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Desert Visions

Mythical and mysterious, Saudi Arabia is a country of contradictions, with an abundance of spectacular (and rarely seen) ancient historic sites. Melissa Biggs Bradley returns to the Middle East to find a once-conservative kingdom in the midst of transformation.





*NAJMA (She Placed One
Thousand Suns Over the
Transparent Overlays of Space),
an art installation originally at
the Desert X AlUla that remains
on the grounds of AlUla's
Habitat hotel.*



AlUla's AlJadidah neighborhood. Clockwise from right: Habitas AlUla; Hegra; Habitas AlUla; a master artisan in Riyadh.





SOME DESTINATIONS immediately conjure strong images and associations. Saudi Arabia is one of them. Whether the images are of caravans of camels cresting desert dunes or of something more visceral, the country, which is one of the last in the world to welcome foreign visitors, remains a mystery to most. Anthony Bourdain emphasized this when he asked during his episode on Saudi Arabia for *No Reservations*, “Is there a country in the world about which Americans are more ignorant or less sympathetic?”

When I first traveled to Saudi Arabia, four years ago, tourist visas had not yet been established; women were not allowed to have driver’s licenses; restaurants segregated men and women; and religious police enforced dress codes and behavior. I disembarked in Riyadh cloaked in a full-length black *abaya* (robe) and *hijab* (headscarf) and melted into a sea of seeming uniformity. Women were almost exclusively cloaked head-to-toe in black. Like a flock of crows, we appeared identical, only distinguished by our handbags. (Suddenly the craze for Fendi baguettes and Dior saddle bags took on new meaning.)

But on my recent trip, the only time I donned a headscarf was while going through customs. By the time I reached the airport exit, one of the women from my flight had told me I didn’t need to wear one anymore.

“When were you last here?” she asked.

“Four years ago,” I answered.

“You will see,” she said with a smile. “Much has changed.”

On my first visit, I had been introduced to Vision 2030, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s plan to transition the conservative kingdom into a modern nation and to diversify the country’s economy away from a dependence on oil by adding other flourishing industries, principally tourism. Though almost 17 million religious pilgrims traveled to Saudi Arabia in 2019, making it the Middle East’s second-most-visited destination, until the fall of 2019 tourist visas were not issued. I had been invited by one of the royal commissions tasked with developing tourism around the cultural treasures at AlUla. The 9,000-square-mile area in northwest Saudi Arabia includes a section that is essentially a giant open-air museum with five historic sites—encompassing ancient cities and towns, tombs, mud houses, rock art—amid vast lunar desert landscapes. The star of these



sites is Hegra, or Mada'in Saleh, as the ancient Nabataean sister city of Petra is called. Located 12 miles north of the old town of AlUla, it contains 110 elaborately stone-hewn classical tombs in a dramatic desert setting. I have been fortunate to visit the greatest of man's monuments—the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall, Petra, Machu Picchu, Angkor Wat, Luxor, the Colosseum and the Acropolis—and Hegra inspires the same caliber of awe. Yet it remains a traveler's secret; the number of living people who have visited may fit into a large football stadium. (For perspective, in 2019 alone Angkor Wat received more than 2.2 million visitors.) When I first visited Hegra in 2018, the site had not yet opened to the public, and in a lifetime of travels I had never felt more akin to Indiana Jones discovering a “lost city.”

Since my last visit, Saudi Arabia has entered into an era of transformation. On this trip, not only was I able to wear Western clothing, but half the guides at Hegra were local women, many of whom have their driver's licenses and gather in restaurants after work, in the lovely pedestrian-only historic old town, where the sexes are no longer segregated. (As alcohol remains illegal, no cocktails are sold.) While on my previous visit I trekked across the sand to tour the columned tombs, now, vintage Land Rovers ferry sightseers between them. Four years ago, there was nothing to purchase; today, you can buy everything from helicopter flights to locally made ceramics and crafts. A hip hotel from the Habitas group offers eco-chic tents, an infinity pool and creative mocktails. Yet there are still fewer than 500 hotel beds in the region, meaning the massive site receives only around 150 people a day at most. So every traveler experiences that frisson of being an explorer, of having arrived at one of the world's great marvels before word has gotten out and the crowds have arrived.

Hegra, though, is not the only reason to visit AlUla. In addition to its stunning tombs, archaeologists are excavating ancient towns and older tombs from the Dedanite and

Travel with Melissa to **Saudi Arabia**

Curious about exploring the kingdom? This fall, Melissa Biggs Bradley will host two exclusive Insider Journeys to Riyadh, AlUla and Jeddah. You'll explore these amazing sites and meet with the people who are shaping Saudi Arabia's future—including the women artisans, engineers and entrepreneurs who are leading the way for generations to come. **Learn more and reserve your spot at travel.indagare.com/saudi.**





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The infinity pool at Habitas AlUla.

