

SAUDI ARABIA & THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

Jeddah, Medina, Al-Ula, Riyadh, Muscat & Nizwa

16 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Jeddah

Today we arrive in Jeddah - welcome to Saudi Arabia!

Founded as a Red Sea fishing hamlet over 2,500 years ago, today's Jeddah is the commercial capital of Saudi Arabia. This city first truly came to light in 647 AD when it was turned into a port for Muslim pilgrims making the Hajj to Mecca.

Jeddah has been mentioned in many ancient travellers' journals and texts, some describing it as "the city surrounded by walls with beautiful markets and teeming with buildings," while others described it as "the small city on the Red Sea coast crowded with pilgrims." It seems as though there have always been inns, caravanserais, and hostels catering to travellers and pilgrims.

Overnight in Jeddah.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Jeddah: City Tour

Jeddah -- "Where desert and water meet rises the gateway to Islam, a city of life and a crossroad of culture."

☐☐ This city has grown from humble origins. In AD 647, Caliph Osman Ibn Affan chose Jeddah as the main port for the city of Mecca (Makkah), and it became known as Bilad al Kanasil -- the City of Consulates. In the 16th century, the Ottomans built a stone wall around the town in order to fortify it against attacks from the Portuguese. Jeddah remained a fortified, walled town for centuries of Ottoman influence and was not released from Turkish rule until 1915. The buildings of old Jeddah were tall and graceful, constructed of coral limestone and decorated with intricately beautiful wooden facades, known as 'rawasheen.' These were designed not only to break up the sun's glare, but also to take advantage of the cooling sea breezes when the inner windows were opened. One cannot help but feel that, with the enclosure of the town within high, fortified walls, the sea breezes may not have stood much chance of reaching Jeddah's early inhabitants; hence their penchant for building their houses tall and for sleeping on the roofs on hot summer nights.

☐☐ Our sightseeing tour today will include a walking tour around old Jeddah (Al-Balad). In bygone days, the streets of Old Jeddah were twisting, unpaved and haphazard, flanked by closely-packed buildings. A thick layer of sand covered these streets, packed solid by numerous tramping feet. Mingling with the strolling inhabitants, water carriers and other street vendors, camel caravans once plodded their way through the wider thoroughfares, while goats and donkeys wandered in the narrow alleys.

☐☐ We will be sure to visit the bustling Alawi Souq, the heartbeat of Old Jeddah and still an exciting and picturesque part of today's city. Traditionally the open-fronted shops were grouped together according to trade; an old Oriental bazaar tradition, which has continued into modern life. Wares were displayed in the street under palm-leafed canopies, sheltering traders from the relentless sun -- a far cry from the modern-day comforts of air-conditioning in the luxurious shopping malls of today.

We'll also visit an extremely eclectic museum, Al Tayebat International City, which features an almost bizarre collection of every type of historical object in a reconstructed Old Jeddah style building.

☐☐☐ In the evening we will drive along the Corniche, a cultural landmark of the city. After the Maghreb (sunset) prayer, the Corniche springs to life, with Saudi families dining al fresco. Picnicking seems to be a favourite local hobby, and is regarded as an ideal opportunity to get together for a family chat and a substantial supper.

☐ Overnight in Jeddah.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Jeddah - Fast Train to Medina

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This morning we will take the high-speed train on the Haramain Railway (+/- one hour). Completed in 2018, it connects the holy cities of Medina and Mecca.

Medina is one of Islam's two most holy cities. The Prophet Muhammad lived and taught in Medina after departing Mecca in the year 622 AD. His arrival in Medina marks the beginning of the Islamic Calendar. Medina, or Medina al Munawwarah, means "the Enlightened City". The key focal point of the city is the Masjid an Nabawi or the "Prophet's Mosque," constructed by Muhammad and also the site in which he is buried.

We hope to be able to get close to the mosque for exterior photos, but due to the cultural sensitivity of a city that, up until very recently, was closed to non-Muslims, we will proceed based on the local guide's first-hand information at the time on whether this would be appropriate.

We'll also visit the old Ottoman Hijaz Railway station that has been converted into a comprehensive museum with artifacts and displays covering many periods in the country's history (please note that several vestiges of the railway are currently under ongoing renovations, which could impact our plans at this and other related sites).

Overnight in Medina.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Medina - Al-Ula

Our journey continues to Al-Ula, passing several villages en-route.

This journey west follows along some amazing rock formations and some great desert sites where we may have opportunities to take photos of camel herds wandering in the vast desert. The Al-Ula Oasis was located on the incense route and was the capital of the ancient Lihyanites. Today, Al-Ula is located in the heart of a beautiful corner of Saudi Arabia, on the west side of a narrow palm-lined wadi. Al-Ula has a rare combination of striking geography, ancient history, ethnography and nature that makes this a fascinating place to visit. This is a rare example of an Islamic city, which dates back to the 11th Century AD.

