

# Kuwait

# الكويت

Kuwait, in the cradle of one of the most ancient and most-contested corners of the world, is best described as a city state. The burgeoning capital, Kuwait City, is like a magnet: indeed it has been attracting Bedouin people from the Arabian interior, in search of a sea breeze and an escape from recurring drought, for centuries. Today the metropolis is still an oasis in a land of desert plains, but rather more of the cultural and epicurean kind. Excellent museums; a corniche ornamented with combed beaches and extravagant restaurants; modern shopping complexes and marinas, and long and lazy retreats at new beach resorts mark the Kuwait City experience.

Between one ostentatious building project and another, it's almost possible to overlook the Iraqi invasion – almost, but not quite. A decade has passed, but Kuwaitis are still smarting from the devastating experience and there are many visible reminders of the war (high security around hotels, and museums dedicated to the invasion). As such, it's surprising to find there is little ostensible animosity between Kuwaitis and their northern neighbours.

Outside Kuwait City there are few attractions, except at resorts dotted along the coast. Tourist development of the historical island of Failaka is still in the planning stage, flat desert plains are given over to oil excavation and, with the exception of Mutla Ridge, there are few distinctive geographical features. That said, there is always something to see in a desert, with a bit of patience and an eye for detail; when it comes to the ritual camping expedition, Kuwaiti people seem to have plenty of both.

## FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Kuwait
- **Capital** Kuwait City
- **Area** 17,818 sq km
- **Population** 2.8 million
- **Country Code** ☎ 965
- **Head of State** Emir Shaikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah
- **Annual number of tourists** 91,000
- **Stereotypes** 'Filthy rich' with 10% of the world's oil reserves
- **Surprises** Wealth not as conspicuously evident as may be expected



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Scientific Center Aquarium** (p158) Appreciate the life of a mudhopper in the magnificent display of marine life at the Scientific Center.
- **Tareq Rajab Museum** (p163) Compare regional headdresses in this gem of an ethnographic collection that escaped the Iraqi invasion.
- **Kuwait Towers** (p160) Take an eagle's eye view of the city and the Gulf from Kuwait's famous triple towers.
- **Al-Boom restaurant** (p169) Dine in a dhow in the shadow of the largest wooden boat on earth, Al-Hashemi II.
- **Kuwait House of National Memorial Museum** (p163) Be reminded of war and its heroes in a country that has put its tribulations to rest.

## ITINERARIES

- **Kuwait Stopover** Spend the morning learning about Kuwait's marine inheritance at the Al-Hashemi Marine Museum (p164), then come eye to eye with the incoming tide at the Scientific Center's aquarium (p158). Potter the length of the Corniche (Arabian Gulf St), pausing at Kuwait Towers (p160) for an aerial view of the city. Get a feel for the country's Bedouin history at Sadu House (p161), take lunch around the courtyard in a typical Kuwaiti house at Beit 7 (p168), and sample local desserts in the city's most traditional souq, Souq Marbarakia (p169). Return to the water (or dry dock to be exact) for dinner on the dhow at Al-Boom (p169).
- **Three Days** Put Kuwait in a regional context by comparing musical instruments and gold jewellery at Tareq Rajab Museum's stunning ethnographical collection (p163). Take a more global view in the city's modern Sharq souq on the seafront and continue the theme by lunching 'internationally' at Le Notre (p169) on the Corniche before spending the rest of the day joining local and expatriate shoppers hunt for brand names in Salmiya district. If your three days span a week-end, then make sure you enjoy a morning among flapping Afghan carpets, velvet furniture and plastic flowers in the Friday Market (p163).
- **One week** Spare a thought for the events of the past decade by visiting the dimin-

ished National Museum (p161), sense the still-smarting scars of war in the Kuwait House of National Memorial Museum (p163) or Al-Qurain Martyrs' Museum (p165), and drive out to Al-Jahra's Mutla Ridge (p172). Brighten up a sobering day with picnicking Kuwaiti families on the road to Sabiyah or gauge the city's remarkable reconstruction with a tour of modern architecture, including the Arab Fund Building (p162). For an altogether more tranquil experience, book in for a day of R&R at the Hilton Kuwait Resort (p168), on a silky stretch of coastline with sequined waters, or explore Wafra Farms (p172) to enjoy some greenery in the unremitting desert.

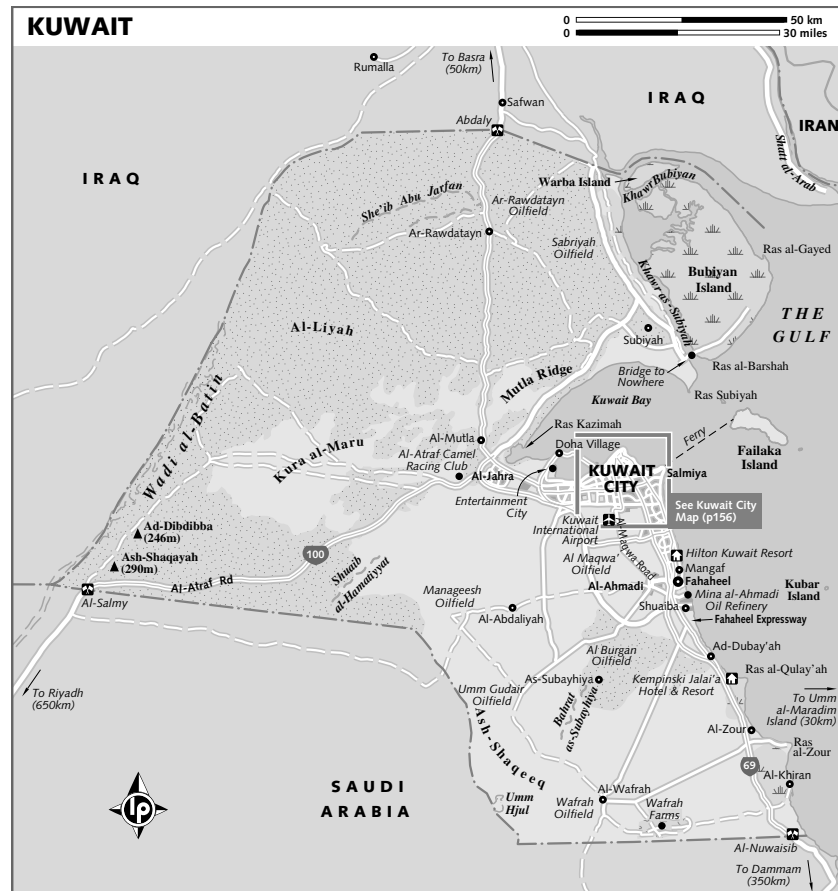
## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

In summer (April to September) Kuwait is intensely hot. The fact that it is not quite as humid as neighbouring Gulf States is not much consolation. There are plenty of air-conditioned amenities, however, to make a summer visit tolerable.

The winter months are positively chilly in the evenings, but with pleasant daytime temperatures hovering around 18°C. Sandstorms occur throughout the year, and are particularly common in spring (February to April). During spring, the desert is laced in a gossamer of lime green and the city is decorated with petunias, making it the most pleasant time to visit. See p530 for a Kuwait City climate chart.

## HISTORY Strategic Importance

At the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, there was some speculation, in Western countries at least, as to why such an unprepossessing splinter of desert should be worth the trouble. Of course, anyone watching the retreating Iraqi army, under skies black from burning wells, could find an easy answer: oil. But oil was only half of the story. Kuwait is not, nor has it ever been, simply a piece of oil-rich desert. Rather, it represents a vital (in all senses of the word) piece of coast that for centuries has provided settlement, trade and a strategic staging post. The latter is a point not lost on US military forces, who until recently camped out on Failaka Island. A decade ago, the same island, at the mouth



of Kuwait Bay, was occupied by the Iraqis. Roughly 2300 years before that, it was the turn of the ancient Greeks, attracted to one of only two natural harbours in the Gulf; and 2000 years earlier still, it belonged to the great Dilmun empire, based in Bahrain. The country has a curious way of cleaning up history once the protagonists have departed, and just as there's very little evidence of recent events without some determined (and ill-advised) unearthing, the same could be said of the rest of Kuwait's 10,000 years of history.

## Early History

Standing at the bottom of Mutla Ridge on the road to Bubiyan Island, and star-

ing across the springtime grasslands at the estuary waters beyond, it's easy enough to imagine why Stone Age man chose to inhabit the area around Ras Subiyah, on the northern shores of Kuwait Bay. Here the waters are rich in silt from the mighty river systems of southern Iraq, making for abundant marine life. Evidence of the first proper settlement in the region dates from 4500 BC, and shards of pottery, stone walls, tools, a small drilled pearl and remains of what is perhaps the world's earliest seafaring boat indicate links with the Ubaid people who populated ancient Mesopotamia. The people of Dilmun also saw the potential of living in the mouth of two of the world's great river systems and built a

large town on Failaka Island, the remains of which form some of the best structural evidence of Bronze Age life in the world.

### The Greeks on Failaka Island

A historian called Arrian, in the time of Alexander the Great, first put the region on the map by referring to an island discovered by one of Alexander's generals en route to India. Alexander himself is said to have called this, the modern-day island of Failaka, Ikaros, and it soon lived up to its Greek name as a Hellenistic settlement that thrived between the 3rd and 1st centuries BC. With temples dedicated to Artemis and Apollo, an inscribed stele with instructions to the inhabitants of this high-flying little colonial outpost, stashes of silver Greek coins, busts and decorative friezes, Ikaros became an important trading post on the route from Mesopotamia to India. While there is still a column or two standing proud among the weeds, and the odd returning Kuwaiti trying to resettle amid the barbed wire, there's little left to commemorate the vigorous trading in pearls and incense by the Greeks. There's even less to show for the Christian community that settled among the ruins thereafter.

### Growth of Kuwait City

Over time, Kuwait's main settlements shifted from island to mainland. In AD 500 the area around Ras Khazimah, near Al-Jahra, was the main centre of population, and it took a further 1200 years for the centre of activity to nudge along the bay to Kuwait City. When looking at the view from the top of the Kuwait Towers, it's hard to imagine that 350 years ago this enormous city was comprised of nothing more illustrious than a few Bedouin tents clustered around a storehouse-cum-fort. Like a tide, its population swelled in the intense summer heat as nomadic families drifted in from the bone-dry desert and then receded as the winter months stretched good grazing across the interior.

Permanent families living around the fort became able and prosperous traders. One such family, Al-Sabah, whose descendants now rule Kuwait, assumed responsibility for local law and order, and under their governance, the settlement grew quickly. By 1760, when the town's first wall was built,

the community had a distinctive character. It was comprised of merchant traders, centred around a dhow and ocean-going boom fleet of 800 vessels, and a craft-oriented internal trade, arising from the camel caravans plying the route from Baghdad and Damascus to the interior of the Arabian Peninsula.

### Relations with the British

By the early 19th century, as a thriving trading port, Kuwait City was well in the making. However, trouble was always quite literally just over the horizon. There were pirates marauding the waters of the Arabian coast; Persians snatched Basra in the north; various Arab tribes from the west and south had their own designs; and then, of course, there were the ubiquitous Ottomans. Though the Kuwaitis generally got on well with the Ottomans, official Kuwaiti history is adamant that the sheikhdom always remained independent of them, and it is true that as the Turks strengthened their control of eastern Arabia (then known as Al-Hasa), the Kuwaitis skilfully managed to avoid being absorbed by the empire. Nonetheless, Al-Sabah emirs accepted the nominal Ottoman title of 'Provincial Governors of Al-Hasa'.

Enter the British. The Kuwaitis and the British were natural allies in many regards. From the 1770s the British had been contracted to deliver mail between the Gulf and Aleppo in Syria. Kuwait, meanwhile, handled all the trans-shipments of textiles, rice, coffee, sugar, tobacco, spices, teak and mangrove to and from India, and played a pivotal role in the overland trade to the Mediterranean. The British helped to stop the piracy that threatened the seafaring trade, but were not in a position to repel the Ottoman incursions – that is until the most important figure in Kuwait's modern history stepped onto the stage. Sheikh Mubarak al-Sabah al-Sabah, commonly known as Mubarak the Great (r 1896–1915), was deeply suspicious that Constantinople planned to annex Kuwait. Concerned that the emir was sympathetic towards the Ottomans, he killed him, not minding he was committing fratricide as well as regicide, and installed himself as ruler. Crucially, in 1899, he signed an agreement with Britain: in exchange for the British

navy's protection, he promised not to give territory to, take support from or negotiate with any other foreign power without British consent. The Ottomans continued to claim sovereignty over Kuwait, but they were now in no position to enforce it. For Britain's part, Prussia, the main ally and financial backer of Turkey, was kept out of the warm waters of the Gulf and trade continued as normal.

### Rags to Riches in the 20th Century

Mubarak the Great laid down the foundations of a modern state. Under his reign, government welfare programmes provided for public schools and medical services. In 1912, postal and telegraphic services were established, and water-purification equipment was imported for the American Mission Hospital. According to British surveys from this era, Kuwait City numbered 35,000 people, with 3000 permanent residents, 500 shops and three schools, and nearly 700 pearling boats employing 10,000 men.

In the 1920s a new threat in the guise of the terrifying *ikhwan* (brotherhood) came from the Najd, the interior of Arabia. This army of Bedouin warriors was commanded by Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al-Saud (Ibn Saud), the founder of modern Saudi Arabia. Despite having received hospitality from the Kuwaitis during his own years in the wilderness, so to speak, he made no secret of his belief that Kuwait belonged to the new kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Red Fort, currently being restored at Al-Jahra, was the site of a famous battle in which the Kuwaitis put up a spirited defence. They also hurriedly constructed a new city wall, the gates of which can be seen today along Al-Soor St in Kuwait City. In 1923 the fighting ended with a British-brokered treaty under which Abdul Aziz recognised Kuwait's independence, but at the price of two-thirds of the emirate's territory.

The Great Depression that sunk the world into poverty coincided with the demise of Kuwait's pearling industry as the market became flooded with Japanese cultured pearls. At the point when the future looked most dire for Kuwait, however, an oil concession was granted in 1934 to a US-British joint venture known as the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC). The first wells were sunk in 1936 and by 1938 it was obvious

that Kuwait was virtually floating on oil. WWII forced KOC to suspend its operations, but when oil exports took off after the war, Kuwait's economy was launched on an unimagineable trajectory of wealth.

In 1950, Sheikh Abdullah al-Salem al-Sabah (r 1950–65) became the first 'oil sheikh'. His reign was not, however, marked by the kind of profligacy with which that term later came to be associated. As the country became wealthy, health care, education and the general standard of living improved dramatically. In 1949 Kuwait had only four doctors; by 1967 it had 400.

### Independence

On 19 June 1961, Kuwait became an independent state and the obsolete agreement with Britain was dissolved by mutual consent. In an act of foreboding, the President of Iraq, Abdulkarim Qasim, immediately claimed Kuwait as Iraqi territory. British forces, later replaced by those of the Arab League (which Kuwait joined in 1963), faced down the challenge, but the precedent was not so easily overcome.

Elections for Kuwait's first National Assembly were held in 1962. Although representatives of the country's leading merchant families won the bulk of the seats, radicals had a toehold in the parliament from its inception. Despite the democratic nature of the constitution and the broad guarantees of freedoms and rights – including freedom of conscience, religion and press, and equality before the law – the radicals immediately began pressing for faster social change, and the country changed cabinets three times between 1963 and 1965. In August 1976 the cabinet resigned, claiming that the assembly had made day-to-day governance impossible, and the emir suspended the constitution and dissolved the assembly. It wasn't until 1981 that the next elections were held, but then parliament was dissolved again in 1986. In December 1989 and January 1990 an extraordinary series of demonstrations took place calling for the restoration of the 1962 constitution and the reconvening of parliament.

