



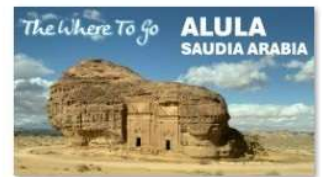
# SAUDI SURPRISES

History, culture, rain, deserts  
and mountains

## The inside cover for your information.....



Saudi Surprises is just one of a series of documentary travel guides under 'The Where To Go' banner. You can also find curated videos of the many different places visited in Saudi Arabia on my YouTube channel which can be found at [www.youtube.com/@thewheretogo](http://www.youtube.com/@thewheretogo). Please feel free to like and subscribe.



You will also find up to date information about my worldwide travels on my dedicated Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/TheWhereToGo](http://www.facebook.com/TheWhereToGo).



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# Chapter 1: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia



Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, offers a unique blend of rich history, modern innovation, and breathtaking landscapes. Known for its vast deserts, towering sand dunes, and the stunning Red Sea coastline, the Kingdom is a land of contrasts, where ancient traditions coexist with cutting-edge architecture.

The country's cities are vibrant with each offering its own cultural charm. Riyadh, the capital, is a bustling metropolis blending historic landmarks with futuristic skyscrapers. Jeddah is a port city known for its stunning waterfront and Jeddah Tower.... will it ever be completed?

Saudi Arabia also boasts diverse natural wonders, from the history and heritage of the oasis city of AlUla to rocky mountain and occasional snow in Abha. Finally, let's not forget Mecca and Medina which are widely revered as the two holiest cities in Islam, drawing millions of pilgrims each year.

Of course, the media's portrayal of Saudi Arabia can often seem negative due to several factors such as human rights concerns, women's rights and religious and social conservatism but this narrative does not give enough attention the complexity of the society.

Saudi Arabia is undergoing significant changes, and while progress may be slow, the country is trying to modernise in several ways such as the Crown Prince's Vision 2030 plan, which aims to diversify the economy, improve tourism and increase international cultural exchanges.

The country has benefitted from greater access to arts and entertainment and expanding international relations. Media portrayals often fail to capture the complexities of a nation undergoing rapid transformation, which can, often lead to an unbalanced view. So here is my attempt at introducing you to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.



## Saudi Tourist Visa



Saudi Arabia had been on my list of places to visit for some time although visiting Saudi was impossible unless you were working there or visiting the country as a Muslim pilgrim to visit Mecca or Medina. However, in September 2019, the country launched the Saudi Tourist Visa allowing tourists from around the world to stay in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for up to ninety days.

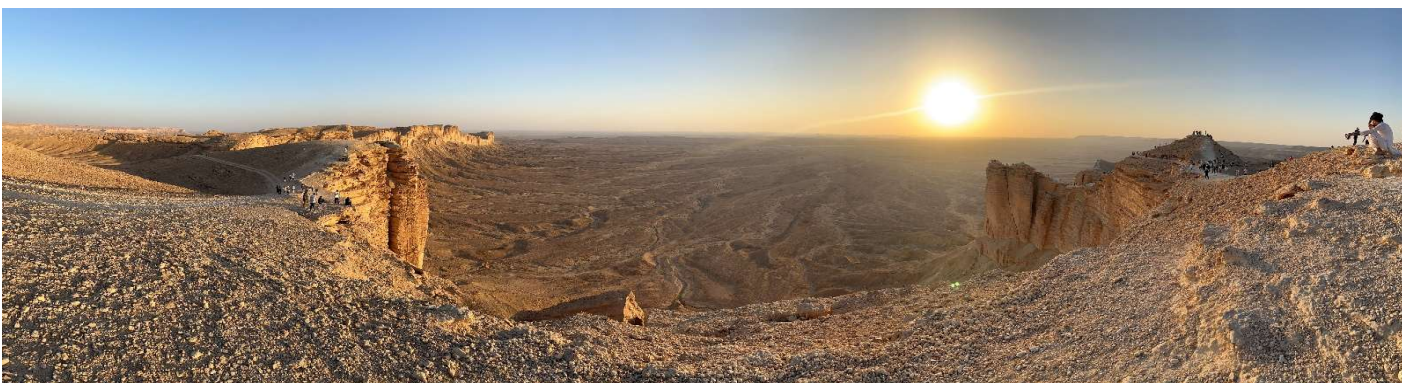
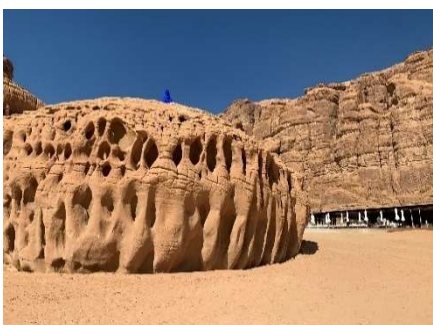
I applied and received my visa, but my first visit was interrupted by COVID and before I knew it the visa had run out. As travelling got back to some sense of normality, I received, out of the blue, an invitation from the Saudi authorities to extend my visa and come to Saudi which, let's face it, would be rather rude to refuse. I eventually made it to Saudi Arabia in December 2021 and fell in love with the place.

My first visit in December 2021 included the capital city, Riyadh, as well as a trip out to AlUla to visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Hegra. I arrived via Dubai courtesy of Emirates. The airport here is just a series of tarmacked runways in a vast expanse of desert on the far outskirts of Riyadh. On landing I couldn't even see the terminal buildings they were that far away.

My second visit in July 2023 saw me return to Riyadh for a short break while December 2024 involved me driving from Dammam to Riyadh by car as well as visiting the recently opened metro system .....including the King Abdullah Finance District (KAFFD) station which was designed by Zaha Hadid. I even managed to take the train back from Riyadh to Dammam.

More recently, I returned (twice) to Saudi Arabia in 2025 to visit the North and Central Regions including Taif, Al Bahah, Buraydah, Hail, Tabuk and Umluj as well as a welcome return to Jeddah which I still count as my favourite city.....I even managed to get fined for overstaying my visa which is 90 days. In May 2026, I was back again updating the chapter on Riyadh.

On the basis of these experiences, I offer the following suggestions on what to do and where to go .....



## Chapter 2: Riyadh



Riyadh is the capital city of Saudi Arabia and manages to beautifully balance traditional Arabian culture with cutting-edge modernity.....a mix of historical landmarks and modern skyscraper. The city is a key player in the region's political and diplomatic affairs as well as a thriving tech, finance, and retail scene.

The city is at the heart of the Saudi Vision 2030, a national plan that aims to diversify the economy and reduce reliance on oil. The Saudi Vision 2030 gives a real focus to developments in tourism, entertainment, and infrastructure.

Riyadh is the cultural heart of Saudi Arabia and hosts a range of cultural events including art exhibitions and music festivals. The city is also famous for its vibrant nightlife and entertainment zones like Boulevard Riyadh and Boulevard World

In many ways Riyadh is very similar to Dubai and in other ways it is very dissimilar. There are no bars in Riyadh and no bars in hotels either. However there many more coffee shops then you'll find in Dubai and local Saudis love to frequent these with many open 24/7.

Riyadh is a very cosmopolitan city with some stunning architecture with buildings and districts complementing each other rather than thrown together randomly. There is a lot of construction work going on including a new and extensive metro system.



### Al Faisaliah Tower

The Al Faisaliah Tower is a pyramid shaped commercial skyscraper which was completed in 2000. The 875 foot (267 metres) high tower, designed by the British Architectural firm, Fosters and Partners, is notable for having been the first skyscraper built in Saudi Arabia and, at the time of its construction was taller than any European building.

The tower is also notable for its monumental stained-glass wall in the lobby and the stunning glass sphere near the summit which can be seen across Riyadh at nighttime. The tower has 44 floors which include a five-star luxury hotel, restaurants, offices, a shopping mall and a splendid viewing platform that provides a spectacular view of the city below.

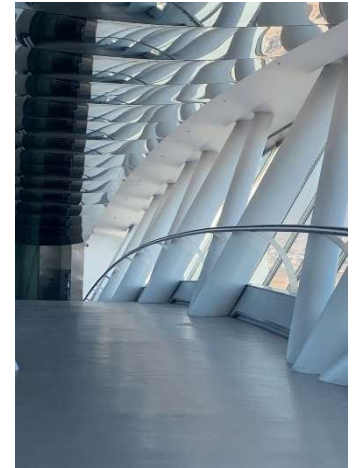


## Kingdom Centre Tower



The Kingdom Tower, also known as Al Mamlaka Tower, is a must-visit landmark in Riyadh. It is the third-tallest skyscraper in the country and was the tallest building in Saudi Arabia from 2002 to 2012 taking over from the Al Faisaliah Tower which held that title from 2000 to 2002. The shape of the building helps reduce wind pressure and keeps it cool in Riyadh's scorching summers.

The tower is 99 floors high and houses a luxury shopping mall, a high-end hotel, miscellaneous offices and some very expensive apartments. It features a distinctive parabolic arch with a sky bridge offering panoramic views of Riyadh from 950 feet (or 290 metres) above ground. The tower also houses the King Abdullah Mosque on the 77th floor.....the highest mosque in Saudi Arabia.



## Digital City



Digital City is a flagship technology and innovation hub developed and managed by the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST). It serves as a cornerstone of the Kingdom's ambitious Vision 2030, aiming to diversify the economy beyond oil and position Saudi Arabia as a global leader in technology and digital transformation.

The City provides state-of-the-art infrastructure designed specifically for technology companies, research institutions and startups including advanced telecommunications networks, high-capacity data centres, modern office spaces and cutting-edge laboratories. The city is designed to act as a powerful engine for propelling Saudi Arabia into a knowledge-based economy and a significant player on the global digital stage.



## Boulevard City



Boulevard City (also known as Boulevard Riyadh) is a key part of Saudi Arabia's 'Vision 2030' which is intended to support and encourage entertainment and tourism. The area is a massive mixed-use entertainment and retail complex on the outskirts of Riyadh occupying roughly 220 acres (89 hectares). Boulevard City opened in October 2019 as part of the annual Riyadh Season entertainment festival.

Boulevard City is famous for hosting international brands and local fashion designers as well as exceptional dining experiences and interactive events. This was the place where, in December 2021, I saw in the New Year and let me tell you that it was one of the most enjoyable and joyous experiences even without the added excesses of alcohol.

The City is divided into a series of sub-zones, each with its own theme including a Garden zone and a Sport zone as well as 'The Square' which is supposed to replicate New York's Times Square) and the 'Trocadero Area' which is inspired by London's Coventry Street (next door to Piccadilly Circus) .....but which looks nothing like its namesake which consists mostly of tacky tourist emporiums.

Boulevard City is linked to Boulevard World by a cable car, and this is my next stop.....



## Boulevard World

Boulevard World is best described as a large-scale leisure and cultural zone situated a short distance (or else a cable car ride) away from Boulevard City. The attraction opened in November 2022 and operates throughout the Riyadh Season which typically runs from October to March.

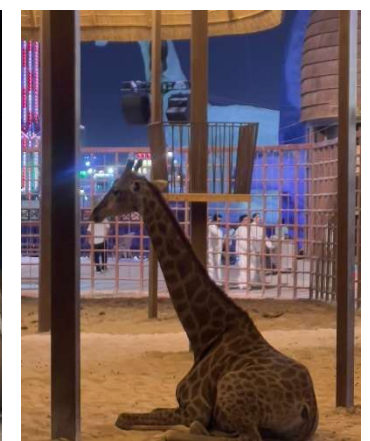
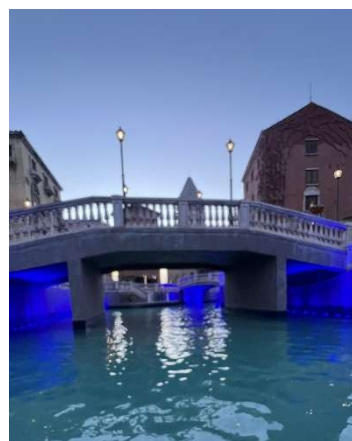
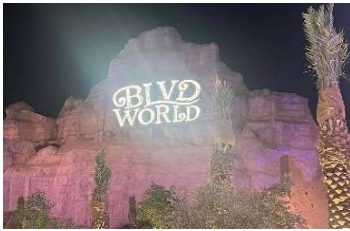


Boulevard World consists of a number of zoned pavilions representing different countries from across the world. Each Pavilion contains created iconic landmarks from that country as well as entertainment, food and shops to match. The attraction offers the opportunity to be a world traveller without the travelling.

My own favourites areas were China, Japan, Turkey, France and the Gaudi themed Spain. Egypt was exceptional and it felt as though I was really there other than the fact it was much cleaner. The Saudi Arabia pavilion was interesting but probably better to go and see the real thing since you are already in the country.

In the centre is a massive man-made lagoon where you can take a boat ride using a variety of different transports including water taxis, ampicars and speed boats as well as a Venetian Gondola. In 2025, the area has expanded considerably and now includes three new country zones: Indonesia, South Korea and Kuwait.

As well as the 22 themed country zones there is also a wildlife park (Next to the remodelled Africa zone) and a sizable number of fairground rides including the Skyloop which is as frightening as it looks....but still no UK themed area which I am not sure is a blessing or a curse?



## Boulevard Flowers

Boulevard Flowers is one of Riyadh's newest and most visually striking attractions, created as part of the wider Riyadh Season entertainment programme. Located opposite Boulevard World, the attraction transforms a large area of the city into a vast floral landscape filled with colour, sculptures, themed walkways and artistic installations.

Boulevard Flowers contains millions of flowers and plants arranged into elaborate displays that combine nature, entertainment and Saudi cultural themes. The attraction has quickly become one of Riyadh's most photographed destinations, particularly during the evening when the gardens are illuminated with decorative lighting. Visitors can walk through giant floral arches, rose-covered sculptures and themed zones.



On top of all this, one of the most unusual features is the presence of three large Boeing aircraft creating a surreal contrast between aviation and nature. These three retired Saudia Boeing 777-200ER aircraft (registered as HZ-AKG, HZ-AKK and HZ-AKP) were physically transported 650 miles by road from Jeddah to Riyadh specifically for the attraction.



## King Abdullah Financial District



It is very interesting to note how this area has developed over the short time that I have been coming to Saudi Arabia. Today, The King Abdullah Financial District (KAFD) is a state-of-the-art, mixed-use financial hub which is one of the most ambitious urban development projects in the Middle East, designed to position Riyadh as a global financial centre and support Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 economic diversification goals.

KAFD was launched in 2006 under the vision of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to create a modern financial district for Riyadh. The district successfully combines office spaces, luxury residences, hotels, retail outlets and entertainment venues and is well served by the Riyadh Metro and a driverless monorail linking six local stations. The KAFD is a symbol of Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a global economic powerhouse.



## Riyadh Metro

The Riyadh metro system is the longest driverless metro in the world covering 109 miles (176 kilometres) and 85 stations. The project began in April 2014 and includes six lines and four major interchanges including King Abdullah Finance District (KAJD) station. Three of the six metro opened in December 2024, and the rest followed during the early part of 2025. The system is operated using four car and two car trains although the two car trains are hardly likely to be sufficient to cater for the predicted 3.6 million passengers per day.....especially since the Dubai metro uses five car trains and is already overcrowded.

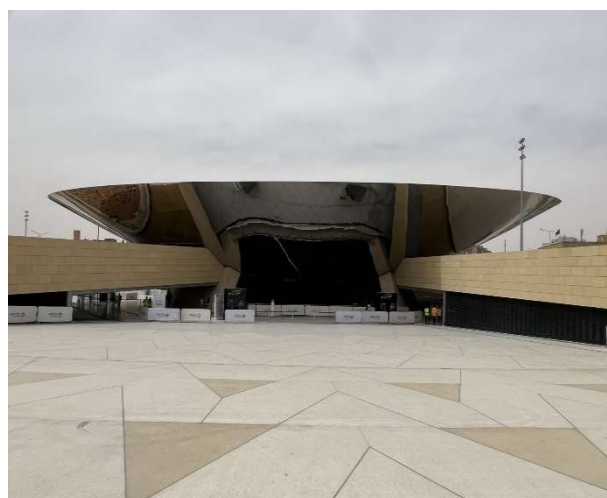


The metro was officially inaugurated on the 27th of November 2024 by His Majesty King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud although my official invitation to this event was never received. I did manage to get a few crafty pictures of King Abdullah Finance District (KAJD) station which was designed by Zaha Hadid.

On the 6th of December 2024, I returned via Riyadh airport and took the recently opened Yellow Line from the airport to the city. Besides being extraordinarily cheap, the train was quick so that I was soon in the centre of Riyadh. I am back again on the 5th of April 2025, and the system is now fully operational.



The trains are bright and spacious with colour schemes matching the colour of the line. Each train is split into three classes including first class, family class and single class which is something of a squeeze in those two car trains. The first few weeks of the metro opening were a bit fraught resulting in a reminder that penalties for 'deliberate Infrastructure damage' can incur fines ranging from 20,000 SAR to 500,000 SAR..... and may include imprisonment of up to two years. Repeat offenders can expect fines as high as 10 million SAR which is around £2000000..... don't mess with the metro!!!



## King Abdullah Financial District station



One of the main reasons for visiting the Riyadh Metro was the opportunity to go and see the King Abdullah Finance District (KAFD) station which one of four interchange stations is linking the Yellow, Blue and Purple. I saw this station on my very first visit to Riyadh and realised who the architect was. I saw the station being built in 2021 and could not wait to see it completed.

Those of you who follow my adventures abroad would be aware that I am great fan of the architect Zaha Hadid, so you can't imagine how to find out that this particular metro station was from her design company. The structure is described as 'a sinuous design defined by a lattice structure composed of rhythmic sine waves'.



## King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Centre



The King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Centre (KAPSARC) is situated just outside Riyadh close to the King Khalid International Airport. The facility was founded by a Royal Order in 2010 by the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. It is dedicated to advancing the understanding of energy economics, policy, technology and the environment, with a strong focus on global impact.

The campus is another architectural landmark designed by Zaha Hadid Architects which was officially opened in 2017. On my first visit, access was highly restricted as the site was a dedicated research facility. However, in April 2026, the Black Gold Museum was officially opened as one of Riyadh's newest cultural attractions (and probably one of the most ambitious museums in Saudi Arabia) allowing full access to the site.





## The Black Gold Museum

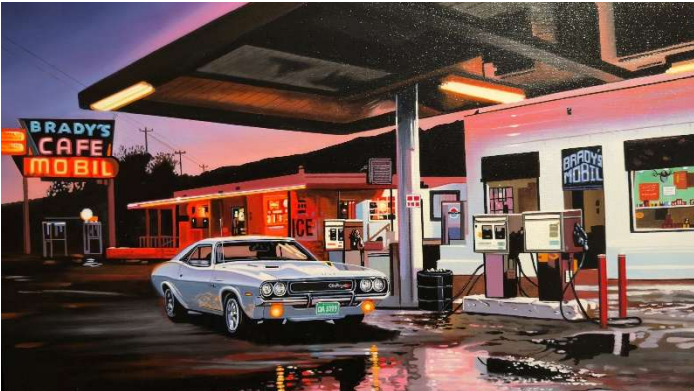
The Black Gold Museum is not just about oil and full of machinery and technical history. Instead, it explores oil (black gold) through art, culture, politics, economics, human development and environmental questions. Saudi Arabia is essentially presenting oil as something that shaped modern civilisation, not just the Kingdom itself.

The museum occupies what used to be the Zaha Hadid-designed KAPSARC research library building from 2017. Instead of demolishing it, the project team stripped out and radically reworked the interiors while keeping most of the original structural shell intact. Architecturally, the museum itself is part of the attraction with its futuristic geometric design, honeycomb-like structures and angular interiors.

The museum contains more than 350 artworks and installations from over 170 artists across roughly 30 countries. It contains contemporary art, photography, archival material, sculpture, multimedia installations and immersive digital exhibits. Some sections celebrate the transformation oil brought to cities and economies, while others critically examine dependency on fossil fuels and the future of energy.

Altogether, this is probably one of the most impressive museums I have recently visited and certainly an eye opener on the subject of oil.





## Dame Zaha Mohammed Hadid



Dame Zaha Mohammad Hadid was an Iraqi-British architect, artist and designer. She was born in Baghdad and studied mathematics at the American University of Beirut before moving to London to study architecture. In her early days, she had a reputation as a 'paper architect' because many of her designs were too avant-garde to move beyond the sketch phase and actually be built.

In 2004 she became the first woman to be awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize which is widely considered to be the Nobel prize for architecture. In 2012, she was made a Dame for services to

architecture. Her design for the Heydar Aliyev Centre in Baku, Azerbaijan won her further awards and the month preceding her death, she became the first woman to be awarded the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Her other major works include the London Aquatics Centre for the 2012 Olympics, the Evelyn Grace Academy in Brixton, the Sheikh Zayed Bridge in Abu Dhabi, the Dubai Opera House and the Al Janoub Stadium in Qatar. Her company, Zaha Hadid Architects (ZHA), continue to work on a range of projects across the world so that her legacy continues.

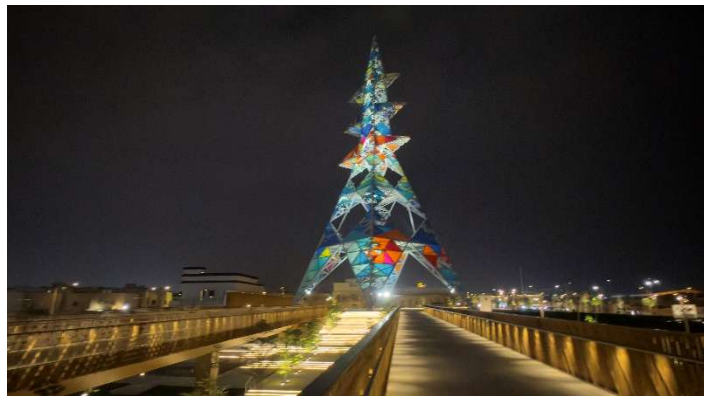


## The Arts Tower



The Arts Tower in Riyadh is a striking architectural landmark that has transformed an abandoned 275-foot-high (83 metres in metric) electricity transmission tower into a vibrant public sculpture. The tower is located within the massive Sports Boulevard project which is a key initiative under the Saudi Vision 2030. The tower is the vision of renowned Saudi artist Abdunasser Gharem paying homage to the traditional electricity pylons that once lined Prince Mohammed bin Salman Road.

The tower is a feat of engineering and adaptive reuse which involved wrapping the existing steel pylon with a lightweight yet resilient second skin of brightly coloured triangular membranes designed to withstand extreme wind loads. The tower is connected to the Riyadh Art initiative and is designed to be an active community hub, featuring art galleries, exhibition halls, and platforms for live performances, thereby creating a dynamic space where art, sport, and urban life converge.



## Royal Saudi Air Force Museum

I thought I might pay a visit to the Royal Saudi Air Force Museum, also known as the Saqr Al-Jazira Aviation Museum, which I came across entirely by accident. The museum opened in 1999 and is one of Riyadh's most fascinating and underrated attractions telling the story of the Royal Saudi Air Force from its early beginnings in the 1920s through to the modern jet age. Located on Riyadh's Eastern Ring Road near the Riyadh Air Base, the museum combines military history, aviation technology, and national heritage in one impressive complex.

