

# Welcome to Oman, UAE & Arabian Peninsula

*The spectacular emptiness of the Arabian landscape provides a blank canvas for a colourful riot of cultural, religious, intellectual and trading wonders.*

## The Desert

'No man,' wrote Wilfred Thesiger of his travels with the Bedu across the Empty Quarter, 'can live this life and emerge unchanged... He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert.' The austere allure of the desert has attracted Western travellers to Arabia for centuries. Marco Polo and TE Lawrence are among many famous travellers beguiled by the beauty of the barren landscapes and the challenge they suggest to body and soul. Thankfully, modern travellers no longer need risk life and limb to encounter the wilderness as roads and camps make encounters with the desert possible for all.

## Urban Landscapes

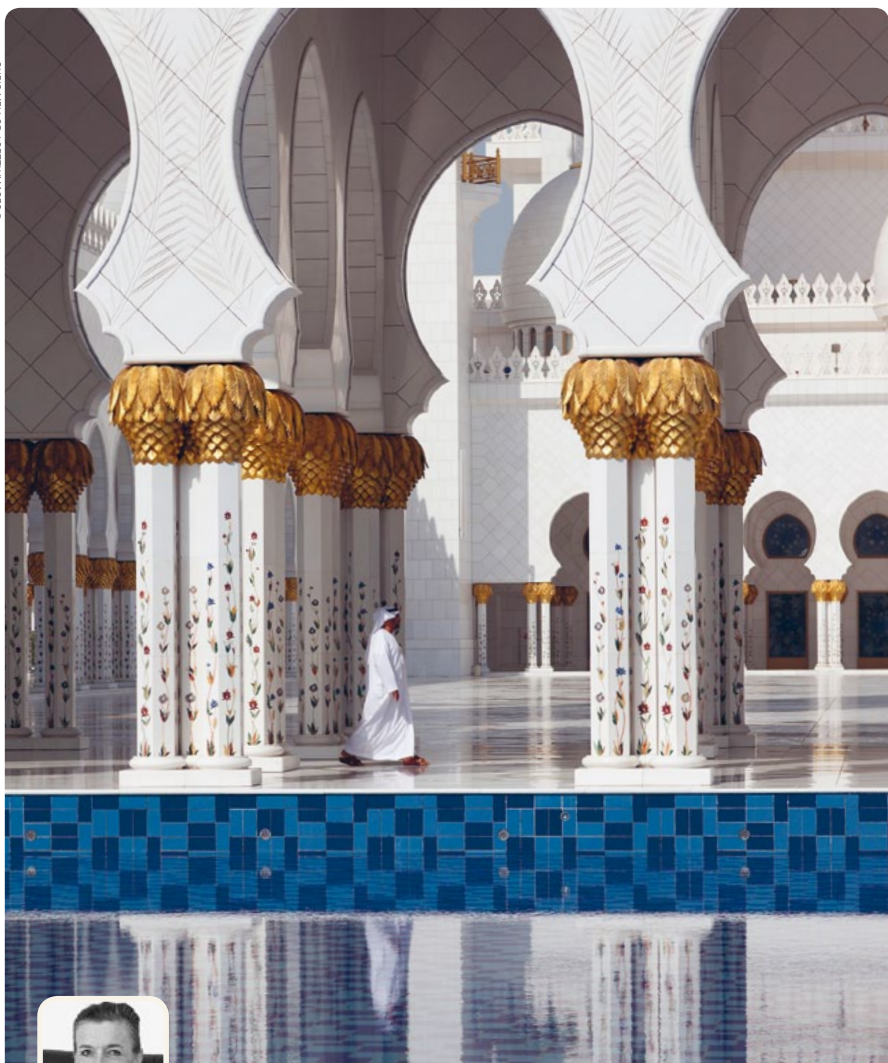
When asked what they most like about their land of sand dunes, the Bedu near Al-Hashman in Oman reply: 'Coming to town'. Town! This is the Arabia of the 21st century, built on oil and banking – sophisticated communities looking to the future with vision and creating empires out of sand, or rather on land reclaimed from the sea. For those looking for a dynamic urban experience, the Gulf cities are the place to find it. With high incomes per capita, elegant towers, opulent hotels and eccentric malls, these cities offer the 'pleasure domes' of the modern world.

## Legendary Hospitality

The essence of the Arabian Peninsula lies in its people: good-natured haggling in souqs, cursing on long journeys, sharing of sweet tea on the edge of wild places. Unifying all, there's Islam, a way of life, the call to prayer carried on an inland breeze, a gentle hospitality extended towards strangers. And this is what many travellers most remember of their visit to the region – the ancient tradition of sharing 'bread and salt' and of ensuring safe passage, albeit given a modern context. Visitors can expect friendly exchange as equally in supermarkets as in remote desert villages.

## Cultural Riches

It's hard to think of Arabia without conjuring the Queen of Sheba holding court at Ma'rib in Yemen; camel caravans bearing frankincense from Dhofar in Oman; dhows laden with pearls from Dilmun; the ruins of empire in Saudi Arabia's Madain Saleh. The caravans and the dhows may be plying different trades these days, but the lexicon of *The Thousand and One Nights* that brought Sheherazade's exotic, vulnerable world to the West, still helps define the Peninsula today. Visit a fort, barter in a souq or step into labyrinthine alleyways and you'll immediately discover the perennial magic of Arabia.



## Why I Love the Arabian Peninsula

By Jenny Walker, Author

Mention the name 'Arabia' and a host of exotic images appear. I've spent half my life studying these images – of deserts, nomads and expressions of religious zeal – in various academic pursuits. But there's so much more to the complex, sophisticated urban culture of modern Arabia than conjured by those stereotypes. I love the Peninsula because each day I encounter that complexity and the gracious, warm-hearted Arab people who lie at the core of the region's enduring appeal. And of course the desert, with its life against the odds, has inevitably crept into my soul!

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