### The Invasion of Iraq

Despite these political and economic tensions, by early 1990 the country's economic prospects looked bright, particularly with

an end to the eight-year Iran–Iraq War, during which time Kuwait had extended considerable support to Iraq. In light of this, the events that followed were all the more shocking to most people in the region. On 16 July 1990, Iraq sent a letter to the Arab League accusing Kuwait of exceeding its Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) quota and of stealing oil from the Iraqi portion of an oilfield straddling the border. The following day Iraqi president Saddam Hussein hinted at military action. The tanks came crashing over the border at 2am on 2 August and the Iraqi military was in Kuwait City before dawn. By noon they had reached the Saudi frontier. The Kuwaiti emir and his cabinet fled to Saudi Arabia.

On 8 August, Iraq annexed the emirate. Western countries, led by the USA, began to enforce a UN embargo on trade with Iraq, and in the months that followed more than half a million foreign troops amassed in Saudi Arabia. On 15 January, after a deadline given to Iraq to leave Kuwait had lapsed, Allied aircraft began a five-week bombing campaign nicknamed ‘Desert Storm’. The Iraqi army quickly crumbled and on 26 February 1991, Allied forces arrived in Kuwait City to be greeted by jubilant crowds – and by clouds of acrid black smoke from oil wells torched by the retreating Iraqi army. Ignoring demands to retreat unarmed and on foot, a stalled convoy of Iraqi armoured tanks, cars and trucks trying to ascend Mutla Ridge became the target of a ferocious Allied attack, nicknamed ‘the turkey shoot’.

Physical signs of the Iraqi invasion are hard to find in today’s Kuwait. Gleaming shopping malls, new hotels and four-lane highways are all evidence of Kuwait’s efforts to put the destruction behind it. However, the emotional scars have yet to be healed, particularly as hundreds of missing prisoners of war are yet to be accounted for, despite the fall of Saddam Hussein.

### **Kuwait After the Demise of Saddam Hussein**

In March 2003 the Allied invasion of Iraq threw the country into paralysing fear of a return to the bad old days of 1990, and it was only with the death of Saddam Hussein (he was hanged on 30 December 2006)

that Kuwaitis have finally been able to sigh with relief. Without having to look over its shoulder constantly, Kuwait has lost no time in forging ahead with its ambitious plans, including that of attracting a greater number of regional tourists. The annual Hala Shopping Festival in February is proving a successful commercial venture, attracting visitors from across the region, and resorts offer R&R mostly to the international business community. More significantly, cross-border trade with Iraq (particularly of a military kind) has helped fuel the economic boom of the past five years.

### **GOVERNMENT & POLITICS**

On 15 January 2006, the much beloved Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Jaber al-Sabah, died, leaving Crown Prince Sheikh Sa’ad al-Sabah at the helm. Poor health, however, led to Sa’ad’s abdication and the prime minister, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, took over.

Under Kuwait’s 1962 constitution, the emir is the head of state. By tradition the crown prince serves as prime minister. The prime minister appoints the cabinet, usually reserving key portfolios (such as the interior, and foreign affairs and defence) for other members of the ruling family.

The powers of the emir, crown prince and cabinet are tempered somewhat by the 50-member National Assembly, which must approve the national budget and also has the power to question cabinet members. The emir has the power to dissolve the assembly whenever he pleases, but is required by the constitution to hold new elections within 90 days of any such dissolution (a requirement that, historically, has not always been honoured).

Kuwait boasts an elected National Assembly, the role of which is beginning to live up to the hopes of those who support a more Western-style democracy. In May 2005, after years of campaigning, women were at last enfranchised and permitted to run for parliament. A few months later, Aasuma al-Mubarak, an academic by training, was named as the Minister of Planning and Administration. Despite the reticence of hard-line clerics and traditional tribal leaders, women now hold positions of importance in both private and public sectors

Despite greater equality between the genders, only ‘original’ Kuwaiti nationals over the age of 30 are eligible to contest parliamentary seats. Only indigenous Kuwaitis are eligible to vote, although members of the police and armed forces are not eligible. Elections are held every four years, with the next scheduled for 2007.

The country’s parliament is still viewed with some scepticism, as it is considered to stall rather than achieve reforms, but slowly and surely democracy is developing.

### **ECONOMY**

During the late 1970s Kuwait’s stock exchange (the first in the Gulf) was among the top 10 in the world, but a decade later the price of oil collapsed together with a not-entirely-legal parallel financial market, leaving hundreds of people bankrupt. The scandal left behind US\$90 billion in worthless post-dated cheques and a mess that the Kuwaiti government is still trying to sort out. The mid-1980s brought further trouble to the economy as tensions with Iran (including the highly publicised bombings of the US and French embassies) scared away foreign investors. The invasion of the 1990s was an unmitigated financial disaster and the country is still paying back its military debts, while trying not to count the cost of rebuilding the country. As such, it is remarkable to see how spectacularly the economy has bounced back since the turn of the 21st century.

With the country home to 10% of the world’s oil reserves, oil and oil-related products naturally dominate the economy

#### **FAREWELL TO THE 14TH EMIR OF KUWAIT**

Several days of public mourning were declared in January 2006, not just in Kuwait but across the region, to mark the death of Kuwait’s popular 14th emir, Sheikh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah. On the throne since 1977, he survived an assassination attempt in 1985 and was forced into exile in Saudi Arabia during the Iraqi invasion. Subsequently, he helped instigate economic and political reforms that helped bring about the modernisation of Kuwait and for this he won plaudits both at home and abroad.

and, with more than 100 years’ worth of remaining oil, the need to diversify has not been as urgent as it has been in neighbouring countries. Nonetheless, the economy is also buoyed by vibrant banking and commercial sectors, and the encouragement of overseas investment. In addition, Shuwaikh Port still boasts the largest cargo fleet in the Arab world. Tourism is a negligible part of the economy.

The government established a free trade zone in 1998 to offer a combination of incentives to investors, including tax-free personal or corporate income, monetary restrictions and, joy oh joy, minimal bureaucracy.

### **PEOPLE The National Psyche**

It’s easy to imagine that recent events have fashioned a suspicious and bitter mindset among Kuwaitis: young Kuwaiti men (together with family heirlooms) snatched from homes; national treasures ripped from the nation’s museum; the Kuwait Towers used for target practice – these and countless other horrors marked the Iraqi invasion. And then there was the almost as agonising threat of the same occurring only a decade later.

Despite the trauma, however, it is a credit to the national temperament that life in Kuwait is characterised not by suspicion and bitterness but by affable handshakes, courteous business meetings and spending sprees in the capital.

Of course, Kuwaitis haven’t forgotten the invasion; indeed, in the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of memorials and plaques appearing around the city as if, since the demise of Saddam, people are daring to look back and place the event in a historical context at last, rather than trying to forget about the possibility of a repeat occurrence. Groups of school children can be seen shepherded through the Kuwait House of National Memorial Museum knowing this was their parents’ war and not a threat they need to feel defensive about for their own sake.

Kuwaitis are an ambitious and sophisticated people, determined to grasp the commercial opportunities that the 21st century has laid at the doorstep of their continuing wealth but mindful, as Muslims, that what

is written will be. As such, there's not much point in fretting about the future.

## Lifestyle

In common with the rest of the Gulf, Kuwaiti people value privacy and family intimacy at home, while enjoying the company of guests outside. In many instances, 'outside' is the best description of traditional hospitality: while female guests are invited into the house, men are often entertained in tents on the doorstep. These are no scout camp canvases, however, but lavish striped canopies made luxurious with cushions and carpets.

Any visitor lucky enough to partake in tea and homemade delicacies in these '*majlis* al fresco' may be inclined to think that life in Kuwait has retained all the charm and simplicity of its Bedouin roots.

Kuwaitis take a different view, however. Some blame the war for a weakening of traditional values: theft, fraudulent practice, a growing drug problem, higher rates of divorce and incidents of suicidal driving have all increased. Others recognise that the same symptoms are prevalent in any modern society. With a cradle-to-grave welfare system, where 94% of Kuwaiti nationals are 'employed' in government positions, and an economy that has run ahead faster than the culture has been able to accommodate, many Kuwaitis feel their society has become cosseted and indulgent, leaving the younger generation with too much time on their hands to wander off course.

Whatever the reasons, life in Kuwait has clearly changed out of all recognition in the past decade: women work, couples hold hands in public, taboo subjects find expression, and people spend money and raise debts. Indeed, the galloping pace of change is proving a divisive factor in a country of traditionally conservative people. It would be ironic if a society that had survived some of the most sophisticated arsenal of the 20th century fell under the weight of its own shopping malls.

## Population

The last census, at the end of 2004, put Kuwait's population at 2.8 million. Of these, about 35% are Kuwaitis, many of Bedouin ancestry, and the remaining 65% are expats. After liberation, the government announced that it would never again allow

Kuwaitis to become a minority in their own country, implying a target population of about 1.2 million. With an unquenchable desire for servants and drivers, and an equal antipathy for manual labour, it is unlikely the Kuwaitis will ever achieve this target.

There are small inland communities but, to all intents and purposes, Kuwait is a coastal city-state.

A generation of young men are missing after the Iraqi invasion.

## Multiculturalism

The origin of the non-Kuwaiti population has changed considerably in the last decade. Before the Iraqi invasion, 90% of the expat population was from Arab countries, with large volumes of Egyptian labourers, Iranian professionals and over a million Palestinian refugees who arrived after the creation of the Republic of Israel in 1948. Since the invasion, Arab nationalities make up less than 15% of the expat population, with large numbers of Palestinians, in particular, being forced to return to their country of origin – a bitter phrase in the circumstances. As Yasser Arafat was widely regarded as a supporter of the invasion, all Palestinians were tarred with the same brush; some were even court martialled on charges of collaboration.

Today Kuwait resembles other parts of the Gulf in its mix of mainly Indian and Filipino immigrants. Alas, a two-tier society appears to have developed wherein some immigrant workers (Filipino maids, in particular) are subject to virtual slave labour. Talk to many Pakistani or Indian traders, taxi drivers, pump attendants or restaurant workers, however, and they evince a warmth towards the country that is somewhat surprising to the Western bystander: just as the friendly reflections regarding the Iraqi man in the street comes as a surprise when speaking to elder Kuwaitis. In comparison with other countries in the region, Kuwait has a relatively small Western expat population, working almost exclusively in higher-paid professions.

## RELIGION

Most Kuwaitis are Sunni Muslims, though there is a substantial Shiite minority. During the 1980s there was considerable tension, mostly inspired by Iran, between the two

communities, a worry that has returned with sectarian violence over the border in Iraq.

Before the Iraqi invasion, Kuwait was still governed by a strict code of conduct, steered by a devout following of Islam. The invasion shook belief in all kinds of areas, including religious observance. Materialism is beginning to exert as strong an influence on the young as religion used to affect the customs and manners of their Bedouin or seafaring ancestors. Kuwaiti society certainly can't be described as permissive, but the veil in many areas of social exchange is discernibly slipping.

A tolerance towards other religions is evinced through the provision of services at Coptic, Anglican, Evangelical and Orthodox churches in Kuwait City. Kuwait is the only Gulf country to have a strong relationship with the Roman Catholic Church.

## ARTS

Kuwait's artistic endeavours are influenced by the country's Bedouin roots and its seafaring tradition.

The Bedouin arts of weaving, folk tales, songs and dancing are to less and less an extent passed on in the daily lives of modern Kuwaitis, but attempts to preserve them by the activities of cultural centres such as Sadu House (p161) are reassuring.

The seafaring tradition of Kuwait has manifested artistically in the form of sea shanties and seafaring folklore. Shipbuilding developed into an art form, too, in its 18th-century heyday, as can be seen at the Al-Hashemi Marine Museum (p164). Two modern wooden sailing boats, *Mohammedi II* and *Al-Hashemi II*, on the same site as the museum, showcase the aesthetic side of shipbuilding. A tradition of lavish feasting upon the return of ships, which were often out pearling for months at a time, is also heartily alive.

Kuwait City has also developed a lively contemporary art scene with a growing regional reputation for the quality of exhibitions shown at venues such as Boushahri Art Gallery (p170) and Dar Al-Funoon (p170).

## ENVIRONMENT The Land

It has to be said that Kuwait is not the most well-endowed patch of earth, either in terms of the sublime or the picturesque. The

interior consists of a mostly flat, gravelly plain with little or no ground water. Its saving grace is the grassy fringe that greens up prettily across much of the plain late in the spring, providing rich grazing for the few remaining Bedu who keep livestock. The only other geographic feature of any note in a country that measures 185km from north to south and 208km from east to west is Mutla Ridge, just north of Kuwait City. The coast is a little more characterful, with dunes, marshes, salt depressions around Kuwait Bay and an oasis in Al-Jahra.

Of the nine offshore islands, the largest is Bubiyan Island, while Failaka Island is the most historic: there are plans afoot to develop a container port on the former and a vast tourist complex on the latter, but at present there is nothing much to see on either island.

## Wildlife

The anticlockwise flow of Gulf currents favours Kuwait's shoreline by carrying nutrients from the freshwater marshes of Shatt al-Arab and the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates in southern Iraq. The result is a rich and diverse coastline, with an abundance of marine life that even the poisoning of spilt oil has failed to destroy.

## ANIMALS

Pearly goatfish, the oddly spiked tripod fish and the popular dinner fish of silver *pomphrey* are just some of the myriad species of fish that frequent the fishermen's nets along Kuwait Bay. Crabs tunnel in the mud flats near Doha Village, surviving in extreme temperatures and aerating the mud for other less durable bedfellows – such as the tiny mudskipper that sorties out for a mouthful of mud and water with which to build the walls of its castles in the sand. Propped up on their fins for a gulp of oxygen, they provide a tasty titbit for black-winged stilts, teals, lesser-crested terns and huge nesting colonies of socotra cormorants, which share the coastline, and they trap algae in their geometric homes that feed the flamingos.

Inland, birds of prey, including the resident kestrel and the short-toed eagle, roam the escarpments. The desert comes alive at night with rare sightings of caracal, and hedgehog, big-eared fennecs – the smallest

canines in the world – and jerboas, which gain all the liquid they need from the plants and insects they eat. It is easier to spot the dhoub, a monitor lizard with a spiny tail, popular as a barbecue snack. And, of course, no Arab desert is the same without the diligent dung beetle or the scorpion.

In terms of endangered species, given the events of the past few years, it's remarkable that a few more species have not been added to the familiar list of desert mammals, like oryx and gazelle, made regionally extinct through hunting. The desert wolf has apparently made something of a comeback in recent years and has been spotted near residential areas.

## PLANTS

After the winter rains, corridors of purple-flowered heliotrope bloom everywhere, and the highways are decorated with borders of assorted wild flowers. There are about 400 plant species in Kuwait. One of the most common is the bright-green *rimth*, which, along with red-flowered *al-awsaj*, is a favourite of grazing camels. The Bedu still use herb poultices for snake bites. In spring, truffles sprout through the cracked ground in desert wadis, as if remembering that Kuwait was once a delta land of the long-extinct Arabian River.

A particular blow to the country's ecology was the loss of many kilometres of

black mangrove roots and beds of seagrass to oil spillage. These precious and endangered species help to stabilise and extend the country's shoreline, and their damage has been devastating.

## National Parks

Larger than the state of Bahrain, the 863 sq km nature reserve on the northern end of Bubiyan Island is home to many species of birds and animals. Comprised of marshland and creeks, it is a haven for waders. It was heavily mined during the Gulf War and the causeway destroyed. The future could be just as alarming with a port and residential complex planned for the southern part of the island.

## Environmental Issues

While Kuwait shares many of the same environmental concerns as its Gulf neighbours, it has also had to contend with the extraordinary circumstances inflicted by war (see boxed text, opposite). Over a decade later, the casual visitor is unlikely to detect any signs of war either in the desert or along the coast. A thorough cleanup by Pakistani and Bangladeshi troops, and subsequent diligence with regard to the removal of unexploded ordnance, means that Kuwaitis can once again enjoy the ritual camping expedition without fear of danger. Perversely, however, it is now the campers who are threatening the environment with discarded rubbish and heavy use of delicate grazing lands. In addition, relaxed standards with regard to waste and oil dumping have led to concerns about polluted seas along Kuwait's shoreline.

