study area has not received a significant share of attention or tourism development.
2. The largest age group was young adults (20–40 years old), accounting for 68.3% of the total sample, due to young people's desire to venture into the wilderness, engage in sports and racing, go off-roading, attend social gatherings, and escape the hustle and bustle of the city.
  - The study revealed a diversity in marital status, with married couples being the most frequent visitors to rural areas; they prefer to stay for extended periods and therefore tend to travel in groups with family, relatives and friends.
4. The study showed that, in terms of educational background, university graduates accounted for 60% of those visiting rural areas, followed by those with intermediate qualifications at 26.1% of the total sample; primary school education was limited to the Al-Ahsa region, and there were no cases of illiteracy.
- 5- The study revealed that employed individuals and students constituted the largest proportion of the sample visiting rural areas, accounting for 69.3% of the total sample. This reflects the seasonal nature of this type of tourism, with the sample preferring to travel during school holidays and when the climate is mild in spring.
- 6- The study revealed a variety of reasons for visiting rural areas, with the majority of respondents (31.4%) citing enjoyment of the natural surroundings, followed by a desire to escape the hustle and bustle of the city and noise (23.6%); together, these two reasons accounted for more than half of the sample (55%).
- 7- The income bracket of 6,000–8,000 riyals accounted for nearly half of the sample (45.3%), followed by the income bracket of over 10,000 riyals, at 26.1%, whilst the majority of expenditure was in the range of 1,000–2,000 riyals (66.9%), followed by the 2,000–4,000 riyal bracket at 25.6%.
- 8- Tourists prefer to visit licensed wilderness areas, accounting for nearly three-quarters of the sample, with the remainder visiting unlicensed areas.
- 9- The duration of tourists' stays in desert areas was less than five nights in 92.6% of cases, whilst stays of 10–15 nights accounted for 1.3% of all desert visits.
- 10- The primary means of transport to the wilderness was four-wheel-drive vehicles, as they can carry all camping equipment and passengers, as well as navigate sand and unpaved roads

11. The study indicated that the peak seasons for desert tourism are winter, due to the mid-year school holidays, and spring, owing to the mild climate, whilst the proportion of visitors drops in summer due to the heat.

12- There are a number of issues faced by desert tourists, ranging from the cleanliness of the area and a lack of security to the distance of service facilities from desert areas; other problems include insects and reptiles, which cause distress to tourists.

### **B. Recommendations of the Study**

The study has arrived at a number of recommendations, based on the findings and objectives set out in the research and in accordance with the researchers' views, as follows:

1. Efforts should be made to focus attention on the development of desert tourism globally, so as to contribute to income diversification, the national economy and cultural diversity, in a manner consistent with the customs and traditions of Saudi society.

2. It is preferable to reduce the cost of renting licensed campsites and make them available to non-Saudis at nominal rates, whilst requiring them to adhere to environmental conservation regulations. This would help increase the number of non-Saudi visitors as a form of promotion and advertising for this type of tourism, as the sample group revealed a low proportion of non-Saudis (1.8%) of visitors in this category.

3- Efforts should be made to establish camps for families and others for singles to respect the privacy of Saudi society and the customs and traditions of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, given the diversity in marital status according to the sample results for male visitors (54.3%) and female visitors, as well as singles (46%) and married individuals (51.4%) in the sample group.

4- The high income level among park visitors calls for a variety of licensed tents to suit the different and lower income levels of both Saudis and non-Saudis.

5- Organising festivals in areas popular for desert tourism during the periods preferred by visitors, particularly in winter, which is one of the most important seasons for an increase in tourist numbers; conversely, organising fewer camps in summer, whilst ensuring that desert camps are equipped with cooling facilities.

6- Establish a hotline during peak visitor seasons to receive reports in the event that any visitors find themselves in danger.

7. The Ministry of Transport should focus on increasing the number of roadside services, particularly on the main roads leading to camping areas, including vehicle repair workshops and other supply services.

8. The Ministry of the Environment should step up environmental monitoring to prevent changes to the natural landscape and ensure the sustainability of tourism resources in light of the growing population in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

9- Encouraging local families and others to promote their products along the roads leading to licensed and unlicensed campsites to stimulate economic activity, improve the living standards of these families, publicise local products, and provide campers with their necessities before and during their trip.

10- Arranging visits for those arriving from outside the Kingdom to attend conferences, organised by the conference organisers in cooperation with the Tourism and Antiquities Authority, and directing them to visit desert camps to familiarise themselves with this form of tourism.

11- Allocating camps at nominal rates to various government institutions, such as ministries and universities, during holidays, naming them after the respective institutions, in order to capitalise on and promote this form of tourism in every possible way.

12- Continuity in conducting studies in the field of eco-tourism and the community concerned with it, by ensuring that periodic studies are carried out to provide proposals and solutions for all new developments in this form of tourism.

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