

# Yemen

# اليمنية

There can't be many places left in the world that could make God smile, but Yemen is one of them.

Inhabited almost forever Yemen is, in many ways, the birthplace of all our lives. In days past, the sons of Noah knew it as the land of milk and honey, Gilgamesh came here to search for the secret of eternal life, wise men gathered frankincense and myrrh from its mountains and, most famously, a woman known simply as Sheba said Yemen was her home.

Yet since the book of mythology was closed, Yemen has remained largely locked away in a forgotten corner, oblivious to the world that was oblivious to it. Today, like a spring tortoise emerging from hibernation, Yemen is awaking from its slumber and slowly revealing its face. And what a face it is. Sitting at the crossroads of two continents, this country has a little of everything. With its shades of Afghanistan, reflections of Morocco, flavours of Africa and reminders of Arabia, Yemen is utterly unique and deeply romantic. To travel in this most traditional of Islamic countries, surrounded by a people whom the Prophet once described as 'the most gentle-hearted of men', is a privilege you will not quickly forget. But never mind what we have to say about it, let's leave the last word to the man who made it.

Legend tells how one day God decided to check out how his creation was fairing: London, he decided, had changed a lot, Egypt was nothing like he remembered it, but Yemen, 'Well', he smiled, 'that hasn't changed since the day I created it'.

## FAST FACTS

- **Official name** Republic of Yemen
- **Capital** San'a
- **Area** 555,000 sq km
- **Population** 21 million
- **Country code** ☎ 967
- **Head of State** President Ali Abdullah Saleh
- **Annual number of tourists** 336,000
- **Stereotypes** Guns and qat chewers, mountains and coffee, frankincense and Sheba
- **Surprises** It's far safer and friendlier than wherever you are from



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Old San'a** (p459) Sigh over San'a's icing-cake houses and saunter through ancient alleyways created by the son of Noah and a mischievous bird.
- **Haraz Mountains** (p467) Weave a trail through a tapestry of fortresses and fields in the Haraz Mountains.
- **Wadi Hadramawt** (p505) Wander the sandcastle cities of weird and wonderful Wadi Hadramawt where giants once roamed and scorpions line the entrance to Hell.
- **Ma'rib** (p494) Ponder the palace of the daughter of the Devil and the lover of Solomon in surreal Ma'rib.
- **Suqutra** (p502) Act like a medieval knight and search for dragons and the secret of eternal life in stupendous Suqutra.

## ITINERARIES

See the Itineraries chapter (p26) for more Yemen itineraries.

- **San'a Stopover** If time is everything, don't waste it – get lost in the old city. Trying to follow any kind of set walking tour here is impossible so instead allow a cat-like curiosity to lead you through alleyways, up back streets and into interesting corners. The perfect day would involve stopping for tea in any of the numerous teashops, having a *salta* (stew) lunch at Houmald Salta (p464), stuffing your cheeks with qat (p462) and, to round out the day, watching the poetry of a San'a sunset from a hotel roof.
- **Qat Chewers' Delight** One of the properties of qat (p453) is its ability to slow time down. Therefore this route, which takes you to the finest qat regions, should cover a fortnight but could stretch to six months! Start your qat experiment in the souqs of San'a (p462), before heading south to the famous qat fields of Jibla (p485), cross over to the Red Sea and the Friday market of Beit al-Faiqh (p480) where the coast stocks up on its kicks. Then climb into the Haraz Mountains (p467) to explore the numerous villages here in the qat heartland. Finally, zoom north to Hajja (p473) and Sa'da (p475), home of the finest qat in Yemen.
- **The Come Down** After a fortnight of qat you'll be wanting to detox, so what better way to do this than by going cold turkey and spending your final week either bird-

spotting in Suqutra (p502) or in magical Hadramawt (p505)?

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Climatically, Yemen can be divided into three main zones: the Tihama (the Red Sea coastal strip); the central highlands (including San'a); and the desert areas of the east and the far north.

The best time to visit the Tihama is between November and February (summertime can be suffocatingly hot). The twice-yearly monsoons bring some rain to the region between mid-March and mid-April, and particularly July to September. Temperatures range from around 21°C in December and January to as high as 40°C in June. Humidity is also high.

The central highlands (which range from 1500m to 3500m) enjoy a temperate climate for most of the year, though it can get hot at noon and chilly at night (particularly between October and February). The monsoons are light in San'a, but heavy (up to 500mm rainfall) in the southwest and can continue into May. San'a ranges in temperature from a minimum of 5°C (from November to January) to a maximum of 25°C (in July).

The desert regions of the east and the far north are hot (particularly between June and September) and very dry, with temperatures from 25°C in December to 37°C or more in June. The southern coastal strip is very hot and humid between May and September.

The island of Suqutra is a special case and is never really too hot or too cold. Wind is the main factor here. During the summer monsoon period from May to September, winds blow constantly from the southwest at severe gale force with frequent gusts up to hurricane force. Don't underestimate how difficult this can make even simple tasks like standing up and walking! Bizarrely, the southern coast of the island and the mountainous interior have much calmer wind patterns than the east, west and north coasts.

Though the monsoons can flood wadis (river beds, often dry) and close roads, they do temporarily turn parts of Yemen into wonderfully green and fertile land.

During the peak season (20 December to 10 January), you're advised to book hotels

in popular tourist spots. Travel during the month of Ramadan is not recommended, and during the annual haj pilgrimage (as well as during Ramadan), Yemenia flights are often overbooked or cancelled.

## HISTORY

### Sabaeans & Himyarites

Aside from legend, a shroud of mystery still envelops the early origins of southern Arabia. The area now known as Yemen came to light during the 1st millennium BC, when a sweet-smelling substance called frankincense first hit the world's markets. Carefully controlling the production and trade of this highly lucrative commodity were the Sabaeans, initially based in eastern Yemen.

Over the ensuing centuries, the Sabaean Empire expanded and came to dominate almost all the rest of modern-day Yemen. The temples and Great Dam at Ma'rib date from this period.

As Sabaean power waned, new powers and empires began to rise in its wake. The greatest of these was the Himyar empire. Initially based in the central highlands, the Himyarites' power grew, and by the late 3rd century AD they had seized control of nearly all the remaining country.

### Foreign Powers & the Coming of Islam

Over the succeeding centuries Yemen was invaded many times by hungry regional powers looking for expansion.

Among the powers that passed through its portals – but never managed to fully contain the country – were the Ptolemaic dynasties, the Abyssinians and the Persians (from modern-day Egypt, Ethiopia and Iran respectively). Today Yemenis are still proud of the fact that no foreign power has ever managed to conquer the country completely.

In the early 7th century AD there came a new invasion. It was to prove far more significant than any that had come before: it was the arrival of Islam.

Initially most Yemenis converted to Sunnism, but over the next few centuries individual Shiite sects, such as the Zaydis, were born. For more information on Islam, see p59. During this time, various mini-states grew, ruled by such dynasties as the Sulayhids and Rasulids.

## Ottoman & British Occupation

From the 15th century onwards foreign powers, including the Egyptians and Portuguese, vied again for control of the Red Sea coast. But it was the Ottomans (from modern-day Turkey) who made the greatest impact. Occupying parts of Yemen from 1535 to 1638, and again from 1872 to 1918, they ignored, or failed to capture, the remote inland areas ruled by local *imams* (prayer leaders). During the 17th century the Qasimi dynasty ruled over much of this region, but its power declined with the demise of coffee trading, upon which it had relied.

In the middle of the 19th century a new power rocked up. From 1839 to 1967 the British occupied and controlled parts of southern Yemen, including the port of Aden, which was declared a British protectorate. Strategically valuable to Britain's maritime ambitions, the port soon grew into a major staging post.

Meanwhile in the north, after WWI and the defeat of Germany (with whom the Ottomans were allied), a new royal Zaydi dynasty, the Hamid al-Din, rose up to take the place of the former occupiers.

