



Visit  
Saudi

# CULTURE & HERITAGE

The rich traditions and culture combined with fascinating future plans that make up the creativity of Saudi



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# CONTENTS



## 4 CULTURE & CREATIVITY

A cultural and economic evolution is underway in Saudi.

## 12 SAUDI'S HISTORY

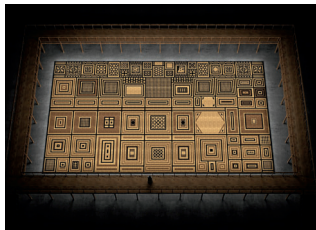
Saudi's long and intriguing history offers stories of trade, religion and unity

## 18 CULTURAL PILLARS

Saudi's heritage is made up of unique traditions encompassing all corners of its culture.

## 24 FAMILY, FOOD & HERITAGE

An integral part of any culture, food sits at the heart of Saudi society, hospitality and family life



## 28 HISTORICAL SITES

Uncover 10,000 years of history across Saudi's 13 regions

## 30 SAUDI ATTRACTIONS

Aside from its magnificent roster of heritage sites, Saudi offers an abundance of places of interest in which to be entertained

## 44 NEXT GEN + FUTURE

The creative industries are playing an important part in the modernisation of Saudi

# CULTURE & CREATIVITY

A cultural and economic evolution is underway in Saudi, from government-backed initiatives to independent creatives, the story of Saudi's rich culture continues to be written



# SAUDI CULTURE AND HERITAGE: AN UNFINISHED TALE

The importance of preserving Saudi's culture

On the outskirts of Riyadh, on a site that has a special resonance in Arabian history, sit a cluster of ancient sandstone buildings. Labyrinthine alleyways snake around the city, revealing glimpses of the carefully restored watchtowers and Najdi architecture of once resplendent palaces. This is At-Turaif: one of six UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Saudi and the birthplace of the House of Saud. Despite its historic significance, a relatively small number of international visitors have seen this marvel of the ancient Arabian world. But that's all about to change.

Saudi is a multi-faceted nation: a land of vibrant contrasts that wears its history on its sleeve, even as it embraces the future. Situated at a physical and spiritual crossroads between east and west, Saudi was largely inaccessible to travellers until the introduction of tourist visas in 2019, marking the dawn of a new era for places like At-Turaif, which embody Saudi culture and heritage.

Given that the country is not yet 100 years old, it's perhaps no surprise that old customs and traditions born from the intricate relationship between man, geography, religion and commerce, are still a prevalent thread in the

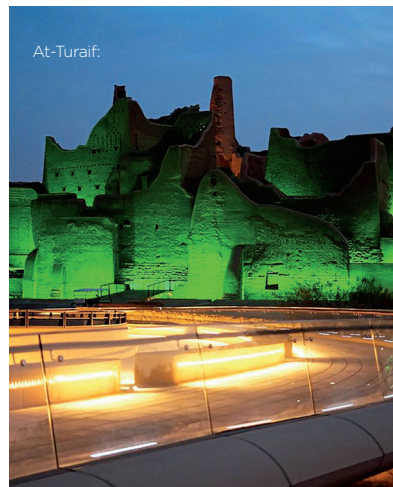
national tapestry. From the Nabataean empire and the ancient trade routes that criss-crossed the lands of the Arabian Peninsula, to the birth of Islam in the 7th century and the emergence of the House of Saud a thousand years later, different chapters have all left their mark on Saudi's heritage.

"Our longstanding traditions are deeply rooted in Saudi culture, and they are what make us unique," says Fahd Hamidaddin, CEO of Saudi Tourism Authority (STA). "With a rich history spanning thousands of years, we have a vibrant and diverse culture. Each of Saudi's 13 regions has its unique subcultures and traditions, and we are committed to their preservation for generations to come."

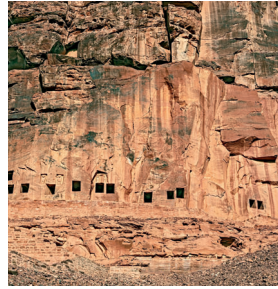
Today, after several decades of rapid modernisation fuelled by immense wealth generated by the oil industry along with a gradual opening-up of Saudi to external influences, Saudi finds itself at another crossroads: between the old ways and the new. Social and economic reforms introduced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud in 2016 provided an even greater catalyst for change, and the launch of Saudi Vision 2030 has set out a framework for an economic and cultural

evolution that will pave the way for a sustainable future while aiming to preserve Saudi's traditional Islamic values.

"When we say Saudi is undergoing a cultural transformation, we do not mean we are moving away from our traditions and creating a new identity," says Hamidaddin. "In fact, we are delivering a cultural renaissance supported by our rich past with a vision for the future. This vision will enrich the lives of all Saudis and residents, encourage and support local talent, create opportunities for cultural exchange, and increase the sector's contribution to the economy," he continues.



At-Turaif:



## TRADE, GEOGRAPHY & RELIGION; A KINGDOM OF TRAVELLERS

From a passion for poetry and falconry, to the warm hospitality shared in homes across the country, many traditions associated with Saudi culture stem from the nomadic Bedouin who once roamed the deserts and mountains of the Arabian Peninsula. The relationship between people and landscape remains at the heart of Saudi identity, from culinary traditions of the 13 provinces to the cultivation of dates and animal husbandry.

The endless quest for food, water and shelter in prehistoric times eventually led to the creation of the first permanent settlements in places where precious ground water supported date palms, orchards and cereal crops. These early towns would become vital stops on the ancient Incense Route: a trade network that connected pre-Islamic Saudi with the wider world. Other aspects of Saudi heritage can be credited to the spread of Islam in the 7th century. Islamic calligraphy is still

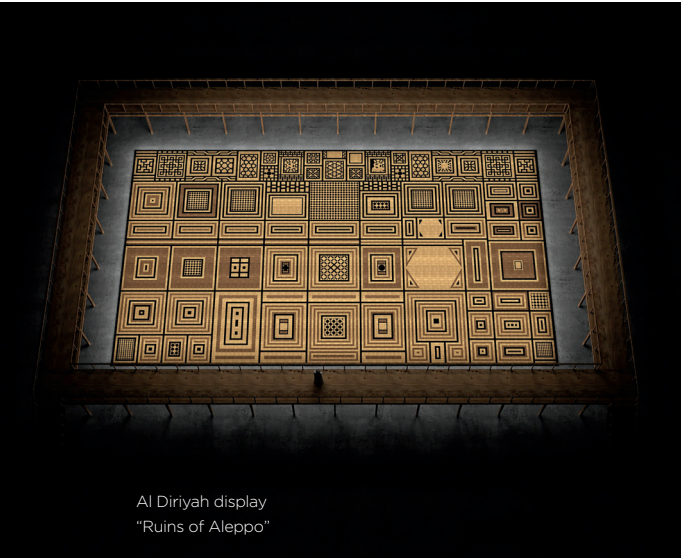


widely used in contemporary art throughout the Middle East, and the geometric designs and arabesque patterns that are found in art and architecture can be traced back to the work of Islamic mathematicians and scientists.

“Ancient civilisations are a source of our culture, and the seeds that inspire our contemporary works. This is what distinguishes us from others,” says Abdunasser Gharem, a prominent Saudi artist whose work is infused with references to traditional symbols and motifs. “As Saudis, we have a lot of customs and traditions concerning food, fashion, music and moral heritage. The

old trade routes were about building relationships with other civilisations all over the world, which connected us as human beings. It is important that we keep that alive.”

As the co-founder of Edge of Arabia, an artists’ collective that brought Saudi art to the world via dozens of exhibitions in Europe, Asia and the US since its formation in 2003, Gharem has been instrumental in promoting Saudi culture internationally. Now that tourist visas are easily available, artists from all over the world flock to his Riyadh gallery, Gharem Studio, reversing the direction of cultural exchange that saw many artists move abroad in the last few decades.



Al Diriyah display  
"Ruins of Aleppo"

## TOURISM: THE NEW BLACK GOLD

As Saudi enters a new chapter, the government is going to great lengths to preserve places that are intrinsically linked to the history of the nation: places like At-Turaif, the capital of the First Saudi State. The UNESCO World Heritage site and the wider Diriyah area are key parts of the national story and have been the subject of major archaeological exploration and restoration in recent years.

"Visitors have long descended on Diriyah from around the world for trade, agriculture, worship and education. Importantly, Diriyah became a place of artistic expression and cultural exchange," says Jerry Inzerillo, CEO, Diriyah Gate Development Authority

(DGDA). "As the heart of the nation, the birthplace of the First Saudi State, and witness to history, Diriyah encourages us to reflect on the origins of Najdi culture and a Saudi identity that exists to this day. Diriyah's cultural legacy resonates, from the clothes we wear, the coffee we drink and the ardash we celebrate."