Outside, visitors are greeted by a large collection of historic aircraft displayed in the open air, including fighter jets, helicopters, transport aircraft, and training planes once used by the Royal Saudi Air Force. Inside, the museum features interactive displays, flight simulators, military uniforms, engines, weapons, photographs and a space exhibition honouring Prince Sultan bin Salman, who was the first Saudi astronaut in space.

One of the museum's most impressive exhibits is the restored Dakota DC-3 aircraft presented to King Abdulaziz by U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt in 1945. Outside, I also came across a Boeing 707 painted in Saudia colours which was delivered in the mid-1970s and used to transport members of the Saudi royal family and, even more exciting, a genuine Lockheed L-1011 TriStar which is one of the most recognisable classic widebody airliners ever built.

The TriStar was developed by Lockheed Corporation in the late 1960s as a long-range luxury airliner designed to compete with the DC-10 and Boeing 747. Its most distinctive feature is the third engine mounted inside the tail...in those days you liked the idea of having three engines. The aircraft was famous for being technologically advanced and exceptionally quiet with many pilots considering it to be one of the best airliners ever built. The aircraft originally flew for Saudi Arabian Airlines (Saudia) before being retired and preserved.



## National Museum (King Abdulaziz Historical Centre)



King Abdulaziz Historical Centre (KAHC) is a significant cultural and heritage complex in Riyadh which includes numerous historic buildings such as the National Museum and the Murabba Palace. The centre was inaugurated in 1999 and designed to highlight different aspects of Saudi history and showcase the rich heritage of the Kingdom.

The National Museum, which is a key component of KAHC invites visitors to explore the Kingdom's rich past, learn about its diverse civilizations and gain insight into the formation of modern Saudi Arabia. The building is a state-of-the-art facility housed in a modern, architecturally stunning building dedicated to preserving and displaying the Kingdom's cultural, historical and natural heritage.

The National Museum consists of multiple galleries, each focusing on a distinct theme covering the prehistoric era, ancient civilizations, Islamic history and modern history. The museum houses an extensive collection of cultural artifacts, including pottery, jewellery, textiles, coins, manuscripts, and weaponry. Many of these objects date back to the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods and give insight into the region's cultural development.

The building itself was designed with traditional Arabian elements fused with modern design. The overall structure is designed to resemble the form of a traditional Saudi Arabian fort or palace, with an emphasis on open spaces and the use of natural light. The museum also pays tribute to King Abdulaziz Al Saud, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia.



## Murabba Palace (King Abdulaziz Historical Centre)

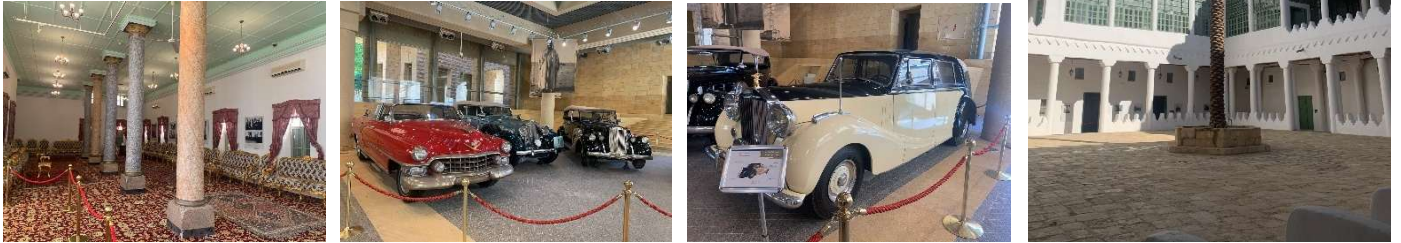
The Murabba Palace (also known as Murbba Palace) is a historic palace located within the King Abdulaziz Historical Centre (KAHC). The palace is a significant architectural and cultural landmark, reflecting the early stages of Saudi Arabia's modern history. It holds a special place in the hearts of Saudis because of its direct connection to the life and reign of King Abdulaziz Al Saud, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia.



The Murabba Palace was built by King Abdulaziz in the 1930s, during the early years of his reign, and it served as his royal residence. The palace is an iconic example of the blend of traditional Arabian architectural styles with modern design influences from the early 20th century. The palace is characterized by high walls, large courtyards, and elegant decorations, with an emphasis on symmetry and geometric forms. The interior is similarly impressive, with spacious rooms, ornate furniture and intricate decorations that were meant to signify both the royal status and the wealth of the newly established Saudi state.



The palace provided a luxurious yet functional living space for King Abdulaziz and his family. It was designed to accommodate the king's private quarters, as well as reception areas for guests and diplomats. The design of the palace emphasised privacy, comfort, and a certain level of grandeur, befitting a monarch. This was the place where King Abdulaziz made key decisions that led to the unification of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.



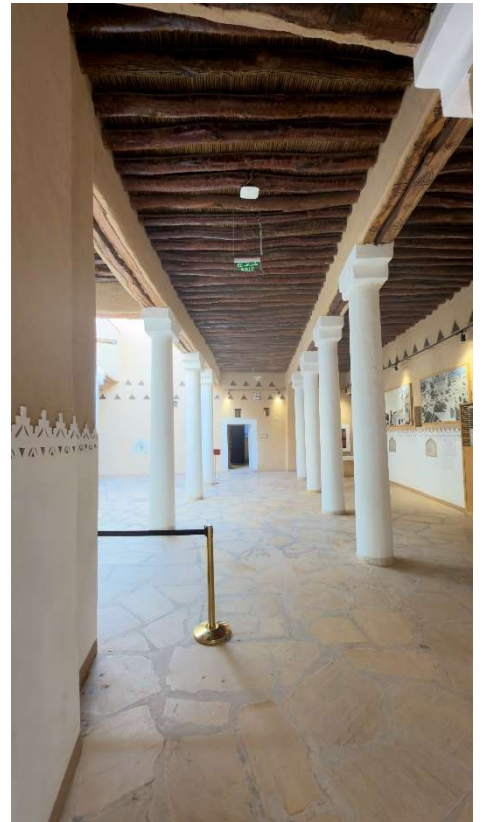
### Al Masmak Fortress

Al Masmak Fortress (also known as Al Masmak Palace) is a large mudbrick fortress with four conical watchtowers situated in Riyadh. The building was built as a fortified stronghold and defensive structure, and not as a royal residential palace in the way that Murabba Palace was. The fortress is one of the most important historic buildings in Saudi Arabia and a symbol of the creation of the modern Kingdom.

The fortress was built around 1865 from mud brick, clay, straw, and palm wood. Its thick defensive walls, watchtowers, and heavy wooden gates were designed to protect the settlement from attack. The fortress became famous in January 1902 when King Abdulaziz Al Saud captured it during a daring raid that allowed him to retake Riyadh marking the beginning of the campaign that eventually unified Saudi Arabia.

Today, Al Masmak Fortress has been restored and turned into a museum. Inside, visitors can explore exhibits about the history of Riyadh, traditional Saudi life, historic weapons, photographs, and maps showing the unification of the Kingdom. Despite the modern skyscrapers surrounding it, the fortress remains a powerful reminder of Riyadh's origins and Saudi national history.





## VIA Riyadh

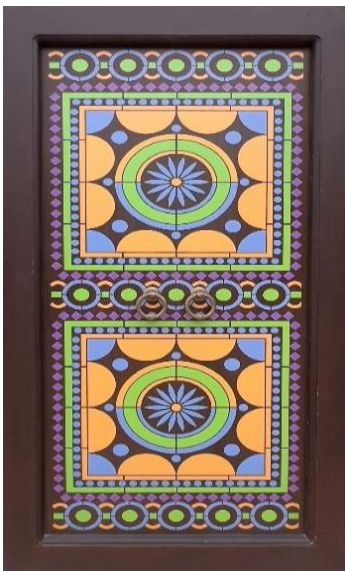


VIA Riyadh is a mixed-use development located next to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh. The development is relatively new and consists of high-end retail, hospitality and entertainment outlets as well as plenty of places to sit and watch the world go by. The development opened in 2021 with an architectural style combining modern elements with traditional Saudi heritage.

The development hosts over 20 high-end boutiques, featuring brands like Dolce & Gabbana, Elie Saab, and Tom Ford as well as 17 restaurants offering a variety of cuisines, from Italian to Japanese and British. There are seven state-of-the-art cinema halls and a five-star hotel offering luxurious rooms and suites, along with amenities like a spa, fitness centre, and signature dining options. Definitely worth a visit but don't forget your credit card(s).



## Diriyah and At-Turaif



Diriyah is one of Saudi Arabia's most historically significant cities and is often referred to as the birthplace of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The area is located just northwest of Riyadh and was once the seat of power for the First Saudi State. Today it is undergoing a significant (and expensive) transformation to turn it into a leading global tourism destination with high class restaurants, open air markets, boutique hotels, art galleries and museums.

At-Turaif is a historic district within Diriyah which is often considered to be the heart of old Diriyah. It is a site of immense historical and cultural significance in Saudi Arabia. Established in the 15th century, it became the first capital of the Saudi Dynasty and stands as a testament to the rich heritage of the

region. It is a recognised UNESCO World Heritage Site due to its cultural significance and historical importance. The site offers an oversight of the early development of the Saudi Kingdom and the way of life and governance.

At-Turaif showcases the distinctive Najdi architectural style, characterised by its mud-brick structures adapted to the central Arabian climate. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, the district's political and religious influence grew, with the citadel serving as the power centre for the House of Saud. The district encompasses the remnants of a traditional settlement reflecting the evolution of human habitation in the Arabian Peninsula.

On my last visit I saw this place by night, so it was good to return and see it in the daytime. In recent years, At-Turaif has undergone extensive restoration to preserve its heritage and make it accessible to the public. Visitors can explore the district's narrow alleyways, historic buildings and museums that narrate the story of Saudi Arabia's foundation and evolution. Adjoining the site is a rather beautiful park when you can enjoy some peace and tranquillity following your walk around the historical site



## Edge of the World



Just over 50 miles (90 kilometres) northwest of Riyadh lies one of Saudi Arabia's most amazing natural wonders known as the Edge of the World or, more officially, Jebel Fihrayn. The Edge of the World gives a clue as to what you will see here, and this can only best be described as Saudi Arabia's answer to the Grand Canyon.

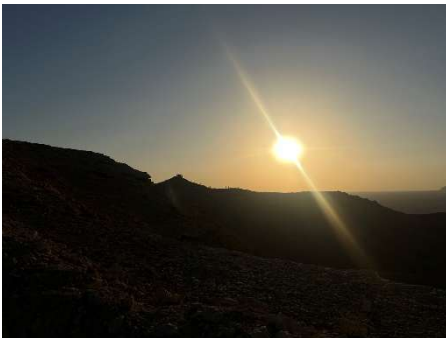
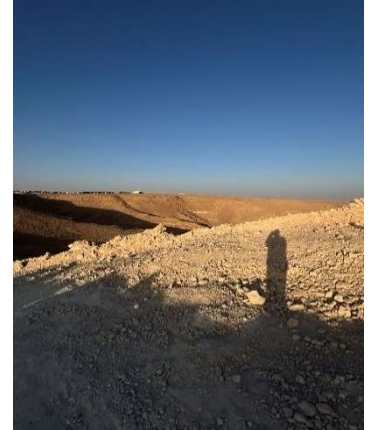


The area is part of the mighty Tuwaiq Mountain Range formed when Saudi Arabia was submerged under a shallow sea. The Edge is a 1000 feet (300 metre) high limestone cliff edge forming a near-vertical drop overlooking the ancient ocean bed stretching to the horizon and featuring layered limestone cliffs which are nothing short of spectacular...the nickname is well deserved,

Getting there was an adventure itself, and I am not sure that our medium sized hire car was the best means of navigating the rocky and sandy terrain which for the last 20 miles (32 kilometres) is entirely off road. We now fully appreciate why all the tour brochures strongly recommend a 4x4 vehicle and ours was the only car in the car park which was not. The locals just dismissed me as a mad Englishman, and they were right.

Having reached the Edge, the views are breathtaking, and you can easily believe that you are at the edge of the world. Sunrise and sunset are good times to visit but we were just concerned to get back before the light had gone so we missed that treat. You will need plenty of water and sun protection as well as a good head for heights...there are no guardrails and some big drops.

Nonetheless, I would highly recommend the place which offers an unforgettable escape from the city and a real appreciation of the enormous beauty of the Saudi desert. October to April is suggested as the best time to visit and, from experience, I would strongly recommend a 4x4 vehicle or else a decent tour company (and there are plenty of those to choose from).



## Qiddiya City

Located around 25 miles (40 kilometres) southwest of Riyadh, Qiddiya City is one of Saudi Arabia's flagship giga-projects and a central part of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 strategy. The city is focused on entertainment, sport, culture and tourism rather than traditional business or residential development. The scale is enormous, with plans for hundreds of attractions, sports venues, hotels, residential districts and entertainment experiences.



Major projects include motorsport circuits, esports arenas, water parks, golf courses, concert venues and the futuristic Prince Mohammed bin Salman Stadium. The city is expected to become one of the largest leisure destinations in the Middle East and aims to keep more Saudi tourism spending inside the Kingdom while also attracting international visitors.

Central to this vision is the Six Flags park which is the first one to be built outside North America in modern times. The park has been designed on a massive scale, featuring six themed lands, 28 rides and attractions, dozens of restaurants and retail outlets, and several world-record-breaking rides aimed directly at thrill seekers. The park's signature attraction is Falcons Flight, promoted as the world's tallest, fastest and longest roller coaster.

The ride reaches speeds of around 155 mph (250 kph) and travels across the mountainous terrain surrounding the park, making it one of the most ambitious roller coaster projects ever attempted. Other major attractions include the Sirocco Tower which is the world's tallest free-standing drop ride and the Iron Rattler tilt coaster where the track tilts vertically before the 200+ foot drop...definitely not for the faint hearted.





Beyond the rides, the park has been designed to compete internationally with major theme park destinations in the United States and Asia. The architecture combines futuristic design with Arabian influences, while extensive shade systems and water features help deal with the desert climate. Six Flags Qiddiya is eventually expected to become one of the most important tourism attractions in Saudi Arabia.



# Chapter 3: Northwest Saudi and the Red Sea

This chapter does not cover a particular city but rather a group of cities and towns including Buraydah, Ha'il, Tabuk, Umluj, Yanbu and King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) on a little road trip starting in Riyadh and finishing in Jeddah before returning back to Riyadh. The whole trip covered 2040 miles (3230 km) and involved approximately 35 hours of driving on quite decent (often 3 lane) roads.

The trip took place in May 2025 and offered some amazing insights into cities that I had never even heard of as well as introducing me to some amazing desert landscapes including the UNESCO recognised rock art in Jubbah as well as some delightful coastal getaways on the Red Sea including Umluj which is known as the 'Maldives of Saudi' for its pristine islands and turquoise waters.....although not so turquoise on this trip!!!



## BURAYDAH

The city of Buraydah is nestled in the heart of Saudi Arabia's Al Qassim Province, Buraydah stands as a vibrant testament to the Kingdom's rich heritage and dynamic present. This city is an intriguing blend of deep-rooted tradition and ambitious modernity. The area is particularly known for its oasis agriculture and date palm cultivation renowned as one of the world's premier date producers.



Buraydah's global fame is undeniably tied to the Al Qassim Camel Market which is the largest of its kind on earth. The market draws traders and spectators from across the globe, showcasing thousands of camels daily and hosting high-stakes auctions where prized racing camels command millions of pounds. The King Abdulaziz Camel Festival is known for its races, beauty contests and cultural celebration.



Beyond its iconic market, Buraydah is a vital commercial and transportation hub for central Saudi Arabia. It offers visitors an authentic slice of Saudi life with vast parks, historical architecture and the coffee pot shaped water tower with spectacular views across the city and beyond. This is definitely the place to explore some authentic Saudi culture.



## Buraydah Water Tower



Dominating the Buraydah skyline, the iconic Water Tower is not just a utilitarian structure but a beloved symbol of the city's growth and resilience. The tower was built in the early 1980s, and its primary function was storing and regulating water pressure for the expanding city. However, its striking design, resembling a traditional Arabic coffee pot, transformed it into an instant landmark.

The water tower houses a reception hall and a restaurant as well as an observation deck offering panoramic views of Buraydah city. The tower is open during the summer months as well as national celebrations and the annual Water Festival. At nighttime, the tower is illuminated with green lights, displaying images of the country's leaders, the Saudi flag and congratulatory messages.



## Buraydah City Museum



The Buraydah City Museum (also known as Mathaf Buraydah Al Madani or Sheikh Ali Al Salim Museum) is a significant cultural landmark. The Buraydah City Museum chronicles the evolution of Buraydah from its humble beginnings to its current status as the vibrant capital of Al Qassim. The museum is located centrally but, like most of Buraydah, was closed when I got there

The museum was established in 1995 and was founded by Sheikh Ali bin Mohammed Al Salim, who was a prominent local historian, heritage enthusiast and businessman. Through diverse exhibits, including archaeological finds, historical documents, photographs, models and multimedia presentations, the museum explores the city's founding and development.



## Al Oqiylat Heritage Museum

The Al Oqiylat Heritage Museum is a unique institution dedicated to preserving the cultural legacy of the Otaibah tribe and, particularly, the women of the tribe. The museum was officially opened in 2017 with the purpose of documenting and showcasing the extraordinary history, resilience and entrepreneurial spirit of the Al Oqiylat women traders.

The museum is one of the few museums in the world specifically dedicated to celebrating the historical economic and social leadership of Bedouin women. It is housed within a meticulously restored traditional Najdi mud-brick palace and highlights the ingenuity and adaptability of women while their husbands and brothers were away for extended periods of time.



## Al Qassim Camel Market

The Al Qassim Camel Market is located just outside Buraydah and is the epicentre of the Arabian camel trade. The market is held daily and is filled with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of camels ranging from sturdy pack animals to prized racing breeds and majestic show camels. The camel market reflects the deep-rooted bond between Bedouins and camels better known as the 'ships of the desert'.

The market is divided up into areas for racing camels, meat camels and dairy breeds. It is particularly famed for the camel beauty pageants, where owners meticulously groom their camels and practice their parade walks although the camels I saw were neither beautiful nor well groomed. The most expensive camel sold here was a racing camel named Qaydar which sold for over £6million in 2021.



## The Fayd Archaeological Site

The Fayd Archaeological Site (also spelled Faid on google maps) is situated off the main road between Buraydah and Ha'il. It is a remarkable and historically significant location, offering a fascinating glimpse into ancient trade, pilgrimage and desert civilisation. The site includes the remains of an ancient oasis city including a fortress, mosque, buildings and a water cistern as well as a museum.



Fayd served as a vital logistical hub and resting point for pilgrims, traders, soldiers and caravans traversing the harsh desert. It provided essential services such as water, food, shelter, security, markets and religious facilities. This was a large and prosperous city featuring extensive residential quarters, markets (souqs), workshops and administrative buildings.

The city's origins are pre-Islamic and likely dating back to the Nabataean (1<sup>st</sup> century BC to 1<sup>st</sup> century AD). The city's existence depended entirely on the ancient oasis which was fed by natural springs and a sophisticated water management system. The fortress (castle) was a dominant feature providing security for the oasis and the caravan routes. Its elevated position offered crucial surveillance.

The mosque is situated just outside the fortress wall and is believed to date back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century (probably around 750 to 800 AD making it one of the oldest mosques in Saudi Arabia. The mosque would have served as a crucial place of worship for the countless pilgrims who passed through the city on their journey to Mecca.

The Water Cistern was particularly important in the desert environment. They were sophisticated underground or partially buried reservoirs, often lined with waterproof plaster and designed to collect and store rainwater or water channelled from springs. The cistern was very large and capable of holding significant volumes to sustain the population and passing caravans, especially during dry periods.



The site is under ongoing excavation and conservation by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (now part of the Ministry of Culture). It is part of the Dumat Al Jandal Historical District, which has been submitted to UNESCO's Tentative List for potential World Heritage status. The Museum provides the crucial link and tells the story of this once-vibrant crossroads of civilization.



## HA'IL



Nestled in the heart of northern Saudi Arabia, Ha'il, pronounced 'High-eel', offers a captivating blend of dramatic landscapes, deep history and modern development. Ha'il, was a vital stop on ancient trade and pilgrimage routes linking the Arabian Peninsula's east and west. Caravans carrying incense, goods and pilgrims were reliant upon its wells and strategic location.

This is a city with a rich past and a strong reputation as a centre for Arabian poetry, literature and tribal diplomacy. From ancient fortresses and palaces to mountain-top dining and relaxing parks, Ha'il delivers a unique and layered experience, promising adventure, history, culture and unforgettable memories which are best shared by being there rather than looking at my pictures.



### **A Poem from Ha'il attributed to Madi bin Hithlayn al-Harbi who is a renowned 20th-century Najdi Bedouin poet....**

*'The desert trains its sons on hardship's way,  
Where scant the water, long the scorching day.  
The mirage shimmers, a deceitful lake,  
Hope's fragile promise, easy it can break.  
Our mounts grow lean, their ribs stark to the eye,  
Yet forward press, 'neath the vast, empty sky.  
Companions lost? We mourn not with loud cries,  
For fate's a hunter – swift and grim, he lies.  
We bear the burden, silent and alone,  
Till death finds rest, or the far goal is won.'*

### **Al Samra Mountain**



Al Samra Mountain is a prominent natural landmark on the outskirts of Ha'il. It is renowned for its distinctive reddish-brown hue although this is not so evident during sunset when I visited.... the word Samra means brown/tan. The mountain is popular for the iconic 'Eye of Ha'il' restaurant which opened in 2019 and is perched dramatically on the mountainside.

The mountain and the restaurant are a major tourist attraction and a good place to start on your visit to Ha'il. The structure resembles an eye gazing out over the city offering unparalleled 360-degree panoramic views of Ha'il city and the

surrounding desert plains. To reach the restaurant is an adventure itself involving a winding mountain road adding to the sense of adventure and excitement.....recommended at sunset.



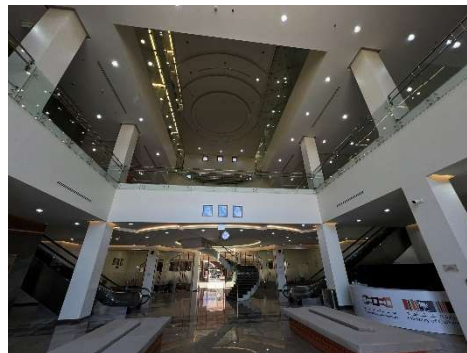
### Aja Park

This recreational park is nestled at the base of the majestic Aja Mountains and is a major recreational hub for families and visitors. The park itself is a modern development designed to offer accessible leisure space. It features walking and jogging paths, designated picnic and barbecue areas, children's playgrounds, amusement rides and a shopping area as you enter.



