

Kuwait

الكويت

Kuwait, in the cradle of one of the most ancient and most-contested corners of the world, is best described as a city state. The burgeoning capital, Kuwait City, is like a magnet and has been attracting Bedouin people from the interior, in search of a sea breeze and an escape from recurring drought, for centuries. Today the metropolis is still an oasis in a land of desert plains, but rather more of the cultural and epicurean kind. Excellent museums; a corniche of combed beaches and extravagant restaurants; modern shopping complexes and marinas, and long and lazy retreats at resorts mark the Kuwait City experience.

Between one glamorous development and another, it's almost possible to overlook the Iraqi invasion – almost, but not quite. Two decades have passed, but the devastating experience lurks under the national consciousness and visible reminders of the war remain to this day, not least in museums of commemoration. Despite this, there's little ostensible animosity between Kuwaitis and their northern neighbours; in fact, a good deal of sympathy passes between the two as Iraq continues to pay a heavy price for former transgressions.

Outside Kuwait City there are few attractions other than coastal resorts. Tourist development of Failaka Island is minimal, oil excavation dominates the flat desert plains and, with the exception of Mutla Ridge, there are few distinctive geographical features. That said, there is always something to see in a desert, with a bit of patience and an eye for detail; when it comes to the ritual camping expedition, Kuwaiti people seem to have plenty of both.

FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Kuwait
- **Capital** Kuwait City
- **Area** 17,818 sq km
- **Population** 3.4 million
- **Country code** ☎ 965
- **Head of State** Emir Shaikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah
- **Annual number of tourists** 91,000
- **Stereotypes** 'Filthy rich' with 10% of the world's oil reserves
- **Surprise/s** Wealth not as conspicuously evident as may be expected



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Scientific Center Aquarium** (p148) Appreciate the life of a mudhopper in the magnificent display of marine life at the Scientific Center.
- **Tareq Rajab Museum** (p154) Compare regional headdresses in this gem of an ethnographic collection that escaped the Iraqi invasion.
- **Kuwait Towers** (p149) Take an eagle's eye view of the city and the Gulf from Kuwait's famous triple towers.
- **Al-Boom restaurant** (p159) Dine in a dhow in the shadow of the largest wooden boat on earth, Al-Hashemi II.
- **Kuwait House of National Memorial Museum** (p153) Revisit the Gulf War and its heroes in a country that has put its tribulations to rest.

ITINERARIES

- **Kuwait Stopover** Spend the morning learning about Kuwait's marine heritage at the Al-Hashemi Marine Museum (p155), then come eye to eye with the incoming tide at the Scientific Center's aquarium (p148). Potter the length of the corniche (Arabian Gulf St), pausing at Kuwait Towers (p149) for an aerial view of the city. Get a feel for the country's Bedouin history at Sadu House (p151), take lunch in one of the few remaining heritage houses at Casper & Gambini's (p159), and sample local deserts in the city's most traditional souq, Souq Marbarakia (p160). Return to the water (or dry dock to be exact) for dinner on the dhow at Al-Boom (p159).
- **Three Days** Put Kuwait in a regional context by comparing musical instruments and gold jewellery at Tareq Rajab Museum's stunning ethnographical collection (p154). Take a more global view in the city's modern Sharq Souq on the seafront and continue the theme by lunching 'internationally' at Le Notre (p160) on the corniche before spending the rest of the day joining local and expatriate shoppers hunt for brand names in Salmiya district. If your three days span a weekend, then make sure you enjoy a morning among flapping Afghan carpets, velvet furniture and plastic flowers at the Friday Market (p154).
- **One week** Spare a thought for the events of the past two decades by visiting the

diminished National Museum (p151), sense the still-smarting scars of war in the Kuwait House of National Memorial Museum (p153) or Al-Qurain Martyrs' Museum (p155), and drive out to Al-Jahra's Mutla Ridge (p163). Brighten up a sobering day with picnicking Kuwaiti families on the road to Sabiyah or gauge the city's remarkable reconstruction with a tour of modern architecture, including the Arab Fund Building (p152). For an altogether more tranquil experience, book in for a day of R&R at the Hilton Kuwait Resort (p158), on a silky stretch of coastline with sequined waters, or explore Wafra Farms (p163) to enjoy some greenery in the unremitting desert.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

In summer (April to September) Kuwait is intensely hot. The fact that it is not quite as humid as neighbouring Gulf States is not much consolation. There are plenty of air-conditioned amenities, however, to make a summer visit tolerable.

The winter months are positively chilly in the evenings, but with pleasant daytime temperatures hovering around 18°C. Sandstorms occur throughout the year, and are particularly common in spring (February to April). During spring, the desert is laced in a gossamer of lime green and the city is decorated with petunias, making it the most pleasant time to visit. See p514 for a Kuwait City climate chart.

HISTORY Strategic Importance

At the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, there was some speculation, in Western countries at least, as to why such an unprepossessing splinter of desert should be worth the trouble. Of course, anyone watching the retreating Iraqi army, under skies black from burning wells, could find an easy answer: oil. But oil was only half of the story. Kuwait is not, nor has it ever been, simply a piece of oil-rich desert. Rather, it represents a vital (in all senses of the word) piece of coast that for centuries has provided settlement, trade and a strategic staging post. The latter is a point not lost on US military forces, who until relatively recently camped out on Failaka Island. Two decades ago, the same island, at the mouth of Kuwait Bay, was occupied by the Iraqis.