Once a crossroads of culture, Diriyah is undergoing a US\$50.6 billion development that will transform it into a buzzing cultural and tourism destination. When complete, the project will be home to at least 14 luxury hotels, plus dedicated spaces for learning, dining, shopping and entertainment, along with a smattering of world-class museums and cultural centres, the first of which have already hosted major events like this year's inaugural Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale.

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CEO, Diriyah Gate  
Development  
Authority**

Diriyah is one of several 'gigaprojects' fuelling Saudi's drive to attract more domestic and international tourism, a key part of the Vision 2030 plan to help diversify the economy and reduce Saudi's dependence on oil. Tourism currently accounts for 5.3 per cent of GDP, but the government hopes to increase that to



Tombs of Dadan

more than 10 per cent by 2030. At the moment, Saudi welcomes around 29.5 million international tourists each year, but new infrastructure will help that grow to around 55 million by 2030.

“Since opening to tourism in 2019, Saudi has built up a competitive offering that combines authentic Arabian culture and a rapidly expanding entertainment offer,” says Fahd Hamidaddin from STA. “As we continue to transform as a destination, we will always strive to preserve and celebrate our heritage. Saudi has six UNESCO World Heritage sites and over 10,000 archaeological sites. AlUla, Qiddiya, and Diriyah are just a few examples of heritage preservation being at the heart of our destination development.”

Among the tourism projects benefitting from government support is the ancient city of AlUla. Once a thriving hub on the well-trodden trade routes between Jeddah and the north, and a former capital of the Nabataean empire, AlUla has supported human life for almost 10,000 years. The incredible rock inscriptions, Neolithic tombs, ancient wells and tracts of cultivated land around Hegra - the UNESCO World Heritage Site to the north of AlUla - tell the story of social evolution over millennia, giving visitors a rare and fascinating insight into the lives of the traders, pilgrims and travellers who passed through.

“The oasis was and is a haven, a place to rewind and gather strength both physically and mentally for

“Since opening to tourism in 2019, Saudi has built up a competitive offering that combines authentic Arabian culture and a rapidly expanding entertainment offer,”

**Fahd Hamidaddin,  
CEO, Saudi Tourism Authority**

the journey ahead,” explains Philip Jones, Chief Destination Marketing Officer, Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU). “Nourishing life here for millennia, the oasis invited people to settle and develop their rich and varied cultures. Amidst a wild and enigmatic desert landscape perfumed with the scent of dates, orange and mint, the oasis provided shelter, nutrition, fuel, inspiration and refuge for all civilisations that settled in AlUla.” That spirit of hospitality and cultural exchange is woven through the ‘Journey Through Time’ masterplan: a 15-year roadmap for the responsible and sustainable redevelopment of AlUla and the surrounding area.

When the project is complete in 2035, new museums and cultural centres will immerse visitors in the story of the Nabataean, Dadan and Lijian kingdoms that once thrived here, with new hotels, restaurants and shopping districts set to welcome two million tourists annually by 2035.

At the same time, crafts and skills that have been practised here since time immemorial form an authentic backdrop to the whole experience.

Organisations like the Princes Foundation School of Traditional Arts at Madrasat AdDeera offer courses and workshops in ancient arts and handicrafts like pottery, stone-carving and leather working, enshrining the area’s cultural heritage in its present-day appeal.

“In AlUla, there is a large-scale awakening, not only of the recent past but also of the ancient past and how people who have lived through the ages in this region used artistic expression in everyday life,” says Jones. “As well as these classes and workshops for locals and visitors, AlUla is welcoming artists to visit and stay and be inspired to create as part of an ongoing series of artists residencies. This is a continuation of the long-held legacy in AlUla for artists to meet, ideate, exchange ideas and practices.”



Nouf Sufyani a.k.a DJ Cosmicat

## FORGING A NEW FUTURE

Artists have long embraced traditional motifs and imagery as a means to explore Saudi culture and identity. As a wave of imagination and inspiration surges across Saudi, creatives in other fields are also integrating traditional elements into their work.

“As local artists, we try to incorporate our culture and the sound of our memories into our work, whether it’s music or fashion or theatre,” says Nouf Sufyani, a.k.a Cosmicat, the first female DJ and music producer in Saudi. “For me, I like to add some Arabic elements to my music, and I love to collaborate with local artists that I admire.”

For Sufyani and other female musicians, the social reforms of 2017 - which gave women much greater autonomy and eased restrictions on live music events and festivals - have created opportunities that didn’t exist 10 years ago. “There’s a few female DJs under the spotlight now in comparison to back in the day, when the local community was very different. We were lucky to experience a lot of change, which made it easier for women who want to pursue music,” she explains.

Across Saudi, new venues that act as cultural centres, exhibition spaces and incubators for the next generation of artists are providing opportunities for young Saudis in this brave new world. Conceived as a creative community that supports a broad range

of artistic genres, Hayy Jameel opened in Jeddah in December 2021 to connect local artists with local and international audiences. The programme spans everything from museum-style art exhibitions to farmers’ markets, concerts and informal jam sessions, as well as a children’s drop-in learning zone, workshops and educational courses.

The complex includes Hayy Arts, which hosts rotating exhibitions by Saudi and international artists, an independent cinema and an array of artists’ studios and makers’ spaces. And alongside these not-for-profit activities are a range of Hayy Residents: home-grown creative businesses that include immersive art experiences, graphic design studios, a baking academy and the Saudi Comedy Club.

“Culture opens up a space for conversation and connectivity like no other. This desire for public discourse and communal experience is perhaps even more acute in a rapidly changing society like that of Saudi,” says Antonia Carver, Director of Art Jameel, the organisation behind Hayy Jameel. “The winds of change are blowing and we’re thrilled to be working alongside colleagues from the government, NGO and commercial sectors as part of this incredible moment of rebirth in Saudi. Local audiences and tourists flock to Hayy Jameel’s exhibitions and events - the appetite for opportunities to experience culture and creativity is truly palpable.”

Thanks to this heady

“Culture opens up a space for conversation and connectivity like no other. This desire for public discourse and communal experience is perhaps even more acute in a rapidly changing society like that of Saudi.”

**Antonia Carver,  
Director, Art Jameel**



blend of government-backed initiatives, private foundations and a new generation of Saudi artists and creatives, the story of Saudi’s rich culture and heritage continues to be written. And people are queuing up to read it.

# SAUDI'S TRADITIONS

Visitors will receive a memorable welcome when they arrive in Saudi as they get ready to embark on a journey of discovery



# A WARM WELCOME TO GUESTS

Arabic hospitality is renowned around the world, and Saudi gives guests a special introduction



Arabic coffee, dates and dried fruit and nuts

From the moment you're likely greeted with "salam alaykum" ("peace be upon you"), get ready to dive into the rich history and traditions of Saudi. If you're staying in one part of Saudi, or exploring different regions, you will be able to learn all about the traditions firsthand. If you're travelling around the country you will get to see how traditions can change just like the beautiful landscapes. Seeing and discovering is just one of the joys of visiting Saudi.

## GREETING

As mentioned, "salam

alaykum" is one of the most common greetings in Saudi. It can now commonly be followed by a wave. Previously, the greeting could be followed by a handshake in more formal situations.

If family or close friends are meeting each other in person after a prolonged period of time, the "salam alaykum" greeting might also be followed by a kiss on the cheek.

## A WARM WELCOME

Guests are welcomed with generosity and warmth in Saudi. If you're checking into a hotel or entering a shop,

souk or even a taxi, you may be greeted with "marhaba" ("welcome") as opposed to "salam alaykum".

Tea or coffee (qahwa in Arabic) with dates is a signature dish of Arabic hospitality, and it is also very much a part of Saudi's way to welcome guests.

Coffee culture is a big part of Saudi, like other places around the world, so it is a fitting, hospitable gesture that guests are greeted with a cup of coffee.

Visitors might also receive a tea or perhaps even another drink, such as a water or a fresh juice (watermelon, pineapple, orange or mixed fruits are popular).

Many hotels offer dates and coffee or tea to guests in the foyer as a warm reception. There might even be a staff member available to pour a hot cup from the dallah (a traditional Arabic coffee pot that has been used for centuries).

Any thoughts of travelling will quickly be forgotten about, and likely any jet lag will be gone when you're sipping on a Saudi coffee paired with a few famous local dates. (What airline queue?) Even before you check-in, you will feel at ease and welcome. Marhaba.



