

# Arabian Peninsula Directory

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The following chapter gives the lowdown on all things practical in the region, and is designed to complement the individual country chapters. It makes a good place to start your search for information (subjects are organised alphabetically), before referring to individual countries for more specific details.

## ACCOMMODATION

Throughout the book accommodation options are listed in the following order: budget, midrange and top end, and from cheapest to most expensive within each category. In this book a single/double with bathroom means a room for one/two peo-

ple with an en suite bathroom. If the bathroom is outside the room, it's 'shared'.

During local holiday periods (particularly over *eid*, the Islamic feast) and popular festivals (such as the shopping festivals in Dubai and Kuwait), as well as Western holidays (Christmas and New Year) and major fixtures (like the Dubai Rugby Sevens), travellers should book well in advance.

## Camping

Except in Saudi Arabia's Asir National Park (see p342) and at Ras al-Jinz (see p221) in Oman, there are no specially designated camping areas, although there are organised, and generally quite expensive, desert camps in Khor al-Adaid, Qatar (p287), and Sharqiya (Wahiba) Sands, Oman (p225). Wild camping (without any facilities) is one of the highlights of the region, providing you have your own transport and bring all your own equipment. It is very popular among expats, tour groups and Arab families (particularly in Bahrain and Kuwait, where camping is becoming an environmental hazard). It is very important to camp discreetly (away from towns or villages) and responsibly by taking litter away with you and avoiding turtle beaches. Turtle beaches can be identified by the presence of large pits at the top of the tide line.

## Hostels

Youth hostels aren't exactly abundant on the Peninsula. Saudi Arabia boasts nine (open to men only) hostels and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) two. All are Hostelling International (HI) members. Cards are required for Saudi Arabian hostels and will secure 50% discounts on prices in the

### BOOKING ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com). You'll find the lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

UAE. All bedding is supplied. Hostels cost US\$2.50 to US\$11 per person per night, depending on whether you're eligible for discounts.

## Hotels

As the region is still far from becoming a backpackers' beat, and as local Arabs traditionally stay with relatives when they travel, budget accommodation can be hard to find.

Prices of hotels in the Peninsula are usually high. Bar Yemen, you'll be hard-pressed to find habitable cheap accommodation in any of the Peninsula cities. Outside the cities, there are generally few options to choose from. The good news is that standards are also high. It's rare to find rooms even in the cheapest category that lack air-conditioning, hot water, a telephone and a fridge. Tellingly, a TV (usually with satellite channels, including BBC and CNN) seems to be considered a basic amenity everywhere (even when a bathroom is not).

Prices reflect amenities: US\$40 is about the minimum for budget rooms (bar hostels), US\$125 to US\$175 for midrange (this range has the biggest selection) and from around US\$200 for top-end hotels. Of course you can pay many hundreds or even thousands of dollars to stay at the region's star-spangled hotels, such as Burj al-Arab (p389) in Dubai, Emirates Palace (p422) in Abu Dhabi or the Al-Husn Hotel (p212) near Muscat. Competition is often high, however, and it's well worth trying to negotiate discounts, particularly in the low season.

Yemen is the Peninsula's poor relation and its hotels are very cheap: starting from around US\$8/14/50 for budget/midrange/top-end accommodation, though several big-dollar, top-end options can also be found.

For those travelling on a tight budget, dormitory-style accommodation is available in some towns, though it's usually very basic, with filthy dorms and worse bathrooms. Such accommodation isn't really an option for women (unless you rent the whole room for yourself). You may even be turned away, or barred outright (as at hostels in Saudi Arabia).

Budget hotel options can normally be found in the souq areas of towns. Increas-

ingly, in some cities, prostitutes (generally from the ex-Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and East Africa) have set up shop and actively ply their trade in these areas. Travellers of both sexes should be aware of this, particularly women travelling alone.

Amenities in the top-end hotels are good and include outdoor pools, business facilities and health centres. Most midrange and all top-end hotels have restaurants. Many serve a wide variety of high-quality food.

In Peninsula countries where restrictions on alcohol apply, drinking is often only officially permitted in the hotels (usually midrange to top end), where bars and nightclubs serving alcohol can be found. Thus hotels often offer the best (or only) entertainment in town for the traveller. Often a second, less than salubrious 'local' bar is attached, which attracts large numbers of rowdy (usually male) merry-makers.

## Rental Accommodation

Rental accommodation (most often unfurnished) can usually be found in all the major Peninsula cities, and ranges from modest, purpose-built flats to attractive villas and sumptuous hotel annexes.

Expats on the Peninsula usually opt for one of three types accommodation: a villa (often with garden); an apartment block (often with communal swimming pool and health club); or a residency within a 'compound' (including communal pool, health or sports club, restaurant, children's play park, shops – usually selling Western foods – and ball courts).

Rental accommodation is usually advertised in local English-language newspapers. Embassies, cultural centres, companies and colleagues (if you're working) are another useful source of information. Relocation consultants as well as estate agents can be found in the telephone directories of most countries.

Most employers organise temporary accommodation until employees find their own accommodation. Many of the larger, international companies have a good range of accommodation available for employees on their books.

When looking for accommodation, it's worth bearing the following in mind: make sure each room has some form of air-conditioning; check whether maintenance of

shared areas of a compound are included in the rent; opt for properties with mains water as opposed to water delivered by bowser; and look for properties with off-road, shaded parking to protect your car from the sun.

Note that non-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) foreigners are not allowed to own property in the Peninsula.

## Resorts

With miles of unspoilt coastline on two seas, it's surprising that the concept of seaside resort is only just catching on. Existing resorts range from basic Robinson Crusoe-style constructions (found in Al-Khawkhah on Yemen's Red Sea) to sumptuous palace-hotels with underwater restaurants (such as Burj al-Arab in Dubai). Many offer a good variety of water sports and activities, from diving and water-skiing to gentler activities, such as boat trips and fun rides for kids.

## ACTIVITIES

Although the Peninsula is a region little known for its activities, it has exceptional potential for more explorative and 'pioneering' activities. The wilderness areas of Oman, Yemen and Saudi, in particular, invite all manner of outdoor pursuits, and the Arabian and Red Seas offer some of the best diving and snorkelling in the world. For more details on all the activities listed below, see Activities in the Directory section of individual countries.

Sporting facilities are quite well developed in most countries on the Peninsula (and particularly in Qatar). If your hotel doesn't stretch to health and sports clubs (and most top-end hotels do), you can usually use the public health and sporting clubs and complexes found in the larger towns of the 'richer' countries. An easy way to keep fit for all visitors to the Peninsula is to pack some running shoes: almost all the seaboard cities of the region have beautiful, landscaped corniches intended for walking, jogging or just catching the breeze.

If on your Peninsula travels the hot weather gets to you, then take heart: for some curious reason, all the countries of the Gulf have an ice-rink! See the boxed text, p204.

## Desert Safaris & 4WD Exploration

The Peninsula's most famous topographical feature is the desert, and it comes in several shapes and sizes, each of which offers a different type of activity. There are sand dunes, wonderful for camel rides and sand boarding; rocky plains, giving the best opportunity for spotting wildlife (see Wildlife Watching, p528); and arid mountains and water-catching wadis, where swimming, hiking routes, climbing and caving opportunities are beginning to develop.

Excursions to any of these environments in 4WD vehicles are a long-established pastime among Peninsula Arabs, as well as expats and tour groups. Apart from the challenge of driving and navigating off-road, and the attractions of magnificent scenery, these excursions also offer the chance to see a way of life that is fast disappearing. Indeed, the opportunity to engage with Peninsula Bedu, or the inhabitants of remote, terraced villages, and see how they have refined life under the harshest of circumstances, is a rare privilege.

Be aware that it requires both skill and experience to drive in the desert and it's essential that you're properly equipped, both for the road and for the weather. See the advice and tips offered in the boxed text, p554. In the interests of minimising harmful effects on the environment, it's very important to stick to established off-road tracks and avoid cutting new paths across the desert (see boxed text, p554). In parts of Dhofar (southern Oman) and Yemen, and to a lesser extent in Kuwait, unexploded ordinance is an added incentive to keep to the tracks.

Oman, the UAE and Yemen all offer activities in the desert (see Activities in those chapters for details). Local tour operators can help you organise trips ranging from a short camel ride to expeditions that map uncharted cave systems.

## Diving & Snorkelling

The Red Sea is one of the world's top diving sites, teeming with a huge variety of marine life and supported by a magical reef system. Although facilities and 'après-dive' on the Peninsula side of the sea are limited (to say the least), there is the joy of having the pristine reefs to yourself. Arabian Sea diving sites are also good. Because water

## RESPONSIBLE DIVING & SNORKELLING

Please consider the following tips when diving, and help preserve the ecology and beauty of the Peninsula's reefs:

- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage is done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells, or to loot marine archaeological sites (particularly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and remove any litter you may find. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life (turtles often ingest plastic bags, mistaking them for jellyfish).
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals. Do not feed the fish. Never ride on the backs of turtles.

temperatures are lower, there is less coral life, but fish life is profuse.

Many diving opportunities are available throughout the region, although for the best experience balanced against the easiest access, Oman is the frontrunner. Most of the region's diving centres offer beginner diving courses (with either PADI, CMAS or NAUI among others) that take between four to five days and cost US\$300 to US\$450, depending on the operator and location. A good way of trying out diving before committing to a full course is a 'try dive' (or 'introductory dive'), which costs from around US\$80, including all equipment.

For those already certified, a day's diving (two to three dives), including all equipment, costs US\$50 to US\$100. Divers who want to find their own dive site can hire full equipment from dive centres for around US\$25. In some places basic underwater cameras can also be hired. For those on a budget, or pushed for time, snorkelling can still give you an excellent idea of life on the reef. Snorkelling gear usually costs around US\$6 to US\$10 per day.

## Fishing

Fishermen's boats (found throughout the Peninsula) can often be hired by the hour or half/full day for a very reasonable fee. They usually come complete with the fisherman! This is a great advantage to finding

the best shoals or haunts of something edible, with some snorkelling and swimming thrown in.

Deep-sea fishing is also possible. Trips need to be booked in advance and usually cost around US\$400 per day for two people, including all equipment. Common catches include yellow-fin tuna (which can weigh between 25kg and 60kg), sail fish, barracuda and shark.

Fishing licences are not needed on the Peninsula, but in some countries you may have to register longer boat trips with the local coastguard.

## Golf

Despite the blistering heat and chronic water shortages, golf has caught on in a big way in some of the Peninsula countries, including Bahrain, Qatar and particularly the UAE. Today the region boasts several world-class courses. Many more are planned for the future, including at least four in Dubai alone and two in Muscat.

## Hammams

Better known in the West as the 'Turkish bath', the *hammam* is one of the great sensual indulgences of the Middle East. Whether you submit to a massage or not (and there's nothing quite like it after days spent on the road), a session in the steam room is worthwhile, if only for a peek at

the architecture of some *hammams*, terrific contact with locals and an insight into daily local life.

Although nothing like as popular, famous or indulgent as the baths of Turkey and Syria, *hammams* can be found in many cities and towns of the Peninsula. Just ask at your hotel for a local recommendation.

### Trekking

The Peninsula is a fantastic place for wild trekking, particularly in the mountains of Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Mostly the activity is down to the initiative of the traveller and involves buying a trekking guide in-country, packing more water than you think you'll need, and striking out alone. Tour companies, however, are increasingly able to tailor trips for hikers and some even cater for tour groups. Not wanting to be left behind in the bid to win tourists, some countries (Oman in particular) have mapped walking routes through some of the region's wildest territory.

Considering the Peninsula's particular climatic conditions, the following precautions are worth noting:

- Budget for at least 4L of water per person per day. In the heat of summer (when temperatures can exceed 40°C) hiking can be extremely dangerous. Most hikers will go through 1L of water every hour. Even in the cooler months your main issue will be water.
- Wear light-coloured and lightweight clothing; use a good sunscreen (at least UV Protection Factor 30) and never set off without a hat that shelters your neck and face from direct sunlight. A light, semitransparent veil is useful to protect eyes, nose, mouth and ears from blowing sand and dust.
- Rise before the sun and hike until the heat becomes oppressive. If it's very hot, rest through the heat of midday and begin again after 3pm. During the hotter months consider timing your hike with the full moon, which will allow walking at night.
- Keep an eye on the weather when following wadis. Rain can suddenly render dry wadis impassable and very dangerous. Never camp in wadis or canyons, and always keep to higher ground whenever there's a risk of flash flooding.

### Water Sports

The Peninsula boasts long stretches of beautiful, sandy beaches. As such, one would imagine that water sports were a highly developed activity in the region. This in fact is not the case, as for half the year the beach is too hot to stand on, the sea too thick to swim in and the air suffocatingly humid. Added to the climate, local people have traditionally regarded the coast and the sea as a place of work (for fishing, sardine drying, rock collecting). Times are changing, however, and now most seaboard cities on the Peninsula, and some rather exclusive resorts beyond the cities, offer opportunities for sea swimming, sailing, windsurfing, even jet-skiing, particularly in the UAE, where the tourist industry is working hard to promote the country as a winter 'sun and sea' destination.

Many water-sports facilities are attached to either big hotels or private clubs and are not always accessible to nonguests and nonmembers. That said, some hotels are starting to accept short-stay visitors and are usually happy to rent out equipment to guests.

Beaches are generally clean and, save for a very few exceptions – such as in the UAE, where rip tides, especially around Dubai, claim one or two lives each year, and during the turbulent summer *khareef* (monsoon) season in southern Oman – the seas are safe.

The Peninsula boasts many yacht clubs and marinas along its coastline, where everything from diminutive dinghies to the famous floating Arab gin palaces and million-dollar power boats can be found. A range of boating activities are possible, from the hiring of small fishing vessels for swimming, snorkelling and picnicking trips, to organised harbour cruises in the Gulf cities, and sailing lessons and crewing for those on an extended stay.

### Wildlife Watching

One of the exceptional opportunities of travelling to countries that are seldom visited is the chance to see nature in the raw. The Arabian Peninsula, which is comprised mostly of desert, may seem like an odd place to see wildlife, but it is far from barren land (see boxed text, p104) and offers some exceptional opportunities for the naturalist.

As the Peninsula straddles important migration routes, bird-watching opportunities are legion, from watching raptors scale the escarpments of the Asir in Saudi and rare sightings of the endangered Houbara bustard in the central Peninsula plains, to following the mass migrations of Socotra cormorants on the Hawar Islands in Bahrain and sand grouse in Oman.

Turtles occur along the entire Arabian Sea coast, often in global proportions and night-time excursions can be made to world-important nesting sites, especially in Oman (see p221). Dugongs, whales and easily spotted dolphins are an added joy of the region, and you don't have to be an expert to enjoy the enormous variety of shells along the coasts of the Peninsula.

Animals, and especially mammals, are not as easy to spot, but there are several opportunities for seeing oryx and gazelle in their natural habitat, particularly in Oman, together with fox, hedgehog and gerbil.

More and more tour companies are beginning to offer tailor-made tours around specialist wildlife interests, including botany and geology. Some even offer the chance to monitor the activities of endangered species like leopard, as part of scientific programmes. See also [www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com) for information regarding responsible travel.

### BUSINESS HOURS

Business hours vary from country to country and sometimes from region to region within a country (depending on climatic differences, such as those in highland/lowland Yemen). They also vary from institution to institution (see the individual country chapters for more details).