During our time in Al-Ula, we will have a walk through the old town, now being developed by the RCA into a tourist hub filled with cafes and local handicraft stores that feels like a walk back through time. Our adventure will also include a stop at Elephant Rock and the Al-Ula Museum (though it has been periodically closed in recent years).

Overnight in Al-Ula.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Al-Ula & Madain Saleh

Madain Saleh, which rises up from the sands in a landscape of real beauty, dates back to the Nabataean civilization and is considered to be one of the most important archaeological sites in Saudi Arabia. The Nabataeans were an ancient trading people whose oasis settlements gave the name of Nabatene to the borderland between Syria and Arabia, from the Euphrates to the Red Sea. This "Capital of the Monuments" is home to over 130 tombs, many dated to between the 2nd century BC and the 2nd century AD. Inscriptions engraved on rocks, facades of graves and mountains provide evidence of the existence of civilizations that had prevailed and fallen in this area. The Kingdom of Nabataeans, with its capital Petra in Jordan, expanded to dominate Madain Saleh, their second city. The landscape here of sweeping sand and wonderful rock formations is stunningly beautiful. The tombs are also in an excellent state of preservation, due largely to the fact that the local stone is much harder than that found at Petra.

Our sightseeing of this extraordinary site will include an early morning visit to some of the most important tombs with the local Royal Commission for Al-Ula (RCA) Governate, "Experience Al-Ula." The RCA has been established to protect the heritage of Al-Ula and sustainably develop the tourism facilities of the region. They have exclusive access to the Hegra site that protects the majority of the tombs in the area.

We will see the famous Qasr al-Farid tomb, a spectacular carved piece of rock standing alone in the desert, as well as the rock construction known as Al-Diwan, likely used for Nabataean ceremonies. We will also view Qasr al-Bint and the Hejaz Railway Station #21. We will also be able to view the magnificent Al-Khuraybah tombs, cut into the face of a cliff.

Overnight in Al-Ula.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Al-Ula - Tabuk

Today we travel to Tabuk.

From snowy mountains to the deep blue sea, the province of Tabuk in Saudi Arabia is home to some of the most varied natural landscapes in the country, offering possibilities for beach holidays, island hopping, Red Sea diving, mountaineering and, of course, sightseeing. The region holds some of the nation's highly treasured historic and archaeological sites, a rich heritage left behind by ancient civilizations of foregone eras.

Tabuk is situated amid a grove of date palms. In former times it was a station on the Hejaz railway (now defunct). At the edge of the old part of Tabuk stands a Turkish fort, built in 1694. Present-day Tabuk is one of the fastest-growing industrial centres of Saudi Arabia.

Tabuk's early-20th-century Hejaz Railway Station is one of the best-preserved in Saudi Arabia (and one that has not been impacted by renovations at the time that this itinerary went to press). There are 13 recently refurbished buildings spread over 80,000 sq metres and these include a workshop, a handicrafts centre, and a building that houses a locomotive, a freight car and several Ottoman relics worth viewing. The Hejaz Railway was a narrow gauge railway that ran from Damascus to Medina, through the Hejaz region of Arabia, with a branch line to Haifa, on the Mediterranean Sea. It was a part of the Ottoman railways network and was built in order to extend the previously existing line between Istanbul and Damascus all the way to the holy city of Mecca (eventually being able to reach only Medina due to the interruption of the construction works caused by the outbreak of World War I). The main purpose of the Hejaz Railway was to establish a connection between Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire and the seat of the Islamic Caliphate, and Hejaz in Arabia, the site of the holiest shrines of Islam and the holy city of Mecca.

Dating to 1559, Tabuk Fort is now a museum, with several rooms housing some interesting historical artifacts from the Ottoman period and lots of signage about the history of Tabuk, its connection to the Prophet Muhammad and several famous travellers. The castle features a ground-floor mosque, an open courtyard and a stairway to the castle's 2nd-floor mosque, and watchtowers. Outside are cisterns that once captured water from a spring that the Prophet Muhammad reportedly drank from.

We'll see the At Tawba Mosque (from outside), where the Prophet Muhammad prayed when he arrived with 30,000 men in AD 630 for the Battle of Tabuk against the Byzantines. The battle never took place but, while here, the Quran's ninth chapter, Surah At Tawba, was revealed. At Tawba Mosque was originally made of bricks, mud and palm-tree trunks. The Ottomans rebuilt it in 1652.