## STRANGERS

No matter who you are, even if you begin your journey as a stranger, you will likely not ever feel like one as it is part of Saudi culture to be respectful of strangers. Furthermore, even if you start off as a stranger, by the end of your travels, you will likely not feel that you're a stranger thanks to the marhaba welcome. Saudi hospitality is about being welcome to everyone, and within that there are special points whether you're a stranger, an elder or a family member.

## GUESTS

If you were to visit someone's home in Saudi, you can likely expect a similar welcome as in a hotel or elsewhere. Guests are held in high

esteem, and are given a warm welcome of coffee and dates. If you don't happen to drink coffee or tea, your host will no doubt offer a fresh juice or something equally refreshing. If you finish your drink, your host or hostess will continue to refill your cup until you say otherwise. It is

“Saudi hospitality is about being welcome to everyone”

these special touches and attention to deal that really showcase Saudi hospitality.

## YOUNGSTERS

Each person in Saudi society is valued and respected, young or old, big or small. This starts at a young age with teachings. It is considered important to respect the younger generations as they will be the ones carrying on traditions.

## ELDERS

Respecting elders is a foundation in many cultures, and that is also very much true in Saudi where Saudis are raised to respect the elders, along with youngsters and the strangers.

Arabic coffee and dates





## OTHER TRADITIONS

Saudi is brimming with traditions, and within the vast country, you will see that each of the regions can have different customs which make that area especially unique. It's all the more reason to travel across the 13 territories to discover firsthand what makes each place special from Eastern Province to Hijaz, and beyond. Given Saudi's signature hospitality and welcoming nature to guests



Fabric being woven in Saudi

and strangers, locals will likely be happy to share the family and cultural traditions of their region.

As you travel around Saudi, it's not just the landscapes that will change from the sparkling coasts to ancient rock formations to wide dusty planes. You will also notice different outfits

and colours themes by the regions in both the dress of men and women.

Just looking at ladies' traditional dress, you will see the beautiful range of colours between the regions. As you discover more, you will see that there are even variances between cities and specific clothes

for different occasions. Additionally, the outfits hold significance and connections to the place the wearer is from and the craftspeople that created the garments.

For example, in Taif in the southwest of Saudi, there are a few different ladies' traditional dresses depending on the specific region. The most common of ensembles is a deep blue dress with trousers that

“You will see that each of the regions can have different customs which make that area especially unique.”

are suited for the mountainous terrain.

Meanwhile in Asir, also in the southwest, the use of primary colours and richly embellished gold thread adorns women's traditional dress. This makes Asiri dress famous around Saudi and highlights the incredible craftsmanship of local artisans. These striking, heavily ornamented dresses are works of art and can take months to produce.



Saudi craftsmanship at work

# CULTURAL PILLARS

Saudi's heritage is made up of unique traditions encompassing all corners of its culture, from clothing to fragrance, food and falconry



# THE CORNERSTONES OF SAUDI HERITAGE

Unique traditions from the 13 regions of Saudi come together to create this culturally-rich country

**M**uch of Saudi life is rooted in traditions forged by geography, climate, religion and historical events. Many customs, like the culture of hospitality and generosity for which Saudi is known, stem from the Bedouin, who were renowned for the way they greeted and honoured their guests.

Arts and crafts made use of resources that were readily available: goat and sheep wool was used by Bedouin

women in their traditional Al Sadu weaving to make textiles and clothing; birds of prey were trained to aid with hunting and navigation; and date palms were cultivated to make everything from food and shelter to bags and jewellery.

Many of the traditions and customs celebrated today stem from the arrival of the Islamic faith in the 7th century. The two most important Islamic holidays, Eid al Fitr and Eid

al Adha, are directly linked to Ramadan and Hajj, and motifs associated with Islamic calligraphy, architecture and design are still prevalent in the work of contemporary artists today.

Even as Saudi looks towards the future, these time-honoured cultural pillars remain the cornerstone of life in Saudi, creating a beautiful dichotomy between tradition and modernity and a powerful impression for anyone visiting the country.



traditional cultural  
Souk Okaz festival

## ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

### Calligraphy

The beautiful flowing script in which the Quran was written evolved into an artform that was widely adopted across the Islamic world. Calligraphy grants its practitioners artistic license to reposition and transform the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet to create patterns and motifs that can resemble floral arrangements, complex equations or intricate sheet music: works of art in their own right.

Originally created to improve the legibility of classic Arabic, calligraphy turns language into art and is used by everyone from school children to modern artists.

In 2021, Arabic Calligraphy was recognised by UNESCO on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

### Architecture

Islamic architecture flourished in the 500 years after the dawn of Islam and its influence can still be seen today. Typically associated with mosques, its principles were adopted in the design of palaces, fortresses, tombs and public buildings, which incorporated domes, ornamental archways, symmetrical patterns and intricately carved vaulted ceilings. Initially conceived as the physical representation of the principles of Islam, the genre evolved to include more geometric shapes and patterns inspired by the work of Islamic scholars, mathematicians and astronomers, whose work



Arabic calligraphy

also laid the groundwork for modern science.

### Ramadan

The Holy Month of Ramadan is celebrated by Muslims all over the world, but it is especially revered in Saudi, home to the two holy cities of Makkah and Al Medinah. It falls on the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which is based on the cycles of the moon, so the dates on which Ramadan is observed change every year.

During the Holy Month, Muslims fast from dawn to dusk and avoid all forms of bad behaviour, from unkind thoughts to selfless deeds; the intention being to exercise self-restraint, which is one of the five pillars of Islam. Each evening, the fast is broken after sunset prayers with iftar, and Muslims rise before dawn to pray and savour a small meal called suhour.

### Eid al Fitr

One of the two most important holidays of the year for Muslims, Eid al Fitr, the Feast of Fast-Breaking, marks the end of Ramadan. After a month of abstinence, Eid al Fitr provides the opportunity for friends and family to come together and celebrate with gift-giving and elaborate feasts at which families don their finest clothes and cook

traditional dishes reserved for special occasions.

Each region has its own specialities, but one of the most popular Eid dishes in Saudi is mugalgal, an aromatic medley of lamb, green peppers, onions and tomatoes. Eid al Fitr is one of two major religious holidays in Saudi; the other is Eid al Adha, which marks the end of the Hajj.

### Saudi National Day - Al Yawm Al Watani

Every year on 23 September, Saudis celebrate the day on which King Abdulaziz Al Saud (Ibn Saud) unified the regions and declared the formation of Saudi.

Al Yawm Al Watani is a celebration of identity and culture, with parades, traditional dances and festivities taking place in every part of the country, where revellers often wear the traditional dress of their region.

The Saudi flag, which bears the Shahada - the Islamic oath reading: "I bear witness that there is no deity but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God" - is flown from cars and buildings across the country as a reminder of the important role Islam plays in national identity and culture.

## BEDOUIN TRADITIONS

### Al Sadu

The Bedouin practiced a form of traditional weaving known as Al Sadu to make all manner of textiles, from tents and bags, to belts, clothing and decorative items. Master weavers were able to express their creativity via unique patterns and designs involving symmetrical geometric patterns, as well as animals and insects like scorpions and snakes.

Yarn was dyed using pigments extracted from plants, herbs and rocks, reflecting the colours of the natural world and the desert environment. Al Sadu was recognised by UNESCO as part of Saudi's intangible cultural heritage in 2020 and the artform is today passed on to new generations in workshops and artisan schools around the country.

### Falconry

Birds of prey have been used all over the world for hunting and sport since time immemorial, but falconry

was a quintessential part of daily life for the Bedouin and remains an important part of Saudi culture.

A vital tool in the quest for food and water in the deserts and mountains of the Arabian Peninsula, falconry speaks of a time when man lived at one with the natural world.

It may no longer serve any practical purpose, but falconry is still a treasured aspect of traditional life and a popular hobby. It's also a lucrative business: in 2020, a Shaheen falcon was sold for US\$170,000 at an auction organised by the Saudi Falcon Club (established in 2017 to protect the ancient ways).



## LANGUAGE

Hundreds of different dialects are used across the Arabic-speaking world. The version spoken in most of the Arabian Peninsula is known as Khaleeji or Gulf Arabic. For non-native speakers, the language can seem daunting, but as the sixth most widely spoken language in the world and one of the six languages used by the United Nations, its useful to know a few phrases, especially if you're planning a visit to Saudi.