Every year on 24 April, the country observes Regional Environment Day, with school competitions and raised public awareness regarding marine and land resources.

## FOOD & DRINK

Not surprisingly, a particular emphasis on fish occurs in Kuwaiti cuisine. It is often baked or stewed with a particularly Kuwaiti blend of Indian spices, such as coriander, turmeric, red pepper and cardamom, but without the chilli hit. Parsley, onions and dill are used to stuff *hammour* or *pomphrey*, two white-fleshed fish, similar to cod, while pine nuts, cashews and almonds are added to the stuffing on special occasions. Late

autumn and early winter are the best times for sampling Gulf prawns.

Kuwait's seafaring past has brought to this patch of desert an eclectic taste for international cuisine, and visitors can choose from a large selection of restaurants specialising in anything from Iranian stews to a burger and fries.

All drinks are nonalcoholic, but the elaborate mixed fruit cocktails are just as engaging.

Note that in addition to the usual prohibition on eating and drinking, it is illegal to chew gum in public during Ramadan.

# KUWAIT CITY

## مدينة الكويت

With its landmark triple towers looming over a clean and accessible corniche; a first-class aquarium and some excellent museums; stunning pieces of marine and land architecture; malls and souqs to please the most discerning or eclectic of shoppers; and a selection of restaurants to whet the appetite of the fussiest gourmards, Kuwait City is a sophisticated and interesting destination in its own right. Add to its sights and attractions a harrowing layer of modern history, the effects of which rumble invisibly below the surface, and there is enough to keep all but the dedicated nightclubber intrigued for days.

## HISTORY

Kuwait City evolved from a collection of Bedouin tents around a well into a small military outpost with a *kout* (small fort adjacent to water), built in 1672 by the Bani Khalid tribe who came from the Arabian interior to escape drought. The word '*kout*' evolved to give the city (and indeed the country) its name. The outpost continued to attract Arab nomads who migrated east in the hot weather, but its natural harbour also made it an ideal location for a port. Indeed, it proved such an excellent port that it soon came to handle a lucrative trade in frankincense from Oman, pearls from Bahrain, spices from India, textiles from China and dates from just about everywhere. The port also facilitated the transshipment of goods across the desert to the Syrian port

## BLOOMS OF HOPE IN THE DESERT

A coalition of 28 nations fought to drive Iraq's military out of Kuwait in January and February 1991. In the months that followed, an equally impressive international effort helped clean up the ensuing mess.

The environmental damage caused by the Iraqis occurred on an unprecedented scale. On 20 January 1991, the third day of the war, Iraqi forces opened the valves at Kuwait's Mina al-Ahmadi Sea Island Terminal, intentionally releasing millions of litres of oil into the Gulf. The resulting oil slick was 64km wide and 160km long. Between six and eight million barrels of oil are thought to have been released, at least twice as much as in any previous oil spill. At least 460km of coastline, most of it in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, was affected, with devastating consequences for the region's cormorants, migratory birds, dolphins, fish, turtles and large areas of mangrove.

The slick was fought by experts from nine nations and oil companies eventually managed to recover, and reuse, around a million barrels of crude oil from the slick.

The Iraqis were also to blame for the systematic torching of 699 of the emirate's oil wells. By the time the war ended, nearly every well was burning. At a conservative estimate, at least two million barrels of oil per day were lost – equivalent to about 5% of the total daily world consumption. One to two million tonnes of carbon dioxide streamed into the air daily, resulting in a cloud that literally turned day into night across the country.

Like the slick, the fires devastated wildlife throughout the region, but they also had a direct impact on public health. Black, greasy rain caused by the fires was reported as far away as India, and the incidence of asthma increased in the Gulf region.

Initial reports that it would take five years to put all the fires out proved pessimistic. A determined international effort, combined with considerable innovation on the part of the firefighters, extinguished the fires in only eight months. The crews did the job so quickly that one well had to be reignited so that the emir of Kuwait could 'put out the final fire' for reporters in November 1991.

Cleaning up the 65 million barrels of oil, spilt in 300 oil lakes covering around 50 sq km of desert, was not so speedily effected. In a joint project between the Kuwait Institute of Scientific Research (KISR) and the Japanese Petroleum Energy Center (PEC), a bioremediation project was launched to rehabilitate the oil-polluted soil. Through a variety of biological processes, which included composting and bioventing, more than 4000 cubic metres of contaminated soil were treated, resulting in soil of such high quality that it was good enough for landscaping and could be used as topsoil. The Japanese Garden in Al-Ahmadi is a showcase for the miracle 'oil soil'. The garden's 'blooms of hope' are a testimony to international cooperation and the ability of man and nature to outwit the worst that disaster can throw at them. The gardens are currently closed to the public.

of Aleppo, a journey of two to three weeks. Pilgrims returned in the other direction, great caravans taking sustenance for the onward journey to Mecca.

Walls were built around the city in 1760, 1814 and 1920 in an attempt to define as well as confine the city, and five of the original districts – Qibla, Murgab, Sharq, Dasman

and Salhiya – remain. But no number of walls could restrain the oil boom. Within the memory of the older generation, Kuwait City was a nomadic port town and Salmiya consisted of a few mud huts around a tree. Suddenly, within the last two decades, a booming Middle Eastern metropolis has burst from its skin and the city gates are all

that remain of the redundant walls. Three successive master plans have tried to give direction to city growth, allowing for generous mortgages and free housing for the needy, but the growth is organic and unstoppable.

The Iraqi invasion in 1990 tore a piece of the heart out of the city, but remarkably most of the landmark buildings remained standing. Barring the fortifications around hotels and embassies, and the mirror searches under cars, a visitor today is never likely to know how much the city suffered.

## ORIENTATION

Kuwait City is vast. Extending 25km or more from east to west and 12km from north to south, one district runs seamlessly into the next. For the visitor, there are several key landmarks. Most of the city centre, sites of interest and souqs are enclosed by the First Ring Rd and by Arabian Gulf St, which forms the corniche. Near the northernmost point of the corniche are the distinctive triple Kuwait Towers and in the middle of central Kuwait City is the unmistakable Liberation Tower, used for telecommunications.

The main shopping and commercial street is Fahad al-Salem St in the city centre, which becomes Ahmed al-Jaber St north of Safat Sq. The souq is buried in the area between the municipal park and Mubarak al-Kabir St. More international shopping areas are clustered along the lower end of Fahad al-Salem St (near the Kuwait Sheraton hotel), behind the JW Marriott Hotel, along Arabian Gulf St and, for designer labels, further southeast in the shopping district of Salmiya.

The city spreads inland gradually, ringed and bisected by major highways.

## Maps

GEO Projects publishes two maps of Kuwait City found on the back of the country map in its Arab World Map Library. These are available from hotels and bookshops for KD5.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**Kuwait Bookshop** (Map p159; ☎ 242 4289; kbs1935b@qualitynet.net; Basement, Al-Muthanna Centre, Fahad al-Salem St, Safat; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 5-9.30pm

Sat-Thu, 9am-noon & 5-9pm Fri) With a wide selection of bestsellers, books on current affairs and local-interest, this is the best place to look for English-language books.

## Cultural Centres

**Beit Lothan** (Map p156; ☎ 575 5866; baylathan@hotmail.com; Arabian Gulf St, Salmiya) Located in a traditional Kuwaiti house and dedicated to the promotion of arts and crafts; offers courses on crafts, poetry, drawing and painting.

**British Council** (Map p159; ☎ 251 5512; www.britishcouncil.org/kuwait; Al-Arabi St, Mansouria; ☎ 8am-3pm Sat-Wed) Located next to Nadi Al-Arabi stadium. The British Council runs a library, with a comprehensive video section, and gives guidance regarding studying in the UK as well as information on local and regional arts events. It also runs a number of English-language courses and testing services such as IELTS.

**Centre Culturel Français de Koweït** (Map p159; ☎ 257 1061; Villa 24, Block 1, Street 13, Mansouria) Located at the French embassy, there is a library and video cinema; concerts, plays and exhibitions are sometimes organised.

**US Cultural Center** (Map p156; ☎ 539 5307; Plot 14, Block 14, Al-Masjid al-Aqsa St, Bayan) Located at the US embassy, about 17km south of the city centre, the Cultural Center provides information on studying in the US and runs a library.

## Emergency

**Fire, Police & Ambulance** (☎ 777)

## Internet Access

Many of the top-end hotels offer free internet access to guests. There is a growing number of internet cafés in the city centre and in Salmiya.

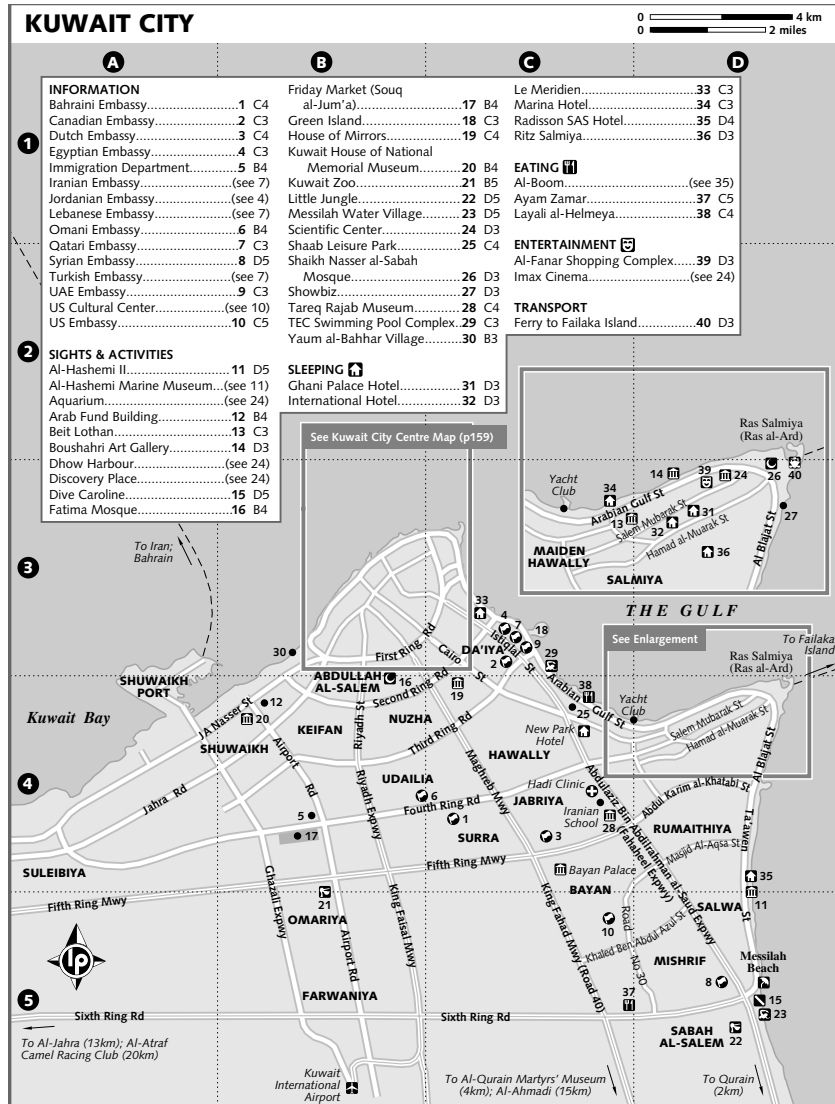
**Kuwait Internet Café** (Map p159; 2nd fl, Al-Dawliyah Centre, Fahad al-Salem St; per hr 250 fils) Located behind the Kuwait Airways building, it offers reasonably fast connections.

## Medical Services

Services in an emergency are provided free or at a minimal charge on a walk-in basis in most city hospitals. The biggest hospital is **Al-Amiri Hospital & Casualty** (Map p159; ☎ 245 0080; Arabian Gulf St).

## Money

Banks are evenly distributed throughout the city. Moneychangers can offer slightly better rates than banks (and usually charge lower commissions); try some of the side streets that run from Safat Sq. Travellers





cheques can be changed at the following places:

**Al-Ghanim Travel** (Map p159; 2nd fl, Salhiya Commercial Centre; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu) American Express (Amex) is found here and card holders can cash personal cheques, but the office will not hold mail for Amex clients.

**Al-Muzaini Exchange** (Map p159; Fahad al-Salem St)  
**UA Exchange** (Map p159; Basement, Burgan Bank Bldg, Fahad al-Salem St)

**Post**

**Kuwait City Post Office** (Map p159; Fahad al-Salem St; ☎ 7am-2pm Sat-Wed, 7am-noon Thu) Located by the intersection with Al-Wattiya St.

**Telephone & Fax**

**Main Telephone Office** (Map p159; cnr Abdullah al-Salem & Al-Hilali Sts; ☎ 24hr) Located at the base of the telecommunications tower. Prepaid international calls can be booked, but international cardphones are cheaper. Fax services are also available.

**Tourist Information**

There is still no official tourist information office in Kuwait despite rumours to the contrary. However, there is a useful website ([www.kuwaittourism.com](http://www.kuwaittourism.com)). The Kuwait Tourism Services Company (p166) is a private company with many years of experience in supplying tourist information.

**Travel Agencies**

Lots of small travel agencies are to be found on Fahad al-Salem and Al-Soor Sts, between Al-Jahra Gate and the Radio and TV building. For helpful service, try the following:

**Al-Ghanim Travel** (Map p159; ☎ 802 112; [travel@alghanim.com](mailto:travel@alghanim.com); 2nd fl, Salhiya Commercial Centre, Fahad Al-Salem St)

**Al-Hogal Travels** (Map p159; ☎ 243 8741; Al-Dawliah Centre)

**Sanbouk Travels and Tours** (Map p159; ☎ 245 7267; Arabian Gulf St) Located opposite Sharq Souq.

**SIGHTS**

Many of Kuwait's sights are concentrated along the corniche and around the National Museum area. While some of the downtown sights are within walking distance of each other, the most convenient way of visiting outlying attractions, or of covering longer stretches of the corniche (Arabian Gulf St), is by taxi.

**Scientific Center**

With time to do nothing else, it would be hard to beat a trip to the excellent **Scientific Center** (Map p156; ☎ 848 888; [www.tsck.org.kw](http://www.tsck.org.kw); Arabian Gulf St, Salmiya; ☎ 9am-9.30pm Sun-Thu, 2-9.30pm Fri). Housed in a fine, sail-shaped building on the corniche, the centre's mesmerising **aquarium** is the largest in the Middle East. A sign of contentment, perhaps, turtles perch on the back of lazy crocodiles, hedgehogs mate, prickles notwithstanding, in the adjacent eco-display, and even the aquarium's guards have taken to humming Arabic love songs. The unique intertidal display, with waves washing in at eye level, is home to shoals of black-spotted sweetlips and the ingenious mudskipper. But the most spectacular part of the display (with giant spider crabs at 3.8m leg to leg, a living reef and fluorescent jellyfish coming in at a close second) is undoubtedly the wraparound, floor-to-ceiling shark and ray tanks. Ring to inquire about current feeding times.

The **IMAX cinema** includes a sensitive feature entitled *Fires of Kuwait*, charting the post-invasion cleanup. **Discovery Place** is an interactive learning centre for children, who can make their own sand dunes or roll a piece of road. There is a pleasant **dhow harbour**, where the *Fateh al-Khair*, the last surviving dhow of the pre-oil era, is moored.

Admission prices vary, depending on which parts of the centre are visited. A ticket to the aquarium or IMAX, for example, costs KD3/2 per adult/child while entrance to Discovery Place is KD2/1.500 per adult/child. A family could easily spend a day here and not get bored.

Salmiya bus stop, for buses 15, 17, 24, 34 and 200, is a short 10-minute (shaded) walk away.

**Corniche**

Comprising over 10km of winding paths, parks and beaches on Arabian Gulf St (sometimes referred to locally as Gulf Rd), the corniche is marked at its southern end by the Scientific Center and at its northernmost point by the Kuwait Towers. Stop off at any one of the many beaches, restaurants or coffeehouses to watch a desert sunset, or, on hot summer evenings, enjoy being part of the throng of people flocking to the sea to catch the breeze.