An added complication is that traditionally the 'weekend' in the Peninsula used to be Thursday and Friday. Now, in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE, the weekend has shifted to Friday and Saturday with Oman roused to follow suit.

In practical terms this means that Thursday and Friday are holidays for all government offices. Thursday is a holiday for most banks and embassies in Saudi, Yemen and Oman. Saturday is a holiday for most banks and embassies in the other countries. Shops stay open for six days a week in all countries

### OPEN SESAME

Where possible throughout this book we have given the opening times of places of interest. The information is usually taken from notices posted at the sites. However, often the reality on the ground is that sites open pretty much when the gate-guard feels like it. On a good day he'll be there an hour early, on a bad day he won't turn up at all. Who can blame him when in little-touristed sites, like some of those in Yemen or Oman, he may not see a visitor for days, anyway? All opening hours must be prefaced, therefore, with a hopeful *insha'allah* (God willing)!

and many open for a limited period on Friday evening too.

Bank opening hours vary throughout the region, but usually operate from 8am or 9am to noon or 1pm, either five or six days a week. Some reopen for a couple of hours in the afternoon. Foreign-exchange facilities usually keep longer hours.

Hours also vary according to the season or month. All government offices work shorter hours during Ramadan (the month-long fast for Muslims) and businesses tend to open much later and close earlier, or else not open at all during the day but remain open for much of the night. Note that many restaurants close during the day throughout Ramadan – or even remain closed for the month.

One important thing to remember when travelling in the Arabian Peninsula is that you can't rely on many tourist sites opening as prescribed (see boxed text, above). If you're determined to see a particular museum or other attraction and haven't time to waste, it's worth calling ahead to make sure it's open as stated. That, alas, is still no guarantee!

### CHILDREN

Taking the kids certainly adds another dimension to a trip to the Peninsula. Children are often made a big fuss of and are allowed liberties unthinkable in Western countries. Travelling with children can help break the ice and permit closer contact with local people. However, there are a few provisos that should be kept in mind.

It's a good idea to avoid travel during the summer months, when the extreme heat can be debilitating for children, particularly babies.

Cleanliness may be another problem when travelling with infants. It's obviously impractical to carry more than about half a dozen washable nappies with you, but disposable ones are not always easy to come by (though they're increasingly available in the larger cities). Infant formula is widely available, however, as is bottled water.

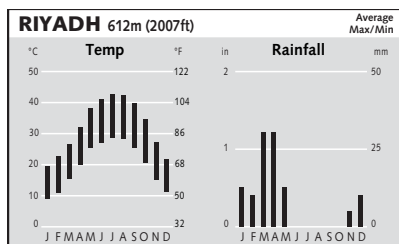
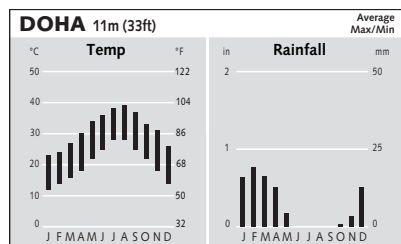
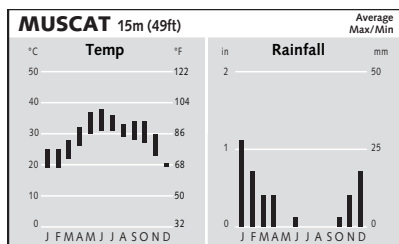
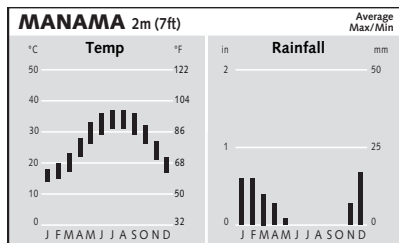
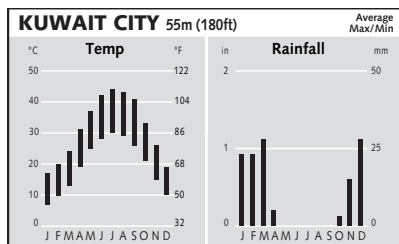
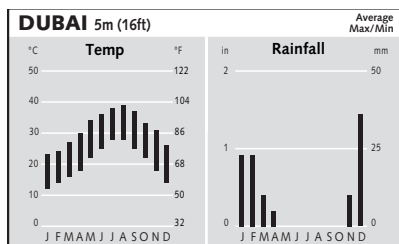
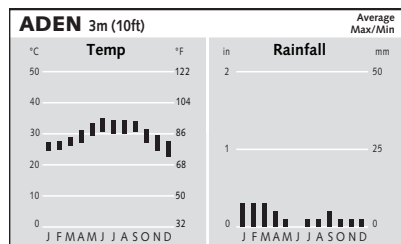
In top-end and some midrange hotels, children can usually share their parents' room for no extra charge. Extra beds or cots are normally available. High chairs are often only available in top-end restaurants.

There are few sophisticated children-oriented entertainments outside of the big cities, but a beach is never too far away, and there are often parks containing children's play areas (including swings and slides) even in small towns. In some cities, babysitting services are also available.

See 'For Children' sections listed under each capital city, for information on interesting diversions.

For more comprehensive advice on the dos and don'ts of taking the kids see Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* by Cathy Lanigan.

## CLIMATE CHARTS



## COURSES

The Arabian Peninsula is not the most obvious place to come to learn a skill as a traveller, as there is relatively little tourist-related activity in the region. If you are planning a longer stay, however, or are planning to be expatriate in the region, there are literally dozens of opportunities from learning to line dance in Muscat, public speaking in

the cities of the Gulf, to belly dancing in Abu Dhabi.

It is possible on a longer-term stay to learn Arabic at various institutes and colleges throughout the region. Courses generally focus on Classical Arabic (as opposed to local dialect) and vary between six and 10 weeks, with costs starting at US\$200.

### ARABIC: A COMMON LANGUAGE?

There is nothing more disparaging than polishing up your best phrases in Arabic and having them returned to you by the well-meaning recipient with a crit sheet: 'That was good, but you could have said it this way' is a favourite response, and another is, 'Ah, so you're speaking Arabic, that's great, but that's not how we say it here!' After returning a full volley of greetings (some of which can last up to five minutes) in Arabic, there's then the dismal moment when your companion turns to the main body of the conversation – in English. After a few Arabic courses and endless failed attempts to practise the language, all but the most determined of linguists admit defeat. In short, one has to conclude that learning Arabic in Arabia is neither easy nor encouraged.

Inevitably one begins to wonder whether there's some kind of cultural conspiracy involved. Many people in the region are regretful that their higher studies (especially in health care) are conducted through the medium of English. They regret that the language of the internet is mostly English. They regret too that advertising often involves untranslatable English words and phrases. If you don't speak English, there's a sense that you're missing out on international debate. With the adoption of English at so many different levels, there's the suspicion that a degree of cultural persuasion or even propaganda is subliminally present. Some even suspect the spread of the English language as being part and parcel of a general relaxing of rigid moral codes in the region. Whether or not this is justified, the suspicion of 'cultural colonialism' may be one reason why Arabic people are reluctant to expose their own language to foreign tongues. It raises sensitive questions. Should foreigners and infidels be let loose on the holy language of the Quran? Can language be subverted by meddling foreigners?

A more likely explanation is that Arabic itself is not the common language of the Peninsula that one might expect. Firstly, each country, each region within each country even, has its own dialect. This can pose substantial problems for one national trying to understand another. Secondly, not all Arabs speak Arabic as their mother tongue. In Oman, for example, thanks to their former empires and trading partners, many of them speak Swahili or Baluchi, and some tribespeople speak linguistically unrelated tongues like Kumzari (a mixture of all-sorts) or Jibbali, the arcane 'Language of the Birds'. Thirdly, a considerable number of people living on the Peninsula (over half the population in Qatar) are not Arab. Indeed, most travellers are more likely to come across Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam or Tagalog among the souqs, tour operators, hotels and restaurants in the region than they are Arabic.

Like it or not, English has become the language of cultural and commercial exchange in the region and the younger generation is particularly keen to acquire the basics. Drive up any wadi, ride to any Bedouin settlement and you're sure to hear a stream of 'how-are-yous' following your progress.

So does that mean as a traveller you shouldn't even try to respond in kind? Not at all. Learning Arabic opens windows onto elements of a culture that finds no translation and unlocks the door to meaningful cross-cultural relationships. In fact, even acquiring a few words gives some interesting cultural insights – like the term *insha'allah* (God willing) and the whole concept of fatalism that lurks behind it, or *mash'allah* (the closest English translation is 'God has willed it'), and the protection from the evil eye that this phrase affords. If nothing else, it'll explain why when you say 'thank you', you won't actually receive anything: *shukran* (thanks in Arabic) usually means 'no thanks'. Never mind opening doors and windows, that one's a cultural minefield!

Some schools additionally offer courses in 'Islamic studies', as well as cultural courses. See Courses in the country chapters and capital city sections for more details.

## CUSTOMS

Customs regulations vary from country to country, but in most cases they don't differ significantly from those in the West.

The most important restriction to bear in mind is that it is strictly forbidden to take alcohol into dry regions (Kuwait, Qatar, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia). Alcohol can only be taken into Oman by air. If you're caught attempting to smuggle in even small quantities of alcohol, punishments range from deportation and fines to imprisonment. In most other countries, foreigners (but not Muslims) are permitted a small duty-free allowance.

Those caught in possession of drugs (including ecstasy, amphetamines, cannabis and cocaine) can face the death penalty, which in Saudi Arabia, with its policy of zero tolerance, means what it says. Note that syringes and needles, and some medicinal drugs are also banned (such as tranquillisers and even some antidepressants and sleeping

-pills), unless you have a doctor's prescription to prove that you need them.

Video cassettes and DVDs are a sensitive subject in Peninsula countries. Censors may well want to examine tapes and then allow you to collect them after a few days. Other custom taboos include pork products (though some countries make allowances for foreigners) and material construed as 'incendiary' (such as books critical of Islam, Peninsula governments or their countries).

There are no restrictions on the import and export of money (in any currency) in and out of Peninsula countries.

All luggage is x-rayed and sometimes opened too. That said, with greater numbers of tourists arriving and in the drive to appear more tourist-friendly, many of the old customs nightmares (like long queues while officials check the contents of your soap box) are things of the past.

See Customs under the directories of individual countries for details, and particularly the boxed text on p362, for the trials and tribulations of Saudi customs.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The Arabian Peninsula has a historical reputation for being a dangerous place, whether for political turmoil, the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism or, more recently, the threat of terrorism. However, the trouble spots are usually well defined, and as long as you keep track of political developments, you are unlikely to come to any harm.

In Saudi Arabia a spate of Al-Qaeda bombings and threats (directed specifically at Westerners) in 2004 was a serious cause for concern. However, the authorities are proving both determined and relatively successful in combating the terrorism threat. Similarly, the hostage threat in Yemen appears to have abated with the authorities threatening zero tolerance of anyone caught messing with the returning tourist trade.

Politics aside, the Peninsula is actually a very safe place compared with much of the West (see boxed text, opposite). The crime rate is extremely low, with the Peninsula boasting one of the lowest average crime rates in the world, and more often than not foreign immigrants (arriving in the Peninsula since the 1970s) turn out to be the

### IS IT SAFE?

Safety is a subjective topic. As far as security in the Peninsula is concerned, most people's perceptions are shaped by the continual news stories of Islamist fundamentalism, terrorism and bombings. It's a picture that bears little relation to reality. Interestingly, Arabs travelling to the US share similar concerns, bearing in mind Al-Jazeera reports of Guantanamo Bay and thinking of *Kill Bill*. Needless to say, day-to-day life in the Peninsula revolves around violence about as often as it does in Wyoming.

Fortunately, the people of the Middle East are ready and willing to distinguish between foreign governments and their policies, and foreign travellers. You might receive the occasional question about politics, but you'll never be held personally accountable. Keep abreast of current events, visit your embassy for travel advice if you're feeling cautious, but otherwise, just go.

perpetrators. One reader calculated that he was 97 times more likely to be robbed or killed in his home town (Kansas City, USA) than in San'a, Yemen's capital! That doesn't mean to say you should take unnecessary risks, but it does mean you don't have to worry unduly about mugging and scams designed to part you from your goods.

See the individual country chapters for country-specific dangers and annoyances, as well as Road Hazards, p556.

### Climate

The most major hazard of the region is undoubtedly the weather. At any time of year, the high temperatures of midday can quickly lead to heat exhaustion, sun stroke and serious burns. If you are travelling in the summer, breaking down on an empty road without water can literally be life-threatening. You should bear this in mind when planning a trip outside urban areas and think twice about travelling alone.

Avoiding problems is largely a matter of common sense: always carry more water than you think you'll need; cover your head and neck; wear sunglasses; cover up, especially between 11am and 3pm; and avoid too much activity in the summer months – in other words, do as the locals do!

## Swimming

The waters of the Red Sea and the northern part of the Arabian Sea are usually calm and safe for swimming and paddling. During the summer in eastern and southern Oman (July to September) and on the northern coast of Yemen, however, huge swells occur making, swimming a very dangerous activity. Every year there are casualties associated with the strong tides and powerful undercurrents. On some stretches of the normally quieter Gulf and Red Sea coasts, lifeguards using internationally recognised flags patrol the beach at weekends.

Litter affects many public beaches, despite the best efforts of local authorities, and tar can be a nuisance on wild beaches, released from irresponsible tankers. The practice is illegal but hard to police.

Most wild beaches are free from pollution and are safe for paddling and swimming. It's important to beware of natural hazards, though, including stone fish (with a highly venomous sting), stingrays and sometimes jellyfish (that deliver a fairly innocuous but persistent sting). These problems can be avoided by wearing shoes and a T-shirt when swimming (also useful against sunburn).

Sharks are common but only very rare incidents of aggressive behaviour have been reported and generally in predictable circumstances (such as in waters where fishermen are gutting fish).

On beaches, foreign women may attract unwanted attention from young Arab males. Generally, the more conservative your swimwear the less attention you'll attract and the more comfortable you'll feel. In some countries 'family beaches' are reserved for females and boys under 10 years.

Note that topless or nude sun bathing on the beaches or in wadi areas is strictly forbidden on the Peninsula; those who flout this law are liable to be arrested, as well as giving grave offense to anyone who chances to see them. Nothing causes more resentment among traditional communities than the behaviour of the few tourists who can't keep their clothes on.

## DISCOUNT CARDS

Unfortunately, student, youth and senior citizens cards are of little use anywhere on the Peninsula, though hostelling cards do secure discounts (see p524).

### GOVERNMENT TRAVEL ADVICE

For info on what's new, as well as updated safety reports, check these websites.

The US State Department's **Bureau of Consular Affairs** ([www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov)) offers periodically updated Consular Information Sheets, which include entry requirements, medical facilities, crime information and other topics. However, these err heavily on the side of caution and are often out of date.

British Foreign Office travel advisories can be obtained from the **Travel Advice Unit** (☎ 020-7270 4129; [www.fco.gov.uk/travel](http://www.fco.gov.uk/travel)); Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Room 605, Clive House, Petty France, London SW1H 9HD). Regularly updated Foreign Office travel advice is also displayed on BBC2 Ceefax teletext pages pp 564 ff.

Australians can ring the **Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade** (☎ 02-6261 3305) in Canberra for advisories, or visit the **Consular Travel Advice** ([www.dfat.gov.au/travel](http://www.dfat.gov.au/travel)) website.