### USEFUL PHRASES

**What is your name?**

*Eysh esmk?*

**My name is Ali**

*Ismii Ali*

**How are you?**

*Kaif halak?*

**How much?**

*Be kam?*

**Do you speak**

**English?**

*Forsa sa'eda*

*or Tasharrafná*

### USEFUL WORDS

**Hello**

*As-salam alaykum*

**Please**

*Min fdlek*

**Thank you**

*Shukran*

**Yes**

*Eewa*

**No**

*La*



Traditional dance

### **Najdi Ardah**

Originally performed before battle, Najdi Ardah is a type of ceremonial sword dance that combines percussion, poetry and music. The dance is performed all over Saudi, but the Najdi version, which originated in the ancestral lands of Saudi founder King Abdulaziz Al Saud, is particularly impressive.

Two rows of men in intricately embroidered daghla robes unique to the region line up as the dance gets underway, waving their swords in time to the

music and chanting lines of poetry as they sway rhythmically with the drums. Today, alardah is considered a valuable part of Saudi culture, and is performed during weddings, national celebrations and most religious holidays.

### **Date Palm Cultivation**

The humble date palm is one of the most important symbols of Saudi culture and heritage, which is why it appears on the national emblem of the country.

As one of the few trees

that can thrive in dry desert environments, it has been grown for centuries across the Arabian Peninsula, serving numerous purposes. Its fruit, the succulent date, provides sustenance and has been traded since the earliest days of the Incense Route. The palm's wide fronds provided shelter from the hot Arabian sun, creating shaded space to rest for humans and animals alike. Its leaves, fibres, bark and trunk have been used to make shelter and furniture throughout the ages, and today, vast date palm oases are found all across Saudi, which is the largest producer of dates in the world.

### **Majlis**

After the mosque, the majlis is perhaps the most important meeting space in the Arab world. A symbol of hospitality and openness, the majlis is a place to welcome guests and exchange news, to talk business and make important decisions or resolve conflicts with neighbouring tribes.

They are places for formal receptions and council meetings, but also for sharing ideas, poetry and song; places where traditions and customs are passed down from elders to young members of the community.

These informal 'sitting places' can be found everywhere, from palaces and private homes to open-air settings in the middle of the desert. There are no formal rules about what constitutes a majlis, so long as there's space to sit and a fire to prepare coffee for guests.

## **CLOTHING**

Saudi clothing is similar to that worn in other parts of the Arabian Peninsula, with a few notable differences. In the summer, men wear the thawb, a full-length robe made from pristine white cotton, and a red and white head covering comprising a kaffiyeh (or gutrah) held in place by an aqal: a black headband traditionally woven from camel hair. In the colder months, men sometimes wear dark blue, beige or black thawbs, and during formal occasions, they wear a bisht, a ceremonial robe edged with elaborate golden embroidery.

Traditionally, Saudi women wear a full-length cloak called an abaya, a headscarf called a shayla (or hijab) and a veil known as the niqab. Since 2019, tourists no longer have to wear an abaya or cover their hair, but must still dress conservatively. These days, it is not uncommon to see Saudi women in Jeddah and Riyadh wearing more fashionable and elaborate abayas in different colours and contemporary cuts. Ceremonial abayas worn on holidays or weddings often feature intricately woven designs adorned with coins, handcrafted silver jewellery and precious stones.

## UNIQUE CUSTOMS

### Family Names

Family lineage is an important status symbol in Saudi and names are an essential part of this heritage.

Naming conventions follow a simple format for men and women: the given (or first) name is followed by the father's name, then the family name. Sometimes the word bin or ibn, meaning 'son of' may be added between first and second names. In the case of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, the name indicates that he is Mohammed, son of Salman (the present King) of the Al Saud family.

### Saudi Coffee

Hospitality and generosity are fundamental characteristics of the Saudi people: traits that stem from the culture of welcoming visitors after long journeys.

Whether you're a prince or a pauper, you can expect to be received with open arms. Guests are usually greeted with Saudi coffee, an aromatic brew made from indigenous Khawlani coffee beans boiled with cardamon and cloves, served with delicious dates: a restorative double-hit of caffeine and sugar and a symbol of friendship.

### Poetry

For the nomadic Bedouin, poetry was a means to commemorate feats of bravery, new alliances or great victories over rival tribes.

Before writing became commonplace, these oral histories, known as nabati among the Bedouin, were an



Oud wood

important means of recording historic events and provided a way to preserve their stories for the next generation. Poetry, both Nabati and the classical qasidah form, is still a highly respected skill today, and Saudis place great value in the poets and storytellers who protect this heritage.

### Oud

Before oil and dates, oud and frankincense were the most important exports in the Arabian Peninsula.

The caravans of the ancient Incense Route were piled high with fragrant products of the Greek and Roman empires, and the burning of oud became customary at social occasions and religious

events throughout Arabia.

Its popularity never waned, and visitors will discover its heady, intoxicating scent all over Saudi.

### Music

Throughout Saudi history, feasts and celebrations have been accompanied by dancing and music. Dances like the Ardah would often be accompanied by traditional music played on instruments including the rababah, a type of stringed instrument made with horsehair, and the duf (or tar), a basic hand drum used to create a rhythm.

Other folkloric tunes are played on a flute called the ney or the elegant oud, a stringed lute-like instrument found across the Middle East and Africa.

# FAMILY, FOOD & HERITAGE

An intergral part of any culture, food sits at the heart  
of Saudi society, hospitality and family life



# SAUDI CUISINE

A roster of heart-warming, aromatic dishes influenced by Saudi's location at the crossroads of the ancient trade routes

**H**uman life depends on four fundamental resources: food, water, air and shelter. In a land with no rivers, where 95 per cent of the earth is covered in mountains and desert, the quest for these precious resources occupied much of the life of the nomadic traders and Bedouin who once roamed across the Saudi.

Long before modern Saudi was formed and earlier even than the dawn of Islam, Saudi was criss-crossed with a vast network of trade routes connected by early towns and settlements that provided food, water and shelter for travellers.

These settlements were established around oases where ground water could be tapped by wells and date

“Pilgrims from Africa and Asia... brought their own culinary traditions and recipes with them.”

palms and orchards could be cultivated.

As well as land-based trade routes, Saudi's culinary canon has much to thank for its role as a stop-off for traders on the maritime Silk Road between Europe and Asia. Ships arrived laden with

exotic spices like cardamon, cloves, saffron and nutmeg, which found their way into the culinary repertoire of Saudi.

The endless tide of pilgrims from Africa, Asia and the rest of the Middle East who came to perform Hajj and Umrah brought their own culinary traditions and recipes with them, many of which found a permanent home in Saudi's recipes, which have been handed down from generation to generation.

Today, generosity and hospitality are fundamental aspects of Saudi culture, and food is an important aspect of family and public life. From the rituals around Ramadan and family celebrations to cherished recipes cooked at home, food is a fundamental part of Saudi life.



Lamb mandi

## 7 DISHES AT THE HEART OF SAUDI CUISINE

### CHICKEN KABSA

Widely considered to be the national dish of Saudi, Kabsa is a simple but delicious one-pot chicken and rice dish that's served on special occasions.

The chicken is cooked in a pan in an aromatic blend of spices including cumin, coriander, turmeric, cloves, saffron, cardamom, bay leaves, black lime and cinnamon, then transferred to the grill to finish.

The rice is then cooked in the delicious spicy stew, and the resulting feast is served with an assortment of accompaniments that usually include raisins and toasted almonds or pine nuts. The chicken can be swapped for beef or lamb, and the dish is sometimes served with a spicy tomato and chili sauce called shatta.

### HAREES / JAREESH

Rice, now a staple in the Saudi diet, was introduced by traders from Asia. Before its arrival, wheat was the main source of carbohydrates and was used to make everything from flatbreads to hearty dishes like harees.

This very traditional dish, which probably originated in the Najd region around Riyadh, is incredibly simple to make and a typical example of the cooking style favoured by nomadic Bedouin. After soaking coarse wheat overnight, it is added to a pot in which lamb or mutton has been cooked in stock with a classic blend of Arabian



spices including cumin, cardamom and cinnamon. After slow cooking for hours to make the meat tender, the stew is vigorously stirred until glutinous. The resulting meaty porridge, which is usually finished with a generous splash of ghee, is a staple during Ramadan and at wedding banquets.

### SALEEG

This popular dish hails from the western Hijaz region. Like many Saudi dishes, its main components are chicken cooked in a delicious blend of spices and served on a bed of aromatic rice.

But unlike other dishes, Saleeg uses a combination of quick-cooking short grain rice and the more popular long grain or basmati rice to create a blend of textures.