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Touring its labyrinthine alleys at dusk, with a flight of doves circling above and a call to prayer in the distance, I could see how tales of mythic Arabian nights of genies and flying carpets originated here. Within the ancient city walls are new museums devoted to the Arabian horse, Saudi history and military, lifestyle and architectural traditions.”



Lihyanite civilizations as well as open-air libraries where rocks are inscribed with ancient writings in Aramaic and early Arabic. The old town of AlUla, dating to the 12th century, is being restored and filled with cafés and local artisan shops, even a stylish nail salon. A few miles away, a museum, which will house the world's most expensive painting, Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi*, is rising. The just-created, nearly 600-square-mile Sharaan Nature Reserve has epic desert views, ancient rock drawings and rare sightings of red-necked ostrich, Nubian ibex and Idmi gazelles. In the coming years, it may become the country's first national park and will also contain endangered Arabian leopards and a hotel carved into the caves designed by Jean Nouvel, architect of the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Among the existing attractions to help lure repeat domestic travelers are a series of cultural festivals that feature concerts by international stars such as Andrea Bocelli, an edition of the contemporary art fair Desert X and pop-up restaurants, including an outpost of Annabel's from London.

As Vision 2030 gains momentum, so too grows awareness of the many treasures that lie beyond AlUla. In 2008, Hegra was the first UNESCO World Heritage site in Saudi Arabia, but four others have been named since then and another 12 are under consideration. On the outskirts of Riyadh is one: At-Turaif, the ancient seat of the first Saudi dynasty (1744 to 1818) and the largest mud heritage city in the world. Slated to open to the public next fall, the complex of restored mud-brick ruins in traditional Najd-style architecture is billed as an open-air museum. Touring its labyrinthine alleys at dusk, with a flight of doves circling above and a call to prayer in the distance, I could see how tales of mythic Arabian nights of genies and flying carpets originated here. Within the ancient city walls are new museums devoted to the Arabian horse, Saudi history and military, lifestyle and architectural traditions.

Saudi Arabia's past underpins one of the country's tourism slogans: Journey Through Time. But having preceded my visit to At-Turaif with another to the offices of the man overseeing the brand-new city of Diriyah, which is growing around the heritage site, I felt whiplashed between the past and the future. American Jerry Inzerillo, Group CEO of the Diriyah Development Gate Authority and one of the visionaries behind the Atlantis resorts in the Bahamas and Dubai, has been tasked with creating—from scratch and in record time—what has been dubbed both “the Beverly Hills of Riyadh” and the world's largest walkable cultural heritage city. The plan for the 11 square kilometers includes one of the Kingdom's largest parks (seven times the size of Central Park); a boulevard mimicking the Champs-Élysées, lined with world-class museums, stadiums and theaters; universities; mosques (one with a capacity of



Above: Discovering traditional architecture at the Tayebat Museum in Jeddah. **Opposite:** An open-air library preserving centuries of rock-carved messages in the Tabuk desert.

14,000); residences for 100,000 people and 38 hotels, including properties by Orient Express and Raffles. With more than 100 dining venues, the retail and entertainment offerings may rival those of Dubai, especially when combined with the other nearby giga-project, Qiddiya in Riyadh, which aims to be the capital of entertainment, sports and the arts. However, the style of Diriyah Gate will be historically sensitive, honoring At-Turaif's Najd architecture, so its charm will be more in line with that of Marrakech. Inzerillo predicts that by 2030 Diriyah “will be in the top 10 most-visited cities in the world.”

A few days later, I had another bold and innovative glimpse of the future when I visited Neom, “the country within a country” in the northwest of Saudi Arabia. A parcel of 10,000 square miles—similar in size to Massachusetts—fronting the Red Sea, Neom will have 95 percent of its striking landscape preserved for nature. The other five percent will be developed into a series of regions; two have so far been announced: the Line, a 105-square-mile





AlUla's Maraya Concert Hall, the world's largest mirrored building. Opposite: UNESCO World Heritage site Al-Balad, Jeddah's historic center.

“cognitive city” with no cars and zero carbon emissions, and Oxagon, a next-generation industrial city. At Neom base camp, I met one of the world's experts on artificial snow, who's been working on a Neom Mountain ski resort. Other teams are focusing on driving a green hydrogen economy and exploring environmental issues—such as how the coral in the Red Sea resists bleaching in high temperatures and whether its cells hold the key to repairing reefs around the world. Today, Neom's beaches and islands look like the Maldives before tourism.

But as awestruck as I was by Saudi Arabia's natural beauty and past and future visions, it was sharing the present moment of change with the Saudis themselves that left the

greatest impression. Over the course of my career, I have been asked often about my favorite places to travel, and I have answered that traveling to specific moments in time has been more impactful than specific destinations: visiting Vietnam or Cuba when they had just reopened to the West, or South Africa right after apartheid had ended, or China when it abandoned Mao's Communism or Eastern Europe after the Berlin Wall came down. These experiences allowed me to step into historic events.

