

Saudi Arabia

المملكة العربية السعودية

Saudi Arabia. A forbidden kingdom for many and emblem of everything most inexplicable to the West about the Middle East: Islam, the veil, terrorism. For centuries the country was effectively closed to outsiders, penetrable only to the bravest and the boldest: Richard Burton, TE Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger.

Today Saudi Arabia is not quite so harsh on outsiders. And, for travellers, there is a surprise – Madain Saleh, sister city to Jordan’s Petra, numbers among the most magical and monumental sites of the Middle East.

The Empty Quarter, one of the largest seas of sand on the planet, is home to dunes the size of ships. The Arabian oryx, one of the most beautiful animals on earth, also lives there. In the far south lies Najran, an ancient caravan stop, where mudbrick forts rise out of the oases. On the coast, libertine Jeddah – as seen by the Kingdom’s more conservative kinsmen – is home to vibrant souqs and lovely coral houses, once the abode of its moneyed merchants. Off the south west shores lie Saudi’s Red Sea riches – reefs that are among the least spoilt and most spectacular in the world.

Most memorable for many, however, is the traditional Bedouin hospitality which, like the sands of the Empty Quarter, seems to go on and on forever.

FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- **Capital** Riyadh
- **Area** 2,149,690 sq km
- **Population** 28.2 million
- **Country code** ☎ 966
- **Head of State** King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud
- **Annual number of tourists** (including hajj pilgrims) 95,000
- **Stereotypes** Wells spurting oil, kings as rich as Croesus, hijackers, desert
- **Surprises** Mist-covered mountains, fragrant juniper forests, freezing desert temperatures (in winter), rich coral reefs



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Madain Saleh** (p328) Marvel at Madain Saleh, the 'other Petra', with its evocative tombs in a stunning desert setting.
- **Old City of Jeddah** (p316) Meander among the old merchants' houses, ancient markets and myriad museums of Old Jeddah and enjoy delicious coffee and conversation in the buzzing restaurants of the cornice.
- **Empty Quarter** (p343) Drive the dramatic dunes of the Empty Quarter or camp out under star-lit desert skies.
- **Najran** (p337) Feast your eyes on fantastic mudbrick fortresses set amid palm plantations in this lovely oasis town.
- **Red Sea diving** (p325) Dive the dazzling depths of Saudi's Red Sea and spot sharks, sea turtles and stunning coral reefs at Yanbu or Al-Lith.

ITINERARIES

Itineraries covering other parts of the Arabian Peninsula can be found on p26.

- **Riyadh and around** Tour the remains of Dir'ayah (p313) and explore the foundations of the modern Kingdom. Enjoy cardamom coffee at The Kingdom Tower (p309) with its stunning aerial summary of Riyadh old and new. Take your time to indulge in Arabian culture at the National Museum (p308), one of the finest in the Middle East; follow up with a languid lunch at Najd Village (p311). Splurge on a plutocrat's dinner at the Globe (p311) then relax with a fruit cocktail and Cuban at the Cigar Lounge (p311) both in the Al-Faisaliah Tower. At the weekend, trot out to the colourful camel market (p313) and camp in the Red Sands (p314).
- **Jeddah and around** Get in on the action at Jeddah's frenetic fish market (p318) before taking a traditional breakfast of bread and fuul at Restaurant Ful & Hummus (p321). Amble through the Souq al-Alawi (p318) and crane your neck admiring the coral houses (p318) of Jeddah's maritime merchants. After lunch at one of the city's many Asian eateries (p321), take a stroll sizing up the famous sculptures (p320) along Jeddah's cornice. At night, taste Jeddah's home cooking at the chilled-out, Al-Nakheel

Restaurant (p321). Relax at the Red Sea resort of Al-Nakheel (p323).

- **City Escapes** Head off into the great Al-Nafud desert (p315) and hunt for signs of the ancient frankincense trade that once made Jeddah fabulously rich. Take the plunge and go diving off Saudi's spectacular Red Sea shores and search the reefs (p350) in Jeddah, Yanbu and Al-Lith. Migrate to Madain Saleh (p329) and spend a week exploring the spectacular Nabataean necropolis, see the ghost of TE Lawrence on the Hejaz Railway and revel in glorious desert scenery. Fill up that 4WD and head off to explore the great Empty Quarter (p341), enjoy a spectacular camel safari or star-gaze at night from traditional Bedouin tents.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Saudi Arabia is between November and February. From mid-April until October, average daily temperatures regularly top 40°C, with high humidity in the coastal regions to boot.

It's appreciably cooler in the Asir Mountains and around Taif all year. In winter (December to January), temperatures in the main cities (except Jeddah) will drop into the teens during the day and even hit zero in some places overnight. For climate chart information, see p514.

The Kingdom's Islamic holidays (p353) are another important factor in deciding when to go. For non-Muslims, Ramadan is best avoided, as getting a day-time meal can be difficult and opening hours are patchy.

HISTORY

Arabia is Stinking Rich!

The myriad kingdoms and empires that grew from the desert sands of Arabia all had one scented commonality (at least prior to Mohammad) in frankincense. Ancient gods

VISA VICISSITUDES

Note that it is still impossible to visit Saudi as an independent traveller and expats are currently restricted when travelling to the southern provinces due to incursions along the Saudi-Yemeni border. Tourist visas are granted to groups if booked through a recognised agency (see p355 for more details).