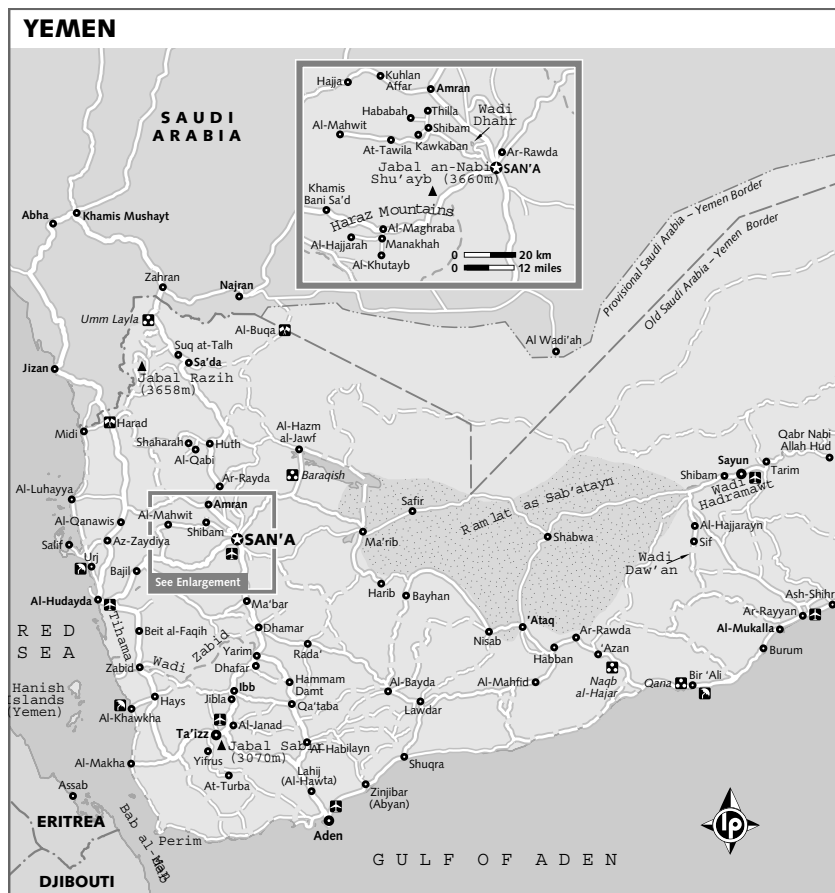
## Civil War

Until 1962 central and northern Yemen had been ruled by a series of local *imams*. However, on the death of the influential *imam*, Ahmad, a dispute over succession broke out, embroiling the whole region in a war that dragged on for the next eight years.

On the one side, army officers supported by Egypt proclaimed the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), while on the other, the royalists based in the north, and backed by Britain and Saudi Arabia, were loyal to Ahmad's son and successor. The YAR forces eventually won.

Following the National Liberation Front's victories in the guerrilla campaign against the British, the colonialists were forced to withdraw from southern Yemen in 1967. Three years later the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) was born. It became the first and only Marxist state in the Arab world.

In the north of the country, meanwhile, Field Marshall Ali Abdullah Saleh had instituted a progressive rule of the YAR with his General People's Congress (GPC). Conflicts between tribes were contained, and the



constitution vowed to respect both Islamic principles and Western values, such as personal freedom and private property.

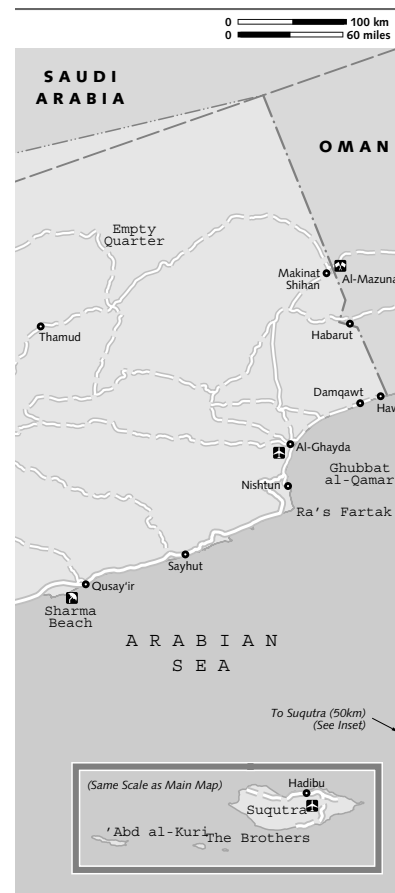
In the PDRY, however, there was turmoil. Power struggles within the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) had led to rising tension. Finally, in Aden in January 1986, a two-week civil war broke out. The situation was aggravated by the collapse of the Soviet Union, previously the major benefactor of the PDRY. As a result, the south was thrown into a state of bankruptcy.

Additionally, border disagreements between the two states had led to short conflicts in 1972, 1978 and 1979. Yet, despite the political differences, most Yemenis hated having a divided country.

## Reunification

On 22 May 1990 a reunified Republic of Yemen was declared and in 1991 Yemen made regional history. The country became the very first multi-party parliamentary democracy on the Arabian Peninsula. Saleh took the position of president and Ali Salim al-Bidh (the leader of YSP, the ruling party of the former PDRY) became vice-president.

Things didn't get off to a good start for the new nation. During the 1990–91 Gulf War, Yemen appeared to side with Iraq (by choosing not to support UN economic sanctions against the country), and in doing so managed to alienate not only the US and its allies, but also its Gulf neighbours, in particular Saudi Arabia



As a result, the GPC swept into power and Islah became the main opposition party.

In September 1999 the country held its first-ever presidential election, and Saleh was re-elected as the country's president.

In June 2000 a border agreement was signed with Saudi Arabia. Due to come into force in 2007, it has finally settled a decades-old dispute over the two countries' frontiers and, the Saudis' hope, will prevent the smuggling of weapons and qat.

## Yemen Today

Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, Yemen was viewed with suspicion by the US. With its remote, unruly and little-policed interior, Yemen was suspected of providing – even unwittingly – a refuge for Al-Qaeda members and supporters, as well as supplying a bolt-hole for militant Islamists. A number of incidents encouraged this perception. In October 2000 the US warship the USS *Cole* was bombed in Aden harbour, killing 17 US servicemen. Following this the French supertanker, the *Limburg*, was bombed in 2002. There have been a number of other attempted attacks, the most recent being a foiled attack on oil installations in September 2006. In an effort to avoid further isolation the Yemeni government was very quick to sign up to the US's 'War on Terror', and international fears that Yemen could become a new Afghanistan have proved largely unfounded. Yemen is one of many countries to firmly oppose the current Iraq War.

Prior to the 2006 presidential elections, Saleh announced his retirement from politics, though at the last moment, and under pressure from his party, he opted to stand again. In an election that was seen as largely free and fair he was re-elected by a large margin. The general consensus was that after so many years under his rule it was a case of better the devil you know. There was also fear that without him civil war could erupt as tribal sheikhs with political ambitions vied for the top job.

On the whole the country is the most stable it's been in years, though the Iraq War and the government's continuing cooperation with the US in the 'War on Terror' are proving increasingly unpopular with most Yemenis. A more immediate thorn in the side of the government is the bloody uprising

and Kuwait. This led to the expulsion of over one million Yemeni migrant workers from Saudi Arabia and devastated the economy.

On the home front things also began to sour and the YSP and its members started to feel increasingly marginalised by the GPC and its coalition partner Islah.

Eventually tensions came to a head, and in 1994 civil war again broke out between the north and the south. Bidh's attempts to secede from the north were quashed, and he fled the country.

The country was reunified shortly afterwards. But the path towards democracy was still not smooth. In 1997 the YSP, predicting vote rigging, boycotted the elections.