### Ha'il Regional Museum

The museum was originally housed in the Al Qishla Palace (Ottoman barracks) but is now housed in a new purpose-built building which had still not officially opened at the time of my visit. Historically, the museum's collection spans prehistory to the modern era, featuring archaeological finds, traditional costumes, jewellery, weaponry, handicrafts, agricultural tools and historical documents.





### Al Rajhi Mosque

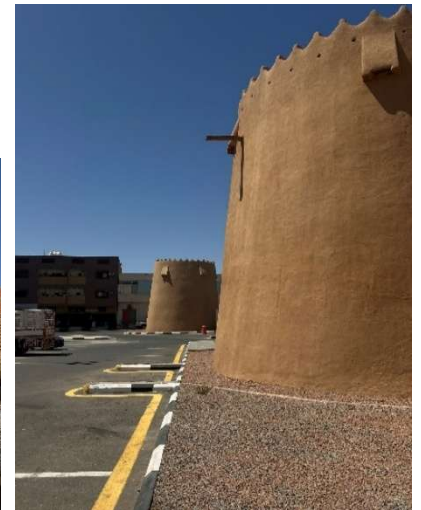
Al Rajhi Mosque is one of Ha'il's largest and most prominent modern mosques, known for its beautiful contemporary Islamic architecture and capacity to accommodate thousands of worshippers. The mosque is named after the prominent Al Rajhi family, known for their philanthropy and business ventures across Saudi Arabia. The mosque is particularly striking at night when its facade and minarets are illuminated.



### Barzan Palace

Barzan (meaning the high place) Palace is a magnificent fortress-palace dating from the peak of the Al Rashid era and renowned for its immense size and historical significance as a royal residence. The palace was built by Mohammed bin Abdullah Al Rashid in 1808 and served as the primary residence for the Al Rashid emirs for decades.

The palace complex was vast, featuring multiple courtyards, residential quarters, reception halls and defensive towers. Today, much of it lies in ruins although ongoing restoration projects are underway to preserve the remaining structures. Its historical importance and sheer scale offer a powerful glimpse into the opulence and authority of Ha'il's ruling dynasty during the 19th century.



### Qishla Palace

Al Qishla Palace or Fortress is a substantial historical building complex constructed around 1908 under the Ottoman administration and serving as military barracks .....the word Qishla means barracks in Turkish. Its architecture is a mix of Ottoman and local Najdi styles. The palace was constructed using traditional materials common during its era, including clay, mudbrick and stone.





The palace has undergone extensive restoration preserving the structure while giving it a vibrant new cultural purpose which is well received by visitors. The palace building has two floors and features an open courtyard which was used for troop training and parades. The rooms served as offices for army officers and the general administration as well as for weapon storage.



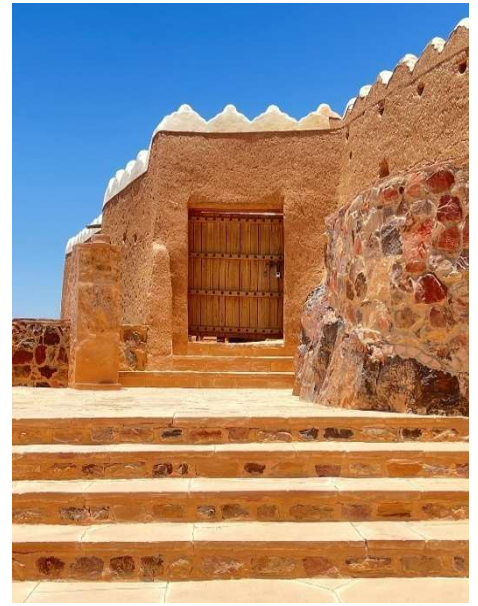
## Al Arif Fort



Al Arif Fort is one of Ha'il's most significant and visually imposing historical landmarks. It was built during the reign of the Al Rashid dynasty, specifically by Talal bin Abdullah Al Rashid in the mid-19th century (around 1840) and served as a central garrison, arsenal and seat of administration and justice. The fort is the oldest historical building in the city of Ha'il.



The fort is located near the old souq and dominates the city's historic centre. The fort's massive walls and distinctive watchtowers were designed for defence and surveillance. The traditional Najdi mud-brick architecture remains awe-inspiring. It's a bit of a trek to the top but it is well worth the climb and great for another view of the city below.



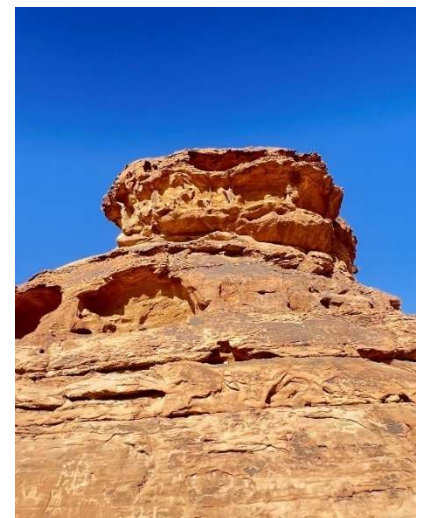
### Al Nafud Desert and Jubbah



The Al Nafud Desert is one of Saudi Arabia's four major deserts, covering an area of approximately 25000 square miles (64000 square kilometres) from Ha'il to Tabuk in northern Saudi Arabia. The desert is characterised by a distinct red-orange colour of the sand which is caused by the high concentrations of hematite which is a mineral form of iron oxide (rust).

The Nafud Desert is noted for its extreme temperature swings from 0°C (winter nights) to 50°C (summer days) as well as sudden violent winds and frequent sandstorms. Rain comes once or twice per year. Dune bashing, camel safaris and camping under the stars are popular tourist attractions.

Jubbah is an oasis town approximately 56 miles (90 kilometres) northwest of Ha'il and on the way to Tabuk. Although surrounded by desert, Jubbah is known for its abundant agriculture and plentiful water. Jubbah is surrounded by large sandstone outcrops that are covered with over 15000 rock drawings/inscriptions and now recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



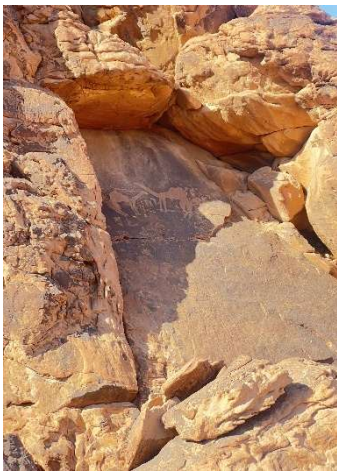


## Umm Senman Mountain Visitor Centre



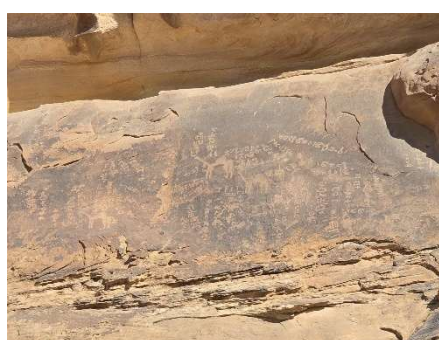
The Umm Senman Mountain is one of the most prominent archaeological sites in the region. The mountain gets its name 'Umm Senman' from its unique appearance, which resembles a camel with two humps. This mountain is famous for the drawings and inscriptions that have been engraved on it. According to archaeologists, some of these engravings date back 10000 years .... yes, I checked it, 10000 years.

According to historians, these engravings are from different historical eras: The large human figures with ambiguous faces represent the Neolithic age, whereas the Chalcolithic age can be traced through goat and animal drawings. Iron Age drawings include warriors with their bayonets, along with leopards, ostriches and palm trees. The famous drawings of horses pulling carts date back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC or possibly earlier.

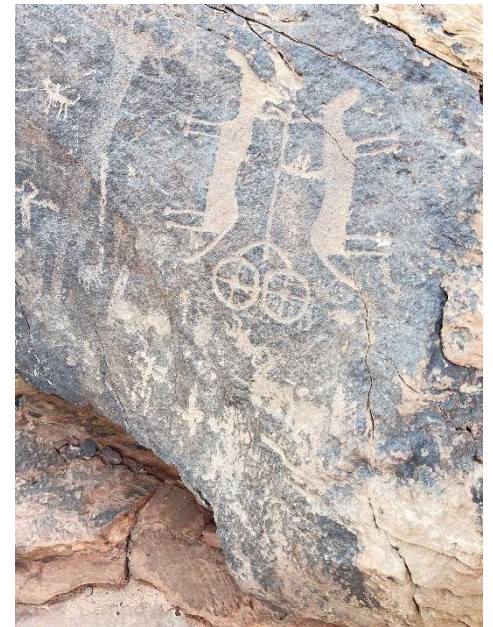


The reception staff at the Umm Senman Mountain Visitor Centre were delighted to see us and provided us with a brief introductory walk around the centre. I was rather surprised to find an exhibit suggesting that the boomerang might actually have been invented in Saudi Arabia evidenced by rock engravings depicting hunting scenes from the Neolithic era using curved tools similar to the Australian boomerang.

It was subsequently confirmed that these engravings dated them as older than the Australian boomerang models. The publication concludes that 'The rock engravings, which depict various forms of the boomerang, serve as undeniable evidence that the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula possessed knowledge of this tool long ago'. Anyway, if it is not true then it is a good story.



Afterwards we were given a free rein and allowed to roam the site of our own free will. I particularly wanted to see the picture of the ancient bicycle (which was in fact a chariot) but this was on another site a short distance away ...so they took us there. Such amazing hospitality ....this was one visit that I shall never ever forget.



## TABUK



Nestled in the northwest corner of Saudi Arabia, Tabuk has a rich history with archaeological evidence suggesting human habitation as early as the Bronze Age as well as links to the Nabataean civilisation similar to that found in Hegra in AlUla and Petra in Jordan. The city is significant as it is where Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) held his final military expedition.

Tabuk was the site of the Expedition of Tabuk in 630 AD which was led by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and aimed at confronting the Byzantine Empire. The event is immortalized in the Quran (Surah At-Tawba), and the city preserves mosques marking the Prophet's stay and the momentous revelation about the change of prayer direction (Qibla) at Al Walidayn Mosque.

The city has a strong Ottoman influence with the construction of Tabuk Castle in the 16th century to safeguard the Hajj route. Historically, Tabuk is famous for its olive groves, rose farms and fruit orchards as well as dramatic mountain ranges like Jabal Al Lawz.

Today, Tabuk is the bustling capital of the Tabuk Province and serves as the crucial gateway to the ambitious NEOM mega project along the Red Sea coast.



The weather is milder than the rest of Saudi Arabia and visitors are drawn to explore its layered past through restored forts and historic mosques as well as modern landmarks such as the iconic Water Tower. Tabuk is deeply rooted in Islamic traditions but also has a vibrant local culture that reflects the Bedouin heritage of its people. The people of Tabuk are known for their hospitality and warmth, welcoming visitors with open arms.



### Tabuk Castle (Tabuk Ottoman Fort)



Dominating the old town centre, Tabuk Castle stands as a powerful symbol of the region's strategic importance. While foundations may trace back to a much earlier era, the present structure is primarily an Ottoman fortification dating back to 1559 with significant rebuilding and expansion ever since then. Its primary purpose was safeguarding the Hajj pilgrimage route to Mecca.

The castle features high defensive walls, sturdy circular watchtowers at its corners and a central courtyard. Excavations within the fort grounds have unearthed artifacts dating back to the mid-16th century BC. Legend suggests that Moses (Prophet Musa in Islam) resided here during his exodus from Egypt with the Israelites, but this is not generally accepted ... although it is a nice story.

The castle was meticulously restored in the 1990s and now functions as a museum although there was not an awful lot on display during my visit. I can only wonder that the 'Islamic artifacts, ancient inscriptions, traditional costumes and weaponry' are to be found elsewhere..... probably the Tabuk Regional Museum which is listed as my next stop



## Tabuk Regional Museum and Hejaz Railway Station

Located adjacent to each other, these two sites offer complementary insights into Tabuk's history. The Tabuk Regional Museum is a modern facility which chronicles the region's evolution from prehistoric times through the rise of Islam to the modern Saudi state. The guidebook offers much to tempt and excite you, but the place was closed on arrival.

Behind the museum stands Hejaz Railway Station (Tabuk Station) which was built by the Ottoman Empire between 1900 and 1908 as part of Sultan Abdulhamid II's ambitious project to link Damascus to Medina (and eventually Mecca). The station complex included administrative buildings, workshops, water towers, and residential quarters.

Its history was cut short by World War I and targeted attacks during the Arab Revolt (famously involving T.E. Lawrence). Although the railway never reached its full potential, the restored station buildings and a preserved steam locomotive (which was not present on this visit) stand as monuments to a rather short-lived, engineering feat.



## Al Walidayn Mosque

Steeped in Islamic history, Al Walidayn Mosque (also known as the Mosque of the Two Qiblas) is believed to mark the very spot where the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his companions camped during the preparations for the Expedition to Tabuk in 630 AD. Its unique name originates from the moment in Islamic history when the Prophet received revelation (Quran 2:144) instructing the change of the qibla (direction of prayer) from Jerusalem to the Kaaba in Mecca.

Tradition says that during the prayer, he immediately turned from facing north (Jerusalem) to south (Mecca), and the congregation followed suit mid-prayer. To commemorate this event, the original mosque was uniquely constructed with two mihrabs (prayer niches) with each one facing each qibla. While the current structure is more recent, it faithfully preserves the location and incorporates two qiblas.





### Al Tawba Mosque

The Al Tawba Mosque, which was being refurbished on my visit, holds immense religious significance as the site where the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) spent time during the Expedition to Tabuk in 630 AD. It was during this campaign, aimed at confronting the Byzantine Empire, that Surah At-Tawba (The Repentance), the ninth and final chapter of the Quran revealed in Medina, was largely communicated to the Prophet.

The Prophet led prayers and addressed the Muslim army from this location and, while the original structure has been replaced by a modern and more spacious mosque, it meticulously preserves the exact location of the Prophet's prayers. This context gives the mosque its powerful name, which directly links it to the themes of repentance as emphasised in the surah.



### King Abdulaziz Grand Mosque

I had already seen two mosques today, but I thought I had better add the King Abdulaziz Grand Mosque to my list as it is the largest and most prominent mosque in Tabuk as well as being a striking landmark of modern Islamic architecture and a central hub for the city's religious life. Named after the founder of Saudi Arabia, its grand scale reflects Tabuk's importance.

The mosque was completed relatively recently and seamlessly blends traditional Najdi architectural elements with modern touches such as the magnificent central dome and towering minaret. The vast prayer hall, adorned with intricate calligraphy and elegant chandeliers, can accommodate thousands of worshippers at a time.

Beyond its primary function for daily prayers and the large Friday congregations, the mosque complex also serves as a centre for Islamic education and community gatherings. Its illuminated façade, especially at night, creates a breathtaking spectacle, making it not only a place of worship but also an iconic symbol of contemporary Tabuk and a must-see for its architectural beauty.





## Tabuk Water Tower and Park

A distinctive symbol of modern Tabuk's development is the symbolic Tabuk Water Tower which is a prominent 280-foot (85-metre) high structure functioning as a crucial piece of urban infrastructure. The tower functions as a water reservoir ensuring a stable supply and consistent pressure for the surrounding areas.

The design is unique, and the tower resembles a traditional clay water jug (ibrik) capped with a stylized representation of the Saudi royal emblem. The tower does have a viewing platform and a panoramic glass elevator, but I could not find anything to suggest that the viewing platform or the advertised restaurant were open.

The tower's base is integrated within the expansive Tabuk Park (King Fahd Garden which offers families and residents a welcome escape from the city. The park features lush, landscaped gardens, shaded walking pathways, children's play areas and recreational spaces. Unfortunately, I was hard pushed to find anything more about the park other than tell you that it is worth visiting.



## Rays Lake



Rays Lake (also spelled Raes or Raas) is described as a surprising and picturesque oasis amidst the predominantly arid landscape surrounding Tabuk. The lake is located roughly 20 miles (35 kilometres) southeast of the city centre and described as an artificial freshwater lake which was created as part of agricultural drainage projects in the Wadi Dam area.

Google maps gave no hint that we would be off-roading to get to the lake and our previous experience with the same hire car in Riyadh would have been enough to put us off. We had come this far, so thought we might as well carry on which is exactly how we ended up getting stuck in the sand in the middle of nowhere in the blazing heat of the midday sun.

I am now acquainted, courtesy of the internet, with numerous ways of dealing with getting stuck in the sand but let me tell you that none of them worked until we were eventually rescued by a local with a 4x4 and a rope who managed to free us from our predicament. He also insisted that we really must see the lake and that he would take us there in his car.



The lake is famous for its natural springs, turquoise waters and lush banks which have 'become a haven for birdlife, attracting various species and enhancing its natural appeal'. Unfortunately, on this occasion, the lake seems to have evaporated, and this 'most popular and Instagram-worthy natural escape' is a reminder that nature has a really good sense of humour.



## DUBA, AL WAJH AND UMLUJ



### Duba

Duba is situated on the northeastern shores of the Red Sea in the Tabuk Province, serving as a vital maritime gateway to northwestern Saudi Arabia. The city of Duba is historically significant as a trading and pilgrimage port balancing its commercial importance with its potential as a future tourist destination. The town's corniche offers serene sea views against a backdrop of the rugged Hijazi mountains,

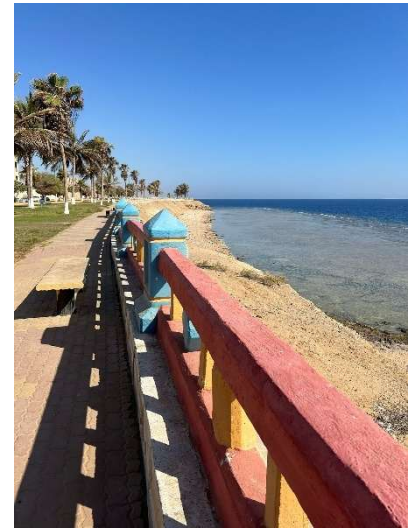
Duba's strategic location places it close to some major development projects including the futuristic NEOM megacity. Duba has plenty to offer including mangrove forests, nearby volcanos and the Red Sea coastline ideal for diving and snorkelling and potential for further development. Duba is poised for transformation and is definitely a place to watch.... remember you heard it here.



## Al Wajh

Al Wajh (or Al Wahj) is a coastal town situated 186 miles (300 kilometres) south of Dubai in the Tabuk Province. This town was once a critical Ottoman port and a lifeline for Hejaz pilgrims and offers much evidence of both with considerable work being undertaken to embrace carefully managed tourism while preserving its unique heritage and ecological riches.

This coastal town has an authentic charm and a sleepy vibe with a coastline offering secluded coves and pristine beaches. The area is part of the ambitious Red Sea Project eco-tourism zone, promising sustainable luxury while protecting delicate ecosystems. Nearby islands are sanctuaries for fishing, seabirds, turtles and eco-tourism and can be accessed using local boat trips.



## Al Wajh Castle

Perched strategically on a rocky hill overlooking the Red Sea, Al Wajh Castle stands as a weathered sentinel of Ottoman power and Hejazi resilience. The castle was built in the early 19th century during the Ottoman Empire's consolidation of the Hijaz coast. The building was intended to safeguard the vital port of Al Wajh from maritime threats as well as overseeing the lucrative pilgrimage and trade routes.



The castle's robust, square-plan design features high stone walls, corner watchtowers and a single fortified gate which is typical of classical Ottoman military architecture. Inside, the layout reveals barracks, storerooms and a central courtyard where soldiers once drilled. The castle's elevated position offered sweeping views of the neighbourhood.

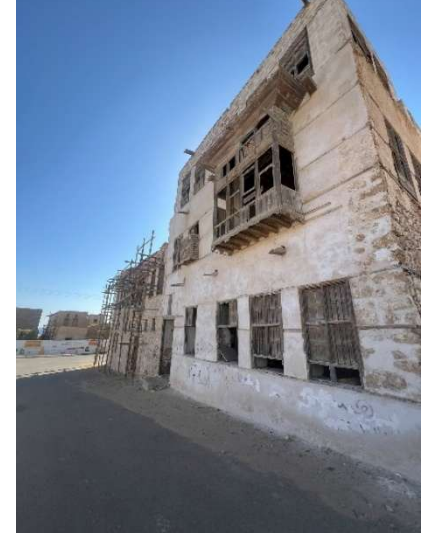


## Al Balad District



Al Balad (literally meaning Old Town) refers to Al Wajh's historic old town which sits right on the Red Sea and was the original centre of Al Wajh before modern Al Wajh expanded inland. The old town developed primarily during the Ottoman era (18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries), and its labyrinth of alleyways are lined with houses made of coral stone and lime plaster with beautiful old rawashin (projecting wooden balconies).

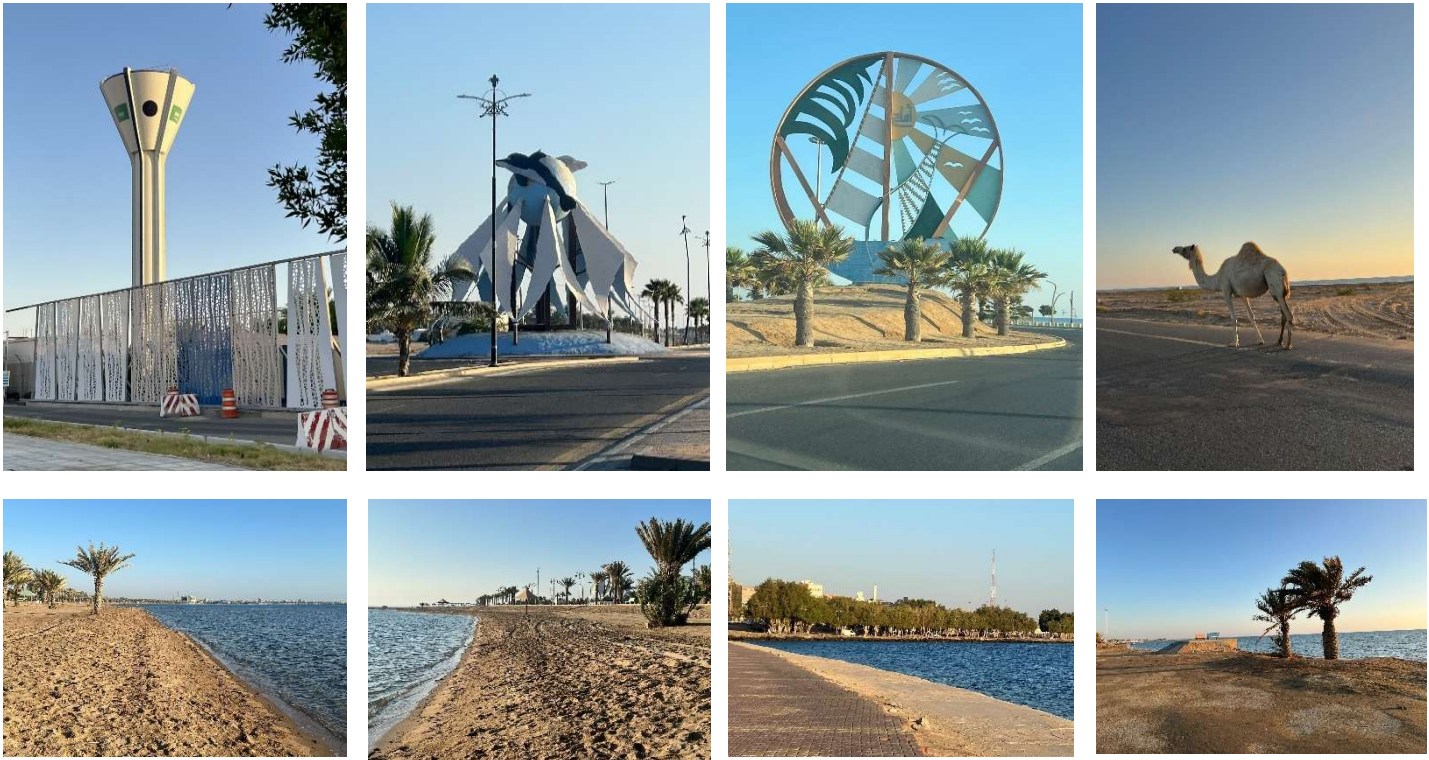
Today, most of the buildings are abandoned and crumbling following years of neglect. However, recent heritage conservation projects are underway to restore key buildings and revive this living museum to something like its former glory. Just walking through Al Balad today is a journey through the rich history of the area and well worth the stopover on your journey along the coastline.



