

# Understand Oman, UAE & Arabian Peninsula

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To the surprise of many observers, the Arabian Peninsula escaped relatively unscathed from the Arab Spring. Find out why.

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Pristine coastlines, golden sand dunes and high mountain ranges provide spectacular habitats for Arabia's shy but resilient wildlife.

# Oman, UAE & Arabian Peninsula Today

With the exception of Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula is enjoying what is termed in Oman as a 'Renaissance' – a rebirth of former confidence and strength, marked by investment in culture, education, health care and infrastructure, and a gentle relaxation of the strictly autocratic regimes of the mid-20th century. Guided by the Islamic faith, each country of the Peninsula is feeling towards a modern society, sharing many of the aims of the Western world while endeavouring to maintain an Arab identity.

## Best on Film

**Lawrence of Arabia** (1962) David Lean's classic desert epic.

**A Dangerous Man: Lawrence after Arabia** (1991) Starring Ralph Fiennes in an unofficial sequel to *Lawrence of Arabia*.

**Lessons of Darkness** (1992) Herzog's exploration of apocalypse in Kuwait's oil fields after the Gulf War.

**The Kingdom** (2007) Action film examining Saudi Arabia's relationship with the USA.

## Best in Print

**Seven Pillars of Wisdom** (TE Lawrence; 1935) Superb evocation of the desert during the Arab Campaign 1915–18.

**Arabian Sands** (Wilfred Thesiger; 1959) Captures the Bedouin way of life before it is lost forever.

**Orientalism** (Edward Said; 1978) The book that redefined the Western love affair with the Middle East.

**Arabia Through the Looking Glass** (Jonathan Raban; 1980) Perceptive descriptions of the Gulf states, challenging stereotypes.

**Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women** (Geraldine Brooks; 1994) Revealing account by Australian journalist living under the veil.

## Rapid Change

It is hard to think of another region where the pace of change has been so phenomenal. Grandparents across Arabia remember when a trip to the capital meant a long journey by donkey, when education was reserved for the well-connected and when housing was hot and inadequate. Infant mortality rates were high, life expectancy low.

Within the space of 50 years, the Peninsula has changed beyond recognition. Icons of the region's success are visible from the superhighways of Saudi Arabia to the soaring towers of Gulf cities. This rapid growth is of course largely due to the discovery of oil, but it is also due to a willingness to embrace modernity and the complex technologies it involves. Computer competence, e-governance, and a mobile-phone culture are commonplace across the region.

## Urbanisation

Rapid change comes at a cost. While there's pride in recent achievements, there are frustrations too. There's resentment, for example, towards Arabia's ever-growing expatriate population who helped build the region's infrastructure but who are now reluctant to leave.

Industry has drawn people away from their villages and disrupted the time-honoured patterns of rural life. Those on the fringe of encroaching urbanisation find the traditions they valued are undermined, leaving little recognisable of a Bedouin heritage. For those remaining in remote areas, there is disappointment at the perceived exclusion from the benefits bestowed on an urban life.

## The Arab Spring

Frustration with the process of modernisation and the perceived threat of encroaching ideologies inevitably leads to political repercussions – a situation that Al-Qaeda and other fundamentalist groups have been quick to exploit.