## ELECTRICITY

Beware of attaching the wrong appliance to the wrong supply (say a 110V appliance to a 220V outlet) and protect electrical equipment from power surges. See the table below for specific country voltages and plug styles.

Country	Voltage	Plug
Bahrain	220 to 240	3-pin UK style
Kuwait	220 to 240	2- & 3-pin UK style
Oman	220 to 240	3-pin UK style
Qatar	220 to 240	3-pin UK style
Saudi Arabia	220 & 110*	2- & 3-pin UK style
UAE	220 to 240	3-pin UK style
Yemen	220 to 240	3-pin UK style

\* Both 220V and 110V are found at various places in the Kingdom, but the latter is more widespread.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies are a fairly good, if somewhat cautious and at times alarmist, source of information on current hotspots and dangers. Many embassies advise travellers to register with them upon arrival, especially if you're staying in the country for an extended period: if you should disappear, have a serious accident, or suddenly need to be evacuated from the country, you will at least be in a better position to receive help.

For the addresses and contact details of embassies and consulates both abroad and in the Peninsula, see Embassies & Consulates in the Directory of the individual country chapters.

## ISLAMIC CALENDAR

Although most secular activities and day-to-day life are planned in the Peninsula according to the Gregorian calendar (the Western system), all Islamic holidays are calculated according to the Muslim calendar. In Saudi Arabia, however, the Muslim calendar is the principal one used. For visitors this can cause confusion (such as when trying to decipher official documents, including the date of expiry of travel permits and visa). Calendars showing parallel systems are available.

The Muslim year is based on the lunar cycle and is divided into 12 lunar months, each with 29 or 30 days. Consequently, the Muslim year is 10 or 11 days shorter than the Christian solar year, and the Muslim festivals gradually move around our year, completing the cycle in roughly 33 years.

Year zero in the Muslim calendar was when Mohammed and his followers fled from Mecca to Medina (AD 622 in the Christian calendar). This Hejira, or migration, is taken to mark the start of the new Muslim era, much as Christ's birth marks year zero in the Christian calendar. Just as BC denotes 'Before Christ', so AH denotes 'After Hejira'.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexual practices are illegal in all of the Peninsula countries. Under Sharia'a (Islamic) law, (see p536) in some countries homosexuality incurs the death penalty (though punishment usually ranges from flogging to imprisonment or deportation). In other countries infractions solicit fines and/or imprisonment.

Westerners are unlikely to encounter outright prejudice or harassment so long as they remain discreet. However, this may well change if you become involved with a local. Room sharing is generally not a problem (it will be assumed that you're economising). Condoms are fairly widely available, though may be limited in selection. You're advised to bring your own supply.

For more information on attitudes to gay and lesbian travellers on the Peninsula (and recommendations of bars and hotels), see the *Spartacus International Gay Guide*.

## HOLIDAYS

All Peninsula countries observe the main Islamic holidays listed below. Countries with a major Shiite population also observe Ashura. Some of the Peninsula countries also observe the Gregorian New Year (1 January). Every state additionally has its own national days and other public holidays – for details refer to the individual country chapters.

**Islamic New Year** Also known as Ras as-Sana, it literally means 'the head of the year'.

**Prophet's Birthday** Known as Moulid an-Nabi, it's 'the feast of the Prophet'.

## ISLAMIC HOLIDAYS 2007–2012

It often comes as some surprise that dates of Islamic holidays are not fixed on a particular day each year, nor are they wholly predictable. This is because dates are dependent on moon sightings and consequently may occur a day later, but not generally earlier, than listed. Not all countries spot the moon on the same day for some reason (cloud cover doesn't count), so regional differences between countries occur each year. In fact, speculation regarding whether or not tomorrow will bring *eid* is the subject of great public debate and private expat exasperation. The following is therefore to be treated as a guide only!

Year	Hejira	New Year	Prophet's Birthday	Ashura	Ramadan Begins	Eid al-Fitr	Eid al-Adha
1428	21 Jan 2007	31 Mar 2007	29 Jan 2007	13 Sep 2007	13 Oct 2007	20 Dec 2007	
1429	10 Jan 2008	20 Mar 2008	19 Jan 2008	2 Sep 2008	2 Oct 2008	9 Dec 2008	
1430	1 Jan 2009	9 Mar 2009	9 Jan 2009	23 Aug 2009	22 Sep 2009	30 Nov 2009	
1431	20 Dec 2009	28 Feb 2010	31 Dec 2009	13 Aug 2010	12 Sep 2010	20 Nov 2010	
1432	9 Dec 2010	18 Feb 2010	20 Dec 2010	3 Aug 2011	2 Sep 2011	9 Nov 2011	
1433	30 Nov 2011	7 Feb 2011	10 Dec 2011	23 Jul 2012	22 Aug 2012	30 Oct 2012	
1435	19 Nov 2012	28 Jan 2012	9 Dec 2012	12 Jul 2013	11 Jul 2013	19 Oct 2013	

**Ashura** The anniversary of the martyrdom of Hussein, the third *imam* (religious teacher) of the Shiites.

**Ramadan** The ninth month of the Muslim calendar, this is when Muslims fast during daylight hours. How strictly the fast is observed depends on the country, but most Muslims conform to some extent. Foreigners are not expected to follow suit, but it is considered very bad form to smoke, drink or eat (including gum-chewing) in public during Ramadan. Hotels make provision for guests by erecting screens for discreet dining. In the more strictly Islamic countries, disrespecting the fast can land you in serious trouble, especially in Saudi Arabia, where jail sentences are handed out to anyone seen so much as smoking during daylight hours. Business hours tend to become more erratic and usually shorter, and in out-of-the-way places you may find it hard to find a restaurant open before nightfall. As the sun sets each day, the fast is broken with something light (like dates and *laban*) before prayers. Then comes *iftar* (breakfast), at which enough food is usually consumed to compensate for the previous hours of abstinence. People then rise again before dawn to prepare a meal to support them throughout the day.

**Eid al-Fitr** The festivities mark the end of Ramadan fasting; the celebrations last for three days and are a time of family feasting and visiting.

**Eid al-Adha** This feast marks the time that Muslims make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

## INSURANCE

Travel insurance covering accidents and medical problems is strongly advised, particularly as road traffic accidents are a major hazard of the region and problems can easily occur if visiting the desert (par-

ticularly on off-road excursions). Although some regional hospitals do not charge for emergency treatment, you cannot rely on this. If you need complicated surgery (for a fracture, for example), it can cost as much as it would to have private treatment in a Western country.

A policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later is a better option for the region. If you have to claim later make sure you keep all documentation.

Note that some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', which can include activities you may want to engage in on the Peninsula, such as scuba diving, rock climbing, motorcycling and even trekking.

See also Insurance, p553 and the boxed text, p550.

## INTERNET ACCESS

The Peninsula has embraced the communications revolution with gusto and it's no longer difficult to keep in touch with home.

Most travellers make constant use of internet cafés and free web-based email such as **Yahoo** ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)) or **Hotmail** ([www.hotmail.com](http://www.hotmail.com)). If you're travelling with a notebook or hand-held computer, be aware that your modem may not work in parts of the Peninsula. The safest option is to buy a reputable 'global' modem before you leave home, or buy a local PC-card modem if you're

spending an extended time in any one country. Wi-fi hotspots are becoming more common in many hotels, shopping malls and cafés, and plugging a laptop in is usually possible even in small towns.

Bring a universal AC adaptor for your equipment, to enable you to plug it in anywhere without frying the circuit boards. You may also need a plug adaptor for each country you visit (see p534).

Keep in mind that there are a variety of telephone sockets used in each country, so ensure that you have at least a US RJ-11 telephone adaptor that works with your modem.

For more information on travelling with a portable computer, see [www.teleadapt.com](http://www.teleadapt.com).

If you access your internet account at home through one of the smaller ISPs or your office or school network, your best option is either to open an account with a global ISP, like **AOL** ([www.aol.com](http://www.aol.com)), or rely on internet cafés and other public access points to collect your mail.

If you intend to rely on internet cafés, you'll need to carry three pieces of information with you to enable you to access your internet mail account, your incoming (POP or IMAP) mail server name, your account name and password.

You'll find internet cafés throughout the Middle East (even Yemen and Saudi Arabia are now online big time). But while getting access is usually no problem, connection speeds can be painfully slow. Lines often suffer from congestion during the Muslim 'weekend'.

The state telephone companies provide access and act as servers, so can regulate all site access. Much censorship takes place, particularly in Saudi Arabia. See Internet Access in the individual countries for further information.

## LEGAL MATTERS

Although the law varies in particulars from country to country, it does share certain similarities. The legal system in all Peninsula countries is based wholly or partly on Sharia'a law, derived mainly from the Quran.

In the West, Sharia'a law is perceived as notoriously harsh and inflexible, but in reality there are basic tenets shared with Western legal values (such as the presump-

tion of innocence until proven guilty). The severest punishment for a crime is in practice rarely exacted (even in Saudi Arabia).

Visitors should remember that they are subject to the laws of the country they find themselves in, and that ignorance of the law does *not* constitute a defence. In Saudi Arabia, in particular, it is vital that travellers (particularly women) acquaint themselves with the local laws.

In other Peninsula countries, note especially the laws concerning alcohol and drugs (see p532), homosexuality (see p534) and the ancient law of 'blood money' in the event of causing injury to another person (see p553).

If you are arrested and detained, call your embassy or consulate and wait until they arrive before you sign anything. In a car accident you mustn't move the car, even if you're causing a traffic jam, until the police arrive.

## MONEY

Specific information on money (including details of the currencies used in each country, as well as the best places to change money) are given in the individual country chapters. See also Costs & Money, p22.

## ATMs

Most of the larger Peninsula banks in the region now have ATMs linked into one of the big global clearing systems (such as MasterCard/Cirrus or Visa/Plus or Global-Access systems). ATMs are also found in shopping malls. Charges for using cash-advance facilities against a credit card are usually high from these machines.

In all Peninsula countries, except Yemen, it's possible to avoid carrying wads of cash by using your plastic for all transactions (but bring at least two credit cards in case of problems or loss of one). Major credit and credit/debit cards, especially Visa and MasterCard, are readily accepted and many ATMs will also accept bank-issued cash cards (which you use at home to withdraw money directly from your bank account).

Be sure to remember your personal identification number (PIN); if you don't have one, request it from your bank several weeks before travelling. Also check out the transaction fees you're likely to incur from both your own bank and the banks

whose machines you will be using when travelling.

## Bargaining

Bargaining over prices is still very much a way of life on the Peninsula, although to a lesser extent than in some other Middle Eastern countries. Yemen and Oman are perhaps the exception, where aggressive bargaining can offend.

Western visitors often have difficulty with the concept of bargaining, being more used to products having fixed values. In the Middle East, on the other hand, commodities are typically considered worth whatever their seller can get for them, balanced against whatever the buyer is willing to pay.

Vendors on the Peninsula won't necessarily quote you prices higher than those that the locals pay, particularly for local produce, such as fruit, and especially outside the cities or tourist areas. You needn't be suspicious, therefore, of everybody charging you high prices just, or particularly, because you're a foreigner. Prices rarely come down much below half the original quote, and 25% to 30% discount is more or less the norm. It does help knowing the prices of things, and after the first few days in a country (when you'll inevitably pay over the odds a few times) you'll soon get to learn the usual prices for basic items. Taxis are something of an anomaly: across the region you'll be fleeced.

## Cash

Most travellers carry a combination of cash and travellers cheques. Cash is quicker to deal with, can be exchanged almost anywhere and usually gets better rates. However, it obviously cannot be replaced if it's lost.

In small businesses, including cheap restaurants, bus stations, youth hostels and budget hotels, and in rural areas, you will need cash for most transactions. Also, always try to have small bills handy when you travel by taxi – it can be difficult to extract change, especially when bartering over a fare.

## Credit Cards

Credit cards are widely accepted on the Peninsula (except Yemen) and almost every-

thing can be paid for by plastic, right down to your morning coffee.

Visa and MasterCard are the most popular credit cards; Amex is also accepted but less widely, and in some places it may not be accepted at all.

It's possible to get cash advances on credit cards in several countries in the region. See Credit Cards in the individual country chapters for more details.

## Moneychangers

Moneychangers often offer better deals than banks, but they don't always accept travellers cheques. They are also usually quicker, have shorter queues and keep longer opening hours. Always check commission charges and exchange rates before handing over money.

## Security

On the whole, the Peninsula is a very safe place and theft is rare. The only real risk of carrying large amounts of cash around is loss. Changing cash outside the big cities can be a hassle, and you may find yourself carrying wads of cash around just to try to avoid this.

In the unlikely event of theft or loss, it's a very good idea to put aside a separate emergency stash, say US\$100 for emergency use.

## Taxes

The Peninsula used to be world famous as a low-tax area. Nowadays, however, a mixture of taxes, often reaching 17%, is added on top of hotel and restaurant prices.

## Tipping

Tips are not generally expected in the Gulf and the concept of '*baksheesh*', well known throughout the rest of the Middle East, is little known on the Peninsula. Those who have contact with tourists (such as guides, car-hire drivers or hotel porters) increasingly expect tips, however.

Note that the service charge added to most hotel and restaurant bills is not an automatic gratuity that goes to the waiters. It usually goes into the till and is often the restaurant's way of making the prices on the menu look 10% to 15% cheaper than they really are. Waiters in the Gulf tend to be paid appallingly low wages, so a small

tip discreetly left on the table, while not required, is definitely greatly appreciated if the service is good. The practice of automatic lavish tip-giving, however, can backfire as many establishments simply reduce the wages of their employees if they know that tips are expected.

### Travellers Cheques

Though not often used by travellers to the region, travellers cheques are widely accepted by banks on the Peninsula, though it can be difficult to cash them in Yemen and with some moneychangers. In some countries hotels offer an exchange service, but rates tend to be poor.

Travellers cheques in US dollars, from major companies such as Amex and Thomas Cook, are the best option, as they're the most widely recognised; both companies have offices in many of the Peninsula cities.

## PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

### Film & Equipment

Photo studios across the Peninsula were quick to make the transfer to digital and now in most cities (even in Yemen) it's easier to buy memory cards and download images to a CD than it is to find a favourite print film. A full range of batteries are available in most large stores, but if you're planning an extended trip to the interior of Saudi, Yemen and Oman it's worth bringing a few rechargeable spares and the battery charger. Don't forget the adaptor. Prices for all camera equipment are very competitive across the Peninsula, and many people make a special point of stopping off at Gulf airports to buy such goods duty free.

A reasonable range of print film is still available in all the major cities of the Peninsula, but slide and black and white films are getting harder to find and in small-town shops are often out of date. It's still easy to process a colour roll of film.

Cameras and lenses collect dust quickly in desert areas. A dust brush (or even better, compressed air with an outlet tube), lens paper and cleaners are essential photographic equipment.

### Technical Tips

In most Peninsula countries, especially in the summer months, early morning and

late afternoon are the best times to take photographs (ideally from dawn to 8am, and 4pm to dusk). During the rest of the day sunlight can be too bright, shadows too dark and the sky too hazy, to allow for a crisp, sharp picture.

There are a few remedies for this: a polarising filter (and a lens hood) cuts glare and reflection from sand and water.