## Umluj

Umluj is a capital town, and a coastal paradise situated 90 miles (150 kilometres) south of Al Wajh on the coastal road heading towards Jeddah. The area is often hyped as the 'Maldives of Saudi Arabia' and it is famous for its white sand beaches, clear turquoise water, and hundreds of untouched islands surrounded by coral reefs, sea turtles, dolphins and fishing boats.

The mainland coastline consists of long, empty beaches backed by dramatic volcanic peaks. Umluj town provides authentic hospitality with seafront restaurants, small guesthouses and welcoming locals. The area is a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's Red Sea tourism initiative but, for now, a sanctuary for adventurers and solitude-seekers looking for a glimpse of coastal Arabia at its most beautiful.

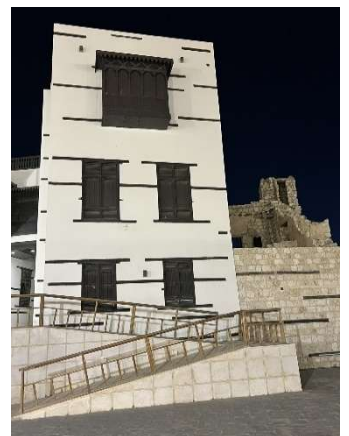


## YANBU



Midway between Jeddah and Doha, is the city of Yanbu or Yanbu Al Bahr meaning Yanbu by the Sea. The city was founded over 2500 years ago as a spice-trading outpost and later a vital Ottoman port. Today, Yanbu is a major port, an industrial zone and a coastal city. It gained notoriety as the 1916 landing site of T.E. Lawrence (famously known as Lawrence of Arabia) during the Arab Revolt against Ottoman Turkish rule.

The modern city is dominated by Yanbu Industrial City which is one of the kingdom's colossal oil refining and manufacturing hubs. However, Yanbu manages to mix heavy industry with historic charm as evidenced in the historic core of the city offering traditional houses, narrow alleyways and ancient Ottoman buildings as well as incredible beaches and a well-maintained corniche bustling with locals at sunset.



Old Yanbu isn't as restored or commercialised as Diriyah in Riyadh or Al Balad in Jeddah, and that is certainly part of its appeal. The place still feels authentic, like a place where history hasn't been dressed up for social media. If you're genuinely interested in Hijazi architecture or simply want to walk streets with real heritage under your feet, then this is the place for you.



## Night Market



The Night Market in Yanbu, also known as Souq Al Lail, is one of the city's oldest and most atmospheric marketplaces. The market is situated near the historic port and was once a bustling hub where fishermen, merchants and pilgrims traded goods long into the night... hence the name. Nowadays, the night market is a fusion of traditional commerce and local culture.

Stalls line narrow alleys, selling everything from spices and textiles to electronics and local crafts. The market's charm lies in its unpolished authenticity with elderly vendors selling dates, kids running between stalls and residents chatting over cups of tea. Recent restorations have included improved lighting and signage without losing its historical character.



## Old Town

Yanbu's Old Town (Yanbu Al Balad) is the historical heart of the city, and arguably one of Saudi Arabia's most underrated heritage districts. It predates the oil era by centuries and once served as a vital Red Sea port for pilgrims, traders and naval forces. The district sits right on the coast, with a tight grid of narrow alleys, coral stone houses and Ottoman-era architecture.

Around the area, there are a number of historic mosques and merchant houses in various stages of restoration. Many homes have

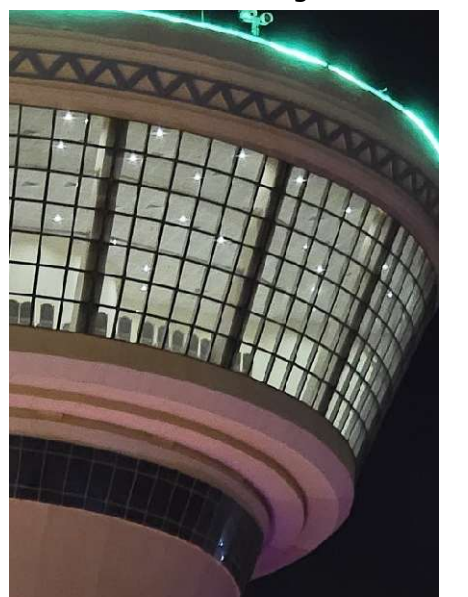
traditional rawashin (projecting wooden balconies) and the area is slowly becoming a focal point for heritage tourism. One standout is the Lawrence of Arabia House, where T.E. Lawrence is said to have lived during World War I. The building is now being converted into a museum.



### Water Tower

The Yanbu Water Tower is one of the city's key landmarks close to the waterfront near the Old Town. The tower was built in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and is a symbol of Yanbu's transition from a modest coastal port to a city balancing heritage and industry. The tower's design is functional yet striking and very reminiscent of classic water tower designs found across Saudi Arabia.

While the interior is not open to the public, the area around the tower has been developed into a popular public space. During national celebrations, the tower is often illuminated with coloured lights and forms part of the city's decorative displays. It serves as a navigational landmark for locals and fishermen and a visual anchor for visitors exploring the nearby corniche or Old Town.



## KING ABDULLAH ECONOMIC CITY



Travelling from Yanbu to Jeddah and the next stop is King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) which is a flagship megaproject. The city, along with another five economic cities, is a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. The first stage of the city was completed in 2010 and the whole city was planned to be fully completed by 2020.... although it is a long way away from reaching that ambition.

The city is positioned 60 miles (100 kilometres) north of Jeddah on the Red Sea coast. The city is undergoing significant rebuilding but its position on the Red Sea makes it an obvious choice as a future holiday destination. The city is served by the Al Haramain High Speed line allowing easy access to the rest of Saudi Arabia as well as Medina and Mecca.



**Next stop Jeddah.....**

## Chapter 4: Jeddah



I visited Jeddah in June 2022, January 2024 and June 2025 and found it to be totally different from Riyadh.... perhaps less sophisticated but more cosmopolitan. Jeddah is a vibrant city on the Red Sea coast of Saudi Arabia which is known as the 'Gateway to Mecca.' Jeddah's history dates back over 2,500 years when it started as a modest fishing village with its coastline location making it a vital hub for trade and pilgrimage.

Jeddah's history as a trade and pilgrimage hub has made it a melting pot of cultures. This diversity is reflected in its architecture, cuisine and festivals. The city's historic district, Al Balad, features traditional coral-stone buildings and intricate wooden balconies, showcasing the ingenuity of its people in adapting to the coastal environment. In 2014, this historic district was confirmed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Jeddah is a popular tourist destination because of its rich history, cultural diversity, modern attractions and unique geographical location. Jeddah Corniche and its stunning waterfront promenade are major attraction offering opportunities for swimming, diving and snorkelling benefitting from clear waters and vibrant marine life.

As part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 plan, Jeddah is undergoing significant development to enhance its tourism infrastructure, including new hotels, resorts, and entertainment venues. In addition, Jeddah is well connected, by air, with King Abdulaziz International Airport serving as a major hub for international and domestic flights.

Each time I visit Jeddah, I am amazed at the pace of development as a first-class tourist destination. It is a shame that I cannot say the same about Jeddah Tower (see below) which, in spite of assurances to the contrary, looked exactly the same in June 2025 as it did on my previous visits. There may be other signs of advancement, but the actual height of the tower was certainly not one of them!!!



## King Abdulaziz International Airport (JED)



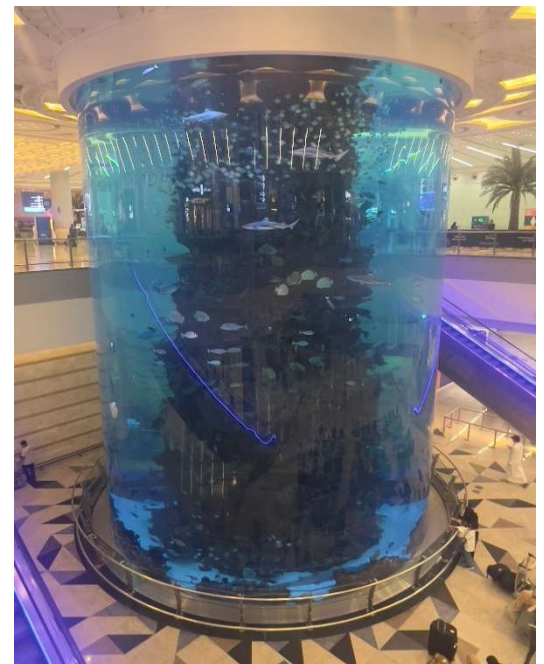
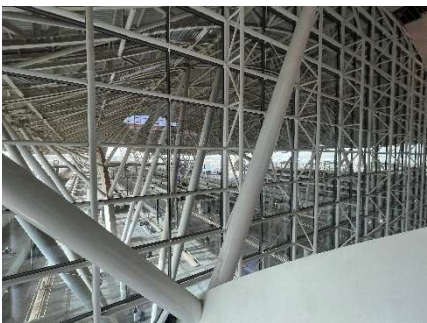
I arrived safely in Jeddah, but my luggage did not, so I have some time while I hang around for the next inbound flight from Doha. King Abdulaziz International Airport (JED), commonly known as Jeddah Airport, is a major aviation hub in Saudi Arabia, serving the cities of Jeddah and Mecca. The airport opened in 1981 and was named after King Abdulaziz, the founder of Saudi Arabia.

The airport is the third-largest in the kingdom by land area and the busiest in terms of passenger traffic, handling over 42 million passengers annually. The airport has grown significantly since 1981 and connects to the Haramain High Speed Railway, providing direct links to Mecca and Medina. The airport also houses a 46 foot (16 metre) tall aquarium filled with Red Sea marine life.

Finally, King Abdulaziz International Airport is home to a 450-foot (136 metre) high air traffic control (ATC) tower along with a 30-foot (9 metres) antenna which makes it one of the tallest ATCs in the world.....I am not sure whether you have to count the antenna to be a world record breaker but I do wonder why you need such a high tower when the surrounding area is completely flat.



Time	Airline	Flight	Destination	Gate	Status	
15:10	flyadeal	F3 479	YANBU	116D	BOARDING	
15:10	flyadeal	F3 493	TABUK	120	BOARDING	
15:35	flynas	XY 405	JEDDAH	118		
15:45	flyadeal	F3 310	JEDDAH	116B		
16:00	16:35	Asagad	SV 1115	JEDDAH	115	DELAY 35 m
16:30	Asagad	SV 1565	NEOM	116		
17:00	China Eastern	U 8995	RIVADH	118		
17:05	CALF AIR	GF 5910	ABHA	120		
17:20	Etihad	ET 4567	JAZAN	119		
17:55	flynas	XY 738				



## Jeddah Tower (Under Construction)



Jeddah Tower previously known as Kingdom Tower, is a skyscraper construction project underway in Jeddah. It is planned to be the first 1 km (3,280 feet) tall building and was intended to be the world's tallest building or structure upon completion, standing 180 metres taller than the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. The tower will feature a mix of luxury apartments, offices, hotels, and observation decks.

The building's design incorporates sleek, modern lines and innovative engineering solutions, including a reinforced concrete core and glass facade, aimed at resisting the region's extreme weather conditions. Construction of Jeddah Tower began in 2013, with progress slowing at times due to financial and logistical challenges.

Construction was halted in 2018 with only 50 of the 157 floors completed and it remains questionable whether, when completed, it will be the tallest building given other contenders (planned and under way) including another one intended for Dubai Creek. My latest visit, and recent reports, suggest that the project is now moving forward but there are a few contenders for the tallest building beyond the planning stage.



## King Fahad's Fountain

I never thought I could get so excited about a fountain, but I am sitting on the rooftop of the Culture Cafe and absolutely mesmerised by this sight which can be seen from across the whole of Jeddah. King Fahad's Fountain is the highest fountain in the world reaching a height of 312 metres high which is a whopping 1024 feet..... that's taller than the Shard in London!

The fountain is located on the Jeddah Corniche and was inaugurated in 1985 and named after the King of Saudi Arabia. The fountain is set in the Red Sea, with its water shooting up in powerful jets at a speed of 375 kph which is approximately 233 mph. The fountain is illuminated by over 500 spotlights, making it a stunning sight both during the day and at night. Wow!



## Jeddah Corniche

The Jeddah Corniche is a coastal area in Jeddah offering a scenic waterfront view along the Red Sea. It stretches over 20 Miles (approximately 32 kilometres), making it a popular destination for locals and tourists.

It is well-known for its picturesque walking paths, green spaces, recreational areas and the opportunity to watch the King Fahad Fountain at close quarters as well as numerous art installations along the Corniche, with sculptures that give the area a vibrant, cultural touch. The area is also lined with various dining options, ranging from local eateries to international restaurants, allowing visitors to enjoy a meal with stunning sea views.



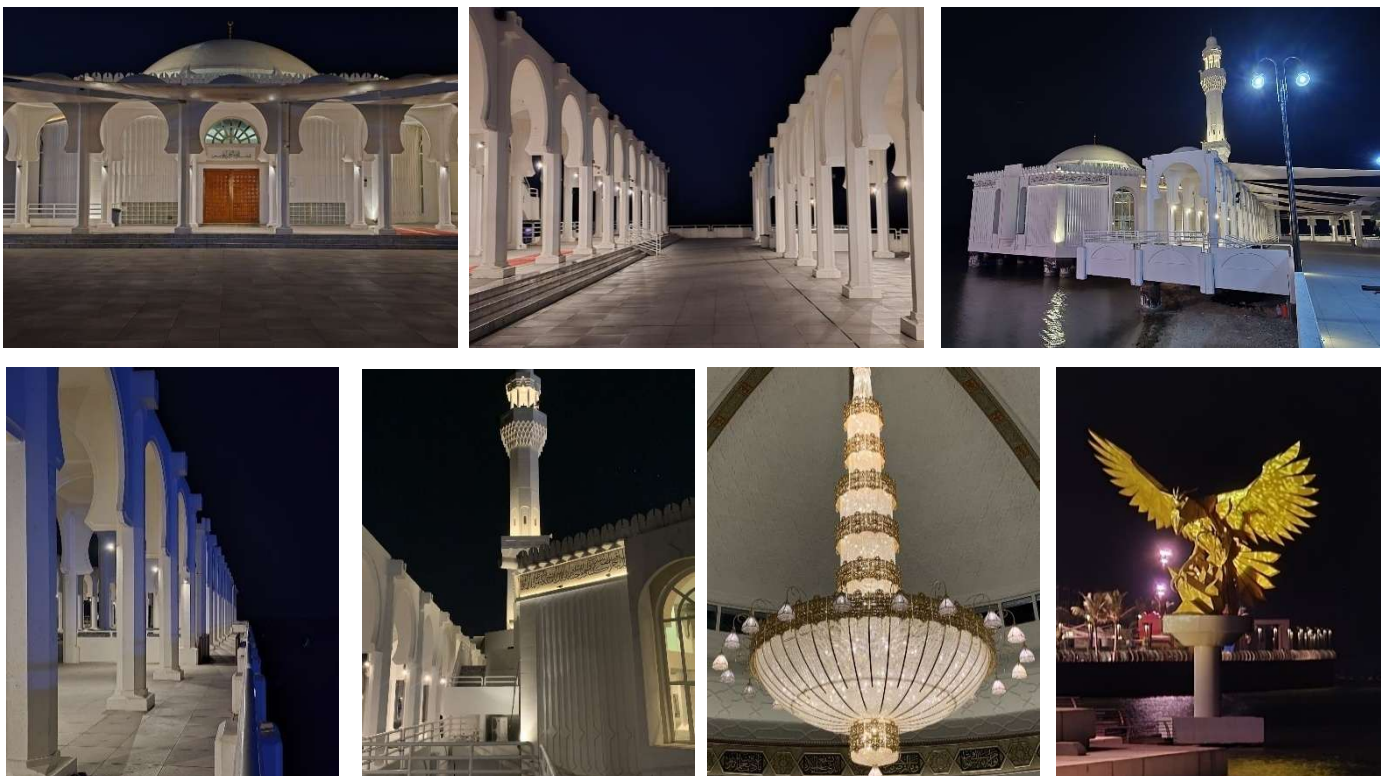
### Al Rahmah Mosque (Floating Mosque)



The Al Rahmah Mosque, also known as the Floating Mosque, is a prominent Islamic landmark situated on the edge of the Red Sea. Its unique architectural design gives the illusion that it is floating on water during high tide. The mosque was built in 1985, the mosque features a large white dome and a single minaret, blending traditional Islamic architecture with modern elements.

The mosque is a popular destination for both worshippers and tourists, offering stunning views of the Red Sea and a serene atmosphere for prayer and reflection. Its location on the Corniche, a scenic coastal area, makes it easily accessible and a key part of Jeddah's cultural and religious landscape. Built on stilts over the Red Sea, this mosque offers breathtaking views, especially at sunrise and sunset.

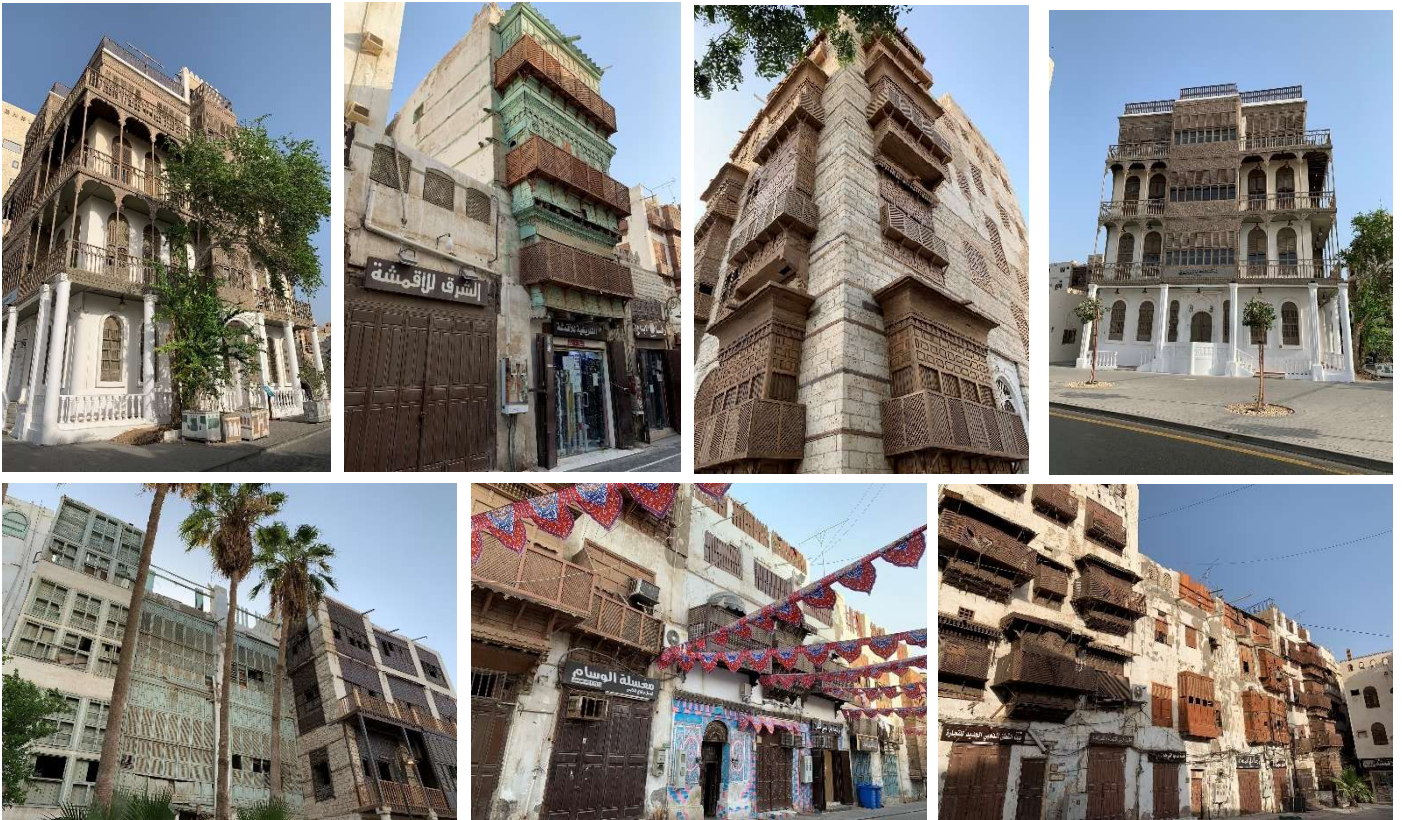
Al Rahmah Mosque can accommodate hundreds of worshippers and is particularly known for its peaceful ambiance, especially during sunset. It also serves as a symbol of Islamic heritage and architectural innovation, attracting visitors from around the world. The mosque's design and setting highlight the harmonious relationship between faith, nature, and modernity



## Al Balad (Historic Jeddah)

Al Balad meaning 'The Town' is the historic heart of the city and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Al Balad dates back over two thousand years and served as the centre of Jeddah's trade and commerce. It was the gateway for pilgrims arriving by sea to perform Hajj in Mecca and is well known for its rich cultural and architectural heritage including its traditional coral stone buildings adorned with intricately carved wooden balconies designed to provide ventilation and privacy.

It is evident that Al Balad has undergone considerable restoration efforts to preserve its cultural significance and promote tourism. Visitors can explore its vibrant markets, narrow walkways and experience the warmth of Saudi hospitality. The district is particularly known for its lively atmosphere. People gather in its narrow streets, where they can enjoy local food and experience the old-world charm of the area offering a rare fusion of historical, cultural and architectural elements showcasing the heritage of the region.