The rice is cooked in a broth of chicken stock, which imparts delicious rich flavours, and finished with full-fat milk and butter, or ghee to give a soft, creamy texture. Imagine

grilled chicken served on a bed of savoury rice pudding: that's Saleeg. The dish is ubiquitous across Saudi and especially popular with children at family celebrations and national holidays.

### KHUBZ

From southern Europe to the Far East, different varieties of flatbread can be found on every meal table. Best served fresh from the oven, when the warmth causes them to puff up, soft, doughy breads are particularly suited to the Saudi kitchen, where they provide the perfect tool with which to soak up hearty stews and broths.

In Saudi, the bread of choice is called khubz, a simple yeasted flatbread made from white and wholewheat flour, salt, sugar and olive oil that can be made at home or bought from the shop; used to make stuffed wraps, scoop up dips and mop up the remnants of delicious meals.



Saudi dates

## FOOD FACT

Beyond their nutritional benefits, dates are delicious. In addition to the commonly known Medjool date, there are more than 300 varieties grown in Saudi, each with unique flavours and textures.

### DATES

Saudis have a notoriously sweet tooth and desserts play an important role in family and social life. This passion for sweet treats can be traced to the original source of sugary joy in the Arabian Peninsula: dates. The humble date has been cultivated in the Middle East since time immemorial and today, it remains one of the most versatile organic products grown in the region.

Dates come in numerous varieties, and some are considered more exquisite than others: ajwa dates from Al Madinah are considered the best. They are sold whole, or stuffed with delicious fillings like pistachio, pecan, candied citrus or walnut. Dates are also pressed to make date syrup, a sticky and moreish nectar used to flavour everything from coffee and ice cream to crispy luqaimat dumplings, a popular post-iftar treat during Ramadan. Dates are also the main ingredient in several notable desserts including maamoul, the butter stuffed cookies loved across the Middle East.

### MUTTON MANDI

Many of Saudi's meat and rice dishes may appear similar, but the devil is in the details. Not to be confused with kabsa, mandi is a Saudi staple that was traditionally cooked underground in a large pot over coals, lending an exotic smoky flavour. In large feasts and celebrations, a whole lamb would be cooked over a bed of rice in a cavernous underground oven, allowing the meat juices to drip onto the rice and infuse it with rich meaty flavours.

Lamb shanks are a popular alternative when cooking on a smaller scale, boiled with a medley of spices to create an aromatic stock before being finished off under the grill or in a pan. Long grain rice is then cooked in the stock, forming a plump bed for the succulent meat, which falls off the bone.

### MACARONS & PASTRIES

Parts of Riyadh and Jeddah are starting to bloom with home-grown restaurants, cafes and bakeries founded by entrepreneurial Saudis like Mayada Badr, founder of Pink Camel Pastry Boutique and CEO of the newly minted Culinary Arts Commission.

The windows of her boutiques in Jeddah, Riyadh and AlUla radiate with a kaleidoscopic array of macarons and other sweet treats, flavoured with ingredients and flavours unique to the region like rose, pistachio and dates, and decorated with familiar Saudi motifs during national holidays like Eid.

Macarons, pastries and other patisserie products are now all the rage among young Saudis and can be found in any number of trendy cafes and bakeries.

# HISTORICAL SITES

Uncover 10,000 years of history across Saudi's 13 regions



# LIVING HISTORY: 10 HISTORIC SITES WORTH A DETOUR

Ancient tombs, Neolithic rock art, lush oases and UNESCO Heritage Sites are on the must-visit list in Saudi

**F**rom Neolithic cave art and ancient Nabataean tombs to ruins and relics from the dawn of the modern age, Saudi is dotted with historic sites that have borne witness to era-defining events.

The fledgling Ministry of Culture, established in 2018 to champion Saudi's rich cultural heritage, is going to great lengths to preserve and restore many of Saudi's historic sites, six of which have been inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage list to date. But you don't have to look far to find places of historical significance in Saudi, where relics of the past are never far from view. From the elaborate architectural style visible in the historic districts of major cities to ancient palaces, mosques and citadels that pepper the landscape, Saudi is awash with notable places to visit that are well worth a making a detour for.

## **JUBBAH ROCK ART**

The sand sea on the outskirts of Jubbah, once a lush lakeside oasis at the foot of Jabal Umm Sinman in the Great Nafoud Desert, is home to some of the world's best-preserved Neolithic rock art. From a distance,



Neolithic rock art in Jubbah

the area resembles a Martian landscape of jagged black outcrops and terracotta sand. But look closer and the mottled rocks are inscribed with ancient petroglyphs depicting animals, humans and rural scenes: vignettes that tell the story of human life in the area spanning more than 10,000 years.

Other canvases feature inscriptions hewn with stone tools, preserved for millennia

by the arid climate and protected from the elements in caves and sheltered outcrops. The motifs, skill and complexity of the artworks varies, indicating a long history of transient visitors eager to chronicle the lives of their people. Jubbah is one of three rock art sites in the Ha'il region jointly inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2018. A must-see when in the region.



Hegra

## HEGRA

The 111 Nabataean tombs of Hegra are hewn into the sandstone rock formations that rise up from the red desert outside AlUla, the remnants of a civilisation that flourished along the Incense Route of pre-Islamic Arabia. As the first UNESCO World Heritage site in Saudi, the city has been recognised as one of the most important and best-preserved ancient monuments in the world.

Elaborately carved inscriptions reveal the identities of the individuals entombed within the monuments and provide clues to the roots and evolution of the Arabic language, while wells and stone-lined water channels speak of the ingenuity of the

Nabataean civilisation.

Other architectural and stylistic elements allude to the influence of the Greek and Roman empires with whom the ancient people of Hegra used to trade, and defensive walls, gates and towers are a reminder that the city was eventually conquered by the Romans around 106 CE. Today, Hegra and the wider AlUla area are a living museum, where visitors can unlock the secrets of the past and discover the magnificent landscape of this sublime corner of Saudi.

[www.experiencealula.com](http://www.experiencealula.com),  
(+966 92 002 5003)

## AL AHSA OASIS

For northbound travellers who survived the gruelling journey through the Rub Al

Khali — the endless expanse of rolling sand dunes that covers much of the bottom half of the Arabian Peninsula — the first glimpse of Al Ahsa Oasis would have brought tears of joy.

The natural spring water gave birth to some of the first Neolithic settlements in the eastern part of Saudi, and the area quickly became an important hub for east coast trade routes and pilgrims bound for Makkah. Ingenious water management techniques helped Al Ahsa become the largest oasis in the world, a title it retains today with more than 2.5 million date palms nourished by a network of wells and canals fed by natural springs.

The Al Ahsa Oasis and the town of Al Hofuf to the



Great mosque of Makkah



Al Balad Jeddah

Muslims. Each year, millions of pilgrims from all over the world travel to Makkah - one of Saudi's two Holy Cities and home to the most sacred shrine of the Islamic faith, the Ka'bah - to perform the Hajj.

Though it was originally built up over many generations from the 7th century, the oldest parts of the current Masjid Al Haram, The Great Mosque of Makkah, date from the 16th century.

Since then, dozens of changes and renovations have taken place: electric lighting was installed in the early 20th century and a PA system was added in 1948. Today, the enormous courtyard is illuminated by dozens of floodlights, enabling pilgrims to perform their sacred duties day and night.

The mosque has grown over time to accommodate the vast numbers of pilgrims who visit the holy site: in 2019, around 2.5 million Muslims participated in the Hajj.

north, were inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2018 as an 'Evolving Cultural Landscape' that also includes archaeological sites, ancient fortresses and the historic Jawatha Mosque, as well as the whitewashed

domes of Ibrahim Palace: a beautiful example of 16th century architecture.

### MASJID AL HARAM

Performing the Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam and is considered the sacred duty of



Edge of the world



Al Ahsa oasis



Al Masmak fortress



### AL MASMAK FORTRESS

The steep walls and imposing watchtowers of Al Masmak Fortress would have posed a daunting challenge to would-be invaders when it was built in 1865. But a lightning-fast dawn raid saw the fort quickly overcome by soldiers led by Abdulaziz Al Saud in 1902, providing a base from which he would take control of Riyadh after long years of exile. Having recaptured his ancestral home, the future King Abdulaziz would consolidate his power and unite the provinces, leading to the birth of Saudi of Saudi

in 1932.