Overnight in Tabuk.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Tabuk - Wadi al-Disah - Fly to Riyadh

Today we travel to Wadi Al-Disah, a 15 km long canyon running through Jebel Qaraqir, a sandstone massif lying about 80 kilometers south of the city of Tabuk. This natural wonder was for a long time a well-kept secret among explorers, before the road leading to the nearby city of Disah was built and satellite images were available to the public. Today, there are two roads leading to each entrance of the wadi and this natural wonder has become one of the must-see places in Saudi Arabia.

The first striking feature of this wadi is its dimensions: at the eastern entrance of the canyon the side cliffs are already higher than 100 meters, but at the western entrance the gap between the bottom of the wadi and the tallest cliffs reaches as high as 500 meters! It is there, from the massive rocky peaks standing on both sides of the canyon, that one can admire the most dramatic scenery of this magical place. The second -- and most unexpected -- amazing feature of the wadi is a water stream that runs through the western part of the canyon towards the city of Disah.

Later we fly to Riyadh, situated on a large plateau in the center of the Arabian Peninsula, and both the capital of Saudi Arabia and it's largest city.

The name Riyadh is derived from plural of the Arabic word rawdha, which means "garden," particularly those formed in the desert after the spring rains. Riyadh has for more than 1500 years been a fertile area set in the heartland of the Arabian Peninsula. The settlement was historically famous for its palm trees, dates and orchards. Once a small walled city, Riyadh has developed into a dynamic metropolis over the

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years and has become a focal point for both travel and trade. One of the richest and splendid cities in this modern era, this is truly the heart of the Arab world.

Overnight in Riyadh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Riyadh: City Tour

Considering that at the turn of the 20th Century there were no main roads leading into Riyadh, this desert capital has come a long way. Although Riyadh has always been the base of the ruling Al-Sauds, it was only in the 1970's that ministries and embassies relocated from the more cosmopolitan city of Jeddah to the traditional capital of Riyadh. Much of Riyadh has been constructed since the boom years of the 1970's.

In addition to being the centre of power, the city is also a commercial hub. Numerous educational, financial, agricultural, cultural, technical, and social organizations have set up base here. The architecture is mostly modern, including contemporary high-rise towers and spacious, air-conditioned malls. The Al-Diriyah district, located to the northwest corner of the modern city, is the original seat of power of the Al Saud family. It has been recently rebuilt in a style meant to evoke the old pre-20th century mud-brick buildings that once existed. Now a focal point for Riyadh tourism, we will take the opportunity to visit the UNESCO-listed site of At-Turaif and explore its winding alleyways.

Our full-day of sightseeing will also include a visit to the Masmak Fortress, a very important historical monument in Riyadh. Located in the centre of the modern city, this fortress and museum symbolizes the unification and foundation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A highlight of our day will be the state-of-the-art National Museum, of the finest in the Middle East. Encased within modernist architecture, its two floors contain eight well-designed and informative galleries covering Arabian prehistory, history, culture and art. When passing through the new part of city we will view the Al-Faisaliah Tower and visit the Kingdom Tower.

Overnight in Riyadh.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Muscat, Oman

Today we fly to Muscat, Oman.

Oman has a population of only 3 million living in a country of over 300,000 sq km (117,000 sq miles), with most of the people living in or around Muscat, the capital. The cultivation in the Batinah, and hence the villages, is concentrated in a narrow strip along the coast where about half of the cultivated land in all of Oman is located. The palm groves are densely green sheltering limes, bananas, pomegranates, figs, papaya, mangoes, guavas, and vegetables. Fishing is also very important in this area.

Muscat is not actually one town, but rather three separate towns, plus several associated towns all separated by geographical features of the mountainous and an indented coast. Time-permitting, we may accomplish some of our Muscat sightseeing upon arrival.

Overnight in Muscat.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Muscat: Area Tour

Oman's position on the Arabian Sea/Indian Ocean, and its isolation from the rest of Arabia, have given the country a much more outward orientation; indeed trade with India and Africa has been conducted for thousands of years. During the age of the European empires in India and Africa, Oman developed strong ties to Britain. Sharing the mountainous south coast of the Arabian Peninsula with Yemen, Oman shares many features with its western neighbour, including aspects of their dress and architecture. In ancient times this area was where highly prized Frankincense was grown and exported.

Today our sightseeing includes the Sultan Qaboos Great Mosque. After a lunch break we'll visit the Old Palace Area (from the outside), and the fabulous National Museum.

Overnight in Muscat.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Muscat - Qariyat - Sur

Today we depart Muscat by road to the Bimmah Sinkhole, a giant depression where sea water has merged with fresh. Two flights of steps take you down to a dazzling pool of blue and green water. After a lunch break at the sinkhole, we continue past Wadi Shab and Wadi Tiwi. This is a region where we can savour the atmosphere of traditional Oman as it was before the days of oil. Towns here prospered centuries ago on the trade with Africa and Zanzibar coming through the Omani port of Sur. Fine houses and forts were built and many of them still stand today, set back from the road behind the modern buildings. Most of the desert area of Oman is a flat gravel plain but the Wahiba has huge ridges of orange sand dunes separated by valleys. The few Bedouin who still live here breed fine camels.