**KUWAIT CITY CENTRE**

0 1 km  
0 0.5 miles

<b>1</b>	<b>INFORMATION</b>	Dar al-Funoon.....18 A5	<b>EATING</b>
	Al-Amiri Hospital & Casualty.....1 C3	Grand Mosque.....19 B4	Beit 7.....35 A5
	Al-Dawliah Centre.....2 A5	Ice Skating Rink.....20 B6	Breadz.....(see 41)
	Al-Ghanim Travel.....(see 12)	Kuwait Tourism Services Company.....(see 20)	Burj al-Hamam.....36 D4
	Al-Hogal Travels.....(see 2)	Kuwait Towers.....21 D3	English Tea Lounge.....37 A6
	Al-Muzaini Exchange.....3 A5	Liberation Tower.....(see 9)	Indian Snack Shop.....(see 29)
	American Express.....(see 12)	Mountain Fountains.....22 C6	Le Notre.....38 D4
	British Council.....4 D6	National Assembly Building.....23 A5	Restaurant 99.....39 A6
	British Embassy.....5 D3	National Museum.....24 A5	Sultan Centre.....(see 41)
	Centre Culturel Francais de Koweit.....(see 6)	Old Kuwaiti Town.....25 A5	<b>SHOPPING</b>
	French Embassy.....6 C6	Planetarium.....(see 24)	Al-Muthana Centre.....40 A5
	German Embassy.....7 C6	Popular Traditional Museum.....(see 24)	Sharq Souq.....41 C3
	Kuwait Bookshop.....(see 40)	Sadu House.....26 A4	Sultan Centre.....(see 41)
	Kuwait City Post Office.....8 A5	Science & Natural History Museum.....27 B5	<b>TRANSPORT</b>
	Kuwait Internet Café.....(see 2)	Sief Palace.....28 B4	Combined Shipping Company.....42 C4
	Main Telephone Office.....9 B5	Souq Marbarakia.....(see 29)	Emirates Airlines.....43 B5
	Ministry of Information (Radio & TV Building).....10 C5	Souq ad-Dahab al-Markazi.....30 B4	Gulf Air.....44 B5
	Moneychangers.....11 A5	Souq al-Hareem.....(see 29)	Kuwait Airways.....45 A5
	Salhiya Commercial Centre.....12 A5	<b>SLEEPING</b>	Kuwait Public Transport Co.....(see 46)
	Sanbouk Travels & Tours.....13 C3	Kuwait Continental Hotel.....31 D4	Main Bus Station.....46 B5
	Saudi Arabian Embassy.....14 C3	Le Meridien Tower Kuwait.....32 A6	Maudi Arabian Airlines.....47 B4
	UAE Exchange.....15 A5	Oasis Hotel.....33 B4	Sharq Marina.....(see 41)
	<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>	Plaza Athenee Hotel.....34 D4	
	Aqua Park.....(see 21)		
	Beit al-Badr.....16 A4		
	Beit Dixon.....17 B4		

KUWAIT

KUWAIT



The private residences, some of which belong to the ruling family, light up the opposite side of the corniche at night.

### Kuwait Towers

Kuwait's most famous landmark, the **Kuwait Towers** (Map p159; ☎ 244 4021; Arabian Gulf St, Dasman; observation deck admission KD1; ☎ observation deck 9am-midnight), with their distinctive green 'sequins', are worth a visit for the prospect of sea and city that they afford.

Designed by a Swedish architectural firm and opened in 1979, the largest of the three towers rises to a height of 187m, and houses a two-level revolving observation deck, gift shop and café. The lower globe on the largest tower stores around one million gallons of water. The middle tower is also used for water storage, while the smallest tower is used to light up the other two.

A **collection of photographs** show how the so-called 'barbarian invaders' tried to destroy the symbol of Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion.

### Beit Dickson

A modest, white building with blue trim, **Beit Dickson** (Map p159; ☎ 243 7450; Arabian Gulf St;

admission free; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 4-7.30pm Sat-Wed) was the home of former British political agent Colonel Harold Dickson and his wife Violet whose love of and contribution to Kuwait is well documented.

Freya Stark spent most of March 1937 in the house and, while she adored Kuwait, she described the house as a 'big ugly box'. Nonetheless, a collection of photographs taken during Kuwait's British protectorate era; a replica museum of the Dixons' living quarters; and an archive of Kuwaiti-British relations that dates from the 19th century to the 1960s, when Kuwait was granted independence, make the museum an interesting place in which to spend an hour.

### Sief Palace

This is the official seat of the emir's court. The L-shaped **Sief Palace** (Map p159; Arabian Gulf St) that faces the roundabout is the original palace dating from the early 20th century, while the new and ponderously opulent palace, complete with lake, helipad and dock for visitors' yachts, was completed around the beginning of 2000. The palace is not open to the public and photography is prohibited.

### BUILDING WEALTH

There are few buildings in the region as iconic as the Kuwait Towers (above). Their slender columns and plump water reservoirs are symbolic of the way in which a city has blossomed from humble beginnings. Nor are they Kuwait's only bid for the skies: Liberation Tower (p162), the fifth-largest communication tower in the world, illustrates how the city, despite the troubles of the past 20 years, is keen to win international status as concrete as the oil reserves upon which it sits.

Kuwait's extraordinary modern wealth has been expressed in many other pieces of civic pride. The flamboyant National Assembly Building (opposite), designed by Jørn Utzon of Sydney Opera House fame, resembles a piece of unfurled silk, evoking both the canopy of a Bedouin tent and a sail-furled dhow, while expressing modernist concepts of negative space and the sculpture of light and shade. Then there's the Arab Fund Building (p162), with its expression of the integrity of space and function, light and communication, and combining modern interior design with a traditional Islamic aesthetic.

Considerable wealth has also been channelled into religious architecture, with some 60% of Kuwait's mosques financed and built by individuals. The Grand Mosque (opposite), across from Sief Palace on Arabian Gulf St, with the tallest minaret in the country; the green-and-white pudding bowl of Fatima Mosque (Map p156) in Abdullah al-Salem; and the pyramid-shaped Shaikh Nasser al-Sabah Mosque in Ras Salmiya (also known as Ras al-Ard) all contend as exceptional pieces of modern mosque design.

But, descending from god to mammon, it is the shopping malls that have been constructed during the last few years that have provided the modern architect with the greatest scope. Sharq Souq (p170) on Arabian Gulf St is a case in point; with its wind-tower design and adjoining marina, architects are clearly free to build on the city's humble Bedouin and seafaring beginnings both metaphorically and literally.

### Grand Mosque

Also known as Masjed Al-Kabir, and located opposite Sief Palace, the **Grand Mosque** (Map p159; ☎ 246 7058, 241 8447; www.freekuwait.com/mosque; Mubarak al-Kabir St) was opened in 1986 and cost KD14 million to construct. The largest of the city's 800 mosques, it boasts Kuwait's highest minaret (74m) and can accommodate up to 5000 worshippers in the main hall, with room for another 7000 in the courtyard. Prebooked tours are possible between 9am and 4pm Saturday to Wednesday and it is respectful to dress modestly, covering arms and legs.

### National Museum Complex

Once the pride of Kuwait, the **National Museum** (Map p159; ☎ 245 1195; Arabian Gulf St, Qibla; admission 250 fils; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 4-7pm Sun-Fri, 4-7pm Sat) is still under restoration. The centre-piece of the museum, the **Al-Sabah collection**, was one of the most important collections of Islamic art in the world. During the Iraqi occupation, however, the exhibition halls were systematically looted, damaged or set fire to.

Following intense pressure from the UN, the majority of the museum's collection was eventually returned, but many pieces had been broken in transit, poorly stored and, some suggest, deliberately spoiled. Nonetheless, this beleaguered collection has since been displayed in London's British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York while waiting to be restored in its entirety to Kuwait's National Museum.

Over 2000 items are now on display, covering various aspects of Kuwait's national heritage, and a newly opened hall displays ancient treasures from Failaka Island, including stamps and seals from the Bronze Age, axe heads and a wonderful Hellenistic limestone dolphin. The dhow in the courtyard (a replica of *Muhallab II* that was destroyed by the Iraqis) makes a good photo opportunity at sunset.

The quaint **Popular Traditional Museum** (☎ 272 9158) – variously described as the Heritage Museum and Culture Museum – is in Building 2, in the rear of the museum complex. It illustrates daily life in pre-oil Kuwait through a diorama of full-sized figures going about their various businesses – be sure to see the bead maker and what

the museum booklet describes as the 'men's over-robe tailor'.

The wonderful, modern **Planetarium** (☎ 245 6534) in the museum complex has shows at around 6pm daily: local children, convinced the room is spinning, clap in syncopated beats every time the accompanying music begins.

Buses 12 and 16 (departing from the main bus station) stop a couple of blocks from the museum complex.

### Sadu House

Forming part of the National Museum complex, **Sadu House** (Map p159; ☎ 243 2395; www.sadu-house.com; Arabian Gulf St, Qibla; admission free; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7.30pm Sat-Thu) is a cultural foundation dedicated to preserving Bedouin arts and crafts. It is also the best place in Kuwait to buy Bedouin goods, such as pillows (KD5) and small bags (KD7 to KD15). The house is built of gypsum and coral, with fine decorations in the courtyard and an elegant use of light and space.

The **Kuwait Textile Arts Association** (☎ 390 3462; ktaaworkshop@yahoo.com) holds a variety of *sadu* (Bedouin-style) and other weaving courses, taught by Bedouin women, at Sadu House.

### Beit al-Badr

A traditional mud-built house, with heavy carved doors, **Beit al-Badr** (Map p159; ☎ 242 9158; Arabian Gulf St, Qibla; admission free; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Wed) was built between 1838 and 1848 and is one of the last examples of pre-oil residential architecture in the city. It is located alongside Sadu House.

### National Assembly Building

Close to the National Museum, the interesting white building with its distinctive canopy, the **National Assembly Building** (Map p159; ☎ 241 8949, 243 6381; Arabian Gulf St, Qibla), was designed by Jørn Utzon, the Danish architect who also designed the Sydney Opera House, and was completed in 1985. The two sweeping roofs were designed to evoke Bedouin tents and the building is befitting of the first parliament of the region.

### Old Kuwaiti Town

Situated just west of the dhow harbour, near the National Assembly Building, the houses in this complex of **replica 19th-century**

**dwellings** (Map p159; Arabian Gulf St, Qibla; admission free) gives a good idea of what Kuwait City would have looked like before the discovery of oil. Part of the complex is lived in, while the other part is given over to some of the city's best restaurants.

## Souq

True to its origins, Kuwait City has retained the **old souq** (Map p159; btwn Mubarak al-Kabir, Ahmad al-Jaber & Ali al-Salem Sts; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-9pm Sat-Thu, 4-9pm Fri) in all of its complex, bustling and convoluted glory in the city centre. Albeit partly housed now in a smart, modern building, complete with cubby-holes of lockable wooden shutters, it nonetheless exudes antique practices, from the sharp haggling over ribands of offal and tails of ox, to the quick-witted trading of olives and dates in the extensive food halls of **Souq Marbarakia**. It's a wonderful place to idle a few hours, and indeed an entire lunch time could be spent sampling delicacies without ever setting foot in one of the numerous snack shops that line the outer rim of the souq.

The souq also comprises the small, covered **Souq al-Hareem**, where Bedouin women sit cross-legged on cushions of velvet selling *kohl* (black eyeliner), pumice stones,

and gold-spangled dresses (KD1) in the red, white and green livery of the Kuwaiti flag. Beyond the covered alleyway, the souq opens out into alleys stocked with woolen vests and Korean blankets.

The close-by **Souq ad-Dahab al-Markazi** is the city's central gold market.

## Liberation Tower

Not to be confused with the distinctive Kuwait Towers, **Liberation Tower** (Map p159; ☎ 242 9166; cnr Al-Hilali & Abdullah al-Salem Sts, Safat) in the city centre is the tallest building in the city, and at a height of 372m claims to be the fifth-tallest communications tower in the world. Started before the invasion, the tower took its new name when it was completed in 1993.

## Science & Natural History Museum

For an eclectic range of exhibits from electronics and space paraphernalia to fossils, stuffed animals and an 18m whale skeleton, this **museum** (Map p159; ☎ 242 1268; Abdullah al-Mubarak St, Safat; adult/child 150/100 fils; ☎ 9am-noon & 4.30-7.30pm Sat-Wed), near Liberation Tower, also has a **planetarium** with a Galaxy Skyshow at 6pm.

## Old City Gates

**Al-Shaab, Al-Shamiya, Al-Jahra** and **Al-Maqsab** are the names of Kuwait City's gates in Safat on Al-Soor St, the street that follows the line of the old city wall ('soor' is the Arabic word for 'wall'). Despite their ancient appearance, the wall and gates were only constructed around 1920. The wall was demolished in 1957.

## Yaum Al-Bahhar Village

With traditional wind-tower architecture, this small area of **craft workshops** (Map p156; Arabian Gulf St, Shuwaikh; admission free) is part of a development along the coast that includes walking paths and fountains. The workshops are open at variable times and some of the items are for sale. Not-for-the-faint-hearted crafts include stuffed bustard, an endangered bird, and shell decorations that you wouldn't wish on your enemy.

## Arab Fund Building

Although not strictly open to the casual caller, the impressive **Arab Fund Building** (Map p156; ☎ 484 4500; www.arabfund.org/aohq;

Airport Rd, Shuwaikh; admission free), with a host of exceptionally beautiful rooms, is worth the trouble of gaining access. Call first to request an appointment and explain that you wish to see the building's interior and you'll be given a guided tour by one of the employees.

The gravity of the exterior belies the light and airy interior, designed upon Arabic architectural principles of integrity of space, decoration and function. The magnificent eight-storey atrium with wooden lattices, opening onto a transparent corridor or an exquisite hidden *majlis* (meeting room), is an exciting reinterpretation of a familiar theme. Traditional craftsmanship from around the Arab world is represented in lavish concoctions of ceramic, carpet and woodwork in one of the most extraordinary expressions of postmodern eclecticism in the Gulf.

## Beit Lothan

The cultural centre, **Beit Lothan** (Map p156; ☎ 575 5866; lothan@hotmail.com; Arabian Gulf St, Salmiya; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4.30-9pm Sat-Wed), promotes the work of Kuwaiti and Gulf artists and craftspeople through regular exhibitions in a 1930s house that was originally the home of the country's late emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah.

## Kuwait House of National Memorial Museum

This innovative **museum** (Map p156; ☎ 484 5335; opposite prime minister's residence, Shuwaikh; admission KD1; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 4.30-8.30pm) encapsulates the horror of the Iraqi invasion and honours the sacrifices that ordinary Kuwaiti citizens, the Kuwaiti military and the allies made in order to beat back Saddam's forces. The exhibits comprise a set of well-crafted models of the city that are illuminated in time with an audio recording in English. Despite the nationalist propaganda, the experience of walking through the darkened corridors, lit only by simulated gun blasts and mortar attacks, and focusing on the heroism of the few for the safety of the many, has a contemporary resonance that transcends the exhibit's narrow remit. The museum is best reached by taxi and can be combined with a visit to the nearby Arab Fund Building. In case you are wondering, the state-of-the-art steel and concrete

building nearby is the brand new headquarters of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation.

## Friday Market (Souq al-Jum'a)

For a plastic pot plant, a second-hand dress, an Afghan coat or a smuggled antique from Iran, this enormous open-air, weekly **market** (Map p156; south of 4th Ring Rd & west of Airport Rd, Shuwaikh; ☎ 8am-4pm Fri) is more than a shopping extravaganza – it offers an insight into contemporary Kuwaiti culture and cross-border relations. Five minutes sitting in the shade of sun-fading textiles and sipping on the good-natured coffee of a friendly vendor delivers more in the way of insight into the complex web of Kuwaiti affairs, domestic and international, than one could absorb in a month of lectures on Arabic culture. Bring a hat and water in summer.