A monopod (easier to carry and doubles as a walking stick) or a tripod is recommended if you want to capture the magic of dusk – a particularly beguiling time of day in the seaboard cities as local authorities are fond of illuminations and the sea and sky melt into a single unit of colour.

### Restrictions

The basic photographic rules on the Peninsula are simple: do not photograph anything vaguely military in nature (including the police) or anything construed as 'strategic' (including airports, bridges and train stations). In general terms, Bahrain and the UAE are the most relaxed countries on the Peninsula when it comes to photography, while Kuwait, Oman and Yemen seem to have the broadest definitions of what constitutes a 'strategic' site. In Saudi Arabia it often seems that the authorities just don't like cameras.

Most importantly, you should not photograph anyone without their permission, *especially* women. In the more conservative countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and some parts of Yemen, you can cause real offence in this way and may risk having stones hurled at you.

By contrast many children love having their photo taken and shouts of '*Sura!*' (photo!) in some countries are meant to encourage you. Many men (particularly in Yemen) are often happy to oblige, and may make a terrific joke out of the whole business.

People on the Peninsula are often offended when you take photographs of run-down houses or anything that resembles poverty, as the tendency is to emphasise what the country has achieved in the last few decades.

Photography is usually allowed inside religious and archaeological sites (when entry is permitted), unless there are signs indicating otherwise.

## POST

The postal systems in the Gulf vary somewhat from country to country. Although most are reasonably efficient, they can be on the slow side. Post offices are found in all the larger towns and cities of the Peninsula.

In some countries incoming packages, even fairly small ones, are still sometimes sent to customs for lengthy searches, during which books, magazines or videos will probably have been vetted for 'inappropriate material'. Note that you may be held responsible for the contents of the parcels sent to you, and sometimes prosecuted (particularly in Saudi Arabia). When picking up parcels you'll need identification.

### Receiving Mail

Poste restante services exist in most Peninsula countries. Letters should be addressed in the following form:

Your NAME  
Poste Restante  
General Post Office  
City, Country

You'll need your passport to collect your mail. Letters can take a couple of weeks to work through the system.

Some hotels and tour companies operate a mail-holding service, and Amex customers can have mail sent to most Amex offices.

There is no delivery service for expats; residents must pick up their post from the local post office (where they will be assigned a post office box number).

### Sending Mail

Letters sent from a major capital take five days to a week to reach most parts of Europe, and anything from 10 days to two weeks to reach North America or Australasia. Parcels take at least a week longer than ordinary mail (and sometimes up to a month).

If something's urgent the major courier companies, such as DHL or FedEx, have offices in most major Peninsula towns.

## SMOKING

Unlike in other parts of the Middle East, smoking is not particularly prevalent in the Arabian Peninsula. This has something to

do with the strict interpretation of Islam and the discouragement of dependency on stimulants of any kind; partly to do with the general lack of advertising in most of the region; and partly to do with government drives to dissuade the young from starting the habit.

That doesn't mean to say you won't encounter smoking. The expat communities from India tend to smoke quite heavily and everyone across the region (even fashionably dressed young Arab women in city areas) enjoys a *sheesha* (water pipe filled with scented or fruit-flavoured tobacco) from time to time.

All top-end hotels offer nonsmoking rooms and there are always nonsmoking sections in more expensive restaurants. Curiously, people often assume that all Westerners are smokers; if you are, you'll find it a good way to strike up a conversation, although it is still mostly regarded as a male activity.

## SOLO TRAVELLERS

Travel for Arabic people and for most Asian expats entails communal farewells, large convoys of family groups, and great gatherings at the airport on the return. As such, solo travellers are often regarded either with sympathy or with suspicion as it is inconceivable to most Arabian Peninsula people that someone might choose to travel alone.

You might just get away without comment if you're a man, but a woman travelling on her own is bound to be a hot topic of discussion. Women will want to adopt you, men will either ignore you (out of respect) or treat you as a token man. Either way, you will inevitably be showered with well-meaning solicitations for your safe-keeping, extra help on public transport and even offers of accommodation. Of course, there are always a few men who will want to take advantage of the fact that you're unaccompanied and for tips as to how to handle that situation, see the section on Women, p542.

Men, on the other hand, will be expected to look after themselves. They will still find that they're the subject of curiosity, however, especially in remote villages and towns, and will get plenty of practice at giving a good account of their purpose and



destination before being ushered in to share 'bread and salt'.

Despite the uncomfortable feeling of being conspicuous, there's lots to commend solo travelling. It offers undoubtedly the best way, if not the only practical way, of integrating with the local culture. In pairs, much of the time is spent sharing each other's company. Alone, you're forced to engage with other people, on the buses, in small coffeeshops, strolling along the beach or haggling over goods in the souq. As people are the greater part of the experience of travelling in the Arabian Peninsula, this is a wonderful opportunity. It is particularly rewarding if you can speak some Arabic and engage in a deeper dialogue than the superficial sharing of greetings. Finding out the extent to which Western and Arabic outlooks on life are the same is an education on both sides. Such encounters are also a precious opportunity to be an ambassador for the good things of the West as well as an apologist for the bad. Nothing does more to help improve international relations than one person saying of another: 'Ah, you're from there! Do you know Mr Smith? He was from your country, and he was a very nice person too'.

Without Arabic, however, travelling in the Arabian Peninsula can be quite lonely at times: the roads are long and the deserts wide. Without an established network of tourism facilities, you may spend days without seeing another Westerner and trying to communicate in broken language for days on end can be exhausting.

Single rooms are available in most hotels, though they're often just a few dollars cheaper than double rooms. Walking around alone seldom presents a safety problem.

One word of caution: if you travel away from urban areas in your own vehicle alone, you need to be quite resourceful. Many roads see very little traffic and you could wait hours before help arrives. It is not recommended that you go off-road alone.

## TELEPHONE & FAX

The Peninsula boasts some first-rate telecommunications networks (though not all countries, such as Yemen, maintain such high standards). Although state-owned, they're generally well maintained and managed. All the Peninsula countries have In-

ternational Direct Dialling (IDD) facilities via satellite links.

Most cities and large towns have public telephone offices (either part of the post office, or privately run) from where you can make international calls and send faxes.

Costs for international calls cost up to US\$2 per minute for most destinations. Rates don't usually vary during the day or night, but in some countries there are reductions at weekends. Public phones accept coins, phonecards and, in some countries, credit cards.

Faxes are widespread on the Peninsula, even though the internet is gradually making them redundant.

## Mobile Phones

The use of mobile phones is widespread throughout the Peninsula and every country has its own (state-owned) national network. Some of these run on the GSM system (as in Europe), so if your phone works on GSM and your account allows you to roam, you'll be able to use your mobile on the Peninsula.

In other places you'll have to buy prepaid SIM cards. Beware though: the cost of using a mobile in some countries is higher than calls made on a land line. See individual country chapters for further details.

## TIME

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Yemen are three hours ahead of GMT/UTC. The UAE and Oman are four hours ahead of GMT/UTC. Daylight-saving time is not observed in any of the Gulf countries (in other words, the time remains constant throughout the year). See also the world map (towards the back of the book) for world time zones.

## TOILETS

Outside the midrange and top-end hotels and restaurants of the Peninsula (where Western-style loos are found), visitors will encounter the Arab-style squat toilet (which, interestingly according to physiologists, encourages a far more natural position than the Western-style invention!).

It's a good idea to carry a roll of toilet paper with you on your travels: most toilets only provide water and the use of paper is considered barbaric.

Beyond the towns you're unlikely to find public loos, except poorly maintained ones at filling stations.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

Despite the fact that tourism is a growing industry in the Peninsula, there are surprisingly few tourist offices. Staff training and office facilities are equally minimal. Sometimes the most you'll find is a free map (often very outdated) or an aged brochure.

There are two good, unofficial sources of information on the Peninsula: your hotel and the local travel agents (many of whom generously offer information without always expecting you to engage their services in return). Both sources are knowledgeable and resourceful.

Details of tourist offices, as well as tour operators, are given in the individual town and city sections of the country chapters.

## TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Generally speaking, scant regard is paid to the needs of disabled travellers in the Peninsula. Steps, high kerbs and other assorted obstacles are everywhere, though streets are less rutted and uneven than in some parts of the world. Roads are made virtually uncrossable by heavy traffic, while some doorways are narrow and many buildings (such as Yemen's famous tower houses) have steep staircases and no lifts.

In the top-end hotels facilities are usually better (with lifts, ramps and more accommodating bathrooms) but still leave much to be desired. Trips have to be planned carefully, and may be restricted to luxury-level hotels and private, hired transport. There is an agency in Oman (one of the more enlightened countries in this regard) specialising in making arrangements for disabled travellers; see p256 for details.

Before setting off for the Middle East, disabled travellers can get in touch with their national support organisation (preferably with the travel officer, if there is one) – in the UK contact **RADAR** (☎ 020-7250 3222; 250 City Rd, London EC1V 8AS) or the **Holiday Care Service** (☎ 0845 124 9971; www.holidaycare.org.uk), or try www.disabledtravelers.com.

Elderly people with physical difficulties will find that every effort will be made to welcome them. Arab people are highly respectful of the elderly, and travelling with

the aged (even in wheelchairs) is a delightful experience.

## VISAS

The flow of foreigners in, out and around the Peninsula is carefully monitored and strictly controlled in most of its countries.

As a result the visa application process ranges from fairly simple and straightforward (Bahrain) to nightmarishly complicated (Saudi Arabia). It also means that if you plan to travel from one country to another, where it involves passing through Saudi, you need to plan ahead. All countries, except Saudi Arabia, issue tourist visas on arrival for most nationalities.

An Israeli passport, or an Israeli stamp in your passport, is a problem. If you have either of these, it's unwise to leave it to chance as to whether an official will notice it or not (see boxed text, below).

Passports need to be valid for at least six months beyond your expected departure date from the region. Note also that most Peninsula countries require you to carry your passport with you at all times. Spot checks occasionally occur.

For more details on each country's visa regulations see Visas in the individual country chapters and the table, p549,

### THE ISRAELI STAMP STIGMA

The game of wits played between travellers and diplomatic consulars across the Middle East is ratcheted up by what's known as the 'Israeli Stamp Stigma'. In the Arabian Peninsula, all countries refuse to admit anyone whose passport has been tainted by evidence of a visit to the Jewish state – even though, from time to time, rumours abound of a relaxation of this rule in some Gulf countries. Israeli immigration officials will, if asked, stamp only a separate entry card and not your passport. This is fine for travellers flying into and out of Israel, but if you are crossing into Jordan or Egypt overland, the entry/exit stamps into those countries (marked, for example: *'taba'* or *'aqaba'*) will be no less incriminating than an Israeli stamp.

The safest option is to arrange your itinerary so that a visit to Israel is the final stop on your tour of the Middle East.

which includes some 'visas at a glance'-type information.

### Collecting Visas

If you've arranged your visa in advance of arrival, make sure you have some proof of it with you before setting off (a fax or email with the visa number), or you may not be allowed to board your plane let alone enter the country of your destination.

### Transit Visas

Saudi Arabia issues transit visas for people travelling overland between Jordan and Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the UAE or Yemen (see p177). These transit visas can be sought from Saudi Arabian embassies in any of these countries with proof of onward connections beyond Saudi borders.

### Travel Permits

Travel permits are necessary for travelling in Yemen (p518) and Saudi Arabia (p367), and are obtainable in the countries themselves. They're also necessary for Omani residents driving to the UAE.

### Visa Sponsorship

If you cannot obtain a visa to the Peninsula on arrival or through an embassy, you can try to obtain one through a sponsor. This can be the hotel where you're planning to stay or a tour company.

In theory, a sponsor is a national of the country you are visiting, who is willing to vouch for your good behaviour and take responsibility for your departure when you're due to leave. You'll need to send details of your passport and itinerary a couple of weeks in advance to your sponsor. Make sure you obtain confirmation that your visa will be awaiting your arrival at the relevant airport before you leave *in writing* (a fax is suitable).

The sponsorship process varies greatly from country to country (and is also liable to change – check current regulations with the local embassy). The documentation required also varies with each country, and processing can take anything from a few days to a few weeks.

### WEIGHTS & MEASURES

The metric system is in use throughout the Peninsula. However, there are some local

variations where petrol is sold by the imperial gallon not litre. There's a metric conversion table at the front of this book.

### WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Many women imagine that travel on the Peninsula is a lot more difficult and traumatic than it actually is. Unaccompanied women will certainly attract curious stares and glances (see Solo Travellers, p539), and occasionally comments, too, but they will receive hospitable treatment almost universally – especially if appropriately dressed.

It's important to be aware that there are 'men areas' and 'women areas' and that this is something that is enforced mainly by women, not by men. As such, it can be quite uncomfortable (and compromising) for both sexes if a woman sits in a male area. Traditional coffeehouses, cheaper restaurants, budget hotels, the back seats of buses all tend to be men-only areas and it's culturally sensitive to avoid them – at some budget Gulf hotels, unaccompanied women may be refused a room. Women areas include family rooms in better restaurants, public beaches on certain days of the week and the front rows of buses.

Sometimes women may be followed or find unwanted visitors at their hotel, but this is far less prevalent than in other parts of the Middle East where there is more exposure to tourists. Sexual harassment in some Peninsula countries is considered a serious crime and the incidence of rape on the Peninsula is extremely low (far lower than in the West). Verbal harassment and sexual innuendo is more common. The best way of keeping trouble at bay is often to engage positively and firmly with potential troublemakers, and above all appear self-confident and keep a sense of humour. For a few simple techniques to help keep hassle at bay, see the boxed text, opposite.

Any specific restrictions on visas, travel or general movement of women (mostly in Saudi Arabia and crossing the border alone by bus in Oman) are covered in Women Travellers in the individual country chapters. For information on the situation for local women, see opposite.

Women's personal requirements (such as tampons and sanitary pads) can be found in some of the larger supermarkets of the bigger cities (which cater for expats), but it's best to come with your own.

### TIPS FOR WOMEN TRAVELLERS

In order to avoid misunderstandings and to detract attention from yourself, there are a number of tips that may prove useful. Top of the list is to dress modestly. A woman revealing her knees and shoulders or wearing a tight T-shirt on the street is, in the eyes of the locals, confirmation of the very worst stereotype held of Western women. Generally, if you're alone or with other women, the amount of attention you receive will be directly related to how you dress: the more skin that is exposed, the more attention you'll attract. In some places that are unused to seeing Western women, it may take garbing yourself in full Saudi *abaya* (a full-length black robe worn by Muslim women) to leave you completely free of unwanted attention. For more on the dress issue, see What to Wear, p544.

Other tips include the following:

- Wear a wedding ring, which will make you appear less 'available'.
- If you are unmarried but travelling in male company, say that you're married rather than girlfriend/boyfriend or just 'friends' (but note the legal restrictions in Saudi).
- Don't say that you are travelling alone or just in the company of another female friend; always say that you are with a group.
- Avoid direct eye contact with local men; dark sunglasses help.
- Don't respond to obnoxious comments – act as if you didn't hear them.
- Be careful in crowds and other situations where you are crammed between people, as occasionally crude things may happen behind you.
- Don't sit on the front seat of taxis unless the driver is a woman.
- On public transport, sit next to a woman if possible.
- Be careful about behaving in a flirtatious or suggestive manner, as it could create more problems than you imagined.
- If you need help for any reason (directions etc), ask a woman first.
- If dining alone, try and eat at Western-style places or those more used to tourists. Ask to be seated in the 'family' section, if there is one.
- It's perfectly acceptable for a woman to go straight to the front of a queue or to ask to be served first before any men that may be waiting. Don't try it if Western men are in the queue or you might find that evil eye isn't the prerogative of Arab men only!
- Going to the nearest public place, such as the lobby of a hotel, usually works if you need to get rid of any hangers-on. If that doesn't discourage them, asking the receptionist to call the police usually frightens them off.