Today, the recently restored citadel - now a museum - still cuts an impressive figure in Riyadh. Maps, photographs and artefacts dating back to the early 20th century give visitors a flavour of life in the early days of Saudi and tell the story of Al Masmak's rich history. A spear flung during the 1902 assault remains embedded in the palm-trunk door of the fort. Outside, merchants at Souq Al Zal sell everything from hand-woven rugs and clothing to traditional handicrafts and painted ceramics, and wicker

## CULTURE FACT

**Girl's mountain in AlUla shows that women were wealthy enough to build their own tombs and some of the tombs are large enough to hold 30 family members**

baskets are piled high with colourful herbs, spices and incense: scenes that have changed little in centuries.

### TUWAIQ ESCARPMENT

Predating everything else on this list, the Tuwaiq Escarpment rises up from the desert to the west of Riyadh: an 800-kilometre-long ridge that drops away in a series of sheer cliffs and deep canyons at a point known as the Edge of the World.

After a scenic drive through wadis and acacia-studded valleys and a short hike to the vantage point at the top, visitors will find themselves looking out across an endless desert - the remnants of an ancient sea - to the distant horizon where the sky meets the earth. Intrepid hikers can attempt to descend from the top to the base of the cliffs, but it's a gruelling climb back up and the descent can be tricky. Formed by shifting tectonic plates in the age of the dinosaurs some 165 million years ago, Tuwaiq Escarpment is a geological marvel and arguably the best place in Saudi to watch the sun go down behind the vast desert.



### HIMA CULTURAL AREA

In the deep south of Saudi, near the Saudi-Yemeni border, a treasure trove of beautifully preserved rock art, freshwater wells and ancient inscriptions spanning 7,000 years of human history lays in plain sight, protected by the arid climate.

Collectively identified by UNESCO as the 'Hima Cultural Area', the artwork in this open-air gallery depicts camels, cattle and palm trees, and human figures dressed as hunters. One appears to show an elephant.

Among the 500 or so sandstone canvases, there are thousands of inscriptions written in a variety of ancient languages including Thamudic, Musnad and South-Arabian: forebears of modern Arabic.

The cluster of wells in Bi'r Hima, many of which still contain fresh water to this day, mark a vital crossroads on the Incense Route between Narjan and towns to the north, and have been used by Bedouin since their creation some 3,000 years ago.

Dozens of tombs dot the landscape and the area has been recognised by UNESCO as "one of the most important desert wells in the Middle East, if not the world."

### TURAIIF, DIRIYAH

If walls could talk, the mudbrick terraces and Nadji architecture of Turaif would have plenty of stories to tell. Founded in 1446 in Wadi Hanifa, 20 kilometres outside modern day Riyadh, the city is the original home of the

House of Saud and the place where the First Saudi State was formed in 1727. Today, many of the original adobe buildings have been restored to their former glory as part of the Diriyah Gate

Development Authority's bid to regenerate the ancient capital as a destination. Home to palaces, mosques and a collection of museums dedicated to different aspects of Saudi culture and heritage, Turaif was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2010.

The neighbouring town of Diriyah is undergoing a huge transformation that will see dozens of new hotels, restaurants, museums and galleries open in the next few years, breathing new life into 'The Land of Kings and Heroes' for a new generation.



Hima

### YANBU & RADWA MOUNT

Once an important stop on the spice route, the port city of Yanbu is home to a beautifully atmospheric Old Town where British military officer T.E. Lawrence (aka Lawrence of Arabia) once lived.

Now a museum that pays homage to the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* author's life and history, the coral-stone building's elaborate façade has been completely restored along with other parts of the historic quarter. Merchants at bustling Souq Al Lail sell everything from rugs and incense to local produce like dates and green mulkiah leaves - used in many traditional soups and stews - and restaurants along the vibrant waterfront serve freshly grilled fish brought in from the Red Sea.



Yanbu mountains

Towering over the town in the Yanbu Al Nakhil Mountains, Radwa Mount has inspired poets and writers throughout the ages. Fleet-

footed visitors can lace up their hiking boots and search for inspiration in the boulder-strewn valleys and wadis of its picturesque foothills.

# SAUDI ATTRACTIONS

Aside from its magnificent roster of heritage sites, Saudi offers an abundance of places of interest in which to be entertained



# CULTURAL HOTSPOTS

From art galleries and installations in the desert, to science and aviation museums - Saudi has it all

**F**ew places in the world wear their heritage on their sleeve as proudly as Saudi, where ancient customs and traditions still inform many aspects of private and public life. In the last few years, the number of galleries and museums across Saudi has ballooned.

A handful of world-class museums make the story of Saudi and the wider Arabian Peninsula more accessible than ever before, and an ever-growing collection of contemporary galleries and cultural centres are providing platforms for young artists and creatives to exhibit their work and express their views: opportunities that didn't exist a decade ago.

## **ATHR GALLERY**

Prior to the founding of the Ministry of Culture in 2018, Saudi's burgeoning arts scene was nurtured and promoted internationally by a handful of privately run institutions like Athr, a gallery and multi-disciplinary art space in Jeddah created in 2009 by artist Hamza Serafi and his friend, businessman Mohammed Hafiz.

In the last decade, Athr has incubated the creative skills of many of the leading figures in Saudi's burgeoning arts scene including Edge of Arabia co-founder Ahmed Mater and Sarah Abu

Abdallah. Today, the venue hosts residence programmes, international group exhibitions and educational events, and provides grants and funding for emerging talent, as well as fostering collaborative partnerships with international events like the Venice Biennale.

In addition to the original gallery and art space in Jeddah, Athr Gallery AIUla recently opened in the new AIUla Design Gallery, with an exhibition featuring works by Saudi artists Ahaad Alamoudi and Mohammad Alfaraj.

[www.athrart.com](http://www.athrart.com)

## **MARAYA**

The Ashar Valley in AIUla has become an open-air museum in recent years, home to the incredible Desert X art exhibition and a collection of permanent site-specific art installations by Saudi and international artists. Perhaps the greatest artwork of them all is Maraya, a multi-purpose

performing arts and concert venue shrouded in 9,740 mirrored panels: the largest mirrored building in the world, according to the Guinness World Records.

A surreal addition to the sublime desert landscape, the mirrored building is perfectly camouflaged within its surroundings, its shimmering surface serving as a constantly shifting canvas that reflects the sandstone rock formations around it.

Today, Maraya, which means reflection or mirror in Arabic, serves as a striking backdrop to the many festivals that take place at AIUla and a venue for exhibitions including the recent *What Lies Within*, a collection of works by Saudi artists from the private collection of art patron and collector Basma Al Sulaiman. Check the AIUla website for upcoming concerts and events.

[www.experiencealula.com](http://www.experiencealula.com)



### DARAT SAFEYA BINZAGR

Prompted to pick up a paintbrush by the rapidly shifting cultural and social landscape in her native Jeddah, Safeya Binzagr quickly established herself as one of the most prominent artists in Saudi following her debut exhibition in 1968.

Using photography, memories and reference books as her muse, the artist captured scenes depicting daily life in the Jeddah Old Town in warm, vivid colours in the Impressionist style. Her paintings showed every aspect of the streetscapes and customs she grew up with, from children's games and traditional costumes to wedding rituals, falconry and hunting scenes.

Now recognised as one of the most important chroniclers of Saudi life in the closing decades of the 20th century, Safeya opened her gallery space in 2000 in an elegant, whitewashed building that evokes the architectural style of the Nabataean tombs at Hegra.

Today, the space serves as studio, workshop, lecture hall and museum and is home to an excellent collection of the artist's work, as well as traditional costumes and jewellery.

[www.daratsb.com](http://www.daratsb.com)

### HAYY JAMEEL

Conceived as a creative community hub, Hayy Jameel is the first dedicated arts and cultural centre in Saudi, comprising a museum and exhibition space, educational centre, a 200-seat cinema and a collection of studios and



makers' spaces for workshops and residencies. Hayy derives from the Arabic word for neighbourhood, reflecting the community spirit of the project, which nurtures new talent and promotes Saudi art via collaborations with international organisations including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

The Jeddah institution was designed by architectural firm waiwai and opened in December 2021, a welcome addition to Saudi's burgeoning contemporary art scene.

Hayy Arts, the gallery-museum element of the project, opened with an exhibition entitled *Staple: What's on Your Plate*, a two-year research project exploring the relationship between food, memory, ecology and place.

The new facility also incorporates the Jameel House of Traditional Arts, an educational programme dedicated to preserving and teaching the ancient handicrafts used to create the intricate architectural details visible in Al Balad, Jeddah's Old Town.

[www.artjameel.org](http://www.artjameel.org)



## KING ABDULAZIZ HISTORICAL CENTER

This sprawling heritage project in Riyadh, home to the excellent National Museum, was built on the site of the former Murabba Palace in 1999 to tell the story of Saudi history and culture through the ages.