On this visit to Saudi Arabia, I witnessed a social transformation occurring and discussed it with the residents in real time. In Riyadh, an expat recalled how “soft” the change was for the young generation. (Almost 70 percent of the

One of many staggering ancient Nabataean tombs that can be viewed—sans crowds—at Hegra, AlUla's most important archaeological site. Opposite, from left: Making new Saudi friends while exploring the Sharaan Nature Reserve; Habitas hotel.



population is under the age of 40.) “They were 100 percent ready,” she said. “I remember when they announced the end of the *mutawa*, the religious police. We had the Saudi National Day, and there were bands and big music, and everybody was dancing in the street, young women and young men.” Her eyes widened at the memory of the shift in atmosphere. “It was just so normal,” she laughed. “It was amazing.” She conceded that some older traditionalists mourn the stricter days. “But the young people instantly embraced it.” She was shocked, too, by how seamless it was when women began driving. “When they were talking about women driving,” she said. “I thought it would be a problem, and women will be harassed, but there was not a single incident. And now all the women I know drive.” In fact, every Saudi woman I spoke to had her license, even if one in Jeddah admitted that she still prefers being driven.

Many changes, of course, will take time to process. Our guide in the Sharaan Reserve spoke of his Bedouin mother, who grew up camping in the same area that he now protects. He explained that she is a bit frustrated that she can no longer sleep beneath familiar rock formations when she

feels like it, but she has helped his fellow guides (and him) get to know the secrets of the area. “She is my Google Earth for the Reserve,” he said, “because she is one of the few who knows the Bedouin names, places and history of the area.” Another guide, one of the *roywes*, or storytellers, who takes visitors through the cultural sites outside of AlUla, admits that the community didn’t embrace some of the changes right away, like women working. When she first became a guide, she was bullied on Twitter. “But the people started to accept it,” she says. “Now lots of girls want to be tour guides.”

Some argue for boycotting the kingdom over its political, economic and social policies, but my many years in the travel business have made me a committed anti-isolationist. Because rather than isolate the citizens of Cuba, Myanmar, Iran or Zimbabwe because of their leaders, I prefer to engage in people-to-people cultural exchange and to see with my own eyes what is rarely represented in the media. Even though I know that what I see is not the full picture. But in conversations with locals in Havana, Bagan and Tehran, I have learned perspectives that never make it into the news and have consistently demonstrated



how much we as humans have in common, rather than what separates us. To me, travel is the greatest way to promote cross-cultural communication and connection.

On my last evening in AlUla, I went up to a rooftop in the old town. I was filming the scene on my iPhone, scanning the sunset as it cast a glow on the mountains, the minaret and the crowds of locals, when I noticed three Saudi women on the street filming me with their iPhones. I waved, amused that we had found each other exotic sights worth capturing. They waved back and one put her hands together to make the shape of a heart. A minute later, after my wave became an invitation, they arrived on the terrace to join me. Residents of Medina and Jeddah, they were visiting AlUla for the first time, so we marveled at the discovery together. A few years ago, they would not have been able to travel without a male chaperone. They were as awed by seeing the old and new treasures of their own country as I was. We exchanged WhatsApp info, as one of the women said she would be soon visiting New York. Before we parted, my guide took a photo of us to capture the moment—four women united by travel. ■



What to Know

Important Considerations for Travelers to Saudi Arabia

While Saudi Arabia is quickly modernizing, it is still governed by Islamic law, and some cultural norms and policies may conflict with Western perspectives.

- Both men and women, but especially women, are required to dress modestly while in Saudi Arabia. Non-Muslim women are no longer required to wear a headscarf or *abaya*, but they should keep their chests, arms and legs covered (with hemlines reaching to the wrists and ankles). Clothing should not be too form-fitting. A long-sleeve, crew-neck maxi dress and espadrilles or jeans with a T-shirt, jacket and sneakers are acceptable outfits.
- Alcohol and drugs are strictly prohibited.
- Non-heterosexual, non-cisgender identity expression is prohibited in Saudi Arabia. Homosexual activity is criminal in Saudi Arabia.
- Public expression that is deemed offensive is criminal in Saudi Arabia and can result in fines or detention. Offensive actions include: consumption of pornographic or sexual material; profane language; public indecency or intoxication; public displays of affection or close physical touch (including holding hands or hugging) between the sexes; criticism or defiance of the Saudi Arabian royal family, government and its laws or politics; and criticism of Islam or promotion of religions that contradict Islam (religious symbols such as the Star of David or the Crucifix should not be shown publicly).
- The Saudi government may monitor your Internet activity while you are in the country; precautions should be taken in consideration of the above points.