### Local Attitudes

Some of the biggest misunderstandings between Middle Easterners and Westerners occur over the issue of women. Half-truths and stereotypes exist on both sides: many Westerners assume all Middle Eastern women are veiled, repressed victims; while a large number of locals see Western women as sex-obsessed and immoral.

The role of a woman on the Peninsula is specifically defined: she is mother and matron of the household (though again, contrary to Western perceptions, may wield much power within that sphere), while the man is the financial provider.

However, as with any society, generalisations can be misleading and the reality is far more nuanced. There are thousands of middle- and upper-middle-class professional women in the Arab world who, like their counterparts in the West, juggle work and family responsibilities.

Among less affluent families, where adherence to tradition is strongest, women may wish to concentrate on home and family, but economic reality means that they are forced to work while being responsible for all domestic chores as well.

The issue of sex is where the differences between Western and Middle Eastern

women are most apparent. Premarital sex (or, indeed, any sex outside marriage) is taboo, although, as with anything forbidden, it still happens. Nevertheless, it is the exception rather than the rule – and that goes for men as well as women. Women on the whole are expected to be virgins when they marry, and a family's reputation can rest upon this point. In such a context, the restrictions placed on a young girl – no matter how onerous they may seem to a Westerner – are intended to protect her and her reputation from the potentially disastrous attentions of men.

The presence of foreign women provides, in the eyes of some Arab men, a chance to get around these norms with ease and without consequences – a view reinforced by distorted impressions gained from Western TV. Hence the hassle (see previous section).

### What to Wear

Dressing modestly has the following advantages: it attracts less attention to you; will get you a warmer welcome from the locals (who greatly appreciate your willingness to respect their customs); and prove more comfortable in the heat.

Dressing 'modestly' means covering your legs, arms, shoulders and neckline. Baggy T-shirts and loose cotton trousers or long skirts will not only keep you cool but will also protect your skin from the sun. Wearing a bra will detract much attention, and a hat or headscarf (which can be slipped on when you want to look even more inconspicuous or when the situation demands it, such as when visiting a mosque) is also a very good idea.

As with anywhere, take your cues from those around you: if you're in a rural area and all the women are in long, concealing dresses, you should be conservatively dressed. For current dress restrictions on foreign women, see the country chapter directories under 'Women' for details.

### WORK

Labour laws throughout the Gulf are extremely strict. It's illegal to seek work in most countries on a visit visa (and there are severe penalties for those caught working illegally). Although some travellers take the chance of applying for ad hoc work (in Dubai, for example), to remain within the law, you should secure a position before arrival. Your 'sponsor' (usually your employer) acts as a kind of guarantor of your good conduct while you reside in the country and will help you obtain a visa.

Working and living conditions are usually of a high standard. Salaries, though not usually significantly higher than those in the West, carry the enormous advantage of incurring no personal taxation. It can be tricky, however, changing jobs if you decide you're not happy with the one you have. It can also be difficult to find long-term employment; many contracts are short term, renewable annually. While it's not necessary to speak Arabic (though it's an advantage), good spoken and written communication in English is a prerequisite.

Those offering professional skills in much-needed services, such as translating, nursing, engineering and teaching (particularly English), stand the best chance of gaining employment: many administrative positions, on the other hand, are beginning to be filled by newly trained local professionals. Recruiting agencies in major European cities still head-hunt for positions in the Peninsula. Note that for English-language teaching, you will need at least a degree and teaching experience to be eligible for most job opportunities.

You can also inquire about job opportunities at your cultural centre (such as the British Council or Centre Culturel Français) and voluntary aid organisations.

For more information and a full discussion of working in the Arabian Peninsula, see the Expats chapter, p91.

# Transport in the Arabian Peninsula

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## GETTING THERE & AWAY

This chapter explains how to reach the Arabian Peninsula by air, land and sea from other parts of the world. For details of travel between Peninsula countries, see the Getting Around section later in this chapter, and the Getting There & Away sections in the relevant country chapters.

### AIR

For thousands of years the Peninsula has served as a kind of commercial crossroads, linking East with West. It still performs the same function, quite apart from attracting considerable international traffic in its own right, channelling commercial activity through some of the world's most modern airports.

All major European, Asian and Middle Eastern airlines (with the obvious exception of El Al, the Israeli airline) serve the principal cities of the Arabian Peninsula. There are also some direct flights between the Peninsula and the US and Australia. Neighbouring regions, such as North and East Africa, also have flights to the Peninsula as do India, Pakistan and the Far East.

The national carriers within the Peninsula itself link one country to another with regular flights at reasonable prices. For

more specific information on the Peninsula's airlines, see p550.

### Tickets

The Peninsula continues to be viewed by the travel industry largely as a business destination. Tourism, however, is on the increase, especially in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman, and as such discounted fares are slowly becoming available.

Dubai and Bahrain are major transport hubs. Dubai, the major link between Europe, Southeast Asia and Australasia, is the destination which offers the best hope of picking up cheaper fares. As such, it may be worthwhile to fly into Dubai and arrange onward travel from there.

The following agencies are recommended for online bookings:

**Cheap Tickets** ([www.cheaptickets.com](http://www.cheaptickets.com))

**Expedia.com** ([www.expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com))

**Lowestfare.com** ([www.lowestfare.com](http://www.lowestfare.com))

**Opodo** ([www.opodo.co.uk](http://www.opodo.co.uk))

**Orbitz** ([www.orbitz.com](http://www.orbitz.com))

**STA Travel** ([www.sta.com](http://www.sta.com)) For travellers under the age of 26.

**Travelocity** ([www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com))

### INTERCONTINENTAL TICKETS

It can often be cheaper to take a transcontinental flight involving a change of planes or a transit stop on the Peninsula, than to buy a ticket directly to the Peninsula. For example, a London–Karachi ticket via Dubai may cost less than the cheapest available London–Dubai ticket, or you could stop off in Dubai on an Emirates package from

### THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

London to Bangkok. However, check carefully for catches. Sometimes a stopover is only allowed on the return leg, or there may be an extra charge for the stopover.

Most of the region's airline 'stopover packages' include hotel accommodation, airport transfers and a short tour, all for a very reasonable fee.

### Australia & New Zealand

Gulf Air and Emirates airlines both fly out of Sydney and Melbourne to Abu Dhabi, Bahrain and Dubai. From these cities, there are connections to most other major Peninsula cities.

Alternatively, it's possible to connect with one of the large Asian carriers, such as Malaysian, Thai, Philippine and Singapore Airlines, which all have regular return flights out of their home ports to Dubai.

No carrier flies direct to the Gulf States from New Zealand. However, there are a number of combination fares available: Air New Zealand and Emirates Airlines, for example, offer return fares to Dubai via Asia.

**STA Travel** (☎ 1300 733 035; www.statravel.com.au) and **Flight Centre** (☎ 133 133; www.flightcentre.com.au) both have offices throughout Australia.

Servicing New Zealand, both **Flight Centre** (☎ 0800 243 544; www.flightcentre.co.nz) and **STA Travel** (☎ 0508 782 872; www.statravel.co.nz) have branches throughout the country. The site www.goholidays.co.nz is recommended for online bookings.

### Europe

There are direct flights to the Peninsula from almost any European city; however, London has the greatest number of flight options closely followed by Frankfurt. Fares from London are usually also cheaper than from other European cities.

The real bargains to the Peninsula used to be with the Eastern European airlines, but for the past few years the best deals have been with Olympic Airways, Air France and Alitalia. All of these involve changes of plane.

### MAINLAND EUROPE

All the major European carriers fly to the major cities on the Peninsula (usually several times a week). Conversely, Peninsula carriers usually fly several times a week to various European mainland cities, most commonly Paris, Frankfurt, Rome and Athens.

As tourism grows in the region, prices are becoming more reasonable.

Recommended agencies on the mainland include the following:

**Barcelo Viajes** (☎ 902 11 62 26; www.barceloviajes.com; Spain)

**CTS Viaggi** (☎ 062 00 400; www.cts.it; Italy)

**Expedia** (www.expedia.de; Germany)

**Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 08 25 00 07 47; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr; France)

**STA Travel** (☎ 0697 4303 292; www.statravel.de; Germany)

**Voyageurs du Monde** (☎ 08 92 23 56 56; www.vdm.com; France)

### UNITED KINGDOM

Most of the Peninsula's airlines offer daily flights to London. Competition is driving fares down and most airlines periodically have excellent special offers.

Discount air travel is big business in London and enticing advertisements for many travel agencies appear in the travel pages of the weekend broadsheet newspapers, especially in *Time Out*, the *Evening Standard* and in the free magazine *TNT*. Increasingly, there are more opportunities for reasonable fares to the Middle East, although make sure that prices offered include the hefty airport taxes. As far as the Peninsula is concerned, there are few dedicated specialists and the best bet is to call **STA Travel** (☎ 087 1230 0040; www.statravel.co.uk) and **Trailfinders** (☎ 084 5058 5858; www.trailfinders.co.uk).

### Middle East

There are regular flights from Cairo, Beirut, Damascus and Amman to all the major cities in the Peninsula.

Recommended agencies in the Middle East include:

**Al-Rais Travels** (www.alrais.com; Dubai)

**NTT Oman** (www.nttoman.com; Oman)

**Orion-Tour** (www.oriontour.com; Istanbul)

### USA & Canada

There are not many flights to/from North America, but most of the big US airlines have some form of code-sharing agreement with one or more of the Peninsula carriers.

Kuwait Airways flies to New York three times a week (stopping in London en route), and Saudia flies to/from Jeddah and Riyadh, linking with both New York and Washington. Yemenia flies to Washington,

Detroit and San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York direct, or via Frankfurt or London.

As well as these direct flights, there are also connections with changes for other Middle Eastern airports from various cities in North America.

The cheapest way to get from the US and particularly Canada to the Middle East might be to fly to London and buy a ticket from there.

It's also worth contacting the airlines directly about 'add ons' in which an extra ticket to another destination in the Peninsula is available for a nominal fee.

Discount travel agents in the USA are known as consolidators. San Francisco is the ticket consolidator capital of America, although some good deals can be found in Los Angeles, New York and other big cities.

For Canada, **Travel Cuts** (☎ 1-866-246-9726; www.travelcuts.com) is Canada's national student travel agency. For online bookings try www.expedia.ca and www.travelocity.ca.

### LAND

#### Border Crossings

Border crossings can be slow and may take anything from half an hour to two hours or more. Make certain you have all the required documentation with you. Showing patience, politeness and good humour is likely to speed up the process. For further information see Visas, p541; Bring Your Own Vehicle, p552; as well as the Transport section in the relevant country chapters.

If you are travelling independently overland to the Middle East, you can currently only approach the region from Jordan into Saudi Arabia (see p369). If you want to travel overland between the different countries of the Arabian Peninsula, see the table, p548.

#### Car & Motorcycle

Anyone who is planning to take their own vehicle with them needs to check in advance what spare parts and petrol are likely to be available (see p552). The following documents are required:

**AAA** (www.aaauae.com, www.aaaoman.com) Information on car use in Oman and UAE.

**Green Card** Issued by insurers. Insurance for some countries is only obtainable at the border.

### CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

#### Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motor travel generates CO<sub>2</sub> (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

#### Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow jetsetters to offset the greenhouse gases they are responsible for with contributions to energy-saving projects and other climate-friendly initiatives in the developing world – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, supports the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: lonelyplanet.com.

## TRAVELLING BY LAND IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

To/From	From/To	Border Crossing Notes	Visa Obtainable at Border?	Visa Information	Border Crossing Information
Oman	Saudi Arabia	There is no border crossing currently open between Oman and Saudi Arabia	n/a	n/a	n/a
Oman (mainland)	UAE	The Wajajah border crossing is the most commonly used (see p242)	yes	see p260 and p444	see p261 and p445
Oman (Musandam)	UAE	The Al-Darah/Tibat border crossing is the only one open at present (see p244)	yes	see p260 and p444	see p261 and p445
Oman	Yemen	The Sarfait border crossing is the most commonly used (see p254)	yes	see p260 and p517	see p261 and p520
Saudi Arabia	Bahrain	The border crossing is on King Fahd Causeway (see p132 and p369)	to Saudi: no to Bahrain: yes	see p141 and p366	see p142
Saudi Arabia	Kuwait	The border crossing is at Al-Khafji and is usually only used by those on public transport (see p178 and p369)	to Saudi: no to Kuwait: yes	see p177 and p366	see p178
Saudi Arabia	Qatar	The border crossing is at Salwah and is usually only used by those on public transport (see p296 and p369)	to Saudi: no to Kuwait: yes	see p295 and p366	see p178
Saudi Arabia	UAE	The border crossing is at Sila (see p369)	to Saudi: no to UAE: yes	see p366 and p444	n/a
Saudi Arabia	Yemen	It is inadvisable to travel between these two countries overland at this time (see p520)	n/a	n/a	n/a
Bahrain	Bahrain	A Saudi transit visa must be obtained before travelling overland between any of these countries	to Saudi: no to others: no (you need a visa for your final destination to transit through Saudi)	<b>General Notes:</b> ■ Although restrictions are beginning to relax, the rules regarding visas and land crossings in the region are subject to contradiction, misinformation and frequent change. Check with relevant embassies before travelling. ■ You need to have insurance for all countries you're passing through if driving. ■ Many car hire companies insist you return cars to country of original hire.	<b>Note from Author of Saudi Arabia Chapter:</b> Stories are legion of individuals who obtain visas in their country of origin only to find them invalid at the Saudi border: double-check with your local Saudi embassy and, if possible, with the authorities in Saudi Arabia.
Qatar	Qatar				
Kuwait	Kuwait				
UAE	UAE				

**International Driving Permit (IDP)** Compulsory for foreign drivers and motorcyclists in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Most foreign licences are acceptable in the other Peninsula States, but even in these places an IDP is recommended.

**Vehicle Registration Documents** Check with your insurer whether you're covered for the countries you intend to visit and whether third-party cover is included.

## SEA

Several ferry services operate to/from the Peninsula. Note that practicality is the priority not pleasure. Even in 1st class you shouldn't expect your voyage to be a cruise, while deck class often means just that. In summer, conditions may be impossibly hot for many people. While food and drink of some sort may be available on board, many passengers prefer to take their own. Vehicles can be shipped on services, but advance arrangements may have to be made.

Ferry destinations and their timetables change frequently. For the latest information get in touch with the head office or local agent of the respective company some time in advance. Most ferry companies have good websites where you can check current fares, routes and contact details.

Cargo boats call erratically at Aden, Muscat and Jeddah on their way to Europe and the Far East. Getting aboard is mostly a question of luck and being in the right place at the right time. Your passage may well be dependent upon the whim of the captain. The best place to inquire about boats is at the port of departure. Be warned that cargo boats are not always a comfortable option. While some offer comfortable passenger cabins (intended for crew family), for others you may need to come equipped with food, drink and bedding.