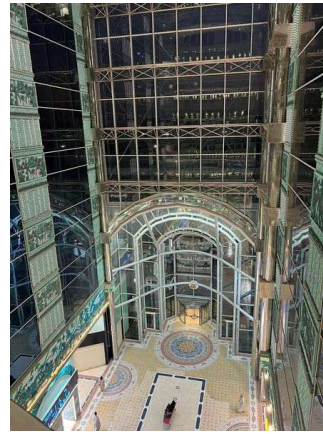
## Oasis Mall

The Oasis Mall, also known as the Mahmoud Said Mall is a prominent shopping destination in Jeddah, known for its striking architecture and diverse retail offerings. The mall originally housed high-end boutiques, including luxury jewellery stores, perfume shops, cosmetics stores, and fashion outlets catering to all ages.

It opened in 2003 as a pioneering luxury shopping destination costing £116 million pounds to build which included 42,000 square metres of mosaic marble and a stunning stained-glass ceiling. The mall closed in 2009 when it was marooned by the construction of a new road bridge causing most of the tenants to relocate to other Jeddah malls.

After years of abandonment, the mall reopened as a wholesale shopping club offering budget friendly local brands and bulk purchases regaining customers with events like shows and performances. Its iconic architecture is well worth a visit..... perhaps before it closes for good.





## City Walk



City Walk is a seasonal adventure park offering a range of attractions and entertainment aimed at families but of interest to anyone visiting the city. The park is located in the Ash Shati district alongside the Corniche. The park opened in 2018 and is a key component in the city's £15 billion regeneration initiative.



The park includes entertainments as well as themes zones including Tomorrow Land, Fantasy Land and Adventure Land as well as themed rides, theatrical performance, interactive art, sensory experiences and relaxing botanical experience as well as ample food outlets and other entertainment which changes each year.





## Jeddah Park Mall



The Jeddah Park Mall is the newest and largest shopping mall in Jeddah offering a diverse range of shops, technology, cuisine and culture as well as a cinema and an amusement park. The mall opened in 2017 Jeddah Park Mall, opened in 2017 to serve the rapidly growing residential communities in the northern part of the city.

The mall spans approximately 430 square feet (40000 square metres) and houses over 100 retail, 40 food and beverage outlets and a 10-screen cinema complex as well as an entertainment centre, open air park and a large indoor theme park with rides and attractions for all the family. If shopping is your particular pleasure, then this place will not disappoint.



# Chapter 5: Southwest Saudi and the Red Sea



## TAIF

The city of Taif is situated in the southwest area of Saudi Arabia. In terms of population, it is the eighth most populated city in Saudi Arabia. It is located 6200 feet (or 1880 metres) above sea level which makes it a popular destination in summer although bloody cold the rest of the year. Taif is a popular retreat during the summer months and is often known as the 'Summer Capital.'

The city itself is desperately trying to drag itself into the 21st century and the tourist board struggles to identify sufficient tourist attractions other than a recently opened mall. The people of Taif are not overly friendly (unlike the rest of Saudi Arabia) and the roads are full of boy racers until the early hours of the morning.

The city is alternatively known as the City of Roses and is famed for its fragrant roses and perfume factories. The Taif Rose perfume is particularly famous and outrageously expensive since it takes around 40,000 rose flowers to produce one 10g bottle of perfume. Taif is also known for pomegranates, grapes, figs and honey. The mountains outside of Taif are a big attraction to the area and offer some beautiful views.

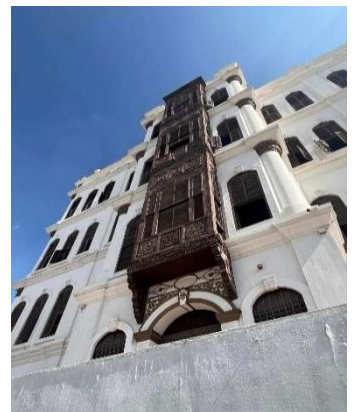


## Shubra Palace



Posters advertising Shubra Palace can be found all over Taif and the picture of the palace features heavily in all of their marketing blurb. The palace served as a royal residence until 1995 when it was transformed into a heritage museum. It was originally constructed in 1858 as a two-storey houses and subsequently rebuilt in 1905 as a royal residence.

The palace was used by King Abdulaziz as a summer residence and was where he died in 1953. His sons, Prince Nawwaf and Prince Talal were also born there. Regardless of the history of the place, it is unclear whether the heritage museum has ever been viewed by the public and many reviews talk about seeing it from the outside but having no idea of what the inside looks like. Maybe one day I will add some pictures.



## Strawberry Farm



The Strawberry Farm is certainly worth a visit if only because it's particularly hard to describe exactly what it's all about other than to say it is strawberry focused. The farm is a vegetable potpourri of anything to do with strawberries including picking strawberries, making strawberry jam, strawberry ice cream and strawberry scented candles.

Other than that, you will find goats, chickens, turtles, lizards and flamingos as well as fairytale houses .... although I have no idea what these have to do with strawberries? Next door is the Berry Farm featuring ducks, turkeys, tropical fish, Snow White and a telephone box. Needless to say, I have no idea what the overlying theme is here, but I am not sure it merits the additional admission costs.





### Awaliv Revolving Restaurant

The revolving restaurant is found on the 29th floor of the Awaliv International Hotel situated in the centre of Taif. The reviews are contradictory and mostly ambivalent with the best highlighting 'the 29th-floor revolving restaurant where you can order local and international dishes while enjoying panoramic city and mountain views'. Given the paucity of tourist attractions, it would be remiss of me to not offer this as a suggestion!!!!



### Al Rudaf Park (by night)



I am guessing that most people have no idea what the name of this park is because in various guidebooks it is described alternatively as Al Rudaf Park, Al Ruddaff Park, Ar Ruddaf Park and Arruddaf Park. My own interpretation of the name is based on the premise that in the middle of the park there is a big lit up sign which proudly states, 'I ❤️ RUDDAF.'

Anyway, I digress when I should be telling you all about this place which is a beautiful park situated to the south of the city and NOT in the centre of the city as some guidebooks suggest.....here we go again. Regardless of its name or its location, it is a lovely place and even more lovely at night when you can watch the 'dancing fountains' although you will be considerably underwhelmed if you compare it to those in Dubai.



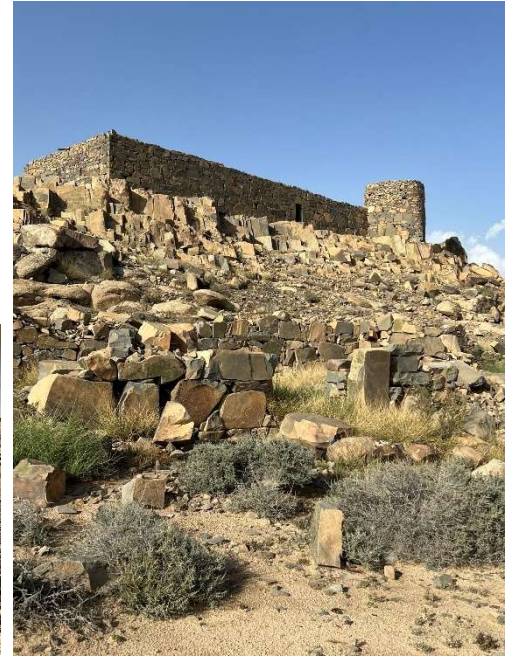
### Rose Plantations



Taif is famous for its rose gardens, particularly the Taif Rose (*Rosa damascena trigtinipetala*), which is used to produce rose oil and other products. The rose oil produced in Taif is highly sought after in the global perfume industry and is a key ingredient in many high-end fragrances. Visiting a rose factory to see the process is certainly recommended.

## Al Arfa'a Fort

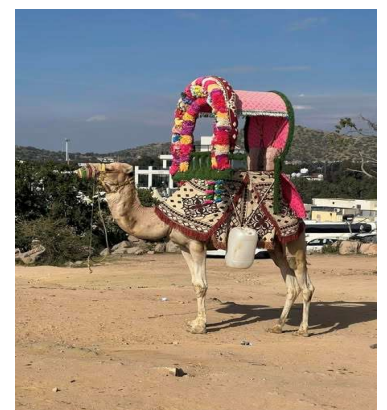
Al Arfa'a Fort (also known as the Al Arfa'a Castle) is located in the northeast of Taif and is said to be one of the most famous forts in the Kingdom. The fort was built in the 13th century on the Al Arfa'a Mountain to ensure commerce and pilgrimage routes remained safe for rifle nomadic tribes and bandits. Nowadays, the fort is busy keeping out tourists as it was completely fenced off on the day that I visited .... so that was a complete waste of the 45-mile round trip from Taif.



## Ash Shafa and the Hejaz Mountains

If the city itself is not quite to your liking, then you can always take a trip outside and enjoy some of the beautiful scenery as well as the Hejaz Mountain and the Jabal Daka which is the highest mountain in the area and affords excellent views when not blanketed in fog. At other times of the year, it is rain and snow and watch out for the fog because it comes down pretty quickly.

Unfortunately, such weather conditions do not deter the reckless behaviour of the local boy racers one bit. Regardless, the roads are quite passable with plenty of shops and coffee places where you can take a break and admire the view. You will also find plenty of accommodation if you fancy the idea of spending your night halfway up a mountain.



## AL BAHAH

Al Bahah is a city in southwestern Saudi Arabia located in the Sarawat Mountains and is one of the countries' prime tourist attractions. The area is known for its scenic mountains, lush forests, and deep cultural heritage. The city is surrounded by more than forty forests and enjoys a moderate climate, so it serves as a popular retreat for those looking to escape the intense heat of other areas of Saudi Arabia.



## Raghadan Forest Park



Raghadan Forest Park is one of Al Bahah's most popular natural attractions, known for its lush greenery, walking trails, picnic spaces, cool climate and breathtaking mountain views. Located at an elevation of 5600 feet (1700 metres) this park is a refreshing retreat, especially in the summer months when temperatures are significantly lower than in other parts of Saudi Arabia.



## Prince Hussam Park

Prince Hussam Park is located near Raghadan Park in the centre of Al Baha city. It is a vibrant recreational area known for its modern facilities and stunning landscaping, a tranquil escape with its colourful flower beds and well-maintained lawns as well as walking trails, cycling paths and shaded seating areas, making it a great place for exercise and relaxation.



## Al Malad Castle (Twin Fortress)



Al Malad Castle, also known as the Twin Fortress, is famous for its twin stone towers, which once served as watchtowers and defensive structures. Built from local stone and clay, the castle is an example of traditional Arabian military architecture, designed to protect the area from invasions and tribal conflicts. The fortress is undergoing restoration work to reinforce the walls and ensure the stability of the towers and archways.

The building is thought to be over 400 years and was built centuries ago by two brothers as a defensive stronghold to protect local communities from external threats. The castle is located on elevated ground offering clear views of the locality. Local authorities and heritage organisations have worked to maintain and restore the structure.

In the meantime, visitors have a free reign across the site with plentiful opportunities to explore its thick stone walls, narrow staircases and strategic vantage points as well as panoramic views of the surrounding mountains and valleys from the upper floors. Inside is a treasure trove of historical paraphernalia ranging from guns and swords to gramophone players and a very old (and very rare?) copy of the Koran.

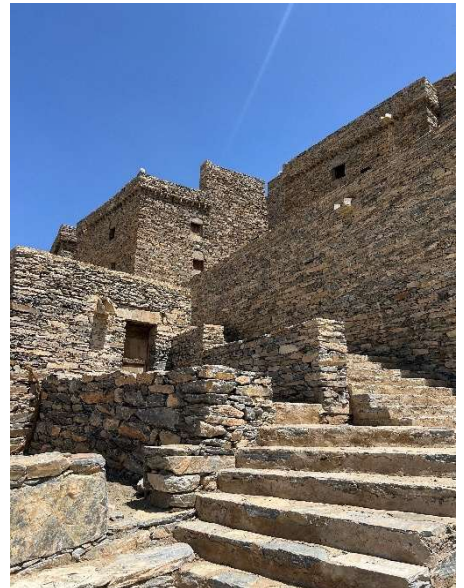




### **Dhee Ayn (or Thee Ain) Village**

Dhee Ayn, also known as Thee Ain Village, is a stunning 400-year-old heritage village built on a white marble hill close to Al Bahah. The village is famous for its ancient stone houses, picturesque setting, and historical significance. The structures, built using hand-cut stones, are arranged in tiers, overlooking a lush valley with natural springs and palm groves.

Similar villages can be found all over the region but many of them exist in a very poor state of repair as a result of more up to date building methods. Dhee Ayn was once a thriving trading and agricultural community, and today, it stands as a living museum, offering insight into traditional Arabian architecture and village life. The site is a UNESCO tentative heritage site and there are no admission charges.

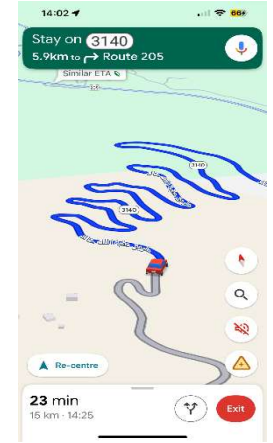


### **Jabal Shada (Shada Mountains)**

Jabal Shada, or Shada Mountains, is a breathtaking natural wonder in Al Bahah which is famous for its 763-million-year-old rock formations, as well as caves, wildlife and hiking trails. The summit has an elevation of over 7200 feet (2200 metres) which means that it is nearly twice the size of Snowdon in Wales and Ben Nevis in Scotland.

In Saudi Arabia, this is one of the most striking geological formations in Saudi Arabia, with smooth, rounded granite peaks shaped by thousands of years of erosion. The cool climate, hiking trails and wildlife diversity make Jabal Shada a perfect destination for adventurers and nature lovers.

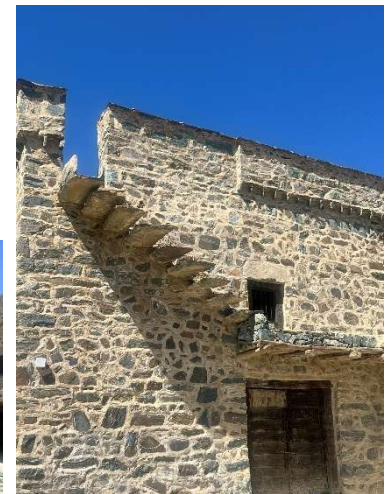
The area has recently gained attention as an eco-tourism site, with efforts being made to preserve its unique geology and biodiversity.



### Raqoush Palace

Raqoush Palace is something of a hidden historical gem situated on the slope of a towering hill in the village of Bani Saar, north of the city of Al Bahah. The construction dates back over 300 years and was built for Sheikh Ali bin Abdullah Al Raqoush, a prominent leader from the Al Zahrani tribe. The palace served as his residence as well as the centre of governance for the surrounding area.

The palace is known for its traditional Arabian architecture, featuring intricately designed wooden doors, carved stone walls and decorative window frames. I was warned that the place might be closed on arrival, but I was still able to access the outside of the building as well as the inner courtyard areas highlighting the traditional Najdi and Hejazi architecture.



### Prince Mashari Park

Prince Mashari Park is a serene retreat in Al Bahah nestled among the rolling hills and forests of the region. The park is well known for its scenic beauty, walking trails and well-maintained green spaces. The cool climate and fresh mountain air make it an ideal destination, especially in the hot summer months. One of the standout features is its spectacular panoramic views of the surrounding mountains and valleys.



## Waterfall Park (Khairah Forest Park)

A very short distance from Prince Mashari Park is the Waterfall Park (translated from the sign above the entrance) which elsewhere is referred to as the Khairah Forest Park and the Wadi Khaira Waterfall. Whatever the name, the park is located in a mountainous area of Al Bahah known for its stunning natural beauty, dense forests and rocky terrain.

Alongside the park there is an adjoining hanging bridge which takes over a waterfall which is described as seasonal, meaning it flows most actively in winter especially after heavy rains, creating a refreshing and picturesque setting. On my visit it was nothing more than a trickle so none of the 'sound of cascading water' highlighted in the tourist information blurb

On the other side of the hanging bridge, for those brave enough to make it and rich enough to pay for it, there a glass walkway situated above the waterfall offering a breathtaking view of the rocks and waterfall underneath. For those not wishing to have their breath taken away, I suggest you enjoy the park (free entrance) and buy yourself a coffee or an ice cream with the 70 SAR (about £7.00) you just saved.



## ABHA

If you think that Saudi Arabia is hot and dry, then you need to visit Abha which was positively freezing on my first visit in January 2024 when the temperature was recorded as -4 degrees Celsius which was colder than London and worthy of a few extra layers of clothes as well as scarves and gloves. My most recent visit in August 2025 was not much warmer and a good reminder that Saudi Arabia is not all desert and sun.

Abha is to be found close to the Red Sea in southwest Saudi Arabia. It is situated 7500 feet above sea level and known for its mountains, forests and fog. The views are spectacular and memorable for the snow which, in Saudi Arabia, is a real treat. This is where the Saudis come for their summer break to get away from the hot weather which is typical everywhere else in KSA.

## Asir National Park



Asir National Park (also listed as Aseer National Park) is nestled in the breathtaking Asir Mountains and is the Kingdom's oldest and one of its most spectacular protected areas. The national park covers 600 square miles (1,600 square kilometres) and offers a dramatic contrast to the typical desert imagery associated with Saudi Arabia. The park's elevation is especially pleasant during the summer months.

The park is renowned for its stunning natural beauty with lush juniper forests blanketing the higher slopes, providing a habitat for unique wildlife such as the Hamadryas baboon (and I saw plenty of these) and the critically endangered Arabian leopard (which I didn't see, and I am told that sightings are extremely rare). Deep valleys (wadis) and rugged mountain peaks are a feature of the area.

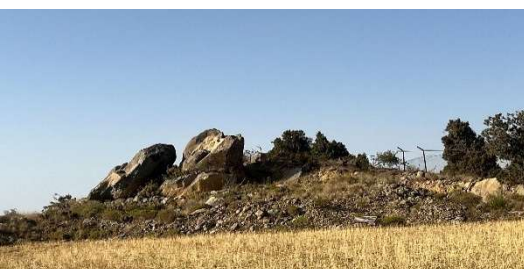
Traditional villages with distinctive, brightly painted stone houses are to be found across the landscape, showcasing the unique cultural heritage of the Asir region. There are plenty of ancient fortresses to explore and quite a lot of old deserted ruins which add to the interest and history of the area, I even found an old cable car but no mention of this in any of the local guidebooks.



### Soudah Mountain

Located at the heart of the Asir National Park, the Soudah Mountain is officially the kingdom's highest peak. The mountain is 9900 feet (3015 metres) high and wrapped in juniper forests and celebrated for its dramatic landscapes. Temperatures range from a mild 25 °C in the summer to -2°C in winter with snowcapped peaks attracting visitors from all over Saudi Arabia and beyond.

The Soudah Mountain is an integral part to the Saudi Vision 2030 involving considerable investment 'to create a world-class sustainable mountain tourism destination while preserving and enhancing the natural and cultural heritage of the national park'. The plan involves luxury resorts, nature experiences, adventure activities and cultural sites.



## Tabab Historical Village:



Nestled on a steep mountainside overlooking a deep valley wadi near Abha is the Tabab Historical Village also known as the Abo Noghta Castles in Tabab. The place was the political, cultural, and economic heart of the Aseer region during the First Saudi State (around 1744 to the early 1800s), under the rule of the Al Abu Noghta Al Mutahmi family.

The village's architecture is primarily from locally sourced stone and mud and the multi-story structures are seamlessly integrated into the cliff face, appearing almost as a natural extension of the rock. This vertical design, characteristic of the Asir region, maximized limited space and created a fortified, communal living environment.

The village was largely abandoned around the 1960s as residents moved to modern housing with easier access. Today, the area is a protected heritage site undergoing careful restoration while offering cafes and restaurants as well as regular events and handicraft demonstrations. It was even named as one of the best tourism villages by UNESCO in 2024.



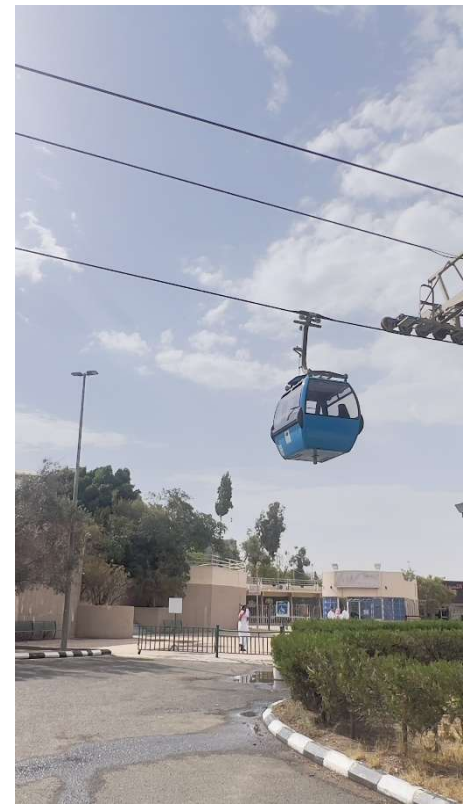
## Abha Lake



Abha Lake is an artificial reservoir created by the Abha Dam, a major engineering project built in 1974 to manage water resources, control floods and support irrigation and electricity generation. It is located a short walk from the city centre and is surrounded by lush greenery and mountains, offering a serene escape from the bustle of the city. Tourist guides suggest that visitors can enjoy boating, walking and wildlife as well as the scenic views but I could not find anywhere to access the lake or the dam.

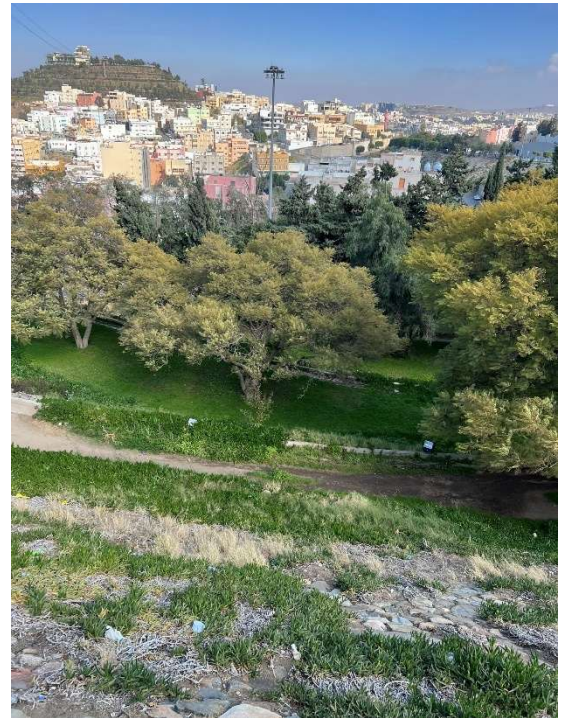


Situated between Abha Lake and the cable car station is the deserted and derelict theme park variously called the Abha Palace Amusement Park or the Abha Lake Theme Park. This small theme park consisted of a roller coaster and a Ferris wheel as well as bumper cars, a haunted house and a miniature train ride. Whilst the amusement/theme park is long since closed, there is a cable car service called the New Abha Cable Car which runs from the adjoining Abha Al Jadidah cable car station to the top of the Green Mountain



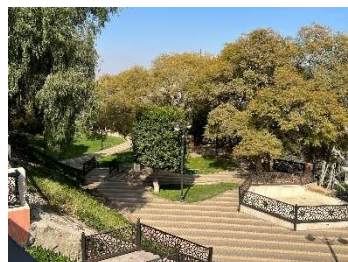
## Green Mountain (Jabal Al Akhdar)

The Green Mountain, also known as Jabal Al Akhdar, was initially used as military headquarters because of its strategic location and clear visibility over Abha and the surrounding Asir Mountain. The name derives from the green night lighting that makes it glow at nighttime. You can reach the top by foot or by cable car. This iconic mountain is especially popular for its panoramic views of Abha as well as various restaurants and coffee shops.