### AN EYE FOR AN EYE

Yemen's tribes still wield a lot of power, sometimes more than the government, and for most Yemenis tribal loyalty comes before national loyalty. Groups of tribes form bigger federations. There are three such federations in the northern part of Yemen – the Hashids, Bakils and Zaranis – and no government can be formed without an equal representation of these groups. In the southern part of the country, where the government of the former PDRY did its utmost to erode the powers of the tribes, the tribal structure is weaker, though since reunification a certain amount of 'retribalisation' has taken place.

In the mountainous central regions and the Tihama each tribe has a fairly rigidly defined 'territory', which is still passionately defended from other tribes. This rule doesn't apply to the nomadic Bedouin of the desert regions. Conflict between the tribes is common in many areas. If a person kills someone from an opposing tribe, his entire tribe will be held liable. In this way blood feuds between tribes can continue for years.

Every tribe is led by an elected sheikh, whose job it is to resolve conflicts or, if that is not possible, to raise a tribal army and lead the battle.

that has rumbled on since 2003 between the army and a Zaydi rebel group, based in Sa'da province, who are seeking to overthrow the government and sever links with the West. A tentative truce was reached in 2006, but a sudden return to violence occurred in early 2007, which at the time of writing remained unresolved.

### GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Yemen's first constitution came into force in 1991. Under this system, the president is head of the executive and is elected every seven years; the last presidential election was held in September 2006 (next due 2013). The president also selects the prime minister, who in turn chooses the cabinet. The main legislative body is the Yemeni parliament, which counts 301 members. Parliamentary elections are held every six years (the next election is due to be held in April 2009).

There are more than 12 active political parties, but the main ones are: the GPC (which has the majority), Islah and the YSP. Yemen's legal system is based on Sharia'a (Islamic law).

### ECONOMY

Yemen is one of the Arab world's poorest countries, though the economy grew at a rate of 3.5% between 2000 and 2006. Oil is Yemen's economic mainstay and accounts for around 70% of government revenue. Nevertheless, compared to other peninsula countries, Yemen's oil wealth is modest, though revenues increased in 2006 in

line with the worldwide rise in oil prices. Yemen struggles to control corruption and excessive spending and relies greatly on foreign aid.

In November 2006 the country secured US\$4.7 billion in development aid from Western and Arab donors.

### PEOPLE The National Psyche

The notion of nationality is almost completely lost on a Yemeni. First and foremost is clan, and men with city jobs may still hurry homewards if their tribe or tribal land comes under threat. Second comes the family. Finally, at the bottom of the chain, comes nationality. Pervading all is Islam, a firm fixture and focus in most Yemenis' lives (see p59).

### Lifestyle

According to UN figures, the average Yemeni is poor (45% of the population live below the poverty line of US\$2 per day), illiterate (just 50.2% are literate) and hard-pressed to find a job. Certainly Yemen's late embrace of education has meant its businessmen have real problems finding qualified employees to fill their posts.

Yemeni society is very traditional, conservative and steeped in superstition. With 20 doctors per 100,000 people, many Yemenis still rely on traditional medicine for medical treatment and healing. Keep an eye out for people bearing scars on their head or neck, where bad spirits have been expunged by red-hot pokers.

Women are more 'liberated' than they look. Many work and drive, but on average still have 6.5 babies each.

### Population

With 21 million inhabitants Yemen has one of the largest populations on the Arabian Peninsula, and one of the highest growth rates (3.5% annually) in the world. The country's population has increased tenfold in 30 years and San'a is the fastest growing capital in the world. It is a very young country, with nearly half its population (46%) under 15 years old. Yemen is also still a firmly rural society, with 73% of its population living in the country.

Along the Tihama, the population is more closely linked to the African mainland. In the interior, the lighter skin of the Semitic 'Arabs' is visible. Bedouin tribes inhabit parts of the desert region to the east.

### SPORT

Yemen's greatest stars have invariably trained abroad. The most famous of these is the boxer Naseen Hamid Kashmiri (aka Prince Naseen), born in Yemen in 1966, but brought up in the UK. Nevertheless, he's considered very much a national hero.

Although the country has participated in several Olympic Games, it's yet to return with a medal.

### EATING THE FLOWERS OF PARADISE

The first thing every new arrival in Yemen will notice are the bulging cheeks of the qat chewer. Qat, khat, chat or miraa are the leaves of the shrub *Catha edulis*. Originally from Ethiopia, the qat plant has spread across parts of East Africa and into Yemen where the afternoon qat-chewing session has become almost the pivotal point of many Yemeni lives.

Classed by the WHO as a drug of abuse that can produce mild to moderate psychic dependence, it has been banned in most Arab and Western countries, including Saudi Arabia where possession is a serious offence, the US and almost all European nations except for the UK where it's currently legal (though there is talk of this changing). In late 2006 the Yemeni qat world was given a shock when the public chewing of qat was banned in Aden. It remains to be seen whether any other towns will follow suit.

Chewing qat is an important social activity in Yemen and around 80% of the male population are thought to be regular chewers. Women also chew but to a lesser degree and much more discreetly, as do an increasing number of young children. Qat plays an important part in the Yemeni economy, both good and bad. For farmers the profit on qat is five times that of crops, and these profits have done something to slow down the drift to urban areas. On the negative side 17% of the average family's income is spent on qat, and with each chewer often spending four hours every afternoon chewing, over 14,622,000 working hours are lost daily in Yemen.

Environmentally the consequences of qat are bad news. The total amount of land given over to qat has grown from 8000 hectares in 1970 to 103,000 in 2000. Qat is also a thirsty plant and 55% of all the water used in Yemen goes on watering it.

The effects of qat have long been debated – most Yemenis will insist that it gives an unbeatable high, makes you more talkative (at least until the come down when the chewer becomes withdrawn and quiet), suppresses hunger, prevents tiredness and increases sexual performance. Others will tell you that it gives no noticeable high, makes you lethargic, slightly depressed, constipated and reduces sex drive! Most Western visitors who try it report no major effects aside from a possible light buzz and an unpleasant aftertaste.

If you're going to chew qat (and you should try it at least once), you need to make sure the setting is perfect in order to enjoy the experience. Ask for the sweetest qat you can get (most Yemenis regard this as poor quality, but first-time chewers find even this very bitter) and get a good group of people together to chew with, because qat is, above all else, a social drug. Take yourself off to a quiet and comfortable spot (ideally a *mafraj*: literally 'room with a view'), sit back, relax and enjoy the conversation while popping leaves individually into your mouth where you literally just store them in one cheek gently chewing them. All going well you'll be a qat 'addict' by the end of the day, but remember when it comes to the end of the qat session you should spit the gooey mess out – only Ethiopians swallow!

The Yemeni love of football soon becomes apparent as you travel throughout the country. There are stadiums in the largest cities with San'a sitting consistently at the top of the league.

## RELIGION

Islam is Yemen's state religion. Most Muslims are Sunnis, many of whom follow the Shafa'i sect. Of the Shiites, most follow the Zaydi sects and are based primarily in the far north. In some parts of Yemen (Hadramawt in particular) many pre-Islamic beliefs have been incorporated into daily life.

The majority of the Jewish population emigrated to Israel in the 1950s. Emigration has continued, and now only a handful of families are estimated to remain in Yemen (largely in the north, in and round Ar-Rayda and Sa'da). In early 2007 the last of the remaining Jewish families were told by Islamic fundamentalists to leave immediately or be killed – most were taking refuge in a Sa'da hotel at the time of writing.

## ARTS

For the traveller, Yemen's arts can most easily be appreciated in the varied architecture of its towns and villages, and in its museums. Beautiful examples of ancient art can be found in the latter, as well as more contemporary examples of artisanship. In the larger towns, galleries showcase modern works.

## Literature

Poetry – originally oral literature – has been an important art form in Yemen since pre-Islamic times. The most famous Yemeni poet by far is Al Baradouni. Novelists include author of *The Hostage*, Za'id Mutee' Dammaj, one of the very few writers who have been translated into English.

## Cinema

Yemen's cinematic industry is yet to get off the mark, and government funding is non-existent. A few directors have made films in Yemen, including Passolini (*Arabian Nights*, 1974). In 2005 Yemen's very first feature film, a romantic drama called *A New Day in Old San'a*, directed by Bader Ben Hirsi, was premiered at the Cannes Film Festival to positive reviews.

## Music

Yemen's music varies greatly from region to region and reflects the different influences of the areas. Tihama music with its frenetic beat, for example, resembles East African music. The best known Yemeni singer is Abu Baker Salem Balfaqih.

Among the most popular instruments are the *oud* (or lute), played by virtuosos such as Ayoub Taresh, the *semsemiya* (a kind of five-stringed lyre) and the *mizmar* (reed or pan pipes). Look out also for the *doshan*, a kind of minstrel, paid today to entertain at celebrations, such as weddings.

For a time (under the Imam Yahya in the 1940s), music was banned in Yemen.

## Architecture

Like Yemen's music, its architecture varies from region to region. Building design depends on available materials (such as mud, reeds or stone), the local climate (seen by thick and high walls to counter the heat or cold) and the region's historical links with other regions or powers (such as Africa, Southeast Asia or the Ottomans).

As Yemen endured a war on average every seven years throughout the 20th century and a similar rate of violence for centuries prior to that, many rural homes are perched on the highest hilltop, sometimes surrounded by walls and towers for added defence.

Water has long played an important part in Yemen, and some of the country's oldest architecture also represents extraordinary civil-engineering feats, such as the Great Ma'rib Dam (p498). For more on Yemeni town houses, see boxed text, p462.

### UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

**Old city of San'a** (p459): Inscribed in 1986 and described by Unesco as one of the most remarkable urban landscapes in the world.

**Shibam** (p505): Inscribed in 1982 and described as one of the earliest and most perfect examples of vertical construction.

**Zabid** (p480): Inscribed in 1993 and added to danger list in 2000. Described as of outstanding archaeological and historical interest for its significant domestic and military architecture.

## Painting

In the past, Yemen's art has been restricted by traditional Islamic taboos, such as the prohibition on the depiction of living things. Consequently, objects were decorated with geometrical patterns and curvilinear forms. Examples of this include the façades of San'a's tower houses and the beautifully illustrated manuscripts found throughout the country.

Today galleries found in the cities exhibit a wider subject matter. The biggest name is Fuad al-Futaih, director and founder of San'a's National Art Centre (Map pp460–1), an artist whose work has been described as 'a wonderful beat to Yemen's heart'.

## Dance

Like music, dance forms an important part of Yemeni social traditions. The best known is the *jambiya* 'dance', in which men perform a series of steps and hops in small groups brandishing their *jambiya* (dagger). Technically, this isn't actually a dance but a bond between tribal members, and each region has its own variation. Women and men always dance separately in public.

## ENVIRONMENT

### The Land

Yemen is about the size of France. Geographically, it can be divided into three main regions.

The Tihama in the west is the desert coastal strip that borders the Red Sea, measuring between 30km and 70km in width.

The central region, which stretches roughly from Sa'da to Ta'izz, is mountainous and rarely drops below 1500m. Jabal an-Nabi Shu'ayb (3660m) is found here, the highest peak on the Arabian Peninsula.

In the east, the Ramlat as-Sab'atayn desert forms part of the Empty Quarter (Rub' al-Khali), which occupies most of southern Saudi Arabia.

### Wildlife

Yemen's big wildlife cannot be described as abundant, but if you know where to look there's plenty out there. The country contains a remarkable diversity of habitats and creatures due to its geographic isolation and its position at the crossroads of three 'biological regions': Oriental, Afrotropical and Western Palearctic.

An excellent booklet on Yemen's wildlife and where to see it is *Wild Yemen – A Guide to Ecotourism Sites Around San'a*, published by the *Yemen Times*. It is sometimes available at bookshops in San'a. Otherwise try another excellent organisation, the **Yemen Ornithological Society** (☎ 01-207059; yos@y.net.ye; PO Box 2002, San'a).

### ANIMALS & BIRDS

Yemen is an excellent destination for twitchers. It boasts almost 400 bird species (though many are winterers or migrants), including the 13 'South Arabian endemics'. The island of Suqutra has six endemics of its own. Good places for sightings include verdant wadis, urban rubbish tips and spots around water. For more information, contact the Yemen Ornithological Society (left).

Of the country's 84 species of mammal, many of the larger ones have disappeared, though if you're very lucky you may spot a fox, caracal lynx or striped hyena at night. The Arabian leopard, Arabian wolf and Nubian ibex have been hunted almost to extinction. More abundant and more visible are the 86 species of reptiles, of which 25 are endemic, including the Yemen monitor lizard. Chameleons and agamas are the most commonly seen.

Yemen is also home to over 40 species of snake and 50 species of scorpion, though you're unlikely to come across either. Look out also for butterflies, dragonflies, praying mantises, camel spiders and centipedes.

Yemen's marine life in both of its seas is abundant. Divers can hope to see spiny lobsters, rays, moray eels, octopuses, turtles and sharks. Whale sharks and dolphins are occasionally seen. See also Diving, p512.

### PLANTS

Yemen boasts a surprising variety of plant life – around 1750 species in total, of which a high 20% of species are endemic. The plants travellers are most likely to see are the ficus (fig tree), the tamarisk and the ubiquitous but beautiful acacia (loved by Yemen's honey bees). Look out for the 'ilb' tree (*Ziziphus spina-christi*), which is also known as the Crown of Thorns tree because the Bible says Christ's crown of thorns came from it. It is quite easily seen on Suqutra, as are the curious-looking

bottle tree (*Adenium obesum*) and myrrh, frankincense, aloe and balsam trees. Other plants include orchids, ferns and euphorbia. Lucerne, coffee, millet, sorghum – and of course qat – are the crops commonly seen in Yemeni fields.

### National Parks

Suqatra has recently become a Unesco biosphere reserve. There are also plans to designate as national parks the forests around Hawf (p511) and the Bura'a Forest in the Tihama.

### Environmental Issues

Yemen suffers from typical 21st-century environmental problems: deforestation, soil erosion, excess hunting and desertification (due to salification of the soil). Sand-dune encroachment is also a problem.

The biggest environmental problem the country faces are rapidly dropping levels of ground water, which is only being exacerbated by the nation's huge population growth rate.

Litter is another problem – it wasn't so long ago that everything in Yemen was biodegradable and recyclable and the idea that plastic, tin cans and their ilk don't just disappear overnight has yet to catch on in Yemen. Some of the mountain slopes below villages are knee-deep in old cans and plastic.

### FOOD

Yemeni food is simple but good. Breakfast usually consists of little more than a cup of *shai* (sweet tea) accompanied by bread and honey. Lunch is the main meal of the day and Yemenis tuck in eagerly. A hunk of mutton is the favoured fare, or beef, goat or chicken. Dishes are often served with a thin but delicious broth, such as *shurba wasabi* (lamb soup), a small salad and a *chapati*-like flat bread (though over 40 mouth-watering kinds of bread exist in Yemen).

The dish of choice in the highlands is *salta*, a piping-hot stew containing meat, lentils, beans, fenugreek (giving it its distinctive aroma) and coriander or other spices. For dinner, *fasouliya* (beans) or *fool* (a kind of paste made from beans, tomatoes, onions and chilli) often suffices.

Meat is a luxury for the well-off, so there's usually a selection of vegetarian op-

tions. Apart from *fool*, plates of boiled or fried vegetables, rice or a salad are usually available.

On the coast and in the capital, fresh fish – often cooked in a traditional clay oven – provides a treat not to be missed. Lebanese starters have made it onto many posher menus but generally international cuisine is nonexistent. Meals in Yemen are rushed affairs with little time devoted to lingering conversations.

### DRINK

Internationally brewed, nonalcoholic beer (YR100) is readily available throughout Yemen (normally stocked by town grocers). Expensive by local standards, imported alcoholic beer (YR300 to YR350) can be found occasionally in top-end hotels (and some budget bars) in Aden, Al-Hudayda and San'a.

Fresh fruit juices (YR20 to YR70) are filling, healthy and delicious, but are likely to contain tap water at cheaper stalls. *Shai* is normally hot, black and sweet, and often spiced with mint or cardamom. For some reason the *shai* served in hotels is usually dreadful. Yemeni coffee is not what you'd expect from the original home of *mokha*. It's a cloudy, amber and very weak brew made from coffee husks and infused with cloves or other spices. If it's the caffeine buzz you're after, ask for 'Turkish coffee' or buy a jar of Nescafé from any grocery store and just ask for hot water to mix it with. Various saccharine soft drinks are widely available, as is bottled mineral water.

## SAN'A

## صنعا

☎ 01 / pop 1,707,586

San'a isn't where it was supposed to be. Shem, the son of Noah and founder of San'a, had originally chosen to site his new city a little further west, but just as he set out his guide ropes and prepared for some major DIY a bird dropped out of the heavens, picked up the guide rope and moved it further east. This, Shem knew, was a sign, and so it was there, where the bird had dropped the guide rope, that San'a was born. Today most visitors to Yemen arrive, like that interfering bird, by air. San'a, the world's oldest city, will be their first taste

of this most mystical of Arabian countries. It's a good arrival, for this sickly, sweet cake of a city is one of the world's great urban centres, and its many layers, colours and patterns make it the most romantic, living, breathing Islamic city you could ever hope to find.

### HISTORY

Though the legend surrounding the founding of San'a may be disputed by a few boring old scientists and archaeologists, what no-one will doubt is that it's a very old city.

Inhabited during Sabaean times, it later became the capital of the great Himyarite dynasty in the early 6th century AD. It also served as a power base for two foreign powers: the Abyssinians and the Persians. In the 7th century AD Islam arrived, altering forever the face of the city, as early mosques and minarets rose up to replace the old churches. The city was later expanded under the Ottomans.

After the civil war in the 1960s, San'a experienced a period of rapid growth, doubling in size every four years. Historically, politically and economically, it was the obvious choice for the capital of the reunited Yemen in 1990. Today San'a is the fastest-growing capital city in the world and this is creating a predictable range of social problems.

### ORIENTATION

The old walled city was originally composed of separate parts – east and west – divided by present-day Ali Abdul Mogni St, today one of the principal thoroughfares in the city.

At the crux of the division and still functioning as the administrative heart of the city is Midan at-Tahrir, where the post office, telecoms and internet cafés can also be found. The heart of the old city is Bab al-Yaman.

Many of the travel agencies, Yemenia offices, upmarket shops and better restaurants can be found among the bright lights of Az-Zubayri and Hadda Sts.

San'a's street names are confusing. Many streets have had different names at different periods, some have different names for different sections and few actually have street signs anyway. Unless you've grown up

there, trying to navigate the winding streets of the old city is almost impossible.

### Maps

City maps are scarce. Your best bet is to use the inset maps of San'a on the back of some of the country maps (see p515), though not many are more detailed than the San'a maps displayed in this book.

### INFORMATION

#### Bookshops

There are very few bookshops selling English-language publications. Your best bet is the bookshop of the **Taj Sheba Hotel** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 272372; Ali Abdul Mogni St).

#### Cultural Centres

**British Council** (Map p458; ☎ 448356; www.britishcouncil.org/yemen; Algiers St) Located inside the San'a Trade Center.

**Centre Culturel Français** (Map p458; ☎ 269472; www.ccdsanaa.com; Al-Qods St; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3.30-6.30pm Sat-Wed, 9am-1pm Thu) Near Hadda St.

#### Emergency

The following emergency numbers apply throughout Yemen:

**Fire Brigade** (☎ 179)

**Police** (☎ 199)

**Traffic Accidents** (☎ 194)

#### Internet Access

Internet cafés are mushrooming up all over the city centre.

**Arab Net** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 24hr; per min YR2) Off Abdul Mogni St.

**Ebhar Net** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 284138; per min YR2; ☎ 8am-1am Sat-Thu, 3.30pm-1am Fri) Off Abdul Mogni St.

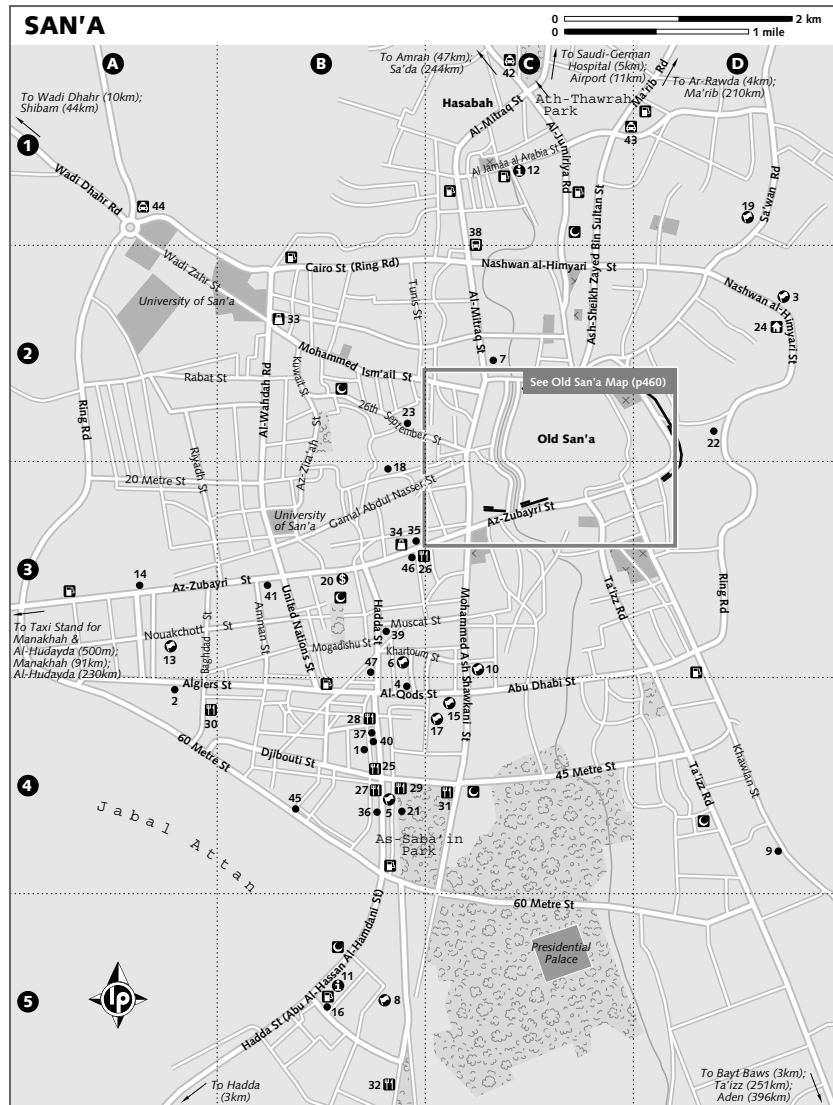
**International Telecom Centre** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 285030; Midan at-Tahrir; per min am YR1, per min pm YR2; ☎ 8am-midnight Sat-Thu, 3pm-midnight Fri)

#### Laundry

Almost all hotels offer laundry services. Taking your clothes to a laundry may save you some cash. **Bab al-Yaman** (Az-Zubayri St; ☎ 7am-midnight) is a good one and charges YR30/40/100 for a shirt/pair of trousers/jacket.

#### Media

Two English-language weeklies, the *Yemen Times* and the *Yemen Observer* (p515), each cost YR30 and are available from newspaper



sellers on Midan at-Tahrir. Old copies of *Newsweek* can sometimes be found in the bookshops of some of the top hotels, such as the Taj Sheba.

### Medical Services

For minor problems, pharmacies (where English is spoken) provide a good over-

the-counter service. The **Saudi-German Hospital** (☎ 313333) is considered to be the best by expats.

### Money

Many of the main bank branches in San'a now have ATMs, which accept international cards. There's a freestanding ATM provided

INFORMATION		US Embassy.....19 D1		SHOPPING	
Arabian Horizons Travel & Tourism... (see 39)		Yemen Commercial Bank.....	20 B3	Fuji Film.....	33 B2
ATC.....	1 B4			Yahsob Spice.....	34 B3
British Council.....	2 A4	SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		TRANSPORT	
British Embassy.....	3 D2	As-Saba'in Amusement Park.....	21 B4	EgyptAir.....	35 B3
Centre Culturel Français.....	4 B4	Qat Souq.....	22 D2	Emirates Airlines.....	36 B4
Dutch Embassy.....	5 B4	Yemen Language Center & Yemen Center for Arab Studies.....	23 B2	Gulf Air.....	37 B4
French Embassy.....	6 B3			Lufthansa.....	(see 20)
FTI Yemen.....	7 C2	SLEEPING		Minibuses to Airport (Al-Shalal Restaurant).....	
German Embassy.....	8 B5	Mövenpick.....	24 D2	Qatar Airways.....	39 B3
Immigration Authority.....	9 D4	EATING		Royal Jordanian Airlines.....	
Italian Embassy.....	10 C3	Al-Fanoos.....	25 B4	Saudi Arabian Airlines.....	41 B3
Marib Travels & Tourism.....	11 B5	Al-Khima Supermarket.....	26 B3	Syrian Air.....	(see 39)
Ministry of Tourism.....	12 C1	Al-Shaibani Modern Restaurant.....	27 B4	Taxis for Amran, Hajja & Sa'da.....	42 C1
Omani Embassy.....	13 A3	KFC.....	28 B4	Taxis for Wadi Dhahr, Shibam, Thilla & Al-Mahwit.....	44 A1
Sabafoan Head Office.....	14 A3	Mumbai Durbar.....	30 A4	UAE Embassy.....	45 B4
Saudi Arabian Embassy.....	15 C4	Pizza Hut.....	31 C4	Yemenia.....	46 B3
Spacelnet Head Office.....	16 B5	Zeyna Food.....	32 B5	Yemenia.....	47 B3
Tourism Promotion Board.....	(see 12)				
Tourist Police.....	(see 12)				
UAE Embassy.....	17 C4				
Universal Travel & Tourism.....	18 B3				

by the Yemen Commercial Bank on Midan at-Tahrir. There are several ATMs at the airport. Foreign-exchange offices are found along Az-Zubayri St.

**Arab Bank** (Map pp460-1-00; ☎ 276585; Az-Zubayri St) Has an ATM.

**Crédit Agricole Indosuez** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 272801; fax 274161; Qasr al-Jumhuri St) Best place for changing travellers cheques.

### Post

**Tahrir Post Office** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 271180; Midan at-Tahrir; ☎ 8am-2pm & 3-8pm)

### Telephone & Fax

Telephone centres can be found all over the city centre, especially along Az-Zubayri St. **TeleYemen** (Map pp460-1; Midan at-Tahrir; ☎ 8am-midnight) Centrally located. Calls to Europe/USA/Australia cost YR200 per minute.

### Tourist Information

San'a is still awaiting a much-needed tourist office. Tourist Information Centres were supposed to have opened at both the airport and in the city centre years ago, but for the moment you'll continue to find nothing but a veil of secrecy. There are currently no maps or other publications available. The best place for information and maps is at one of the local travel agencies (p520).

**Ministry of Tourism** (Map p458; ☎ 237131; Al Jamáa al Arabia St; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Wed)

**Tourism Promotion Board** (Map p458; ☎ 252318) Located inside the Ministry of Tourism building.

### Travel Agencies

For a list of reputable travel agencies providing a range of services, see Tours (p520).

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

### Art Galleries & Centres

The **Gallery Al-Bab** (Map pp460-1) and the **Atelier** (Map pp460-1) are both found inside the gates of Bab al-Yaman. The Gallery Al-Bab also offers the chance to clamber up onto the walls of the Bab al-Yaman for memorable views.

### NATIONAL ART CENTRE

Housed in a traditional tower house, the **art centre** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 296246; al-futaih@net.ye; admission free; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 4-8pm), north of the Grand Mosque, is good not just for checking out the local art scene, but also for a spot of shopping. In addition to pieces by local artists there are lots of interesting photos of San'a taken in the 1920s.

### SHEBA ART GALLERY

Exhibited at this **gallery** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 281415; admission free; ☎ 9am-7pm Sat-Thu, 2.30-7pm Fri) are the paintings of local artist Ali Dahan.

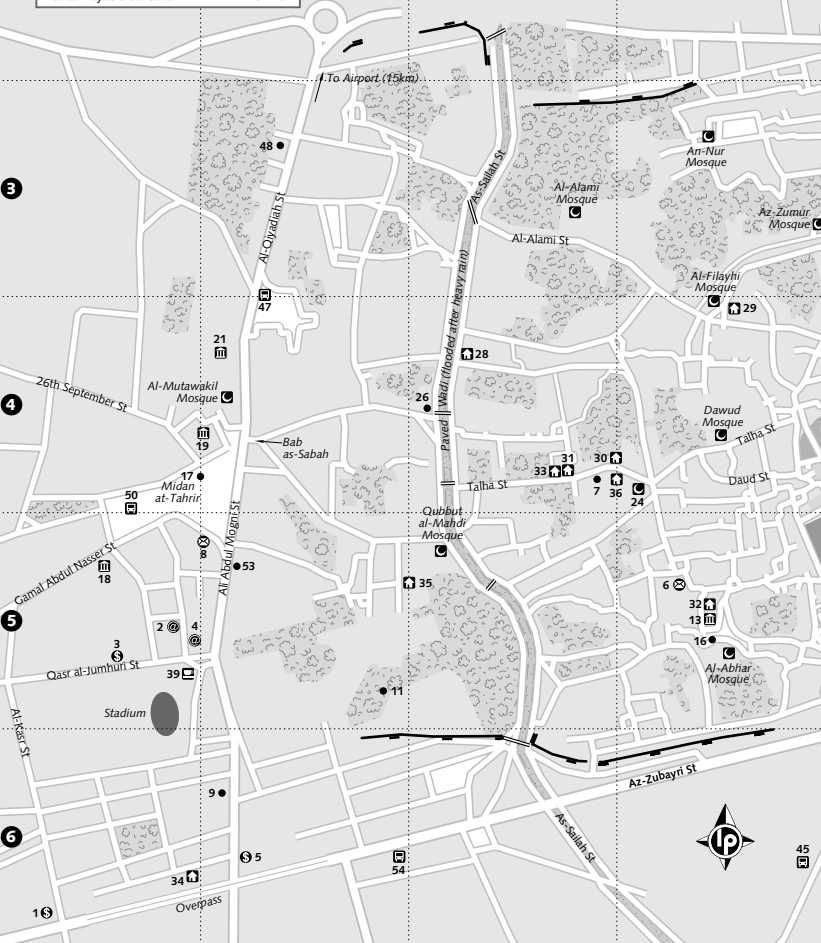
The gallery is located northeast of the Great Mosque, on the 2nd floor of the **National Handicrafts Training Center** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 281415; admission free; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu). This former *samsarah* (resting/storage house for merchants using the old incense trading routes) also houses a series of other shops selling silverware, woodwork and semiprecious stones.

### Old San'a

All these galleries are very nice, but let's be honest, on their own they're not worth traipsing halfway around the world for. However, the Unesco-protected old city of San'a is a different matter altogether. It

**OLD SAN'A**

	A	B	C	D
<b>INFORMATION</b>				
Arab Bank.....	1	A6		
Arab Net.....	2	A5		
Crédit Agricole Indosuez.....	3	A5		
Ebhar Net.....	4	A5		
International Bank of Yemen.....	5	B6		
International Telecom Centre.....	(see 8)			
Post Office.....	6	D5		
Radfan Agency Tours.....	7	C4		
Tahrir Post Office.....	8	B5		
Taj Sheba Hotel.....	9	B6		
TeleYemen.....	(see 8)			
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>				
Al-'Aqil Mosque.....	10	E4		
Al-Italia.....	(see 52)			
Andad.....	11	B5		
Atelier.....	12	E5		
Dar al Hayas a Sanania.....	13	D5		
Gallery Al-Bab.....	14	E5		
Great Mosque (Al-Jamaa al-Kabir).....	15	E5		
Hammam Abhar.....	16	D5		
Horse Riding.....	17	A4		
Military Museum.....	18	A5		
Museum of Traditional Arts & Crafts.....	19	B4		
National Art Centre.....	20	E4		
National Handicrafts Training Center (Caravansera).....	(see 27)			
National Museum.....	21	B4		
Qat Souq.....	22	E4		
Qubbat al-Bakiriyah Mosque.....	23	F4		
Qubbat Talha Mosque.....	24	D4		
Salah ad-Din Mosque.....	25	F4		
Sana'a Institute for Arabic Language.....	26	C4		
Sheba Art Gallery.....	27	E4		
<b>SLEEPING</b>				
Arabia Felix Tourist Hotel.....	28	C4		
Burj al Salam Hotel.....	29	D4		
Dawood Hotel.....	30	C4		
Golden Daar Hotel.....	31	C4		
Old Sana'a Palace Hotel.....	32	D5		
Sana'a Nights Tourist Hotel.....	33	C4		
Say'un Hotel.....	34	A6		
Sultan Palace Hotel.....	35	C5		
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<b>EATING</b>				
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<b>DRINKING</b>				
Al-Asdeqa.....	39	A5		
Coffeehouse.....	40	E5		



would be fair to say that old San'a is one of the most beautiful cities anywhere on Earth and nothing is likely to prepare you for the moment you first pass through the gates of the Bab al-Yaman. Most people spend days wandering without aim through this enormous work of art and that's certainly the best way to absorb this city.

At the heart of it all is the **Souq al-Milh** (Map pp460-1-00). Though the name indicates that the sole product is salt, this is something of a misnomer. Everything from mobile phones to sacks of sultanas is available here. It's almost impossible to point to individual buildings, souqs or sights, but the qat market, in the centre of the old town, is frenetically busy around lunchtime. The spice souq is every oriental fantasy brought to life and the small cellars where blinkered camels walk round and round in circles crushing sesame seeds to make oil is a glimpse into a bygone age. For many the abiding memory of the city is likely to be of the topsy-turvy, icing-cake houses and the dreamy mosques. Walking the streets of old San'a as the evening prayer call rings out across the rooftops is a deeply romantic and exotic experience and something you're never likely to forget.

Finally, a compulsory activity for tourist and local alike is to climb to the top of one of the tower houses and relish the ravishing views over the city as the sun sinks below the surrounding mountains.

**Mosques & Gardens**

The mosques in San'a are open only to Muslims, but you can often get a fleeting glimpse inside through a doorway and the majestic minarets are there for all to enjoy. Out of the 50 mosques still standing, the **Great Mosque** (Al-Jamaa al-Kabir; Map pp460-1) north of Bab al-Yaman, is the most significant. For centuries it served as an important Islamic school and centre of learning, and attached to it is a library containing the largest and most famous collection of manuscripts in Yemen.

Of the many other mosques, ones to look out for include the small but elegant **Qubbat al-Bakiriyah Mosque**, built by the Ottomans and renovated in the 19th century; the 17th-century **Qubbat Talha Mosque** (Map pp460-1), with its unusual minaret; the decrepit mid-16th-century **Al-'Aqil Mosque** (Map

YEMEN

YEMEN



### A CITY CAUGHT IN TIME

San'a is so perfectly preserved that it is said you can walk a square kilometre in any direction without encountering a single new building. The old city is particularly famous for its 'tower houses'. Reaching up to six or eight storeys, they have been called 'the world's first skyscrapers'; San'a contains no less than 14,000 of them.

Tower houses tend to follow a set design: on the ground floor are the stables and storerooms; on the 1st floor the rooms used for entertaining; the 2nd floor is usually reserved for the women and children; and on the 3rd and 4th floors are the bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchen. At the very top of the house is the *manzar* (attic), which contains the *mafraj* (literally 'room with a view'). Serving often as windows in the *mafraj*, are moon-shaped, stained-glass windows known as *qamariyas*. Today much qat-chewing takes place here.

The ground and 1st floors of the building are generally constructed of stone, and the upper levels of mud brick. Considered the best insulator in the world, the mud keeps the interior cool during the warmth of the day and warm during the cool of the night. Outside, the façade is whitewashed with lime (which protects the mud from rainwater) and decorated with geometrically patterned lines. The stone foundations of some houses are thought to date back at least a thousand years (the oldest building in the city was constructed a staggering two thousand years ago).

The original plan and pattern of the San'a tower house is said to have come from the legendary Palace of Ghumdan, a 2nd-century masterpiece whose lights could be seen in Madinah, 1000km to the north, and which was said to have been as close to heaven as you could come on earth. The Great Mosque is thought to have been partially constructed with materials from this palace.

pp460-1) to the north of Souq al-Milh; and the **Salah ad-Din Mosque** (Map pp460-1), due east of Al-'Aqil Mosque, built in the 17th century.

Finally, the city may not look like a lush and green place, but while exploring old San'a keep an eye peeled for the hidden communal vegetable gardens that once made the city self-sufficient.

### Qat Souqs

As well as the atmospheric old town qat souq, there's a bigger one further east, near the ring road (Map p458), and another, the **Andad Souq** (Map pp460-1), just to the west of the dry wadi (now a road) that runs through the western fringe of the old city.

### Museums

#### NATIONAL MUSEUM

Claiming to be the largest museum on the Arabian Peninsula, the **National Museum** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 271696; Ali Abdul Mogni St; admission YR500; ☎ 9am-12.30pm Sat-Thu) is certainly one of the best. The ground and 1st floors contain a breathtaking collection of statues, figurines and other artefacts from the pre-Islamic Kingdoms of Saba and Hadramawt. The 2nd floor concentrates on the medieval Islamic period while the top floor features a slightly less rewarding mishmash of

stuffed lions and re-creations of the souqs of San'a.

#### MILITARY MUSEUM

The ground floor contains Sabaeen overflow from the National Museum, which means this **military museum** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 276635; Gamal Abdul Nasser St; admission YR200; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 3-8pm Sat-Wed, 3-7pm Thu & Fri) is more interesting than it sounds. After that the displays revert to the standard death and guns of military museums the world over, though this one also includes some graphic photos of executions during the Imanic era.

#### DAR AL HAYAS A SANANIA

This renovated old tower house is the newest **museum** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 270734; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon Sat-Wed) in the city. It has been spruced up to reveal something of the life and times of a traditional San'a home. It comes with rooftop views and a craftshop.

#### MUSEUM OF TRADITIONAL ARTS & CRAFTS

This **museum** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 271648; Midan at-Tahrir; admission YR500; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-5.30pm Sat-Wed) was closed for renovations at the time of research but promises to reopen soon. When it does, prices and opening hours are likely to remain the same as listed here.

### Hammams

At least 20 **hammams** (Turkish bathhouses) dot the city and they are among the best places to mingle with locals and, should you speak Arabic, catch up on the latest gossip. Not all hammams are keen to take foreigners, so ask your hotel to recommend one locally. Most charge around YR300 and are open from 6am to 7pm. Men and women always bathe separately. In the old city, **Hammam Abhar** (Map pp460-1; admission YR300; ☎ Mon, Wed & Thu for men, Tue, Fri & Sat for women) lies near the Dar al Hayas a Sanania museum.