## Egypt

The Alexandria-based Misr Edco Shipping Company and four Saudi companies sail between Jeddah and Suez. The journey takes about 36 hours direct, about 72 via Aqaba. Misr Edco also sails about twice weekly between Port Safaga (Egypt) and Jeddah. For current schedules and prices contact **Mena Tours** (☎ 202-748 2231; www.mena-tours.com.eg) in Cairo (Egypt), and **Ace Travel** (☎ 02-605 6002; www.ace-travel.com) in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia).

## Iran

If you're travelling to/from the east and want to avoid Iraq and Saudi Arabia, you can cross the Gulf Sea from Iran into Kuwait and Bahrain.

Ferries only have 1st-class (cabin) accommodation, but are much cheaper than

the equivalent airfare, and most are overnight journeys. They are operated by **Valfajr-8 Shipping Company** (www.irantravellingcenter.com/valfajr8\_persian\_gulf.htm) in Tehran, which has a good online booking service. See Transport in the Bahrain (p143) chapter for details of sailings from there.

## TOURS

Tours to the Peninsula are beginning to gain in popularity, and some attempt multicountry destinations such as the UAE, Oman and Yemen.

In the Peninsula itself there are a host of reputable tour agencies offering good tours at competitive prices. Check under the individual countries for details. Additionally, most regional airlines usually offer short tours of Peninsula cities for a reasonable supplement to an airfare.

## CARNETS

A *carnet de passage* is a booklet that is stamped on arrival and at departure from a country to ensure that you export the vehicle again after you've imported it. It's usually issued by a motoring organisation in the country where the vehicle is registered. Many Peninsula countries require carnets, though exact requirements alter frequently.

The sting in the tail with a carnet is that you have to lodge a deposit to secure it. If you default on the carnet – that is, if you don't have an export stamp to match the import one – then the country in question can claim your deposit, which can be up to 300% of the new value of the vehicle. You can get around this problem with bank guarantees or carnet insurance, but you still have to fork out in the end if you default.

Should the worst occur and your vehicle is irretrievably damaged in an accident or breakdown, you'll have to argue it out with customs officials. Having a vehicle stolen can be even worse, as you may be suspected of having sold it.

The carnet may also need to specify any expensive spare parts that you're planning to carry with you, such as a gearbox, which is designed to prevent spare-part importation rackets. Contact your local automobile association for details about all necessary documentation at least three months in advance.

Note that for Saudi Arabia, tours are often the only way of visiting the country (see p326 for more details). Restrictions in Yemen currently allow visitors to travel to most areas outside the capital only with a tour (see p520).

Particularly recommended are the following agencies:

**Adventure World** (☎ 1800 133 322, 02-8913 0755; www.adventureworld.com.au; 73 Walker St, North Sydney, NSW 2060, Australia) Has branches in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth and is agent for the UK's Explore Worldwide.

**Kuoni** (www.kuoni.co.uk; UK) Offers comprehensive tours of the UAE and Oman.

**Passport Travel** (☎ 03-9867 3888; www.travelcentre.com.au; Suite 11a, 401 St Kilda Rd, Melbourne, Vic 3004, Australia) Middle East specialist which assists in tailor-made itineraries for individuals or groups.

**Spirit of Asia Travel** (www.spiritofasiatour.com) Offers multistop destination tours of the UAE, Oman and Yemen.

## GETTING AROUND

As fuel is cheap throughout the region and vehicles are relatively inexpensive to buy, road transportation is the most popular means of travel within the Peninsula. Car hire (with or without driver) is inexpensive and taxis and bus travel are cheap. Bar the small stretch operating in Saudi Arabia, there is no train service within the region.

Air travel, though a relative newcomer in some Peninsula countries, has developed

fast and there's now a good air network linking most major Peninsula cities. It's often easier for the traveller to get about by air, as there is no regional rail network and travel by bus is a test of endurance due to the large distances. Then there's the added complication of obtaining a transit visa for Saudi Arabia, which hampers transport from one Gulf country to another.

## AIR

Reputable travel agencies in all major Peninsula cities can advise you about the best intercity deals and it's better to use their services than go directly to the airlines. Note that prices fluctuate considerably according to the season or if there's a public holiday (such as *eid*).

Travel agency addresses are found in the Information sections in the major cities in each country chapter.

## Airlines in the Arabian Peninsula

The Peninsula boasts some world-class airlines with good safety records, modern aircraft and well-trained crew. Some, such as Yemenia (the national airline of Yemen), can be less reliable but still offer a good service. For detailed information on safety records (including reams of statistics), visit [www.airsafe.com](http://www.airsafe.com).

Gulf Air is now jointly owned by Bahrain and Oman and has a very good service and safety record. Founded in 1984, Emirates (of the UAE) often wins awards for its

excellent service. Newer airlines on the scene also with excellent reputations are Qatar Airways, Etihad and Oman Air.

Most countries (particularly the larger ones such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, the UAE and Yemen) have good domestic flight networks, which are reasonably priced. The Peninsula also boasts some famously slick international airports with good facilities, including 'business centres' and extensive Duty Free sections, particularly in Dubai but also in Riyadh and Bahrain. Other regional airports are adequate, and all are in the process of being modernised and expanded to meet the anticipated increase in tourism.

On the whole, arrival procedures are straightforward and usually remarkably quick and efficient. Note, however, the import prohibition on various items (particularly in Saudi Arabia); see p361 and p532.

## Budget Airlines

The arrival of budget airlines in the region has recently revolutionised intercity transport on the Peninsula. As in Europe, they tend to use less-frequented cities as their hubs to avoid the high taxes of major airports. This minor inconvenience is worth considering for the cheap travel they offer.

**Air Arabia** (www.airarabia.com; Sharjah)

**Al-Jazeera Airways** (www.jazeeraairways.com; Kuwait)

## BICYCLE

The Peninsula offers many good cycling opportunities on long, flat, sealed roads. Cyclists are usually made very welcome (a trademark of the Peninsula), offered food and sometimes accommodation (though

you should offer to pay for it). Even the police are helpful and friendly. Many immigrant workers in the richer Peninsula states use bicycles, so repair shops are easy to come by, and the locals often prove fabulous 'bush mechanics'.

There are a few difficulties, however. Drivers are not used to watching out for cyclists and in many cities, especially in the Gulf, you'd be right in thinking cyclists have a death-wish even to consider venturing onto the road.

Most bicycles in the Peninsula are simple machines, and you're unlikely to find spare parts for the latest and slickest mountain or touring bike except in major cities (particularly in the UAE).

The greatest difficulty cited by all cyclists is the heat. The worst months are from June to August, and cycling during these summer months is definitely not recommended. February to mid-April and October to mid-December are the best times in most regions of the Peninsula. Even then you're advised to make an early morning start and call it a day by early afternoon.

If you are considering cycling on the Arabian Peninsula but have a few pressing questions, you can post your query on the Thorn Tree on [lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com) under the Activities branch. There's a strong likelihood somebody will respond with the information that you're looking for.

Alternatively, you could contact the **Cyclists' Touring Club** (CTC; ☎ 014-8341 7217; www.ctc.org.uk), a UK-based organisation which offers good tips and has a helpful website. It also has some useful information sheets on cycling in different parts of the world.

## CYCLING TIPS

- Carry a couple of extra chain links, a chain breaker, spokes, a spoke key, two inner tubes, tyre levers and a repair kit, a flat-head and Phillips-head screwdriver, Allen keys and spanners to fit all the bolts on your bike.
- Check the bolts daily and carry spares. Make sure the bike's gearing will get you over the hills.
- Fit as many water bottles to your bike as you can.
- Confine your panniers to 15kg maximum. If you can, pack a two-person tent (weighing about 1.8kg) that can also accommodate the bike for when security is a concern.
- Bring a sleeping bag rated to 0°C and a Therm-a-Rest mattress, a small camping stove with gas canisters, a cooking pot, utensils, a Katadyn water filter (two microns) and Maglite torch.
- Wear cycling shorts with a chamois bum and cleated cycling shoes (the most comfortable).

## BUS

Car ownership levels are so high in some of the Peninsula states that little demand for public bus services exists. It's not too difficult to get between the main towns in Saudi Arabia and Oman by bus, but Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar have fewer if any domestic services.

Of the major regional routes, there are five principal ones: Saudi Arabia to Bahrain; Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to Kuwait in the north; Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to the UAE via Qatar in the south; the UAE to Oman further south; and the UAE to Oman and Yemen in the far south of the Peninsula. For further details of these services see the Getting There & Away sections of the relevant chapters. Note that visas can still be difficult to obtain at borders (see p541).

On the whole, bus travel is reasonably comfortable and fast on the Peninsula and it's very good value. In some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman, roads are good and journeys are quick and comfortable on modern, air-conditioned buses. Yemen's services vary according to the company, for example, Yemitco tends to be fast, reliable and quite comfortable. Loud music or videos as well as heavy smoking can cause discomfort for people on some services – it's worth checking before boarding.

In many countries women accompanied by men can sit anywhere, but women travelling alone are expected to sit in the front seats.

For details of costs, bus passes and classes, see the individual country chapters.

## Reservations

It's always advisable to book bus seats in advance at bus stations, and it's a must over the Muslim weekend (Friday), as well as during public holidays such as *eid*.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Unlike the car, which reigns supreme, motorcycles used as long-distance transport are a rare sight on most of the Arabian Peninsula. In a few cities they're popular for getting around town. If you decide to ride a motorcycle through the Peninsula, take one of the more popular Japanese models if you can. You'll have a better chance of finding spare parts. Even then, make sure

it's in very good shape before setting out. Motorcycles can be shipped ahead of departure. As with cyclists (see p551) try and avoid the summer months.

## Bring Your Own Vehicle

Unless you're coming to live on the Peninsula for an extended duration, bringing your own vehicle may prove more trouble than it's worth. Obtaining a *carnet de passage* (see p550) is expensive and progressing through the Peninsula (due to visa regulations and paperwork) can be a major hassle. For most short-term visitors, it would make more sense to hire a car locally. For long-term residents it is cheaper and more straightforward to buy a car in-country and sell it before leaving.

Fuel stations are common throughout the region, both at major roadsides (in the more developed regions) and in towns and villages. On the desert roads they can be few and far between. Away from the main towns it's advisable to fill up whenever you get the chance (sometimes, this involves having your 4WD topped up by hand pump and funnel!). Fuel is extremely cheap throughout the region. Two grades of petrol are often available, but if in doubt buy the more expensive one. Most cars (except in Yemen) run on unleaded petrol.

Garages can be found even in the smallest towns and villages in most countries, but are less common in Yemen. Spare parts (and servicing) are available for the most

### WOMEN'S LIB OR LIABILITY?

Some drivers are amazed and alarmed at the apparent audacity of local women when crossing roads. Many simply step out apparently oblivious to oncoming traffic. Pedestrians in many Peninsula countries have right of way, and women, who are used to being ushered to the front of a queue, given priority seats on the bus and having doors opened for them, believe this applies particularly to them. Additionally, headscarves or veils may obscure their vision. Note that if you injure someone, you'll be held responsible no matter whose fault it is, the argument being that if you hadn't been in-country, the accident wouldn't have happened.

popular car models (Toyota and Land Rover especially). Parts for other European makes (such as Peugeot) may be more difficult to come by. One tip is to ask your vehicle manufacturer for a list of any authorised service centres in the countries you plan to visit. The length of this list is likely to be a pretty good reflection of how easy it is to get spare parts on your travels.

Signposting (in both Arabic and English) is pretty good throughout the region (bar only Yemen which is notoriously lacking in signs in any language) and uses international symbols. English spelling of place names, however, is highly erratic and seldom matches the maps. Parking is becoming ever more difficult in Peninsula cities, and traffic inspectors and parking meters are now more prevalent.

## Driving Licence

Travellers from the West can use their own national driving licences for a limited period in some Peninsula countries (including Oman and Saudi Arabia).

For longer stays an International Driving Permit, obtainable from your own country, is recommended or required by some countries.

To obtain a local licence you'll need to have a residency visa, plus the following documents: a valid foreigner's licence (and sometimes an IDP), a no-objection certificate (NOC) from your employer, your accommodation rental contract, photocopies of your passport, passport-sized photos and sometimes a certificate confirming your blood group. Some countries (such as Saudi Arabia) insist on Arabic translations of foreign documents. For some expats a driving test may also be required.

See individual country Transport sections for details.

## Hire

Car hire is possible in all Peninsula countries. Though rarely cheap, it's not unreasonable. International hire organisations such as Hertz or Europcar, as well as local companies, have offices in most of the major cities as well as desks at international airports. Reservations are necessary in some countries during the peak tourism times, particularly during the haj, or major national or religious holidays.

### CHECKPOINT CHALLENGE

Travellers often find the number of police checkpoints in many Peninsula countries exasperating. In some states their purpose is pretty pedestrian: to ensure that driver and vehicle papers are in order (note that if they're not, you'll be fined). In other countries there's a more serious purpose: to check for smuggled goods (particularly near the borders of Saudi Arabia and Yemen), illegal immigrants or illegal residents (whose visas have expired). In Yemen the checkpoints are also a means of keeping tabs on unruly tribes and maintaining a conspicuous police presence. Passing through the checkpoints can take time. Showing patience and good humour is always the best way of getting through them unscathed and unruffled.

In a nutshell, the international companies tend to be more expensive, but offer better cars and a better back-up service in case of problems. Local companies offer more competitive rates, but generally offer inferior cars and services, with fewer guarantees. Reputable tour agents are often a good source of cars, offering both competitive rates, plus decent cars and often a driver thrown in for very little extra cost, usually the best option for short-term travellers.

To hire a car you'll need your driving licence and, for some Peninsula countries, an IDP and copies of both your passport and visa. The minimum age varies between 21 to 25. Invariably, credit cards are now a prerequisite.

Some agencies can arrange vans, minibuses and buses for groups, but most deal only in cars; bike or motorcycle hire is near unheard of. Before hiring a self-drive vehicle, seriously ask yourself how well you think you can cope with the local driving conditions and whether you think you can navigate well enough to make good use of one. If going off-road, you also need to be strong enough to change a wheel.

## Insurance

Insurance is compulsory. Given the large number of road traffic accidents, fully comprehensive insurance (as opposed to



## DESERT DRIVING

The following tips may help if going off-road, but there's no substitute for experience:

### Predeparture Planning

- Travel with another vehicle if you're heading for sandy areas so that you can pull each other out if you get stuck.
- Don't travel alone unless you can change a tyre (very heavy on 4WD vehicles).
- Use the services of a local guide if planning an extended dune trip: navigation is not as easy as it seems.
- Take a map and compass. A GPS and fully charged GSM phone are also useful but remember that GPS is only useful for knowing exactly where you're lost (and not how to find the way out) and phones don't work in some mountainous or remote areas.
- Bring the equivalent of at least 5L of water per passenger per day and sufficient food to last several days. Dried dates are a good source of energy and keep well in high temperatures.
- Check oil, tyre condition and tyre pressure before leaving.
- Bring a tool kit with a tow rope, shovel, sand ladders, spanner, jack, wooden platform (on which to stand the jack), tyre inflator (and preferably a gauge) and jump leads. Also pack a first-aid kit.
- Tell someone (and in some countries the local authorities, too) where you're going and leave a note detailing passengers, vehicles, itinerary, departure time and expected return time, as well as any mobile phone numbers.
- Bring a hat, sunglasses and light clothes for the day, and warm clothes and sleeping bags for cold winter nights. Always check clothes, shoes and bedding for scorpions and camel spiders.

