

Welcome to Oman, UAE & Arabian Peninsula

The spectacular emptiness of the Arabian landscape provides a blank canvas upon which is projected a riot of cultural, religious, intellectual and trading wonders.

The Desert

'No man can live this life and emerge unchanged,' wrote Wilfred Thesiger of his travels with the Bedu across the Empty Quarter in *Arabian Sands*. 'He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert.' The austere allure of the desert has attracted travellers to Arabia for centuries. Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo and TE Lawrence are among many famous travellers beguiled by the beauty and challenge of the barren landscapes. 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 and creating empires out of sand, or at least 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 is Islam, a way of life, the call to prayer carried on an inland breeze, a gentle hospitality extended towards strangers. This is what many travellers most remember of their visit here – the ancient tradition of sharing 'bread and salt' and of ensuring safe passage, albeit given a modern context. Visitors can expect equally friendly exchanges in supermarkets as remote desert villages.

Cultural Riches

It's hard to think of Arabia without conjuring the Queen of Sheba and 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 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, Writer

Mention 'Arabia' and a host of familiar, media-weary images probably appear. I've spent half my life studying these images – of wilderness, wealth and war – in various academic pursuits. But there's so much more to the sophisticated culture of modern Arabia than is conjured by these stereotypes. I love the Peninsula because each day I encounter the complexity of Arabia in the dynamic, warm-hearted 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.

For more about our writers, see page 480.