

Arabian Peninsula Directory

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This chapter gives the low-down on all things practical in the region, and is designed to complement the individual country chapters. It makes a good place to start your search for information (subjects are organised alphabetically), before referring to individual countries for more specific details.

ACCOMMODATION

Throughout the book, accommodation options are listed in the following order: budget, midrange and top end, and from cheapest to most expensive within each category. A single/double with bathroom means a room for one/two people with an en-suite bathroom. If the bathroom is outside the room, it's 'shared'.

During local holiday periods (particularly over *eid*, the Islamic feast) and popular festivals (such as the shopping festivals in Dubai and Kuwait), as well as Western holidays (Christmas and New Year) and major fixtures (like the Dubai Rugby Sevens), travellers should book well in advance.

Camping

Except in Saudi Arabia's Asir National Park (p334) and areas of Mutla Ridge in Kuwait, there are no specially designated camping areas, although there are organised, and generally quite expensive, desert camps in Khor al-Adaid, Qatar (p279), and Sharqiya (Wahiba) Sands, Oman (p216). Wild camping (without any facilities) is one of the highlights of the region, providing you have your own transport and bring your own equipment. It is popular among expats, tour groups and Arab families (particularly in Bahrain and Kuwait, where camping is becoming an environmental hazard). It is important to camp discreetly (away from towns or villages) and responsibly by taking litter away with you and avoiding turtle beaches. Turtle beaches can be identified by the presence of large pits at the top of the tide line.

Hostels

The UAE and Qatar are at present the only countries with youth hostels open to foreign visitors. In UAE the hostels are restricted to men only. In Qatar, two hostels with separate dorms for men and women are available in Doha.

Hotels

As the region is still far from becoming a backpackers' beat, and as local Arabs traditionally stay with relatives when they travel, budget accommodation can be hard to find.

Prices of hotels in the Peninsula are usually high. Bar Yemen, you'll be hard-pressed to find habitable cheap accommodation in any of the Peninsula cities. Outside the cities, there are generally few options to choose from. The good news is that standards are also high. It's rare to find rooms even in the cheapest category that lack air conditioning, hot water, a telephone and a fridge. Tellingly, a TV (usually with satellite channels, including BBC and

CNN) seems to be considered a basic amenity everywhere (even when a bathroom is not).

Prices reflect amenities: US\$40 is about the minimum for budget rooms, US\$100 to US\$200 for midrange (this range has the biggest selection) and from around US\$200 for top-end hotels. Of course you can pay many hundreds or even thousands of dollars to stay at the region's star-spangled hotels, such as Burj al-Arab (p380) in Dubai, Emirates Palace (p410) in Abu Dhabi or the Al-Husn Hotel (p203) near Muscat. Competition is often high, however, and it's well worth trying to negotiate discounts, particularly in the low season.

Yemen is the Peninsula's poor relation and its hotels are very cheap: starting from around US\$8/16/50 for budget/midrange/top-end accommodation, though several big-dollar, top-end options can also be found. For those travelling on a tight budget, dormitory-style accommodation is available in some towns, though it's usually very basic, with filthy dorms and worse bathrooms. Such accommodation isn't really an option for women (unless you rent the whole room for yourself). You may even be turned away, or barred outright.

Budget hotel options can normally be found in the souq areas of towns across the Peninsula. Increasingly in some cities, prostitutes (generally from the ex-Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and East Africa) have set up shop and actively ply their trade in these areas. Travellers of both sexes should be aware of this, particularly women travelling alone.

Amenities in top-end hotels rank among the best in the world, with spas, personal fitness and shopping services, fine dining, landscaped gardens and world-class architecture and interior design. Even in Yemen, top hotels have pools, business facilities and health centres.

In Peninsula countries where restrictions on alcohol apply, drinking is often only officially permitted in hotels (usually midrange to top end), where bars and nightclubs serving alcohol can be found. Thus hotels often offer the best (or only) entertainment in town for the traveller. Often a second, less than salubrious 'local' bar is attached, which attracts large numbers of rowdy (usually male) drinkers.

Rental Accommodation

Rental accommodation (most often unfurnished) can usually be found in all the major Peninsula cities, and ranges from modest,

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purpose-built flats to attractive villas and sumptuous hotel annexes.

Expats on the Peninsula usually opt for one of three types accommodation: a villa (often with garden); an apartment block (often with communal swimming pool and health club); or a residency within a 'compound' (including communal pool, health or sports club, restaurant, children's play park, shops – usually selling Western foods – and ball courts).

Rental accommodation is usually advertised in local English-language newspapers. Embassies, cultural centres, companies and colleagues (if you're working) are another useful source of information. Relocation consultants as well as estate agents can be found in the telephone directories of most countries.

Most employers organise temporary accommodation until employees find their own accommodation. Many of the larger, international companies have a good range of accommodation available for employees.

When looking for accommodation, it's worth bearing the following in mind: make sure each room has some form of air-conditioning; check whether maintenance of shared areas of a compound are included in the rent; opt for properties with mains water as opposed to water delivered by bowser; and look for properties with off-road, shaded parking to protect your car from the sun.

Resorts

With miles of unspoilt coastline on two seas, it's surprising that the concept of the seaside resort is only just catching on. Existing resorts range from basic Robinson Crusoe-style constructions (found in Al-Khawka on Yemen's Red Sea) to sumptuous palace-hotels with underwater restaurants (such as Burj al-Arab in Dubai). Many offer a good variety of water sports and activities, from diving and water-skiing to gentler activities, such as boat trips and fun rides for kids.