

# Understand Oman, UAE & Arabian Peninsula

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Peninsula countries recognise the need for diversification beyond oil – and political ties help serve this shared agenda.

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Pristine shores, golden dunes, high mountains and deep canyons provide spectacular desert 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 on the Peninsula is feeling its way towards a modern society, sharing many of the aims of the wider 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) An unofficial sequel to *Lawrence of Arabia*.

**Lessons of Darkness** (1992) Werner 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 USA.

## Best in Print

**Seven Pillars of Wisdom** (TE Lawrence; 1935) Evocative desert descriptions during the Arab Campaign of 1915 to 1918.

**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.

**The Travels of Ibn Battutah** (ed Tim Mackintosh-Smith; 2002) Includes illuminating commentary on the great Arab traveller's lifework.

**Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women** (Geraldine Brooks; 1994) Probing account by an Australian journalist of what it means to be a woman living in an Islamic country.

## Rapid Change

It is hard to think of another region where the pace of change has been so phenomenal. Grandparents across Arabia remember travelling by donkey, studying under a tree and sleeping in hot and inadequate housing. Infant mortality rates were high, and 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 largely due to the discovery of oil, but it is also due to a willingness to embrace modernity and complex technologies it involves. Computer competence, e-governance and a mobile-phone culture are the norm across the region.

## Political Disenchantment

Rapid growth inevitably has social and political repercussions and in 2011 the Arabian Peninsula witnessed its own Arab Spring. Mostly propelled by students who felt sympathy with the democratic aspirations of their Arab neighbours, there were minor protests in Oman and Kuwait and more pronounced problems in Bahrain.

Despite the unrest, many Peninsula Arabs glanced at the chaos in Yemen (the Peninsula's only democracy) and questioned the desirability of democratic governance. They looked to their own regimes and saw other ways of effecting positive change: as Hilary Clinton identified, strong leadership and a mandate to govern is behind the phenomenal growth and modernisation of Gulf countries. The promise of higher education and jobs further helped quell the unrest, while a groundswell of interest in canvassing for local elections to *majlis ashura* (equivalent to a Western parliament) has laid the groundwork for greater participation in government by elected representatives across the region.

Today political disenchantment, where it exists, is less about ideology and more about domestic concerns such as religious sectarianism and high youth unemployment.