## House of Mirrors

For a quirky art-in-action experience, visit this small **museum** (Map p156; ☎ 251 8522; House 17, Street 94, Block 9, Qadisiya; admission free) in a residential house in the suburbs of Qadisiya. Reputedly, 77 tons of mirror and 102 tons of white cement have been used in the creation of the mirror mosaics that spangle the entire house – both inside and out. The creation of Lidia al-Qattan, the widow of Khalifa al-Qattan, a renowned Kuwaiti artist, the project was inspired by the decorating of an old piece of dining-room furniture and grew to incorporate epic scenes, as in the Room of the Universe (bedroom) and the Basin of the Sharks (hallway). Ring ahead to request a tour; you should bring a small gift in exchange for the hospitality you will no doubt receive.

## Tareq Rajab Museum

Housed in the basement of a large villa, this exquisite ethnographic **museum** (Map p156; ☎ 531 7358; www.trmkt.com; House 16, Block 12, Street 5, Jabriya; admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 4-7pm Sat-Thu, 9am-noon Fri) should not be missed. It was assembled as a private collection of Islamic art by Kuwait's first minister of antiquities and his British wife. A pair of ornate doors from Cairo and Carl Haag's 19th-century painting of Lady Jane Digby el-Mesreb of Palmyra, who lived in tents in the winter and a Damascus villa in the summer, mark the entrance to an Aladdin's cave of beautiful items. There are inlaid musical

### SNACKING WITH HISTORY

If you can find it, try a dozen mixed samosas (250 fils) from the Indian snack shop (p169) at the edge of Souq Marbarakia. Approaching from the heritage section of the souq (for incense and perfumes), the shop is in the corner of a small outdoor seating area. Next to a clothing shop and around the corner from the date souq, the shop is identified by the small window in a wall of sheet metal.

This isn't just any old hole-in-the-wall. It hasn't been included in the surrounding modernisations because this ramshackle wooden building is one of the least known and most important of Kuwait's historic buildings. In the early 20th century it was here that Mubarak the Great held his daily *diwaniya* (gathering), walking each day from Sief Palace through the old souq to this building where he would sit, talk to the people and feel the pulse of the street.

### WEARING A THREE-PIECE

When visiting the Friday Market (p163), spare a thought for the ubiquitous men in yellow who scout the aisles of the market looking for customers. They are more than just carters and humpers, they are the backbone of the market.

The lucky ones get to wheel a green three-wheeled barrow of chirping plastic birds or second-hand light bulbs; they load the barrows high with repaired microwaves or used bicycle bells; or they wait patiently for Kuwaiti women to haggle in the open corridors of curtains and wall-to-wall sticky-backed carpeting. On rare occasions, they might win a commission from a Western tourist, wherein they have to fade into the fluffy-sleeved Afghan jackets while the customer tries on badly cut leather jackets from Pakistan or barter old lamps for new in the artisan corner of the market.

But it's the unlucky ones that are the heroes of the souq. They are the men that have to heave second-hand fridges that didn't work the first time, or lever Hoover pipes and old armchairs over the cogs and wheels of discarded machinery. In particular, watch out for the 'three-piecers' – three-piece sofas, that is, carried aloft on the head of a single, extraordinary strong, and conspicuously small, person from Bangladesh. With their king-sized upholsteries perfectly balanced, these mini-Goliaths of the souq trot through the aisles of fluttering caftans to the tune of Tagalog, Urdu, Hindi, Arabic and Malayalam as unphased by their impossible loads as a sherpa on Everest, and generous enough to spare a smile for a passing stranger.

instruments suspended in glass cabinets; Omani silver and Saudi gold jewellery; head dresses, from the humble prayer cap to the Mongol helmet; costumes worn by princesses and by goatherds; necklaces for living goddesses in Nepal; Jaipur enamel; and Bahraini pearl. Despite all these superbly presented pieces from around the Muslim world, it is the Arabic manuscripts that give the collection its international importance.

The museum is all the more prized given the fate that befell the treasures in the National Museum during the Iraqi invasion. When news of the invasion spread, the owners bricked up the doorway at the bottom of the entry steps and strewed the way with rubbish. The Iraqis questioned why the stairs led to nowhere, but mercifully didn't pursue the issue and the collection survived intact.

The museum is in Jabriya, near the intersection of the Fifth Ring Motorway and the Abdulaziz Bin Abdilrahman al-Saud Expressway (also known as the Fahaheel Expressway). There is no sign on the building, but it is easily identified by its entrance – a carved wooden doorway flanked by two smaller doors on each side. All four of the door panels are worked in gilt metal.

Allow an hour to visit, although anyone with a passion for textiles will inevitably want to stay longer. Buses 102 and 502

stop at Hadi Clinic. Walk south along the Fahaheel Expressway for five minutes and turn right just before the Iranian School. Walk for a further 50m and the museum is on the left.

### Al-Hashemi Marine Museum

For proof that the Vikings made it to the Middle East, albeit only model ones, it's worth visiting this **museum** (Map p156; ☎ 565 7000; behind Radisson SAS Hotel, Ta'awen St, Salwa; admission free) with its impressive collection of large, scaled-model dhows. A novel shop sells 21-piece knot boards (KD25) and Gipsy Moth lanterns (KD16,500) among other nautical souvenirs, such as barometers and sextants. You can even buy your own Nelson figurine, incomplete with one arm, at the bargain price of KD12.

On the wall of the museum is a certificate, dated 2002, from the Guinness World Records announcing that **Al-Hashemi II**, the huge and unmissable wooden dhow adjacent to the museum, is the largest wooden boat on earth, measuring a world record-breaking 80.4m long, 18.7m wide and weighing an estimated 2500 tonnes. The vision of Husain Marafie, owner of the Radisson SAS Hotel, the dhow was completed in 1998 from mahogany and ekki logs from Cameroon, planks from the Ivory Coast and pine logs from Oregon. It's worth taking a five-minute walk inside the lavish,

parquet-floored interior, used for conferences and banqueting.

A smaller dhow in the complex, called **Al-Boom** (p169), is a restaurant; it's a great place for dinner.

### Al-Qurain Martyrs' Museum

Located in the residential suburb of Qurain, a 20-minute taxi ride southeast of the city centre, this small **museum** (Rd 208, Qurain; admission free; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) is a memorial to a cell of young Kuwaiti patriots who tried to resist arrest in February 1991. Early in the morning, a minibus (the one that is still parked outside) drew up outside the house. When no-one answered the door, the Iraqis bombarded the house for hours with machine guns, bombs and eventually a tank. Nine of those under siege were captured and tortured to death, while four hid in a roof space.

General Schwarzkopf, who visited the house on 14 April 1994, commented that 'when I am in this house it makes me wish that we had come four days earlier than perhaps this tragedy would not have happened'. The Iraqi occupation lasted for seven long months, during which time many similar raids on the homes of Kuwait families were made: or, as the editor of a local publication put it, the Iraqi army 'was like a locust that ate both the green and the dry'.

To understand what invasion meant to the ordinary Kuwait family, allow half an hour to visit this sobering museum, if only to see copies of documents issuing instructions to 'burn and destroy' homes and 'fire on demonstrations'. Bus 101 stops within a 10-minute walk of the museum, but it is difficult to find the precise location without assistance. Go by taxi.

### ACTIVITIES

Kuwait City's location on the seafront provides many opportunities for fun with water – in it (swimming), on it (water sports, and ice skating), alongside it (jogging along the cornice) and through it (ferry rides). One tour operator that can help you with a wide range of activities is **Nuzha Tourist Enterprises** (☎ 575 5825; www.nuzha.com.kw).

### Green Island

For activities ranging from strolling in the gardens, swimming in a lagoon, cycling or

listening to an impromptu concert, this artificial **island** (Map p156; ☎ 252 6153; Arabian Gulf St, Dasman; admission adult/child 500/250 fils; ☎ 8am-11pm), joined to the mainland by a pedestrian causeway, houses a 700-seat amphitheatre, restaurants, and a game park for children. On 25 February (National Day) and 26 February (Liberation Day), Green Island becomes the launching pad for firework displays.

### Swimming

All the way along Arabian Gulf St there are splendid beaches and there is nothing to stop a committed paddler from taking a dip in any of them, though the water tends to be on the shallow side for serious swimming and worries prevail as to the state of pollution in the water.

For those who prefer facilities, **Messilah Water Village** (Map p156; ☎ 565 0505; Arabian Gulf St, Messilah; admission KD3; ☎ 8am-11pm), some 20km south of the city centre, has a good range of pools, floats and slides. The water is chilled in summer and heated in winter. Between April and August the beach is reserved for women only on three days of the week. The same company manages the centrally located **Aqua Park** (Map p159; ☎ 243 1960). Call first, as it is not always open.

If the turquoise sea doesn't tempt, there's always Touristic Enterprises Company. Affectionately known as the **TEC Swimming Pool Complex** (Map p156; Arabian Gulf St, Dasman), there are three large pools available, one for women and families, one for men only and a shallow one for children.

### Diving

Diving in Kuwait's warm, shallow waters is a pleasant way to spend time. There are several dive outfits, but the best-established is **Dive Caroline** (Map p156; ☎ 371 9289; divcaroline.com) at the Messilah Water Village. It offers day trips for KD15 to KD20 or half-day trips to Donkey Reef leaving at 8am and 2pm daily. You can also try the five-star PADI dive establishment at the **KIM Center** (Map p156; ☎ 371 6002; www.kimcenter.com; Hilton Kuwait Resort, Fahaheel) for diving and snorkelling trips to the outer islands of Kubar and Umm al-Maradim (from around KD20).

### Other Water Activities

Water taxis run regularly from the tourist enterprise office in Shaab to Kuwait

Towers for 500 fils per person. **Nuzha Touristic Enterprises** (☎ 575 5825; www.nuzhatours.com) can organise half- and whole-day boat trips to Failaka Island and other locations.

Both diving companies organise a range of other water sports including kayaking (KD7.500 for four hours).

### Ice Skating

One of the best in the region, Kuwait City's **ice-skating rink** (Map p159; ☎ 241 1151; Al-Soor St & First Ring Rd, Shamiya; admission KD1.500; ⌚ 8.30am-10pm) gives the public a chance to sample an Olympic-sized rink. With a spectator capacity of 1600, it's home to the Kuwaiti Falcons, the country's official ice-hockey team, and the only Arab team to win membership of the International Ice Hockey Federation.

### COURSES

Beit Lothan (p157) offers a range of courses, including crafts, poetry, drawing and painting. Weaving is taught by Bedouin women at Sadu House (p161).

### KUWAIT CITY FOR CHILDREN

#### Fun Parks

Occupying a large, open area, **Shaab Leisure Park** (Map p156; ☎ 561 3777; www.shaabpark.com; Arabian Gulf St, Salmiya; admission 500 fils; ⌚ 4pm-midnight Sat-Wed, 10am-midnight Thu & Fri) offers rides, bungee jumping and pony riding. For a unique souvenir, try the video cinema, where visitors can make their own music video.

For a less-crowded experience, try **Showbiz** (Map p156; ☎ 571 4094; Al Blajet St, Salmiya; admission free; ⌚ 4-11pm), which offers the same kind of activities but on a smaller scale. Attractions inside the funfair cost between 500 fils and KD1.

#### Zoos

The **Kuwait zoo** (Map p156; ☎ 473 3389; cnr Airport Rd & 5th Ring Rd, Omariya; admission 500 fils; ⌚ 8am-10pm winter, 8am-noon & 4pm-midnight Sun-Fri summer) has 65 species with an emphasis on desert dwellers.

Another, smaller zoo, called **Little Jungle** (Map p156; ☎ 390 2635; www.littlejungle.net; off Fahaeel Expressway, Funaitees; admission 250 fils; ⌚ 4-11pm), is designed for smaller children, who can pat a pony, grab a goat or kiss a camel while parents puff on a *sheesha* (water pipe

used to smoke tobacco) and think of caterpillars instead.

### Musical Fountains

Located next to the ice-skating rink, this outdoor **music and water display** (Map p156; ☎ 242 8394; Al-Soor St & First Ring Rd; admission 250 fils; ⌚ 4-11pm) is said to have the 4th-largest set of fountains in the world.

### TOURS

The **Kuwait Tourism Services Company** (Map p159; ☎ 245 1734; www.ktsc-q8.com; Ice-skating Rink, Al-Soor St & First Ring Rd, Shamiya) runs tours around the various city sights and out to the oilfields. It mainly caters for large tour groups, but can also arrange similar tours for individuals. Half- and full-day city tours (depending on the choice of activities) cost around KD15/25 per person for a minimum of two people.

**Nuzha Tourist Enterprises** (☎ 575 5825; www.nuzha.com.kw) can organise a wide range of tours and offers camel and horse rides, desert safaris, climbing tours and many other activities.

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

During the month of February, the city goes crazy with the **Hala Shopping Festival**. There are lots of draws giving away valuable prizes in the shopping centres, and special promotions lure customers in. Many shops offer discounts of up to 70%. Ask your hotel reception where to go for the best bargains.

The festival coincides with National Day on 25 February and Liberation Day on 26 February. During this time, there are fireworks displays on Green Island and the city is draped in lights. Check the *What's On* listings in the English-language dailies to check the cultural programmes on offer.

### SLEEPING

All of the hotels mentioned here have air-con, private bathrooms, satellite TVs and minibridges. Prices quoted are inclusive of the 15% service charge that most hotels add to their tariff, though it's always worth asking for a discount.

### Budget

The following are about as budget as hotels get in Kuwait.

**International Hotel** (Map p156; ☎ 574 1788; www.internationalhotel-kw.com; Dumna St, behind Al-Fannar Complex, Salmiya; s/d KD20/25) This 1970s hotel, in its distinctive round building and period-piece lobby of varnished wood and mirror, is something of a Kuwaiti institution. The oddly shaped rooms with their curved balconies, chocolate brown carpets and grilled radiators, are dated but spacious. There is 24-hour room service but no restaurant.

**Kuwait Continental Hotel** (Map p159; ☎ 252 7300; www.kcontl.net; Road 30, opposite Dasma Roundabout, Bneid Al-Qar; s/d KD30/35; 📶) Popular with regional sporting personalities, as the trophies behind reception testify, this no-nonsense hotel on a busy intersection is not the friendliest place in town. If you can see past the tired and hideous blue corridors, the rooms and bathrooms are recently refurbished with quality, Arabian-style décor and furnishings and as such represent good value. There is a Budget car-hire desk in the foyer.

**Oasis Hotel** (Map p159; ☎ 246 5489; www.oasis.com.kw; cnr Ahmad al-Jaber & Mubarak al-Kabir Sts, Sharq; s/d KD30/35) One can only sympathise with this friendly hotel with its tolerant staff: the adjacent buildings either side of the hotel were being demolished at the time of research. If you're not troubled by the noise of rebuilding and can overlook the dingy corridors and stained carpets, then this lime-green hotel, with its sea-green reception area, has simple, clean rooms and is in a prime downtown location.

### Midrange

All the following midrange hotels offer good value.

**Plaza Athenee Hotel** (Map p159; ☎ 846 666; www.plazaatheneekuwait.com; Port Said St, Block 18, behind Al-Manar Complex, Bneid Al-Qar; s/d KD34/65) If you're wondering at the discrepancy in price between single and double in this brand new boutique hotel, it is not a printing error! The singles are pigeon-sized, with tiny, angular shower rooms and linoleum floors. In contrast, the doubles, with heavy Arabian-style furniture and thick wooden doors all have marble-topped kitchenettes, balconies and separate sitting areas.

**Ghani Palace Hotel** (Map p156; ☎ 571 0301; www.ghanipalace.com; Salem Mubarak St, Salmiya; s/d KD35/45; 📶 📶) Located in an extraordinary

Yemeni-style building next to the Central Plaza shopping mall, this hotel is a flight of Arabian fancy with furniture from Syria, lanterns from Morocco and local plaster work. Each wood-panelled room is split level with kitchenette and balcony and gives in character what it lacks in finish. There is a billiard room and internet café downstairs, and a rather lovely swimming pool on the rooftop. This is one of the few hotels where you don't have to check the address to remember you're in the Middle East.