### Driving Tips

- In all desert areas follow prior tracks for the sanity of locals and care of the desert, as well as for your own safety.
- Keep the acceleration up through areas of soft sand and under no circumstances stop!
- When approaching sandy inclines, engage low gear and increase acceleration.
- Never camp at the bottom of a wadi (dry river bed), even on a clear day.

third-party) is strongly advised. This covers the ancient law of paying blood money in the event of the injury or death of a person (and sometimes animal). Car-hire companies automatically supply insurance, but check carefully the cover and conditions.

Make certain that you're covered for off-piste travel, as well as travel between Peninsula countries (if you're planning cross-border excursions). If you are taking the car outside Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) borders, you'll need separate insurance.

In the event of an accident, don't move the vehicle until the police arrive and make sure you submit the accident report as soon as possible to the insurance company or, if hiring, the car-hire company.

## Purchase

The Peninsula is a good place to buy a car but note that you can't buy one without a residency permit. Most mainstream makes and models are available, and prices are low (since there's no import duty). As when shopping for other items, bargaining is normal. A down payment of around 10% of the purchase price is usually expected if taking out a loan.

Because cars are cheap, they're also seen as disposable by the wealthy. There is a growing second-hand car market, however, throughout the region. When second-hand car shopping it's essential you ensure that the car you're interested in purchasing has the following:

- an up-to-date test certificate

- Be very wary of wadis when rain threatens. Flash flooding rips through the narrow channels of a wadi with huge force. Each year many people lose their lives in this way.
- Engage low gear on extended mountain descents even if it slows your progress to walking speed: many people run into trouble by burning out their brakes.

### Getting Stuck in Sand

- In sand, the minute you feel the wheels are digging in, stop driving. The more you accelerate, the deeper you'll sink.
- If your wheels are deeply entrenched, don't dig: the car will just sink deeper.
- Partially deflate the tyres (for greater traction), clearing the sand away from the wheel in the direction you want to go (ie behind if you're going to try to reverse out).
- Collect brushwood (you'll wish you brought the sand ladders!) and anything else available, and pack under the tyres, creating as firm a 'launch pad' as possible.
- Plan your escape route or you'll flip out of the sand only to land in the next dune. In most dune areas, there are compacted platforms of sand. Try to find one of these on foot so that you have somewhere safe to aim for.
- Engage low ratio and remember that going backwards can be as effective as going forwards, especially if you stalled going uphill: gravity is a great help.
- Remember that using low ratio consumes a lot of petrol. Make sure you top up when you can and reinflate your tyres before rejoining a sealed road.

### What to Do if You're Lost

- Stay with your vehicle, where there's shade and water. The Bedu or local villagers will find you before you find them. It's easier for a search party to spot a vehicle than people wandering in the desert.
- Use mirrors, horns or fires to attract attention, and construct a large sign on the ground that can easily be seen from the air.
- Stay calm, stay in the shade and conserve energy and water. You may think you're alone, but more likely than not, someone will have spotted you travelling through their territory.

- a registration certificate (and that the engine and chassis numbers of the car matches the latter)

Also be sure to give it a thorough check. If you're not a mechanic, bring one. Note that change of ownership has to be completed with the local police and that fines outstanding on the car are usually transferred to the new owner. When buying a vehicle (or importing one), you usually have to register it with the police traffic department.

## Road Conditions

Since the oil boom of the 1970s and the growth of the Peninsula economies, road development has been a major priority and much money and effort have been poured

into constructing roads. Today, with the exception of parts of Yemen, the Peninsula's road system is one of the best in the world.

Built over the last 25 years, most roads are high-quality two- or four-lane highways. Good highways also connect many of the Peninsula countries to one another. Few roads are unsealed (except in Yemen and Oman) and 4WDs are on the whole only necessary for driving across the desert.

Road building continues both within individual countries as well as between them. Sometimes rich and benevolent sheikhs pay for roads in neighbouring countries, such as Omani sheikhs paying for stretches of road in Yemen. Roads of some form go almost everywhere, even if they are not yet sealed;

**DRUNK-DRIVING: A DEADLY SIN**

Note that driving under the influence of either alcohol (of any quantity) or drugs is not only considered a grave offence on the Peninsula, but also automatically invalidates your insurance and makes you liable for any costs in the event of an accident.

Infractions are punished severely even in the more liberal Peninsula countries. At the least it can lead to a night or two in jail, a fine of around US\$1500 and suspension of your licence. More serious cases (such as if you're involved in an accident) can lead to long prison sentences, the loss of your job if you're a resident and even deportation.

car tracks even cross the remotest regions of uninhabited desert, leaving only the Empty Quarter (Rub' al-Khali) inviolate.

As such, off-road routes (unsealed roads that have been graded, or levelled, with a roller, or tracks that have simply been made by cars driving along old camel or donkey tracks) provide some of the most exciting ways to explore remote parts of the desert. Off-road driving is a popular pastime in the Peninsula and can be enjoyed by any confident driver with a bit of common sense. Desert driving and navigation require a certain amount of skill, however, and as with all skills they take some practice. It's better to start off with a relatively short and simple trip, and build up to dune driving or extended wadi routes.

Don't economise by taking a sedan when the road conditions require 4WD: it could end up costing you more than you bargained for.

**Road Hazards**

Prior to the oil boom there was limited vehicular traffic on the Peninsula. Since then the number of vehicles on the road has increased dramatically. Today, some cities suffer from congestion, with rush-hour traffic in Muscat and Dubai rivalling that of Western cities. With the increase in traffic, traffic accidents have become a major issue (particularly in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have the highest number of accidents per capita in the world) and as such, it's worth being aware of the main hazards in order to avoid them.

The standard of driving on the Peninsula is poor, largely because driving tests are less exacting or are illegally dodged. Bad driving includes tailgating, queue-jumping, pushing-in, lack of indication, not using mirrors, jumping red lights and turning right across the traffic when sitting in the left lane. Car horns, used at the slightest provocation, take the place of caution and courtesy and no-one likes to give way, slow down or wait.

During Ramadan, drivers (due to the day's fasting) are often tired, thirsty, hungry and irritable, and everyone is in that much more of a hurry – generally to get home for a nap.

The one good news story of the region is Oman, where (on the whole) drivers stick to the speed limits, let people into their lane and thank others for the same courtesy. Use of the horn is forbidden in an emergency and you can be fined for having a dirty car.

Other hazards to look out for are animals on the road (particularly camels). In some countries, such as Yemen, cars are poorly maintained and at night they may travel without any lights. Heavy rain and flash floods frequently wash out sections of road in the mountain areas of the Peninsula, leaving uneven surfaces that damage the tyres. Spare tyres are therefore essential as is a set of jump leads. Batteries are also quickly exhausted in high temperatures.

If involved in an accident, don't move the car until the police arrive. An accident report will be issued (required by law), but it's best to decline to sign anything you don't understand (as you may be accepting responsibility for an accident that wasn't your fault) and call your insurance or car-hire company. If involved in an accident, try at all costs to remain calm. Aggression may be held against you and will only worsen the situation. The traffic police are generally helpful and friendly, and it's customary for men to shake hands with policemen before commencing discussions.

**Road Rules**

Driving is on the right side of the road in all Peninsula countries, but speed limits vary between 100km/h to 120km/h on highways and 45km/h to 60km/h in towns and built-up areas. Speed cameras are in operation in

most city areas and on highways. If you're an expat with a local licence, you can clock up penalty points or hefty fines in some Peninsula countries.

Seat belts are a legal requirement and noncompliance can incur on-the-spot fines (up to around US\$30 in some countries).

The use of hand-held mobile phones while driving is also an offence in most countries and may lead to a fine. The use of the horn is banned in Oman except in an emergency.

You should keep your licence with you at all times and carrying a first-aid kit, fire extinguisher and warning triangle is required in some Peninsula countries.

Driving while under the influence of alcohol is a serious offence (see opposite).

Saudi Arabia has many road offences and infractions that can be punished quite severely (fines are high and often accompanied by jail sentences or even lashes); see opposite for more details.

**HITCHING**

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country and can't be recommended. Travellers who still decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. This is particularly the case in the Peninsula, where distances are great between towns and you can be marooned in

isolated places with literally life-threatening consequences (for example, if you run out of water in the summer months). You may also find that you end up spending days at someone's remote desert settlement because your driver fancied taking you home to show the family. The novelty wears off after the first day and a half of communal living.

Nevertheless, hitching is not illegal in any Middle Eastern country and in many places it is a common practice among the locals. It's considered not so much an alternative to the public transport system as an extension of it. Throughout the Peninsula a raised thumb is a vaguely obscene gesture. The most common means of signalling that you want a lift is to extend your right hand, palm down and wag it up and down briskly.

While it's normal for Arabs, Asians and Africans to hitch, it isn't something Westerners are expected to do. You may attract considerable attention and while this can work to your advantage, it can also lead to suspicion from the local police. It's also considered disappointing by many people: in rural areas there's an expectation that tourism will bring money into the country; watching you hitch along with the locals isn't returning the kind of dividends on their investment that they'd hoped.

**HITCHHIKERS FROM HAYL**

Only the hardest-hearted driver could leave an old man by the side of the road but don't be fooled: this could be the hitchhiker from Hayl. Hayl is the kind of mountain village that you really hadn't planned on visiting. It's usually at the end of a three-hour detour along a goat track along which most people wouldn't march their boots, and which at more than one point, gives way to precipitous drops to certain death in the wadi below. In fact, there's usually some kind of memorial on the roadside, showing where the last driver reached Hayl earlier than the rest of us. Naturally, when you reach the village you'll be waded in between plantation walls that were intended for slim-line donkeys, not pot-bellied 4WDs. Equally naturally, there's nowhere to turn round, so you'll have to negotiate the tightrope in reverse.

Although giving the old man a ride can be a great way to make friends – as without doubt he'll insist on your returning home for coffee and dates – you may not have had in mind that the entire village would want to make your acquaintance, too. Nor did you reckon on the presents: expect at least a fish, generally smelling a few days distant from the sea, or dates with attendant wasps, and, joy oh joy, company for the return journey. This usually takes the form of two women and a child, none of whom are accomplished car passengers, and nor did they bring a plastic bag. Given their vulnerability, and besides the old man entrusted them personally to your care, you can't possibly leave them at the junction. Unfortunately, they invariably want to go to Hail, three hours in the other direction. Hell, why not just give up the day job and become a taxi driver instead!

Hitching isn't free. The going rate is usually the equivalent of the bus or shared taxi fare, but may be more if a driver takes you to an address or place off their route. However, make sure that any fare is negotiated *before* you get into the vehicle.

Note also that it's safer always to hitch in pairs. Unless accompanied by men, it's inadvisable for women to hitch and out of the question for women travelling alone.

As a driver you'll often be flagged down for a ride: you might need to think what this might entail before offering one (see boxed text, p557). Women drivers should never give a lift to a man.

## LOCAL TRANSPORT

As cars are relatively cheap to buy and run, public transport (particularly buses and minibuses in towns) tends to be used by less affluent members of the population.

### Minibus & Bus

In most cities and towns, a minibus or bus service operates. Fares are cheap, regular and run on fixed routes. However, unless you're familiar with the town, they can be difficult to use (not all display their destination) and they're often crowded.

In some Peninsula countries, minibus or local bus services tend to connect residential or commercial areas, rather than providing a comprehensive network across the whole city.

Few countries have public minibuses to/from the airport, but top-end hotels and

travel agents (if you're taking a tour) can usually provide a complimentary minibus with advance notice. Some hotels provide bus services to city centres too.

### Taxi

In the West taxis are usually an avoidable luxury; in the Arabian Peninsula they are often the best way for travellers to get about town. Many cities have no other form of urban public transport, while there are also many rural routes that are only feasible in a taxi or private vehicle.

The way in which taxis operate varies widely from country to country, and often even from place to place within a country. So does the price. Local details are given in the Getting Around sections of the country chapters. See also the boxed text, below.

### REGULAR TAXI

The regular taxi (also known as 'contract', 'agency', 'telephone', 'private', 'engaged' or 'special taxi') is an urban phenomenon found in all the main Peninsula towns or cities. In some places no other public transport exists, but usually regular taxis coexist alongside less expensive means of transport (such as shared taxis or minibuses).

Their main purpose is for transportation within a town or on a short rural trip, and their rates can work out competitively even for several hours. They're also often the only way of reaching airports or seaports and are generally considered safe for women travellers.

Taxis range from old Toyota Corolla bangers to fleets of sleek, well-organised, comfortable and metered vehicles (in the larger cities), and even limousine services. For details see the individual country chapters.

### SHARED TAXI

A perfect compromise between the convenience of a regular taxi and the economy of a bus is the shared taxi. Known also as 'collect', 'collective' or 'service taxi' in English, and *servees* in Arabic, most shared taxis take up to four or five passengers, but some seat up to about 12 and are as good as indistinguishable from minibuses.

Shared taxis are far cheaper than private taxis and, once you get the hang of them, can be just as convenient. They're usually a little dearer than buses, but run more frequently and are usually faster (they don't stop as often or as long). They also tend to operate for longer hours than buses. Shared taxi function as urban, intercity and rural transport.

Fixed-route taxis wait at the point of departure until full or nearly full. Usually they pick up or drop off passengers anywhere en route, but in some places they have fixed halts or stations. Sometimes each service is allocated a number, which may be indicated on the vehicle. Generally a flat fare applies for each route, but sometimes it's possible to pay a partial fare.

On 'routeless' taxis, you'll quickly find a taxi willing to take you almost anywhere,

but if you're prepared to wait a while, or to do your journey in stages, you can get around for almost nothing. Fares depend largely on time and distance.

Beware of boarding an empty shared taxi. The driver may assume you want to hire the vehicle as a 'contract taxi' (see Regular Taxi, p558) and charge accordingly. It's a good idea to watch what other passengers pay and to hand over your fare in front of them. Also, look for a taxi to your destination that's almost full. If a taxi's empty when you board it, you may have to wait a long time (sometimes several hours) for it to leave, particularly if it's destined for a less popular or remote place.

Passengers are expected to know where they are getting off. '*Shukran*' is 'thank you' in Arabic and the usual cue for the driver to stop. Make it clear to the driver or other passengers if you want to be told when you reach your destination.

## TRAIN

Because relatively small populations are spread over large areas, as well as the fact that reasonable and inexpensive bus and air services already operate, there's little demand for a train service and no immediate plans to build one.

The only train service currently in the region is that found in Saudi Arabia (see p372) which connects the capital with the east of the Kingdom (running from Riyadh to Dammam, via Hofuf and Dhahran among other places).

### TAXI TIPS

On the whole, taxi drivers in the Peninsula are helpful, honest and humorous – they're not, however, so scrupulous when it comes to the tariff. New arrivals are particularly tempting bait and a target for minor scams or a bit of overcharging. Here are a few tips:

- Be aware that not all taxi drivers speak English. Generally, in cities used to international travellers they speak enough to get by, but not otherwise.
- Always negotiate a fare (or insist that the meter is used if it works) before jumping in. Town taxis sometimes have meters, most of which work only intermittently. This book quotes local rates but if in doubt ask a local, or at hotel reception, what a fair rate is for your destination.
- Don't rely on street names (there are often several versions). If you're not going to a well-known place, find out if it's close to a local landmark. Alternatively, ask someone to write down the name in Arabic.
- Ask the driver to wait while you check you've reached the correct destination.
- Avoid using unlicensed cab drivers at airports.

