

Saudi cabinet approves tourism visa for foreigners

DUBAI: Saudi Arabia's cabinet has approved electronic visas for foreign visitors to attend sporting events and concerts, local media reported, as the world's top oil exporter tries to diversify its economy and open up its society.

The kingdom previously restricted visas to resident workers, business travellers, and pilgrims who are given special visas to travel to holy sites.

Economic reforms pushed by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman aim to lift total tourism spending in the kingdom — by local citizens as well as foreigners — to \$46.6 billion in 2020 from \$27.9bn in 2015, the government has said.

As part of Prince Mohammad's agenda, the country has ended a nearly 40-year ban on cinemas, allowed music concerts, including performances by Western pop stars, and organised international sporting events. Plans to admit significant numbers of tourists from abroad have been discussed for years, only to be blocked by conservative opinion and bureaucracy.

"Embassies and consulates will be able to issue the visas within 24 hours of receiving a request," the Arab News reported on Saturday, citing a cabinet decision last week.

Agencies