**Ritz Salmiya** (Map p156; ☎ 571 1001; www.ritzkuwait.com; Qatar St, Salmiya; r KD40-57) With the opportunity of using the facilities (including swimming pool and sauna) of the sister Ritz hotel on the corniche, this good value, bright and friendly hotel, opposite the City Center shopping mall, has an appealingly busy atmosphere. Rooms are modern and bright.

**Le Meridien** (Map p156; ☎ 251 0999; www.lemeridienkuwait.com; Arabian Gulf St, Bneid al-Qar; r KD59.500; 📶) This small and tasteful boutique-style hotel with wonderful views of Kuwait Towers has a French Rococo foyer and a bright and intimate atmosphere. The floors and ceilings need a bit of TLC but the rooms, with their CD players, polished floors, floral-design bedsteads, huge bolster pillows and enormous luxury bathrooms are state-of-the-art.

### Top End

The prices quoted here are rack rates: with a bit of persuasion, you can usually negotiate some sort of 'corporate' rate.

### HOTELS

There are plenty of five-star hotels to choose from. The following are well-located options that have something different to offer.

**Le Meridien Tower Kuwait** (Map p159; ☎ 247 9000; www.lemeridienkuwait.com; Fahad al-Salem St, Wattiyah; s/d KD57/69; 📶 📶) Located in the heart of downtown Kuwait, this stylish hotel prides itself as being the first 'art and tech' hotel in the Gulf with designer features such as LCD TV screens, powered showers, DVD, VCD, CD and interactive TV in each room. The illuminated glass panels behind the bedstead and the glass washbasin in the bathrooms help complete the impression of 22nd-century living. Live

cooking shows in the chrome and wood Cascade Restaurant cater for individual guests.

**Radisson SAS Hotel** (Map p156; ☎ 575 6000; www.radissonsas.com; Ta'awen St, Rumaithiya; s/d KD 96/110; 📍 🚗) If it wasn't for the armed guard on the gate, it would be hard to imagine that a decade ago there wasn't a window remaining in this quiet hotel. While the hotel is ordinary enough, the presence of Al-Hashemi Marine Museum (p164) and the intimate Al-Boom restaurant (opposite) in the back garden give this old warhorse of a hotel a welcome added dimension, together with the excellent staff, small but cosy rooms and beach access.

**our pick Marina Hotel** (Map p156; ☎ 224 4970; www.marinhotel.com; Arabian Gulf St, Salmiya; s/d KD110/122; 📍 🚗) Situated within walking distance from the shopping district of Salmiya, this beautiful circular, low-rise hotel floats like a lily on the water's edge and is a welcome addition to the corniche. Many of the stunning rooms have direct access onto the beach. Sophisticated, elegant and modern, this is one boutique hotel that succeeds in being practical as well as aesthetically pleasing. If you get bored of gazing at the sea outside your bedroom window, you could always sit in the lobby and enjoy the aquarium behind reception instead. The hotel's Atlantis restaurant, in the shape of a ship's prow, is an excellent place to sample the catch of the day (KD12.500), together with six oysters (KD6).

## RESORTS

There are many resorts along Kuwait's sandy seashores, but they mostly cater for private membership. The following, which are well out of town, welcome tourists.

**Hilton Kuwait Resort** (Map p147; ☎ 372 5500; www.hilton.com; Coast Rd, Mangaf; s/d KD75/88; 📍 🚗) Situated on 1.8km of white-sand beach with spotless water, this resort provides the perfect antidote to the proverbial 'hard day in the office', whether 'office' equates with a business meeting, a day of committed shopping or sightseeing, or even a day of peace-keeping over the border. While the hotel is still popular with allied officers on R&R, it is equally attractive as a family holiday destination, with plenty of activities for children, and an excellent spa, restaurants and exercise opportunities for mum and

dad. Lessons in Thai cuisine at the Blue Elephant Royal Thai Restaurant may occupy those who can't sit still and there is a dive centre here. An apartment or chalet offers good value, but if the cost is still prohibitive, check the current rate for use of the resort's facilities for the day. At 35km and a 20-minute drive south of the city centre, it's pushing it to call it a city resort, but it still makes an easily accomplished afternoon's outing.

**Kempinski Jala'ia Hotel & Resort** (Map p147; ☎ 844 444; www.kempinski-kuwait.com; Rd 245, Fahad Motorway, Jala'ia; s/d KD94/106; 📍 🚗) Located about 70km south of Kuwait City, this is definitely not what one could call 'conveniently located'. If you are looking to get away from the city for a weekend, however, this palm tree, pool and beach complex, with its desert-castle architecture, Ayurvedic Centre and health club could be just the thing. With a spa, water-sports facilities, cinema, entertainment centre and bicycle hire, it's unlikely you'll notice that there's precious little surrounding the resort.

## EATING

Perhaps the city's best-loved activity, dining out is something of an institution, and there are literally hundreds of restaurants to suit all wallets and palates. The following represent an eclectic hotchpotch of choices that have a flavour of the region either in the cuisine or in the ambience.

## Restaurants

**Burj Al-Hamam** (Map p159; ☎ 252 9095; fax 254 1308; Arabian Gulf St, Dasman; meals KD2-5; ☎ 9am-midnight) This circular restaurant at the end of a pier is like a piece of punctuation along the corniche – but don't let the rather unattractive steel exterior put you off. This is a great place to sample Middle Eastern fare in a thoroughly convivial atmosphere among loudly chatting local families. There is an inner and outer core to the restaurant with 280 degrees open to the sea – that's if you can glimpse it above the heaps of primary-coloured cushions and through the haze of peach-flavoured *sheesha* (KD2.500). Try the *kheshkhash* (spiced mince meat with onions and parsley) priced at a very reasonable KD2.250.

**Beit 7** (Map p159; ☎ 245 0871; www.beit7.com; Behbahani Houses No 7, Usama Ben Monqiz St, off Al-Soor St,

Wattiya; meals KD5-8) With tables tucked around the interior courtyard of this old coral-and-gypsum house, dating from 1949 and included on the government's list of heritage sites, this restaurant, with its beaded lanterns, palm fans and wicker chairs, has retained the feeling of house and home. It serves international fare and is a firm favourite with the expat community. Try the herb-crusted lamb chops (KD6.500) and the naughty date pudding (KD2.500).

**Ayam Zamar** (Map p156; ☎ 474 2000; Crowne Plaza Hotel, Farwaniya; meals KD6-9) Perched in an eyrie high in the atrium of the lively and 'happening' Crowne Plaza Hotel, this whimsical Lebanese restaurant is spread over a number of split levels, taxing the dexterity of the waiters who have to climb dozens of steps per serving. Somehow they still manage to bring the mezze steaming hot and crispy from the kitchens, and deliver the devilled chicken livers with truly Arabian grace and hospitality. It's not surprising that it's a favourite with Gulf nationals and is packed on Fridays when a comprehensive Arabian brunch is on offer.

**our pick Al-Boom** (Map p156; ☎ 575 6000; Radisson SAS Hotel, Ta'awen St, Rumaithiya; set 3-course meal KD12) Located in the hull of a boat, this inventive restaurant takes some beating, particularly as this isn't just any old boat: this is *Mohammedi II*, built in Culicut, India in 1979. A replica of the largest dhow ever built (*Mohammedi I*, 1915), it took three years to construct from teak wood and 2.5 tonnes of copper, and was completed with 8.8 tonnes of handmade iron nails. Not that one spares much thought for the 35,000 days of labour that was invested in one of the most characterful cargo holds in the history of boat building: when ensconced in the curving hull, under a ship's lantern hung from the beams, the attention is much more carefully focused on the set-piece of grilled grouper or sirloin, delivered sizzling to a personalised brass dinner setting. As the ship is dry, in all senses of the word, seasickness is not a prime concern.

## Cafés

**Restaurant 99** (Map p159; Al-Soor St; sandwiches from 300 fils) Near Al-Jahra Gate, this is one of the city's best bets for a quick bite. Hummus, *shwarma* (meat sliced off a spit and stuffed

in a pocket of pita-type bread with chopped tomatoes and garnish) and a wide variety of Arabic-bread fillings are on offer for a few hundred fils.

**Layali al-Helmeya** (Map p156; ☎ 263 8710; Arabian Gulf St, Salmiya; snacks 300 fils-KD1) A block north of the New Park Hotel, this is a lovely place to sit and enjoy the view overlooking Kuwait Bay. A modern version of a traditional Egyptian coffeehouse, it offers kebabs and *ta'amiyya* (deep-fried bean-paste ball) sandwiches for 250 fils to 500 fils, *shish tawouk* (chicken kebab) for KD1 and *sheesha* for 500 fils.

**Le Notre** (Map p159; ☎ 805 050; Arabian Gulf St; lunch buffet KD3, meals KD5-9) Fantastic views of the Kuwait Towers, a discerning buffet lunch, an exclusive *chocolatier*, and a landmark building of steel and glass, make this French café one of the chicest in town.

**English Tea Lounge** (Map p159; ☎ 242 2055; Sheraton Kuwait Hotel, Wattiya; high tea KD6-10; ☎ 10am-1pm & 4pm-midnight) The newly renovated Sheraton, with its multiple marble pillars and extravagant Persian carpets, looks like the last place to find a Welsh tea with rarebit (KD6.500). But if scones and cucumber sandwiches beckon, choose from a Yorkshire tea with fruit cake (KD7), or a Royal Windsor tea with smoked salmon (KD7).

## Quick Eats

**Souq Marbarakia** (Map p159; btwn Mubarak al-Kabir, Ahmad al-Jaber & Ali al-Salem Sts; kebabs KD1.500) One of the best ways to get a feel for the heart of the city is to pull up a chair at one of the casual tables strewn around the western edge of the old souq on the semi-pedestrianised Abdullah as Salem St. If you order kebabs at lunchtime, a generous helping of green leaves, pickles, hummus and Arabic bread arrives to garnish the meat.

**Breadz** (Map p159; ☎ 240 7707; Ground fl, Sharq Souq, Arabian Gulf St, Sharq; sandwiches & salads from KD1.500) Serving a deliciously fresh selection of pastries, sandwiches and salads, as well as fresh fruit juices, tea and coffee, the outdoor terrace overlooking the Sharq marina makes this a pleasant spot for a snack. The decadent dessert bar is worth a look.

## Self-Catering

**Indian snack shop** (Map p159; Shop 8/9, off Money Exchange Sq, Souq Marbarakia; 12 samosas 250 fils) This hole-in-the-wall shop on the edge of the

souq is famed for its fresh samosas. Ask for a mixed bag and then finish off lunch around the corner at the date souq.

**Sultan Centre** (Map p159; Sharq Souq, Arabian Gulf St, Sharq) This modern chain of supermarkets has all the wherewithal for a budget picnic. The closest store to the city centre is in Sharq Souq, which has lots of opportunities for a portable pudding that'll blow the budget.

## DRINKING

### Coffeeshouses & Tea houses

There are a number of Arabic cafés around town where mostly men go to chat over a *sheesha* and numerous small cups of sweet, thick coffee. The following coffeehouses are the equivalent of a commercial *diwaniya* (gathering) and business preliminaries are often conducted informally on the premises.

**Souq Marbarakia** (Map p159; btwn Mubarak al-Kabir, Ahmad al-Jaber & Ali al-Salem Sts) Women may feel rather uncomfortable in the covered inner courtyard of the old souq, near the cafés on the western edge of the souq, but men will love the convivial atmosphere.

**Beit Lothan** (Map p156; ☎ 575 5866; Arabian Gulf St, Salmiya) Coffee, tea and a *sheesha* are available in a quiet garden, adjacent to the Beit Lothan cultural centre (see p157).

The best high tea in town is served at the English Tea Lounge (p169).

## ENTERTAINMENT

In the absence of bars, entertainment in the city is pretty much confined to shopping and dining, although film and theatre are popular with locals.

### Cinemas

Considering its size, Kuwait has an overwhelming number of cinemas, which unfortunately show the same films (usually heavily edited to exclude kissing, nudity and sex – violence, however, is left uncensored). The more popular and modern of the cinemas are at **Sharq Souq** (Map p159; Arabian Gulf St, Sharq) and in the **Al-Fanar Shopping Complex** (Map p156; ☎ 575 9306; Salem Mubarak St, Salmiya). Admission to all films costs KD2.500. Call ☎ 80 3456 for What's On and Where.

There is also an Imax cinema in the Scientific Center (p158).

## Theatre

Arabic theatre has enjoyed a long history in Kuwait, dating back to 1922 when the first amateur plays were performed, and are highly popular with Arab audiences.

Two groups perform in English. The Kuwait Players began in 1952 and stage about 10 productions per year, from pantomime to Shakespeare. The other company is **Kuwait Little Theatre** (☎ 398 2680; www.theklt.com; Main St, Al-Ahmadi), which has been performing comedies and dramas in its own venue in Al-Ahmadi (see opposite) since 1948.

For performance times and venues, check What's On listings in the local papers.

## SHOPPING

Salmiya is undoubtedly *the* shopping district of Kuwait. The main street, Hamad al-Mubarak St, is known as the 'Champs Elysée' of the Middle East and is filled with dazzling shopping malls. **Sharq Souq** (Map p159; Arabian Gulf St, Sharq) is another modern complex, and boasts its own marina.

For something more traditional and locally produced, the Kuwaiti Bedouin weavings at Sadu House (p161), a cultural foundation dedicated to preserving Bedouin art, are recommended. Alternatively, some attractive Iranian and Pakistani antiques often turn up at the Friday Market (p163). The old souq (p162) in the heart of Kuwait City is a great place to shop for anything from olives to blankets – or just to snack and watch the world go by.

## Contemporary Arts

Galleries showcasing contemporary regional work include the long established **Boushahri Art Gallery** (Map p156; ☎ 571 4883; off Arabian Gulf St, Salmiya; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7pm) and **Dar Al-Funoon** (Map p159; ☎ 243 3138; www.daralfunoon.com; Salhiya; ☎ 10am-1pm & 4-8pm Sat-Wed, 10am-1pm Thu). Situated behind the churches near the Sheraton Hotel and housed in an old Kuwaiti-style house with a courtyard, the popular Dar Al-Funoon gallery and restaurant complex is the best place to buy a piece of contemporary local art.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Kuwait being more or less a city-state, the information for getting to Kuwait City are the same as for those to Kuwait in general, so please see p178 for details.

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Taxis charge a flat KD5 between the airport (16km south of the city), and the city centre. It's 20- to 45-minute journey. Bus 501 runs between the main bus station and the airport every half-hour from 5.30am to 9pm daily (250 fils). Car-rental agencies have booths on the ground floor of the airport.

## Bus

The main bus station (Map p159) is near the intersection of Al-Hilali and Abdullah al-Mubarak Sts in the Safat district. On printed timetables the station is referred to as 'Mirqab bus station'.

Buses run from approximately 5am to 10pm. Fares are 100, 150 or 200 fils, depending on the distance travelled. An office on the ground floor of the Kuwait Public Transport Company (KPTC) building at the main bus station sells a route map for 150 fils.

## Taxi

Any trip within the city centre costs 250 fils plus 100 fils per kilometre. Longer trips outside the city centre (eg to Salmiya) cost about KD3. Some reliable taxi companies are **Al-Salmiyah Taxi** (☎ 572 2931) and **Al-Ghanim Taxi** (☎ 481 1824).

Call taxis often offer tours of the city for a flat rate of KD5 per hour, but finding a driver that doesn't have a death wish is not always easy. One highly recommended driver for safe and knowledgeable service is **Mohammed Hanif** (☎ 962 5140). Another is Mr Ramsi of **Taxi Al-Amana** (☎ 656 8270). Both are available 24 hours a day and have many years of experience driving in and around the city.