# Health

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Though prevention is always the key to staying healthy while travelling, medical facilities in most Peninsula countries are excellent and as good as anywhere in the West (though emergency and specialised treatment may not be so readily or extensively available).

Problems particular to the Peninsula include respiratory complaints (due to the arid climate and high levels of dust), sunburn and sunstroke, eye problems, and injuries resulting from the high incidence of road accidents (see p556).

## BEFORE YOU GO

A little planning before departure, particularly for pre-existing conditions, will save you a lot of trouble later:

- Bring medications in their original, clearly labelled containers with a signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical condition and the medications (including generic names)
- Carry a spare pair of contact lenses and glasses (and take your optical prescription with you).
- Pack a first-aid kit.

- If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity (see p532).
- See your dentist before a long trip.

It's tempting to leave it all to the last minute – don't! Many vaccines take time to ensure immunity, so visit a doctor four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for a 'yellow booklet' (an International Certificate of Vaccination), listing all the vaccinations you've received. This is mandatory for some Peninsula countries that require proof of yellow-fever vaccination upon entry for travellers who have recently visited a country where yellow fever is found.

Travellers can register with the **International Association for Medical Advice to Travellers** (IMAT; [www.iamat.org](http://www.iamat.org)); its website can help travellers find recommended doctors. For travellers about to set off to very remote areas of the Peninsula (to do aid work in Yemen, for example), first-aid courses are offered by the Red Cross and St John Ambulance, and a remote-medicine first-aid course is offered by the **Royal Geographical Society** ([www.rgs.org](http://www.rgs.org)).

## INSURANCE

In most Peninsula countries, doctors expect payment in cash on the spot. Find out in advance if your insurance makes payments directly to overseas health providers or reimburses you later. Insist on a receipt for any treatment so that you can claim the money back later.

Ensure that your travel insurance covers evacuation or repatriation, or access to better medical facilities elsewhere (which may be the only way to get medical attention for a serious emergency).

## RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that all travellers, regardless of the region they are travelling in, should be covered for diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella, polio and hepatitis B. See your doctor to ensure your vaccination cover is complete and up to date.

## MEDICAL CHECKLIST

Consider packing the following items:

- acetaminophen/paracetamol (eg Tylenol) or aspirin
- adhesive or paper tape
- antibacterial ointment (eg Bactroban) for cuts and abrasions
- antibiotics (if travelling off the beaten track)
- anti-diarrhoeal drugs (eg loperamide)
- antihistamines (for allergic reactions)
- anti-inflammatory drugs (eg ibuprofen)
- bandages, gauze and gauze rolls
- DEET-containing insect repellent for the skin
- iodine tablets (for water purification if hiking or staying in remote areas)
- oral rehydration salts
- permethrin-containing insect spray for clothing, tents, and bed nets
- pocket knife
- safety pins
- scissors
- steroid cream or cortisone (for allergic rashes)
- sun block
- syringes and sterile needles
- thermometer
- tweezers

## INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel-health advice on the internet; **Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) is a good place to start.

The **World Health Organization** ([www.who.int/ith/](http://www.who.int/ith/)) publishes an excellent book, *International Travel and Health*, which is revised annually and is available online at no cost. Another good website is **MD Travel Health** ([www.mdtravelhealth.com](http://www.mdtravelhealth.com)), with travel-health recommendations for every Peninsula country. It's updated daily and is free. The website of **Centers for Disease Control & Prevention** ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) is also a very useful source.

## FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* contains useful information for those with kids, including pretrip planning, emergency first aid, immunisation and disease information, and what to do if your kids get ill on the road.

Some other recommended reference books include *Traveller's Health* by Dr Richard Dawood, *International Travel Health*

## TRAVEL HEALTH WEBSITES

Consider consulting your government's travel-health website before departing:

- Australia** ([www.dfat.gov.au/travel/](http://www.dfat.gov.au/travel/))
- Canada** ([www.travelhealth.gc.ca](http://www.travelhealth.gc.ca))
- UK** ([www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice/](http://www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice/))
- United States** ([www.cdc.gov/travel/](http://www.cdc.gov/travel/))

*Guide* by Stuart R. Rose, MD, and *The Travellers' Good Health Guide* by Ted Lankester. The latter is especially useful for volunteer workers and expats on the Peninsula.

## IN TRANSIT

### DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT) occurs when blood clots form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk. Though most blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some may break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they may cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf, usually, but not always, on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and difficulty breathing. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights, walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles (ie contract the muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol.

### JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones; it results in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag, drink plenty of nonalcoholic fluids and eat light meals. Upon arrival, seek exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. Their main side effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger.

## IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

### AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

At least one modern, well-equipped hospital with well-trained, English-speaking staff can be found in most of the larger towns and cities throughout the Peninsula. Most also have emergency units. In rural regions, treatment may be more limited and hospitals less well equipped. In very remote areas, medicine and even sterile dressings or intravenous fluids may need to be bought from a local pharmacy (signposted with green crosses).

There is a high ratio of doctors to patients in the Peninsula (bar Yemen), and a clinic can usually be found even in rural areas. Due to the high numbers of foreign doctors working in the Gulf countries, you'll probably have little trouble finding a doctor who speaks your language.

Though some Peninsula countries allow travellers access to free state medical treatment in emergencies, you should not rely on this and are strongly advised to have insurance cover. Reciprocal arrangements with other countries don't exist, so you should be prepared to pay for all medical and dental treatment that you receive.

Your insurance company may be able to provide a list of hospitals or clinics; otherwise ask at your hotel or, better yet, your embassy (which will have approved lists). In an emergency, contact your embassy or consulate.

Standards of dental care are also excellent in the larger towns and cities (though again patchy in Yemen). Note that in basic

#### CALL ME A CAB!

If you find you suddenly require urgent medical treatment on the Peninsula, don't call an ambulance, call a cab. The ambulance services – where they exist – are usually reserved for road accidents when the victim is unconscious or immobile (though even they are sometimes popped into taxis!). It's common (and much quicker) to take a taxi.

hospitals there is an increased risk of hepatitis B and HIV transmission via poorly sterilised equipment. Note also that your travel insurance will not usually cover you for dental treatment for anything other than an emergency.

For minor illnesses such as diarrhoea, pharmacists (who are usually very knowledgeable and speak good English) often provide valuable advice and sell appropriate medication over the counter. They are also very familiar with local diseases or bugs, and can advise when more specialised help is needed.

Doctors' appointments can usually be arranged within around 24 to 48 hours in the Peninsula (less if it's urgent), and an examination (without clinical tests or prescriptions) typically costs around US\$50.

### INFECTIOUS DISEASES

#### Dengue Fever

Also known as break-bone fever, dengue is spread through the bite of the mosquito. It causes a feverish illness, with a headache and muscle pains, that's like a bad, prolonged attack of influenza. There may also be a rash. Take precautions to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes.

#### Diphtheria

Diphtheria is spread through close respiratory contact. It causes a high temperature and a severe sore throat. Sometimes a membrane forms across the throat, requiring a tracheostomy to prevent suffocation.

Vaccination is recommended for those likely to be in close contact with the local population in infected areas. The vaccine is given as an injection by itself, or with tetanus, and lasts 10 years.

#### Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is spread through contaminated food (particularly shellfish) and water. It causes jaundice and, although it is rarely fatal, can cause prolonged lethargy and delayed recovery. Symptoms include dark urine, a yellow colour to the whites of the eyes, fever and abdominal pain.

Hepatitis A vaccine (Avaxim, VAQTA, Havrix) is given as an injection; a single dose will give protection for up to a year, while a booster 12 months later will provide protection for a subsequent period of 10

years. Hepatitis A and typhoid vaccines can also be given as a single dose vaccine in the form of Hepatyrix or Viatim.

#### Hepatitis B

Infected blood, contaminated needles and sexual intercourse can all transmit hepatitis B. It can cause jaundice, and affects the liver, occasionally causing liver failure. All travellers should make this a routine vaccination – many countries now give hepatitis B vaccination as part of routine childhood vaccination.

The vaccine is given by itself, or at the same time as the hepatitis A vaccine. A course protects for at least five years, and can be given over four weeks or six months.

#### HIV

HIV is spread via infected blood and blood products, sexual intercourse with an infected partner, and from an infected mother to her newborn child. It can also be spread through 'blood-to-blood' contacts such as contaminated instruments used during medical, dental, acupuncture and other body-piercing procedures, as well as from sharing intravenous needles.

Countries in the Peninsula that require a negative HIV test as a requirement for some categories of visas include Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

#### Malaria

The prevalence of malaria varies throughout the Peninsula. The risk is considered minimal in most cities, but may be more substantial in rural areas. Check with your doctor or local travel-health clinic for the latest information. Antimalarial tablets are essential if the risk is significant, and you should also be aware of the disease's symptoms.

Malaria almost always starts with marked shivering, fever and sweating. Muscle pains, headache and vomiting are also common. Symptoms may occur anytime from a few days up to three weeks or more after being bitten by an infected mosquito, and you may still show symptoms even though you are taking preventative tablets.

#### Meningitis

Meningococcal infection is spread through close respiratory contact.

### AIDS ON THE PENINSULA

Though it's strictly illegal for AIDS or HIV sufferers either to visit or to live on the Peninsula (and detection of the disease usually results in instant deportation), the region is not the AIDS-free place you might imagine. In recent years, prostitutes (mostly from Eastern Europe and the old Soviet bloc) have flowed into the area under the guise of tourists. Locals have also returned infected after sexual adventures abroad. Additionally there is something of a cultural taboo about condom use among many Arab men. Travellers who form new relationships should also note that 'fornication', adultery and homosexuality are considered grave crimes in some Peninsula states.

A meningococcal vaccination certificate covering the A and W135 strains is required as a condition of entry if embarking on a haj pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, and for all travellers arriving from the meningitis belt of sub-Saharan Africa. Visas for pilgrimages are not issued unless proof of vaccination is submitted with the visa application.

#### Rabies

Spread through bites or licks (on broken skin) from any warm blooded, furry animal, rabies can be fatal. The skin should be immediately and thoroughly cleaned. If there is any possibility that the animal is infected with rabies, immediate medical assistance should be sought. Animal handlers should be vaccinated, as should those travelling to remote areas where a reliable source of postbite vaccine is not available within 24 hours.

Three injections are needed over a month to vaccinate against rabies. If you have been bitten and have not been vaccinated, you will need a course of five injections starting within 24 hours or as soon as possible after the injury. Vaccination does not provide you with immunity; it merely buys you more time to seek appropriate medical help.

#### Rift Valley Fever

This haemorrhagic fever is spread through blood or blood products, including those from infected animals.

It causes a flu like illness with fever, joint pains and occasionally more serious complications. Complete recovery is possible.

### Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis (TB) is spread through close respiratory contact, and occasionally through infected milk or milk products.

TB can be asymptomatic, although symptoms can include a cough, weight loss or fever, months or even years after exposure. An X-ray is the best way of establishing if you have TB.

BCG vaccine is recommended for those likely to be mixing closely with the local population. BCG gives a moderate degree of protection against TB. It's usually only given in specialised chest clinics, and is not available in all countries. As it's a live vaccine, it should not be given to pregnant women or immunocompromised individuals.

### Typhoid

Typhoid is spread through food or water that has been contaminated by infected human faeces.

The first symptom is usually fever or a pink rash on the abdomen. Septicaemia (blood poisoning) may also occur. Typhoid vaccine (Typhim Vi, Typherix) will give protection for three years. In some countries, the oral vaccine Vivotif is also available.

### Yellow Fever

Yellow-fever vaccination is not required for any areas of the Peninsula, but any traveller coming from a country where yellow fever is found will need to show a vaccination certificate at immigration.

The yellow-fever vaccination must be given at an approved clinic, and is valid for 10 years. It is a live vaccine and must not be given to immunocompromised or pregnant travellers.

### TRAVELLERS' DIARRHOEA

To prevent diarrhoea, avoid tap water in rural areas. In areas of uncertain hygiene, eat only fresh fruit or vegetables if they've been cooked or if you have peeled them yourself, and avoid dairy products that might contain unpasteurised milk.

If you develop diarrhoea, drink plenty of fluids and preferably an oral rehydration solution containing lots of salt and sugar.

If you start having more than four or five loose stools a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (usually containing quinolone) and an anti-diarrhoeal agent (such as loperamide). You should seek medical attention if the diarrhoea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours, or is accompanied by fever, shaking, chills or severe abdominal pain.

### ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

#### Heat Illness

Heat exhaustion occurs following heavy sweating and excessive fluid loss. Be aware that in the summer months, temperatures can reach 50°C and in such conditions even a round of golf can be dangerous if you're not protected against the sun and adequately hydrated.

Symptoms include a headache, dizziness and tiredness. Aim to drink sufficient water so that you produce pale, diluted urine. To treat heat exhaustion, drink lots of water, cool down in an air-conditioned room and add a little more table salt to foods than usual.

Heatstroke is a much more serious condition, and occurs when the body's heat-regulating mechanism breaks down. An excessive rise in body temperature leads to the cessation of sweating, irrational and hyperactive behaviour, and eventually loss of consciousness and death. Rapid cooling of the body by spraying it with water or fanning is an effective treatment. Emergency fluid and electrolyte replacement (by intravenous drip) is also usually required.

#### Insect Bites & Stings

Mosquitoes may not carry malaria or dengue fever, but they can still cause irritation and infected bites. Using DEET-based insect repellents will help prevent bites.

If you have an allergy to bee or wasp stings, carry an adrenaline injection or similar.

Scorpions are frequently found in dry climates. Though their bite can be painful, it's rarely life threatening.

Bed bugs and sometimes scabies are occasionally found in hostels and cheap hotels. They cause very itchy lumpy bites – spray the mattress or find new lodgings!

#### Water

Tap water is safe to drink in Gulf cities (but not in Yemen or Saudi, nor in rural areas

where water is delivered by tanker), but it doesn't agree with everyone. It's easier to stick to bottled water (found everywhere), boil water for ten minutes, or use water-purification tablets or a filter. Never drink water from wadis (valleys or riverbeds) or streams as animals are usually watered in them.

### WOMEN'S HEALTH

Emotional stress, exhaustion and travelling through different time zones can all contribute to an upset in the menstrual pattern. If using oral contraceptives, remember that diarrhoea, vomiting and some antibiotics can stop the pill from working. Take condoms with you just in case. Condoms should be kept in a cool dry place or they may crack and perish.

Tampons and sanitary towels are not always available outside of major cities in the Peninsula.

If travelling during pregnancy, have a medical checkup before embarking on your trip. The most risky times for travel are during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, when miscarriage is most likely, and after 30 weeks, when complications such as high blood pressure and premature delivery can occur.

Most airlines will not accept a traveller after 28 or 32 weeks of pregnancy, and long-haul flights in the later stages can be very uncomfortable.

Excellent obstetric and antenatal facilities are offered throughout the Peninsula (though less so in Yemen), particularly in the larger cities.

Taking written records of your pregnancy, including details of your blood group, is helpful if you need medical attention while away. Ensure your insurance policy covers pregnancy delivery and postnatal care, but remember insurance policies are only as good as the facilities available.

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