

TRIP REVIEW

SAUDI ARABIA

by Ihab Zaki (November 2010)

For centuries the Saudi Arabia was considered closed to outsiders, penetrable only to the bravest and the boldest, such as Richard Burton, TE Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger, who risked life and limb to get there. Today it continues to exist only in the realms of the imagination for most people, who still relish the sensational stories surrounding it. And yet, ever so tentatively, the country is beginning to permit travelers past its portals.



The archeology, rock art, geology, food, culture history and hospitable people were awesome!

Visiting Saudi Arabia still feels a bit of an adventure: few people have seen some of the ancient places we visited and some were apparently inaccessible, except to a person with inside knowledge like our resourceful guide: Khaled Took.

Diriyyah, the old capital of the Al Saud clan, which stands in its ruined state among the palm groves outside Riyadh, is a gem of a site, ever looking with its deserted dwellings, mosques and ghost town. Our guide managed to make the place come alive in our eyes and revived in our imagination this significant historical site, being the home of Wahhabism, the fore-runner of the modern Salafi movement. The other important site, circled by an apparently thick fence, was that of Rajjajil in the Al Jouf region of North Arabia. This place, often referred to as Saudi Arabia's "Stonehenge" consists of 50 clusters of slim carved sandstone standing stones, some as high as 9 feet, aligned to catch the rising sun on a terrace above a wadi. Their purpose is still a mystery but their date, 4th millennium BCE, is extremely early. The fence round the site was firmly locked but our guide knew of a hole at the back, through which we surged, savoring the ancient site in a lovely evening light. This "trespass" added flavor to our visit.



So did our evening with a local family, our women with the girls and mother of the family, who spoke some English, the men with the males of the family. We didn't realize that the family is readying themselves for us and preparing more food! We arrived where a Bedouin tent is awaiting us. Colorful rugs cover the floor from end to end. All of the women in the family are veiled. In the center of the tent is a table piled with pastries and dates. Their culinary treats outshined those of the hotel.



The highlight of this tour, as of every tour to Saudi Arabia, was our day in Madain Saleh - and a whole day is really necessary to appreciate this beautiful place to the full. This was the southern city of the Nabataean kingdom, which had its capital at Petra. Its inhabitants were merchants who had grown rich on the incense trade from South Arabia which passed through their territory on its way to the ports of the Mediterranean. It was only after the Romans found a way to navigate the Red Sea in the first century CE that this profitable trade, and hence the towns which existed on it, started to decline. The Nabataeans left over 100 rock-cut tombs in yellow sandstone jebels over a wide area. The place is still little visited by Saudis and we found ourselves enjoying the clear air, silence and beauty of the place on our own.

Arrival at Madain Saleh was an incredible experience. Several group members have been to Petra in Jordan, where comparable tombs exist. They were duly impressed with the large concentration of tombs found here. The tombs have signs posted in Arabic and English, telling the story of each of them.

After incense came pilgrims bound for Makkah, passing through some of the same towns which had flourished when frankincense and myrrh were the most profitable commodities. We saw how this made mediaeval Al-Ula town, now being restored, and an important one, as a stopping place for pilgrims. We saw too how the merchants of old Jeddah, the port for Makkah, prospered and were able to build elaborate houses. We stopped at stations on the Hejaz Railway, which, for a few years in the early 20th century, conveyed pilgrims from Damascus to Medina, until blown up by T.E. Lawrence and others during the Arab Revolt of 1916. The Ottoman Turks used it to transport troops later on.



In beautiful Jeddah, look out for the famous Corniche sculptures that line the wide pedestrian areas for 30kms north from the port. Subjects range from the mundane to the miraculous; from anchors and boats to giant sunflowers squirting water; elongated and fragmented camels to a boat made entirely out of Arabic calligraphy. Sculptures of sacks of flour, pipes, a globe, water vessels, coffee pots, phase of the moon and an unknown bicyclist



The relative peace of the desert landscape, which we enjoyed at Madain Saleh and in the rocky canyons around Al-Ula, covered in ancient rock art, contrasted with our visits to the 2 major cities of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh and Jeddah. In the former we wandered round the restored area which surrounds King Abdul-Aziz's old palace, and the National Museum which is splendid in its design and contents. It is a delight with its special sound system of "talking exhibits" and should not be missed by any visitor to the Kingdom. The Musmaq Fort, an iconic place for modern Saudi history as the oldest building in Riyadh, and the scene of King Abdul-Aziz's seizure of the city from his enemies, the Rashids of Hail, in 1902, is also well restored and laid out as a museum. The Camel market where you will see the camels that once the principal mode of transportation in the Arabian Peninsula, are now used mainly for racing. In Jeddah, in contrast, we wandered round the crumbling but still lovely coral houses of the old city, with their intricate fret-work balconies, and in the afternoon cruised down the Creek in balmy weather, watching families enjoying their Friday.



One of the most enjoyable moments on the trip is when we ventured on a desert trek in our comfortable jeeps and set camp amidst stunning mountains after seeing some of the petroglyphs and the crew prepared for us a picnic and tea at set time and meanwhile Denise gave us a very suitable lecture on camels and caravans while our crew was performing the 4th prayer of the day in the background.



I have to say that this group was so homogeneous and had been by far one of the finest I had accompanied. They were courteous to each other, and helpful to those who needed physical assistance to access some sites. I have to say I was very impressed with the hotels, big ones in the large cities but adequate in smaller towns and was amazed at the cleanliness of the airports, and the ease and comfort of internal flights within the Kingdom.

If you have always dreamed of visiting this Forbidden Kingdom, make plans to join us on our future departure. You won't be disappointed. Please contact us at 1-800-645-3233 to request our brochures or any questions you may have - Ihab Zaki.