## AROUND KUWAIT

Kuwait, to all intents and purposes, is a city-state wherein most of the attractions and activities are centred in the capital. There are few towns outside Kuwait City and even less in the way of physical attractions in the oil-producing interior.

Despite these drawbacks, however, Kuwait is comprised of a long and beautiful stretch of coast, and future tourist devel-

opments include the multi-billion-dollar holiday resort and entertainment complex on Failaka Island, expected to take 10 years or so to complete.

## FAILAKA ISLAND

جزيرة فيلكا

Failaka Island has some of the most significant archaeological sites in the Gulf. With a history dating from the Bronze Age, evidence of Dilmun and Greek settlements, a Classical name to die for (the Greeks called it 'Ikaros') and a strategic location at the mouth of one of the Gulf's best natural harbours, this island could and should be considered one of Kuwait's top tourist attractions.

Alas, recent history has deemed otherwise. First, the Iraqis established a heavily fortified base on Failaka, paying scant regard to the relics over which they strewed their hardware, and then the island was billeted by Allied forces with equally pitiful regard for antiquities.

The island is once again open to visitors but there is not much to see at present, although it does make a pleasant place for a picnic. If you like it enough to stay, the **Safir Hotel** (☎ 252 0600; www.safirpalace.com; Failaka Heritage Village; s/d KD30/35; ☎) has a range of facilities including a children's zoo, lake, horse-riding and *shwarma* outlets, all of which cater mainly for the local community. There are also some homemade crafts available for sale.

**Kuwait Public Transport Company Ferries** (☎ 571 3544; www.q8boatc.com) to Failaka Island depart from Ras Salmiya (also known as Ras al-Ard) on Arabian Gulf St in Salmiya. The trip takes 1½ hours, costs KD2,500 and leaves daily except Saturday and Monday at 8.15am, returning at 12.30pm. A guide would be handy for interpreting the various ruins. If you take your own vehicle it costs KD20 for the return fare. The ferry terminal in Kuwait City can be reached via buses 15, 24, 34 and 200.

## AL-AHMADI

الاحمدى

pop 41,556

Built to house the workers of Kuwait's oil industry in the 1940s and '50s, the town of Al-Ahmadi was named after the emir of the day, Sheikh Ahmed. It remains, to some extent, the private preserve of KOC.

The **Oil Display Centre** (☎ 398 9111; www.kpc.com.kw; Mid 5th St; admission free; ☎ 7am-3pm Sat-Wed)

is a well-organised introduction to KOC and the business of oil production. The Kuwait Little Theatre (p170) has performances in the town.

Bus 101 runs from the main bus station in Kuwait City to Al-Ahmadi (passing by the oil display centre as it enters town). To get here by car from Kuwait City, take the King Fahad Motorway south until the Al-Ahmadi exit. First follow the blue signs for North Al-Ahmadi and then the smaller white signs for the display centre.

## FAHAHEEL

pop 74,175

The traditional town of Fahaheel was, until quite recently, a distinct village in its own right. It now merges into the city suburbs but retains a distinctive atmosphere, reminiscent of its Bedouin roots. The fish souq and dhow harbour are more characterful, in many ways, than their modern counterparts in the city centre. The oil refinery at neighbouring Mina al-Ahmadi is one of the largest in the world.

The Hilton Kuwait Resort (p168) is just north of here.

## RAS AL-ZOUR

One-hundred kilometres and about an hour's drive of the capital, Ras al-Zour (also spelt Ras Azzor) is one of the most pleasant beach areas in Kuwait. The Saudi Texaco compound is only open to guests of members, but the public beach alongside is clean and attractive too.

## WAFRAH FARMS

While not the most obvious of tourist destinations, Wafrah Farms, about 1½ hours drive south of the capital, on the Saudi Arabian border, is a soothingly green oasis of vegetable gardens and papaya trees. It makes a pleasant excursion from Ras al-Zour.

## ENTERTAINMENT CITY

Located in Doha Village, this huge park (☎ 487 9545; admission KD3.500; ☎ 3.30-10pm Sun-Thu, 10am-10pm Fri) is located 20km west of Kuwait City. It comprises three theme parks (Arab World, International World and Future World), a miniature golf course, a small lake with landscaped parkland and railway, a small zoo, and a variety of restaurants. The entrance fee covers most of the rides

but there is an additional charge for some of the more elaborate rides. Admission times vary slightly from season to season, so call ahead. There is no public transport to the park and a taxi (KD4 from the city centre) is not easy to hail for the return journey.

## AL-JAHRA

pop 28,387

Al-Jahra, 32km west of Kuwait City, is the site where invading troops from Saudi Arabia were defeated (with British help) in 1920. It was also the site of the Gulf War's infamous 'turkey shoot' – the Allied destruction of a stalled Iraqi convoy as it lumbered up Mutla Ridge in an effort to retreat from Kuwait. The highway and surrounding desert are now completely clear of evidence, picked over by scrap-metal dealers and dubious souvenir hunters.

## Sights & Activities

The town's only sight is the **Red Fort** (☎ 477 2559; admission free; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-6pm), which played a key role in the 1920 battle. Also known as the Red Palace, this low, rectangular, mud structure near the highway has recently been restored. Coming from Kuwait City, take the second of the three Al-Jahra exits from Jahra Rd. The Red Fort is on the right, about 200m south of Jahra Rd.

Between November and April camel racing can be seen early in the morning (races start around 7am or 8am) at **Al-Atraf Camel Racing Club** (☎ 539 4014; Salmi Rd; admission free). Phone ahead for details of races, which are held most Thursdays and Fridays, or check the What's On listings in the English-language dailies. The track is located 7km west of Al-Jahra.

## Getting There & Away

Al-Jahra can be reached conveniently by bus 103 from Kuwait City, which passes directly in front of the Red Fort. By car, take the Sixth Ring Rd west out of Kuwait City. For the racing club take the turn-off where there is a faded sign of a camel, after skirting Al-Jahra.

## MUTLA RIDGE

While not a particularly spectacular line of hills, Mutla Ridge is about as good as it gets in Kuwait. The ridge at least offers a wonderful view of the full expanse of Kuwait

## الجهراء

الجهراء

## WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE BUT NOT A DROP TO DRINK

Kuwait has long been known for its fine natural harbour but, like so many places in the Middle East, it is chronically short of water. Indeed, from 1907 until 1950, traders had to buy fresh water from the Shatt al-Arab waterway near Bubiyan Island, at the head of the Gulf, and ship it by dhow to Kuwait. The trade peaked in 1947 when it was estimated that 303,200L of water per day was arriving in Kuwait by boat – thankfully the country didn't have a golf course.

Early investment of oil revenues into the search for ground water was unsuccessful, but the country's first desalination plant in 1950 signalled the end of the sea trade in water. An exorbitant way to acquire fresh water, desalination nonetheless satisfies the country's huge thirst for water, which jumped from 682L per capita in the 1950s to 83,380L per capita in the mid-1980s.

Natural resources are precious and, as every Bedouin knows (and any mid-summer visitor can guess at), water in the desert is far more valuable than oil. In Kuwait, it's also more expensive.

Bay. Although the land mines have been cleared, you should stick to the paths in case of explosive remnants.

For a taste of the desert, take the road to **Bubiyan Island** that runs along the south-eastern flank of the ridge. Either side of the road, large numbers of camels roam along its edge, grazing on the coarse grass that is common to the area. In spring, the slope down to the coastal marshes is pale green with new shoots and full of wild flowers. It is also a popular area for camping, both for Bedu (black tents and goats) and city dwellers (white tents and aerials) keen to touch base for a while.

By following signs to Subiyah, you'll eventually reach the **Bridge to Nowhere**, some 50km northeast of Al-Jahra. There's a checkpoint in front of it, preventing further excursion, but the bridge spans more than just the narrow passage to Bubiyan Island: it also reinforces Kuwait's claim to the island in the face of erstwhile claims by both Iraq and Iran. So keen was Kuwait to maintain its claim to the uninhabited, flat and barren island and its neighbouring water supply (see the boxed text, above), when the Iraqis blew up the middle section of the bridge, the Kuwaitis quickly rebuilt it even though it goes to nowhere.

## KUWAIT DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

There are few options for budget travellers in Kuwait but some excellent value choices in the midrange category. In this chapter, we have defined budget hotels as being those that charge no more than KD35 for

a double room, midrange hotels as those that charge between KD36 and KD65 for a double room, and top-end hotels as those that charge over KD65 for a double room. All prices are inclusive of the 15% service charge and unlike other countries of the peninsula, there are no particularly high or low seasons. Prices do not include breakfast unless otherwise stated.

The northern shore of Kuwait Bay is a popular camping spot with locals: just look for the tents from October to April. Alternatively, there are some good places to camp on the coast near the Saudi Arabian border. Camping equipment is available in the many sporting goods shops in the city malls and a 4WD is necessary to find a suitable spot.

### ACTIVITIES

Most activities are either organised, or take place, in Kuwait City (see p165).

For swimming outside of Kuwait City, there are many public beaches along the coast, particularly to the south. One-piece swimsuits for women are encouraged.

Fishing and boating are offered to visitors by **Kuwait Offshore Sailing Association** (☎ 973 1859; www.kosaq8.com). Camel racing takes place just outside Al-Jahra (opposite).

### BOOKS

There are several excellent, recently published books on Kuwait available. *Pearling in the Arabian Gulf*, by Saif Marzooq al-Shamlan, offers an interesting collection of memoirs and interviews on Kuwait's pearling industry. *Women in Kuwait*, by Haya al-Mughni, paints a clear and illuminating picture of the lives and roles of Kuwaiti



women, as well as society's attitudes towards them. Sheikha Altaf al-Sabah's *Traditions & Culture* is a beautifully produced coffee-table book, with excellent photographs depicting old Kuwait, its people and traditional culture.

The Ministry of Information publishes the *Welcome Visitors' Guide to Kuwait*, updated regularly. It is pricey at KD12 but has some lovely photographs.

The definitive work in English on the Iraqi invasion is John Levin's *Days of Fear* (1997). Levin, an Australian long-term resident of Kuwait, lived through the Iraqi occupation.

For more general Middle Eastern titles, some of which contain coverage of Kuwait, see p23.

## BUSINESS HOURS

The following opening hours prevail throughout Kuwait (see p529 for general details for the entire region):

**Banks** 8am to 1pm Sunday to Thursday

**Government offices** 7am to 2pm Saturday to Wednesday

**Internet cafés** 8am to 10pm

**Post offices** 7am to 2pm Saturday to Wednesday, 7am to noon Thursday

**Restaurants** 11am to 3pm and 7pm to 11pm

**Shopping centres** 10am to 10pm

**Shops** 8am to 1pm and 4pm to 7pm or 8pm Saturday to Thursday.

## CHILDREN

Kuwait is a safe, easygoing, family-oriented country, and children are welcome and catered for everywhere. See p166 for ideas of what to do while you're here.

## CUSTOMS

No alcohol or pork-related products are permitted in the country. Up to 500 cigarettes and 500g of tobacco are acceptable. Duty-free items are on sale at the duty-free shop in the arrivals and departures section of the airport. See also p532 for general information.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The many spectacularly twisted bits of metal left by the roadside are testament to the fact that Kuwait has one of the highest road accident rates in the world. Indeed, one third of all deaths in Kuwait are driving-

related. The horrifying scenes on TV have not deterred Kuwait's drivers, despite government efforts to slow the pace down with radar surveillance. As such, it's hard to recommend driving in Kuwait unless you're confident of holding your own in the face of sheer lunacy. A police sign at traffic lights speaks volumes: 'Crossing the red signal leads to death or prison.'

Although the country has now been cleared of mines after the Gulf War, you should still remember *not to pick up any unfamiliar object* in the desert and to stick to established tracks.

For some reason, smoking appears to be much more prevalent in Kuwait than in neighbouring Gulf countries. While smokers may be glad to enjoy a smoke on buses, in taxis, at the airport, and in restaurants and hotel rooms without fear of vilification, nonsmokers are sure to find the dense atmosphere in public places quite irritating.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Kuwait Embassies & Consulates

Kuwaiti embassies in major cities around the world are as follows. For Kuwaiti embassies in neighbouring Arabian Peninsula countries, see the relevant chapters.

**Canada** (☎ 613-780 9999; www.embassyofkuwait.ca; 80 Elgin St, Ottawa, ON, K1N 1J9)

**France** (☎ 01 47 23 54 25; 2 Rue Lubeck, Paris 75116)

**Germany** (☎ 228-378 081; Griegstrasse 5-7 D, Berlin 14193)

**Netherlands** (☎ 070-3603 813/6; Carnegielaan 9, KH den Haag)

**UK** (☎ 020-7590 3400; 2 Albert Gate, Knightsbridge, London SW1X 7JU)

**USA** (☎ 202-966 0702; 2940 Tilden St NW, Washington DC 20008)

### Embassies & Consulates in Kuwait

Many embassies are located in the Diplomatic Area. Embassies are usually open from about 8am to 1pm Saturday to Thursday. A more complete list appears on www.kuwaitiah.net/embassy.html.

**Bahrain** (Map p156; ☎ 531 8530; fax 533 0882; Villa 35, Block 6, Surra St, Surra)

**Canada** (Map p156; ☎ 256 3025; www.dfaitmaeci.gc.ca/kuwait; House 24, Block 4, Al-Mutawakil St, Diplomatic Area, Da'ija) Located adjacent to the Third Ring Rd.

**Egypt** (Map p156; ☎ 251 9956; fax 256 3877; Villa 1, Block 5, Street 58, Diplomatic Area, Da'ija)

**France** (Map p159; ☎ 257 1061; www.ambafrance.kwt.org; Villa 24, Block 1, Street 13, Mansouria)

**Germany** (Map p159; ☎ 252 0857; fax 252 0763; Villa 13, Block 1, Street 14, Abdulla al-Salim)

**Iran** (Map p156; ☎ 256 0694; iranembassy@hotmail.com; Block 5, Diplomatic Area, Da'ija)

**Jordan** (Map p156; ☎ 253 3261; joremb@qualitynet.net; Villa 20, Block 3, Akkah St, Nuzha)

**Lebanon** (Map p156; ☎ 256 2103; fax 257 1628; Block 6, Diplomatic Area, Da'ija)

**Netherlands** (Map p156; ☎ 531 2650; kwe@minbuza.nl; House 76, Block 9, Street 1, Jabriya)

**Oman** (Map p156; ☎ 256 1956; fax 256 1963; Villa 25 Block 3, Street 3, Udailia) Located by the Fourth Ring Rd.

**Qatar** (Map p156; ☎ 251 3606; fax 251 3604; Istiqlal St, Diplomatic Area, Da'ija) Located off Arabian Gulf St.

**Saudi Arabia** (Map p159; ☎ 240 0250; fax 242 0654; Arabian Gulf St, Sharq)

**Syria** (Map p156; ☎ 539 6560; fax 539 6509; Villa 1, Block 6, Al-Khos St, Mishref)

**Turkey** (Map p156; ☎ 253 1785; fax 256 0653; Block 5, Istiqlal St, Diplomatic Area, Da'ija) Opposite Green Island.

**UAE** (Map p156; ☎ 252 8544; fax 252 6382; Plot 70, Istiqlal St, Diplomatic Area, Da'ija) Located off Arabian Gulf St.

**UK** (Map p156; ☎ 240 3336; visa@britishembassy-kuwait.org; Arabian Gulf St, Dasman) Located west of Kuwait Towers.

**USA** (Map p156; ☎ 539 5307; www.kuwait.usembassy.gov; Plot 14, Block 14, Al-Masjid al-Aqsa St, Bayan) About 17km south of the city centre.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

See p166 for information on festivals and events in Kuwait.

## HOLIDAYS

In addition to the main Islamic holidays described on p535, Kuwait celebrates the following public holidays:

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**National Day** 25 February

**Liberation Day** 26 February

## INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is easy for those travelling with a laptop as many hotels and cafés are now wi-fi enabled. Prepaid dial-up internet cards are available in denominations of KD1, KD5 and KD10, and can be purchased at *bakalas* (corner shops) and supermarkets. A KD10 card gives around 150 hours of internet access.

