

Yemen

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There can't be many places left in the world that could make God smile, but Yemen is one of them. Inhabited almost forever, Yemen is, in many ways, the birthplace of all our lives. In days past, the sons of Noah knew it as the land of milk and honey, Gilgamesh came here to search for the secret of eternal life, wise men gathered frankincense and myrrh from its mountains and, most famously, a woman known simply as Sheba said Yemen was her home.

Yet since the book of mythology was closed, Yemen has remained largely locked away in a forgotten corner, oblivious to a world that was oblivious to it. Today though, the world is waking up to what it's been missing. Sitting at the crossroads of two continents, Yemen has been constructed from shades of Arabia and reflections of Africa, and is deeply romantic and utterly unique.

Travel here doesn't come easily, nor in complete safety; today Yemen dances on the brink of catastrophe and you should assess the security situation carefully before taking the plunge. But for those who do venture to this most traditional of Islamic countries, home of a people whom the Prophet once described as 'the most gentle-hearted of men', the rewards are enormous.

But never mind what we have to say about it, let's leave the last word to the man who made it. Legend tells how one day God decided to check out how his creation was faring: London, he decided, had changed a lot, Egypt was nothing like he remembered it, but Yemen, 'Well', he smiled, 'that hasn't changed since the day I created it'.

FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Republic of Yemen
- **Capital** San'a
- **Area** 555,000 sq km
- **Population** 23 million
- **Country code** ☎ 967
- **Head of State** President Ali Abdullah Saleh
- **Annual number of tourists** 379,000 (2007 figures)
- **Stereotypes** Al-Qaeda, kidnappings, qat, coffee, frankincense and Sheba
- **Surprises** The first two stereotypes are way off the mark!



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Old San'a** (p450) Sigh over San'a's cake-icing-like houses and saunter through ancient alleyways created by the son of Noah and a mischievous bird.
- **Haraz Mountains** (p458) Weave a trail through a tapestry of fortresses and fields in the Haraz Mountains.
- **Wadi Hadramawt** (p489) Wander the sand-castle cities of weird and wonderful Wadi Hadramawt where giants once roamed and scorpions line the entrance to Hell.
- **Suqutra** (p486) Act like a medieval knight and search for dragons and the secret of eternal life in stupendous Suqutra.
- **Beit Al-Faqih** (p468) Bargain for a camel or two and be swallowed up by the colour and chaos of Yemen's largest weekly market in the fascinating Tihama region.

ITINERARIES

- **San'a stopover** If time is everything, don't waste it – get lost in the old city. Trying to follow any kind of set walking tour here is impossible so instead allow a cat-like curiosity to lead you through alleyways, up back streets and into interesting corners. The perfect day would involve stopping for tea in any of the numerous teashops, having a *salta* (stew) lunch at Houmald Salta (p455), stuffing your cheeks with qat (p451) and, to round out the day, watching the poetry of a San'a sunset from a hotel roof.
- **Qat chewers' delight** One of the properties of qat (p446) is its ability to slow time down. Therefore this route, which takes you to the finest qat regions, should cover a fortnight but could stretch to six months! Start your qat experiment in the souqs of San'a (p451), before heading south to the famous qat fields of Jibla (p473), cross over to the Red Sea and the Friday market of Beit al-Faiqh (p468) where the coast stocks up on its kicks. Then climb into the Haraz Mountains (p458) to explore by foot the numerous villages here in the qat heartland.
- **The come down** After a fortnight of qat you'll be wanting to detox, so what better way to do this than by going cold turkey and spending your final week either bird-spotting in Suqutra (p486) or giant-spotting in magical Hadramawt (p489)?

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Climatically, Yemen can be divided into three main zones: the Tihama (the Red Sea coastal strip); the central highlands (including San'a); and the desert areas of the east and the far north.

The best time to visit the Tihama is between November and February (summertime can be suffocatingly hot). The twice-yearly monsoons bring some rain to the region between mid-March and mid-April, and particularly July to September. Temperatures range from around 21°C in December and January to as high as 40°C in June. Humidity is also high.

The central highlands (which range from 1500m to 3500m) enjoy a temperate climate for most of the year, though it can get hot at noon and chilly at night (particularly between October and February). The monsoons are light in San'a, but heavy (up to 500mm rainfall) in the southwest and can continue into May. San'a ranges in temperature from a night time minimum of 5°C (from November to January) to a daytime maximum of 30°C (in July).

The desert regions of the east and the far north are hot (particularly between June and September) and very dry, with temperatures from 25°C in December to 40°C or more in June. The southern coastal strip is very hot and humid between May and September.

The island of Suqutra is a special case and is never really too hot or too cold. Wind is the main factor here. During the summer mon-

WARNING

The security situation in Yemen has taken a dramatic step backwards in the last couple of years and potential visitors should consider the situation very carefully beforehand. At the time of research, civil war engulfed the far north, there was increased Al-Qaeda activity in the east and a violent secessionist movement in the south. However, the situation was not as bad as the international media was making out and it was perfectly safe to visit San'a, the Haraz mountains, the Tihama coastal regions, Suqutra, Aden, Ta'izz and the rest of the southern mountains. Hadramawt was slightly more risky but most tourists were still including it in their travel plans. For more see p516 as well as individual region sections.