## Abu Kheyal Park

This hilltop park is quite stunning with excellent view across to the Green Mountain and home to the Lascerne Café. The park is open 24/7 and is a great place for picnics and walks with play areas and benches to take a break and admire the view. The park is home to some wild goats (which I didn't see) and I am reliably informed that it is especially beautiful at sunset. The cable car to the Green Mountain passes overhead but was not operating at the time of my visit.





### Lascerne Café

The Lascerne Café is a stylish and modern café situated in the Abu Kheyal Park. It is known for its cozy ambiance and delicious coffee offering a mix of international and local treats, making it a great place to unwind. The café is popular among both locals and tourists, and you can sit inside or outside to admire the amazing views.....especially from the rooftop.



### Al Dabab Walkway



The area offers a scenic walking path with spectacular views across to the mountains of Abha although it is often covered in mist which makes you feel as though you are walking through the clouds. The walkway is perfect for an evening stroll, a pleasant jog or simply enjoying the cool, fresh air while you enjoy the spectacular views of the surrounding landscape.



## Joy Venue

The Joy Venue is a 'dining establishment' situated along the Al Dabab Walkway. It offers a mix of dining, music, shopping and recreational activities, and is a great place for families and friends to hang out and enjoy live performances while taking in the spectacular views ....as long as the mist has cleared. Outside you can huddle next to one of those gas heaters and, if you are feeling particularly daring, then take advantage of the distinctive glass floor allowing you to look down at the mountain side below you while you eat.



## Art Street

Art Street is a vibrant art-themed street in Abha decorated with colourful murals, art installations and beautiful lighting. It was approved by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage to create a collaborative space for artists. The street started as a short promenade but has since grown into a dynamic art district with galleries, theatres and restaurants hosting cultural events and showcasing work from local artists.





### Shadda Palace

Shadda Palace, also known as Shada Palace, was built in 1927 for Sheikh Abdulwahab Abu Melha who was the financial manager of Abha at that time. The palace served as the main ruling palace and the headquarters for the Prince of the Asir region until recently when it was refurbished and converted into a museum

This six-story mud-brick fortress-palace exemplifies the ingenuity of mountain construction, blending defensive functionality with domestic artistry featuring intricately carved wooden windows and vibrant Asiri murals painted by women using natural pigments. The restored palace serves as a dynamic cultural hub offering an informative glimpse into the history and heritage of the Asir region,

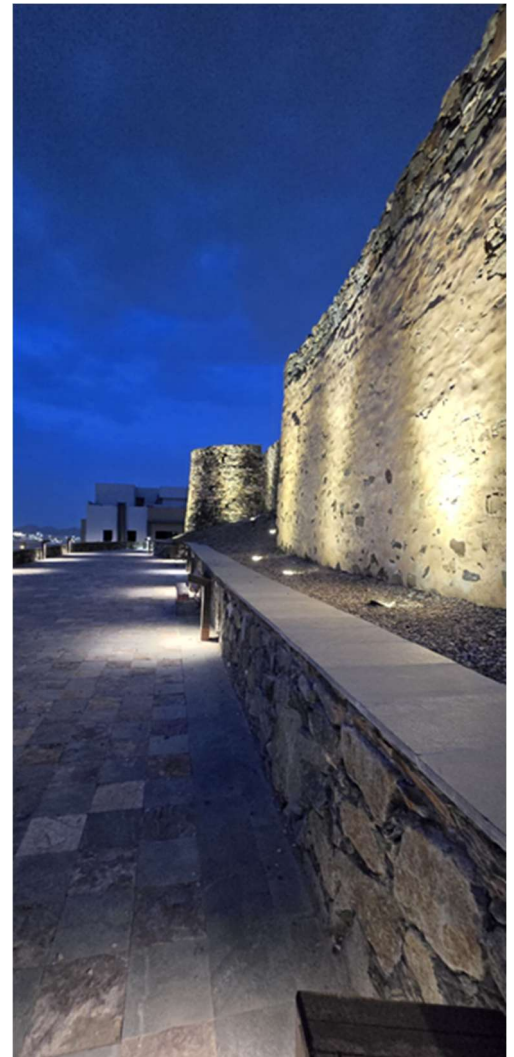


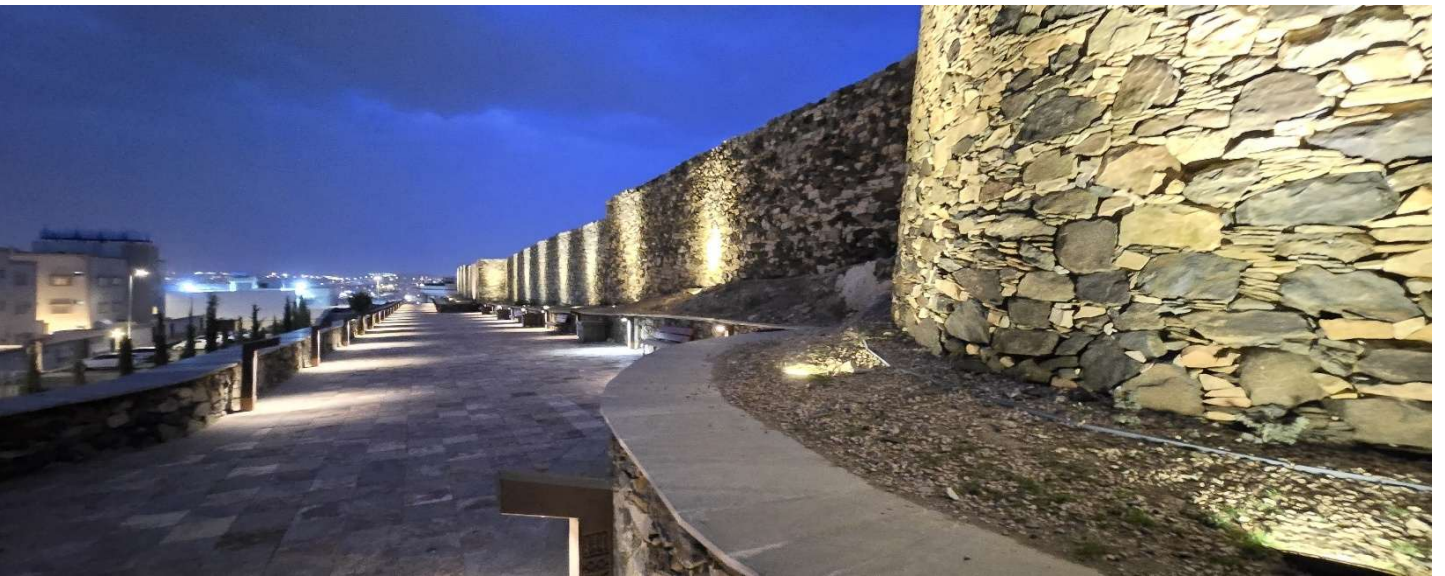
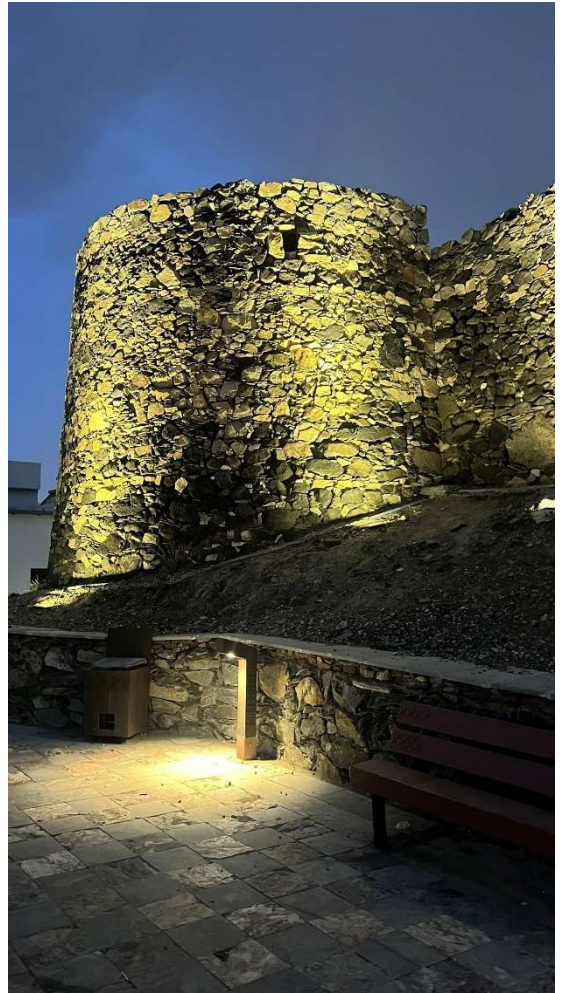


## Shamsan Castle.

Perched dramatically atop a strategic hill in the heart of Abha, Shamsan Castle stands as a timeless symbol of Asir's heritage and resilience. The castle was built over 200 years ago, during the Ottoman era, and served as a vital military stronghold and administrative centre, guarding the ancient trade routes linking the highlands of Asir to Yemen and the Hejaz. The castle has been meticulously restored under Saudi heritage initiatives and seamlessly blends historical significance with cultural accessibility. It showcases the rugged ingenuity of Asiri mountain fortresses featuring thick stone walls, traditional wooden ceilings and distinctive circular watchtowers designed to withstand both climate and conflict.

The panoramic terrace offers a 360-degree vista of Abha's terraced hills, juniper forests and the distant peaks of the Sarawat Mountains.... this is the place to visit at sunrise or sunset. Maybe, join the locals and bring a picnic along with you to enjoy the panoramic views well away from the bustling city of Abha which spreads out below







## Rijal Almaa

Situated approximately 28 miles (45 kilometres) outside of Abha is Rijal Almaa which is listed on the UNESCO tentative list so meeting UNESCO's criteria and under consideration for World Heritage status. This heritage village is certainly worthy of the title for its unique architecture which exemplifies Asir's ancient highland civilisation.

This 900-year-old settlement was once a thriving hub on the frankincense trade route between Yemen and the Eastern Mediterranean (including Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Cyprus and Palestine/Israel). The site, which includes 56 stone palaces and eight-story fortified towers stand as breathtaking monuments to the ingenuity and cultural wealth of the Qahtan and Asiri tribes.

The village's fortified structures, built from mountain stone, mud and wood, showcase unparalleled engineering and was designed for defence and communal living. The adjoining museum offers displays of tribal weaponry, traditional attire, agricultural tools, jewellery and manuscripts, narrating centuries of trade and craftsmanship.



## JAZAN



The city of Jazan is situated in the southwest corner of Saudi Arabia bordering the Red Sea to the west and Yemen to the south. This may not be your typical idea of a holiday destination especially since the Foreign Office advises against all but essential travel which I guess negates my outrageously expensive travel insurance even if I should drop dead from natural causes.

Regardless of the Foreign Office advice, Jazan and Jazan Province is a popular tourist destination and an absolute treasure trove of natural wonders, history and culture. The city of Jazan served as a crucial crossroads for ancient trade routes and maritime activity. Today, the city is a keeper of artefacts, handicrafts and traditions dating back to the bronze age.

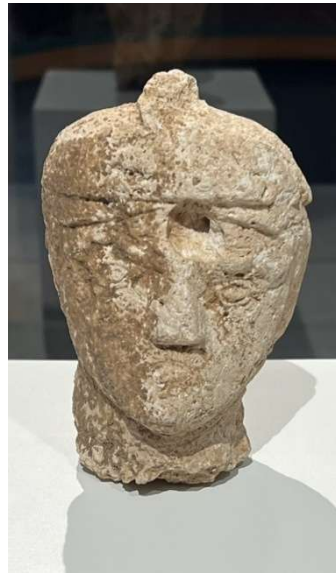
Evidence of pre-Islamic kingdoms, Ottoman influence and the resilient traditions of indigenous tribes, such as the Faifa and Bani Malik tribes, are evident and increasingly celebrated through visitor centres, heritage villages, forts and castles as well as a busy port (and the free ferry to the Farasan Islands) as well as beautiful beaches and scenic mountains. Jazan is also the heartland of Saudi coffee cultivation.

### Jazan Visitor Centre

The Jazan Visitor Centre seemed like a good enough place to start my visit to Jazan and turned out to be a really useful starting point in helping me to understand this multifaceted region. The centre is housed in a modern building offering immersive exhibits on Jazan's ecology, history and culture through interactive displays, short films and an excellent guide who was both helpful and informative.

I learned all about the ancient incense trade routes that crisscrossed the province as well as the legacy of Our helpful guide highlighted Jazan's role as Saudi Arabia's 'fruit basket' and she told us about how the centre was involved in preserving the heritage and culture of the area by providing training in heritage crafts and encouraging new design applications of age-old techniques.





### **Al Dosariyah Castle**



Al Dosariyah Castle also known as Turks Castle (although this title is vehemently denied by the locals) is located on a mountain overlooking the port of Jazan. The castle was built during the Ottoman Empire when Jazan served as the Turkish ruler's residence. The castle was built to guard the trade route and repel invaders. Its elevated location provides a clear aerial view of the port and the horizon.

The castle offers defensive systems such as protection walls installed at the entrances, an observation room on the upper floor and openings in the walls for observation and shooting. During its time, the castle served as a military stronghold and a learning centre under Sheikh Abdullah Al Qar'awi. The castle was renovated in 1932 to become the first Saudi military garrison in the city.



### **Jazan Corniche**



Stretching gracefully along the Red Sea coast, the Jazan Corniche is a modern waterfront promenade where locals and visitors gather to embrace the sea breeze and enjoy the atmosphere. The corniche features lush parks, interactive fountains, play zones and cafés serving Saudi coffee. The seaside promenade offers residents and visitors a place for relaxation, recreation and social gatherings.

Historically, this coastline was a hub for ancient maritime trade, linking Arabia with Africa and beyond. Today, it is a symbol of Jazan’s urban renewal which has been designed as a community hub and a venue for events and festivals. The corniche is also a key access point for ferry services to the Farasan Islands which is a protected archipelago known for its marine and wildlife.



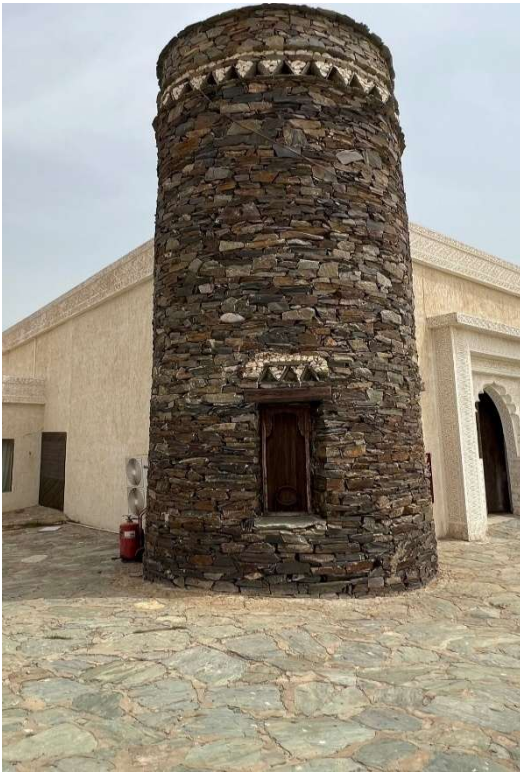
### Fayfa Mountains (Jabal Fayfa)



The Fayfa Mountains, also known as Jebel Faifa, Feyfa or Fayfa) or Faifa) are part of the Sarawat range and one of Saudi Arabia's most stunning natural landscapes, located about 35 miles (60 kilometres) from the Red Sea and about 60 miles (100 kilometres) from Jazan. It is not difficult to see why the place is affectionately known by locals as 'The Hanging Gardens of Saudi Arabia,' and 'Heavens of the Earth.'

The mountains are renowned for the year-round moderate climate, and the mountain slopes are a masterpiece of ancient agricultural engineering with terraced fields carved into near-vertical cliffs growing crops such as coffee, cocoa, maize, figs, bananas and pomegranates taking advantage of gravity-fed irrigation systems perfected by the Fayfa tribe.

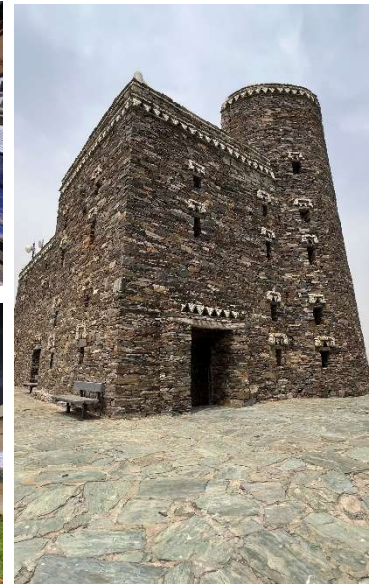




## Jazan Heritage Village

The Jazan Heritage Village showcases the cultural heritage of the region including traditional houses and handicrafts. This open-air museum vividly recreates the region's architectural and cultural legacy with replicas of traditional homes constructed using authentic materials like palm fronds, stone and mud brick.

The Heritage Village was opened in 2009 and is located on the southern Corniche. It recreates regional architecture, from stone mountain houses (Baitul Jabali) to mud-grass Tihami huts (Baitul Ousha) as well as Farasan homes (Baitul Farasani), and a traditional souk displaying craftwork, artifacts handicraft stalls supporting local artisans.



## Al Adarisah Houses

The archaeological ruins of the Al Adarisah Houses (elsewhere referred to incorrectly as the Idrisid Houses) are located in Sabya about 24 miles (36 kilometres) from Jazan. The site, which was closed on my visit, consists of a collection of dilapidated buildings which were constructed between 1906 and 1934. It is likely that the buildings functioned as a residential compound rather than a royal palace.

The information board says (in English) that the site contains the remains of 15 rooms possibly multiple adjoining rooms and courtyards which were built using brick, black stone and gypsum. Some of the rooms are distinguished by internal openings with shelves decorated with gypsum ornaments. In the northern side, there is a well and remains of a mosque with huge columns supporting perpendicular and parallel arches



I decided to undertake further research on the name and Chat GPT insisted that 'The Idrisid Houses and the Al Adarisah Houses are two distinct architectural and historical sites located in Saudi Arabia'. When I queried this and shared my pictures it responded, 'You're absolutely right to point that out—and based on the photos you've shared, it appears that the Idrisid Houses and the Al Adarisah Houses are in fact the same site'.

Which just goes to show that you should never believe everything that AI tells you!!!



### Black Mountain (Jabal Al Aswad)



The Black Mountain (Jabal Al Aswad) is a geological wonder which gets its name from the striking dark volcanic rock formations that stand out vividly against the surrounding landscape. Its dense vegetation, especially from a distance, gives the mountain an almost black appearance, reinforcing its name. Local legends cast the mountain differently as both a sacred site and a cursed place.

The mountain rises 6000 feet (1800 metres) above sea level and is one of the highest peaks in the Jazan Region. The terrain is rugged and varied, featuring sloping plains, winding valleys, misty peaks and terraced agriculture. The Black Mountain has increasingly become a focal point for ecotourism, attracting hikers, campers, photographers and nature lovers.



## FARASAN ISLANDS



The Farasan Islands (reputedly known as the Maldives of Saudi Arabia) are a group of 170 islands situated off the southwestern coast of Saudi Arabia and approximately 25 Miles (40 kilometres) from the city of Jazan. The islands are accessible via a ferry which is free to use but advisable to book in advance. If you are really well organised, then you can even take your car with you on the same ferry at no extra cost (ie free).

The islands are renowned for their exceptional biodiversity, and the area is protected and recognised as a UNESCO

Biosphere Reserve. This designation recognises the critical importance of the pristine coral reefs, dense mangrove forests and extensive seagrass meadows providing vital habitats for numerous marine species, including endangered sea turtles and a rich variety of fish.

The islands are also famous for their historical legacy. Visible remnants include the coral-stone ruins of Al Qassar, the Al Rifai House, the Ottoman Fort and the Al Najdi Mosque which is one of the oldest sites of worship featuring paintings and inscriptions from India. The Farasan Islands were originally known as Portus Ferresanus, and it is speculated that the islands were once a Roman garrison.



### Farasan Island Ferry

The Farasan Island Ferry is an essential maritime lifeline connecting the archipelago to mainland Saudi Arabia. The ferry service is operated by two roll-on/roll-off ferries departing from Jazan Port and taking just over one and a half hours to complete the 30-mile (about 50 kilometres) journey. The service is indispensable for residents commuting for work, education or supplies for tourists visiting the islands.



The ferry service is free of charge although you are advised to book tickets well in advance especially if you want to take your car with you. The service runs twice daily at 7.00am and 3.30pm from both ports. Once onboard, you'll find it's clean and comfortable although somewhat hectic. There is a snack bar offering drinks and snacks as well as pot noodles.

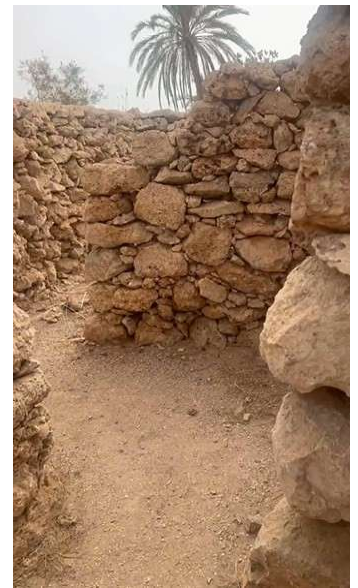


## Al Qassar Heritage Village

The Al Qassar Heritage Village offers a useful starting point for an adventure across the islands as a useful introduction to the Farasan Islands' rich and complex past, especially its once-thriving pearling industry. This previously abandoned settlement comprises some remarkably well-preserved ruins of numerous structures painstakingly constructed from fossilised coral stone, locally known as 'mangabi'.

The architecture is distinctive including low-rise houses with thick walls, small windows (for insulation) and characteristic pointed arches over doorways and niches. Walking through the silent, sandy lanes offers a tangible connection to the early 20th century, when Al Qassar was a bustling hub for pearl divers and traders.

The site, which is situated a few miles from the town centre, features around 400 small stone and palm houses as well as some larger merchant houses. Its decline paralleled the collapse of the pearl market after the advent of cultured pearls. The site has been restored to reflect its original look, with stone houses, narrow alleys, white seashell-decorated courtyards, and engravings showcasing local craftsmanship.