Oman is not principally a land of sand deserts but rather a dramatic area of dry, jagged mountains with narrow river valleys (wadis) between. The evidence of Oman's tribal past is everywhere, with ruined forts commanding every important vantage point. Much of Oman remains hidden in remote valleys and there is a feeling of self-imposed isolation here at the tip of the Arabian Peninsula.

Overnight in Sur.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Sur - Wahiba Desert Camp

Sur's historical importance is based on the building of dhows, the wooden sailing vessels used to sail to India and other countries from Sur. We may visit the dhow building yard if there is any activity to observe (in recent times, the number of dhows being built here is unfortunately very few). Sur was an important port in ancient times, but really came into its own when Oman started to trade extensively with East Africa. Merchants here made fortunes from the trade in slaves and cloves and used the profits to build elaborate houses. We will learn of Sur's history and its role in shipbuilding.

Later we transfer to 4x4 vehicles for our foray into the Omani desert for a desert camp experience. Our camp is located within the breathtaking golden sands of the Oman desert, called the Wahiba Sands. Gas is used for the cooking and refrigeration; paraffin lamps and candles provide light. The camp is a very peaceful place to relax and to experience authentic desert nights.

Our accommodation is in the form of well-equipped huts (called Barasti) with comfortable beds (mattress, blankets, pillows and fresh sheets), and private bath facilities. Our huts are basic but cozy, and a wonderfully atmospheric way to enjoy the desert way of life and to learn about the local culture in a warm and friendly environment. Activities include sunset admiring, musical entertainment, and stargazing.

Overnight at Wahiba Desert Camp.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Wahiba - Ibra - Jabreen Castle - Nizwa

We recommend an early wake-up in order to observe the rising sun over the dunes. After breakfast we depart our camp and head toward Nizwa, the main town of the interior province.

En route we experience the inland side of the great mountainous backbone of Oman, where sands lap at the thresholds of farmlands, and a string of border towns marks the zone of transition between nomadic and settled peoples. In the oasis villages of Oman, desert and village economies have mingled for ages to their mutual benefit. Living within and along the sands are approximately 3,000 pastoralist Bedouins belonging to different tribes, who are primarily herders of goats and camels.

Forts and castles are Oman's most striking cultural landmarks and have historically been used as defensive bastions or look-out points. It is estimated that there are over 500 forts, castles and towers in Oman. Today we will visit a few of them that are particularly remarkable in their architecture and style. Included is a stop at Bahla Fort, a UN World Heritage Site.

We continue our drive to Jabreen Castle, built as a defensive stronghold. Jabreen is perhaps the finest of Omani castles, with dungeons, passages, rooms and ceilings decorated with fine carvings and paintings. This castle is distinguished by the inscriptions and frescoes that adorn its rooms; its ceilings are decorated with paintings and Islamic-era style inscriptions, and its doors are beautifully carved. We also explore the village of Misfat Al Abriyeen where we can see its fascinating history, agriculture and falaj watering system.

Overnight in Nizwa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Nizwa: Jebel Shams Mountains

The Jebel Shams, translated literally to "Sun Mountain" is the highest peak in Oman, often called the "Grand Canyons of Oman." We spend another day with our 4x4 vehicles, travelling up the Western Hajjar Mountains, where we can explore the old village of Al Hamra located at the foot of the hills. In this area we can enjoy the date plantations, ruined houses and the scenery. We also stop at Wadi Ghul and discover small villages hidden in the mountain ranges as we climb up the steep and winding road.

We enjoy a walk to an abandoned village on Jabal Shams Plateau, an exciting route along steep canyon walls. This ancient donkey path follows the west flank of Wadi an Nakhar and leads to the abandoned village of As Sab. Our stroll provides spectacular views into Wadi an Nakhar and down to Al Hamra.

We return to Nizwa for our overnight stay.

Overnight in Nizwa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Nizwa - Bilad Sait - Muscat

Today we continue by 4X4 through breathtaking mountains scenery; terraced farming and beautiful mountain villages line our route, as well as great views especially of Bilad Sait Village. It is in these mountain areas where Omani honey is produced. Beekeeping has been practiced here since ancient times. The specialist bee keepers of northern Oman have developed great skill in obtaining honey and propagating bee colonies in a sustainable manner. Our guide will take us to one of the bee keepers to observe this traditional practice.

Up on reaching the main road, we continue to Muscat along the fertile Batinah coast with its beautiful beaches, forts, fishing villages and places famous for camel racing and bull fighting.

Overnight in Muscat.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Departure

Departure from Muscat.

RH LAH S' IDAH / BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast