

Saudi Arabia

المملكة العربية السعودية

Saudi Arabia. The world's last great forbidden kingdom, and an emblem of everything most inexplicable to the West: the Middle East, Islam, oil and terrorism. For centuries the country was considered closed to outsiders, penetrable only to the bravest and the boldest, such as Richard Burton, TE Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger, who risked life and limb to get there. Today it continues to exist only in the realms of the imagination for most people, who still relish the sensational stories surrounding it.

And yet, ever so tentatively, the country is beginning to permit travellers past its portals. For those willing to 'risk' the realm, there may well be a surprise or two. Madain Saleh, called Saudi Arabia's Petra, numbers among the most magical and monumental sites of the Middle East. Or it would if more people knew about it.

The Empty Quarter, the largest sea of sand on the planet, is home to dunes the size of ships. The Arabian oryx, one of the most beautiful animals on earth, also lives there. In the far south lies Najran, an ancient caravan stop, where mud-brick forts rise out of the palm plantations and oases. On the coast, liberal, libertine Jeddah – or so it's seen by the Kingdom's more conservative kinsmen – is home to sensation-full souqs and lovely coral houses, once the abode of its moneyed merchants. Off its shores lie Saudi's Red Sea riches – reefs that rank among the least spoil and most spectacular in the world.

Most memorable for many, however, is the traditional Bedouin hospitality that, like the sand of the Empty Quarter, seems to go on and on forever.

FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- **Capital** Riyadh
- **Area** 2,149,690 sq km
- **Population** 26.6 million
- **Country code** ☎ 966
- **Head of State** King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud
- **Annual number of Western tourists** (including haj pilgrims) 95,000
- **Stereotypes** Wells spurting oil, kings as rich as Croesus, hijackers, desert
- **Surprises** Mist-covered mountains, fragrant juniper forests, freezing desert temperatures (in winter), rich coral reefs



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Madain Saleh** (p336) Marvel at Madain Saleh, called 'Saudi Arabia's Petra' for its tremendous tombs set in a stunning desert setting.
- **Old City of Jeddah** (p322) Meander among the old merchants' houses, ancient markets packed with pilgrims and the myriad museums of Old Jeddah.
- **Empty Quarter** (p351) Drive the dramatic dunes of the Empty Quarter or camp out with camels under star-lit desert skies.
- **Najran** (p344) Feast your eyes on fantastic mud-brick fortresses set amid palm plantations in this lovely oasis town.
- **Red Sea Diving** (p332) Dive the dazzling depths of Saudi's Red Sea and spot sharks, sea turtles and stunning coral reefs at Yanbu or Al-Lith.

ITINERARIES

See also the Saudi itineraries on p27.

- **Riyadh and around** Take a tour of Masmak Fortress (p313) and see where the city began. Next sip coffee whilst standing on Sky Bridge (p313) with its stunning aerial summary of the town's old and new. After a whirlwind whiz through the Kingdom's culture at the National Museum (p313), lay off for lunch at Najd Village (p316). Later, fine-dine at the Globe (p316) then relax with a fruit cocktail and Cuban at the Cigar Lounge (p316) in the Al-Faisal Tower. At the weekend, head out to visit the colourful camel market (p318), camp in the Red Sands (p319) or wander the ghostly ruins of Dir'ayah (p318).
- **Jeddah and around** Attend the early auction at Jeddah's frenetic fish market (p325) before taking a traditional breakfast of bread and *fool* at Restaurant Ful & Hummus (p327). Next amble the alleyways of the Souq al-Alawi (p324) and crane your neck counting the coral houses (p324) of Jeddah's maritime merchants. After a light lunch at one of the city's many Asian eateries (p327), take a stroll sizing up the famous sculptures (p325) along Jeddah's corniche. At night, taste the town's cooking and its culture at the laid-back, Al-Nakheel Restaurant (p328). At the weekend, unwind and relax at the Red Sea resort of Al-Nakheel (p329).
- **City Escapes** Head off to hike in the great Al-Nafud desert (p321) and recce the

VISA VICISSITUDES

Note that it is still currently impossible to visit the Kingdom as an independent traveller (though expats already in Saudi Arabia are free to travel around the Kingdom). Tourist visas are, however, granted to groups (minimum four people; women under 30 must be accompanied by their husband or brother) if booked through a recognised agency (see p366 for more details).

rocks for ancient art and stupendous scribblings. Take the plunge and go diving off Saudi's spectacular Red Sea shores and search the reefs (p332) for sensational riches in Jeddah, Yanbu and Al-Lith. Migrate to Madain Saleh (p336) and spend a week exploring the wonderful Nabataean necropolis, the haunting remains of the Hejaz railway and the stupendous desert scenery. Fill up the 4WD and head out to explore the great Empty Quarter (p348), driving across the dunes, setting off Thesiger-style on a spectacular camel safari, or star-gazing at night from traditional Bedouin tents.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

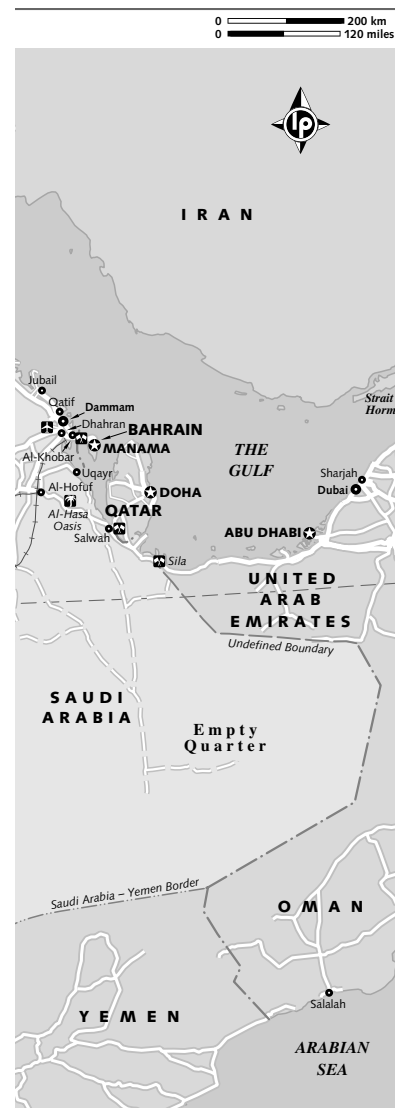
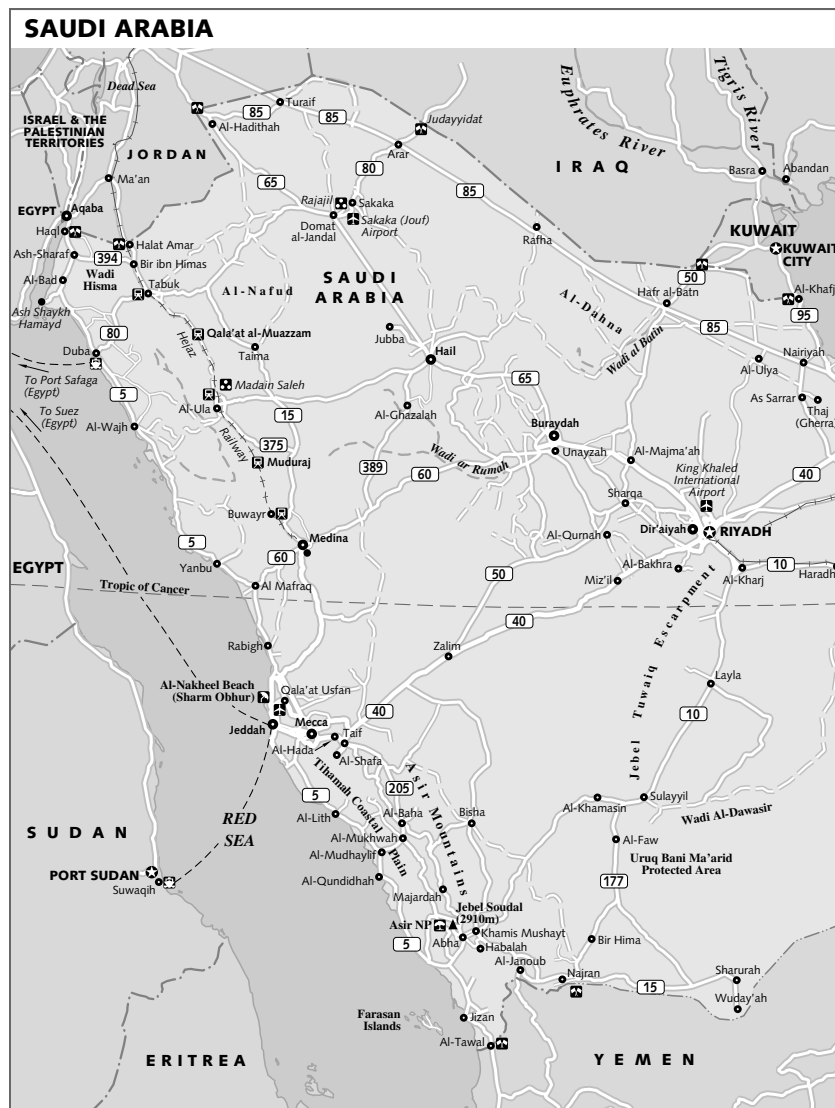
The best time to visit Saudi Arabia is between November and February. From mid-April until October, average daily temperatures regularly top 40°C, with high humidity in the coastal regions to boot.

It's appreciably cooler in the Asir Mountains and around Taif all year. In the dead of winter (December to January), temperatures in the main cities (except Jeddah) will drop into the teens during the day and even hit zero in some places overnight. For climate chart information, see p530.

The Kingdom's Islamic holidays (p364) are another important factor in deciding when to go. Unless you've no choice, Ramadan is best avoided as getting a daytime meal can be difficult and opening hours are kept to a minimum.

HISTORY Early Arabia

Of all the empires that profited from the lucrative trade in frankincense, few have captured the imagination like the



Birth of Saudi Arabia

In 1703 Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab was born in the oasis of Al-Uyaynah in the Najd. After a period of itinerant religious scholarship, Al-Wahhab returned to Al-Uyaynah to preach a zealous message calling for the purification of Islam (see 'Wahhabi Islam' p307).

Al-Wahhab's reformist zeal was initially tolerated by the local authorities, but he was expelled from the town after he meted out severe punishments to those who didn't engage in communal prayer, and led the stoning of a woman accused of adultery. He sought refuge in Dir'ayah, 65km from Al-Uyaynah, where he was granted protection by Mohammed ibn al-Saud, the local emir.

In the meantime, there was considerable anger throughout Arabia that the holy cities of Mecca and Medina were under foreign (Ottoman) tutelage and the Saudi-Wahhabi emirate expanded rapidly.

Upon his death, Al-Saud was succeeded by his son Abdul Aziz, who captured Riyadh in 1765. In 1792 Al-Wahhab died but the inexorable expansion of the Saudi-Wahhabi emirate continued.

In 1803 the Saudi army marched on the Hejaz and defeated Sherif Hussain of Mecca. The same year, Abdul Aziz was assassinated by a Shiite fanatic in the mosque of Dir'ayah in revenge for the Saudi-Wahhabi sacking of the Shiite cities of Iraq. Despite losing their leader, the Saudi-Wahhabi emirate was recognised by the Mecca authorities. The first Saudi empire stretched from Al-Hasa in the east to Hejaz in the west and to Najran in the south.

Second Saudi Empire

It didn't last long. The Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II ordered his viceroy in Egypt, Mohammed Ali, to retake Hejaz in the Ottoman sultan's name. With the support of many Arabian tribes who resented the strictures of Saudi-Wahhabi rule, the Ottoman armies took Mecca and Medina in 1814, conquered the Saudi-Wahhabi stronghold of Dir'ayah on 11 September 1818 and executed Abdullah ibn al-Saud (Abdul Aziz's successor).

In 1824 Turki ibn Abdullah, the son of the executed Abdullah, retook Riyadh. A series of assassinations and family squabbles over succession attracted the attention of the Ottomans, who captured Faisal, the emir

Nabataeans (see the boxed text, p336), a people of Bedouin origin who developed a specialised knowledge of the trade caravan routes.

From their extraordinary rock-hewn cities of Madain Saleh and Petra (in Jordan), the Nabataeans grew wealthy from around 200 BC by exacting tolls and protection money

from the caravans. The Nabataeans never really possessed an 'empire' in the common military and administrative sense of the word, but instead established a zone of influence that stretched as far north as Syria and south into the Hadramawt (Yemen).

In the years following the Prophet Mohammed's death in AD 632, the territory

of what is now Saudi Arabia was nominally ruled from afar by the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, and was saved from obscurity only by the spiritual significance of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

By 1517 the Ottomans, under Salim I, had established their authority over Hejaz, a deeply unpopular move in Arabia.

THE FERASA PHENOMENON

'Have you seen my camel?' A man once asked another.

'Right eye missing? Loaded all on the left side? No tail?' The other replied.

'Yes, that's exactly my camel!'

'I've no idea.'

'But you just described her perfectly!'

'I don't have her.'

'You're a liar, I tell you! A Liar!'

'I'm telling you, I don't have her.'

Eventually the first man took the second before the judge.

'This man has described my camel perfectly yet he says he's never seen her!'

The judge asked the second man to explain himself.

'It's simple,' the man replied. 'Only the left side of the bushes have been eaten, the footprints of the left feet are more heavily pressed into the sand than those on the right, and the camel's stool is clumped together and not dispersed'.

'Alright, but can you help the man find his camel?' asked the judge.

'Certainly,' replied the man. 'She went that way.'

Ferasa, as it's known in Arabic, is a gift uniquely credited to the Bedu. Translated roughly by 'perspicacity' in English, it's a kind of swift summing-up of the situation.

The talent probably evolved as a kind of survival technique in the hostile environment of the desert. Though desert days have long since past for most Saudis, don't think it doesn't have its uses: *ferasa* continues to play a vital role in many areas of Saudi life. Professional desert trackers regularly assist the police with their hunt for criminals, for example, and more recently, with the 'war on terror'. As you travel, listen out for famous local tales.

Policemen are also said to put *ferasa* to good use at checkpoints; park wardens use it in the fight against poachers; and customs officials in the combat against smuggling and illegal immigrants.

Even the present ruler, King Abdullah, is said to put his Bedouin bent to good use in his ability to quickly get the measure of his foreign guests trying to pull a fast one.

of Riyadh, and sent him into exile in Cairo. Six years later, Faisal escaped, marched on Riyadh and regained the throne, a position he would hold for another 22 years. After Faisal died, Riyadh fell to the Al-Rashids, an increasingly powerful tribe based around Hail, in the early 1890s.

The decisive battle for the future of Arabia came in 1902 when the 21-year-old Abdul Aziz ibn Abdul Rahman ibn al-Saud (Ibn Saud) and a small band of followers stormed Riyadh at night. The religious authorities in Riyadh then swore allegiance to the Al-Sauds through a series of religious edicts.

With deft diplomacy skills and the momentum of successful military campaigns, Ibn Saud orchestrated a conference at which Arabia's Islamic clergy condemned Sherif Hussain (ruler of Mecca) as a foreign puppet. Although Sherif Hussain responded by proclaiming himself the King of the Arabs, the tide of history was with Ibn Saud.

In 1925 the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance took Mecca and Medina. The following year Ibn Saud proclaimed himself King of the Hejaz and Sultan of Najd, and on 22 September 1932, Ibn Saud announced the formation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Discovery of Oil

The economic future of the new kingdom was almost instantly secured with the discovery of oil and the signing in 1933 of Saudi Arabia's first oil concession. Four years later, the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) discovered commercial quantities of oil near Riyadh and in the area around Dammam in the east. In 1943 President Roosevelt established the Kingdom's political importance by stating grandly that the Kingdom was 'vital for the defence of the USA'.

Upon Ibn Saud's death on 9 November 1953, his profligate son Saud became king. Saud endeared himself to the Arab in the

street by supporting Egypt in the Suez Crisis of 1956, but, with the Kingdom's finances in deep trouble, Saud abdicated in 1964.

His brother Faisal proved more willing to provide his citizens with a stake in the economic benefits of oil. He introduced, among other things, a free health service for all Saudis, and began the building boom that has transformed Saudi Arabia from an impoverished desert kingdom into a nation of modern infrastructure.

In response to the USA's unconditional support for Israel, Saudi Arabia imposed an oil embargo on the USA in 1974, a move that quadrupled world oil prices, drew support from across the region and reminded the world of Saudi Arabia's importance in a world economy dependent upon oil.

Growing Pains

On 25 March 1975 King Faisal was assassinated by a nephew. Although the throne passed to Faisal's brother Khaled, a man who was known for his piety, frugal lifestyle and closeness to his subjects, the real power behind the throne was another of Faisal's brothers, Fahd.

In November 1979 the Great Mosque of Mecca was overrun by 250 fanatical followers of Juhaiman ibn Saif al-Otai, a militant Wahhabi leader, who claimed that the Mahdi (Messiah) would appear in the mosque on that very day. During two bloody weeks of fighting, 129 people were killed. The conflict was a devastating blow to the credibility of a regime that had prided itself on being the inheritors of the Wahhabi legacy and the rulers best able to safeguard the holy places.

During the following year, riots also broke out in the towns of the Qatif Oasis, the heartland of the Kingdom's 300,000 Shiites, many of whom were inspired by the revolutionary fervour of their co-religionists in Iran and the exhortations of the Ayatollah Khomeini to export the Shiite revolution. The riots were brutally put down.

On 14 June 1982 the figurehead King Khaled died aged 69. Fahd became king and set about reinforcing the twin pillars (and contradictions) of modern Al-Saud rule. He made a priority of proving himself a moderate and reliable friend of the West, while in 1986 he proclaimed himself the 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques'.

Saudi Arabia Today

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, Saudi Arabia's subsequent decision to allow foreign military forces to operate from Saudi soil would later prove one of the catalysts for propelling Osama bin Laden, a Saudi, and his Al-Qaeda movement onto the world stage.

In 1991 a petition calling for reforms and greater openness was sent to King Fahd by liberal intellectuals. It was quickly followed by a contrary petition by conservative Islamic scholars – a struggle symbolic of the two opposing sides of Saudi politics that continues to this day.

After a great deal of fanfare, the much-vaunted Consultative Council (Majlis ash-Shoura) was opened on 20 August 1993. For more on politics, see p305.

When Fahd died from a stroke in August 2005, his half-brother Abdullah ascended to the throne. Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz al-Saud became crown prince.

An Uncertain Future

After the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, and the discovery that 15 of the accused 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens, the world's attention focussed on Saudi Arabia. Western governments questioned both the alleged financing of terrorists in the Kingdom and the measures taken by the authorities to combat Al-Qaeda cells operating there.

In 2003 and 2004, a series of widely reported Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks targeted Westerners in Riyadh, Al-Khobar and Yanbu. It led to the subsequent departure of an estimated 50% of expat Americans and 30% of Europeans (on whom the government is so dependent for technical expertise). As a result, the Saudi authorities have been very keen to be seen to combat terrorism, including the hunting down of its main operatives. See also p363.

However, for as long as security (in the shape of international terrorism) and economic issues (in the shape of oil) remain a key concern for Washington, Saudi Arabia will remain a vital strategic partner to the USA and the West.

For the Kingdom's part, it has to play a difficult double-game. On the one hand, it's keen to show itself as a staunch supporter

SAUDI DATES

'We love dates – the dates we eat, and the dates we do!' goes the popular Saudi saying. Of the edible variety (as opposed to *dating*) you'll find these pressed upon you in every home you enter – and some hotels too.

Traditionally much beloved by the Bedouin, the Saudi desert-dwellers could survive for days in the dunes on just a diet of dates and camel milk.

The Kingdom's travellers also traditionally treasure them, particularly those performing the haj (annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca). No self-respecting pilgrim would leave home without at least a kilo. Replete with vitamins and minerals, they are the perfect source of sustenance during the still quite arduous journey. Returning *hajjis* also buy dates as presents for their families.

Saudis also give dates as presents, particularly during Ramadan, and love to boast that 'These came from my own farm'. They also bring dates as gifts when visiting friends in hospital (but for the patients' visitors rather than for the patients themselves!). During Ramadan, dates (eaten in even numbers only) are famously used to break the fast. The easily-digested sugar soon satisfies the stomach. Saudi mothers traditionally eat dates mixed with herbs after child birth in order to recuperate their strength.

Because of the range of both soil type and climate, as well as the centuries of selective breeding, Saudi Arabia's dates are considered among the best in the world.

Many Saudis also like to keep date palms much as they like to keep camels – for the sake of it and for the social kudos it brings.

Nearly all the parts of a palm are traditionally used in Saudi Arabia – the fruit to eat and for cooking, the trunks for ceiling beams, and the leaves for making basket ware, straw hats and prayer mats.

Generally considered the choicest Saudi dates are the type known as *Ajua* (SR90 to SR120 per kg) from Medina, *Sukariya* (SR20 to SR50) from Qasim, and *Rotana* (SR15 to SR35) from Al-Kharj. When in Rome...a little bag of dried dates (from SR7 for 250g) goes a long way on one of those legendary long Saudi bus journeys.

of the West and its 'War on Terror' (and in doing so, continue to benefit from the trade it depends upon). On the other, it has to try and allay the growing resentment and hostility of its own people and religious establishment (who see the war in Iraq as unjustified and disastrous), and the insidious, corrupting influence of the West in general.

Saudi Arabia also fears a power imbalance in the region, so is strongly opposed to the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Nervous about Shiite Iran increasing its influence in the area (with neither Iraq nor America to counter it), it also fears the stirring up of sectarian tension within its own boundaries (Shiites dominate some areas, including the eastern provinces).

In the meantime, regional, tribal and sectarian discontent continues to simmer (albeit on a low flame and generally unfelt and unheard by the traveller – it's almost never reported by the country's press), as does the jockeying for power among the royal family, and an increasingly restless youth.

In response, the government continues its tried-and-tested policy of dampening the flames of any political discontent by chucking lots of money at it; a criticism long levied at the Al-Sauds by their opponents – in effect buying rather than earning the loyalty of its regions and tribes.

Another persistent threat to Saudi's future is terrorist attacks on both Western expats and the government, with the aim of destabilising what is viewed by Islamists as a corrupt and overtly pro-Western state. The security services have claimed both diligence and success in tracking down operatives. As you travel around the Kingdom, look out for the billboards proclaiming 'Together Against Terrorism' and 'Help police route out these people'.

It's worth remembering that tribal warfare and anarchy existed within the lifetime of some of the Kingdom's inhabitants. In many respects, Saudi Arabia has achieved an enormous amount (stability, peace and modernisation) in the space of about 50 years, when it took the West centuries.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

On paper (and many would say in practice too), Saudi Arabia is one of the least democratic countries in the world. There is no written constitution, no elected parliament and no political parties.

The Council of Ministers holds all executive and legislative power. It is headed by the king (who is also the country's prime minister), who also appoints all council ministers. The legal system is based upon Sharia'a (Islamic law).

In addition to the Supreme Economic Council (which advises ministers on economic policy), there is also the Consultative Council, though it only has a very limited influence and is made up entirely of men.

Wahhabism, the ultra-conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam, remains the cornerstone of the Al-Saud legitimacy (along with the political and moral support of its clerics). And though oil has transformed the country economically, politically it remains a deeply conservative society.

In 2005, the first and much-hailed Saudi municipal elections took place. Some commentators saw this as the first tentative – if limited – step towards the introduction of a democratic process in the Kingdom.

King Abdullah, despite initial concerns about his perceived conservatism and caution (particularly in balancing the demands of leading members of the royal family with the appeasement of the powerful clerical establishment), has won considerable credit among critics and commentators alike for his recent spate of reforms. These include even the curbing of royal family spending. He has also expressed his support for reforms for women.

Known locally as 'rolling thunder' for his decisive and widespread initiatives, he is genuinely popular among his people too.

Unless commitment to reform is genuine and far-reaching, however, and the pace of implementation quickened, Saudi's future path is still far from smooth and assured.

ECONOMY

Saudi Arabia's enormous oil wealth is the single most important factor that has shaped its economy. It is still the world's largest oil exporter with the largest proven oil reserves – estimated at over 250 billion barrels.

Since oil accounts for some 90% of exports and government revenue, the economy is highly dependent on the commodity, and very vulnerable to fluctuations in the world's oil prices. Projections based on known reserves suggest that oil will only continue to flow for the next 90 years or so.

Problems facing Saudi's economy include this high dependence on oil, the rapidly-growing population (which is expected to double by 2030), the high unemployment rate (which hovers at around 26%), and a relatively undereducated and underskilled Saudi workforce.

The education system in particular is in desperate need of reform to improve the skills and education of those entering the job markets. Currently, it is overly oriented towards religious studies and learning by rote, and fails to prepare its youth for the modern-day labour market.

Saudi's foreign workforce is also considered top-heavy (more than 50% of the total). The government is currently pursuing a 'Saudisation' programme in order both to increase the number of Saudis in the labour force, as well as to level out the balance of payments (most expat workers send a large portion of their salary to their home countries – look out for them queuing outside Western Union offices around the country). The government recently declared that it is going to limit the number of foreign workers and their dependants to 20% of the Saudi population by 2013.

Other future measures include diversification of the economy into non-oil sectors, including manufacturing and services, as well as encouraging the private sector. Saudi's accession to the WTO in 2005 should slowly lead to the liberalisation of the economy to comply with WTO rules including openness to foreign investment.

Saudi's economic forecast is fairly rosy (with a predicted annual growth of a healthy 5.2% to 2010), helped by foreign investment, increased oil production, and above all, high oil prices.

PEOPLE The National Psyche

Residing as they do in the home of Islam, the Saudis are fiercely proud of their Islamic heritage. Religion plays a more active

VEILED FREEDOM?

'A woman's beauty is her hair,' goes one Arab saying. Walking around without a headscarf certainly seems to attract attention. Though you don't have to wear one, doing so does seem to earn you extra respect.

In the more conservative regions (the centre, far north, northwest and far south), many would prefer more. 'May God lead him to a straight path,' were the mutters my driver and I heard as we walked down a street in Najran. They assumed we were married; it was my 'husband's' shame to show me. Time to adopt the full attire.

From within the veil I could see without being seen, understand without being understood, and ogle the magnificent tribesmen without suffering inspection myself. It shielded from the sun and deterred the dust; it hid blemishes and bags brought on by a late-night's writing or a 15-hour drive. It concealed uncombed hair, a crumpled shirt or clumsy cosmetics. When I returned to London, the pressure to appear fashionable, feminine and *au fait* again seemed overwhelming. To my surprise, I secretly coveted those days in my coverings.

Don't think the Saudis themselves miss out too much either. Underneath the austere attire, many Saudi women don the finest fabrics or Milan's most fashionable fittings. Saudi men manage too:

'From the fold in a woman's ankle, you know her age; from the size of her wrist, her build; from the *abeyya* in motion, her figure; and from her hands, her complexion. From the eyes, you have everything else.'

Frances Linzee Gordon

part in the daily life of its inhabitants than perhaps anywhere else on Earth.

At the same time, many Saudis are drawn irresistibly to their satellite TV (the going rate is just SR200 for a satellite dish or cable) and their computers for the window it offers on the 'forbidden fruit' of the West (including European pornography channels), inciting in them both an envy and an utter contempt for all that the West offers.

In the same way, Saudis are both deeply suspicious of Western encroachment onto Islamic values and lands (including their own), but also can't get enough of American consumerism and popular culture including fast-food, and fast, gas-guzzling cars. A down side of all this is that a once very active people now lead a very inactive life; one of the consequences is one of the highest incidents of diabetes in the world.

Many Saudis also speak proudly of their Bedouin heritage, although few would forsake the comforts of city life for it now. One of the more positive results is a dramatic increase in life expectancy, which stands now at 75 years of age (77 for women). There has been a dramatic decrease in the fertility rate, which has fallen from a whopping 7.3 (number of live births per woman) in 1970-75, to 4.1 in 2007, though compared to the world average of 2.7, it's still high.

Lifestyle

Saudi society is strictly segregated between the public (male) and private (female) domain. Apart from Islam, family is the bedrock of Saudi society and family members only leave the family home once married.

Traditional Arabian society was formerly divided into nomadic desert dwellers, traders and sedentary town dwellers. In this pre-oil world, tribes were the main source of cultural identification and loyalty.

Since the discovery of oil, most former nomads have been encouraged to settle, and the importance of tribal loyalties has diminished a little. Nevertheless, such familial ties and bonds remain and are much stronger than the authorities and even some citizens care to admit to – even within the royal family.

Education (primary and secondary) is free (though strictly segregated) in Saudi Arabia; male professors sometimes lecture their female students via video link. The Saudi curriculum has been widely criticised for its overwhelming focus on Islam (one third of all subjects relate to the Quran).

For many women, life in Saudi Arabia is more controlled than anywhere else in the world (bar perhaps Taliban Afghanistan), particularly with regard to freedom of movement. Women are forbidden to drive

and may not travel abroad without the permission of their husband or brother. Many Saudis (both men and women and including King Abdullah) are in fact strongly in favour of reform. Reforms are expected in the near future. Saudi Arabia has also signed the UN Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women.

Girls also enjoy the same rights to attend (segregated) schools and universities as boys, and later work as teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, business managers and journalists in the print media, although their numbers are proportionally small and most may deal only with women as part of their work. Many Saudis (including women) also claim that women in Saudi Arabia live free from the fear of public sexual violence.

For a look at modern-day life inside the Kingdom see the boxed text, p327.

Population

More than 80% of Saudi Arabia's population is concentrated in urban areas, with one-third of the population living in the urban agglomerations centred on Riyadh, Jeddah and Mecca.

Overall population density is low: 12 people per square kilometre, although desert regions have less than one person per square kilometre. Despite the urbanising impact of oil wealth and modernisation, around 1.8 million Bedu still claim to live a semi-nomadic lifestyle, though numbers are decreasing all the time.

Saudi's population is very young (over 40% of the population are under 15 years old), with an annual population growth rate of 2.8% (which means that the population doubles every 20 years). Saudi authorities are increasingly confronted with the dilemma of providing for a disaffected, young, undereducated population with not enough jobs (or money) to go around (see also p305).

Multiculturalism

Modern Saudi Arabia is a paradox. One of the most insular societies on earth, yet less than two-thirds (some say only half) of the population is Saudi. Official figures place the number of foreign expatriates living and working in the Kingdom on temporary visas at nine million or more.

Westerners (mainly from Europe, North America and Australasia) work in high-skilled jobs for which most Saudis do not have the qualifications. Non-Western expats (primarily Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Indians and Filipinos) perform mostly unskilled labour (such as taxi driving, construction work and domestic help), which many Saudis consider beneath them.

A process of 'Saudisation' is underway (see p305), but foreigners still form the backbone of the Saudi economy. Many of the lower-paid immigrants complain of ill-treatment, exploitation or even abuse, although Saudi law does in theory protect its legal immigrants.

RELIGION

Islam is not just the religion of Saudi citizens, it's the religion of Saudi society and the Saudi state, and is all-encompassing.

Officially, all Saudis are Muslim, 15% of whom are Shiites who are found in different parts of the country but particularly in the Eastern Provinces. The practice of other religions is strictly forbidden in Saudi Arabia. Non-Muslims cannot even be buried there.

Wahhabi Islam

The prevailing Islamic orthodoxy in Saudi Arabia is Wahhabi Islam (also known as the Hanbali or literalist school of Islamic interpretation). It is named after Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who preached a 'new' message in the 18th century – essentially a call to return to the roots and purity of Islam.

At the heart of the Wahhabi doctrine lies the denunciation of all forms of mediation between Allah and believers, and a puritanical reassertion of *tawhid* (the oneness of God). Under the Wahhabis, only the Quran, the Sunnah (the words and deeds of Mohammed) and the Hadith (Mohammed's sayings) are acceptable sources of Islamic orthodoxy. The worship of saints and the reverence towards tombs belonging to holy men (especially by the Sufis) are seen as acts of egregious heresy.

Obligations espoused by Al-Wahhab included the requirement to pay *zakat*, a tax (in 2007, 2.5% of net worth) payable to the leader of a Muslim community and calculated according to a person's wealth.

PREPARING FOR PRAYER

In Saudi Arabia, *everything* closes during *salat* (prayer time). Strictly enforced, it can last for up to 30 minutes. If you're already inside a restaurant and eating, you'll usually be allowed to finish your meal (with the curtains drawn and door locked), but note that most places won't let you in unless they think you can finish in time. In shops, banks and other places, you will usually be asked to leave to avoid problems with the *mutawwa* (religious police; p362). Business also stops temporarily in offices.

Prayer times vary throughout the Kingdom and from day to day, and there are at least four during business hours. A list of prayer times appears daily on pages two or three of *Arab News*.

Communal prayers are also considered a religious duty, and rulings on personal matters are interpreted according to Sharia'a (Islamic law), which has changed little in the 14 centuries since it was revealed by the Prophet Mohammed.

One of the central questions in modern Saudi Arabia today is the battle over who can be considered the true inheritors of the Wahhabi legacy. Famously, Al-Qaeda believes that it is they, not the Saudi royal family, who are the modern guardians of the austere and fundamentalist Wahhabi vision.

Although Muslims traditionally attribute a place of great respect to Christians and Jews as Ahl al-Kitab (People of the Book), Wahhabi orthodoxy is unusually hostile to any deviations (whether they be Shiite or Christian) from Sunni Islam.

ARTS Literature

Novelists to chronicle the impact of oil money and modernisation on a traditional desert kingdom include Hamza Bogary, Ahmed Abodehman and Abdelrahman Munif (works are available in English).

Recent translations of Saudi women writers offer an interesting perspective into the otherwise closed world of Saudi women. Among them are Saddeka Arebi, Raja Alim, Fowziya Abu Khalid, Ruqayya ash-Shabib, Sharifa as-Shamlan, Khayriyya as-Saggaf and Najwa Hashim.

Music

Since the early 1980s the Saudi government has made recordings of folk-music traditions from almost every village of the Kingdom, and some of these are screened on Saudi TV. In the Hejaz, the Al-Sihba form of folk music interestingly blends Bedouin poetry with the songs of Arab Andalusia in mediaeval Spain.

Of the musicians whose music has found an audience in the wider Arab world, among the most important are Tariq Abdul Hakim, Mohammed Abdou, Abadi al-Johar, Mohammed Aman and Abdou Majeed Abdullah.

Architecture

Saudi Arabia boasts a good range of architecture, though sadly much built in the traditional style has either disappeared or is deteriorating fast. Recently launched restoration projects should start preserving some for posterity.

Among the finest examples of traditional architecture (high-walled homes built from mud, straw, stone and palm products) can be found at Al-Ula (p333) and Dir'aiyah (p318). Mud fortress-style architecture can find its most enchanting expression in Najran in southwestern Arabia.

Further north, the merchants of Jeddah built stunning homes from Red Sea coral with lattice-work wooden balconies.

The most startling expressions of modern Saudi architecture are found in Riyadh, such as at the Kingdom and Al-Faisaliah Towers.

Dance

The mesmerising Bedouin *ardha*, with its roots in the Najd, is the national dance of Saudi Arabia, and involves a pastiche of singers, dancers and a poet-narrator. Sword-bearing men, shoulder to shoulder, are set off by a singing poet while the men sway in unison to rhythmic drum beats.

Your best chance of seeing one of the more than 50 folkloric dance and music groups in Saudi Arabia is at the annual Jenadriyah Festival (p314).

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Saudi Arabia takes up 80% of the Arabian Peninsula. Over 95% of Saudi Arabia is desert or semidesert, and the country is

home to some of the largest desert areas in the world, including Al-Nafud (Nafud Desert) in the north and the Empty Quarter in the south.

Just 0.5% of Saudi territory is considered to be suitable for agriculture and less than 2% of the land is covered by forest.

Saudi Arabia's most elevated regions run like a spine down the west coast – from 1500m in the north, up to Jebel Soudah (2910m) located in the southwestern Asir Mountains.

Wildlife

Illegal hunting is still a major problem in Saudi Arabia, and during your travels, the animal you're most likely to come across is the Arabian *hamadrya* (baboon), which is proliferating along the mountain roads of southwestern Saudi Arabia.

The waters of Saudi's Red Sea are rife with wildlife (see Diving, p359), including five species of marine turtle; the green and hawksbill sometimes breed on Saudi Arabia's Red Sea beaches. Whales and dolphins are also present in both the Red Sea and the Gulf.

For more information on the Kingdom's wildlife, contact the **National Commission for Wildlife Conservation & Development** (NCWCD; Map p312; ☎ 01-441 4333; www.ncwcd.gov.sa; 📧 7.30am-

2.30pm Sat-Wed). The commission's small museum can be visited in Riyadh.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

At least seven mammal species are considered endangered in Saudi Arabia, including the Syrian wild ass, Arabian gazelle, Saudi gazelle, Arabian jird, Arabian oryx, Arabian leopard and Nubian ibex.

Efforts such as captive breeding and re-introduction programs are at the forefront of the government's work to arrest the slide. Also vulnerable are Geoffroy's bat, the lesser horseshoe bat and Sind bat. The Kingdom's waters are among the last remaining habitats for the dugong.

Endangered bird species include the Arabian bustard (found on the Tihamah coastal plain). The ostrich and Houbara bustard are currently being bred in captivity and the latter has been successfully reintroduced into the wild.

National Parks

At the time of writing, Saudi authorities have designated 13 wildlife reserves (which amount to over 500,000 hectares) as part of a plan for more than 100 protected areas.

Travellers wishing to visit any of the reserves must apply for permission from the **NCWCD** (☎ 01-441 4333; www.ncwcd.gov.sa;

CAMEL CULTURE

Though the traditional, Bedouin way of life has long since passed for most Saudis, a few habits die hard. The camel, traditionally much treasured and revered by the Bedu, remains an important status symbol in the Kingdom (with the obvious exception of the city of Jeddah, where it's your 'wheels' which really count).

The Saudis simper over their camels as Westerners worry over their dogs and cats. Some owners visit their cherished charges daily; others take off at weekends with coffee and dates, and friends or families in tow to admire their animals.

Unlike the keeping of sheep or goats, the keeping of camels serves no commercial purpose; in fact many owners expend vast sums on medicine and veterinary fees. A herd of 50 camels is not an unusual number to own; several hundred is not uncommon. Today, it's the Sudanese Bedu who usually care for the camels, especially those from the Al-Rashid tribe who are famous for their facility with camels.

During the school holidays, Saudi families love to go to the races. At other times of the year, camel beauty contests occur, in which several thousand camels of all shapes, sizes and colours converge from all across the Kingdom. The author visited one; first prize was no less than 100 cars. At Saudi weddings, camels given as gifts are appreciated above all. In Riyadh, the people are still partial to baby camel served on a plate – count the traditional restaurants that still serve *hashi*.

It all goes to show, you can take the Saudi out of the Bedu, but you can't take the Bedu out of the Saudi.

OLD HABITS DIE HARD

Many visitors to the Kingdom are shocked by the state of Saudi's scenery. Though some cities such as Riyadh may be kept sparkling by the legions of immigrant workers, not so the countryside. Indeed, discarded tyres are so ubiquitous along the sides of the roads that they're known as 'desert dolphins'; they may be the only Saudi wildlife you see.

Until quite recently, most Saudi waste was biodegradable, consisting of natural materials such as pottery, cotton and paper. With the introduction of plastics, along with a consumer society, and a burgeoning population with the oil, bygone Bedouin habits are coming back to haunt them.

Nevertheless, environmental campaigns are slowly gathering pace. Look out for the US-inspired 'Leave No Trace' adverts, as well as the sporadic land, coastal and even coral reef clean-ups across the country.

In September 2006, stiff fines (between SR200 and SR5000) for dropping litter were introduced, though they're yet to be forcefully implemented. Wildlife awareness programmes are also underway to combat hunting and to teach locals how to care for their environment.

☎ 7.30am-2.30pm Sat-Wed). Some of the best places to see wildlife are at the 'Uruq Bani Ma'arid Protected Area (p349) in the Empty Quarter and the Farasan Islands (p348).

Environmental Issues

Saudi Arabia's environmental problems are legion, and include desertification, pollution, deforestation, lack of local education and awareness, and the critical depletion of underground water.

Illegal hunting (even of endangered species) is a particular problem. Once part of Bedouin survival, many Saudis are struggling to cease the sport.

Expansion of human settlements to accommodate Saudi Arabia's rapid population growth, as well as overgrazing by local herds have both led to the decline in numbers of ungulate species and also ensured that a number of wildlife species are highly endangered.

On the plus side, captive breeding programmes and the subsequent reintroduction of species formerly extinct in the wild (particularly the Arabian oryx) are considered to be among the most successful in the world.

The Kingdom's water shortages are being partially addressed through the development of costly seawater desalination facilities.

FOOD & DRINK

Traditional Saudi food shares many characteristics with the cuisines of other Gulf States (see p82). But it also benefits greatly from the enormous influence of its im-

migrant population (particularly Asian), which spices up (literally) the traditional standard Bedouin diet of meat and rice.

Great feasts mark the momentous events of Saudi society and some dishes have been designed especially for such occasions. One of the most famous ceremonial dishes is *khouzi*. It consists of a whole lamb pot-roasted with almonds, sultanas, spices and hard-boiled eggs. It's served with rice, and in some areas, the eyes are a delicacy and reserved for honoured guests.

As a traveller, you will be offered food and refreshments every step of your way, often in stomach-groaning excess. It is considered mean and remiss to serve a meal that isn't far in excess of your guest's needs, even when ordering in restaurants.

Some of the Saudi fast-food chains are also well worth tasting. The most famous is the newish and wildly successful Jeddah (and Mecca) chain Al-Baik, a kind of Saudi equivalent of KFC.

Starters

Many restaurants serve *mezze*, truly one of the joys of Arab cooking. Similar in conception to Italian antipasti or Spanish tapas (for which it was the inspiration), *mezze* can include dips such as hummus (chickpea dip), a variety of nuts, *lahma bi-ajeen* (small lamb pies), *kofta* (meat balls), *wara ainab* (stuffed vine leaves) and other savoury pastries.

Main Dishes

Grilled chicken, *shwarma* (meat sliced off a spit and stuffed in a pocket of pita-type

bread with chopped tomatoes and garnish) and *fool* (fava bean paste) are the ubiquitous cheap – but often delicious – dishes. You'll find restaurants specialising in them in almost every town in the Kingdom.

For a few riyals more, meat dishes are served with rice and salad. In some, the rice (hard-grain basmati) will itself be a highlight – aromatic and enlivened by a spice mix known as *baharat*, which can include cardamom, coriander, cumin, cinnamon, nutmeg, chilli, ginger and pepper, with (occasionally) turmeric and saffron added for colour.

Rosewater (or orange-blossom water), pine nuts, tomato and ghee (*samneh*; clarified butter) are sometimes used in Saudi cooking. The *baharat* spice concoction is also sometimes used in preparing soups, fish and other meat dishes.

Another enduring favourite of Gulf palates is *kebab meshwi* (shish kebab).

Seafood is another widely available highlight. Fish in Saudi Arabia is at its best when slow-cooked over coals or baked in the oven, but it's usually fried in cheaper places. Other seafood on offer includes prawns, crabs and lobster.

RIYADH

الرياض

☎ 01 / pop 3.7 million

Once little more than a dusty, desert outpost, Riyadh today is one of the fastest growing cities in the world. Since the 1970s (and the influx of ample oil revenue), the population has tripled. Today, Riyadh is the country's capital as well as its financial and administrative centre, eclipsing at last Jeddah's power and influence on the coast.

Nowhere are the contradictions of modern Saudi Arabia more evident than in Riyadh. Seen from afar, soaring, sparkling, stunning modern towers rise above the desert and camels. Amid the split-new Chevrolts and luxury Lotuses, slip the *mutawwa* (religious police) hurrying and harrying the citizens to prayer.

Its considered conservative, cautious and sober, yet the Kingdom's capital boasts handsome hotels, fabulous fine-dining and cosy cafés. It's also got considerable culture, including a National Museum that numbers among the best in the region.

HISTORY

Riyadh became the Al-Saud capital in 1818 when the Al-Sauds were driven from Dir'ayah by soldiers loyal to the Ottoman sultan. Riyadh fell to the Al-Rashids in the 1890s, and it was not until the dramatic recapture of the city in 1902 that Riyadh became the Al-Sauds' undisputed and permanent capital.

ORIENTATION

Riyadh reels and sprawls over 960 sq kms. Unfortunately, most of its street signs are in Arabic only. Al-Bathaa is the central, older portion of town. Most of what you'll require in Riyadh lies north of here, especially in Olaya and Sulaimania, the main business and shopping areas.

The main north-south thoroughfares are Olaya St and King Fahd Rd, while Makkah Rd is the main east-west artery.

Maps

The Farsi *Map & Guide of Riyadh* (SR20) is essential for navigating your way around Riyadh. It's very detailed, and contains an extensive index of street names and points of interest.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Jarir Bookstore (Map p312; ☎ 462 6000; Olaya St; www.jarirbookstore.com; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-11pm Sat-Thu, 4-11pm Fri) The excellent Jarir Bookstore has extensive selections in Arabic and English. The Olaya St branch is the most accessible.

Emergency

Ambulance ☎ 997

Fire ☎ 998

Police ☎ 999

Traffic accidents ☎ 993

Internet Access

There are loads of internet cafés across Riyadh, though you'll be very hard pushed to find any that admit women (even foreign women).

Manila Internet (Map p314; ☎ 403 4345; Manila Plaza, Al-Bathaa; per hr SR5; ☎ 8.30am-10pm Sat-Thu, 8.30am-10.30am & 12.30pm-10pm Fri)

Medical Services

24-Hour Pharmacy (Map p312; Mosa ibn Nosayr St) Located in Al-Akariya Centre.

RIYADH

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See Central Riyadh Map (p314)

Dallah Hospital (☎ 454 5277; cnr King Fahd & Al-Imam Saud ibn Abdul Aziz ibn Mohammad Rds) This hospital northeast of Riyadh accepts emergency cases on a walk-in basis.

Money

Banks and moneychangers can be found throughout Riyadh, including on Olaya St and Al-Bathaa St.

Post

Main Post Office (Map p312; King Abdul Aziz Rd; ☎ 7.30am-2.30pm & 4-10pm Sat-Wed, express mail window 7.30am-1pm Thu) Located north of the intersection with Al-Bathaa St.

Travel Agencies

Al-Tayyar (Map p312; ☎ 463 3667; www.altyayyargroup.com; Al-Takhassasi Rd; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 4.30-8pm Sat-Thu) The largest travel company in the Kingdom and one of the most reputable, Al-Tayyar can organise car hire, air tickets, tourist visas, accommodation and tours.

SIGHTS

National Museum

This state-of-the-art **museum** (King Abdul Aziz Museum; Map p312; ☎ 402 9500 ext 1290; www.arriyadh.com; King Saud Rd; adult/child/student SR15/10/free; ☎ men & schools 9am-noon Sun, Mon, Wed, Thu & 4.30-9pm Tue; women & schools 9am-noon Tue; families 4.30-9pm Sun, Mon & Wed-Fri) is without question one of the best museums in the Middle East. Its eight floors contain well-designed, engaging and informative displays on Arabia's history, culture and art, including beautiful, original rock carvings, models and even a full-scale reconstruction of a Nabataean tomb.

Films (in English via headphones) shown on 180° screens complement the exhibits, as do virtual visits to sites and other excellent interactive displays.

It's great for a sneak preview of the Kingdom's attractions, a sum-up, or a virtual visit if you don't have time to get to places. Don't miss it.

Murabba Palace

Built by King Abdul Aziz in 1946, this **fortress-palace** (Qasr al-Murabba; Map p312; ☎ 401 1999; King Saud Rd; ☎ 8am-3pm & 6-9pm Sun-Fri) is most impressive for its formidable white-washed walls than for anything much within. Largely empty (albeit labelled) rooms surround a central courtyard.

Masmak Fortress

This **fortress** (Qasr al-Masmak; Map p314; ☎ 411 0091; Imam Turki ibn Abdullah St; admission free; ☎ men 8am-noon & 4-9pm Sat, Mon & Wed, women & families 8am-noon & 4-9pm Sun & Tue, 9am-noon Thu) is Riyadh's most significant historical monument. It was built around 1865 on the site of an earlier fortification and has been extensively restored to its pre-Saud days.

Masmak was the scene of Ibn Saud's daring 1902 raid, during which a spear was hurled at the main entrance door with such force that the head is still lodged in the doorway. The information panels and short (but action-packed and well-produced) films on the storming and the 'reunification' afterwards are rather reverential towards the Al-Sauds, but are worth watching nonetheless.

Inside, look out for the mosque, *diwan* (meeting room), and well (in the rear courtyard). There are also displays of weapons and costumes, maps and evocative photographs dating from 1912 to 1937.

Outside, the four watchtowers stand around 18m high and the walls are 1.25m thick.

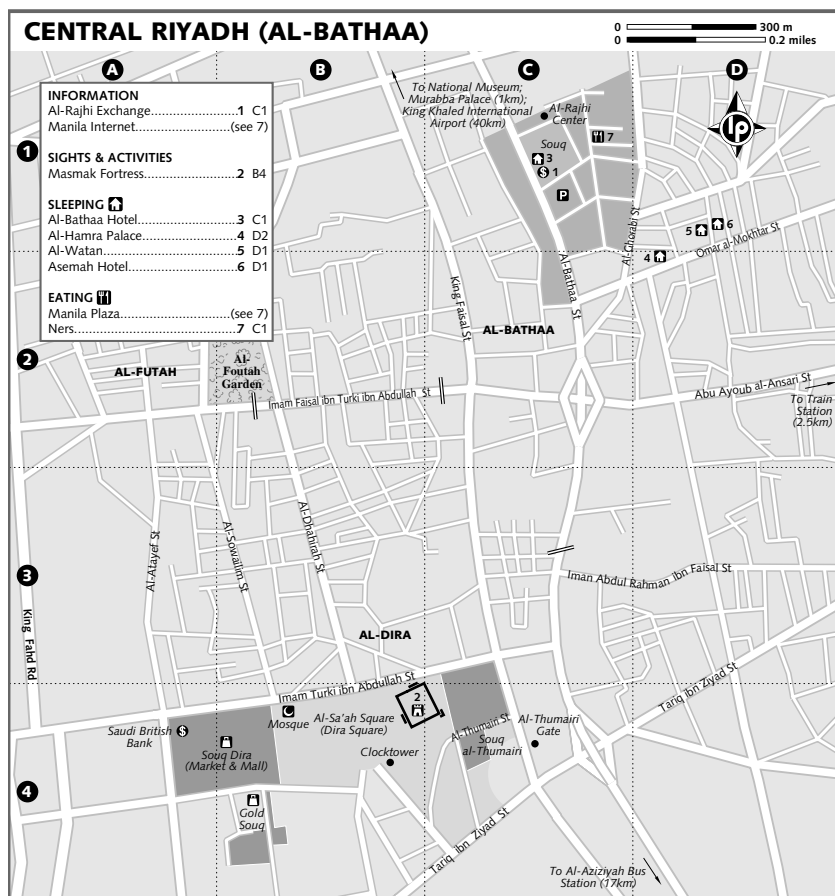
Al-Faisaliah Tower

Designed by British architect Norman Foster and built in 2000 by the Bin Laden construction company, **Al-Faisaliah Tower** (Map p312; ☎ 273 3000; www.rosewoodhotels.com; off Olaya St; admission SR35; ☎ 10am-midnight) was the first of the startling new structures to rise above Riyadh's skyline. It's most famous for its enormous glass globe (24m in diameter and made of 655 glass panels) near the summit.

On its 34 floors can be found a five-star deluxe hotel and four exclusive restaurants (see p314), offices, apartments, the **Sky shopping mall** (☎ 273 0000; ☎ 10am-11.30pm Sat-Thu, noon-11.30pm Fri) and a fabulous **viewing platform** (Globe Experience; per adult/family SR25/35; ☎ 10am-11.30pm Sat-Thu, noon-11.30pm Fri). The tower's needlepoint pinnacle (with a crescent on the tip) sits 267m above the ground.

Kingdom Tower

Riyadh's newest landmark **tower** (Map p312; King Fahd Rd) is another stunning piece of modern architecture. Known as the 'necklace' for its unusual apex, it's particularly



conspicuous at night when the upper sweep is lit with constantly-changing coloured lights.

Rising 302m above the ground, its most distinctive feature is the steel-and-glass, 300-tonne bridge connecting the two towers. High-speed elevators fly you (at 180km/h) to the 99th floor **Sky Bridge** (☎ 201 1888; admission per child/adult SR12.50/25; ☎ 10am-midnight) from where the views are breathtaking (you're allowed to take photos from up here). Avoid weekends and evenings after 6pm when it can get very crowded.

If you're feeling peckish, the tower is also home to some reputable restaurants, including Spazio 77 (p316).

COURSES

The **Al-Manahil** (☎ 488 1069; www.almanahil.com.sa; Ibn Zaher St, Diplomatic Quarter) offers Arabic courses to non-Arabic speakers (men and women) at 10 levels (consisting of 24 hours spread over two weeks). Lying just west of the French and Italian embassies, it specialises in tuition to women (but can also accommodate men).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The annual two-week **Jenadriyah National Festival** takes place in late February or early March at a special site about 45km north-east of central Riyadh.

Commencing with the King's Cup (an epic camel race with up to 2000 partici-

pants racing across a 19km track), the festival programme includes traditional songs, dances, and poetry competitions, as well as demonstrations of falconry, and exhibitions of traditional crafts from around the Kingdom. It's a colourful event; don't miss it if you're in town.

SLEEPING

Note that contrary to the rest of the country, Riyadh's hotels fill up during the week (with people on business) and are quieter at weekends. To be sure of a room, reserve three to four days in advance; several weeks in advance in the high season.

Budget

Al-Watan (Map p312; ☎ 404 3489; fax 403 1644; Rail St, Al-Bathaa; s/d SR70/100) Don't be put off by the lurid green paint; the rooms are a decent-size, fresh-smelling and sparkling. There's even a plastic potplant for company.

Al-Hamra Palace (Map p312; ☎ 403 1071; fax 409 4077; Asad Bin Al-Farar St, Al-Bathaa; s/d SR80/100) Well-hidden behind the Riyadh Hotel and with a sign in Arabic only, this is nonetheless worth finding; it's the best budget bet in town. Its 30 rooms are clean, fairly well-furnished and are quieter than most. It's next door to the Smari Pharmacy.

Midrange

Asemah Hotel (Map p312; ☎ 402 4121; fax 402 4120; www.asemah.com; Ibn Faris St, Al-Bathaa; s/d SR150/180) New and nicely decorated, the 68 rooms are arranged around a quiet central courtyard and are terrific value for money. There's also a coffee shop and a restaurant.

Al-Bathaa Hotel (Map p314; ☎ 405 2000; www.albathaa-hotel.com; Al-Bathaa St; s SR180-220 d 260-300; ☎) With large (40 sq metre) rooms designed like mini suites, professional management, a central location and breakfast included to boot, this is a great choice. There's also a good coffee shop, a paper shop and a health club.

White Palace Hotel (Map p312; ☎ 478 7800; www.hotelwhitepalace.com; King Abdul Aziz Rd; s/d 170/260; ☎) Though it may look a bit like a polystyrene box with bubbles for balconies, it's well-maintained, well-managed and unbeatable value for money. Rooms have good views (ask for the Kingdom Tower side) and facilities include free access to the business centre, airport pick up (SR60), and

a restaurant. In the future there will be a pool which *may* open to women also.

Al-Khozama Hotel (Map p312; ☎ 465 4650; www.rosewoodhotels.com; Al-Faisaliah Tower, Olaya St; s/d 500/600, ste SR2000; ☎) Though rooms aren't the largest, they're cosy, comfortable and well-furnished. With a lively lobby, a good patisserie (cakes SR15), a coffee shop, and three reputable restaurants offering a good variety and quality of cuisine including Al-Nakheel (Arabic) and Da Pino (Italian), it's a popular choice for those on business.

Top End

ourpick Al-Faisaliah Hotel (Map p312; ☎ 273 2000; www.rosewoodhotels.com; Al-Faisaliah Tower, Olaya St; s SR800-1000, d SR800-1250, royal ste SR10,000; ☎) Beyond adorably decorated rooms, it's the attention to detail (including fresh orchids and chocolates) that make Al-Faisaliah stand out. It's also known for excellent service (including 24-hour butlers in tailcoats) and good facilities (such as DVD players in all rooms). Its Il Terrazzo restaurant has a good reputation too.

Riyadh InterContinental Hotel (Map p312; ☎ 465 5000; www.intercontinental.com; Al-Ma'dhar St; s/d from SR900/1100; ☎) A great choice for those on business, each room has a little office, the hotel provides first-class service, and facilities include a nine-hole golf course, health club, squash and tennis courts, as well as laptop rental (per day SR150). Excursions can be organised.

RIYADH'S REMARKABLE ARCHITECTURE

Being less than 100 years old, Saudi Arabia is unimprisoned by its past; there's sackfuls of space and prosperous patrons falling over one another to build the biggest and the best.

Scan the Saudi skyline: there's the King Fahd football stadium with its dramatic white 'sails' that resemble a Bedouin's tent; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that copies a *qasr* (traditional castle); and the Ministry of Interior that resembles a space ship. Look for Riyadh's most recognisable icon of all: the Kingdom Tower, known as the 'necklace', or 'bottle-opener' by the less charitable.

Love it or loathe it, Saudi's architecture is statement-making.

Four Seasons Hotel (Map p312; ☎ 211 5000; www.fourseasons.com; 15-24th fl, Kingdom Tower, King Fahd Rd; s/d SR1200/1600, ste SR11,000; 📶 📶) Located in the Kingdom Tower, the hotel's biggest boon is its show-stopping views (ask for rooms on the upper levels) through wide-paned windows. All in grey, granite and glass, it's a slick, sleek and modern choice.

EATING

All of the following have family sections unless indicated.

Budget

There are a mass of cheap eats and *shwarma* stands along Talya St. Choose the busiest.

Mama Noura (Map p312; ☎ 470 8881; Prince Abdul Aziz ibn Mosa'ad Jalawi St; kebabs SR5-13; 🕒 6am-3am) Large, bright and clean, this Turkish place remains perennially popular among Riyadh's, who come for the succulent *shwarma* (sandwich/plate SR3/10) or famous *felafel* (deep-fried balls of chickpea paste with spices; SR3 to SR10). There's no family section, but takeaway is possible.

Ners (Map p314; ☎ 50-078 9927; mains SR6-15; 🕒 11am-10pm Sat-Thu & 7am-10am Fri) Located on the 2nd floor of the Manila Plaza, Ners is an old fave among Riyadh's Asian community for its freshly prepared Filipino and Thai food at fabulous prices. It's clean, waiter-served and very friendly. Dishes such as tom yum soup (SR15) or chicken chilli with coconut milk (SR12) are delicious.

Restaurant Grand Lebanon (Map p312; ☎ 463 1888; Al-Sulaimania St; mezze SR6, mains SR12-20; 🕒 6.30am-2am Sat-Thu, 1pm-2am Fri) Spotless, salubrious and serving delicious Lebanese and Syrian dishes that change daily, this is much loved locally. The mixed grill (SR20) is something of a speciality.

There are supermarkets around Olaya including Euromarche and Al-Azizyyah.

Midrange

Ourpick Najd Village (Map p312; ☎ 464 6530; Al-Takhassosi Rd; mains SR15-25; 🕒 men only noon-midnight Sat-Thu, families only noon-midnight Fri) Serving Saudi food in a Saudi setting (designed like a central-region village), this place is almost unique in the Kingdom. It's the perfect place to sample *kasba* (meat with rice; SR25), or the Najd region speciality, *hashi* (baby camel). The set menu (SR85;

minimum five people) includes 14 different mains, coffee, dates and even *bachoor* (incense). Prices are reasonable and it's much loved by locals.

Beit al-Hashi (Map p312; ☎ 240 0000; Prince Abdulah bin Abdul Aziz Rd; men only; 🕒 10.30am-12.30am) Though located just over 10km north of the centre, this restaurant's worth the trek for its famous speciality, baby camel (SR35). The sign's in Arabic only (look for the appropriately camel-coloured sign). It's next to Mama Noura Juice Centre, just west of the Sheraton.

Spazio 77 (Map p312; ☎ 211 1888; open buffet per child/adult SR60/140; 🕒 10am-1am Sat-Thu, 1pm-1am Fri) Located in the nook of the 'necklace' of the Kingdom Tower, Spazio 77 consists of a coffee shop, brasserie and sushi bar – all with gorgeous views thrown in for free.

Top End

La Campagne (Rif Al-Lubnani; Map p312; ☎ 416 2006; Tahlia St; mezze SR8-25, mains SR30-85; 🕒 12.30pm-1am) Though roomy and rambling, the place gets packed – it's rated by some as Riyadh's best Lebanese. The mezze are freshly made and the grills are something of a speciality. In warm weather, head for the lovely covered terrace at the back. Reserve 24 hours in advance; 48 hours at weekends.

Mirage Restaurant (Map p312; ☎ 483 4127; Al-Takhassosi Rd; starters SR10-66, mains SR35-166; 🕒 1pm-11.30pm) Boasting 'the best Chinese chef in the Peninsula', the Mirage certainly attracts a loyal, and royal, following (the king's grandchildren were there when we visited). The décor (illuminated fish tanks and water channels running down the centre), is like the food – full of fun and panache. Reservations are essential at the weekend.

The Globe (Map p312; ☎ 273 3000; Al-Faisaliah Tower; set menus SR350-750; 🕒 noon-3pm, 7.30pm-1am) Considered one of Riyadh's top-ranking restaurants, it's also one of the most romantic. Cosy, dimly-lit and with spectacular views of town, it's the place to go to gaze over candlelight. The *haute cuisine* cooking of the Austrian chef includes dishes such as pan-roasted foie gras, and butter-roasted wagu beef.

DRINKING

There's a good number and selection of cafés in the shadow of the Al-Faisaliah Tower, as well as along Tahliya St.

CREATIVE CRUISING

If you think it might be difficult to survive in a city with perhaps the most restricted entertainment scene in the world, spare a thought for young Saudis. In a country where cinema is banned, singles are kept strictly separated from members of the opposite sex and nightclubs are nonexistent, young Saudis have resorted to novel means of making contact.

The least subtle of these are the *shebab* (teenage boys) with little else to do but 'impress' other drivers with their speed. Cars also cruise up and down outside girls schools and the *shebab* sometimes throw their phone numbers from the window in the hope of receiving a call on their mobile phones.

A similar charade takes place in the shopping malls (particularly the Al-Faisaliah and Kingdom Towers). Called 'numbering', it's the Saudi version of a casual encounter. The latest Blue Tooth technology has facilitated things still further by allowing total strangers to text each other without even knowing each other's numbers.

Cigar Lounge (Map p312; ☎ 273 3000; Al-Faisaliah Tower; minimum cover charge per person SR150, cigars SR74-450; 🕒 noon-2.30am) A badly kept secret among well-heeled 20- to 30-something Saudis as *the* place to take a date, it's all low-light...and discretion here. Set in the highest point of the Al-Faisaliah Tower, the views by day and night are spectacular. Snacks range from Beluga caviar (SR795) to hot mezze (SR50). Drinks include coffee (SR21 to SR30) and non-alcoholic cocktails (SR37 to SR40).

ENTERTAINMENT

Foreign embassies (see p363) frequently organise cultural and social evenings, as well as musical or theatrical performances, so it's not a bad idea to get plugged into the expat scene.

SHOPPING

In a country where there are scarce public diversions, shopping has become almost a national sport. A new shopping mall seems to mushroom up every three months, crammed with all the latest international designer outfits a woman (or man) could want. Even if you're not buyin', the malls are well worth a mosey.

Among the most famous malls are **Kingdom Tower** (Map p312; ☎ 211 2222; Al-Mamlaka Mall; 🕒 9am-noon & 4-11pm Sat-Thu, 4-11pm Fri), which even has a floor for women only ('Ladies Kingdom') and the mall in **Al-Faisaliah Tower** (Map p312; 🕒 9.30am-noon & 4-10.30pm Sat-Tue, families only 10am-11.30pm Wed-Thu & 4-10.30pm Fri) is also well known and popular.

For (mostly) Arabic handicrafts, **Lamsa** (Map p312; ☎ 401 4731; lobby, National Museum;

🕒 9.30am-noon & 4.30-10pm Sun-Thu, 4.30-10pm Fri) has a good though not inexpensive selection. Most handicrafts and 'antiques' are in fact manufactured by the Lamsa company. For the real McCoy, head to **Souq al-Thumairi** (Map p314; Al-Thumairi St; 🕒 9am-noon & 4-9pm Sat-Thu, 4-9pm Fri) immediately south of the Masmak Fortress in the Al-Dira area. The shops in the small lanes offer everything from carpets to coffee pots and silver daggers to silver jewellery.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Riyadh's **King Khaled International Airport** (Map p312; ☎ 222 1700) lies nearly 40km north of Al-Bathaa. All domestic air services are operated by the main carrier, **Saudi Arabian Airlines** (Saudia; ☎ 450 0000; www.saudiairlines.com; Olaya St; 🕒 8am-10pm Sat-Wed), which has an office 14km north of Al-Bathaa. A number of airlines have offices around Olaya.

There are daily flights to Abha, Jeddah, Najran, Sakaka (Jouf) and Sharurah for SR280 each, Medina and Taif for SR250, as well as Jizan (SR320), Dammam (SR150) and Hail (SR200).

Bus

Al-Aziziyah Bus Station (☎ 213 2318) lies around 17km south of the city centre. From Al-Aziziyah station to Al-Bathaa stop (under the bridge, around 200m from Al-Bathaa Hotel) buses (SR2, 10 to 15 minutes) run every 15 to 30 minutes. Taxis cost SR10 to SR15.

There are daily departures heading to Dammam (SR60, five to six hours, every hour); Hail (SR100, eight hours, seven

daily); Al-Hofuf (SR45, three hours, three daily); Jeddah (SR135, 12 hours, every two hours); Taif (SR110, 10 hours, Jeddah bus); Najran (SR135, 13 hours, three daily); Sakaka (SR190, 15 hours, two daily); Abha (SR135, 12 hours, every two hours); Jizan (SR170, 13 hours, three daily); and Al-Ula (SR150, 12 hours, one daily).

There's also a VIP service to Al-Khobar (SR90, five hours, four daily) departing from the Olaya Hotel.

Car

Car-hire agencies in Riyadh can be found along Olaya St, near the Al-Khozama Hotel, where choices include **Budget** (Map p312; ☎ 463 3546) and **Abu Diyab** (Map p312; ☎ 464 7657); as well as at the airport domestic arrivals hall.

Train

From the **train station** (☎ 473 4444; www.saudi-railways.org; off Omar ibn al-Khattab St; ☎ 7am-2am), 2.5km east of Al-Bathaa, direct trains run to Dammam (2nd/1st/VIP class SR60/75/130, 3¼ hours, two daily) via Al-Hofuf (SR45/55/100, 2½ hours, four daily).

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Buses (SR10, every two hours) run from 8am to 10pm daily between Al-Aziziyah **Sapto Bus Station** (☎ 213 3219) and the airport, via the main bus stop in Al-Bathaa.

A taxi from the airport to the city centre costs SR70, from the city centre to the airport SR50, but negotiate first.

Taxi

Riyadh's white taxis charge SR5 for a journey of 1km to 2km, but always negotiate the price first.

AROUND RIYADH

CAMEL MARKET & RACES

Riyadh's **camel market** (Souq al-Jamal; free admission; ☎ sunrise-sunset) is one of the largest in the Arabian Peninsula. Spread out north of the Dammam road 30km from the city centre (take the Thumamah exit), this is a fascinating place to wander. Late afternoon is when the traders really find their voices. If you want to put in a bid, you'll need a good SR5000 to SR10,000.

At 4pm on some Thursdays during season, camel races take place at the camel race track along the extension of Al-Uroubah St in the Thumamah district, 10.5km from Riyadh.

DIR'AIYAH

الدرعية

The ancestral home of the Al-Saud family and the birthplace of the Saudi-Wahhabi union, **Old Dir'ayah** (☎ 486 0274; admission free; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Sat-Thu, 4pm-5.30pm Fri winter, 8am-5.30pm Sat-Thu, 4pm-5.30pm Fri summer), makes a welcome escape from the frenzy of Riyadh.

Built of mud, this old, walled oasis town boasts a few restored buildings, but most lie in ruins, lending it an evocative, abandoned, even ghostly air. The ruins are among the most extensive old cities in the Kingdom.

Ask for the free colour pamphlet at the Visitor's Centre; inside there's just the odd panel with site labels.

History

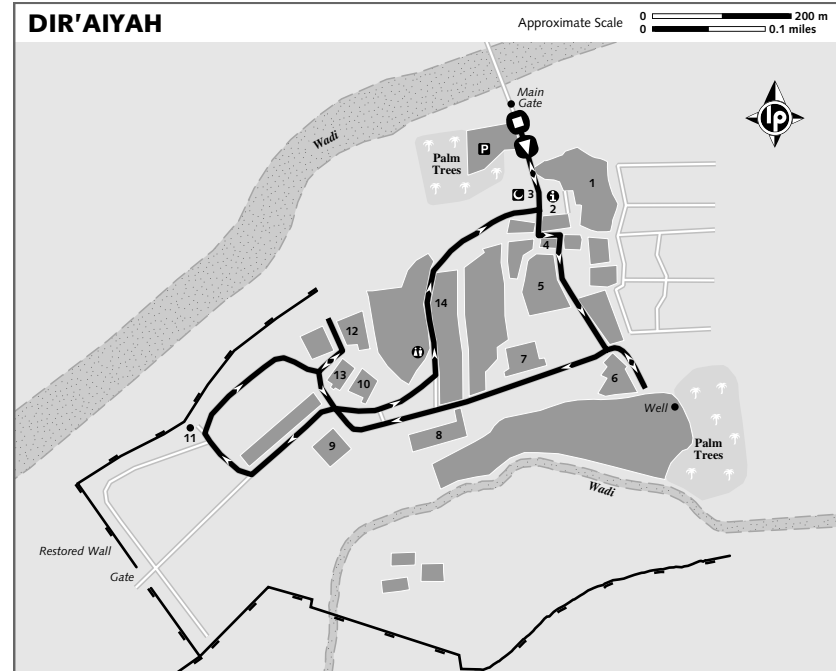
The site was settled in 1446 by an ancestor of the Al-Sauds. Dir'ayah reached its peak in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, during the first Saudi empire. The city fell to the Ottomans after a six-month siege in 1818. After Dir'ayah was razed, the Al-Sauds moved to Riyadh.

Walking Tour

As you climb up from the car park, the **Palace of Salwa (1)** – once a four-storey complex of palaces, residential and administrative buildings and the home of Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab – towers above the **visitors' centre (2)** on your left. Directly opposite, the **Al-Saud Mosque (3)** was once connected to the palace by a bridge.

The main path continues south, then east, then south again to the **Palace of Fahd (4)** and **Palace of Abdullah bin Saud (5)**. Further south are the somewhat nondescript ruins of the **Palace of Thunayyan Bin Saud (6)**, behind which are good views out over the palm groves.

Returning to the main path, walk west for around 250m, passing the ruined **Palace of Mishaari (7)** on the right and the newly restored **Al-Turaif Bath (8)**, with its decoratively painted doors. After a further 100m to the west and northwest respectively, you'll find the restored **Palace of Nasser (9)** and the **Palace of Saad bin Saud (10)**, which has turrets, wall



and door decorations. This is how much of Dir'ayah must have once looked.

The main lane continues west before entering an open area where few houses remain. You can continue on to the restored sections of the wall (which once ran for 15km around the perimeter of Dir'ayah) or branch off to the north to the **Tower of Faisal (11)**, the only restored tower in Dir'ayah. A different path twists back to the Palace of Saad bin Saud, passing en route the ruined **Palace of Fahran bin Saud (12)** and the **Saad bin Saad Mosque (13)**.

Circle the Palace of Saad bin Saud from where a path heads north and then east back to the entry gate, passing some of the best-preserved **houses (14)** along the way; watch for decoratively painted doors hanging forlornly from their hinges.

Getting There & Away

There's no public transport to Dir'ayah, which lies 25km northwest of Al-Bathaa. A one-way taxi costs SR30; if you want it to wait for you, you'll need to negotiate the fare back.

If you're driving, take King Fahd Rd north and follow the signs off to the west after passing the Dallah Hospital. The road then turns north again – follow the brown signs marked 'Old Dir'ayah'.

SAND DUNES

There are numerous stretches of sand dunes just off the Riyadh–Mecca Hwy.

The **Red Sands**, just west of the turn-off to Duruma around 40km west of Riyadh, are probably the best because they boast a backdrop of the cliffs of the Jebel Tuwaiq Escarpment – a great sight at sunset. To see them properly, you'll need a 4WD.

THE NAJD

نجد

Meaning 'highland', the Najd is hemmed in by the Hejaz Mountains to the west and vast stretches of sand surrounding its other three sides. Its people are known for their strict and staunch adherence to Islam, and the local women all don the traditional burka (face veil). For centuries the region was

plagued by civil strife that wracked almost every town, tribe and inhabitant. Today, it's peaceful enough, and of the attractions on your way north, the most outstanding is the pre-Islamic rock art at Jubba.

HAIL

☎ 06 / pop 310,100

Hail, an ancient caravan crossroads, is the homeland of the Al-Rashid tribe, historical rivals to the Al-Sauds.

Though attractions aren't epidemic, it's a neat, pleasant and peaceful town which also makes a good base from which to visit the rock carvings at Jubba (p321).

During the last two weeks of March and the first week of April, hundreds of demoiselle cranes land in Hail on their annual migration. If you're in the area, don't miss it.

Hail is also known for the quality of its dates.

Orientation & Information

Hail's main north-south street centres on Commercial District Sq by the Saudi Hollandi Bank building. Other banks, the bus station and most other services (including internet) are all close to the square.

Sights

The mud-brick **Al-Qashalah Fortress** (☎ 533 1684; admission free; ☞ 9am-noon) in the centre of town was built in the 1930s and was used mostly as a barracks for King Abdul Aziz's troops in Hail. Recently restored, it may soon open afternoons also. The tent inside should eventually house a small museum.

Near the post office is the **Hail Museum** (☎ 533 1684; admission free; ☞ 9am-noon) which contains archaeological finds from the surrounding area.

On a hill just outside the centre of town, the impressive-looking **'Airif Fort** (admission free; ☞ 9am-noon & 4-6pm Sat-Thu, 4-6pm Fri), also mud-brick, was built around 200 years ago as a combined observation post and stronghold. Inside you can wander the (now empty) residential quarters, mosque, baths and storerooms. It makes a pleasant climb up the hill, and there are lovely views from 'Airif's main watchtower.

Hail's **souq** (☞ 7am-sunset Sat-Thu, to 10.30am Fri), found behind the elementary school, is well worth a wander, and you can watch traditional coffee pots (SR60 to SR2000)

being made (reflecting the importance of coffee here). Look out also for locals selling wonderful *fagga* (a type of truffle) that appear in the rainy season (usually from December to February); they go for SR250 to SR300 for a small box.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Sahari Hail (☎ 532 6441; fax 532 4390; King Khaled St; s & d SR100) Rooms are nothing fancy, but they are clean and spacious (those on the eastern side are smaller but quieter), but it is the helpful and keen-to-please staff that make the Sahari such a good budget choice.

Al-Jabalain Hotel (☎ 532 3100; www.jabalain.8m.com; King Abdul Aziz Rd; s/d SR200/260) Hail's current top hotel, it's hardly luxurious but is comfy, peaceful and friendly. Future plans include a business centre, sauna and pool (men only). It can get booked up, so reserve in advance.

Lebanese House Restaurant (☎ 532 6736; King Khaled St; mezze SR3, mains SR10-20; ☞ 1pm-1am) Next door to the Hotel Sahari Hail (where women wishing to eat can be served), the restaurant is much loved locally and prepares decent dishes at pleasing prices, including chicken *tajine* (chicken stew cooked in a traditional clay pot; SR10), *shwarma* (SR5 to SR10) and pizza (SR5 to SR15). It also sells fruit juices (small/large SR3/5).

ourpick At-Thurathy (☎ 532 9636; King Faisal St; ☞ 6am-midnight Sat-Thu, 11.30am-midnight Fri) Half-restaurant, half-museum, you can admire the artefacts over your baby camel (SR25) or roasted, quarter kid (SR150). Seating is on the floor around a courtyard. Sadly, construction of a new road is threatening to close this all-too-rare example of Saudi tradition, but it will hopefully relocate elsewhere.

Getting There & Away

There are daily **Saudia** (☎ 532 2222; Main Rd) flights to and from Riyadh (SR200, three daily) and Jeddah (SR250, one daily), and less frequent departures to Dammam (SR360), Medina (SR160) and Sakaka (Jouf; SR110).

Saptco (☎ 531 0101) has buses to Riyadh (SR100, eight hours, three daily), Al-Ula (SR65, five hours, one daily), Jubba (SR20, one hour, two daily), Tabuk (SR100, eight hours, five daily), Sakaka (SR185, 20 hours,

THE ROCK ART OF ARABIA

With almost 2000 rock art sites, Saudi Arabia is one of the richest open-air museums in the world. Every year, locals discover more. Though some are in a very sad state of decay as a result of natural erosion as well as local vandalism (look out for the bullet holes riddling some!), they are well worth seeking out. All are astonishing for their extraordinary age; some give great insights into the ancient culture they represent, and a few are very beautiful.

The general rule is that the earlier carvings display a higher degree of sophistication, while later carvings are simpler, even child-like.

The most impressive examples you'll come across in Saudi Arabia date from around 5500 BC and mark the transition from hunter-gatherer communities to sedentary agricultural ones, as reflected in the images of domesticated cattle.

The most impressive and accessible sites are at Jubba (below), Al-Ula (p333) and Sakaka (p338).

twice daily) and Jeddah (SR110, 12 hours, one daily non-stop).

Getting Around

Hail's taxis can take you around town (around SR10 but be sure to negotiate first).

JUBBA

Jubba, lying 100km northwest of Hail, is famous above all for its impressive **rock carvings** (www.jubbahl.com). Revealing a level of sophistication remarkable for their era, they include ibexes with long curved horns, and several sets of elegant and elongated human figures, and are believed to date from 5500 BC when much of the area was covered with water. There are also cruder carvings of camels and other domesticated animals dating from around AD 300. The closest carvings to Jubba are 3kms away.

A permit is necessary to visit the site. You can either obtain it from Riyadh (see p367), the Hail Museum (p320), or from the custodian of the keys himself and local guide, the energetic and entrepreneurial **Ateeq Naif al-Shamari** (☎ 057 494 877).

To find him, follow the signs to Naif's Palace of Heritage, which is just off the main street. Whilst there, cast a glance at the lovely 800-year-old well, the valuable collection of arms, and the rooms where Lady Blunt apparently rested. The **museum** (☎ 541 2103; admission SR20; ☞ 7am-7pm) – along with the Palace – is a family heirloom, and the result of a life time's collection of antiques and artefacts. It's also well worth a wander.

Apart from guiding you to the rock carvings (all-day hikes are possible to some),

Mr Ateeq (☎ mobile 05 0749 4877) can also organise camel excursions lasting from one hour to five days or more, ranging from visits to rock carvings and local Bedu camps, to full-on traverses of the Great Nafud desert.

As Mr Ateeq doesn't speak English, you'll need to enlist the help of an Arabic speaker or go through a tour agency (see p323).

Prices range from SR300 per person for one day's sightseeing by camel, to SR1500 per person (minimum two) for a three-day trip into the Great Nafud desert. Excursions by 4WD are also possible, as are trips to see traditional falconry. All camping equipment can be supplied and a pick up from both Hail and Hail airport can be arranged.

You'll need your own transport to get to Jubba, or call Mr Ateeq.

HEJAZ

الحجاز

Meaning 'barrier', the region derives its name from the great escarpment that runs along the Hejaz, separating it from the great plateaux of the interior. It also seems separate in its distinct character, culture and history. The Hejazi are fiercely proud of their heritage; a few even mutter about independence.

The Hejaz has seen a multitude of merchants and traders pass through its portals as well as pilgrims on their way to perform the haj. For this reason, it's the most multi-cultural and mixed of all Saudi's regions.

With its Red Sea coastline, its mountainous hinterland and the fascinating old town of Jeddah, it is a great place to pass some days.

JEDDAH

☎ 02 / pop 3.2 million

A converging point for pilgrims and traders for centuries, Jeddah is probably the largest cultural melting pot in the world. The tremendous foreign influence is reflected not just in the faces of its multicultural inhabitants, or in its range of restaurants, souqs and shops, but even in the peculiar, hotpotch accent of the liberal, laidback Hejazis.

Considered the most cosmopolitan town in the Kingdom – and somewhat wild, degenerate and dangerous by some Saudis! – it has a palpably relaxed, seen-it-all feel. Don't be surprised if you see bikini-clad girls on jet skis at the beaches here.

Jeddah is also the undisputed commercial capital of Saudi Arabia. If you fancy a spot of shopping, this is the town to trawl (see p328).

The Al-Balad district, the heart of Old Jeddah, is a nostalgic testament to the bygone days of old Jeddah, with beautiful coral architecture casting some welcome shade over the bustling souqs beneath. Occupied largely by the poorest of the poor – mainly over-staying Haj pilgrims – they crumble visibly before your eyes. There's now a local race to save the old town before it too disappears under the concrete.

History

A local legend asserts that Eve died and was buried here: the name 'Jeddah' means 'grandmother'. The graveyard (Hawa Cemetery, northeast of Al-Balad) still exists, but is out of bounds to non-Muslims (who are not permitted to enter Islamic cemeteries).

Since AD 646, when Caliph Uthman officially established Jeddah as the gateway to Mecca, Jeddah's fortunes have been dominated by Islam's holiest city, which lies to Jeddah's east. The entire Hejaz came under nominal Turkish control in the 16th century, though the local rulers retained a great deal of autonomy. The Wahhabis, under Abdul Aziz, took control of the city in 1925.

Orientation

Al-Balad, the historic district, loosely represents the centre of Jeddah; King Abdul Aziz St is its main north-south thoroughfare, and has a host of restaurants, banks and

جدة

shops. Medina Rd is the principal street running north from the centre, flanked to the west by Al-Andalus St.

The corniche (Al-Kournaish Rd) runs the length of Jeddah's coastline from Jeddah Port in the south to the city's northern outskirts.

MAPS

The best map is the *Farsi Map & Guide of Jeddah* (SR20), which is available from any Jarir Bookstore.

Information BOOKSHOPS

Jarir Bookstore (www.jarirbookstore.com; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4.30-11pm Sat-Thu, 4.30-11pm Fri) Falasteen St (Map p323; ☎ 673 2727); Sary St (Map p323; ☎ 682 7666)

EMERGENCY

Ambulance ☎ 997

Fire ☎ 998

Police ☎ 999

Traffic accidents ☎ 993

INTERNET ACCESS

Jeddah has numerous internet cafés (open to men only), which include the following two places:

Asia Internet Café (Map p324; ☎ 668 9834; King Abdul Aziz St; per hr SR3; ☎ 7.30am-midnight Sat-Thu, 10am-noon & 1.30pm-midnight Fri)

Hala Internet Café (Map p323; ☎ 653 0884; At-Tawbah St; per 30 mins/hr SR3/5; ☎ 7am-2am Sat-Thu, 7am-9am & 3pm-3am Fri)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Dr Sulayman Fakeeh Hospital (Map p323; ☎ 665 5000, 660 3000; Falasteen St) A good accident and emergency department.

MONEY

Head for the row of **moneychangers** (Map p324; Al-Qabel St, Al-Balad; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 4.30pm-10pm), which offer good rates, and don't charge commission.

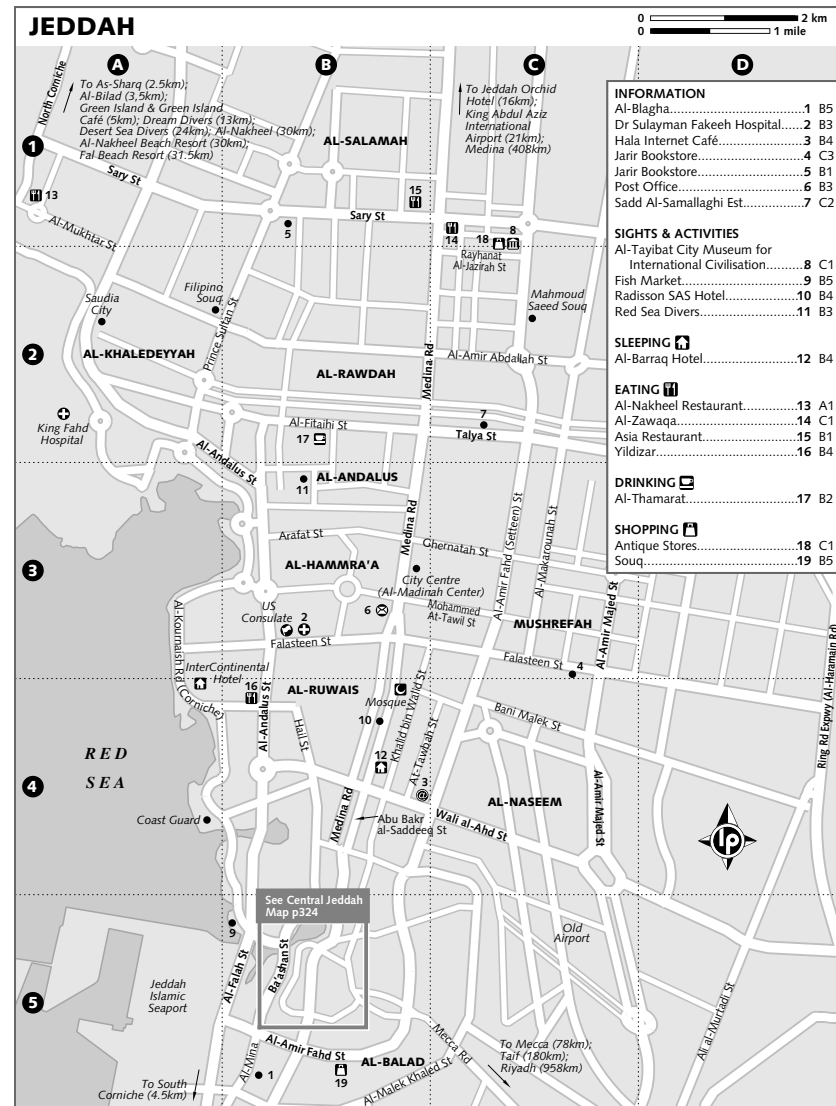
POST

Main Post Office (Map p324; Al-Bareed St; ☎ 7.30am-9.30pm Sat-Wed)

Post Office (Map p323; off Medina Rd, Al-Hamra'a)

TELEPHONE

There are international call cabins all over the city.



TOURS

Sadd Al-Samallaghi Est (Map p323; Talya St; ☎ 668 5054; www.samallaghi.com) With a solid reputation locally, this tour company can organise Saudi visas, tours, car rental, scuba diving, desert excursions (including falconry) and boat trips. Ahmed Mostafa, the Saudi owner (who lived formerly in Germany) runs the company with a killer combination of local know-how and Teutonic efficiency.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Alireza Travel & Tours (Map p324; ☎ 648 1380; www.alirezatravel; King Abdul Aziz St; ☎ 9am-8.30pm Sat-Thu) The long-established Alireza Travel & Tours agency is a good place to visit to if you're after airline tickets. It issues tickets for all major airlines both inside and outside the Kingdom (as well as for airlines servicing the Peninsula).

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Hala Internet Cafe.....	3 B4
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Yildizlar.....	16 B4

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Sights & Activities

OLD JEDDAH (AL-BALAD)

The old city of Jeddah is one of the most fascinating places in the Kingdom.

Souq al-Alawi

This souq (Map p324), running off Al-Dahab St, is the most extensive and traditional in the Kingdom. With old houses towering skyward, the market stalls cut into the heart of the old city and buzz with the activity of traders and pilgrims from across the sea and desert in much the same way it has for more than a millennia. The atmosphere is especially cosmopolitan during the haj season. Be here at sunset when the call to prayer fills the lanes – this is Arabia at its best.

Old Coral Houses

Sadly, Jeddah's old coral houses are in a very sorry state. Almost unique among the sea of dilapidation, however, is the restored **Naseef House** (Map p324; ☎ 647 2280; admission SR20; ☹ 5-9pm), which once belonged to one of Jeddah's most powerful trading families. It's set back from Souq al-Alawi.

Look out for the wide ramps installed by King Abdul Aziz in place of staircases so that camel-mounted messengers could ride all the way to the upper terrace in order to deliver messages. The house is also home to the General Directory for Culture and Tourism in Jeddah (see Tours, p326).

Shorbatly House (Map p324; Maydan al-Bayal) also boasts some lovely *mashrabiyya* (balconies

with perforated screens to allow the air to circulate). Though much restored to something approaching its original state in the 1980s, it has since been allowed to deteriorate once again. It is closed to visitors.

MUSEUMS

Jeddah now boasts no less than 13 museums. Some of them are private collections belonging to the heritage-proud and ever-entrepreneurial Hejazi, and are open by appointment only. The General Directory for Culture & Tourism in Jeddah (see Tours, p326) can arrange access if you're interested.

Don't be put off by the grandiose name: **Al-Taybat City Museum for International Civilization** (☎ 693 0049; www.altaybatcity.com; Rayhanat al-Jazirah St; students/adults SR20/30; ☹ 8am-noon & 5-9pm Sat-Thu) definitely merits a visit. The vast palace contains over 300 rooms crammed with a collection built over a local merchant's lifetime.

The four-floor collection ranges from exquisite Islamic manuscripts and old coins, to stunning furniture and pottery (some of it bought from international art houses). Exhibits are accompanied by good captions and information panels, as well as a few dioramas.

Note that, unfortunately, it can't open for less than 10 people; try and form a group or telephone to join one.

For those who have neither the time nor the energy to face Jeddah's 'Louvre', try the **Shallaby Museum of Traditional Handicrafts & Hejazi Heritage** (☎ 697 7442; Al-Balad; admission free; ☹ 10am-1pm & 6-11pm Sat-Thu) with a good collection of coins, silver antiques (look out for the silver-plated wedding slippers) and traditional Bedouin clothes.

FISH MARKET

The colourful and frenetic **fish market** (Map p324; west of Al-Kournaish Rd; admission free; ☹ 5am-9pm) is located in Al-Balad, just over 1km south of the Red Sea Palace Hotel. It's well worth a wander if only to admire Saudi's Red Sea riches – there's at least 50 species of fish on display ranging from hammer-head sharks to grouper, parrot fish and squid.

Don't miss, if you can, the daily auction of the morning's catch (from 5am to 9am), when the place really lights up. Note that

JEDDAH'S OPEN-AIR ART

Ever mindful of the serious spiritual responsibility that comes with the hosting of the haj, Jeddah's mayor had an idea: to use some of the vast oil revenue of the 1960s to beautify his city, the official portal to the pilgrims. For the next 20 or so years, Mohammed Said Farsi collected sculptures from all around the world and placed them at strategic points along the seafloor.

Jeddah's corniche now comprises one of the most impressive outdoor sculpture collections in the world, and counts among it no less than four bronzes by the British sculptor Henry Moore, as well as work by, among others, the Spaniard Joan Miró, the Finnish artist Eila Hiltunen and the French César Baldaccini.

One artist, the Spaniard Julio La Fuente, contributed in particular, as a landscape architect as well as a sculptor. Hired to help beautify the city, he demonstrated how scrap metal could be recycled into art – see if you can spot his pieces.

as the market's situated close to the Coast Guard and Port, photos are not permitted.

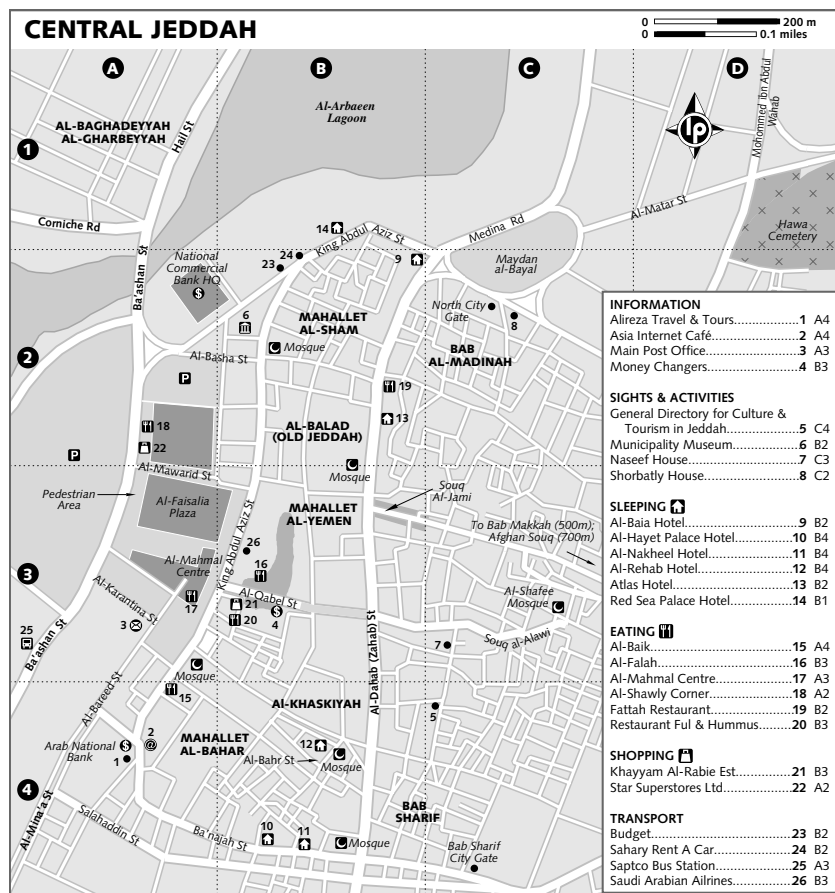
CORNICHE

Do as the Saudis long have and take a walk along the 35km-long corniche (Al-Kournaish Rd; Map p323), particularly on a warm, summer's night. You'll get a real sense of what Jeddah is all about, as well as life in the Kingdom today. Students sit cross-legged and stooped over books, families share picnics spread on rugs, men gather to gossip and cut commercial deals, and young men meet to play cards and show off their latest car.

Look out for the famous corniche sculptures (see boxed text, above) that line the wide pedestrian areas for 30km north from the port. Subjects range from the mundane to the miraculous; from anchors and boats to giant sunflowers squirting water; elongated and fragmented camels to a boat made entirely out of Arabic calligraphy.

BEACHES & DIVING

Sadly, some of Jeddah's best stretches of sand are now covered in concrete. What's left often disappoints. Many beaches are



swamped by beachgoers at weekends, along with their sand buggies and jet skis.

Some five-star hotels have their own private beach. The **Radisson SAS Hotel** (Map p323; ☎ 652 1234; www.radissonsas.com; Medina Rd) allows nonguests to use their beach and facilities for SR50 per person per day, or you can head for Al-Nakheel (see p329).

See p360 for information on diving around Jeddah.

Tours

The **General Directory for Culture & Tourism in Jeddah** (Map p324; Naseef House; ☎ 647 2280; www.jeddah.org.gov) organises an excellent 'lecture and walking tour' of Jeddah's history and architecture at 9am every Thursday, meeting at Naseef House (p324). To book a place, email jedsam@yahoo.com, or call the charming director, Sami Nowar. It's located south of Souq al-Alawi.

Sadd Al-Samallaghi Est (p323) is also a good option for tours.

Sleeping

Most of Jeddah's budget and midrange hotels are in Al-Balad.

BUDGET

Al-Nakheel Hotel (Map p324; ☎ 647 5127; alnakheel@icc.net.sa; Ba'najah St; s/d from SR80/130) Very much the best of the budget bunch, Al-Nakheel's rooms are reasonably sanitary, quite well-furnished (including fridge and TV) and well-maintained. Ask to see several rooms, as they vary in size.

Atlas Hotel (Map p324; ☎ 643 8520; fax 644 8454; Al-Dahab St; s/d from SR80/120) Though some of the furniture's seen happier days, and the hotel's within easy earshot of a mosque, the rooms are clean, quite spacious and well cared for.

Al-Rehab Hotel (Map p324; ☎ 647 9636; fax 647 2246; s/d from SR90/140) Similar to the Al-Nakheel above and belonging to the same owners, the Al-Rehab also offers good value for money. Clean and quite attractively decorated, all rooms also have fridges and TVs. It's just off Al-Bahr St, west of the mosque.

MIDRANGE

Al-Barraq Hotel (Map p323; ☎ 650 3366; htl_barraq@hotmail.com; Khalid bin Walid St; s/d SR125/150) Smaller and with more character than most, the

Barraq's a little gem: rooms are all well-furnished, decent-sized and great value.

Al-Hayet Palace Hotel (Map p324; ☎ 647 7111; www.alhayethotel.com; Ba'najah St; s/d SR160/180; 📍) This new, four-star hotel, lying 50m west of Bab Sharif, is centrally-located, well-managed and unbeatable value for money; rooms are a reasonable size and the décor's very decent. There's also a choice of two restaurants. It's next door to the Tysir Hotel.

Al-Baia Hotel (Map p324; ☎ 644 4446; Maydan al-Baya; s/d SR180/250) Though the rooms aren't the largest, the lovely views from 24 of them overlooking the Al-Arbaeen Lagoon and city, plus the rational prices and well-furnished rooms (some also with balcony) more than compensate. The restaurant on the 9th floor brings you the additional boon of breakfast-with-a-view.

Jeddah Orchid Hotel (Map p323; ☎ 607 0777; jeddahorchidhotel@hotmail.com; Medina Rd; s/d from SR270/360; 📍) If you're catching an early flight, or are in town for business, this new and accommodating four-star hotel is located opposite the Jeddah Exhibition Center, just 5km from the southern terminal of the airport.

TOP END

Red Sea Palace Hotel (Map p324; ☎ 642 8555; www.redseapalace.com; King Abdul Aziz St; s/d from SR350/425; 📍) This newly renovated, five-star hotel's biggest boon is its location in the thick of things downtown, as well as its impressive views over the Al-Arbaeen Lagoon offered by 135 of its rooms. The downside is sometimes stinky seaward smells, and a booking service that could be more reliable.

Al-Bilad Hotel (☎ 694 4777; www.albiladhotel.net; North Corniche; s/d SR420/550, bungalow SR850; 📍) Situated 35km from downtown, the Bilad is much beloved for its 'escape-the-crowds' feel and cosy, homey atmosphere. Facilities include a bakery, a lovely, covered veranda (complete with air con in summer) and large, landscaped gardens with sea glimpses and birdsong.

Mövenpick Hotel Jeddah (☎ 667 6655; www.moevenpick-hotels.com; s/d from SR450/500; 📍) Lying on Medina Rd, 10km from the town centre, the recently opened Mövenpick combines Rococo razzle with its usual reputation for excellent food and hospitality. Facilities include a terrific Indo-Chinese

SAUDI'S WOMEN SPEAK

'The problem is that the West's perception of our condition hasn't changed for decades, and despite the advances made by women here – particularly in education and business.

It's true that my work as a woman journalist is probably more challenging than it might be say for a male colleague. There are offices that I can't go into or social issues that I am not supposed to handle. But while I face opposition in some sectors of society, more and more men are encouraging me in my work. Being a woman has also its advantages, you know! More doors, especially those of big personalities, are open to me.

I'm certain that the condition of women in Saudi Arabia will improve in the next few years. Right now, there are actually more women in Saudi universities than men! And imagine the impact that will have on their status in Saudi. And did you know that they own 70% of all savings held in Saudi banks? I also reckon that women will be able to drive within the next five years – and why not when there is already a Saudi woman pilot flying for Saudia. The number of women entering law and engineering will drastically increase too.

I am also encouraged by King Abdullah's strong commitment to social progress.'

With thanks to Rawdha Al-Jaizany, journalist, Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazira newspapers

restaurant (three-course business lunch SR49 per person), and ice-cream parlour.

InterContinental Hotel (☎ 661 1800; www.intercontinental.com; Al-Kournaish; s SR650-725, d SR800-875; 📍) The chic InterContinental boasts three main drawcard: the waterside location, good facilities (including decent restaurants), and the attention to detail (right down to complementary underwater cameras and playing cards for the kids).

Qasr As-Sharq (☎ 659 9999; www.hilton.com; North Corniche; ste US\$1500-15,000; 📍) Decorated by the same designer that worked on Dubai's famous Burj al-Arab, the newly opened seven-star As-Sharq prides itself on 'Luxury' (with a capital L) and 'discretion'. The dazzling décor includes no less than 60kg of gold leaf, silk curtains and a 12m chandelier; rooms all have a 42-inch plasma TV (complete with gold-panelling) and 24-hour butler service. In low-season, rates are US\$700 to US\$15,000.

Eating

BUDGET

Restaurant Ful & Hummus (Map p324; ☎ 647 6468; off Al-Qabel St; 🕒 7am-11.30am & 5pm-10.30pm Sat-Thu, 8.30am-10.30am & 5.30pm-10.30pm Fri) For a filling breakfast of bread and *fool* (SR4), do as the locals do and head here. It lies a couple of doors down from Khayyam Al-Rabie date shop. The sign's in Arabic only – look for the Coca Cola sign.

Al-Shawly Corner (Map p324; ☎ 644 7867; Ba'ashan St; 🕒 9am-11pm) This Filipino-run restaurant remains wildly popular with Jeddah's Asian

community. Though simple and unpretentious, it's clean, the food is fresh, and the service is fast and efficient. There's also a family section and a few outdoor 'cubicles'. Ask for the 'budget meal' (soup, choice of two mains, rice and Coke, SR12), which is terrific value.

Al-Baik (☎ 647 7827; meal SR10; 🕒 11am-midnight) A kind of Saudi equivalent of KFC (but considered far superior by its fans) that comes complete with its own secret recipe. Well-heeled young Saudis are said to fly in from Riyadh and back, especially for a chicken fillet fix for them and their friends.

Al-Falah (Map p324; ☎ 647 4974; entrées from SR5, mains SR10-15; 🕒 7.30am-11.30pm Sat-Thu, 4pm-11.30pm Fri) Sparkling and central, and with a large seating area, the Al-Falah serves up Arabic, Filipino and Chinese dishes ranging from *shwarma* (SR4) to fried shrimp (SR15) and sweet-corn soup (SR4). The restaurant lies down a side street east of King Abdul Aziz St – take the first left after McDonald's.

Al-Zawaqa (Map p323; ☎ 691 6004; Sary St; mains SR15-35; 🕒 7am-2am) Much loved locally, this Lebanese restaurant serves everything from great grilled chicken and succulent *shwarma* to chocolate baklava and fresh fruit juices. For something different, try the fried lamb's testicles (SR15).

For a table-with-a-view, the 7th floor of the **Al-Mahmal Centre** (Map p324; King Abdul Aziz St) has several small restaurants serving Turkish, Lebanese and Filipino fast food.

MIDRANGE

Fattah Restaurant (Map p324; ☎ 604 0620; Al-Dahab St; ☎ 6am-midnight) Don't be put off by the façade (rustic log cabin meets Santa's grotto), this Yemeni restaurant is a firm local fave; sample the food and you'll soon see why. Try the delicious shish kebabs (SR10) served with tahini and chilli sauce and freshly-baked flatbread

Asia Restaurant (Map p323; ☎ 682 8525; Sary St; mains SR20-40; ☎ 1pm-12.30am) A longstanding favourite locally (particularly among Jeddah's expats), the Asia's Thai food is much sought after, particularly the tom yum kum soup (SR15) and its fish seafood, such as deep-fried grouper with tasty chilli sauce (SR40). Reserve at weekends – it gets packed.

our pick **Al-Nakheel Restaurant** (Map p323; ☎ 606 6644; Al-Mukhtar St; starters SR12-15, mains SR25-50; ☎ 9am-3am) Styled like a traditional tent (with open sides to let in the sea breezes), this is the place, to come for a taste of Jeddah – in the culinary and cultural sense. It's wildly popular locally; even the Jeddah women let their hair down here (literally). The food is great; the fish and seafood is a speciality.

TOP END

Yildizar (Map p323; ☎ 653 1150; off Al-Andalus St; entrées from SR15, mains SR40-60; ☎ 1pm-1am) Lavish in both décor and its dining, the Yildizar (and its Lebanese chefs) are renowned. Dishes range from boneless pigeon with truffles (SR55) to caviar (SR100), fabulous fish dishes (SR65 to SR180) and gorgeous grills (SR30 to SR60).

Green Island (Map p323; ☎ 694 0999; North Corniche; starters SR45-65, mains SR65-130; ☎ 1pm-1am) Spread across the water in the form of little chalets-on-stilts (complete with glass floor panels that reveal the fish and the water beneath), this is the place to come if you're after a final splurge or a romantic revival. The menu is a fusion of Arab, Asian and Continental cuisines. Try the locally loved rock lobster bisque (SR25), or go for the all-out 'seafood platter Green Island' (SR130).

CAFES

The perfect place for a drink at sunset or for a morning coffee-and-cake (coffee SR5 to SR6, desserts SR12 to SR15) is the **Green Island Café** (Map p324; ☎ 694 0999; North Corniche;

sandwiches SR7-25, mains SR18-48; ☎ 8am-2am Sat-Thu, 1pm-2am Fri), open to men and women, and one of Jeddah's best kept secrets. The outdoor tables have great sea views and the food is good albeit a little pricey (note the minimum charge of SR25 per person).

A popular place for breakfast among well-heeled Saudi families is **Al-Thamarat** (☎ 660 0514; breakfast dishes SR10, mains SR18-35, juices SR7; ☎ 6am-midnight), which is designed like an old-style Jeddah coffeehouse. The traditional Saudi dishes are good, but not the cheapest. It's on Al-Fitaihi St, off Talya St

Shopping

Jeddah claims to offer the best prices, latest products and greatest variety of shopping of any town in Saudi.

Popular things to purchase include photographic equipment, computers, mobile phones, electronic equipment and gold.

More 'local' souvenirs include Saudi dates (SR15 to SR120 per kg) and coffee pots (SR200 to SR4000), Yemeni coffee (from SR25 per kg), and even *Zamzam* (holy water) from Mecca (SR4 for 250ml). If you're after a souvenir, or fancy 'going local', the *thobes* (traditional shirt-dresses) are, according to one Saudi, 'great value in Jeddah!'

For antiques, head for the string of stores on Rayhanat al-Jazirah St, right next to the Al-Tayibat City Museum for International Civilisation (Map p323) where you can find *jambiyas* (tribesmen's ceremonial daggers), old coffee pots, good-quality Bedouin jewellery and incense burners.

For dates, nuts and nibbles, head straight for the famous **Khayyam Al-Rabie Est** (Map p324; ☎ 647 6596; off Al-Qabel St), which, with its fairy lights and floor-to-ceiling rows of goodies (including over 50 varieties of dates in all shapes, shades, colours and textures), is like an Aladdin's cave for the sweet-toothed.

Jeddah's **souq** (Map p323; ☎ 10am-11pm) immediately south of Al-Amir Fahd St and Al-Balad, is well worth seeking out. It's subdivided into different sections, some populated by different immigrant groups, such as Yemenis selling Yemeni coffee and *jambiyas*. If you're here immediately before, during or after the haj, don't miss it (see the Haj chapter, p71).

The largest supermarket downtown, with a reputation for reasonable prices, is the **Star Superstores** (Map p324; ☎ 643 7291; Ba'ashan St;

☎ 8am-midnight) found inside the Corniche Commercial Centre. With its selection of fresh fruit, cheeses, freshly baked breads and olives, it's a good place for preparing a picnic. It also sells baby food.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Jeddah's **King Abdul Aziz International Airport** (☎ 684 1707, 688 5526; Medina Rd) is north of the city centre. **Saudi Arabian Airlines** (Saudiya; Map p324; ☎ 632 3333; King Abdul Aziz St), departs from the south terminal (25km from the city centre). Foreign airlines use the north terminal (35km from the centre). There is also a separate Haj terminal, as well as a Royal Terminal (exclusively for the use of Saudi's royals and VIPs).

Daily domestic departures include Abha (SR190), Dammam (SR390), Hail (SR250), Jizan (SR200), Medina (SR140), Najran (SR250), Riyadh (SR280), Sakaka (Jouf; SR300), Taif (SR110) and Yanbu (SR110). There are less regular departures for Sharurah (SR330).

BUS

The **Sapto Bus Station** (Map p324; ☎ 647 8500; Ba'ashan St) has daily departures to Abha (SR100, nine hours, every two hours), Dammam (SR200, 14 to 15 hours, three daily), Jizan (SR100, nine hours, every two hours), Najran (SR130, 14 hours, four daily), Riyadh (SR135, 12 hours, every two hours), Taif (SR30, three hours, every hour) and Yanbu (SR60, five hours, every two to three hours).

Buses also go to Medina (SR50, five hours, every two hours) and Mecca (SR10, one hour, every hour), though you must be Muslim to travel here.

For Al-Ula, passengers travel to Medina, then change to Al-Ula (SR55, five hours). If you're a non-Muslim, you'll need to inform the ticket vendor when you buy your ticket. The driver of your bus will be asked to drop you at a partner bus station outside the *haram* (forbidden) boundaries and another bus should come and pick you up from there. As it's all a bit of an unknown quantity, you should check details first.

CAR

Rental agencies can be found in the arrivals hall of the airport and in Jeddah's centre.

Budget (Map p324; ☎ 642 0737; www.budget.com; King Abdul Aziz St) charges the usual rates (see p371), and the local company, **Sahary Rent A Car** (Map p324; ☎ 645 0770; King Abdul Aziz St), offers a cheaper alternative (from SR70 per day for a 2WD, including full insurance with 150km daily included (SR0.30 per extra km thereafter)).

Getting Around

A taxi from the town centre to the south/north terminals costs SR30/40 (add SR10 to SR20 in high season). A short hop in town costs SR10 to SR15. Hiring a taxi for a half-/full-day tours should cost no more than around SR100/150. Decide on a price with the driver beforehand.

AL-NAKHEEL

النخيل

Lying 40km northwest of Jeddah's city centre in the North Obhur area, the small but pleasant **Al-Nakheel Beach Resort** (☎ 656 1177; www.saudi diving.com/al-nakheel-beach.htm; adult/child SR50/25; ☎) is a good place to come if you fancy a day at the beach (but avoid the weekends). Claiming to be 'one of the best family resorts', it welcomes women, who are permitted to swim in both the sea and swimming pools. Well-designed and well-managed, it's also clean and very relaxed. Diving (per dive per person including equipment SR120) is also possible.

If you live in Saudi Arabia and truly want to 'get away from it all', the new, Greek-designed and luxurious **Fal Beach Resort** (☎ 656 0033; www.falbeachresort.com; North Obhur; studio SR500, ste SR1000; ☎) styles itself on being a 'little piece of Europe'. The wearing of either *thobes* or *abeyyas* (woman's full-length black robe) is even banned within its grounds. It's beautifully designed and contains everything you could want for the weekend, including a gorgeous 70m pool complete with its own little island.

TAIF

الطائف

☎ 02 / pop 760,000

After the cauldron-like coastal plain, Taif in summer can seem like a breath of fresh air. It is. Located 1700m above sea level, its gentle, temperate climate is its biggest attraction, and in summer, Taif becomes the Kingdom's capital. With its wide, tree-lined streets, remnants of old Taif, a large and lively souq and beautiful surrounding

CAMEL CHAOS

Each weekend (Wednesday to Friday), every two weeks during July and August, the town of Taif departs for the races. Open to all, the camels come from far and wide including from other Peninsula countries. It's a spectacular sight. Located on a site 10km outside Taif, the four races run from 3pm to 5.30pm and attract from between 25 to 100 participants in a single race! No wonder: first prize is SR150,000 in cash, 10 cars and 100 bags of wheat.

scenery, it's not hard to see why the King and his cronies relocate here.

Taif is also known for the cultivation of roses and fruit (particularly honey-sweet figs, grapes, prickly pear and pomegranates). Over 3000 gardens are said to grace Taif and its surrounds.

The Taif to Mecca road was one of many roads built by the Bin Laden construction company (the largest construction company of its kind in Saudi, and specialising in mountain road construction).

Orientation

The town centre stretches out from the southern end of Shubra St to south of As-Salamah St.

Information

Main Post Office (Souq area) Just south of King Faisal St.
Saudia (☎ 733 3333; Shubra St)

Sights

SHUBRA PALACE

The city's **museum** (☎ 732 1033; Shubra St; admission free; ☞ 8am-2pm Sat-Wed Sep-May, 8am-noon & 5-7pm Jun-Aug) is housed in a beautiful early 20th-century house that is the most stunning vestige of old Taif.

The exterior is lovely, with latticework windows and balconies made from imported Turkish timber, offset against pristine white walls. The interior marble was imported from Carrara in Italy. King Abdul Aziz used to stay here when he visited Taif and it was later the residence of King Faisal.

AL-KADY ROSE FACTORY

The largest rose factory in Taif and belonging to one of Taif's oldest families, the

120-year-old **Al-Kady Rose Factory** (☎ 733 4133; off As-Salamah St; admission free; ☞ 9.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu) is well worth a visit, particularly at harvest time (May to July, when it's open 24 hours). The old distillers date to Ottoman times. The precious rose essence (SR1200 for 10g!) is apparently much in demand among the rich-and-the-royal in Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries. Rose water (SR10 per bottle), used in Arabia to scent clothes, baths, cooking and drinks, is also sold and is a bargain by comparison.

SOUQ

Taif's **souq** (☞ 9am-2pm & 4.30-11pm Sat-Thu) is one of the largest in the Kingdom and is well worth a wander, particularly on a summer's evening when all of Taif is out and about. Look out for the little boxes of honeycomb (SR350 per kg), touted by Taif's citizens as 'the best in the world'.

Famous also are the local white cheeses (*jubal bality*), *bachoor* (incense) and the gold souq area. Look out also for the dried Taif rose petals used locally to brew a fantastically fragrant tea.

The souq is southeast of the Great Mosque.

BEIT KAKI

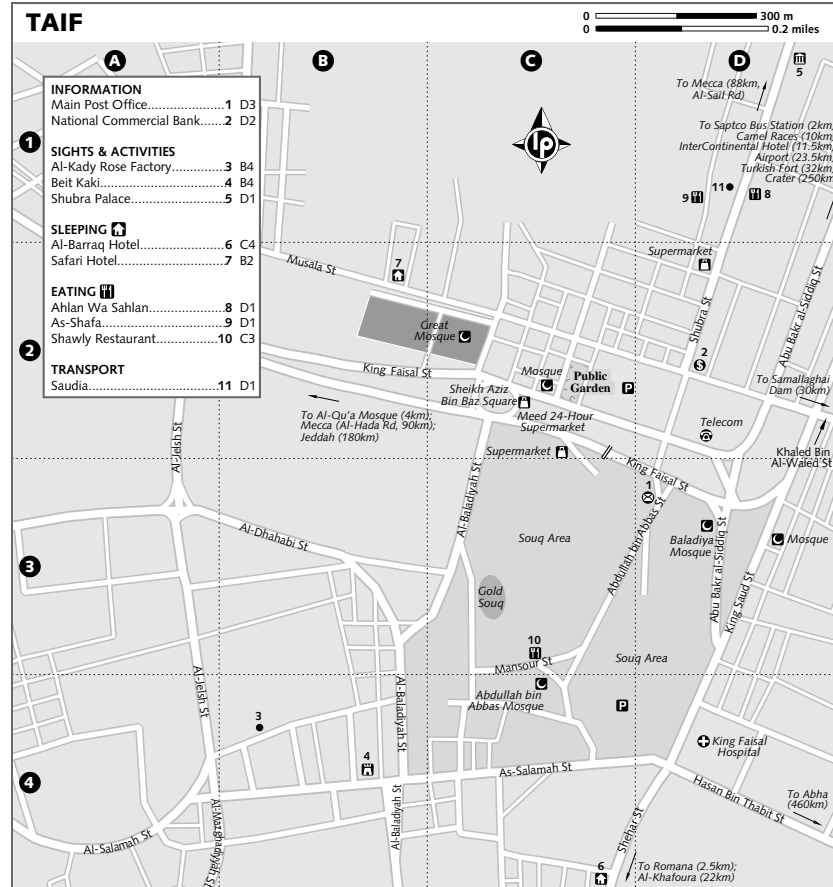
Built in 1943 as a summer residence for one of Mecca's most important merchant families, **Beit Kaki** (As-Salamah St; currently closed) is one of Taif's oldest surviving buildings.

With its intricately carved balconies and carved window and door frames, it's a typical Hejaz building. In the future, the building should be restored and turned into a museum on the history and culture of the area.

Tours

A local guide who can give great, custom-made tours in his car of both the town and perimeters of Taif is **Mahmoud Maqsoud Alim** (☎ 050-571 0197; mmalim2004@yahoo.com; 1-day tour 1-4 people SR300 per tour). The country around Taif is very attractive and contains a range of intriguing sights.

Sites Mahmoud suggests include the ancient Al-Qu'a mosque (4km from Taif), the oldest tree in Taif – known locally as 'Al-Khafoura' (22km), the 1400-year-old Samallaghi dam (30km), the Turkish fort (32km) and the crater (250km).



Sleeping

Taif is a still a popular summer retreat during the summer (May to September) for Saudis as well as for Kuwaitis, Emiratis and Omanis. Reservations (at least 10 days in advance) are advised.

Safari Hotel (☎ 734 6660; Musala St; low/high season's SR60/100, d SR90/150) The best budget choice (and value) is the Safari with newly renovated, pleasantly furnished rooms, all with balcony (ask for a 'mosque-side' view).

Al-Barraq Hotel (☎ 650 3366; fax 651 1322; Shehar St; low/high season's SR165/210, d SR250/270) Popular among the diplomatic expat community, it's easy to see why: rooms are spacious, comfy and recently refurbished, and the luxurious lobby, laden with marble and

chandeliers defies the prices. There are also two restaurants, a health club and Jacuzzi.

InterContinental Hotel (☎ 750 5050; www.ichotelsgroups.com; Al-Matar Rd; s/d from SR450/585, villas SR4000-4500; ☞) Lying 11.5km north of Taif's centre, the InterContinental looks a bit 1970s-Arabia, but the refurbished rooms are extremely comfortable and the hotel offers good facilities and services. Non-guests (men only) can use the outdoor pool and health club for SR75 per day.

Eating

The following all have family sections (unless otherwise indicated).

As-Shafa (☎ 733 0332; just off Shubra St; ☞ noon-1am) Located behind the Saudia office,

As-Shafa serves delicious Saudi/Turkmenistan dishes, including *mantı* (like ravioli; two pieces SR1) at unbeatable prices; it's much admired locally.

Ahlan Wa Sahlan (☎ 732 7324; Shubra St; mains SR13-25; ☎ 7am-noon & 1pm-1am) Light, bright and clean, the Ahlan has a great pick-and-point counter containing fresh Turkish dishes that change daily, including veggie options.

Romana (☎ 743 3700; Shahar St; mains SR18-35; ☎ 1pm-1am) Turkish in décor and in dining, the Romana is well-run, and with tablecloths and cut flowers, more upmarket than many. The mezze (SR3 to SR12) are freshly made and delicious.

For a local breakfast of freshly made *fool*, do as the locals do and head for **Shawly Restaurant** (☎ 736 1180; Mansour St; ☎ 5am-11am & 5pm-1am). It's men only, but they'll do takeaway.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Taif airport (☎ 685 5527) is 25km north of the town. There are daily flights to Riyadh (SR250), Dammam (SR360) and Jeddah (SR110), as well as flights to Abha (SR150), Medina (SR250) and Sharurah (SR310). **Saudi Arabian Airlines** (Saudi; ☎ 733 3333; Shubra St) is just north of the town centre.

BUS

The **Sapto Bus Station** (☎ 736 3195; Airport Rd) lies 2km north of the town centre. Buses

depart for Riyadh (SR110, nine hours, 17 daily), Jeddah (SR30, three hours, 20 daily), Dammam (SR170, 14 hours, four daily) and Abha (SR100, eight hours, three daily). For Al-Ula and Jizan, change at Jeddah. For Najran, change at Abha.

Getting Around

Taxis charge SR10 for short journeys around town (including to/from the bus station) and SR25 to the airport. From the airport, they charge SR50.

YANBU

☎ 04 / pop 173,000

With a booming port, refineries and petrochemical plants, this is hardly the Kingdom's biggest beauty spot. But if you're into diving, it's considered one of the top three spots in the Kingdom.

As the Red Sea resort that's closest to Medina, Yanbu's also a popular spot for *umrah* (Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca outside haj season) pilgrims, particularly from Syria, Jordan and Iraq. You may find yourself sharing your hotel with them as they relax on their way home from Medina or Mecca (racy old Jeddah is considered far too dangerous).

Orientation & Information

King Abdul Aziz St is the main thoroughfare and runs perpendicular to the north-south road from Jeddah. The 25km-long industrial zone stretches south of the town.

Activities

DIVING

Of the dive centres in Yanbu, **Dream Divers** (☎ 322 0330; www.alahlam-marina.com; King Abdul Aziz St; per person per day for 2 dives incl tanks, weight belt, lunchbox SR250; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-10pm) has the best reputation. If you're without equipment, BCDs and regulators can be hired for US\$25 each, a mask and snorkel for US\$20. PADI scuba diving courses are also offered, including a seven-day Open Water course (per person all inclusive SR1400). Bring your own boots, fins and wetsuit.

For more details about diving in Saudi's Red Sea, see p360.

Sleeping & Eating

Middle East Hotel (☎ 322 1281; fax 322 8571; King Abdul Aziz St; s/d SR80/120) Though the rooms aren't the largest and those nearest the road

can be a bit noisy, they're sanitary, have firm mattresses and are good value.

Banat Hotel (☎ 391 2222; danat_hotel@yahoo.com; King Abdul Aziz St; s/d SR150/160) Decorated in browns and creams like a giant crème caramel, the rooms are nevertheless comfortable, clean, and conveniently situated two doors down from Dream Divers.

Arac Yanbu Resort (☎ 328 0000; www.arac.com.sa; chalets for 1/2/3 people including service charge weekdays SR590/890/1190, weekends SR890/1190/1590) The new Arac, lying 17km from town and 10km from the airport, boasts good facilities in a good location. This includes a private beach where women can swim (albeit in trousers and T-shirt), Marine Club (offering diving, and in summer waterskiing, as well as jet ski, pedalo and bike hire), a tennis court, a café and a restaurant. The comfortable two-storey chalets are built on the waterfront and the management is friendly and accommodating.

Iskenderun Restaurant (☎ 322 8465; King Abdul Aziz St; ☎ 1pm-2am) Canary-coloured, cheap and cheerful, this is Yanbu's favourite eating establishment. Buzzing with locals, the place is kept spotless and the food's fresh and finger-lickin'. Try the speciality, the *shwarma iskender* served with a special, secret sauce. Mezze (SR5 to SR6), pide (Turkish pizza SR7 to SR12), fish fillets (SR20) and fresh fruit juices (SR3 to SR5) are also served here.

Getting There & Away

The airport lies 10km northeast of the town centre. **Saudia** (☎ 322 6666; King Abdul Aziz St) has flights to Jeddah (SR110, twice daily). Coming by car, Yanbu lies 230km (around 2½ hours) from Jeddah.

MADAIN SALEH & THE NORTH

مدائن صالح و الشمال

The astonishing Madain Saleh is the single most impressive site in Saudi Arabia and should be on every visitor's itinerary.

Saudi Arabia's northern provinces are the Kingdom's richest source of pre-Islamic sites, including those at Al-Ula and the rarely visited Rajajil (Standing Stones) near Sakaka.

The substations of the Hejaz Railway and forts stand as lonely sentinels to the days of trade and pilgrim caravans that once passed through here thick and fast.

AL-ULA

☎ 04

Al-Ula, the gateway to Madain Saleh, is a small town lying in the heart of some exceptionally beautiful country, with palm groves running down the centre of the wadi (valley or river bed) and forbidding red sandstone cliffs rising up on two sides.

As well as the extraordinary nearby tombs of the Nabataeans, are the delightful if sadly decrepit mud-brick ruins of Old Al-Ula, one of the last remnants of old towns in Saudi Arabia.

The surrounding area also bears ample evidence (in the form of tombs and rock inscriptions) to habitation dating back more than two millennia.

Orientation & Information

Al-Ula lies along the western side of the wadi. The southern section of town is home to the museum, some banks with ATMs (one opposite the museum), and an internet café, **Ala-Albal** (☎ 884 3621; Khaled Bin Waleed St; per hr SR10), 300m southwest of the Riyadh Bank.

A terrific little book on the area is *Al-Ula and Mada'in Salih* by AR Al-Ansary and Hussein Abu Al Hassan (SR40). It's available in Al-Ula's hotels, as well as in Al-Jarir bookshops (where's it's also cheaper).

Sights

AL-ULA MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY & ETHNOGRAPHY

Well-worth a visit, this **museum** (☎ 884 1536; Main St; admission free; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sat-Wed) is attractively designed with some intriguing and informative displays on the history, culture, flora and fauna of the area, as well as on Madain Saleh and the Nabataeans.

OLD AL-ULA

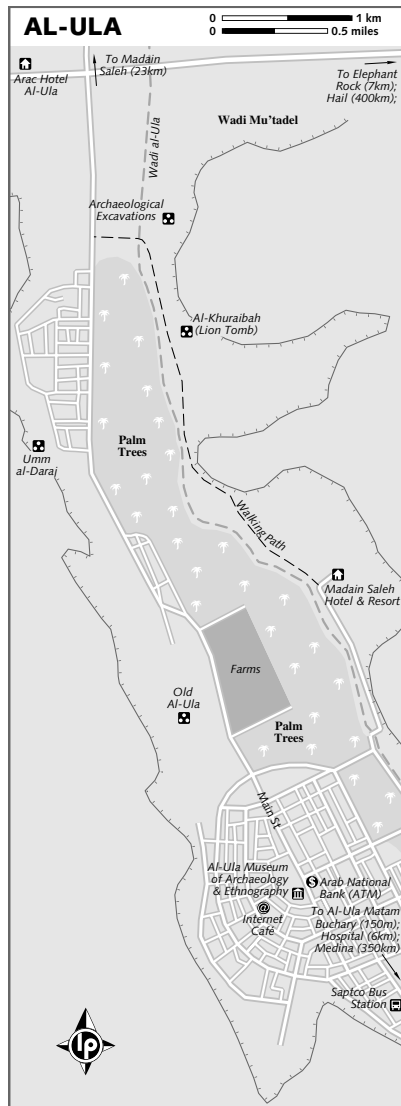
Although crumbling as you look at it, and each year after the rains, less and less remains, Old Al-Ula is one of the most fascinating old towns in Arabia. Locals are petitioning for its preservation.

The mud-brick town stands on the site of the biblical city of Dedan, which is mentioned in Isaiah (21:13) as the home base of

SAUDI'S RED SEA RICHES

As soon as we hit the water, we came face to face with two of the largest white-tip sharks I have ever seen; they appeared quite unruffled by our presence. Above our heads, just below the surface, was a shimmering shoal of some of the most curious creatures I have seen: large, bumphead parrot fish, turquoise-green and with a large protrusion issuing from their heads. The corals – hard and soft – were magnificent, though I brushed my elbow accidentally against some fire coral and still have the scar a month later; I've never seen so much. Towards the end of the dive, a huge leatherback turtle, startled by our presence, dived deeply below us.

From the author's dive log book. Malutha South Island, off Al-Lith



500 houses; it was occupied until the late 1970s. Throughout the town, there are some superb doors made from palm trunks. Rising up from the centre of the old town are the remnants of Qala'at Musa Abd al-Nasser. The palm trees and maze of low mud-brick walls directly across the road from the old town were once farms whose owners lived in the old town.

AL-KHURAIBAH

Situated in the northeast of town is the impressive site of Al-Khuraibah, believed to have formed part of the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Lihyan.

Several important tombs have been found here along with inscriptions in the Lihyanite, Dadanite and Minaean scripts.

Sadly, the site is closed while it undergoes excavation, but you can get a view of it from outside the fence across from the tombs. Ask your guide to show you. Look out for the 'Lion Tomb', so-called for the two lions carved on either side of it.

UMM AL-DARAJ

At the northwestern end of town, some kilometres north of Old Al-Ula, Umm al-Daraj (Mother of Steps) is worth a brief detour. It contains a former Lihyanite sacrificial altar, weathered steps climbing up the hill, some beautiful, albeit rather weather-beaten, Lihyanite inscriptions and a few rock carvings of people and camels.

From the top of the steps there are fine views out over the wadi. You'll need a guide to find Umm al-Daraj, but it's included on most tour itineraries.

Tours

Madain Saleh Hotel & Resort (☎ 884 2888; www.mshotel.com.sa) offers a good-value weekend package of three days and two nights half-board including sightseeing of all the main attractions in both Al-Ula and Madain Saleh, and airport pick-up for SR895 to SR980 per person (depending on which airport) in a double room (single supplement SR180). With your own vehicle (a guide is provided by the hotel), it costs SR660 per person half-board.

The **Arac Hotel Al-Ula** (☎ 884 4444; hotelalula@arac.com.sa) charges SR300 per group per day for a guide. With a guide, vehicle (for up to 25 people) and driver, it charges SR650 per

day. Guided excursions by 4WD into the desert (half/full day SR350/600) can also be arranged. Lunch boxes (SR40) can be prepared on request.

A local tour guide – and the author of a soon-to-be published coffee-table book (that will sell for around SR60) on Madain Saleh – is **Hamid M Al-Sulaiman** (☎ 055-435 3684; hamed699@yahoo.com). With intimate knowledge of the area, he offers tours in his 4WD of all the local sites, including up Al-Harra (a mountain from which there are good views), as well as a few not offered by the hotels (but which are very well worthwhile if you have the time). Though his English is limited, he is reliable, very keen to please and good company. Trips include: Al-Mejez (SR350, half day, one to four people) known as Al-Ula's 'Grand Canyon' for its impressive rock formations; Hejaz Railway (SR1200, full day including BBQ lunch, one to four people); camel excursions (SR350 per person); Bedu visits (SR350 per person); and even star-gazing trips in the desert.

Sleeping & Eating

Madain Saleh has just two hotels.

Madain Saleh Hotel & Resort (☎ 884 2888; www.mshotel.com.sa; r SR220, ste SR390-495, tent s/d SR145/165; 📍) Located 3km east from the town centre, the hotel's big boon is its location on the eastern cliff face overlooking the wadi, and its pool set in gardens (open to men and women). The rooms are decent-sized and comfy and all have a small balcony (ask for 'garden view'). The tents, furnished attractively in a traditional style (complete with camel stool) are great value, atmospheric

and comfortable (with ensuite bathroom, TV, minibar and air con).

Arac Hotel Al-Ula (☎ 884 4444; www.arac.com.sa; s/d/ste SR390/315/1035 Dec-May, s/d SR190/220 Jun-Nov) Situated 7km from the town centre on the main road to Madain Saleh, the Arac restaurant (SR65 for three-course lunch or dinner) is also known for its great Asian and Italian-inspired food – the beef stroganoff is famous. There are plans to build a large, open-air pool that will be open to both men and women (at different times). It's located 15km from the entrance gates to Madain Saleh. Note that discounts are usually available, and reservations advised.

Of Al-Ula's small selection of restaurants, **Al-Ula Matam Buchary** (☎ 884 1124; Khaled Bin Walid St; mains SR9-16; 🕒 1pm-1.30am Sat-Thu), which lies 100m south of Sapitco, has the best reputation. It's signposted in Arabic only and there's no family section (but it does takeaway). Try the flavoursome barbecue half chicken (SR9).

Getting Around

There are no taxis or car hire companies in Al-Ula, though cars with drivers can be organised through the hotels (from SR300 per day).

Getting There & Away

A new airport located 60km from Al-Ula is planned for the future. In theory, it should be completed by 2009, but check for progress.

In the meantime, daily flights leave from Riyadh to Hail, daily from Jeddah to Medina (399km from Al-Ula), or twice weekly from Jeddah to Al-Wedj airport (240km

WHO WERE THE NABATAEANS?

Little is known about the earliest origin of the Nabataeans, though it's believed they were a nomadic people. It was their tight control of the vital, overland trade routes (stretching from modern-day Jordan all the way down to modern-day Yemen) however, that brought them their greatest power and prosperity. Before long, they had transformed themselves from a simple, nomadic people into a sedentary, sophisticated and wealthy state with a king.

Establishing their capital at Petra in Jordan from the 3rd century BC, they began to expand, taking control of all of northwestern Arabia from the 2nd century BC onwards. A second great centre was then founded at Madain Saleh, and at one point they even occupied Domat al-Jandal.

Known to be great engineers and skilled masons, they were also masters in techniques of irrigation. Many Saudi Arabian sites testify to the sophistication of their agriculture.

In 106AD, the Nabataean power finally began to wane as their kingdom was annexed by Rome.

Arab caravans, and in Ezekiel (27:20-21) as a trading partner of the Phoenician city of Tyre. The buildings that you'll see mostly date back a few hundred years, although bricks from much earlier settlements have been reused.

Originally, the old quarter was walled with just two gates and consisted of around

from Al-Ula). Hotels charge SR1500 for an airport pick-up from Al-Wedjeh.

Sapto (☎ 884 1344) runs buses to Al-Ula from Jeddah (SR110) and Riyadh (SR170).

AROUND AL-ULA

A wonderful natural rock formation, **Elephant Rock** (Sakharat al-Fil) towers above the sands in a landscape of red rocky monoliths. Also known as Mammoth Rock, it lies 11km northeast of Al-Ula, just off the road to Hail, some 7km from the Arac Hotel Al-Ula.

MADAIN SALEH

مدائن صالح

If you can only visit one place in Saudi Arabia, make it Madain Saleh. This crossroads of ancient civilisations, pilgrims, explorers, trade caravans and armies finds its most remarkable expression in the elaborate stone-carved temples of the Nabataeans.

The Nabataeans, who carved the astonishing city of Petra (Jordan), chose Madain Saleh as their second city. Although the tombs are less spectacular here than those in Petra, their setting in large landscapes of sweeping sand and remarkable rock formations, is unique and unsurpassed.

History

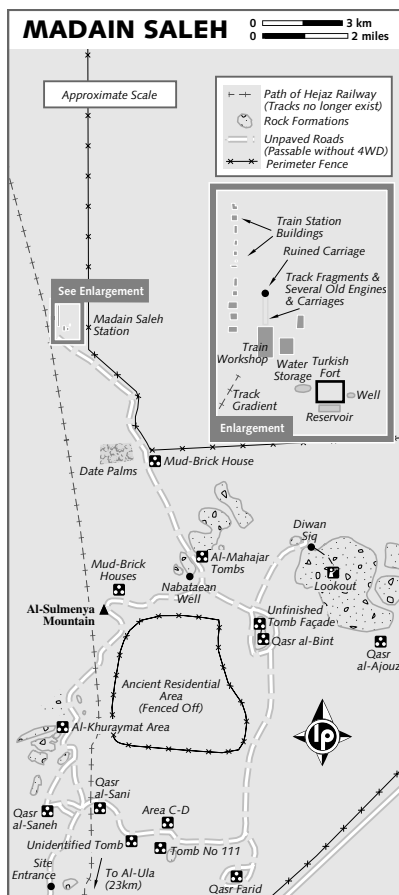
Madain Saleh (Mada'in Salih) was the Nabataeans' second city and stood at the midpoint of the caravan route between Mecca and Petra. When Petra was, after a period of Nabataean autonomy, finally taken by the Romans in AD 106, Madain Saleh fell into a decline from which it never recovered.

The Romans later reoriented trade away from the Arabian interior, instead preferring the ports of the Red Sea. In later centuries the pilgrim road from Damascus to Mecca passed through Madain Saleh.

Information

You need a permit (p367) to visit Madain Saleh. Both of Madain Saleh's hotels, as well as the tour operators (see p326), can arrange permits on your behalf if you fax them your details a week in advance.

Video cameras are not allowed inside the site; be aware that surveillance is carried out. Bring your passport – you will need to present it at the gate along with the permit.



Sights

The extraordinary **Madain Saleh** (admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm) is home to 131 tombs, 45 of which carry inscriptions in late Aramaic script above the doors. These inscriptions detail the period of the tomb's construction; translations appear on signs in front of most tombs. The tombs were the only permanent structures built by the Nabataeans; they lived in relatively flimsy adobe houses, the remains of which are yet to be excavated, and lie in the fenced-off area in the centre of the site.

QASR AL-SANEH

Qasr al-Saneh is an appropriate place to start a tour of Madain Saleh, as it reveals

many of the essential elements of Nabataean funerary architecture: a relatively unadorned façade; the two five-step motifs at the top; a simple interior burial chamber with shelves for corpses; and inscriptions above the doorway.

Built around AD 50, Qasr al-Saneh was in use for just 50 years before the Nabataean kings were overwhelmed by Rome.

AL-KHURAYMAT

This area of **tombs**, about 750m north of Qasr al-Saneh, has some of the best preserved tombs in Madain Saleh. With around 20 tombs carved into the rock face, you'll see some impressive griffin-like figures with human heads, lions' bodies and wings that adorn the corners of the pediment. Look out also for rose-like designs above some doors; these symbolise plates on which blood fell during animal sacrifice.

NABATAEAN WELL & AL-MAHAJAR

The Nabataean Well was one of around 60 wells in the area. The wall supports – added in the 20th century – were built from railway sleepers pilfered from the Hejaz Railway.

Across the track from the entrance to the well, the Al-Mahajar tombs are especially photogenic because they're all lined up in a row.

HEJAZ RAILWAY STATION

At the northern edge of the site, is the **Madain Saleh Station** of the Hejaz Railway. Though the site has been comprehensively restored, it lacks the lonely and decrepit charm of the substations elsewhere.

The complex, built in 1907, consists of 16 buildings, which include a large workshop (with a restored WWI-era engine), shells of train carriages and a rebuilt Turkish fort that served as a resting place for pilgrims travelling to Mecca.

DIWAN

The diwan, carved into a hillside to shield it from the wind, is one of the few examples of non-funerary architecture in Madain Saleh. The name owes more to modern Arab culture than to the Nabataeans, who probably used the area as a cult site. Opposite the hollowed-out room are niches cut into the rock where Nabataean deities were carved (some deeply weathered examples remain).

Running south from the diwan is the **Sig**, a narrow passageway between two rock faces lined with more small altars. At the far end is a striking natural **amphitheatre** with weird and wonderful rock formations. Carved into the eastern wall you can see *qanats* (water channels), while at the southern end there are some well-preserved sacrificial altars.

High above the canyon to the west is a lookout with breathtaking views over the site.

QASR AL-BINT

Qasr al-Bint (Girl's Palace) consists of a wonderful row of façades that make for dramatic viewing from across Madain Saleh.

The east face has two particularly well-preserved tombs. If you step back and look up near the northern end of the west face, you'll distinguish a tomb that was abandoned in the early stages of construction and would, if completed, have been the largest in Madain Saleh; only the step façade was cut.

QASR FARID

Qasr Farid in the south is the largest tomb of Madain Saleh and certainly the most stunning. Its stand-alone location makes it a spot of rare beauty, especially just before sunset. Carved from a single free-standing monolith of rock, it's visible from miles away, and the craggy mountains to the east are spectacular.

Getting There & Away

The road from Al-Ula (23km) is easy to find. The site entrance is marked off the road with a blue 'Antiquities' sign.

TAIMA

تيماء

☎ 04 / pop 65,000

Taima is famous above all for its extraordinary **well** (Bīr Al-Haddaj; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Wed). Not merely the oldest well in the Kingdom, it's also the largest, measuring over 18m across and 12m in depth. It is believed to date back to Babylonians time (the early 1st millennium BC), though it may even be older.

Originally, 60 draw-wheels positioned around the rim of the well brought water up from the well bottom to the surface with the aid of camels and ropes. Stone-hewn channels then conducted the water to the

labyrinth of gardens that made up the verdant oases, for which Taima was famous. The well is still in use today (except that diesel pumps have replaced the camels!).

The nearby **Taima Museum** (☎ 622 1398; admission free; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Sat-Wed) has excellent and informative displays (including photographs, maps and diagrams) on the well and the history and culture of the area, as well as archaeological finds from the region. Look out in particular for the 'silent visages' – the mysterious faces carved on Taima's unique tombstones thought to date to the 5th or 4th century BC.

With time to spare, Taima merits further exploration. One of the largest archaeological sites in the Kingdom, there are a mass of interesting sites, remains and buildings in the area.

In the 1st millennium AD, it was an important caravan stop for the holy cities to and from Damascus. German archaeologists are currently excavating the site.

An agricultural town since ancient times, Taima is known even today for the high quality of its fruit, including pomegranates, figs, peaches, melons and plums.

Sleeping & Eating

Sahari Hotel (☎ 463 5103; Prince Khaled St; s SR80-100, d SR100-150, 2-bed apt from SR200) The best bet in town at the time of writing, it's hardly the Hilton (and the carpet can tell a tale or two), but the rooms are clean, quite well-furnished and quiet. The Yemeni management is also friendly and keen to please.

Hadramawt Restaurant (☎ 463 5103; Prince Khaled St; mains SR10-15; ☎ 8am-1am) Located next door to the Sahari Hotel, the Hadramawt is loved locally for its wholesome dishes served in simple but clean surrounds. Dining is on cushions on the floor and there's family eating inside the little cubicles.

Getting There & Away

Sapto (☎ 463 2942) runs buses to Jeddah (SR110, 10 hours, 10 daily), Al-Ula (SR30, 2½ hours, one daily), Tabuk (SR45, three hours, 10 daily), Domat al-Jandal (SR75, five hours, one daily), Hail (SR65, five hours, five daily), Riyadh (SR165, 13 hours, five daily) and Sakaka (SR80, five hours, one daily).

The nearest airports to Taima are the ones at Tabuk (220km northwest of Taima) and

Al-Jouf (300km northeast of Taima). Saudia flies from Riyadh to Tabuk daily (SR280) and from Riyadh to Al-Jouf (SR200).

SAKAKA

سككاكا

☎ 04 / pop 55,000

Remote rural Sakaka has a host of little-visited archaeological sights, particularly Rajajil (Standing Stones; opposite) 25km from town.

Lady Anne Blunt and her husband Wilfred visited Sakaka (which they called Meskakeh) in 1879; Lady Blunt's book, *A Pilgrimage to Najd*, provides a rare portrait of Arabian society in that era.

Orientation & Information

Sakaka's main street runs north from a single, large intersection for approximately 4.5km. The intersection is dominated by Sakaka's main mosque and its biggest hotel, Al-Nusl. Along or near this street you'll find most of Sakaka's restaurants and services.

Sights

At the northern end of town, **Qasr Za'abel** (admission free; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 4pm-sunset) dates from the early 19th century. Restored in 1994, the fort has lost something of its antique charm, although the hilltop perch, irregular shape and four towers make it worth a look. Inside, you'll find the usual diwan and the commander's house.

The rocky outcrop 150m north (as the crow flies) of Qasr Za'abel, Jabal Burnus, has rock carvings of dancing stick figures with their hand raised level to their face, as well as inscriptions. The carvings date from the 6th century BC.

Sleeping & Eating

Al-Nusl Hotel (☎ 625 0353; fax 625 0408; s/d incl service charge SR345/448; 🍽️) Designed by a Canadian architect, the Al-Nusl is modern-meets-Moorish. The rooms, which lie around three central courtyards covered by glass domes, appear a little anodyne after the grand entry but are quiet, peaceful and comfortable. Guides, car hire and tours can be organised – though they're not the cheapest – and there's a free airport pickup.

Al-Andalus Hotel (☎ 633 1212; fax 633 1331; Main St; s SR90-120, d SR150-180) Lying on the highway 37km beyond Domat al-Jandal and 13km from Sakaka, the Al-Andalus offers good

value and convenience, with a restaurant, laundry, supermarket, parking space and car rental (SR80 per day including insurance) all next door. Rooms are clean and spacious.

Sofrajy (☎ 626 111; Main St; mains SR9-12; ☎ 1pm-1am) Long the local choice, the Sofrajy has menus in both Arabic and English and a family section. Dishes such as chicken cooked in a clay pot (SR11) are fresh, filling and very reasonably priced. With its wide choice of breakfast foods (including set breakfast menus – SR10 to SR12 for two people) and fourteen fruit juices (from SR3), it's also a great place to start the day. It lies 400m north of the Al-Nusl Hotel.

Also much loved locally is **As-Safir** (☎ 635 7414; Main St; ☎ 3pm-2am), lying 800m north of Al-Nusl, which does succulent *shwarma* (sandwich/plate SR3/7).

Getting There & Away

The airport (listed as Jouf in Saudia flight timetables) lies 28km southwest of town on the road to Domat al-Jandal. There are two daily **Saudia** (☎ 624 4444; King Abdul Aziz St) flights to Riyadh (SR290), and less-frequent services to Jeddah (SR300) and Hail (SR120).

Buses go from the **Sapto Bus Station** (☎ 624 9844) to Riyadh (SR185, 12 hours, two daily) and Dammam (SR185, 12 hours, two daily), Domat al-Jandal (SR10, one hour, six daily), Tabuk (SR85, six hours, four daily), Taima (SR80, five hours, one daily). For Al-Ula and Jeddah, go to Tabuk first.

Getting Around

A taxi to/from the airport to/from Al-Andalus/Al-Nusl costs SR50/70. Car-hire agencies can be found at the airport, the Al-Nusl Hotel and the Al-Andalus Hotel.

AROUND SAKAKA

Perched on a windswept plateau and surrounded by some of the loneliest country in Arabia, approximately 25km west of Sakaka, stand the mysterious clusters of 2m-high stone pillars of **Rajajil** (Standing Stones; admission free; ☎ 8am-1pm Sat-Wed).

Little is known of their history, but they're thought to date from around 2000 BC and are covered in ancient Thamudic graffiti. Archaeologists surmise that the stones once belonged to a Bronze Age cult centre and served an astrological purpose.

According to a local legend, they are *rijal al-hajar* (men of stone) who were punished by God for their unfaithfulness.

Keep your eyes peeled for arrowheads which litter the area; but don't remove any (you may be checked for them at Hail airport).

To visit the site, you need a permit (p367); at the time of writing, a large hole in the fence allowed access, though don't count on this! The Al-Nusl Hotel can arrange access if you're staying there.

To get here, take the first right off the highway after the Saudi Aramco Bulk Plant building (65km from Domat al-Jandal), follow the road for 5.7km and the dirt track for 350m to the site. The way in is indicated by a brown sign, but it's in Arabic only.

A taxi should cost SR50 to Al-Andalus Hotel and SR70 to Al-Nusl.

DOMAT AL-JANDAL

دومت الجندل

Domat al-Jandal is a modest town that boasts a ruined fortress, an interesting fort and a good museum. There are still no hotels in the town.

Information

The museum and Qasr Marid are 1.2km east of town, south off the main Tabuk-Sakaka road. Domat al-Jandal has few services and the only hotels are at Sakaka, 50km away.

Sights

AL-JOUF MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY & ETHNOGRAPHY

This **museum** (☎ 622 2151; admission free; ☎ 7.30am-2.30pm Sat-Wed), contains some excellent and informative displays (including old photographs, drawings, maps and diagrams) on the local history, flora, fauna and culture, ranging from 'the Arabian One-Humped Camel' to 'Desert Life' and the Nabataeans.

A new museum is scheduled to open in the building across the car park. Enquire.

QASR MARID

The foundations of **Qasr Marid** (☎ sunrise-sunset) date to at least Nabataean times, and Roman-era records of Queen Zenobia's expedition to the area in the 3rd century AD mention Marid by name.

The fortress was repaired in the 19th century and became the local seat of

government until the new fort, built by the Al-Rashids, supplanted it.

The main mud structure has towers at its four corners, and beautifully hewn, squared pre-Islamic brickwork is visible around the building's lower levels. The ramparts provide great views over the town and oasis.

MOSQUE OF OMAR

One of the earliest surviving mosques in Saudi Arabia, the Mosque of Omar is believed to have been founded by the second caliph, Omar bin al-Khattab (who ruled until AD 644), when he stopped here en route to Jerusalem.

Still in use, the mosque's famous lone minaret is one of the few surviving sections of the original building and may even pre-date its use as a mosque. Though the exact date of its construction is unknown, the exquisite, dry-stone construction and corbelled point possibly to pre-Islamic times (notice the similarities between it and the older parts of Qasr Marid). And fascinatingly, this is confirmed by the local tradition – that the 'tower' was indeed converted into a mosque by Caliph Omar.

OLD DOMAT AL-JANDAL

The old mud quarter adjacent to the Mosque of Omar has been settled for almost 1000 years. Although the buildings standing there today are not that old, earlier building materials have been used (Nabataean inscriptions are visible on some stones).

A clear path runs through the houses, and wandering through the ruins is a pleasant way to pass an afternoon.

Getting There & Away

Taxis cost SR70/SR100 to Al-Andalus/Al Nusal hotels for the 50km trip from Sakaka, but you're better off arranging transport through your hotel in Sakaka. The same applies in the opposite direction.

ASIR

عسير

'Asir' means 'difficult' in Arabic, after the legendary difficulties involved in crossing the Asir Mountains by camel. It is perhaps this above all that has preserved the distinctive cultural heritage of the Asir region.

With much closer historical ties in fact to Yemen than the rest of Arabia, the Asir is home to beautiful (albeit fast-disappearing) stone, slate and mud-brick architecture nestled among towering mountains of rare beauty, forests barely a hundred kilometres from the Empty Quarter and valleys that drop steeply down to the Red Sea coastal plain.

In the coastal region, look out for the traditional, conical huts showing the African influence from across the water, and around Abha, keep your eyes peeled for the famous 'Flower Men', locals who traditionally wear garlands of flowers on their head (apparently to attract women and detract the flies!).

In the mountains, and easier to spot, are the ubiquitous Arabian baboons now living the easy life from the picnic leftovers thrown to them by passing Saudi tourists. Don't let children get too close; they've been attacked or bitten in the past.

Merhaban alf – 'a thousand welcomes' is the traditional greeting of the Asir people; it sums up their supreme hospitality and you'll soon find yourself pressed to accept an invitation to eat or stay overnight everywhere. If you're invited to a wedding, don't be alarmed if the whole village starts shooting off guns – it's a traditional form of celebration (as in Yemen)!

ABHA

أبها

☎ 07 / pop 163,000

Arriving in Abha, perched 2200m above sea level, is a shock to the senses. Not only is it palpably cooler – or colder (hail and ice are not unheard of in winter), but it's the neat green lawns, marigolds, mountains and mist that make the greatest impression.

Attempting to explain the stark contrast to the torrid, torpid lowlands below, the locals talk rather unkindly of the giant, invisible air-conditioner that points to Abha, with its back to Jizan.

Some tourists (particularly the Japanese) are disappointed by Abha; for some it's too much like their home country. For the Saudis, however, the cold, mist and rain is all a bit of a novelty and they flock here (along with other GCC citizens, particularly Kuwaitis) to escape the relentless heat and humidity of the lowlands during summer.

Unfortunately, this has seen the rise of unchecked and uncontrolled building, which has resulted in a rash of carbuncle-like concrete apartments on Abha's gentle hills.

Orientation

The town centre is roughly demarcated by four streets: King Saud, King Faisal, King Khaled and Prince Abdullah. Nearly everything you'll need in the town itself is found within or just outside these boundaries.

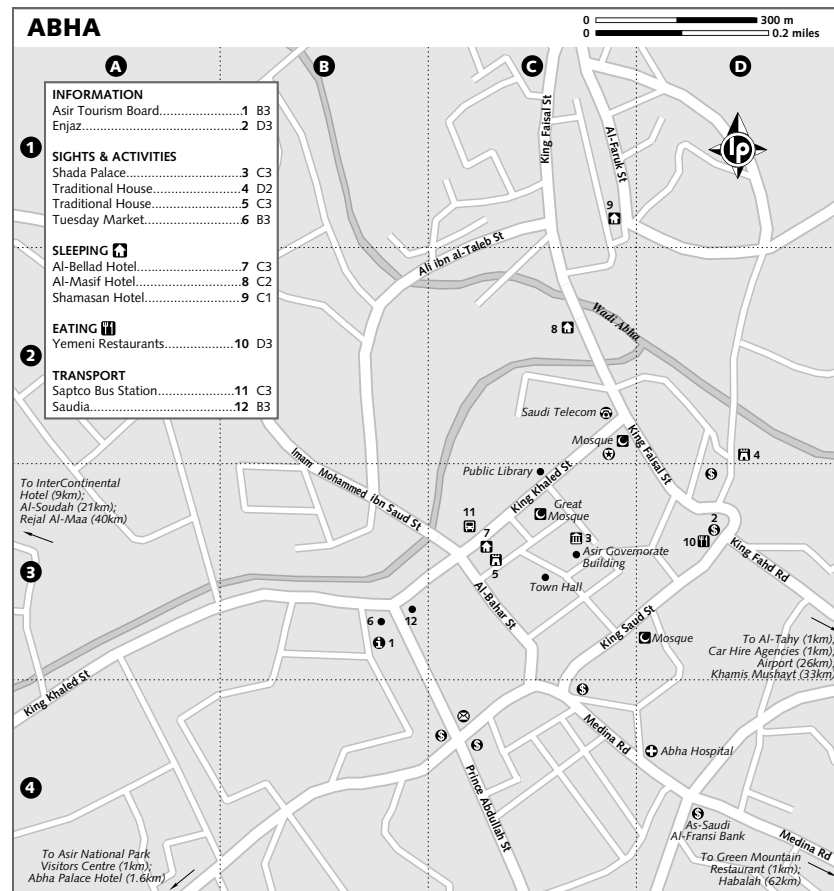
Information

There are various banks with ATMs in the centre. To change money, head for **Enjaz** (☎ 229 0271; King Saud St; ⏰ 9am-noon & 5-8pm Sat-Wed, 5-8pm Fri), which offers the best rates and

is found diagonally opposite the Mawasam Agadeer Hotel.

The proactive **Asir Tourism Board** (☎ 231 1506; off King Khaled St) can organise English-speaking guides, as well as trips to the brightly painted, traditional houses of the area; or to traditional mud-brick villages such as Alianfa or Rejal Al-Maa; or alternatively, to bird watching trips in pursuit of the 170 species which make their home in the region.

In summer, French-monitored paragliding from Al-Soudah (SR200) and rock climbing (grades from 3a to 7b) at Habalah (including all equipment SR150) are also possible. Mountain bikes can also be hired (call for prices).



Sights

SHADA PALACE

Built in 1927 as an office-residence for a local Saudi governor, this **palace** (off King Khaled St; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm Sat-Thu winter, 9am-6pm Sat-Thu summer) is one of the few traditional buildings left in Abha. Its squat, mud-walled tower provides an interesting counterpoint to the modern buildings that surround it.

The building itself is arguably more interesting than the exhibits (local handicrafts and household items). The whitewashed walls are adorned with brightly painted geometric patterns, particularly the staircase, which leads to the sitting rooms and the palace's former residential quarters on the upper two floors.

TUESDAY MARKET

Abha's **Tuesday market** (off King Khaled St; ☎ 6.30am-1pm & 4pm-6.30pm Sat-Thu, 8am-10.30am & 4pm-6.30pm Fri) is well worth a visit. Though it's open daily, Tuesday is the busiest day. As well as selling locally made handicrafts, such as coloured basket ware, traditional leather baby-carriers and clay ovens, there's also a gold souq and a fascinating herb, spice and incense souq.

Items sold include a ground white powder known locally as *shab*, which is used as a natural deodorant and antiseptic, and natural beauty aids (such as the lemon, sugar and water mixtures used by women for hair removal).

Look out also for the women's kaftans embroidered with traditional Asiri patterns. Prices start at SR165.

TRADITIONAL HOUSES

There's sadly not much of Old Abha left in the town. But the few good examples of traditional architecture are well worth seeking out. Some of the best-preserved houses lie southwest of the Grand Mosque, on the same square as the Town Hall, so you'll need to ask the police guarding the building for permission to photograph first.

There's another well-preserved façade about 100m north of the intersection between King Faisal and King Fahd Sts.

ASIR NATIONAL PARK ABHA VISITORS CENTRE

At the time of writing, only the **picnic park** (☎ 4pm-11pm last week Jun-1st week Sep), located in

the southwest of Abha under the southern edge of the Ring Rd, was open to the public. Around five hectares in size, it contains some trails and paths, a climbing area for children, and a French-designed, artificial climbing wall (with climbs ranging from Grade 3 to Grade 7, including a 14m stretch that carries a prize of SR100,000 if you can do it in less than two minutes!). Sadly, an old Ottoman *hammam* was flattened in the construction of the cable car.

For access to the **visitors centre** (☎ 225 0920; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm), you must first contact the **Asir National Park Office** (☎ 224 9812 ext 221222; fax 225 0920) located 4km from the centre for permission (or ask your hotel to do so).

The visitors centre contains some interesting and informative panels on the park, a model of the park and an upstairs viewing platform. The auditorium shows a 20-minute film about the construction of the park (upon request).

Sleeping

In the high season (June to August), you may need to book up to two months in advance, especially on the weekend; and note that prices can more than double. In the low season, quoted prices can usually be negotiated down.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Al-Masif Hotel (☎ 228 7000; almasifhotel@hotmail.com; King Faisal St; low season s/d SR125/188, high season s/d SR150/220, 2-/3-bed apt SR350/450) Though the décor's a bit lugub, and the bathrooms have seen better days, the Al-Masif is peaceful, centrally-located and friendly. The hotel's newly refurbished apartments are very comfortable.

Shamasan Hotel (☎ 225 1804; fax 228 2293; Al-Faruk St; low season s/d SR80/120, high season s/d SR110/165) After all the marble and gypsum Arab arches of the lobby, the rooms seem rather plain and drab, albeit clean and tidy. But the Filipino and Indonesian staff is friendly, and the hotel's within walking distance of the centre.

Al-Bellad Hotel (☎ 226 1451; fax 224 7433; King Khaled St; low season s/d SR80/120, high season s/d SR150/220) Located next to the Great Mosque, the Al-Bellad has very large, white and somewhat clinical rooms, but it makes a good choice if the others are full.

TOP END

Abha Palace (☎ 229 4444; www.abhapalace.com.sa; Nahran Rd; low season s/d SR350/425, high season s/d SR450/525, 4-bed apt from SR350, 3-bed villas from SR750; ☎ ☎) Lying 1.5km southwest of the town centre, the five-star Abha Palace certainly makes an impression: outside for its bold, glass-paned architecture, and inside for its combination of great facilities, excellent service and picturesque location overlooking Lake Saad and its dam. Facilities include a ladies health club (and pool).

InterContinental Hotel (☎ 224 7777; www.intercontinental.com; high season s/d SR495/675, villas from SR1500; ☎ ☎) Perched atop the escarpment in Al-Soudah to the west of Abha and originally designed as a palace for a Saudi prince, the InterContinental is suitably large, lavish and lush. The hotel is only open June to September. It's about 10km west of town.

Eating

Green Mountain Restaurant (☎ 229 1519; Green Mountain; starters SR10-12, mains SR30-55; ☎ 8am-midnight) Lit up at night with green lights, this large restaurant (situated at the top of the hill known as Green Mountain in the southeast of Abha), is hard to miss. It's the views overlooking Abha that you come for. Take them in over a coffee (SR4 to SR7) and a cake (SR8) at a table outside, or as the locals do over a suck on a *sheesha* (water pipe). Meals and snacks are also available, though neither the food (nor prices) are anything too special. It lies around 2km south of the town centre.

Al-Tahy (☎ 228 331; Prince Sultan St; ☎ 1pm-1am) One of the very few restaurants in Abha with a family section (found around the back), the Al-Tahy is also known for its excellent Syrian chef (after whom it's named). Large, bright and sparkling clean it's much-beloved by the locals for its fresh and excellent mezze (small/medium/large SR55/10/15) and mains such as stuffed aubergine (SR10) and chicken *tajine* (SR15). It's 1.25km from the town centre

Along King Saud St, there is a string of small Yemeni restaurants which serve delicious and filling *fool* (SR4) or omelettes (SR4) for breakfast, as well as succulent *shwarma* sandwiches (SR4) and half roasted chickens (SR10). Choose the most popular.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Saudia (☎ 223 7777; King Khaled St; ☎ 9am-6pm Sat-Thu) has several daily departures to Jeddah (SR190), Riyadh (SR280) and Dammam (SR390), with less frequent departures for Medina (SR310) and Taif (SR140).

BUS

Abha's main **Sapctco Bus Station** (☎ 226 3929; King Khaled St) lies diagonally opposite the Great Mosque. There are departures to Jeddah (SR100, nine hours, every 90 minutes), Taif (SR100, eight hours, three daily) and Jizan (SR35, four hours, three daily). For Riyadh, take the free bus to Khamis Mushayt (45 minutes, every 10 minutes) and change. From Khamis Mushayt, it costs SR135 to Riyadh and takes 12 hours. For Najran (SR45, 3½ to four hours, four daily), you'll also need to go to Khamis Mushayt.

Getting Around

The airport lies just over 26km from town, signposted from the Abha-Khamis Mushayt road.

There are no taxis in Abha, so you'll have to make arrangements with your hotel – most will collect you or drop you at the bus station or airport. Car-hire agencies can be found at the airport and in town.

During the summer months, a cable car links the top of Green Mountain with the Asir National Park Abha Visitor Center and the Abha Palace hotel (one-way/return SR30/60).

AROUND ABHA

Asir National Park

This **National Park** (☎ summer; free admission) in the southwest of Abha was Saudi Arabia's first and contains some of the Kingdom's most spectacular scenery, with mountains reaching nearly 3000m before plunging down onto the coastal plain. The park encompasses some 450,000 hectares stretching from the Red Sea coast, across the mountains and east into the desert. The park's territory is not contiguous, with a number of pockets of land – separated by towns, villages and farmlands – fenced off for protection.

Al-Soudah

Al-Soudah, or 'the black one', so named for the black clouds that so often surround it, is

jaw-droppingly beautiful. Located close to the summit of the Kingdom's highest peak, **Jebel Soudah** (2910m), about 22km west of town, this is the place to come for precipitous cliffs, deep valleys and mountain-tops disappearing behind the clouds.

There's no better way to enjoy the views than taking the **As-Sawdah Cable Car** (☎ 229 1111; return ticket SR50; ☎ 9am-9pm Apr-Sep, winter by special request). It's well signposted on the approaches from Abha.

It drops down off the escarpment to the traditional mud-brick village of **Rejal Al-Maa**, with wonderful views to accompany you all the way, including stone villages, terraced fields, juniper forests off in the distance and even the occasional defensive watchtower.

Habalah

Believed to have been established by frightened villagers fleeing the invasion of the Ottomans, the old village of Habalah is unusually situated halfway down a cliff face. It lies around 63km southeast from Abha.

To reach the village, you no longer have to climb by rope down the cliff face as the villagers once had to do, but can take the **cable car** (☎ 253 1919; adult/child return ticket SR40/30; ☎ 9am-9pm Jun-Aug, public holidays & weekends Sep-May) instead. Though it's only a short ride (600m; 3½ minutes), the views en route are impressive.

Unfortunately, the site itself is not. Almost nothing remains of the old village, and some of the last villagers were forcibly removed with the completion of the cable car. And in its place is a pretty hideous, concrete tourist complex – in parts very litter-strewn, whose only aim appears to be to make as much money as possible during the high season. Nevertheless, the complex contains several restaurants as well as activities for kids and remains a popular local tourism attraction among Saudi families.

Unfortunately Habalah symbolises the more destructive face of privately-owned Saudi tourism ventures. It costs SR6/3 per adult/child to enter the tourist complex, a fee that's waived if you take the cable car.

A via ferrata (climbing route with the aid of fixed cables) has been established up the rock face from Habalah. It costs SR20 including all equipment, a free cable car ride back down to Habalah, and on-hand assistance from Saudi guides.

NAJRAN

☎ 07 / pop 123,000

The oasis at Najran, surrounded by mountains and close to the Yemeni border, is one of Saudi Arabia's hidden gems. With towering mud-brick, fortress-like homes known as *qasr* strung out along the wadi and an exceptional mud-brick fort, Najran is like nowhere else in the Kingdom.

Throughout its long and sometimes turbulent history, Najran has been a key link between the north and west of Arabia and Yemen. Today, these connections can still be seen and felt in Najran's people and its culture.

Orientation & Information

Najran is strung out over nearly 30km. Just about everything you'll need (hotels, restaurants, transport and banks) is located on or just off King Abdul Aziz Rd.

Don't be alarmed about the unusually high number of checkpoints around the town – it's to combat the smuggling of arms, qat (the mildly narcotic leaf), and hashish from Yemen.

Sights

NAJRAN FORT (QASR AL-IMARA)

The town's most conspicuous monument, the **Najran Fort** (☎ 542 1060; western end of King Abdul Aziz Rd; admission free; ☎ 7.30am-sunset) displays all the architectural features of Najran's traditional architecture (see boxed text, opposite). Construction began in 1942, and the fort's 60 rooms were designed to form a self-sustaining complex.

The main entrance is through a beautifully carved door. The highlights of the interior at ground level include the fort's mosque, a restored well that dates to pre-Islamic times and the two-storey prince's palace in the centre.

From the latter, a bridge leads to the rooms above the fort's entrance, which include the prince's office and the *majlis* (meeting place) where the king held audiences. There are good views from the ramparts.

AL-UKHDUD ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE & MUSEUM

One of the most important archaeological sites in Saudi Arabia and even on the southern Arabian Peninsula, is **Al-Ukhudud archaeo-**

نجران

ARCHITECTURAL DĒJĀ VU?

Rising regally out of the fertile fields, gardens and palm plantations, Najran's traditional tower houses are a stunning sight. Built with bricks made from a mixture of mud and straw, the houses usually stand three or four storeys high.

Unlike mud-brick architecture in other parts of the Kingdom however, Najran's houses are sometimes whitewashed or daubed with bright colours around the window and door frames.

The windows of the houses are usually large, and on the *majlis* (top floor) the windows are semi-circular in shape and often contain coloured glass. At night, and lit up, they look like giant lanterns lighting up the landscape. *DĒjĀ Vu?* Mirroring uncannily Yemen's houses across the mountains, they are yet another reminder of the close cultural ties between the two regions.

logical site (☎ 542 5292; fax 542 5120; Prince Sultan ibn Abdul Aziz St; admission free but permit required).

For 1000 years before the dawn of Islam, Al-Ukhudud was a major centre for the overland caravan trade in frankincense and myrrh which stretched from Yemen in the south all the way to Egypt and Syria in the north, and to the Gulf and Iraq in the east.

Measuring just over 5 sq km, a walk around the site will take you past the ruins of an ancient city (some buildings date back to 600 BC), which may be that of Al-Ukhudud (or, it is now thought by Saudi scholars, ancient Najran), including the remains of fortifications (in the unmistakable 'South Arabian style' found fascinatingly also in Yemen and across the water at Ethiopia's Yeha) and the remains of a moat or trench.

Look out also for the beautiful rock drawings and some stunning ancient inscriptions. You currently need permission to visit the site (see boxed text, p367), but this may change in the future.

The well-designed **museum** (☎ 542 5292; fax 542 5120; Prince Sultan ibn Abdul Aziz St; admission free; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Wed, 3-7pm Fri) next door contains some interesting information panels and displays on the history of the site as well as the culture of the area.

Exhibits include items excavated at Al-Ukhudud such as some very beautiful pre-Islamic, South Arabian scripts (dating to the early 2nd millennium BC), pottery, small artefacts and glass.

There are plans to open a new museum that will house items excavated at Al-Ukhudud. In the future, admission may be charged to both museums (probably SR10), but the ticket should include a guided tour around the archaeological site.

AL-AAN PALACE

This **palace** (Prince Nayef ibn Abdul Aziz Rd) is one of the best-preserved pieces of traditional architecture remaining in Wadi Najran. Set on a hill overlooking the wadi, it rises impressively to five storeys high. Many of the original windows and doors are still evident.

The palace is closed to visitors, but the views over the wadi from the car park make a visit here worthwhile, albeit if only to witness the ever-increasing encroachment of concrete on the traditional architecture.

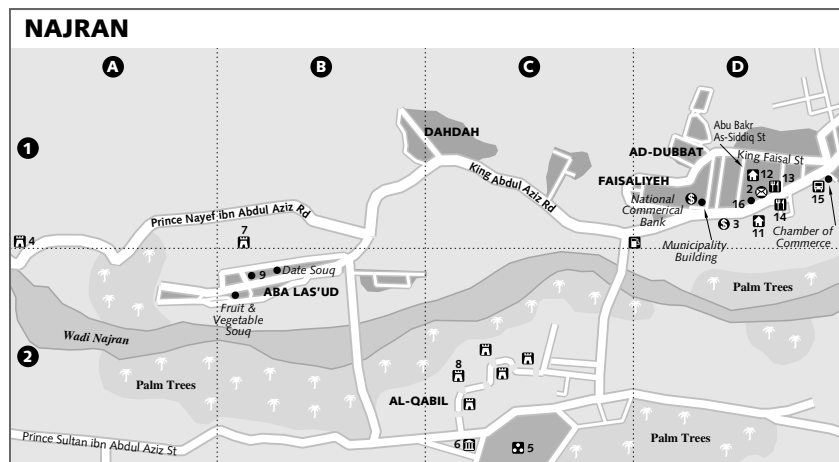
TRADITIONAL MARKETS

Don't miss Najran's **traditional markets** (Ash Sha'abi (Public Souq); western end of King Abdul Aziz Rd; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm) which are spread in different sections over a large area south of Najran Fort. The souqs sell everything from spectacularly sequined burka (headscarf covering a woman's face) and DIY *bachoor* (incense) sets complete with little spoon (SR15), to tooled, leather pistol holders, antique *jambiyas* (SR500 to SR30,000) and delightful baskets with pointed conical covers for holding dates (SR5 to SR100).

For the ultimate souvenir-hunter, what about a gold-plated Saudi ceremonial sword (SR1000)? Also worth seeking out are the gold and silver souqs; at the latter, women sell antique Bedouin jewellery, though you'll need to bring your best bargaining skills.

Tours

Both the Holiday Inn Najran and Najran Hotel offer tours of Najran and the surroundings. The Najran Holiday Inn offers half-day tours (per person SR50) and full-day tours (SR100). The Najran Hotel offers full-day tours of Najran for SR150 per person.



Both hotels can organise a permit to visit Al-Ukhduud Archaeological Site if given a few days' notice (you should fax the hotels your dates and a copy of your passport and visa).

Sleeping

Najran Hotel (☎ 522 1949; fax 522 1418; just off King Abdul Aziz Rd; s/d 80/150) Though the lobby's a bit lugub, the Najran is friendly, well-run and welcoming. Rooms are generously sized, clean and comfy and are great value (but be sure to ask for one of the 'tourist rooms'). Breakfast is included.

Hyatt Najran Hotel (☎ 523 3344; www.najranh.com; King Abdul Aziz Rd; s/d SR300/400; 📠) The newly opened Hyatt wouldn't win a style contest, but it's the best midrange choice with rooms boasting good views over the town and some of its traditional houses. There's also a restaurant.

our pick **Holiday Inn Najran** (☎ 522 5222; www.holiday-inn.com/najran; King Abdul Aziz Rd; s/d SR440/570; 📠 📺) The most comfortable place to stay in Najran, the Holiday Inn is also well-managed, friendly and accommodating.

Eating

Lahore Pakistani Restaurant (☎ 523 6777; King Abdul Aziz Rd; mains SR4-10; 🕒 7.30am-2am) Simple but spotless and serving fresh, delicious food at extremely pleasing prices, it's easy to see why this is a firm local favourite. Dining is at tables or on the floor inside little cubicles, and there's a family section. Try

the nicely spiced chicken tikka and fragrant biryani rice.

Hori Restaurant (☎ 523 4335; King Abdul Aziz Rd; 🕒 11am-2am Sat-Thu) For a quick bite or take-away, head for the Hori. Its chicken with garlic sauce (SR12) is famous, but it also does excellent *shwarma* sandwiches (SR5), roast fish fillet (with chips, salad and bread; SR15) and lamb kebabs with salad (SR15). It's also got a family section.

Getting There & Away

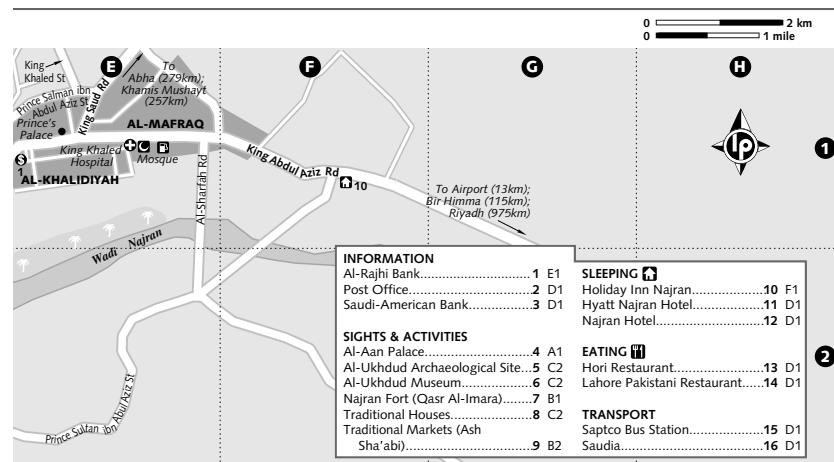
The **Saudia** (☎ 522 3333; King Abdul Aziz Rd) booking office is 3km west of the Abha-Riyadh roads intersection. There are daily flights to Riyadh (SR280) and Jeddah (SR250), and less frequent flights to Dammam (SR390), Jizan (SR150) and Sharurah (SR120).

Sapctco Bus Station (☎ 522 0005; King Abdul Aziz Rd) lies 1.7km west of the Abha-Riyadh roads intersection. Buses leave for Jizan (SR80, eight hours, three daily), Riyadh (SR135, 12 hours, three daily), Jeddah (SR130, 14 hours, four daily), Abha (SR45, 3½ hours, six daily), and Sharurah (SR50, 3½ hours, one daily).

Getting Around

The airport lies 19km northeast of Najran; there are no buses there, only taxis (SR30).

Najran's taxis operate as shared shuttles, mostly between Faisaliyeh and Najran Fort and cost SR1 to SR2 per person (though you should negotiate the fare before getting in). If you want one to yourself, expect to pay between SR5 to SR10.



AROUND NAJRAN

Lying 116km north of Najran, off the road leading north to Al-Khamasin, is **Bir Himma** (admission free; 🕒 24hr), the site of a famous and beautiful well said to be over 4500 years old but still used by the locals. It's well worth a stop if you have your own transport.

Close by are some impressive **rock carvings** (admission free with permission; 🕒 8am-sunset), albeit much damaged by vandalism, which has led to the construction of a perimeter fence. You can fetch the key from the mayor's office (though it's perfectly possible to clamper over the rocks around the fence).

Look out for the carvings showing how dates were traditionally harvested. To visit the site, you need a permit which your hotel can arrange for you in Najran.

JIZAN

☎ 07 / pop 78,000

Jizan is known as the 'fruit basket' of Saudi Arabia for the variety and abundance of its agricultural produce.

The fair ladies of Jizan are considered to be great cooks, tidy housekeepers and skilful in the use of perfumes and fragrances – so are much admired by Saudi men! If you're invited to an inhabitant's house, expect a fabulous feast. The whole region of Jizan is known for its famous hospitality, in which guests are fed to the gullets.

For the traveller, Jizan can seem muddy, grubby and drab – and in summer unbearably humid. Fruity fish market smells

don't help either. Most use it merely as a jumping-off point for Farasan Island. But if you're here in the autumn (usually around September), be sure to enquire about the famous Parrot Fish Festival, which is a riotous and very colourful event.

Orientation & Information

The heart of the town is between Al-Tawhid Sq and the corniche. The bus station is just off the corniche.

Sights

If you're filling time, the **souq** is worth a wander, if only to admire the gold shops or the abundant produce for which Jizan is famous: everything from cucumbers and cabbages to tomatoes, watermelons and mandarins.

Look out also for the exquisite local honey, coffee husks from Yemen (made into a type of coffee), and the endless types of *bachoor* (incense) much loved by the Jizani women to scent their houses, clothes and hair.

Sleeping & Eating

Al-Hayat Gizan Hotel (☎ 322 1055; fax 317 1774; Corniche; s/d SR230/300; 📠 📺) Conveniently located 200m from the sea port south of the town centre, the hotel is also friendly and well-run. Despite the somewhat dank smell and cavernous corridors, rooms are spacious and well-furnished. Rooms on the third floor are best.

Atheel Hotel (☎ 317 1101; atheelhot-jaz@hotmail.com; just off main roundabout; s/d with breakfast SR240/330; 🍽️) Though with somewhat small rooms and bathrooms in need of renovation, the big boon here is the pool.

Waterfall (As-Shalal; ☎ 322 3998; mains SR10-25; 🍽️ 1pm-1am) A favourite restaurant locally, it's a bit like walking into a car wash (with its windows of cascading water). The menu's in Arabic only, but you can pick-and-point at the counter, or try the speciality, *kasba* (mutton on a bed of rice; SR15). It lies opposite the Atheel Hotel off the main roundabout and is men-only

Happy Time Restaurant (☎ 321 7162; Corniche; 🍽️ 5pm-midnight) With a family section, the optimistically named Happy Time boasts a speciality of delicious, fresh fish oven-roasted, Yemeni-style (SR30). It lies around 1km from the Al-Hayat Gizan Hotel on the same road.

Getting There & Away

The airport is about 5km northeast of the town centre; a taxi should cost SR10. There are several daily **Saudi Arabian Airlines** (☎ 323 3333) flights to Jeddah (SR200) and Riyadh (SR320), with less frequent departures to Najran (SR150) and Sharurah (SR190).

Sapto Bus Station (☎ 317 1267; King Abdul Aziz St) is just off the corniche between the junction with the main road and the entrance to the port. Buses run to Jeddah (SR100, 9 to 10 hours, every two hours), Abha (SR35, four hours, four daily) and Najran (SR80, eight hours, three daily).

To get to Farasan Island, the **Seaport Authority** (☎ 317 2864 for ferries from Jizan, 316 3446 for ferries from Farasan; Jizan Port; 🍽️ 6am-6pm) issues tickets (free) for the two ferries (a recent gift to the people from King Abdullah) that depart daily at 7am and 3pm in both directions. The journey takes one hour 20 minutes.

If you're coming with a car, it's best to reserve two days in advance. The Seaport Authority (and entry to the ferry departure point) lies around 1.5km from the centre of town.

FARASAN ISLANDS

جزر فرسان

☎ 07

The Farasan Islands form part of an archipelago which lies about 40km off the coast of Jizan. Farasan, the main island, is the

only one with any significant number of inhabitants.

During the time of the first ruler of Saudi Arabia, King Abdul Aziz, political dissidents and criminals were exiled to the islands. Even today, employers threaten lazy or incompetent employees with banishment here. Though it's hardly an archetypal island-paradise (it's generally flat, arid and dusty and in parts, is rather poor, run-down and litter-strewn), it makes an interesting break from the mainland.

The area is rich in marine life, and diving (if pre-booked with one of the dive companies) is superb in the shallow, plankton-rich waters. The islands also have some of the few remaining stretches of coastal mangroves (the habitat of the endangered dugong) in the Red Sea. The bird life is also prolific here.

The small town of **Farasan** has several surviving traditional houses built from coral with intricately decorated and carved doorways. These were the homes of former merchants and pearl dealers. There's also a small **Turkish Fort** on the edge of the main town.

The newly opened **Coral Farasan Resort** (☎ 316 0000; www.coralhotels.com.sa; s/d low season SR350/460, s/d high season SR400/550; 🍽️), lying 11km east of the port, offers comfortable rooms, a private beach (where women can swim), a restaurant, car rental (SR75/125 per day in low/high season), a ferry booking service and boat trips (SR250 per hour per boat for up to six people). In the future, a dive centre should open.

If the Coral Farasan is full, the **Farasan Hotel** (☎ 316 0876; mohdbinali@yahoo.com; s/d SR250/375) right next to the hospital in the town centre offers similar services and accommodation as well as fishing trips, snorkelling and reef diving if pre-booked (from SR250 per person inclusive; minimum six passengers). In winter, both places get busy, so reserve one week in advance.

THE EMPTY QUARTER

الربع الخالي

The Empty Quarter (Rub al-Khali; 'the Abode of Silence'), conjures up all that was romantic and forbidden about Arabia. European adventurers all dreamt of conquering it, while the Bedu, who called

AMID THE DESERT DUNES

We stopped to examine a small clump of sage grass. In the stems was a little water, and I chewed on them as I supposed the animals chewed on them as they eked out an existence in this merciless but mesmerising environment.

'I love to sleep in the desert,' Abu Ali declared. 'The sand is so smooth and restful. There is no dirt and dust – you get up and you feel refreshed.' He stood up and the sand on his *thobe* poured softly to the ground. Looking towards the horizon he said, 'I shall die here. And when I do, I want that they bury me here.'

Later we came across what he called *zaher*, a tiny *tribulus* flower with bright yellow petals, endemic to the Empty Quarter.

Turning towards me with the flower outstretched he proclaimed, 'Just as this flower is the light of the desert, so you are the light of all womanhood.' I smiled embarrassed. Even in the presence of a stranger, even in front of a foreigner, the Bedu can't resist the spontaneous poetry that still sometimes seizes them.

'Are you sad that you're no longer living the life of a Bedouin, Abu Ali?' I asked later.

'Yes,' he said. 'I long for that way of life.' After a pause he went on, 'But I don't long for those days...those terrible, difficult, desert days.'

As we slipped and struggled up another dune, a pair of Arabian oryx, the colour of the sands, spun, startled to face us. In a minute they were gone again, leaping lithely through the dunes in the fast-descending dusk. At sunset, the dunes now a deep mauve, Abu Ali fell to his knees and prayed.

From the author's diary. With thanks to Sheikh Abu Ali, Head Park Ranger, 'Uruq Bani Ma'arid Protected Area & Mr Othman A Llewellyn, Environmental Planner, NCWCD.

it simply the 'Sands', looked upon it as a formidable world of necessity, less enamoured with the beauty of a sand dune than concerned about the number of days' travel to the next well.

The largest area covered by sand on the planet, the Empty Quarter encompasses 655,000 sq km, an area larger than France or Texas. The breathtakingly sculpted sand dunes, for which the Empty Quarter is famous, can rise over 250m and form vast chains of longitudinal dune ridges, stretching over hundreds of kilometres, as well as individual barchan dunes. Shifted by the wind, sand dunes can move at a rate of up to 30m per year.

INFORMATION

Unfortunately, after September 11, access to the Empty Quarter was suddenly restricted and all off-road driving was banned without special permission. As a result, local hotels no longer offer day excursions and overnight trips here.

If you want to get permission, you'll need to apply to the Ministry of Interior and also justify the trip. Currently, the Ministry is also asking all embassies in the Kingdom to advise their nationals against going

there. Tour agencies in Jeddah (see p323) can obtain permission if you give them enough advance notice, but trips there are not cheap.

If you want to get an idea of the dunes without subjecting yourself to the rigmarole of obtaining the permits, one option is to take the road running from Najran to Sulayyil. You'll pass through the dunes on the way (though it's difficult to get much idea of them without going off-road). Don't try and sneak in; the area is patrolled.

A better option (though you'll need your own 4WD) is to visit the 'Uruq Bani Ma'arid Protected Area.

'URUQ BANI MA'ARID PROTECTED AREA

Lying 222km north of Najran (6km east off the main road) and about the same distance from Wadi Sulayyil, is the 'Uruq Bani Ma'arid Protected Area. Though as yet it doesn't register on tourists' or expat itineraries, it's a fantastic way of both sneaking (legally!) into the Empty Quarter, as well as seeing some of Saudi's all-too-rare but beautiful wildlife.

The dunes are as spectacular here as anywhere (up to 250m high and several

EXPLORING THESIGER

As any visitor to the great desert interior of the Empty Quarter will tell you, there is an intangible magic about sitting astride the ridge of one of its sand dunes. It is here that you come closest to the work of the wind as it catches up a few grains of sand and sneezes them over the crest in a shiver of heat and redundancy – an act performed on numberless ridges as the dunes progress to nowhere, and eventually, as the wind turns, come back again. A geode, like a hard, unripe cauliflower, and a golden dancing ant are often the only distractions in this immutable pattern of topographical inanity.

Not surprisingly, then, this celebrated sea of sand has been a holy grail of explorers for well over 200 years. In the empirically-minded 19th century, it represented one of the last frontiers of Western exploration: a place to be overcome, penetrated, civilised, acquisitioned, labelled, explained. In the more egoistical 20th century, it became a blank canvas for self-exploration through physical endurance: man (especially man) pitted against nature.

It is tempting, as such, to map the Empty Quarter in terms of the remarkable lives of the eccentric few who endeavoured to penetrate its uncharted interior. Many made or harboured dreams of the attempt but it wasn't until 1930 that the first crossing of the Empty Quarter was made by one Bertram Thomas, a softly-spoken British civil servant. His travels from Salalah in Oman to Doha in Qatar resulted in a fine book, *Arabia Felix*, that is a classic of the personal endurance genre. St John Philby travelled from Riyadh to Sulayyil, tortured by the knowledge that he'd missed the plaudit of being the first across the wilderness by only a matter of months. His accounts of the experience are poignant for the disappointment they describe.

What is easy to forget in the reading of these endurance classics is that the Empty Quarter has in fact been peopled for centuries. The Bedu know what it is to cross this desert; they know what it means to feel the menacing, maniacal must for water; they live with the grit under their eyelids,

hundred kilometres long) and so also is the wildlife. You should see at least three types of gazelle and the very beautiful Arabian oryx, but don't expect to see large numbers of any species. The best time to see animals is from dawn to 10am and from 4pm to sunset.

Information

You will still need to apply for permission to visit (from the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation & Development – see p309), but permits are usually readily and quite quickly granted, and are free. A ranger will be provided to guide you at the protected area.

To get the permit, send an email to the Commission outlining who you are, when you want to travel, how many people and vehicles will make up your party, and include a copy of your passport or *iqama* (residence permit).

AL-FAW

Nestled under the limestone cliffs of the Jebel Tuwaiq Escarpment on the western fringe of the Empty Quarter, Al-Faw was once a great trading centre, as well as a

staging post for camel caravans crossing the desert between Yemen and the Gulf.

Al-Faw was at the height of its prosperity from late in the 2nd century BC until early in the 1st century AD. It was evidently a large city (1.5km by 1.7km) surrounded by 20m-high walls, beyond which lay fields of irrigated wheat. The city appears to have had a fortified two-storey souq, a palace, temple, domestic houses and a number of tombs.

The outlines (in the form of beautifully hewn stones) of many of these buildings are still evident in the remarkably atmospheric and extensive ruins. Within some of the tombs are some startlingly beautiful and well-preserved inscriptions, though you'll need a guide to find them.

A permit (p367) is required to visit the site. There are no official opening hours, but a guardian and his family live there. Photography is not allowed.

Though the site has been closed for the time being, Professor Ansary, the distinguished Saudi archaeologist who spent 25 seasons at the site, is currently finishing four volumes about it, which should be published in the near future.

wedged in the ear cavities and ground into the cracks of sunburnt heels. What they don't understand, rather like the Sherpas on Everest, is why anyone else wants to know what they know.

There was one traveller, however, who not only wanted to know what the Bedu know but who also wanted the rest of us to understand that it is wrong to assume that Western exploration conquered the Empty Quarter. That man was Wilfred Thesiger – an Eton and Oxford man who found his soul in the heart of Arabia. 'I was exhilarated by the sense of space, the silence,' he wrote of the desert in *The Life of My Choice*. But it is not just the emptiness and his own remarkable resistance to fatigue, thirst and hunger that he describes. Crucially, he describes being 'in harmony with the past, travelling as men had travelled for untold generations across the desert'. Thesiger's Empty Quarter, compellingly described in *Arabian Sands*, isn't empty at all: it's filled with the history of the people of that region and of their extraordinary patience and humour; of the comradeship of the Bait Kathir tribe (among others) and their aptitude to withstand hardship. His sensitivity to their character, his empathy with and profound respect for the Bedu (which was returned in kind), is one of the most significant aspects of his 1000km crossing of the Empty Quarter.

By the time of Thesiger's death in 2003, aged 93, his journey had become a legend. After leaving Arabia, he railed against the dubious advances of modern technology and their impact upon his Bedu friends. Even into his 80s, Thesiger lived in Kenya in a tin-roofed house with neither electricity nor running water.

It wasn't until early 1999 that three Canadian explorers and their camels successfully retraced Thesiger's footsteps, crossing from Salalah in southern Oman to Abu Dhabi in the UAE. They, too, were accompanied by the legendary Bait Kathir, immortalised in Thesiger's black-and-white photographs of the days before the pickup changed the desert forever.

Getting There & Away

Al-Faw can only be reached by private vehicles.

From Sulayyil, take the main highway west for 40km and then the turnoff south to Najran. The turnoff to Al-Faw is a further 76km south, near a petrol station and a large radio tower. The site is 700m east of the road – look for the guardian's Bedouin tent (and the fence enclosing the ruins 200m beyond). Al-Faw lies 340km from Najran.

AL-KHAMASIN (WADI AL-DAWASIR)

الخماسين

☎ 01 / pop 85,500

Lying at an important junction 475km from Najran, 445km from Abha and around 600km from Riyadh, Al-Khamasin (known locally also as Wadi Al-Dawasir after the wadi it's found in) lies on an ancient caravan route and today still makes a useful place to overnight on your way to or from the South, or from where to explore the Empty Quarter.

The town is particularly famous for its *bachoor* (incense) and for the quality of its camels. It's also one of the most impor-

tant areas for the rearing of camels, and in spring, with the rains, the whole place bursts into a verdant green, attracting caravans of camels from all around.

Sleeping & Eating

Al-Rokan Hotel (☎ 784 2492; fax 784 0311; Main St; r SR100) Though considered the best bet in town, rooms can only be described as adequate. Rather small and with somewhat grubby walls, it's nevertheless welcoming and good value.

Sarawat Hotel (☎ 786 1243; fax 786 2111; Main St; s SR75-125, d SR100-150) A better bet but lying 8km from Saptco, the Sarawat is well-run by the friendly Egyptian manager and offers small-but-quiet rooms located at the back, or larger-but-roadside ones at the front.

Al-Rokan Restaurant (☎ 784 6861; Main St; ☎ 1pm-midnight) Part of Al-Rokan Hotel, the restaurant is considered one of the best places for a bite to eat. Try the flavoursome oven-roasted quail (SR12) or juicy chicken kebab (SR10).

Getting There & Away

Saptco (☎ 784 1433) runs buses from Al-Khamasin to Riyadh (SR80, eight hours,

nine daily), Al-Hofuf (SR125, 10 hours, two daily), Dammam (SR140, 12 hours, two daily), Khamis Mushayt (SR55, four hours, four daily) and Jeddah (SR160, 14 hours, two daily). For Abha, go to Khamis Mushayt and change. For Najran, go to Sulayyil (80km south of Al-Khamasin, SR10, one hour, six buses) and from there take a bus to Najran (SR65, five hours, two daily).

Saudia flies to the airport known as Wadi al-Dawasir daily from Riyadh (SR190) and from Jeddah (SR250).

EASTERN PROVINCE

المنطقة الشرقية

The Eastern Province is the centre of Saudi Arabia's colossal oil industry and, as such, you're more likely to live and work here than to visit. The province boasts the longest history of Westerners living and working in Saudi Arabia, and the sprawling satellite towns of Dammam, Al-Khobar and Dhahran are prosperous and relatively liberal.

Despite the modernity, the desert is never far away and rarely more enchanting than the Bedouin market of Nairiyah and the oasis town of Al-Hofuf.

DAMMAM

☎ 03 / pop 836,000

The run-down provincial capital, Dammam, is the longest settled and largest town of the Dhahran-Dammam-Khobar group, but it nonetheless has the feeling of a town whose time has passed. The town is home to enormous populations of immigrant Asians – in the centre it can be hard to imagine that you're in Saudi Arabia at all.

Central Dammam spreads south of the intersection between King Abdul Aziz and 11th Sts.

There are plenty of banks and reasonably priced internet cafés. **Sharkiya Internet Café** (off King Saud St; per hr SR4; ☎ 6am-1am) is for men only; it's behind Safari Al-Danah Hotel. The main post office is on 9th St.

Sights

The **Dammam Museum of Archaeology & Ethnography** (☎ 826 6056; 4th fl, Prince Mohammed bin Fahd St; admission free; ☎ 7.30am-2.30pm Sat-Wed), at the

railroad crossing and opposite the Al-Waha Mall, contains Stone Age tools, Hellenistic pottery, Bedouin crafts, silver jewellery and information on the archaeological sites of the Eastern Province. Frustratingly, the exhibits aren't all labelled in English.

Sleeping

Gulf Flower Hotel (☎ 826 2170; fax 827 0709; 9th St; s SR99-110, d SR132) The best budget bet by a mile, and a good midrange option too, the Gulf Flower has sparkling-clean, spacious and quite well-furnished rooms. It's great value. Ask for one of the 15 rooms with a decent-sized balcony.

Golden Tulip Al-Hamra Hotel Dammam (☎ 833 3444; www.goldentulipalhamra.com; King Khaled St; s/d SR450/550; ☎) The big boon of the four-star Tulip is its central location. There are also four restaurants and a health club (men only) offering massages, Jacuzzi etc.

Eating

As in Al-Khobar (see p352), you're spoilt for choice in Dammam. Streets such as those around Prince Mansour St and Prince Nasser St host everything from Syrian and Sudanese to Afghani and Filipino cuisine. The following all have family sections.

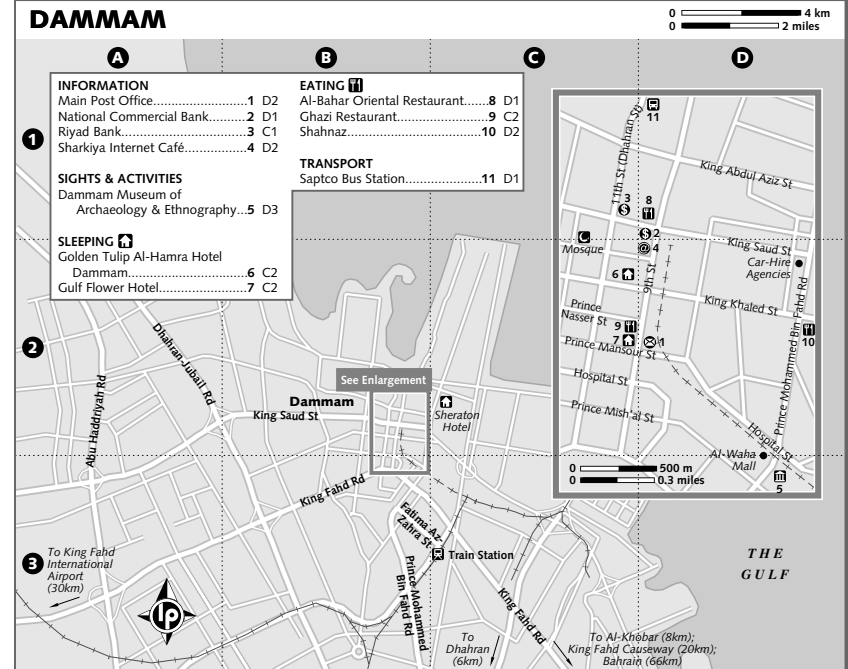
Al-Bahar Oriental Restaurant (☎ 833 4579; King Saud St, diagonally opp Al-Dahah Shopping Centre; ☎ 9am-11pm) Though the outside looks unpromising, this bright, clean Filipino restaurant does delicious dishes at unbeatable prices. Ask for the excellent-value set menu (SR10).

Shahnaz (☎ 833 2243; King Khaled St; starters SR8-18, mains SR25-38; ☎ noon-4pm & 7pm-12.30am) The Shahnaz is known for its pizzazz: first-class food served in a magnificent Moorish setting. The cuisine is Italian (pasta/pizza SR18 to SR24) and Iranian; the seafood cooked *à l'Iranien* is famous (SR42 to SR52).

Ghazi Restaurant (☎ 828 0887; Prince Nasser St; mains SR12-18; ☎ noon-3pm & 7pm-midnight) Perennially popular locally, the spotless and well-managed Ghazi serves fresh and flavourful Pakistani food at decent prices. Specials change daily.

Getting There & Away

AIR King Fahd International Airport, lies about 42km west of the city centre. **Saudia** (☎ 894 3333; Gulf Centre, Prince Turki St, Khobar) has flights



leaving once daily to Abha (SR390), Hail (SR320), Najran (SR390) and Taif (SR360), three times daily to Jeddah (SR390) and eight times daily to Riyadh (SR150).

BUS

The **Suptco Bus Station** (☎ 834 2545; 11th St) is approximately 700m north of the city centre. Intercity services include Al-Hofuf (SR20, two hours, nine daily), Riyadh (SR60, 4½ to 5½ hours, 14 daily), and Jeddah (SR200, 16 hours, three daily) via Taif (SR170, 12 hours) and Sakaka (SR185, 13 hours, four daily).

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 871 5071; end of Fatima Az-Zahra St; ☎ 24hr) to the southeast of the city centre has trains to Riyadh (VIP/1st/2nd class SR130/75/60, four to 4½ hrs, four daily), and Al-Hofuf (VIP/1st/2nd SR40/25/20, 1½ hours, daily).

Getting Around

Buses (SR15, 50 minutes, hourly) run from the bus station to the airport. A taxi between

the airport and Dammam costs about SR50; from the bus station to the town SR10, and to Al-Khobar SR25 to SR30.

AL-KHOBAR

☎ 03 / pop 205,000

Al-Khobar (Khobar) is both the newest and the most attractive of the three cities that make up Greater Dhahran.

With its long corniche along the waterfront, it is the most pedestrian-friendly, relaxed and liberal city in the Eastern Province. It also boasts some of the finest restaurants in Saudi Arabia.

Orientation

Khobar follows a compact grid design, with the central business area bounded by Prince Faisal bin Fahd St to the north, Dhahran St to the south, the Gulf to the east and Prince Hamud St to the west.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Jarir Bookstore (☎ 894 3311; www.jarirbookstore.com; Prince Turki St, btwn 11th & 12th Sts; ☎ 9am-2pm

& 4-11pm Sat-Thu, 4-11pm Fri) Particularly well-stocked with publications on Saudi Arabia in English.

INTERNET ACCESS

Khobar has numerous internet cafés, including the following:

Email Café (☎ 893 8579; Prince Turki St; per hr SR10; ☎ 8am-4am Sat-Thu, 1pm-4am Fri) Men only.

MEDICAL SERVICES

King Fahd University Hospital (☎ 887 3333; 30th St) In the west, with a good accident and emergency department.

MONEY

There are numerous banks around town.

POST

Al-Khobar Post Office (Dhahran St)

Activities

If you're desperate for a dip, the **Holiday Inn Resort** (☎ 896 3333; www.hmb@chotelsgroup.com; King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz Rd; ☎ ☎) lying at a safe distance (45km) south of the city centre on Half Moon Bay, allows non-guests (including women) to use its clean, private beach and facilities for SR60 per person per day (redeemable against drinks and snacks). Facilities include jet ski, buggy and boat hire, and waterskiing. By 2008, it should also have a second pool and gym (for women only). A taxi will take you here for SR50.

Sleeping

our pick Al-Nimran Hotel (☎ 867 5618; www.alnimranhotel.com; Prince Faisal bin Fahd St; s/d SR288/400; ☎ ☎) Though the rooms and bathrooms could be bigger, the big boon here is the lively lobby which also doubles as the very popular Latasia Café. There's also a pool on the 9th floor, which is open to both men and women. Note that 'older rooms' are available (singles/doubles from SR100/150) if you're on a tight budget. Ask for the very accommodating English manager, Mr Neil Maitland Walker.

Gulf Meridien (☎ 896 9000; www.lemeridien-alkhobar.com; Prince Turki St; s/d SR650/700, villas SR3500, royal ste SR12,000; ☎ ☎) Though the décor's a bit anodyne, the comfort is not. Khobar's finest boasts lovely views (all rooms have sea views and balconies), a pool that's open to both men and women, and restaurants with an excellent reputation (buffets SR135).

Eating

Fine dining is one of Khobar's key attractions; here's a tiny selection. All have family sections.

Latasia Café (☎ 867 5618; Prince Faisal bin Fahd St; coffee SR5-10; ☎ 6am-midnight) Located in the Al-Nimran Hotel, this place is famed for its fabulous cakes at fair prices (SR7 to SR9), prepared by an Austrian chef.

Madina (☎ 865 1991; 26th St, off King Khaled St; starters SR6-7, mains SR15-25; ☎ 1pm-midnight) Designed like a traditional *qasr* inside and out (complete with traditional rugs, cushions and carpets), the Madina does succulent Saudi dishes and regional specials, such as grilled pigeon (SR15). The prices are hard to beat too.

Copper Chandni (☎ 887 7868; Prince Faisal bin Fahd St; starters SR8-20, mains SR20-55; ☎ 12.30pm-4.30pm & 7pm-1am) Designed like a Mogul palace right down to the gold damask screens, liveried waiters and Karma vibes, the cuisine here is North Indian and the biryanis are famous.

La Gondola (☎ 893 7345; mains SR48-128, pizzas SR35-48; ☎ noon-3pm & 6pm-11.30pm) Aiming above all for 'authenticity', the Gondola imports many of its products from Italy (including its chef, Paolo). The signature dish *orchidea dell' Oceano* (shrimps in a mascarpone cheese and mustard sauce) and tiramisu are famous in the Eastern Province, and the restaurant's the choice of princes and the press alike. It lies just east of Prince Msa'id St.

our pick Al-Sanbok (☎ 865 3867; just off Dhahran St; starters SR22-28, mains from SR65, 3-course average SR150; ☎ noon-3pm & 6pm-11.30pm) Claiming the 'Kingdom's finest' crown, Al-Sanbok is particularly famous for its fish and seafood, supplied by its own fishing boats. The cuisine, 'international' in style (with Thai and Tandoori influences), is superb; the tom yum kung soup (SR22) is legendary. Much patronised locally as well as by Saudi celebs and international news crews, it's not uncommon to queue for one to 1½ hours in the high season.

If you've blown your budget on fine-dining, or fancy something fast, head for the terrific **Al-Shallal Pastry** (☎ 899 0088; 10th St; sandwiches SR1-2, pizzas SR5-6, ☎ 5.30am-2pm & 3.30pm-12.30am Sat-Thu, 6am-11am & 3.30pm-1am Fri). Its combination of fresh food, freshly baked in spotless premises at rock-bottom prices sees this place buzzing with locals and delivery vans heading off to local schools.

Getting There & Away

AIR

For details of flights from King Fahd International Airport, see p352.

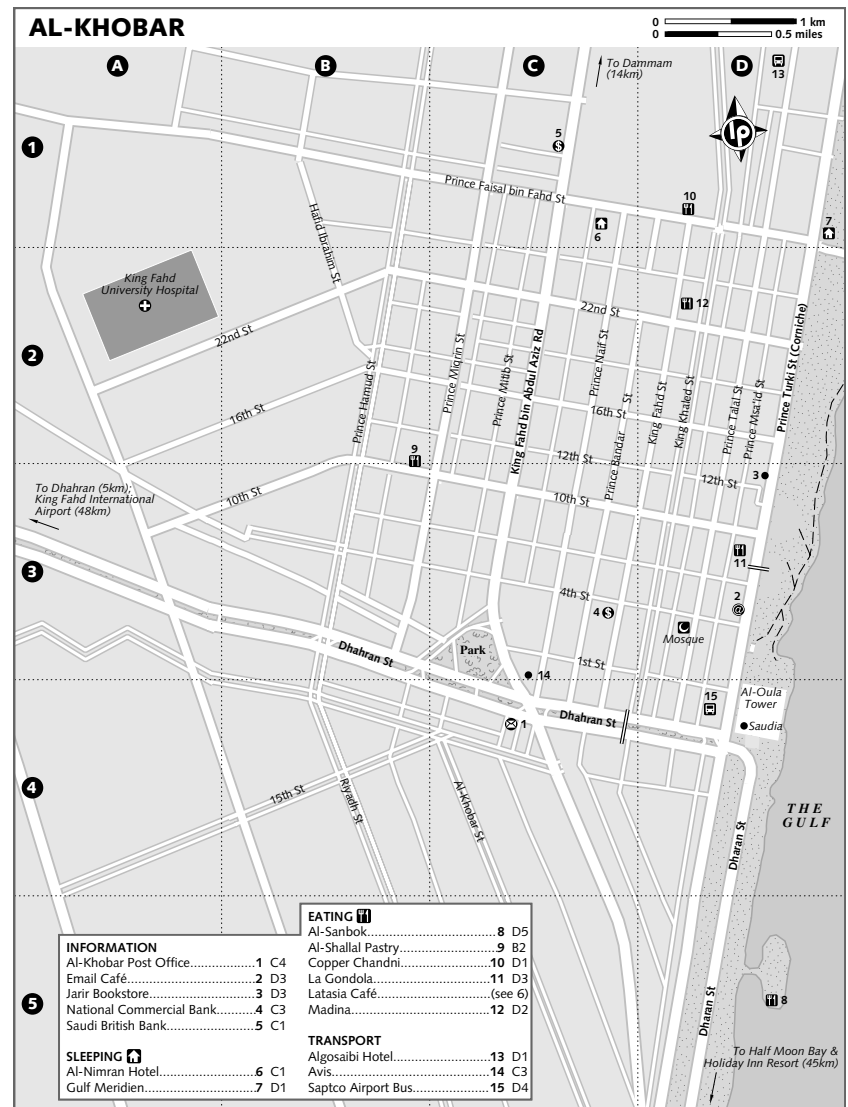
BUS

All intercity buses leave from Dammam (p353), with the single exception of a non-

stop Saptco VIP service between Al-Khobar and Riyadh (SR90, five hours). It leaves from the **Algozaibi Hotel** (☎ 882 2882; Prince Talal St) from where you can also buy tickets.

CAR

Considered reputable among the many car rental companies are **Avis** (☎ 895 5053; www



.avis.com.sa; ☎ 8am-10pm Sat-Thu, 2pm-10.30pm Fri). Hire per day, including insurance plus 150km free, starts at SR80, then SR0.23 per extra kilometre.

Getting Around

The easiest way to get to/from the airport is with the Saptco airport bus (SR15, 45 minutes, hourly from 6am to 11pm). The bus stop is on Prince Majed bin Abdul Aziz St.

Taxis are everywhere. You shouldn't pay more than SR15 for the longest journey within Al-Khobar or SR25 to Dammam (it's better not to use the meter).

DHAHRAN

☎ 03 / pop 105,000

Dhahran is the home of Saudi Arabia's oil industry and the base of Aramco, the granddaddy of Saudi oil companies.

Much of Dhahran is like an exclusive club: a small and self-contained American city, which consists of the Aramco compound, shops, residential areas and the University of Petroleum & Minerals.

If you want a tour of the compound (and a peek at the famous No 7 pipeline), you should contact the Aramco PR department in advance (see the website listed below).

Sights

The **Aramco Exhibit** (☎ 877 2499; www.saudi.aramco.com; admission free; ☎ 8am-4pm Sat-Wed, 10am-6.30pm Thu, 3-6.30pm Fri, families only Thu & Fri) is one of the best museums in the country. Split into eight sections covering all-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-oil-and-the-Saudi-oil-industry, it's educational and informative, and should entertain kids and adults alike (there are plenty of buttons to push, interactive displays and fun activities). A 17-minute long film 'Energy to the World' can be organised with prior arrangement (though be warned, it's mostly toe-curling Aramco propaganda), as can guided tours (1 to 1½ hours). English, French & German speaking guides are free.

Getting There & Away

Taxis to/from Dammam cost SR40, Al-Khobar SR30, and the airport SR80.

NAIRIYAH

The **Bedouin market** at Nairiyah, about 250km north of Dammam, is well worth a visit if you're here on a Thursday. For the Bedu, the market is a major centre for

buying and selling sheep, goats, housewares and the occasional camel.

For foreigners the attraction has long been the Bedouin weavings (mostly rugs) sold by women tending stalls off to one side of the main market; be wary of hard-nosed negotiating techniques, and don't even think of getting a good price if you point your camera at any of them.

Few people stay the night in Nairiyah, but those who do stay at **Al-Sharafi Hotel** (☎ 373 0772; fax 373 1688; s/d SR150/200), which is comfortable, homely, accommodating and friendly. The hotel is signposted throughout town.

From Dammam, take the Jubail expressway to the Abu Hadriyah turn-off and then follow the signs to Nairiyah. Once in town head for the large mosque with a low green dome and follow the crowd.

Be sure to get an early start as the market is usually evaporated by around 10am.

AL-HOFUF

☎ 03 / pop 326,000

Al-Hofuf (also known as Al-Hasa and Al-Ahsa) is for most the highlight of any visit to the Eastern Province. The Al-Hasa Oasis, of which Al-Hofuf is a part, is believed to form the largest oasis in the world. The palm trees (over three million of them) seem to march in all directions and produce no less than half a million tons of dates a year. As an ancient caravan stop, it's not hard to imagine the relief and joy felt by travellers upon arrival after days of desert travel.

The Al-Hofuf area has a rich historical and cultural tradition which warrants a deeper exploration, if you have the time. A couple of the hotels do excellent guided tours of the area's surrounding attractions.

Al-Hofuf is also believed to hold the Kingdom's largest reserves of undrilled oil.

Orientation & Information

The centre of Al-Hofuf is compact. King Abdul Aziz St is the main commercial street and intersects with Prince Mohammed ibn Fahd ibn Jalawi St to form a central square. There are several banks around the main intersection.

Sights

AL-HOFUF MUSEUM

This **museum** (☎ 580 3942; Prince Sultan St; admission free; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Wed) is well-presented,

with maps, photos and good information panels. There's a large map of the oasis at the entrance to the exhibit hall. Sections include those on Eastern Province archaeology, as well as displays showing the Arabian Peninsula disappearing and reappearing from under the oceans up until well after the Ice Age.

QASR IBRAHIM

With its solidity and austerity, this heavily restored **palace** (☎ 585 0852; Prince Mohammed ibn Fahd ibn Jalawi St; admission free; ☎ 7am-1pm & 4-8pm Sat-Wed, on request Thu) dominates the centre of town metaphorically and literally. Inside, the atmosphere is a bit abated by the rather insensitive permanent light fixtures – a common affliction in Saudi Arabia.

The Qasr Ibrahim fort's earliest structure is the restored, white **Al-Quba Mosque** (1571), although most of what you see dates from the beginning of the 19th century. Other structures include the **soldiers' barracks**, the **well**, the **stables** (note the high doors to allow horse and rider to enter) and the **Guard's dormitory**. King Abdul Aziz

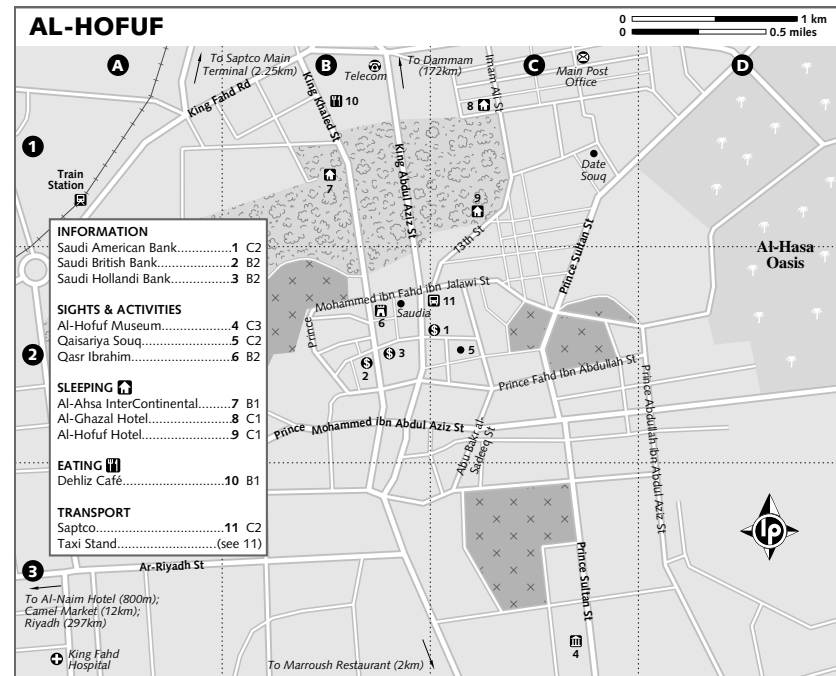
apparently used the *hammam* (bathhouse) to store his dates. Check out the views from the ramparts.

SOUQS & MARKETS

One of the last-remaining souqs in Saudi Arabia, and one of the most extensive, the **Qaisariya souq** (☎ 8am-11.30am & 4pm-10pm) was tragically devastated by a fire in 2001. Following a patch-up job by the local authorities, King Abdullah has recently pledged his help to rebuild the famous souq in its original style.

Until then, it's still well worth a visit as it contains an excellent selection of local handicrafts including basketware, pottery and locally made coffee pots.

Look out in particular for the *besht* (the lovely, thick cloaks worn by Saudis in winter) as well as *mashlah* (the fine, lightweight cloaks sometimes bordered with gold and worn at ceremonial occasions), Bedouin silver jewellery and antiques. A little jar of Iranian saffron (SR10) would make a great pressie to take to loved ones back home.



Also well worth a visit if you're in town on a Thursday is the **camel market** (🕒 7am-noon) which takes place on the outskirts of town (around 15km west from the centre) on the Riyadh road.

Tours

The Al-Ahsa InterContinental offers 'City Tours' for SR50 per person per hour; the Al-Hofuf Hotel provides comprehensive two-day tours of the town and surrounding area (SR500 per person). Prices are cheaper if you can muster a group.

Sleeping

Al-Naim Hotel (☎ 575 5511; fax 575 8211; Riyadh St; s/d SR120/180) The best budget bet in town, rooms are simply furnished but sanitary. The hotel is also an agent for Saptco (and can issue tickets for its buses), and lies south-west of the town centre.

Al-Ghazal Hotel (☎ 582 6555; fax 586 9966; 16th St; s/d SR230/300) Set on a quieter road, the hotel is more peaceful than many. Its decoration is a bit Orientalist-glitzy, but the rooms are well-furnished and comfortable. It's excellent value.

our pick Al-Hofuf Hotel (☎ 585 5555; hofhtl@nesma.net.sa; 13th St; s/d SR400/570; 🚗 🚗) Offering the usual four-star facilities (including carpets thick enough to leave footprints in, and a health club open to men and women), the Al-Hofuf is also particularly well-managed, accommodating and welcoming. Ask to stay in one of the 20 'oasis-side' rooms.

Al-Ahsa InterContinental (☎ 584 0000; www.intercontinental.com/alahsa; off King Khaled St; s/d from SR650/800; 3-bed villas SR2400; 🚗 🚗) It may look Gothic-church-meets-Arab-*qasr* from the outside, but inside it's well-designed and luxurious. The pool and health club are open to men and women (at different times). Ask for the corporate rate (singles/doubles SR475/575) if you can.

Eating

Marroush Restaurant (☎ 581 0000; Stadium St; starters SR6-10, mains SR12-22; 🕒 noon-2am Sat-Fri, families only Fri) Considered one of the best eating options in town, the Marroush is an upmarket but reasonably priced place serving scrumptious food. Try the BBQ pigeon (SR16) or *steak au poivre* (SR22). The family rooms are comfy and cosy, and

the restaurant is 2km south of the town centre.

our pick Dehliz Café (☎ 587 5533; off King Khaled St; iced latte SR12, cakes SR12; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 4pm-2.30am) Close to the Al-Ahsa InterContinental, the Dehliz is a fabulous new café decorated like a traditional *qasr*, complete with part-beamed roof and traditional Quranic chant-music. It's a great place for breakfast or a coffee-and-a-cake curled up on the comfy sofas. Look out for the old photos of Al-Hofuf hung on the walls.

Getting There & Away

There are bus services with **Saptco** (☎ 587 3688; cnr King Abdul Aziz & Prince Mohammed ibn Fahd ibn Jalawi St) including Dammam (SR20, two hours, nine daily), Riyadh (SR45, 4½ hours, five daily), Nairiyah (SR5, three hours, one daily) and Jeddah (SR190, 16 hours, one daily).

The **train station** (☎ 582 9999; King Fahd Rd; 🕒 5am-12.30am) lies 2.5km northwest of the town centre. Trains run to Riyadh (VIP/1st/2nd class SR100/55/45, 2½ hours, four daily) and to Dammam (VIP/1st/2nd class SR40/25/20, one hour 20 minutes, four times daily Saturday to Wednesday, twice daily Thursday, and three times daily Friday). Taxis to/from the town cost between SR10 and SR15.

Saudia flies to Al-Hofuf from Riyadh (among other destinations) for SR190 one-way.

Getting Around

There's a taxi stand just outside the Saptco office in the city centre. To/from the airport (25km) costs SR15 to SR20, to/from the bus stations SR10 to SR15.

SAUDI ARABIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION Camping

Camping is permitted anywhere in the Kingdom (bar security-sensitive areas), and the Saudis love to camp. Of the handful of camping grounds, such as Asir National Park (p343), there are no facilities such as water or electricity, but the sites are free.

Hostels

These days very few Westerners stay at Saudi Arabia's men-only youth hostels (*buyut ash-shabab*). Most are located near the stadium (they're run by the Youth Association) some distance from the centre, though they're usually clean and well maintained. Most offer rooms with a private bath (SR10 per person, maximum three nights).

Hotels

Throughout this chapter, quoted room rates include private bathroom, unless stated otherwise, and exclude the 15% service charge that is added to your bill by all five- and some four-star hotels (and restaurants).

During the haj season (particularly in Jeddah), at the end of Ramadan, during school holidays, and in summer (June to August) in Abha, Taif and other mountain regions (periods all known as the Saudi 'high season') prices can increase from between 50% to 150%, .

The cheapest budget hotels are basic and bleak, but for a few riyals more you can usually find something simple and clean, some with private bathrooms and almost all with air-conditioning. Expect to pay from around SR60 to SR80 for a single to SR100 for a double.

Midrange hotels (singles SR150 to SR200, doubles SR250 to SR400), offer good value for money, with comfortable and often spacious rooms, satellite TV (usually with English-language channels) and private bathrooms.

Saudi Arabia also has a generous selection of top-range hotels. Most offer the

usual five-star facilities including business centres, internet access, swimming pools, fitness centres etc. Most hotels quote rack rates (around SR500 to SR1000 for singles, and SR700 to SR1500 for doubles), but offer decent 'corporate discounts' to tour operators, embassies and companies with whom they have prior agreements. If you're travelling independently, try to book your hotels through a local tour operator (see p366) who can get discounts of between 15% to 50%, or ask your company (if you work for one) to fax the hotel with your dates.

Note that many hotels offer 'weekend packages', which offer special rates; if you're planning a whole weekend somewhere, enquire.

During the haj season, the end of Ramadan and during school holidays, be sure to reserve well in advance. During the haj in Jeddah, two months is not too soon.

ACTIVITIES

Beaches

Saudi's beaches can disappoint. Many have been built on or over, are litter-strewn and very crowded and noisy at weekends. They're almost all men-only. The best bet is to head for the five-star coastal hotels, which often have their own private beach, where women also can swim (albeit usually covered up in a t-shirt and trousers).

Diving

With the longest coastline of any country on the eastern seaboard of the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia has huge diving potential. Those who do know it, rank it among the

BED BUREAUCRACY

To check in at any hotel, Saudi law requires the presentation of a passport (for those travelling on visitors' visas) or an *iqama* (for expats).

In order to share a room, you must be married – and able to prove it: either a marriage certificate, or your passports *and* visas clearly showing your marital status.

Unaccompanied women (one or in a group) have the biggest bureaucracy to battle with. You will need to present one of three documents: a letter of introduction (claiming full responsibility for you) from either your company (if you are working in Saudi Arabia), or your sponsor (and ideally stamped by the Chamber of Commerce in Jeddah or Riyadh); a confirmed hotel booking from a local tour agent if you're a tourist; or, as a last resort, a letter from the local police. Even then, lodging may be refused you, except by the five-star establishments (though not all) and some four-star hotels. Travelling in a group (minimum of four women) does simplify things, as this is considered more acceptable. Note also that with very few exceptions, hotel pools and health clubs are for men only.

best sites in the world. It is also this relative obscurity outside the Kingdom that is its greatest advantage: its reefs remain almost empty of divers and boats.

Note that women (local and foreign) are permitted to dive, though conservative behaviour is still sometimes expected (such as wearing loose clothing over your wetsuit until just before you get into the water).

Currently, just one dive operator regularly operates live-aboard diving, though a number of dive outfits operating in Jeddah cater to growing local demand.

Saudi Arabia's diving is considered forgiving. Even in winter, the water temperatures rarely drop too low (at the southern sites from 24°C to 26°C), though wetsuits of between 5mm to 6mm are advised in winter; 3mm to 4mm in summer. Saudi's greatest advantage is its visibility, which ranges from the good to the astonishing (up to 35m to 40m is not uncommon). In general, there are also few currents to contend with.

More experienced divers prefer to boat-dive off Jeddah, and particularly around Al-Lith, Yanbu and the Farasan Islands, where the diving can be spectacular. See the quick guide (right).

A local dive operator frequently recommended and with a good safety record, which also operates live-aboard boats on a regular basis (and which can arrange tourist visas) is **Dream Divers** (☎ 02-234 0473; www.dreamdiver.net; Dream Marina, Corniche Rd, South Obhur, Jeddah), the largest, privately owned diving operation in the Middle East. It has offices in Jeddah, Yanbu and Al-Lith.

Two other outfits are **Red Sea Divers** (☎ 660 6368; fax 660 2064; Al-Kournaish St, Jeddah) and **Desert Sea Divers** (☎ 02-656 1807; www.desertseadivers.ws; Al-Kournaish St, 4km north of Radisson SAS Hotel, Jeddah).

Equipment can be hired (regulators and BCDs per day SR20 to SR25), though boots, fins and wetsuits can be difficult to find; bring your own. Jeddah has a decompression chamber.

For more information on diving in Saudi, visit www.saudidiving.com, a comprehensive website that includes descriptions and maps of individual dive sites, a list of tour operators and general information about the region.

JEDDAH

- Boasts over 50 dive sites and a number of wrecks (accessible even to inexperienced divers), reached by day boats operated by dive clubs in and around town.
- A colourful selection of hard and soft corals.
- Good variety of smaller reef fishes, including Anthea, sergeant major, large-sized trevally jack, king fish, Spanish mackerel, tuna dog tooth, big eye, bump tail, skip jack.
- During the season there are yellow fin, rays, moray eels and turtles.

YANBU

- Lies 230km north of Jeddah.
- Boasts outstanding visibility (34m to 40m average).
- Hammerheads found at deeper depths (from around 40m).
- Wide variety of fish including good numbers of Napoleon wrasse, blue-spotted rays, moray eels and turtles.

AL-LITH

- Lies 180km south of Jeddah.
- Giant bumphead parrot fish (often in quite big groups) are major draw.
- Sharks (grey, white-tip and black-tip mainly) seen all year, others (hammerhead chiefly) during winter.
- Large variety of hard and soft corals as well as coloured sponges and sea whips.
- The only accommodation is currently at **Ahlam Marina & Resort** (☎ 07-733 4112; cabins per night SR300) with restaurant, and fishing and dive shop.
- Other attractions include caverns, caves and islands used as nesting site by leatherback and green turtles, and excellent birdlife (including sooty gulls, blue legged boobys, white-eyed gulls, little bitterns, crab plovers, goliath herons, night herons, pelicans, flamingos, ospreys and sooty falcon).

FARASAN ISLANDS

- Lies off coast, 40km from Jizan, 722km from Jeddah.
- Though visibility is not always so good, waters around Farasan Islands can offer the most spectacular diving of all – the nutrients and plankton attracting large pelagic species including whales, whale

sharks and mantas, and on the drop offs, many hammerheads.

- Currently, only one dive operator branch (at the Farasan Hotel p348); another operator to open soon.

4WD

There are ample opportunities to leave tarmac roads behind and explore Arabia's desert interior. Among the most rewarding are the sand seas of the Empty Quarter (p348), following the Hejaz Railway, and excursions into the Al-Nafud desert (p321).

BOOKS

If you're in Saudi for a while, there's a good variety of locally written and produced books such as *Desert Treks from Riyadh* by Ionis Thompson. *An A-Z of Places and Things Saudi*, by Kathy Cuddihy, contains everything from the *abeyya* and Islamic banking to an overview of key places around the kingdom.

Both Sandra Mackey's *The Saudis: Inside the Desert Kingdom* and the more recent *Saudi Arabia Exposed* by John R Bradley are expats' insider (and banned) accounts of life in Saudi Arabia. Though they pander slightly to the West's love of salacious Saudi stories of violence, intrigue and drama, they nevertheless offer interesting insights.

The world of Saudi women is illuminated by Saddeka Arebi's *Women and Words in Saudi Arabia*, a fascinating look through the eyes of nine female Saudi writers.

The impact of rapid modernisation upon Bedouin society is beautifully portrayed in Abdelrahman Munif's novel, *Cities of Salt*.

Of the good selection of coffee-table books, the *Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, published by the Supreme Commission of Tourism, makes a great pictorial souvenir. Other glossy tomes include *The Traditional Architecture of Saudi Arabia* by Geoffrey King, and the beautifully produced *Travelers in Arabia – British Explorers in Saudi Arabia*, edited by Eid al Yahya, which includes maps and evocative photographs.

For more book listings, see p23.

BUSINESS HOURS

Opening hours vary according to the season and province. In general:

Banks 8.30am to noon and 4.30pm to 8pm Saturday to Wednesday. At airports, banks are open 24 hours.

Offices 7.30am to 2.30pm or 3.30pm Saturday to Wednesday

Post offices 7.30am to 10pm Saturday to Wednesday, 4.30pm to 10pm Friday

Restaurants 7am to 10.30am, noon to 3pm and 6pm or 7pm to midnight (to 1am or 2am at weekends)

Shopping centres 9am or 10am to midnight Saturday to Thursday

Shops & souqs 8am or 9am to 1pm or 2pm and 4.30pm or 5pm to 9pm to midnight, Saturday to Wednesday
Note that during prayer times (five times a day), everything shuts.

CHILDREN

For general information on travelling with children in the Peninsula, see p529. Saudi Arabia has numerous amusement parks for children. They're usually family-only affairs, cost SR10/5 per adult/child and just about any medium-sized town has one. For a small listing of some amusement parks in the Kingdom, visit www.funiguide.com/parks/park.pl?saudiara.

CUSTOMS

Despite all the warnings, some travellers continue to try and enter the Kingdom with alcohol. Note that if you are caught with any amount, you will be returned home on the next flight. If you're deemed to be in possession of a quantity that exceeds 'personal consumption', punishments are severe (the death penalty if convicted of smuggling).

DVDs, videos or suspect-looking books are passed to the Ministry of Information officials for inspection. Unfamiliar or suspect-looking items may be confiscated for further inspection for up to 48 hours. Receipts are issued for later collection once inspected and passed. Laptop harddisks and computer media are not checked unless officials are suspicious. See also boxed text, p362.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES Dos & Don'ts

Conservative dress is the rule of thumb in Saudi Arabia. Shorts in public are a big no-no (bar the private beaches operated by some top-end hotels and expat compounds). See also Women Travellers, p367.

Unmarried couples shouldn't travel together; if they do, they may be stopped and investigated. Alcohol is strictly illegal in Saudi Arabia.

PLEASE (DON'T) BRING A BOTTLE

The following items are banned in Saudi Arabia. Don't be tempted to try and sneak them in; the bags of all passengers are X-rayed upon arrival (with high-tech equipment that can detect liquids as well as metals):

- Alcohol
- Art work or any other item bearing religious symbols or motifs, such as Stars of David
- Banned books, DVDs and videos
- Firearms and explosives
- Illegal drugs and medication without a doctor's prescription
- Politically sensitive material, and material overly critical of the government or royal family
- Pork products
- Pornography or any publications containing pictorial representations of people (particularly women) in a less than conservative state of dress
- Symbols of other religions, such as Christian crosses

You should carry your passport with you at all time. If travelling independently, carry a letter of introduction (and many copies) with you from your company.

See also p50 for general information on social etiquette in the Peninsula.

Mutawwa

Formally known as the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, the *mutawwa* (religious police) have an infamous reputation as a kind of squad of moral vigilantes out to enforce strict Islamic orthodoxy.

Operating independently of other branches of the security services, the *mutawwa* are at their most authoritative (and hence not to be argued with) when accompanied by uniformed police.

They have become less visible – and less welcome – in places like Jeddah and Al-Khobar in recent years, but they remain active elsewhere.

Ramadan

For Muslims, public observance of the fast is mandatory. For non-Muslims, smoking, eating or drinking anywhere in public could result in an arrest.

Road Safety

Saudi Arabia has one of the highest incidents of road fatalities in the world. If you're driving, here are the main hazards to heed:

- Be particularly careful on the coastal road that links Jeddah to Jizan (known as Road No 55), which has the highest fatality rate in the Kingdom (though a new dual-carriageway is planned for the future).
- Camels wandering onto unfenced roads, particularly at night.
- In towns, local buses and taxis suddenly veering across the road to pick up or drop off passengers.
- Pick-up trucks suddenly pulling out in front of you at junctions or after petrol stations.
- Vehicles driving with one or no lights at night on roads outside the towns.
- Vehicles trying to overtake, particularly on corners. Saudi drivers expect you – and sometimes oncoming traffic too! – to pull over onto the hard shoulder so that they can pass.

See also the boxed texts, p371 and p555.

Sexual Harassment

As elsewhere, Hollywood movies and hard-core porn channels (now all too easily available in the Kingdom) have greatly coloured the Saudi perception of Western women. As a result, stares, leers and obscene comments are sometimes reported by Western women travellers.

It's very rarely more than this, however, and the social disgrace that comes from having touched a woman in public is one of your most effective weapons. If your

harasser persists, report him to the police or security men that can be found on most streets and malls.

Remember also the rule of thumb: the more conservatively you dress, the more conservatively you will be treated, particularly with regards to wearing a headscarf.

See p51 for more information.

Terrorism

Since the widely reported series of attacks on Western targets in 2003 and 2004 (see p303), security has been dramatically tightened around residential compounds and embassies.

Nevertheless, incidents are still sporadically occurring (most notably in the shooting of four French tourists near Medina in February 2006), though these are not always reported by the largely government-controlled press.

Some security analysts both in and outside the country fear that this new form of unplanned, low-tech, low-cost and spontaneous attack against Westerners may even form the future face of Al-Qaeda attacks against Westerners in Saudi Arabia. While there may be little cause for undue alarm, it pays to remain vigilant at all times, especially around Western compounds and other places frequented primarily by Westerners.

Travellers visiting with group tourist visas are currently accompanied (incognito) by a Ministry of Interior vehicle for added safety. You should also register your arrival in the Kingdom with your embassy, and keep a close eye on warnings issued

by them (in the form of emails or text messages).

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES
Saudi Embassies & Consulates

Following are the Saudi embassies and consulates in major cities around the world.

Australia (☎ 612-6282 6999; 38 Guilfoyle St, Yarralumla, 2600 ACT)

Canada (☎ 613-237 4100; Ste 901, 99 Bank St, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 6B9)

France (☎ 01 47 66 02 06; 5 Ave Hoche, 75008 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-889 250; Kurfürstendamm 63, 10707 Berlin)

Ireland Apply through Saudi embassy in UK.

Netherlands (☎ 070-361 4391; Alexanderstraat 19, 2514 JM, The Hague)

New Zealand Apply through Saudi embassy in Australia.

UK (☎ 020-7917 3000; 30 Charles St, London W1X 7PM)

USA (☎ 202-342 3800; 601 New Hampshire Ave NW, Washington DC 20037)

Embassies & Consulates in Saudi Arabia

All of the following are in Riyadh's Diplomatic Quarter in the west of Riyadh. They generally open from 9am to 4pm Saturday to Wednesday.

Australia (☎ 01-488 7788 or 01-488 7812 after hrs)

Bahrain (☎ 01-488 0044)

Canada (☎ 01-488 2288)

France (☎ 01-488 1255)

Germany (☎ 01-488 0700)

Iran (☎ 01-488 1916)

Ireland (☎ 01-488 2300)

Jordan (☎ 01-488 0039)

Kuwait (☎ 01-488 3500)

New Zealand (☎ 01-488 7988)

Oman (☎ 01-482 3120)

MINDING THE MUTAWWA

The *mutawwa* are a source of both fear and fascination for many travellers. But so long as you dress and behave appropriately, you should have little to fear. Indeed, some *mutawwa* are known to give *hawajas* (Westerners) a wide berth.

Not so for Saudi's immigrant population, however, who sometimes complain of harassment. One Filipino that the author met in Abha claimed to have been severely chided for allowing her pigtail to peep out the back of her headscarf, and on another occasion for having plucked her eyebrows, which 'Allah had given her'.

The *mutawwa* are conspicuous for their *thobes* which are worn above their ankles (according to instructions in the Quran) and for wearing *gutrás* (white head cloths) without *agals* (head ropes), since God alone is entitled to wear 'crowns'.

The places where you're most likely to encounter *mutawwa* in Saudi Arabia (since they are more conservative) are in descending order: Al-Ula, Qasim, Jizan, Abha, Hail, Al-Jouf, Sakaka, Al-Hofuf, Riyadh, Taif, and Najran.

Qatar (☎ 01-482 5685)

UAE (☎ 01-482 6803)

UK (☎ 01-488 0077)

USA (☎ 01-488 3800)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Saudi Arabia's major festival is the **Jenadriyah National Festival**; see p314 for details. Other smaller, local festivals include Abha's summer festivals of poetry and folklore, and National Day (23 September) is usually also celebrated in some form or another across the Kingdom.

HOLIDAYS

No holidays other than **Eid al-Fitr**, **Eid al-Adha** and **National Day** are observed in the Kingdom. See the boxed text, p535, for information on Islamic holidays.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are present in the larger Saudi towns, but are not as ubiquitous as you might imagine and are men-only domains. Connections are generally adequate and costs SR3 to SR10 per hour. It's far easier to bring a laptop or Blackberry, however, particularly for women (who should otherwise head for the business centre of a five-star hotel). Most four- and all five-star hotels and many coffeeshops now have wireless facilities.

Most three-star hotels will let you use a dialup connection.

Connecting your computer to a local internet server is relatively easy. Internet cards from Saudi Internet companies start from SR10 for 10 hours; the best companies are Awal Net, Nesma and Saudi Net. Cards are available from computer shops, Jarir Bookstores (Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Al-Khobar and Al-Hofuf) and some stationery stores.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The internet is strictly policed, with more than 3000 sites blocked at the last count. Most of these are pornographic, but they also include sites discussing politics, health, women's rights and education. For a full list of internet topics prohibited by the Saudi authorities, visit www.al-bab.com/media/docs/saudi.htm.

Some useful websites on Saudi Arabia include the following:

Arabian Wildlife (www.arabianwildlife.com/archives/vol2.2/sawwhe.htm) A good listing for most of Saudi Arabia's protected areas.

Saudi-American Forum (www.saudi-american-forum.org/index.html) An informative cross-cultural dialogue with articles discussing the Saudi-American relationship and changes taking place within Saudi society.

Saudi Arabian Information Resource (www.saudinf.com) Run by the Ministry of Culture & Information, it contains nearly 2000 pages of history, culture, economics and helpful addresses.

Wahhabi Theology (<http://reference.allrefer.com/country-guide-study/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia40.html>) Fairly balanced and detailed coverage of the history and central tenets of Wahhabi Islam.

Who Were the Nabataeans? (<http://nabataea.net/who.html>) Everything you needed to know about the builders of Madain Saleh.

LEGAL MATTERS

Saudi Arabia imposes strict Sharia'a (Islamic law), under which extremely harsh punishments are imposed.

If you're involved in a traffic accident, call ☎ 999 (it doesn't have to be an emergency), don't move your car (even by 1m) and don't leave the scene until the police arrive.

Try and get the name of the other driver, and the registration and insurance number of the vehicle. To claim insurance, a police report is obligatory. Sometimes Saudis in a hurry offer to pay for minor damages on the spot, but you should insist on a police report, as garages are not allowed to carry out repairs without one.

MAPS

The best maps of Saudi Arabia are Farsi Maps. They're available at branches of the Jarir Bookstore throughout the Kingdom (SR20 each). The series includes many general maps for most regions, and excellent city maps for Riyadh, Jeddah, Al-Ahsa (Al-Hofuf), Hail, Abha, Taif, Mecca and Medina, among other places.

MEDIA

All forms of media (other than satellite TV) are controlled by the government, though the grip has definitely loosened in recent years.

Newspapers & Magazines

The English-language dailies *Arab News* and the *Saudi Gazette* (SR2 each) are sur-

prisingly frank, although they steer clear of any criticism of the royal family or Islam.

International newspapers (the *Guardian*, the *Times*, *International Herald Tribune* and *Le Monde*) and magazines (*Time* and *Newsweek*) are available from any branch of Jarir Bookstore, usually three days after publication.

Don't expect your foreign newspaper to include all of its pages; censors routinely extract articles about Saudi Arabia and any photographs considered vaguely risqué or controversial.

Radio

Jeddah Radio (96.2FM) broadcasts in English and French, while the **BBC World Service** (www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/index.shtml) is available on short-wave frequency (11.760khz or 15.575khz).

TV

Satellite TV (CNN, BBC and RFI) is widely available in private hotels and homes. NBC2 broadcasts films in English 24 hours, and Saudi Arabia TV Channel 2 broadcasts in English (everything from Australian soap operas to *Islam Q&A*).

There's also Al-Jazeera, see p294.

MONEY

Credit Cards

More and more establishments are accepting credit cards including most medium to large-sized hotels, restaurants, airline offices and shops. Surprisingly, some tour operators do not – check first.

Currency

The unit of currency is the Saudi riyal (SR) and one riyal (SR1) is divided into 100 halalas. Coins come in 25 and 50 halala denominations. Notes come in SR1, SR5, SR10, SR20, SR50, SR100, SR200 and SR500 denominations. The Saudi riyal is a hard currency and there are no restrictions on its import or export.

Exchanging Money

Banks (with ATMs that accept international cards) are ubiquitous throughout the country. For exchanging cash, you'll get a much better rate at one of the many money changers, whose bureaus are found in most town centres. All major hard currencies are

exchanged and commission is not usually charged, but check this (and rates) first.

As everywhere, avoid the exchange desks at top-end hotels, which offer poor rates.

Exchange Rates

The riyal is pegged to the US dollar. The following exchange rates were correct at the time of printing:

Country	Unit	Saudi riyal
Australia	A\$1	SR3.05
Bahrain	BD1	SR2.00
Canada	C\$1	SR3.24
Euro zone	€1	SR5.01
Japan	¥100	SR3.16
Kuwait	KD1	SR13.02
New Zealand	NZ\$1	SR2.70
Oman	OR1	SR9.77
UAE	Dh1	SR1.02
UK	£1	SR7.41
US	US\$1	SR3.75
Yemen	YR100	SR2.08

PHOTOGRAPHY

Though the ban on photography in public places has recently been lifted, there are still areas that are off-limits (mainly because of security concerns): designated government buildings, embassies, airports, seaports, desalination or electricity plants, oil rigs, royal palaces and police stations or anything vaguely connected with the military or security services. Don't photograph people without their permission, and never photograph women (even in a general street scene).

Camcorders are prohibited at some archaeological sites; if you get caught, your camcorder may be confiscated. If you're coming to Saudi with a tour operator, ask them if they can organise a video permit for you, as well as a letter to Customs (stating that you will arrive with a camcorder).

Memory cards and batteries can be found in both Riyadh and Jeddah, as can places that burn CDs.

POST

The queues at Saudi post offices can be long, especially in the main city branches in the evenings and at weekends.

Any parcel you want to post to an address outside the Kingdom must first be taken to the post office unwrapped so that

UPWARDLY MOBILE

Mobiles make the world go round in Saudi Arabia. Owning one – even temporarily – can also greatly ease your path. Call:

- Direct Enquiries (☎ 905) if you're having trouble tracing someone or something (it lists almost every hotel, restaurant and government office in the Kingdom, the service operates 24 hours, is English-speaking and is well-known for its efficiency and helpfulness)
- Home (it's astonishingly cheap calling via the Saudi networks)
- Hotels if you're running late (reservations are automatically cancelled by hotels' computer systems after a certain time)
- Museums, shops or restaurants to check opening hours (which are notoriously erratic)
- Police or emergency services in the (sadly, not too unlikely) event of a road accident or for help
- To stay in touch with new Saudi friends or contacts (the author was handed mobile numbers belonging even to Saudi ministers and princes).

Saudi customs can inspect it. If the parcel includes video tapes, they may be viewed by customs before you can mail them.

The attempt to introduce private post boxes recently failed inexplicably. Most Saudis continue to use their company mailboxes instead. If you're living in Saudi, you should follow suit or get a post box at your local post office.

TELEPHONE

Healthy competition between the mobile companies keeps costs down. There's little difference in price between calling from a home number and a mobile number.

At the time of writing, you could buy a mobile SIM card from SR75 (from Mobily) which included 120 minutes' free credit (with a one to three month expiry date), as well as second handsets from SR100.

The mobile phone network run by STC operates on the GSM system. For directory assistance, call ☎ 905 (domestic) or ☎ 900 (international).

VISAS

Saudi Arabia is one of the most difficult places in the world to visit. Note that Jews are not granted visas to the Kingdom.

Haj & Umrah

For haj (pilgrimage to Mecca) visas there's a quota system of one visa for every 1000 Muslims in a country's population. Exactly how this system is administered varies from country to country.

Umrah (any pilgrimage to Mecca that is not haj) visas are issued to any Muslim requesting one, although if you're not from a Muslim country or don't have an obviously Muslim name, you'll be asked to provide an official document that lists Islam as your religion. Converts to Islam must provide a certificate from the mosque where they went through their conversion ceremony.

Umrah and haj visas are free and are valid only for travel to Jeddah, Mecca and Medina, and on the roads connecting them to one another.

Residence (Work) Visas

The visas required to live and work in the Kingdom are organised by your employer.

Tourist Visas

During the last six years the Saudi authorities have started tentatively to issue tourist visas, but *only* for those willing to travel as part of a group (minimum four people) organised by a recognised tour company (including dive companies).

Issued under the sponsorship of Saudia (under its 'Discover Saudi Arabia' program), you can find the list of approved international and local Saudi tour companies who can arrange the visas at: www.saudiairlines.com/tours/discoversaudi Arabia.jsp. It takes 14 days from the date of request to issue a tourist visa.

Note also that passports must be valid for a minimum of six months, and women

under 30 years old must be accompanied by their husband or brother (who must also arrive and leave Saudi Arabia at the same time).

Note that men and women are only allowed to travel together (and granted a visa to do so) if they are (a) married (with an official marriage licence) or (b) form part of a group.

It is not permitted for an unmarried couple to travel alone together in Saudi Arabia (and doing so runs the risk of apprehension). Regarding the tourist visa, two couples could in effect travel together, but only if they came as 'individuals in a group'.

One local tour company that can offer advice and has an excellent reputation locally is Sadd Al-Samallaghi Est based in Jeddah (see p323).

Transit Visas

Three-day transit visas are available for people driving between Jordan and either Kuwait or Yemen. Those driving between Jordan and Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are usually granted seven-day visas. They're only issued if you can prove that there was no other way to get to your destination.

To obtain a transit visa you must visit the embassy with your vehicle's carnet de

passage and proof that you have a visa for the country you're planning to visit.

Visitor (Business) Visas

Rule number one is that you must have a Saudi sponsor (a company or an individual). The sponsor applies to the Saudi Chamber of Commerce & Industry for approval and, if granted, an invitation letter will be sent to you (or direct to the embassy).

Rule number two is that you must then make your application in your country of nationality or permanent residence.

Depending upon the Saudi embassy to whom you are making your application (always phone the embassy to check), most commonly you will require a letter from your company outlining the nature of your business in Saudi Arabia and a letter of support from your local chamber of commerce.

Armed with this paperwork, the visa is usually granted without difficulty by the embassy, sometimes even on the same day (if you visit in person), but more often within a week to 10 days if applying by post.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Saudi Arabia is considered the most difficult country in the world for Western

SITE PERMITS

Though access to Saudi's sites is gradually opening up (with plans to further facilitate access in the near future), some forts, ruins or archaeological sites still require permits in order to visit them. You can obtain these (free) from the Director General of the **Department of Antiquities** (☎ 01-404 0617; fax 01-404 1391; PO Box 3734, Riyadh 11418; 7.30am-2.30pm Sat-Wed). The office lies right in front of the water tower besides Riyadh's National Museum.

File the permit application in the morning and return a day later to collect it. If you're not in Riyadh, fax your details (passport number, a list of which sites you want to visit and when) 14 days in advance, including a fax number to which the permit can be faxed back. Email facilities aren't available yet.

Resident foreigners must present their *iqama* (residence permit); travellers their passport and visa. Local tour operators (see p323) and some local hotels (such as at Madain Saleh, p334) can usually arrange the permits if you give them enough notice.

The major sites that require permits:

- Al-Faw (p350)
- Rock art at Jubba (p321)
- Madain Saleh (p336)
- Standing Stones of Rajajil (p339)
- Al-Ukhudud archaeological site, Najran (p344)

women to travel. Though the strict segregation of the sexes and the prohibition on female drivers leads to obvious limitations on movement, most women travellers (including the author) are surprised by the privilege they are accorded, and the respect and deference they are shown, and end up having a very positive experience.

Women everywhere are urged to the front of queues, for example, and are served first at banks, restaurants, check-in desks and ticket offices. It is also said that Saudi decorum dictates that no man can ever turn down the appeal for help from a woman – so take full advantage (as the author did)!

Restrictions

Access to almost all internet cafés, and most mid- and budget-range hotels is impossible, as is access to many restaurants. Most towns and villages have at least one restaurant with a ‘family section’ where women, whether accompanied or not, must sit; those that do not, are provided with takeaways. Museums and some sights have special family-only hours, and banks have ‘Ladies’ branches’.

For information on women and diving, see p359. For information on women and access to hotel facilities, see p359.

See also Internet Access information on p364.

What to Wear

Women must by law wear an *abeyya*. Though a headscarf is not compulsory, you should always have one at hand as the *mutawwa* (religious police – see p362) may insist that you wear it.

See also p543.

TRANSPORT IN SAUDI ARABIA

GETTING THERE & AWAY Entering Saudi Arabia

Immigration is much quicker than it used to be (except during the haj and Ramadan when you can expect long queues). All bags (including hand luggage) are now X-rayed and only opened when warranting further investigation (see Customs p361). Don’t forget to fill in immigration cards.

Note that upon departure, security is vigorous and is time-consuming; you’re advised to arrive early, 1½ hours before departures for domestic flights, three hours before international flights. If you’re travelling with Saudia, a tip to save time is to obtain your boarding pass up to 24 hours in advance.

If you’re arriving by land, procedures are similar, although expect long delays if you’re bringing your own car into the Kingdom.

Note that Jews are not permitted entry to the Kingdom (nor anyone showing evidence of having visited Israel).

Air

There are four airports handling international traffic in Saudi Arabia:

King Abdul Aziz International Airport (JED; ☎ 02-684 2227) Located in Jeddah.

King Fahd International Airport (DMM; ☎ 03-883 5151) In Dammam.

King Khaled International Airport (RUH; ☎ 01-221 1000) In Riyadh.

Medina International Airport (MED; ☎ 04-842 0052) Opens only during the haj and occasionally during the *umrah* season to assist haj traffic in and out of Jeddah.

The national carrier is **Saudi Arabian Airlines** (Saudia; ☎ 01-488 4444; www.saudiairlines.com), which flies to dozens of destinations across the Middle East, Europe, Asia and the USA. It has a respectable safety record (see www.airsafe.com for details) and is usually on time. In the future, it will be privatised.

Saudia also offers special fares for groups, as well as offering special advantages when travelling on its domestic network.

AIRLINES FLYING TO/FROM SAUDI ARABIA

Al-Arabiya (G9; ☎ 01-465 9826; www.airarabia.com; hub Sharjah)

Air France (AF; ☎ 01-476 9666; www.airfrance.com; hub Paris)

British Airways (BA; ☎ 01-465 0216; www.british-airways.com; hub London)

EgyptAir (MS; ☎ 02-644 1515; www.egyptair.com.eg; hub Cairo)

Emirates (EK; ☎ 01-465 5485; www.emirates.com; hub Dubai)

Ethiad Airways (EY; ☎ 01-644 2871; www.ethiad-airways.com; hub Abu Dhabi)

Gulf Air (GF; ☎ 01-462 6666; www.gulfairco.com; hub Bahrain)

Iran Air (IR; ☎ 02-664 6449; www.iranair.com; hub Tehran)

Kuwait Air (KT; ☎ 01-463 1218; www.kuwait-airways.com; hub Kuwait)

Lufthansa (LH; ☎ 01-463 2004; www.lufthansa.com; hub Frankfurt)

Middle East Airlines (ME; ☎ 01-465 6600; www.mea.com.lb; hub Beirut)

Oman Air (WY; ☎ 02-664 8666; www.oman-air.com; hub Muscat)

Qatar Airways (QR; ☎ 02-667 5182; www.qatar-airways.com; hub Doha)

Royal Jordanian Airlines (J; ☎ 01-218 0850; www.rja.com.jo; hub Amman)

Yemenia (☎ 02-644 7042; www.yemenia.com.ye; hub Sana’a)

Sample fares for flights include:

Flight	Price	Frequency
Riyadh to Doha (Qatar)	US\$185	3 per week
Riyadh to Manama (Bahrain)	US\$140	3 per day
Riyadh to Kuwait City (Kuwait)	US\$255	1 per day
Riyadh to Abu Dhabi (UAE)	US\$265	3 per day
Riyadh to Muscat (Oman)	US\$420	2 per week
Riyadh to San’a (Yemen)	US\$415	2 per week

Land

BORDER CROSSINGS

At the time of research, all of Saudi’s land crossings were trouble free and relatively efficient (except during the haj and Ramadan when you can queue up to 12 hours at some crossings, such as Halat Ammar).

Make sure you have visas for the countries you wish to enter (see p366). And never agree to carry either passengers or baggage through borders.

See the table on p547 for information on Saudi Arabia’s land crossings.

BUS

Sapta (☎ 800 124 9999; www.sapta.com.sa) offers the best international bus services, although other companies from surrounding countries also cover the same routes for similar prices. Departures are primarily from Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam.

From Riyadh’s Al-Aziziyah bus station (p317), departures include: Amman (SR175, 22 hours, one daily), Kuwait (SR180, eight hours, three weekly), Aden (SR200, 42 hours, one daily), Sana’a (SR200, 36 hours, daily), Bahrain (SR100, six hours, three

daily), Qatar (SR125, eight hours via Al-Hofuf, one daily), Dubai (SR125, 12 hours via Abu Dhabi, one daily), Cairo (SR335, 32 hours, one daily), Khartoum (SR593, 36 hours, three weekly) and Damascus (SR175, 24 hours, three weekly). There are currently no buses to Oman, Turkey, Iran or Iraq.

From Jeddah’s bus station (p329), buses depart to Amman (SR175, 18 hours, daily), Cairo (SR348, duration varies according to route taken, daily), Beirut (SR180, 26 hours, daily), Damascus (SR175, about 23 hours, daily), Dubai (SR210, 30 hours, daily), Abu Dhabi (SR210, 30 hours, daily), Khartoum (SR425, 31 hours, daily), Sana’a (SR150, 24 hours, daily) among other destinations in Yemen. For Bahrain and Qatar, change at Dammam.

From the Dammam bus station (p353), there are regular daily departures to Bahrain (SR50, about two hours, six daily), and to Doha (SR190, five hours, one daily), Kuwait (SR100, five hours, one daily), Abu Dhabi (SR110, 8 hours, one daily), Dubai (SR110, 10 hours, one daily), and Sharjah (SR110, 11 hours, one daily) and to Yemen. The same bus travels to Al-Hudayda (SR250, 24 hours), Sana’a (SR300, 30 hours) and Aden (SR300, 36 hours). There are no buses for Oman. Take the Dubai bus and take a shared taxi (SR50) from there.

There are also buses from Dammam to Damascus (SR175, 24 hours, one daily); Amman (SR175, 24 hours, one daily), Aqaba (SR235, 24 hours, two to three weekly); Cairo (1st/2nd/3rd class SR378/408/458, at least two daily). There are no buses currently running to Turkey, Iran or Iraq.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

For general information, see p547.

To avoid queues at busy times (such as during holidays), go early or late (all borders are open 24 hours). If you’re driving someone else’s car, make sure you carry a letter granting permission from the owner.

Sea

Car and passenger ferries operate between Saudi Arabia and Egypt: **Al-Blagha** (☎ 02-648 0334 ext 253; www.alblagha.com) is the largest shipping company in the Red Sea and operates boats from Jeddah to Suez (1st/2nd/3rd class SR845/695/395, car from SR850; 42 hours, once weekly both ways), and from

Duba to Port Safaga (1st/2nd/3rd class SR300/265/225, car from SR469, eight hours, daily both ways).

Boats also travel from Jeddah to Suwaqih, Sudan (1st/2nd/3rd SR470/370/300, cars from SR460, 10 hours, three weekly both ways). In the future, boats should also sail sporadically from Jeddah to Al-Hudayda (Yemen); check the website. Boats do not go to Massawa (Eritrea).

Ferries are modern, well-kept and professionally run. Cabins (either two- or four-bed) are simple, clean and comfortable and all have air-conditioning. First-class cabins have private bathrooms; 2nd class common bathrooms; and 3rd (also known as 'Pullman' are just seats). Bookings can be made by email or telephone and you can travel on the same day. In the high season (summer, haj and Ramadan), book one week in advance for Duba to Port Safaga and one month in advance Jeddah to Suez, and vice versa. All ferries have restaurants. Check in three hours before departure.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Domestic air services in Saudi Arabia are operated by **Saudi Arabian Airlines** (Saudia; www.saudiarabianairlines.com). Once Saudia has been privatised, the monopoly on providing domestic passenger services will be lifted, and it's likely that new domestic air companies will spring up.

Saudia flies frequently to major towns, generally runs on time and is very reasonably priced. Unlike international tickets (which travel agents can sell at discounted prices), domestic Saudia tickets cost the same price whether bought from an agency or direct from Saudia.

Domestic tickets can also be bought from abroad. Tickets can be changed as often as you like (though SR20 is sometimes charged). You can get refunds (minus an administration charge of SR20), even on missed flights. Putting yourself on the waiting list is well worthwhile therefore as there are so many no-shows.

Check in 1½ hours prior to departure is advised for domestic flights. Note that Medina airport lies outside the *haram* (forbidden) area so can be used by tourists.

Prices are very reasonable and haven't changed in six years. Schedules also don't

alter much either. Bookings by telephone can also be made if you're flying within 24 hours (you can pick the ticket up at the airport). For information on flight schedules and information, call ☎ 920-022 222.

Bus

All domestic bus services are operated by the **Saudi Arabian Public Transport Company** (Sapctco; ☎ 800-124 9999; www.sapctco.com.sa). The company is professionally run and has a good safety record with well-maintained buses (usually replaced every two to three years).

The buses are comfortable, air-conditioned and clean. Standing passengers are not allowed, talking to the driver is prohibited and smoking is strictly prohibited. Sapctco also guarantees that if a bus breaks down, a repair vehicle is sent within two hours, a replacement within four.

All buses have on-board toilets, and make rest stops every few hours. For general information, fare prices and timetables, dial ☎ 800 124 9999, toll-free (with recorded messages in both Arabic and English).

Unaccompanied foreign women can travel on domestic and international buses with their *iqama* (residence permit) if an expat, or passport and visa if a tourist. The front seats are generally unofficially reserved for 'families' including sole women, and the back half for men.

Check in half an hour before domestic departures, one hour before international departures (though passengers with hand luggage can arrive 10 minutes before). If the bus is full, you can join the waiting list and board the bus five minutes before departure if there are no-shows.

Note that during the haj, services are reduced across the country as buses are ordered for the pilgrims.

CLASSES

There are no classes, except on one service: the Sapctco VIP Express service that runs between Riyadh (see p318) and Al-Khobar (p355; SR90, five hours).

COSTS

Bus fares cost approximately half of the equivalent airfare. Return tickets are 25% cheaper than two one-way fares. Note that at the time of writing, only cash was accepted for payment.

RESERVATIONS

When purchasing your ticket, you'll need to show your passport (visitors) or *iqama* (expats). During the haj season, during Ramadan or in summer, booking at least a week in advance is advisable.

Tickets can be bought up to three months in advance for domestic journeys, six months for international. If tickets are cancelled or unused, you can get a refund (less 10%) for a one-way ticket (or unused return) or 30% for a return ticket if it hasn't expired (within three/six months for domestic/international destinations).

Note that you can only buy tickets from the point of relevant departure, and that you can't make a reservation unless you've bought a ticket (so you can only make a telephone reservation for the return portion of the ticket).

Tickets are best bought from Sapctco itself (as opposed to its agents which are less reliable vis-a-vis reservations).

Car & Motorcycle

Despite its impressive public-transport system, Saudi Arabia remains a country that glorifies the private car (the large private car above all), rivalled in this regard only by the US. Roads are generally sealed and well-maintained.

Motorcycles are an extremely rare sight on Saudi roads (they're rather unfamily friendly because of the heat, dust and their price relative to cars), though in recent years Harley Davidson clubs have opened in Jeddah and Riyadh.

DRIVING LICENCE

If you have a visitors' visa and want to rent a car, you should always have your International Driving Licence (IDL) available to show.

If you're going to be in the Kingdom for more than three months, you'll need to get a local driving licence, which is arranged by your employer. You'll also have to do a driving test and purchase insurance.

FUEL

It currently costs just 47 halalas per litre for unleaded petrol (introduced in January 2007) and 60 halalas for leaded fuel. All stations charge the same (by law). Petrol stations are ubiquitous throughout the country on sealed roads.

HIRER

International and local car-hire agencies can be found in the larger towns in the Kingdom, as well as at international airports. Local companies tend to be significantly cheaper, but always check that *full* insurance is included. Prices usually stay the same throughout the year.

Rates for the smallest cars at international agencies generally start at SR75 per day (including full insurance) and can start from SR450 for 4WDs. For rental of a month or more, prices drop by around 30% or more. Be sure to negotiate.

There's usually an additional charge of around SR0.75 to SR1.5 per kilometre, although most agencies offer the first 150km free. Women travellers (who are not permitted by law to drive) will need a driver – around SR105 per eight-hour day (SR20 per extra hour).

INSURANCE

If you are travelling with a car from another GCC country, insurance and the Collision-Damage Waiver (CDW) are mandatory. With car hire, it is usually included in the price, but it pays to check very carefully that it is.

ROAD RISKS

Over the last five years, a concerted government campaign has tried hard to reduce Saudi's shocking rate of road fatalities. On the roads, look out for the billboards proclaiming 'Enough!' On TV, you may well come across the graphic interviews with real-life road-accident victims, or doctors.

Speed cameras and radars now riddle the roads – for many Saudis, a worse hazard than before! Steep speeding fines of between SR150 and SR800 are regularly demanded on the motorways, from SR300 in the towns. For jumping traffic lights, you can be arrested on the spot, fined and your car impounded. Note that the fine for failing to wear a seatbelt is a stiff SR100.

ROAD RULES

The main rules include:

- Driving on the right side of the road.
- Leaving the scene of an accident is a serious offence and can result in fines of over SR1000, imprisonment and deportation.
- Not carrying a valid driving licence can result in a night in jail and a hefty fine.
- Right turns are allowed at red lights unless specifically forbidden.
- Speed limit in towns is 60km/h, 70km/h or 80km/h.
- Speed limit on open highways is 120km/h (but can drop to 90km/h or 100km/h). See also the boxed text, p371.

Local Transport

TAXI

Taxis are found in most of the larger towns and are known as 'limousines' locally; they can be hailed anywhere. Note that it's much better to negotiate the fare first (as the locals do) rather than using the meter.

Train

Saudi Arabia has the only stretch of train track in the entire Arabian Peninsula. Trains travel between Riyadh (p318) and Dammam (p353) via Al-Hofuf.

Future rail plans include a line from Jeddah to Hail, and a train linking Riyadh's Al-Bathaa with King Khaled international airport (scheduled for 2013) and a Tabuk to Dammam line (for 2017).

Note that schedules change often; check the website for the latest information (www.saudirailways.org). Maximum luggage allowance is 50kg (per excess kilo SR0.50); luggage is loaded onto a separate carriage.

The gate closes five minutes before departure, but you should get there one hour before departure for the sometimes time-consuming police checks and luggage x-rays.

CLASSES

There are three classes: 2nd, 1st and the new VIP class. The main difference between them is a bit of space (and TV screens and a meal in VIP class). All classes have access to the train restaurant.

Women can travel unaccompanied (with ID) and sit in any class (in 2nd – there's a separate carriage; in VIP and 1st, designated areas).

COSTS

You'll need either your passport or *iqama* to buy a ticket. Travelling by train in 2nd class is slightly cheaper than the equivalent bus fare, but note that the company will be privatised by the end of 2007/2008, so prices may change. There are discounts for Saudi students only.

RESERVATIONS

Reservations (☎ 92 000 8886) can be made a minimum of 24 hours before departure and a maximum of 90 days in advance, and from any station to any station.

Tickets can be changed up to three hours before departure though you'll forfeit 10% of the total ticket cost. Check all tickets are correct after purchase, and note that there is no refund if you miss your train.

During school holidays, Ramadan and the Haj Eid, book well in advance. At the weekend, book three to four days in advance.