Home to leafy parks, tranquil plazas and a collection of restored buildings, the Center is a useful first stop for any Saudi first-timer keen to find out more about Saudi.

The National Museum takes visitors on a journey through time via eight immersive exhibition halls, from the creation of the universe and the origins of life on the Arabian Peninsula to the



spread of Islam and the birth of the modern Saudi state.

The permanent collection includes Neolithic rock art, hand-painted ceramics and ornate inscriptions that reveal much about the origins of Thamudic, Aramaic and Islamic writing. Interactive exhibits reveal the routes of

ancient trade and pilgrimage, and scale models of traditional houses and some of Saudi's most impressive geological features provide a useful insight into the role that history, geography and trade have placed in shaping the character of modern Saudi.



### ITHRA

Seen from afar, the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture - better known as Ithra, meaning enrichment in Arabic - resembles a pile of smooth grey stones.

The naturalistic design, created by Norwegian architectural firm Snøhetta, reflects unity and togetherness: themes that underpin the mission at this innovative institution. Part museum, part business accelerator, part cultural centre, Ithra was envisioned as a platform for cross-cultural experiences and has injected new vigour into the east coast's cultural landscape since it opened in 2017.

The centre's facilities are based around five pillars: creativity, culture, knowledge, art and community, and host workshops, performances, talks and cultural events. The most easily accessible

elements for visitors are the Museum and dedicated Children's Museum.

The former has five galleries dedicated to Saudi culture, contemporary Middle Eastern art, Islamic art and the natural history of the Arabian Peninsula, as well as an archive gallery that chronicles the history of national energy company Saudi Aramco, which was responsible for conceiving and creating Ithra. Dhahran, [www.ithra.com](http://www.ithra.com), (+966 1381 69799)

### TAYEBAT MUSEUM

The elaborate Hijazi architecture alone justifies a visit to this spectacular museum, which tells the story of Jeddah's evolution from quiet Red Sea port to one of the most important cities in Saudi. Traditional mashrabiya windows and intricate latticed balconies adorn the façade of

the museum, which combines elements of the wonderful townhouses of Jeddah's Old Town with crenelated fortifications and religious architecture, embodying three important factors that shaped the history of Saudi: trade, religion and inter-tribal conflict.

Inside, the dazzling collection includes weaponry, traditional clothing, artwork and photographs that tell the story of Jeddah's early years, the foundation of modern Saudi and the history of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, and there's a section dedicated to nomadic Bedouin life.

Among the highlights are a collection of early scripts written by Arab travellers that allude to Jeddah's importance as a vital stop on the Incense Route, and scale models of Makkah and other important cities. [www.visitsaudi.com](http://www.visitsaudi.com)



King Abdulaziz Center  
for World Culture, or Ithra



The Arabian Horse Museum in Diriyah

### THE ARABIAN HORSE MUSEUM

Across the Arabian Peninsula, horses have been prized since time immemorial. While the camel may be the animal of choice for long, arduous desert crossings, the horse is a much more efficient means of navigating all but the most inhospitable environments.

The Arabian horse's role as a transporter of people and goods and a vital military asset, has made it a fundamental part of Saudi history and heritage.

The Arabian Horse Museum in Diriyah pays homage to the noble steed and explores the relationship between man and horses throughout the history of Saudi.

Highlights include the identity documents of horses belonging to the Al Saud family, vintage saddles, bridles and riding accessories

and ancient texts illustrated with equine imagery, as well as modern artwork and sculptures. Pride of place is given to a life-sized bronze sculpture of Turfa, a sprightly mare belonging to King Abdulaziz that was presented as a gift to King George VI of Britain in 1937.

[www.visitsaudi.com](http://www.visitsaudi.com)

### SAQR ALJAZEERA AVIATION MUSEUM

A Lockheed L-1011 Tristar commercial aircraft decorated in the vintage livery of national carrier Saudia marks the entrance to the Saqr Aljazeera Aviation Museum, a quirky off-the-beaten track address for aviation geeks and plane spotters.

Spanning a huge open air static park and a collection of indoor display halls, this unique museum is home to an impressive collection

of aircraft and air force paraphernalia including uniforms and weaponry. From fighter jets and light bombers to military transports and helicopters, the collection spans the century-long history of the Royal Saudi Air Force, which was created in the 1920s. The museum also pays tribute to the most prominent Saudi to serve in the Royal Air Force, Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz.

When he joined a NASA mission aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery as a payload specialist in 1985, the prince became the first Saudi, the first Arab and the first member of a royal family in space.

### SHARQIA CENTER - SCITECH

Created to stimulate interest in science and technical innovation in a new generation of young Saudis, Sharqia Centre - Scitech, is a science museum and observatory in Al Khobar on the Arabian Gulf-facing east coast of Saudi.

Home to a state-of-the-art Astronomical Observatory and an immersive museum divided into six themed halls covering everything from 'Earth and Space' to 'The Living World' and 'Our Beautiful Seas', Scitech is designed for younger visitors, but training courses, lectures and stargazing sessions for adults are also on offer.

The 190-seat IMAX dome was the first of its kind in Saudi and shows films dedicated to science and discovery.

[www.scitech.sa/en](http://www.scitech.sa/en)



Saqr Aljazeera Aviation Museum



Inside Scitech in Al Khobar

# NEXT GEN + FUTURE

The creative industries are playing an important part in the modernisation of Saudi



# BRAVE NEW WORLD: VISION 2030 & THE SAUDI RENAISSANCE

Art, music, fashion - Saudi's creatives are leading the charge for change

It's no great stretch to compare Vision 2030 to the Renaissance that swept through Europe in the 15th century, marking the end of the Middle Ages and the dawn of a new modern era. The notable difference being that, while that cultural revolution took place over several hundred years, Saudi's modernisation is happening in just over a decade and has the full economic and moral support of the government behind it.

For Saudi's young creatives, the changes represent a welcome paradigm shift in Saudi's approach to the arts. Filmmakers and DJs, previously restricted to pursuing their passions in basements or overseas, are embracing their new freedom at events like The Red Sea Film Festival and MDLBEAST Soundstorm, while artists who once had to travel abroad to exhibit their work now have a growing collection of world-class events on their doorstep.

"It just can't be overstated what an incredible moment this is for Saudi's creative scene," says Antonia Carver, Director of Art Jameel, which opened its Jeddah cultural centre, Hayy Jameel, in December 2021. "This coming-together of government vision and resources for the

arts with multiple generations of artists, designers, architects and filmmakers, plus independent NGOs like Art Jameel doing their part, is of global significance. There is everything to play for right now."

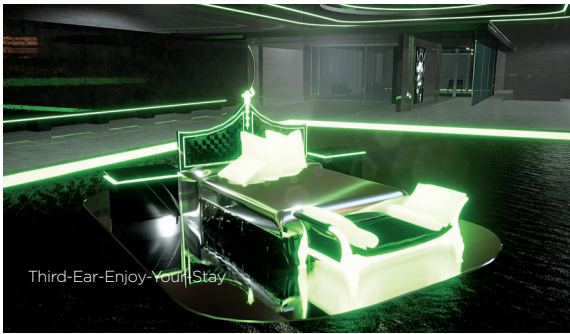
The feeling of excitement and opportunity is echoed across the arts community, from the individuals who find themselves with platforms on which to practice their craft publicly for the first time, to the organisations responsible for paving the way for future generations while preserving the cultural identity of Saudi.

"As a country that has been closed off from a lot of the world, Saudi's rich cultural heritage has been largely untapped," says Philip Jones, chief destination marketing officer, Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU). "Now however, be it art, fashion, literature, film or music, the creative spirit is alive and being fostered and encouraged through the various government and community entities backed by the Saudi Vision 2030. There is an eagerness for Saudi artists to have a voice and share their experiences and their unique culture and heritage with the world. There is an equal eagerness for the global arts



community to listen."

Music, film and design events launched during the last five years have gained international attention and attracted audiences from all over the world; some are already planning their second or third editions. Meanwhile a collection of exhibitions across the country provided a platform for the legions of Saudi artists whose work has only ever been exhibited in foreign lands: a seismic shift for those who lacked the means or support to travel overseas.



## THE SAUDI ART SCENE:

The significance of hosting events on Saudi soil is about more than artists being able to share their work. It's also about bringing the world to Saudi and fostering relationships and dialogue between Saudis and the global community, creating a web of human connections that transcend national borders and hark back to the days when trade routes facilitated the exchange of goods and ideas from all over the world.

"We are living in a grand new narrative," says Abdunnasser Gharem, one of the pioneers of the contemporary arts scene in Saudi and co-founder of the

influential Edge of Arabia artists collective in 2003. "I spent 20 years travelling around the world to represent Saudi art overseas because we couldn't do anything in our country. New platforms like the Diriyah Biennale and Desert X don't only give us a chance to showcase our work, they also bring people here to experience our culture for themselves."

His Riyadh workspace, Gharem Studio, is a place where young artists can come and work alongside like-minded individuals. The recent social reforms mean men and women can now work side-by-side, talk and share ideas: something that wasn't possible half a decade ago. "We can't deny the importance of what's

happening," says Gharem. "I'm talking to you right now while my daughter is with her grandmother at the market. Before 2017, I couldn't do this interview because I would have to be with them at the market. So it's a different world." And the art world is making the most of it. A handful of organisations - like Athr Gallery in Jeddah and AIUJa, SAC and its non-profit 21,39 Jeddah Arts initiatives and Gharem Studio in Riyadh - act as both platforms for exhibitions and incubators for new talent, providing young artists with support in the form of workspaces, talks and lectures and international representation, as well as hosting major exhibitions and events. Citywide initiatives like Riyadh Art are fostering young talent and making art accessible to more of the population with public installations that turn the streets of the capital into a creative canvas, while the Diriyah Biennale was a sign of Saudi's intent to become a major player on the international art scene.

## UPCOMING ATTRACTIONS

### **THE KINGDOMS INSTITUTE, AIUla**

Conceived as a global hub for archaeological knowledge and research dedicated to the cultures and civilisations that have inhabited AIUla for more than 7,000 years, The Kingdoms Institute is one of the flagship components of the RCU's Journey Through Time masterplan. The project will train a new generation of Saudi archaeologists and researchers and will act as a window into the ancient kingdoms of Dadan, Lihyan and the Nabataean city of Hegra when complete in 2030. [www.uclrcu.gov.sa](http://www.uclrcu.gov.sa)

### **TEAMLAB BORDERLESS JEDDAH, Jeddah**

Digital art collective teamLab, which has wowed audiences at international exhibitions and a handful of permanent galleries in Asia since its formation in 2001, is working on a new home in Jeddah. "The concept of teamLab Borderless is that everything exists in a borderless continuity. And our work is based on the continuous accumulation of human knowledge over a long history. For that reason, it is very significant for teamLab to be able to open the permanent teamLab Borderless in Jeddah, right next to a World Heritage site," says founder Toshiyuki Inoko. "By experiencing teamLab Borderless, we hope people will be able to move between the seamlessly interconnected past and present, and to imagine an ideal future."

[www.teamlab.art](http://www.teamlab.art)

### **THE RED SEA MUSEUM, Jeddah**

The historic Bab Al Bunt building in Jeddah's historic Al Balad neighbourhood will soon reopen as the Red Sea Museum, exploring the role Jeddah and the wider Red Sea region has played in the story of modern Saudi. Countless millions of pilgrims have passed through Jeddah en route to Makkah and Al Madinah in the last 1,400 years, and before that, the city was a cultural crossroads for traders and merchants: a rich history that has left its mark on the region in its culture, customs and identity.

### **DIRIYAH ART FUTURES, Diriyah**

Saudi's first dedicated centre for digital arts, Diriyah Art Futures will provide a space for interaction between local and international scientists, creatives, intellectuals and entrepreneurs across multiple industries. Conceived as a dynamic centre for creative exchange and an incubator for creative practice, the venue is due to be completed before the end of 2022, and is one of the many new museums currently being developed in Diriyah. The 100 Stories Museum will share tales about life in historic Diriyah; a music academy will provide short introductory courses on Arabic music and a planetarium will explore the Arab world's contribution to the world of science. [www.dgda.gov.sa](http://www.dgda.gov.sa)

### **BLACK GOLD MUSEUM, Riyadh**

Saudi's Museums Commission has teamed up with the King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center to develop a museum dedicated to the artistic exploration of oil and the impact it has had on Saudi's fortunes. The Black Gold Museum will feature works exploring all aspects of oil, from its formation and extraction to its uses and the various ways it has impacted life in Saudi: economically, culturally and geopolitically.

## MUSIC: LET THE BEAT GO ON

The social reforms of the last decade were felt across the cultural and arts worlds, and creatives in every sector have benefitted from the changes. But the cultural shift is perhaps most apparent in the world of electronic music: an industry that didn't even exist until recently. "We always had an underground music scene in Saudi that consisted of very small, isolated groups and communities that adopted different genres, from hip-hop, to rock, to dance music," explains Jeddah-born Nouf Sufyani, Saudi's most prominent female DJ and music producer; better known as Cosmicat to fans. "Everyone was trying to develop their craft in the shadows. But after the recent changes, as we head towards Vision 2030, more and more artists have graduated to the big stage and have the chance to show the world how talented they are and what they can bring to the table to enrich our local culture."

The reckoning came in 2019 with the formation of MDLBEAST and its flagship music event, Soundcloud, the first grand scale electronic music festival in Saudi. More than 80 artists from Saudi and the wider Middle East descended on Riyadh for the four-day event, in which Saudi's electronic artists flexed their musical skills in public for the first time and 400,000 people came to share the moment.

The sight of so many young Saudis, men and



The Red Sea Film Festival is growing year-on-year



DJ Cosmicat

women, dancing together to one beat, was a powerful symbol that reflected not only the untapped potential of Saudi, but a collective sense of unity: that essential human bond that led to Saudi's formation 90 years ago. "What excites me the most is seeing more women

on stage and seeing more young talented people having access to art education and scholarships to polish their talents," says Sufyani. "Our art and our music are the building blocks for the future of our culture, and they are an important tool to eternalise and celebrate our heritage."

## CULTURAL EVENTS

### **DIRIYAH CONTEMPORARY ART BIENNALE, Diriyah**

Designed to create cross-cultural dialogue between international artists and support the growth of Saudi art, the Diriyah Biennale Foundation's programme includes talks, debates, masterclasses and kids' events as well as the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale. The first edition ran from December 2021 to March 2022 under the theme of 'Feeling the Stones', which was inspired by the cultural and societal changes that occurred in China in the 1980s as the country opened up to external influences. The parallels with Saudi's current cultural renaissance are clear, and the inaugural Biennial explored ways in which artists are navigating those changes. [www.biennale.org.sa](http://www.biennale.org.sa)

### **RED SEA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, Jeddah**

This 10-day cinema extravaganza created in 2018 to support Saudi and regional filmmakers takes place in the atmospheric streets of Al Balad, Jeddah's Old Town. The programme covers contemporary work from regional talent as well as classic arthouse productions and short films. Highlights to date include *Becoming*, a collection of five short films by five young filmmakers that explore ideas about identity and culture in a rapidly changing society, and *Fay's Palette*, directed by Saudi filmmaker Anas Ba-Tahaf, who was assistant director on Saudi's 2016 Oscar submission, *Barakah Meets Barakah*. [www.redseafilmfest.com](http://www.redseafilmfest.com)

### **MDLBEAST SOUNDSTORM, Riyadh**

Possibly most important act of unity since Saudi was created in 1932, the inaugural Soundstorm festival in 2019 brought together DJs and musicians from Saudi and the wider Middle East for four days of music and magic in Riyadh. The organisation behind it was MDLBEAST (Middle Beast, in case you didn't get it): an entertainment company and record label that's striving to nurture new talent and promote Saudi electronic music scene around the world, while providing a platform for local artists to perform in public after years of obscurity. The next event is set to take place in late 2022. [www.mdlbeast.com](http://www.mdlbeast.com)

### **DESERT X ALULA, AlUla**

The sublime rock formations of AlUla form the backdrop to Desert X, a ground-breaking art festival in which sculptural works and artistic installations emerge from, and interact with, the landscape. Envisaged to stimulate cross-cultural exchange between local and international artists and local communities in the vicinity of AlUla - a cultural crossroads since time immemorial - the second instalment came together under the theme of Sarab (mirage and oasis) and transformed a portion of the UNESCO World Heritage site into an open-air gallery for six weeks in early 2022. [www.desertx.org](http://www.desertx.org)

### **RIYADH ART**

Riyadh Art was envisaged to turn the entire city into a creative canvas by transforming public spaces into open air galleries. More than 1000 artworks by local and international artists are being installed across the city, with a view to stimulating creative expression among residents and engage the community in public art. One of the programmes is Noor Riyadh, an annual festival of light that will transform Riyadh's buildings into monumental canvases for Saudi and international light artists, and involve the public through a programme of tours, talks, workshops and family activities. [www.riyadhart.sa](http://www.riyadhart.sa)

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