## Farasan Island Beaches

The beaches of the Farasan Islands are characterized by their exceptional natural beauty and pristine condition. The main beaches are to be found on the Farasan Kebir and Sajid Islands which offer expanses of remarkably fine, luminous white sand that contrasts vividly with the turquoise, aquamarine and deep blue waters of the Red Sea.

Many of the beaches serve as critical nesting grounds for endangered sea turtles, including Hawksbills and Green Turtles. The waters immediately offshore often fringe healthy coral reefs complete with diverse marine life, making the beaches ideal launch points for snorkelling and diving. Overall, there is a profound sense of tranquillity which, I suspect, will diminish when more people find out about this place.



## Al Najdi Mosque

The Al Najdi Mosque is situated close to the main town and represents a significant landmark of Islamic heritage and architecture. The mosque was constructed between 1916 and 1929, and its construction reflects the unique building traditions of the Red Sea coast.... utilising meticulously cut and fitted fossilised coral stone (mangabi) covered in white cement.

The Andalusian-inspired Mosque was built by Yemeni architects built it using local stone and Indian-style decorative elements. It includes an open courtyard, an octagonal minaret base and twelve intricately decorated domes along with coloured glass windows, floral motifs and geometric designs and a women's prayer room elevated above the roof.

The mosque's design is notable for its functional simplicity which is well adapted to the climate and features thick walls for thermal regulation and a flat roof. Its most striking external feature is the tall, rectangular minaret, also built of coral stone, which serves as a distinctive visual beacon. Its preservation offers insight into the historical development of Islamic architecture in this specific coastal region.



## Al Rifai House



Al Rifai House, also known as Beit Al Rifai, is a 1922 pearl-merchant home standing close to the main town and the Ottoman Fort. Constructed from the fossilised coral stone (mangabi), this large, two-story residence exemplifies the grandeur afforded to successful pearl traders. The house speaks volumes about the status and wealth generated by the pearling industry.



The house features multiple rooms arranged around inner spaces, high ceilings and a design that maximised airflow in the humid climate. The house showcases traditional Farasani architecture, and its architectural significance lies in the sophisticated details such as the intricately carved ornate windows and the internal doors featuring geometric and floral motifs providing privacy, ventilation and decoration.

Al Rifai House offers visitors a compelling glimpse into the lifestyle, aesthetics, and building mastery of a bygone era showcasing craftsmanship rarely seen elsewhere.



### Ottoman Fort

The Ottoman Fort (sometimes called Qila' al-Turk or the Castle of the Turks) sits on Farasan's coastal edge and commands 360-degree views over the sea and the island. The fort was built during the Ottoman rule and served as a military base and strategic watchtower. The Heritage Commission seems to be slowly restoring the area, but the fort remains largely untouched and inaccessible although it can be viewed from the outside.



### NAJRAN

If you thought that Jazan was a little too close to Yemen for comfort, then Najran is definitely not going to be on your visit list. The city of Najran is situated in the extreme southwest corner of Saudi Arabia and lies approximately 100 miles (160 kilometres) from the Yemen border although some of the places we intend to visit are a lot closer. In this case the Foreign Office advises against all travel so no insurance cover for me.

Regardless of the Foreign Office advice, Najran offers a unique blend of history and culture with some stunning landscapes. The area is a mix of mountains (it is part of the Sarawat range), valleys and desert plains. The climate is cool in comparison with most of Saudi Arabia, so the area is a popular destination for those seeking a cooler climate in the summer months.



The area is home to the pre-Islamic Kindah Kingdom and was a crossroads for trades and pilgrimages. The close proximity to the Yemen border means that the area is strongly influenced by Yemeni culture and is one of the country's most historically rich and culturally distinct regions. Najran is also notable for its Christian heritage before Islam.



Najran is also known for its distinct traditional architecture including multi-storey mud-brick forts and houses with white gypsum decoration as evidenced in places such as Amarah Palace and Najran Fort. The Najrani people have their own dialects, customs and dress which is influenced by both Arabian and Yemeni traditions.

The city has a growing tourism scene focused on heritage sites, mountains and desert landscapes. It is also a base for exploring the Rub' al Khali which is better known as the Empty Quarter. The Empty Quarter is the largest continuous sand desert in the world and spans parts of Saudi Arabia, Oman, the UAE and Yemen. The Saudi Arabia portion is the largest and covers much of the south of the Kingdom.



### **Al Ukhdood Archaeological Site**

The Al Ukhdood Archaeological Site (also known as Raqamat or Rijmat) is one of the most prominent archaeological sites in Saudi Arabia. The site dates back 2500 years and consists of a surrounding wall, remnants of buildings, temples, markets, artifacts, tombs, inscriptions and drawings. Its oldest artifacts date back to the Stone Age, while its most recent ones belong to the Islamic period.

The city was called Al Ukhdood, which translates to 'a ditch' or 'bottomless pit' and was famous for being the location where the Jewish Himyarite king Dhu Nuwas massacred the majority of the population of the city which had converted to Christianity and who refused to convert to Judaism. The event is referenced in the Quran which mentions the 'People of the Ditch' who were martyred for their faith.

The most famous account describes victims being burned in trenches with estimates of the numbers ranging from several hundred to several thousand. The atrocity led to an invasion and Dhu Nuwas's defeat and subsequent suicide. The archaeological site contains mass graves and evidence of burning consistent with the accounts serving as a powerful archaeological confirmation of a major historical atrocity.

Since 1979, the Heritage Commission has been conducting archaeological excavations at the site revealing a fort, a mosque and several ancient tombs, as well as graves dating back to the Islamic period. The authorities are working hard to make the area more tourist friendly, and the newly built visitors centre provides a welcoming introduction to the site and its' history.



**Amarah Palace**

Amarah Palace (also called Qasr al-Emara or Emara Palace) was built in 1944 by the then Governor of Najran, Prince Turki bin Madhi. The building took approximately two years to complete and is located in the centre of Najran. The palace is characterised by its four circular towers that rise above the high walls at the corners, which were previously used to protect it through surveillance and guarding.

The inside includes administrative offices, reception halls, residential quarters, a mosque and internal courtyards, reflecting its dual role as a centre of governance and a residence. The palace complex is often labelled as Najran Fort although, on checking this out, ChatGPT insisted that these two places 'are not the same, though they're often confused because they're both historic mud-brick forts in Najran'.



ChatGPT later contradicted itself by describing Najran Fort as Qasr al-Emara or Emara Palace. However, the place identified as Emara Palace is the same as Amarah Palace thus suggesting that Najran Fort and Amarah Palace are the same place. When I reminded ChatGPT of this contradiction, it said 'You're absolutely right to call this out'

Which, once again, goes to show that you should never believe everything that AI tells you (see my earlier comments about the confusion over the Al Adarisah Houses).



### Al Aan Palace



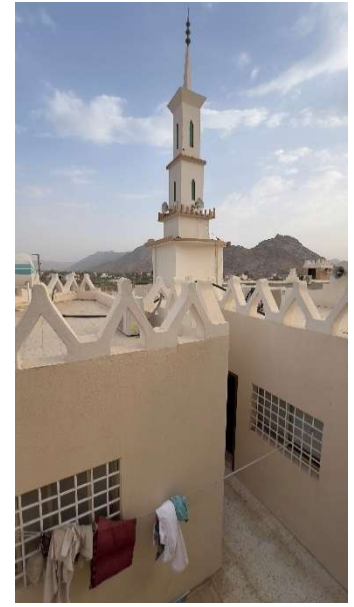
Perched on top of the Al Aan Mountain to the west of Najran and overlooking the vast palm oasis of the Najran Valley, Al Aan Palace (also known as Saadan Palace) stands as a tribute to the region's rich cultural and historical identity. The palace consists of four floors, each occupied by one family, and it is surrounded by a wall with several circular and rectangular towers to protect the palace and its surrounding areas.



Al Aan Palace dates back to 1688 and is built entirely of mud with roofs made of wood, palm trunks and fronds. Interior rooms are outfitted with heritage implements, folk costumes and utensils to showcase Najran's past. A climb to the top is rewarded with stunning views of the patchwork of green farms stretching out towards the desert horizons.

In recent years, Al Aan Palace has undergone a meticulous restoration process, which has breathed new life into this historical landmark. The commitment to preserve the past has cemented the palace's position as a must-visit tourist destination. With its captivating blend of history, architecture and breathtaking views, Al Aan Palace offers an insight into the soul of Najran.





### Hima Cultural Area (Bir Hima Rock Art)



About 60 miles (100 kilometres) north of Najran lies the Hima Cultural Area containing over 500 rock-art panels stretching over 200 square miles (550 square kilometres) and featuring inscriptions in Thamudic, Nabataean, Syriac, Greek and early Arabic scripts as well as depictions of animals and human figures, along with weaponry and hunting scenes.

This UNESCO World Heritage site is pretty remote and just as hard to access not least because the caretakers are worried about you taking some of the rocks home with you. Unfortunately, we did not book ahead of our arrival, but the security guards felt sorry for us and gave us a personalised introduction including driving us across the extensive site which was very much appreciated.

The area is an ancient Palaeolithic and Neolithic site covering the time period from 7000 to 1000 BC. The massive area includes several archaeological sites, such as Jabal 'Sidah', Jabal 'Hima', 'Aan Jamal' Site, 'Shis'a', and 'Al Kawkab'. The site offers a fascinating window into the ancient history of the Arabian Peninsula.



The inscriptions and writings showcase the significance of the site as a hub of cultural and human communication across various time periods. Pictures of animals including camels, ostriches, ibexes and lions, suggest that the area was more fertile in ancient times. Human figures provide useful insights into the social and cultural practices of the time.



## King Fahd Park

When you have had your fill of archaeological sites and mud-built palaces, then maybe I can recommend the King Fahd Park which is located in the Saqam Forest and is one of the most important natural recreational landmarks in the city. The park is characterised by its stunning natural scenery and breathtaking views, with something for everybody.

This sprawling, meticulously landscaped park is a testament to modern Najran's commitment to providing green spaces for its residents and visitors. Wide, tree-lined pathways invite strolls and cycling, while expansive, manicured lawns provide perfect spots for picnics and relaxation under the shade. Cafes and kiosks offer refreshments, and dedicated sports areas cater to active pursuits.



At night, the park transforms with artistic lighting illuminating fountains and walkways. It serves as a place for social gatherings, festive celebrations and a peaceful escape where the pace slows down, allowing locals and tourists to unwind and enjoy the pleasant Najrani evenings. At the time of my visit, you could even get a very thorough health check supported by local volunteers....it seems I am doing very well for my age.



## Al Manjam Village



Al Manjam is an iconic mud-brick heritage village in the Najran province showcasing the region's unique architecture and historical way of life. It is one of a cluster of similar historic mud-brick villages in the region. The village is over 300 years old, with recent restorations preserving its historic mud architecture and cultural significance.

The village features seven towering mud houses/palaces with designs like sloping roofs (Al Mashoulq) and circular towers (Al Murabba), built using local materials. The buildings house various facilities such as a mosque, horse stables, gathering rooms, grain storage and upper balconies. The village is enclosed by a massive mud wall with three main gates suggesting this was a fortified village and not an open settlement.



## An Namas

Al Namas is situated about 75 miles (120 kilometres) north of Abha and is a governorate in the Asir Province. The city is significantly higher in elevation than Najran and therefore offers a dramatically cooler climate, with misty mornings and lush greenery. An Namas is renowned for its stunning terraced farms clinging dramatically to steep mountainsides, meticulously cultivated with coffee beans, fruits and herbs.



Near the centre of the city is a historic site containing a large number of palaces (including the Tharban Palace and the Mishref Palace) representing the heritage and architecture of the Asir region. In the past, they were used as forts for government administrations but nowadays they provide the backdrop to a thriving tourist attraction supporting markets and old shops as well as numerous places to eat.



The Al Asabelah Heritage Palaces (listed as Asabilah Palaces on Google) are a collection of seven (?) historical palaces in varying states of repair and restoration. The buildings date back over 300 years are notable for their height, with some reaching up to five floors. They have a square or rectangular layout, which is wider at the base and narrows as it rises, giving an impression of strength, majesty and stability.



## Al Meger Tourist Village



I am not really sure how to explain this place other than likening it to an Arabic version of Disney World designed by Antonio Gaudi ....and hoping that neither will sue me for libel. The Al Meger Tourist Village is located on the top of the Sarawat Mountains near Al Namas in the Asir region and is a popular tourist destination given its high altitude and mild temperature.

Central to the village is the Andalusian inspired palace, known as the Al Meger Palace or Royal Palace which was built by Mohammed bin Ali Al Muqar who was a local visionary and self-taught architect from An Namas. Construction began in 1984 and was not fully completed until 2010. The building features 4 towers symbolizing Saudi regions, 365 windows and 52 doors .... but I did not count them to confirm

The upper floors contain a selection of traditional household tools, agricultural tools, old doors, printing machines.... and other miscellaneous tut. On the third floor, you will also find an extensive collection of historical Islamic manuscripts and books spanning medicine, astronomy and mathematics as well as miscellaneous copies of the bible and Holy Qur'an.

The palace incorporates hanging gardens, water fountains and panoramic views as well as over 18000 heritage pieces plus the most dramatic staircase that I have seen in a long time.....although I think that the staircase at the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel in London might be even more exciting if only, I could afford to stay there.

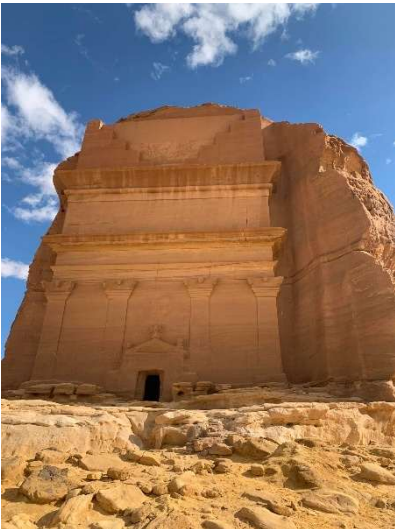


## Chapter 6: AlUla



AlUla is a historic region in northwest of Saudi Arabia. It is known for its stunning landscapes, rich history and archaeological significance. It has become a major tourist destination in recent years and offers a mix of ancient heritage, natural beauty and modern luxury. AlUla is Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site and a 10-hour drive or 75-minute flight from Riyadh..... but, worth the journey.

There are clear links here with the Nabataean civilisations of Petra in Jordan. The ancient tombs offer a legacy of 7,000 years of human civilisation along with some stunning rock formations which reminded me very much of the Grand Canyon. To date, AlUla is not a particular busy tourist attraction but the work being undertaken suggests that this is going to change in the near future. So, I seriously suggest you get in soon.



### Hegra (Madain Saleh)

Hegra is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and dates back over 2000 years to the time of the Nabataeans who were desert-dwelling merchants, controlling the incense and spice trade routes from Arabia and Jordan to the Mediterranean, Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia. Hegra is often likened to Petra in Jordan, although it is a lot less crowded, as it was also a major trading hub for the Nabateans controlling the trade routes.

The area features over 100 well-preserved Nabatean tombs carved into sandstone and built between the first century BC and the first century AD. The most famous tomb on the site is the stand-alone 72-foot-tall Qasr Al Farid (the Lonely Castle.) The Nabataean city also boasts examples of ancient engineering and craftsmanship such as wells and stone-lined water channels.



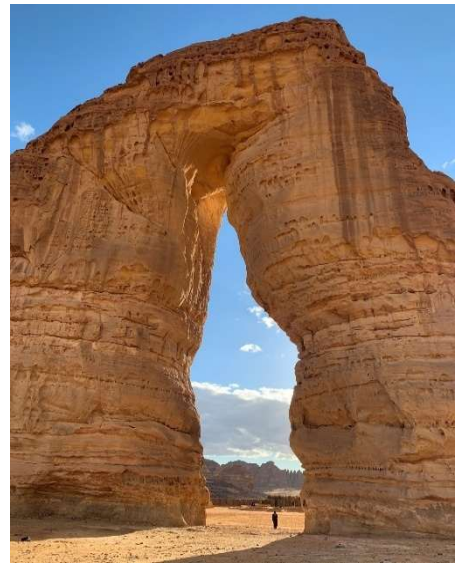
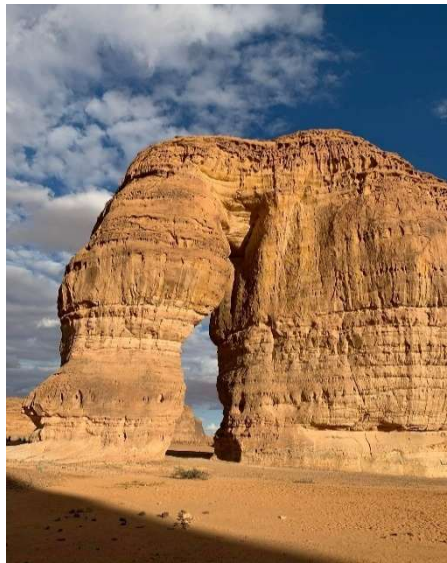


## Elephant Rock (Jabal AlFil)

Elephant Rock is one of the region's most iconic natural landmarks. This stunning geological formation, shaped by wind and water erosion over millions of years, resembles a giant elephant with its trunk touching the ground. The rock is a popular tourist destination and a testament to the unique desert landscapes of Ayla. It is often featured in promotional materials for AIUla's growing tourism initiatives.

You can enjoy the site during the day or at night, when it is illuminated, creating a magical atmosphere. The area around

Elephant Rock is also being developed to enhance the visitor experience, with amenities like seating areas, food trucks and guided tours. This is definitely a must-visit destination for anyone exploring Saudi Arabia's cultural and natural heritage.



## Maraya Concert Hall

The Maraya Concert Hall is one of the most amazing and unique cultural venues in the world. The Maraya Concert Hall is covered entirely in mirrors, reflecting the surrounding desert, mountains, and sky. Maraya, which means 'mirror' or 'reflection' in Arabic, is a testament to modern design harmonising completely with the natural beauty of the desert landscape.... this building is absolutely worth a visit.

The mirrored design allows the building to blend seamlessly into its environment, creating a surreal and almost invisible appearance from certain angles. The building serves as a platform for international and local artists, musicians, and performers. The venue has already hosted a variety of high-profile events, including concerts by renowned artists, opera performances by celebrities including Maria Carey, Andrea Bocelli and James Blunt.

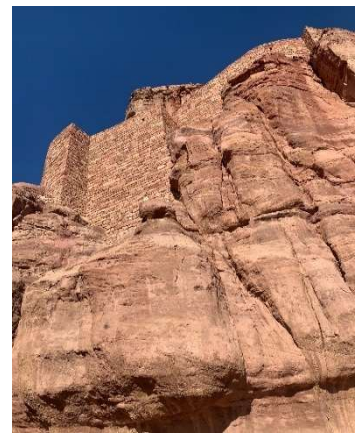


## AIUla Old Town

AIUla Old Town is a historically rich and culturally significant site dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and serving as a vital stop on the 'Incense Route' which connected southern Arabia to the Mediterranean. The town is characterised by its traditional mudbrick house and narrow alleyways as well as a fortress and a castle.

The town once had over 900 houses, 400 shops and 5 town squares and several mosques but was gradually abandoned as residents moved to modern settlements with better infrastructure. The last few families left in the 1980s and, today, the abandoned town is a protected heritage site, with ongoing restoration and conservation efforts supported by the Royal Commission for AIUla.

Visitors can explore AIUla Old Town through guided tours providing insights into its history, architecture and cultural significance. The area is also used for cultural events, festivals and performances. It is also beautifully lit up at night and you can even take a night tour of the place. Nearby markets and shops offer traditional crafts and souvenirs for you to stuff in your suitcase and take home.



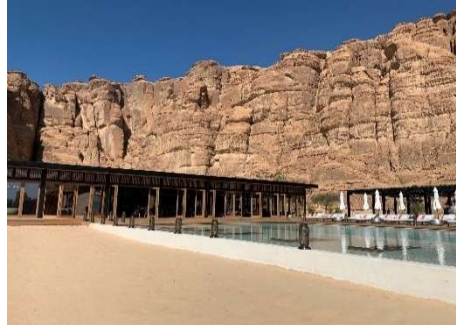
## Habitas AIUla

Not sure why I am advertising this place as they are not paying me, but Habitas AIUla is one of a growing number of luxurious eco-conscious resorts located in the breathtaking desert landscape of Alulu. The resort offers a unique and tranquil retreat for travellers seeking both adventure and relaxation. The resort uses eco-friendly materials and construction methods to minimize its environmental impact.

The architecture is inspired by the natural landscape, with structures that blend seamlessly into the desert surroundings. The use of natural materials like wood, stone, and canvas creates a harmonious connection with the environment offering a range of accommodations, including spacious tents and private villas. Including solar-powered lighting and water-saving fixtures.



You can undertake desert hikes, nature walks and rock climbing through the stunning landscapes of the Ashar Valley or else spend your nights gazing at the stars taking advantage of AlUla's clear night skies and minimal light pollution. If that isn't enough, then their yoga and meditation sessions and spa treatments inspired by traditional Arabian healing practices.... best to take advantage before the tourists arrive in their droves.



## Dadan and Jabal Ikamah



Not so far away and certainly on the tourist route is the ancient city of Dadan which was the capital of the ancient Dadanite and later Lihyanite kingdoms (9<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC). It thrived as a vital hub on the incense trade route, connecting Arabia with Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Mediterranean. The Dadanites and Lihyanites controlled trade, particularly frankincense, leveraging AlUla's strategic location.



Close by is Jabal Ikamah which is known as the 'sacred mountain,' and features thousands of inscriptions rock carvings in Dadanitic, Nabataean, and other ancient scripts which look more like graffiti rather than something I should get excited about. But since everyone around me is extremely excited then I decided to enter into the spirit of things.

The site served as a gathering place for travellers and pilgrims, with inscriptions indicating religious rituals and communal activities. Its preservation is attributed to AlUla's arid climate and secluded valley setting. The inscriptions include prayers, legal texts and personal messages offering a glimpse into daily life, trade and multilingual interactions in those ancient times.



# Chapter 7: Eastern Province

The Eastern Province also known as the Eastern Region is the easternmost of the 13 Saudi Arabi provinces and the third most populated after the Riyadh and Mecca provinces. Most of my visits to Saudi Arabia have started and finished in the Eastern Province so there is much that I want to share. For the purposes of this chapter, I have divided the writing into sections covering Dammam, Al Khobar, Jubail and Al Ahsa although these divisions are completely arbitrary given their close proximity

## Dammam & Al Khobar



Dammam is the capital of the Eastern Province and one of Saudi Arabia's largest cities. It serves as the administrative centre of the region and is a hub for commerce, culture, and transportation including King Fahd International Airport which is one of the largest airports in the world by area. Dammam is particularly well known for its cosmopolitan atmosphere.

Al Khobar is a vibrant coastal city known for its modern infrastructure and its close proximity to Bahrain.... just across the bridge if you cannot possibly manage without a drop of alcohol. Khobar is known for its 'modern and cosmopolitan vibe' and offers a wide range of dining options as well as many vibrant nightlife and entertainment venues.