There are also many internet centres in Kuwait City (see p157).

## INTERNET RESOURCES

Some useful Kuwait-specific websites include the following:

**Arab Times** (www.arabtimesonline.com) An on-line version of the local newspaper.

**Complete Guide to Kuwait** (www.kuwaitiah.net) An excellent guide to Kuwait.

**Kuwait Information Office** (www.kuwait-info.org) Contains lots of information and links on Kuwaiti history, culture and lifestyle.

**Kuwait Petroleum Corporation** (www.kpc.com.kw) Gives a rundown on the nation's number-one resource and industry.

**Kuwait Pocket Guide** (www.kuwaitpocketguide.com) Comprehensive expat site giving information on all aspects of living and working in Kuwait.

**Kuwait Tourism Services Company** (www.ktsq-q8.com) Provides information on accommodation, sights and specific tours, as well as the Kuwaiti lifestyle.

## MAPS

GEO Projects publishes a good country map on the reverse of two useful maps of Kuwait City in its Arab World Map Library, available from car-rental offices, hotels and bookshops for KD5.

## MEDIA Newspapers & Magazines

The *Arab Times* and *Kuwait Times* are Kuwait's two English-language newspapers (150 fils each). Both provide adequate foreign coverage, largely reprinted from British newspapers and the international wire services. They include useful What's On listings. International newspapers are available (usually a day or two late) at major hotels.

The *Kuwait Pocket Guide* (KD5) covers everything from doing business in the country to where to find horse-riding lessons, and is essential for anyone intending to spend any length of time in the country.

International glossy magazines, complete with large tracts of blackened text courtesy of the government censor, or even with pages torn out, are also available from hotels.

## Radio & TV

Radio Kuwait – also known locally as the Superstation – broadcasts on 99.7 FM; it plays mostly rock and roll, with some local news and features thrown in for good measure. The US military's Armed Forces Radio & TV Service (AFRTS) can be heard on

107.9 FM; it broadcasts a mixture of music, news and chat shows. On 92.5 FM there is a nonstop music station that broadcasts '60s to '90s hits, with the occasional piece of classical music.

Kuwait TV's Channel 2 broadcasts programmes in English each evening from around 2pm to midnight. Many hotels, even the smaller ones, have satellite TV.

## MONEY

### ATMs & Credit Cards

Visa and Amex are widely accepted in Kuwait, and all major banks accept most credit cards and are linked to the major networks. Most banks accept Visa (Electron and Plus), MasterCard and Cirrus.

### Costs

Kuwait is an expensive country to visit. While it's easy to eat for KD3 (about US\$9) or less per day, sleeping cheap is another matter. Visitors are hard pressed to get away with spending less than KD25 per night on accommodation. Add to this other costs, such as transport, dining out, and admission prices to museums and other attractions, and an average daily budget of at least KD40 needs to be planned for.

### Currency

The currency used in Kuwait is the Kuwaiti dinar (KD). The dinar is divided into 1000 fils. Coins are worth five, 10, 20, 50 or 100 fils. Notes come in denominations of 250 fils, 500 fils, KD1, KD5, KD10 and KD20. The Kuwaiti dinar is a hard currency and there are no restrictions on taking it into or out of the country.

### Exchanging Money

Moneychangers are dotted around the city centre and main souqs, and change all major and regional currencies. Only banks and the larger money-exchange facilities will change travellers cheques. Since the dinar has been pegged to the dollar, there's little difference between exchange rates from place to place.

### Exchange Rates

Since 2003, the Kuwaiti dinar has been pegged to the US dollar. The following exchange rates were correct at the time of printing.

Country	Unit		Kuwaiti dinar
Australia	A\$10	=	KD2.31
Bahrain	BD10	=	KD7.71
Canada	C\$10	=	KD2.47
Euro zone	€10	=	KD3.86
Japan	¥1000	=	KD2.47
New Zealand	NZ\$10	=	KD2.04
Oman	OR10	=	KD7.56
Qatar	QR100	=	KD7.98
Saudi Arabia	SR100	=	KD7.74
UAE	Dh100	=	KD7.91
UK	UK£10	=	KD5.66
USA	US\$10	=	KD2.90
Yemen	YR1000	=	KD1.65

### Tippling & Bargaining

A tip is only expected in the upmarket restaurants where 10% for service is often already added to the bill. For longer journeys, 10% is a suitable tip for a taxi driver.

Bargaining is *de rigueur* in Kuwait's souqs but also in many Western-style shops and some hotels. It is always acceptable to ask for a discount on the original price offered, particularly as discounts have generally already been factored into the quoted price.

### PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Photographing obvious 'tourist' sites, such as the Kuwait Towers or the Red Fort in Al-Jahra, is no problem, but aiming a camera at military installations, embassies or palaces is not advisable. Remember to ask before taking pictures of people and bear in mind that photographing local women is considered *haram* (forbidden).

Any photo lab can print digital images, and memory cards and an assortment of batteries is obtainable throughout the city. Colour print film is quick and cheap to develop. Slide and B&W film is much more expensive and is very hard to find. Small photo studios throughout the city centre process passport photos for about KD4.

### POST

Post boxes are a rare sight around Kuwait City, so there's little alternative to braving the lines at post offices. The postal rate for aerograms and for letters or postcards weighing up to 20g is 150 fils to any destination outside the Arab world. Postage for cards or letters weighing 20g to 50g is 280 fils. Ask at the post office for parcel rates

as these vary significantly from country to country.

There is no poste-restante service in Kuwait. Large hotels will usually hold mail, but only for their guests.

### TELEPHONE & FAX

The country code for Kuwait is 965, and is followed by the local seven-digit number. There are no area codes. The international access code (to call abroad from Kuwait) is 00.

Kuwait's telephone system is very good, though getting an overseas connection on weekends and public holidays can take time. Local calls are free, but international calls are expensive: per minute to Australia, Canada and the UK costs around 300 fils; New Zealand, the Netherlands and Japan 400 fils; and the USA 150 fils. Payphones take 50 fils and 100 fils coins, though they are increasingly giving way to cardphones. Phonecards are available in units of KD3, KD5 and KD10.

### Fax

Fax services are available from government communications centres, though there are usually long queues. The best bet is the business centres in the larger hotels, which charge according to their IDD rates.

### Mobile Phones

Users of mobile phones can link into the GSM services of Mobile Telecommunications Company (MTC) or Wataniya. Pre-paid SIM-cards are widely available in malls and from Wataniya (there's a booth at the airport).

### VISAS

Visa requirements for Kuwait have relaxed considerably in an effort to encourage more people to visit the country. It is now possible – indeed easy – to obtain a visitor visa at Kuwait International Airport on arrival for nationals of 34 countries including Australia, Canada, the EEC, New Zealand and the USA. A visa costs KD3, except for the citizens of the UK, USA, Italy, Norway and Sweden for whom entry is free. The five-star hotels listed in the sleeping section of this chapter are usually able to sponsor guests not eligible for a visa at the airport, if they intend to stay at the hotel.

Visitor visas are valid for 90 days from the date of issue and allow a maximum stay of 30 days from the date of entry.

Anyone holding a passport containing an Israeli or Iraqi stamp will be refused entry to Kuwait.

Multiple-entry visas are only valid for business requirements. They are valid for 12 months but need to be applied for in advance. For general details on visas for other Middle Eastern countries, see p541.

### Transit Visas

A transit visa can be obtained from any Kuwaiti consulate or from the Kuwait Port Authority if you arrive by sea; it is valid for a maximum of seven days and costs KD2. To be eligible, applicants must have a valid visa for their next destination and a confirmed onward ticket.

### Visa Extensions

Up to two one-month visa extensions are possible. To do this, an application needs to be made to the **Immigration Department** (Map p156; 28 Street, off Airport Rd) in Shuwaikh before the existing visa expires. There is a hefty fine (KD10 per day) for overstaying once the visa has expired.

### WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Women travellers may find the increased attention from men in Kuwait a nuisance. From being tailgated while driving to being followed around shopping centres, expat women are frequently the targets of young men's harmless (read mindless) fun. Despite dressing conservatively, refusing to respond to approaches and avoiding eye contact with men, it's still hard to avoid attracting unwanted attention. Generally, if the situation becomes uncomfortable, the best way to defuse it is to stop being an object and become a foreign person: this can be accomplished by turning towards the men in question, giving them a firm but frosty greeting (all the better in Arabic) and offering the right hand for shaking. Ask the offending parties where they come from and to which family they belong. This is usually so unexpected and traumatising for these men that the threat disappears.

For tips on avoiding or dealing with harassment from males, see Women Travellers (p542) in the Arabian Peninsula Directory.

## TRANSPORT IN KUWAIT

See also the Arabian Peninsula Transport chapter (p545).

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Air

#### AIRPORTS & AIRLINES

**Kuwait International Airport** (☎ 433 5599; flight information 181) is a reasonably modern enterprise and plans are afoot to upgrade it with the building of a second terminal. Visas are obtained from a counter on the upper storey of the airport, before descending to passport control and baggage claim. Check-in time is two hours before flights are due to depart. Given the limited attractions of the airport and the heavy smoking of regional users, this can seem like a long time. Note that Gulf Air still insists on reconfirmation of tickets 48 hours ahead of departure.

Kuwait's national carrier is **Kuwait Airways** (☎ 434 5555; www.kuwait-airways.com; cnr Abu Bakr al-Siddiq St & Al-Hilali St, Safat), which flies to many destinations in the Middle East, Europe (including London, Paris and Frankfurt), Asia and the USA. It has an excellent safety record and is reliable and punctual.

Kuwait also has a no-frills, private carrier called **Jazeera Airways** (☎ 177; www.jazeeraairways.com; Kuwait International Airport) with flights to 30 destinations within the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent.

#### OTHER AIRLINES FLYING TO/FROM KUWAIT

**British Airways** (BA; ☎ 242 5635; www.ba.com; hub Heathrow Airport, London)

**EgyptAir** (MS; ☎ 243 9576; www.egyptair.com; hub Cairo)

**Emirates Airlines** (EK; ☎ 242 5566; www.emirates.com; hub Dubai)

**Gulf Air** (GF; ☎ 245 0180; www.gulfairco.com; hub Bahrain)

**Lufthansa** (LH; ☎ 242 2493; www.lufthansa.com; hub Frankfurt)

**Oman Air** (WY; ☎ 241 2284; www.oman-air.com; hub Muscat)

**Qatar Airways** (QR; ☎ 242 3888; www.qatarairways.com; hub Doha)

**Saudi Arabian Airlines** (SV; ☎ 242 6310; www.saudi-airlines.com; hub Jeddah)

**Yemen Airways** (IY; ☎ 240 8933; www.yemenia.com; hub San'a)

#### DEPARTURE TAX

There is an airport departure tax of KD2, payable in cash at the airport. Some tickets sold outside Kuwait already include this charge. To check, look for 'KD2' or something similar in the 'tax' box just below the part of the ticket that indicates the destination.

#### FARES

Kuwait is not a particularly cheap place to fly into or out of. The airlines and travel agents control prices tightly, and few discount fares are available. The following fares represent walk-in prices from Kuwait City with Gulf Air, one of the most flexible and comprehensive airlines in the region.

Flight destination	Price	Frequency
Doha (Qatar)	US\$207	daily
Manama (Bahrain)	US\$175	daily
Muscat (Oman)	US\$360	daily
Abu Dhabi (UAE)	US\$280	daily
Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)	US\$411	daily
San'a (Yemen)	US\$245	2 per week via Manama

#### Land

#### BORDER CROSSINGS

Kuwait has borders with Iraq (currently closed to visitors) and Saudi Arabia. The border-crossing situation with Iraq changes frequently and it's best to check with embassy officials before contemplating this option. It is certainly not currently open to the curious tourist; in fact, it's not possible, at present, to get beyond the checkpoints on Mutla Ridge without a good reason and paperwork to back it up.

The crossings with Saudi Arabia are at Al-Nuwaisib (for Dammam) and Al-Salmy (for Riyadh). You must have a valid visa for Saudi Arabia or a transit visa, an onward ticket and a visa for your next destination beyond Saudi's borders before you can cross the border. You cannot obtain these at the border. See p547 for further details.

#### Bus

**Kuwait Public Transport Company** (☎ 246 9420; www.kptc.com.kw) operates comfy, modern buses to a number of different destinations

beyond Kuwait's borders. Buses also operate between Kuwait and Cairo, via Aqaba in Jordan and Nuweiba in Egypt. Agents specialising in these tickets (the trip takes about two days) are in the area around the main bus station.

Modern, air-con buses, operated by the Saudi bus company **Sapcto** (www.sapcto.com.sa) and handled in Kuwait by **Kuwait & Gulf Transport Company** (☎ 4849355), travel between Kuwait and Dammam (Saudi Arabia) and cost KD6.500. The trip takes six hours.

#### Car & Motorcycle

For those planning on driving through Saudi Arabia, a three-day transit visa is required. Inquire at the **Saudi Embassy** (☎ 240 0250; Arabian Gulf St, Sharq) for more details.

#### Sea

The **Combined Shipping Company** (Map p159; ☎ 483 0889; www.csc-kw.com; Ahmed al-Jaber St, Sharq) operates a return service twice a week from Kuwait's Shuwaikh Port (Map p159) to the Iranian port of Bushehr. A one-way/return economy passage costs US\$70/140; an extra US\$250 is required to take a car. You can book online (www.irantravelingcenter.com).

Speedboat services leave from Shuwaikh Port for Manama (KD45, five hours) in Bahrain. The easiest way to book tickets for these services is through one of the city travel agents (p158).

**Nuzha Touristic Enterprises** (☎ 575 5825; www.nuzhatours.com) run charter trips to Manama and Doha but this is not likely to be a cheap way of getting to those countries.

#### GETTING AROUND

##### Boat

**Kuwait Public Transport Company Ferries** (KPTC; ☎ 571 3544; www.q8boat.com) goes to Failaka Island from Kuwait City (see p171 for more details). **Nuzha Touristic Enterprises** (☎ 575 5825; www.nuzhatours.com) run half- and whole-day boat trips.

##### Bus

Kuwait has a cheap and extensive local bus system but it's designed for the convenience of local residents rather than for visiting tourists. The routes therefore don't often

coincide with the places of tourist interest. Nonetheless, if a 10-minute walk either side of the bus stop isn't a problem, pick up a bus timetable from the main bus station in the city centre.

Most bus routes are operated by **Kuwait Public Transport Company** (KPTC; ☎ 880 001; www.kptc.com.kw), which has air-conditioned and comfortable vehicles. Intercity trips cost between 150 fils and 250 fils. Route 101 runs from the main bus station in the city centre to Al-Ahmadi and Fahaheel. Route 103 goes to Al-Jahra. The **Citibus** (☎ 882 211) alternative follows KPTC routes but doesn't always go the full nine yards; a route map can be obtained from the bus – by which time it may be too late! Both services are used primarily by lower-income workers travelling to their place of work.

#### Car & Motorcycle

If you have an International Driving Permit (IDP), or a license and residence permit from another Gulf country, driving in Kuwait is possible, without any further paperwork, for the duration of your visa.

Fair warning is given of the dangers of driving on Kuwait's roads. See Dangers & Annoyances (p174), as well as Road Hazards (p556) for information.

#### HIRE

Expect costs of between KD10 (for a Toyota Corolla) to KD30 (for a Toyota Prado) per day for car hire. This rate usually includes unlimited kilometres and full insurance. Those driving on an IDP are required to pay an additional KD10.500 for a one-month period to cover insurance. **Al-Mulla** (☎ 243 7333; travel@almulla.com.kw) is one of the better local agencies, with desks at the airport and in many of the city hotels.

#### Local Transport

##### TAXI

Taxis are a useful and popular way of getting around, though they are comparatively expensive when travelling outside the city area, when costs can increase to KD9 per hour. If you want to do some exploring around Kuwait by taxi, it's better to agree on a half- or full-day rate in advance. See p171 for more details.

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