## Dammam Coast

Dammam Coast (including the Dammam Corniche) is a vibrant waterfront area stretching right along the Arabian Gulf, known for its scenic views, beautiful parks, walking paths and playgrounds, making it a popular spot for picnics and outdoor activities. Unlike Jubail and Khobar, Dammam Corniche is more urban and bustling with a focus on community gatherings and public events. Its proximity to the city centre makes it easily accessible.



## Heritage Village



The Heritage Village is situated in Dammam and is a cultural and historical attraction that offers visitors a glimpse into Saudi Arabia's traditions, heritage and way of life. The museum is designed to preserve and showcase the Kingdom's cultural legacy and features architecture, artifacts and exhibits that reflect the region's history and customs.

The village is built in the style of a traditional Najdi or Eastern Province village containing artifacts, tools, and household items as well as displays of traditional clothing, jewellery and weapons. A traditional souk is recreated within the village, where visitors can browse and purchase handmade crafts, souvenirs and local products as well as interacting with local artisans.



## King Fahd Park



King Fahd Park in Dammam is one of the largest and most popular public parks in Saudi Arabia. The park was inaugurated in the 1980s and covers 12 million square feet (approximately 1 million square metres) featuring a variety of trees, flowers, and plants. There is also a large artificial lake which is surrounded by fountains that create a serene and picturesque atmosphere, especially in the evenings when they are illuminated.

There are well-maintained walking and cycling paths and dedicated playgrounds for children as well as designated picnic areas with tables and benches. An open-air amphitheatre hosts cultural events, performances and community gatherings with several cafes and restaurants including the Bear Café which was full of teddy bears.



## Dammam Railway Station

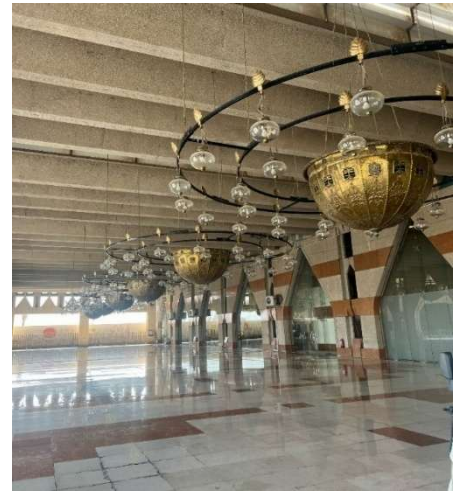
Dammam Railway Station is a key transportation hub in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, serving as the eastern terminus of the Dammam–Riyadh railway line which is owned and operated by the Saudi Railway Company (SAR). The company was previously known as the Saudi Railway Company and is the state-owned national railway company of Saudi Arabia.

The railway was inaugurated in 1951 and consists of three main railway networks: the Northern Railway and the Eastern Railway from Riyadh as well as the Haramain High-Speed Railway between Al Madinah and Makkah. Planning and development are in progress for a coastal railway linking Saudi to the other five nations in the GCC running from Kuwait City to Muscat in Oman passing through Dammam which is my destination on this 1225 train from Riyadh to Dammam.



In December 2024, I decided to take the train from Riyadh to Dammam having spent some days in Riyadh looking at the newly opened metro. The journey was comfortably enough, although the train seemed somewhat old. This was not the most modern train that I travelled on in a while. The journey takes just over four hours to travel 256 miles (approximately 400 kilometres) so certainly not high speed even allowing for the two stops. The seats are comfortable, and the view is just sand after sand after sand.

We departed on time and arrived ontime. The train had a buffet and a trolley passed through the carriages at regular intervals The only surprising thing to note was that my arrival at Dammam gave me a sense of déjà vu since the railway station at Dammam was exactly the same building as the one I just left in Riyadh. Overall, a pleasant experience but not the fast city to city you might expect from Saudi Arabia



### King Fahd International Airport

King Fahd International Airport (DMM) is situated approximately 20 miles (about 30 kilometres) northwest of downtown Dammam and is the main airport serving the Eastern Province. It is the largest airport in the world by land area (300 square miles so roughly the size of New York City) and the third busiest in Saudi Arabia, handling over 10 million passengers annually.

The airport opened in November 1999 and served as a US military base during the Gulf War. The airport has two runways and consists of one main passenger terminal plus an Aramco Terminal for Saudi Aramco employees and a Royal Terminal which is reserved for Saudi royalty and dignitaries, although rarely used. The control tower is over 280 feet (85 metres) which is roughly equivalent to a 30-storey building.



## Khobar Coast

Khobar Coast (including Khobar Corniche) is a modern and lively waterfront destination known for its stunning views of the Arabian Gulf and the King Fahd Causeway. It features luxury hotels, posh restaurants, and chic cafes catering to a more sophisticated, cosmopolitan and trendy crowd. The area is perfect for evening strolls and fine dining with a focus on luxury and leisure. Its proximity to Bahrain and the causeway adds an international flair.



## King Fahd Causeway

The King Fahd Causeway is a 15 mile (approximately 25 kilometre) bridge spanning the Arabian Gulf and connecting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the Kingdom of Bahrain. The causeway connects Al Khobar in Saudi Arabia to Al Jasra in Bahrain. The causeway is named after King Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud who initiated the project.

The causeway was officially opened on November 25, 1986, after five years of construction and cost an estimated £1 billion funded entirely by Saudi Arabia. The drive across the causeway takes about 25 minutes depending on traffic and border procedures. The causeway has strengthened cultural and social ties between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain as well as making Bahrain a popular weekend destination for Saudi residents.



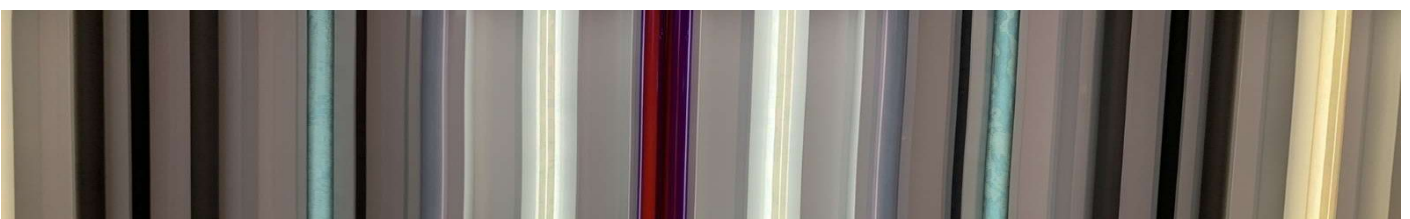
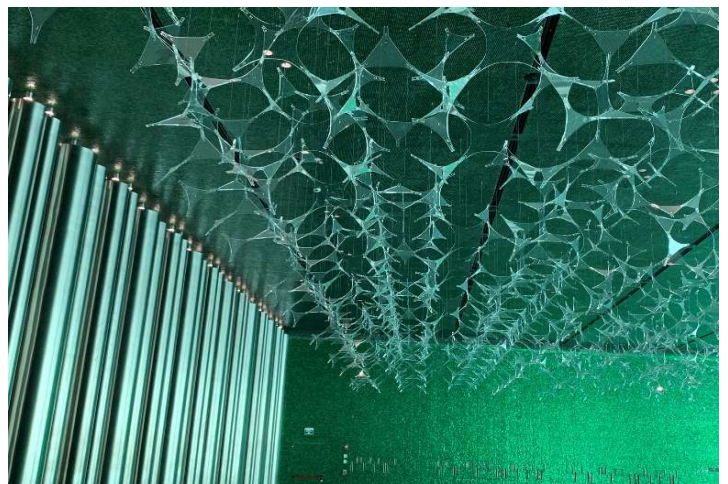


## Al Ithra in Dharan

Al Ithra, also known as the King Abdulaziz Centre for World Culture, is a groundbreaking cultural and educational institution located in Dhahran. The word 'Ithra' means 'enrichment' in Arabic, reflecting the centre's mission to enrich lives through knowledge, creativity and cross-cultural understanding. The centre officially opened in 2017 after nearly a decade of planning and construction.

The building was designed by the Norwegian architectural firm Snøhetta and features a futuristic design inspired by the shapes of rocks and pebbles found in the desert. The building includes a library with over 270,000 books in Arabic and English, as well as digital resources and study spaces. There is a museum with exhibits exploring Saudi Arabia's history, culture and natural heritage.

The state-of-the-art cinema screens a mix of international and regional films and a 1000 seat theatre hosts performances, concerts and cultural events. Al Ithra also offers a wide range of programmes and initiatives including workshops, festivals, educational programmes and community events including book clubs, film screenings and public lectures.



## JUBAIL



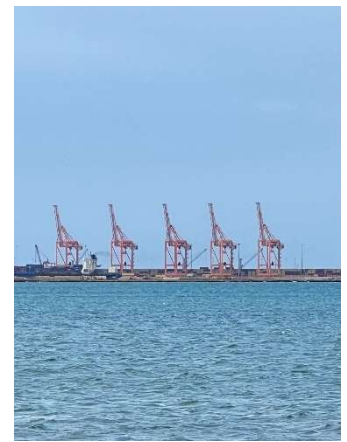
Jubail is one of the largest industrial cities in the world and a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's industrial and economic development. It is divided into Jubail Industrial City and Jubail City, with the former being a major hub for petrochemicals and heavy industries, and the latter being where you should stay if you want to visit Jubail. The city is home to a diverse population from around the world creating a multicultural environment.



Situated between Jubail and Dammam you will find Tarout Island which is the historical soul of the region dating back over 5000 years to the Bronze Age. To the west of Jubail is a significant yet unexplored archaeological site called Thaj which is believed to have been the capital of the ancient Gerrha civilization. Excavations in 1985 revealed Thaj as a complete buried city dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Watch this space

## Jubail Coast

Jubail Coast (including Jubail Corniche) is a more serene and tranquil escape from the city's industrial zones offering a more peaceful waterfront experience. It is characterized by its wide pathways, lush greenery and quiet beaches making it ideal for jogging, cycling, and family picnics. Unlike Dammam and Khobar, Jubail Corniche has a more laid-back and less commercialised vibe.



## Tarout and Tarout Castle

Tarout (also called Tarut) is located on Tarout Island (Tarut Island), which is part of the Qatif oasis in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. It is now connected to the mainland by causeways and is situated near Jubail and Qatif. The island is one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in the region, with a history stretching back over 5,000 years to the Dilmun civilisation.



Tarout was a crucial strategic and commercial hub due to its location on ancient trade routes and its position in the heart of a rich date palm oasis. The area is also home to the Tarout Castle, also known as the Portuguese Castle. The original castle dates back about 5000 years although the name 'Portuguese Castle' dates back to the 16th century when the Portuguese Empire occupied the Arabian Gulf coast.

The Portuguese captured and fortified the existing castle around 1544 to protect trade routes and secure access to fresh water from the islands. Their occupation was relatively brief, lasting only a few decades before they were expelled by local forces. The castle continued to be used for defence by the Ottoman Empire and later by local inhabitants. It was eventually abandoned and fell into ruin.

The entire area around the castle is an archaeological site of immense importance. Excavations have revealed evidence of continuous human habitation from the Dilmun Civilisation (c. 3000 BC. Evidence suggests that the island was known to the Greeks and Romans as a source of pearls and dates. The site continued to thrive through the Pre-Islamic and Islamic Eras.



## Darin Palace



Darin Palace (Qasr Darin) was built in 1825 on Tarout Island overlooking the Port of Darin which is historically linked to the pearl trade and maritime history. The palace consists of two floors with thick mudbrick and stone walls, a central courtyard, numerous rooms for storage and living quarters and distinctive watchtowers designed to spot incoming ships.....both traders and potential raiders.



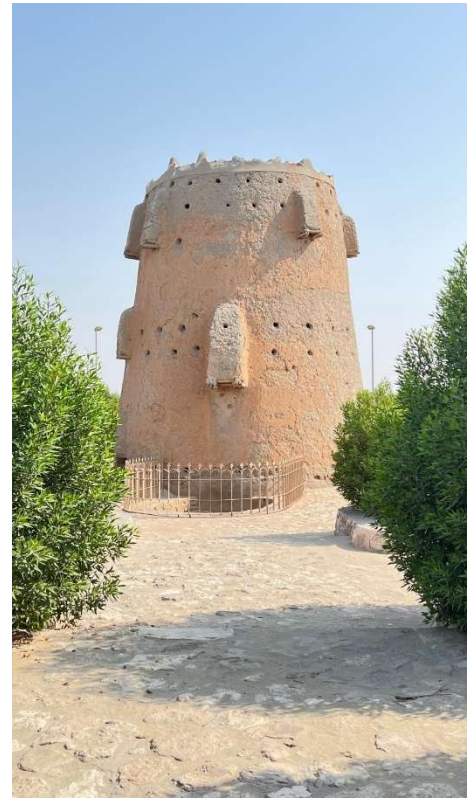
The palace served as a fortified customs house, a residence for its wealthy owner, Sheikh Mohammed Al Fadhani, and a crucial defensive stronghold, protecting the island's valuable resources. Ongoing restoration work includes restoration of the castle's walls, roofs and decorative elements. The goal is to prevent further decay from the harsh coastal environment using traditional materials and techniques.

The area surrounding the castle is also being developed for tourism. This includes creating visitor pathways, informational signage and facilities to ensure a safe and educational experience while protecting the archaeological site. This ongoing work is a key component of the 'Darin and Tarout Island Development Foundation' as well as the larger national Vision 2030 initiative.



## Al Tawiya Tower

The Al Tawiya Tower (also known as the Al Tawiya Fort or Al Tawiya Fortress Tower) was built in 1928 by order of King Abdul Aziz to protect the nearby Al Tawiya well (also known as the Crease Well) which was a critical water source for nomadic tribes and early residents of Jubail. The ancient tower is a tall, cylindrical watchtower made of traditional materials: such as stone, mud and palm wood.



The building has three floors and stands out for its impressive height and distinctive shape. Its height provided a strategic vantage point to look over the surrounding date palms and the approaches to the village. The thick wall includes several holes to enable guards to shoot and defend against any external attack or aggression.



## Tawi Al Shalab and Jubail Church



Tawi Al Shalab is a large archaeological site outside of Jubail which is currently being excavated. The area dates back to the third century so existed during the pre-Islamic period and continued through to the early Islamic area. The site is under the protection and management of the Heritage Commission which is part of the Saudi Ministry of Culture.

The site also contains the remains of an early Christian church which was discovered in 1986. The structure has been dated to the 4th century and identified as a church of the Nestorian Christian sect by some archaeologists and historians who were able to access the site. The building is now widely recognised as one of the earliest surviving Christian church structures.

Christianity was a significant and organised religion in parts of Arabia for hundreds of years before Islam. The rise of Islam in the 7th century was a major turning point and many tribes and communities converted to Islam. Christians (and Jews) were granted protected status under Islamic rule. The discovery of such structures offers tangible proof of early Christianity, which the Saudi government is actively preserving,

Regardless, I was interested to note that the church here is listed as 'The Building'.



## Thaj



Thaj is one of the most significant and fascinating archaeological sites in Saudi Arabia, representing a major pre-Islamic city that was once a crucial hub for trade and civilisation in the ancient world. It is situated in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia approximately 55 miles (90 kilometres) west of Jubail. The site dates back to the third century and is widely believed to be legendary Kingdom of Gerrha (also spelled Gerra or Gerrhea).

Gerrha was a major ancient city-state that flourished from around the 5th century BCE to the 1st century CE. It was a critical trading hub in the pre-Islamic era. Caravans carrying precious goods like incense from southern Arabia (modern-day Yemen and Oman) would stop at Thaj before branching off to Mesopotamia (Iraq), the Levant (Syria, Jordan, Lebanon) and the Mediterranean world.

Archaeological evidence shows influences of these areas reflected in the artifacts found, such as pottery, coins and inscriptions. Excavations have revealed a vast city protected by enormous fortification walls and the tomb of a young girl containing a collection of gold funerary masks, bracelets, necklaces, rings and other precious items. The treasure is now on show in the National Museum in Riyadh.

The site also contains several burial mounds and tombs, providing rich information about burial practices and social hierarchy. In addition, the city had a sophisticated system of wells and canals to manage water in the arid environment, essential for supporting a large population. Excavations have also found inscriptions in Aramaic and other scripts have been found, helping to piece together the city's history and connections.

Although this is not a developed tourist site like AlUla or Diriyah, Thaj is open for visitors. It is an expansive archaeological landscape with outlines of the ancient city walls, and excavation pits revealing layers of history. A walk around the site offers a powerful sense of the size and importance of this once-great city but the site is still at an early time of excavation so not too much to see yet.

Overall, Thaj is the archaeological site of a fabulously wealthy ancient Arabian trading city that grew rich by controlling the incense routes, and whose remains offer a breathtaking glimpse into a pivotal era of Arabian history. Due to its outstanding value, the site of Thaj and the Ancient City of Gerrha has been submitted and is on the Tentative List to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

## AL AHSA

Al Ahsa (also spelled Al Hasa or Al Hassa) is a historically rich and culturally significant region in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. It is one of the largest oases in the world and has been recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to its unique natural and cultural heritage. The region is characterized by a vast oasis which is surrounded by sand dunes and rocky hills.

Al Ahsa is situated between Riyadh and Dammam. It has a hot desert climate, but the oasis provides a lush, green contrast to the arid surroundings. The region played a significant role during the early Islamic period and was a centre for learning and culture. Al Ahsa was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2018 due to its cultural landscape including gardens, canals, springs and historical buildings.

## Al Qarah Mountain (Jabal Al Qarah)

Located near Al Hofuf in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, Al Qarah Mountain stands approximately 250 feet (75 metres) tall and is renowned for its intricate network of caves and towering passageways. The rock formations are uniquely formed from the limestone being eroded by rivers and rain. The caves maintain a moderate temperature, providing a cool retreat during the hot summers and a warmer shelter in the winters.

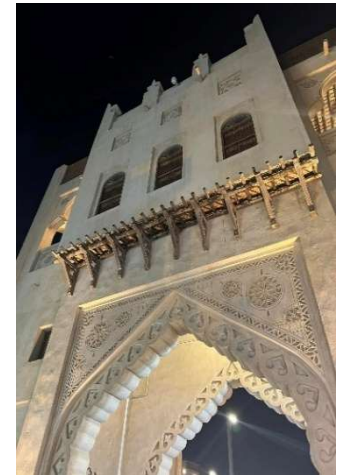
The caves are also home to the Judas Cave where, according to tradition, it is believed that Judas Iscariot ended his life following his betrayal of Jesus. This association adds a layer of mystique to the cave, attracting both tourists and pilgrims interested in its historical and spiritual significance. I reckon that the 1240 miles (1995 kilometres) distance from the site of the crucifixion to these caves makes this a little unlikely???



## Al Qaisaryah Market

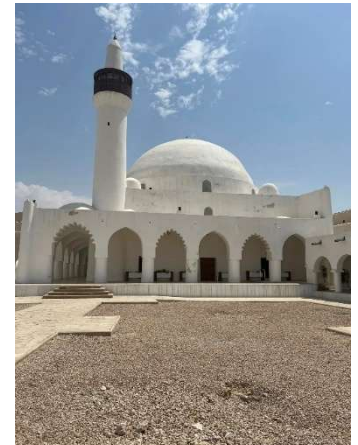


Al Qaisaryah Market, located in Al Ahsa, is one of the oldest traditional markets in Saudi Arabia. It dates back several centuries and showcases the region's rich commercial heritage. The market's architecture features narrow alleys and over 400 shops, offering a variety of goods such as spices, textiles, handicrafts, and traditional garments. In spite of its age, the market looks rather new which isn't surprising since the market underwent a significant restoration after a fire in 2001, preserving its historical essence while incorporating modern safety measures.



## Ibrahim Palace (Qasr Ibrahim)

Ibrahim Palace, also known as Qasr Ibrahim, is a historic fort located in Al Hofuf. It was constructed during the Ottoman period in the 16th century and served as a Turkish military base before being seized by King Abdul-Aziz Al Saud in April 1913. The palace was constructed in 1556 and served as a castle, prison and Turkish bath. The palace combines Islamic and Ottoman architectural styles, featuring a prominent dome, arches and a mosque within its premises.



## Al Koot Heritage Hotel

The Al Koot Heritage Hotel is housed in a restored historical building and features authentic architectural elements such as mud-brick walls, wooden beams and intricate carvings. The building was originally a 200-year-old palace and was subsequently converted into a beautiful hotel incorporating a heritage theme and showcasing antiques to introduce tourists to the region's history and culture. The hotel comprises eight suited with each one uniquely decorated to reflect the region's cultural heritage, providing a blend of comfort and history.



## Al Ahsa Palm Oasis



Al Ahsa Oasis is the largest oasis in Saudi Arabia and a UNESCO World Heritage site. The oasis contains evidence of human settlements dating back to 5,000 BC, making it one of the oldest known inhabited regions in the Arabian Peninsula. Al Ahsa Oasis boasts over 2.5 million palm trees, primarily date palms, which have been cultivated for centuries. The oasis is a testament to the region's ingenious irrigation systems including ancient canals, wells and springs that have sustained agriculture in the arid environment.



## Chapter 8: Reflections on Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia successfully manages to merge ancient heritage with futuristic ambition. As the birthplace of Islam, it holds profound spiritual significance, anchored by Mecca and Medina, while its cities pulse with modernity under Vision 2030—a transformative plan to diversify the economy and boost tourism.

Riyadh, the capital, epitomizes this duality, blending skyscrapers like the Kingdom Centre Tower with historic sites such as the Al Masmak Fortress. The city's cutting-edge metro system and Zaha Hadid-designed KAFD station and KAPSARC underscore its rapid urban evolution.

Jeddah, the coastal "Gateway to Mecca," charms with its UNESCO-listed Al Balad district, the world's tallest fountain, and the unfinished Jeddah Tower—a symbol of aspirational engineering. AIUla, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, captivates with Nabataean tombs akin to Petra and surreal landscapes like Elephant Rock.

The mirrored Maraya Concert Hall exemplifies innovative design harmonising with the surrounding desert. The Eastern Provinces, including Dammam and Khobar, offer cosmopolitan energy alongside industrial might, while the King Fahd Causeway bridges Saudi Arabia to Bahrain.

Natural wonders abound: Taif's rose-scented highlands and Abha's misty mountains. Cultural gems like Diriyah's mud-brick ruins, Al Bahah's ancient villages and the various archaeological sites (including some amazing rock art) highlight Saudi Arabia's deep historical roots.

More recently, I particularly enjoyed exploring the northwest and southwest regions of Saudi especially the coastal route alongside the Red Sea from Al Aajh to Jeddah and Jeddah to Jazan. Unfortunately, my visa expired before I got to Neom ..... maybe another day?

Despite media critiques of conservatism, the Kingdom is evolving. Women now drive cars and pilot planes, entertainment centres like Boulevard Riyadh and Mayadin Theatre thrive and tourists are welcome. Saudi Arabia balances tradition with reinvention, inviting travellers to explore its deserts, heritage and future.



The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



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