For a total 'makeover', male travellers might fancy a trip to the **barber**, where for less than US\$1 (YR100 to YR150) you'll get a closer-than-close shave and a hair snip.

### COURSES

**Sana'a Institute for Arabic Language** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 284330; info@sialyemen.com; As-Sailah St) Courses cost US\$300/570/830 for three/six/nine weeks. Year-long courses are also offered, as are courses in Islamic culture.

**Yemen Language Center & Yemen Center for Arab Studies** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 270200; www.ylccint.com; 26th September St) Offers group and individual tuition from €1710 for five weeks. The centre is currently merging with the recently formed College of Middle Eastern Studies.

### TOURS

City tours of San'a (for around US\$40 to US\$50) are offered by local travel operators (see Tours, p520).

### SLEEPING

The old city might be cramped, noisy and sometimes uncomfortable, but without any doubt its immense character and colour

means that it's the best place to stay. Unless you're a businessperson requiring form and functionality, then it's very hard to know why you would opt for the soulless streets and hotels of the ugly new town.

### Old City

All of the following are converted tower houses marketed as 'palace hotels', though none were ever anything of the sort.

### BUDGET

**Old Sana'a Palace Hotel** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 280200; Harat al-Abhar; s/d US\$10/15) Spartan rooms and one thin, dirty mattress are all you get at this not-too-welcoming hotel. On the plus side it has good views from the roof (non-guests YR100) and a café with a massive wooden sculpture of the Bab al-Yaman.

**Sultan Palace Hotel** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 273766; sultanpalacehotel@yahoo.com; s/d with breakfast €12/15) Located close to the Qubbat al-Mahdi Mosque in a quiet corner of the old city, this is a friendly budget hotel that is handy to the Midan at-Tahrir and new town. It's the best of the budget options in the old town.

### MIDRANGE

**Sana'a Nights Tourist Hotel** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 482826; www.sanaanightshotel.com; Talha St; s/d from US\$15/20) This is a welcome new addition to the accommodation scene. It shares a courtyard with the Golden Daar (p464) but its wobbly white roof beams, bright wall tapestries and clean, simple bedrooms are infinitely preferable to those of its neighbour. It includes a basic free breakfast and as much help and advice as you can handle.

### SAN'A FOR CHILDREN

Childcare facilities are lacking in San'a, but entertainment for kids includes the following:

- **Horse riding** Rides costs YR1000 for a five-minute ride around the square, and YR200 for a photograph sitting on a horse. Ask for the bright-orange horse. Its on Midan at-Tahrir, opposite the Honda building.
- **As-Saba'in Park** (70 Park; admission free) Enclosed within this 50,000-sq-metre park are shaded areas for picnicking, as well as swings, slides and a couple of amusement centres.
- **As-Saba'in Amusement Park** (admission free; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm) Located in As-Saba'in Park, there are rides (about 18 types) for YR50. If you're not travelling with children, it's worth being a big kid and going anyway, as it's a fun experience that is a real contrast to the exotic souqs of the old city.

**Taj Talha Hotel** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 287130; www.tajtalha-hotel.com.ye; Talha St; s/d with telephone from US\$20/25) With possibly the best stained-glass windows in San'a, stunning rooftop views and, just a few metres away, the most tuneful mosque in town, this has all the ingredients for a classic hotel. However, the rooms are dark and gloomy, with bathroom plumbing that seems permanently clogged up. Friendly.

**Golden Daar Hotel** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 287220; www.almokalla.com; Talha St; s/d with breakfast from US\$20/25) The Golden Daar has been providing simple beds to weary travellers for years. The plain rooms have frayed carpets but are very clean, and the giant windows make you feel like you're flying high above San'a.

**our pick Dawood Hotel** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 287270; dawoodhotel@yahoo.com; Talha St; s/d from US\$20/25) A brash new upstart putting every other hotel in San'a on notice and offering easily the best value for money in town. It's a lovingly restored tower house with shiny clean rooms full of little extras including delightful textiles, Arabian cushion seats and bundles of real and not so real antiques. The beds are soft and comfortable, the views memorable and the sunny courtyard overlooks communal vegetable gardens. The best things, though, are the warm and friendly staff that come a-knocking each evening with frankincense for your room. Try and get one of the better rooms on the upper floors.

**Arabia Felix Tourist Hotel** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 287330; http://arabiefelix.free.fr; s/d incl breakfast US\$22/25) This hotel's best asset is its small but attractive garden. Rooms are small and simple. Some include a bathroom and some don't, but the price is the same! Note that taxi drivers may know the hotel by its Arabic name: Funduq al-'Arabiya as-Sa'ida.

#### TOP END

**our pick Burj Al Salam Hotel** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 483333; www.burjalsalam.com; s/d/st US\$48/84/175) A smart four-star hotel lost in the heart of old San'a. The Italian management ensure European standards but the local staff ensure Yemeni fun and character. The small standard rooms are perfectly presented with heavy wooden furniture, stone floors and large windows, while the suites are big enough to get thoroughly lost in. The biggest attraction might be the arresting rooftop views and the luxurious *mafraj*.

#### New City BUDGET

**Say'un Hotel** (Map p506; ☎ 274838; sayunhotel@y.net.ye; Ali Abdul Mogni St; r YR2500) The scrappy reception and stairway leads you to fear the worst, but the rooms are actually much cleaner and better than you'd expect. Good for couples on a budget.

#### TOP END

**Mövenpick** (Map p458; ☎ 546666; www.movenpick-hotels.com; Nashwan al-Himyari St; s/d from US\$180/204; ☎ ☎) This monster on the hill doing its utmost to ruin the San'a skyline is undeniably the best hotel in the city. It hardly needs saying that the rooms and facilities are of the highest calibre, but the best features are the tempting indoor pool and the huge views. However, you've got to wonder why on earth anyone felt it necessary to build a massive 400-room hotel in such an obstructive place.

#### EATING

Not surprisingly San'a has the best range of restaurants in the country, including a few serving international dishes.

#### Restaurants

**our pick Houmaid Salta** (Map pp460-1; Souq al-Milh; meals YR200; ☎ noon-3pm) Next to the qat market in the heart of the old city. This *salta* (a kind of stew and the traditional lunch dish of the highlands) restaurant is regarded as having the best *salta* in San'a and is a pre-qat-session institution. Buy the accompanying sheets of bread from the women standing around outdoors.

**Zeyna Food** (Map p458; 14th October St; meals YR250-500; ☎ noon-3pm) Run more as a hobby than a business by an Ethiopian woman, this incredibly popular lunchtime restaurant gives you the opportunity to try Ethiopia's national dish, *injira* and *wat*, a decidedly acquired taste!

**Naeem** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 771601473; Bab al-Yaman; meals from YR300) This shiny white-tiled restaurant is cleaner than most and does great roast chickens (YR600) and freshly squeezed fruit juices (YR1000). It's right next to the Bab al-Yaman.

**Al-Shaibani Modern Restaurant** (Map p458; ☎ 505290; Hadda St; meals YR400-700) This is the restaurant that all the other restaurants in Yemen want to take after. All the staples are

done to perfection, but it's the oven-baked fish that rules the roost.

**Al-Khima** (Map p458; ☎ 444705; off Hadda St; meals YR500-800) Its Yemeni and Lebanese food isn't great but it's one of the few places where you might want to linger over a meal. Better than the food are the fruit-flavoured *sheesha* pipes and the big-screen TV showing all the major sporting events.

**Al-Fanoos** (Map p458; ☎ 441042; off Hadda St; starters YR200, mains YR600-750) Probably the best Western-style sit-down-and-relax restaurant in Yemen – though don't rely on it being open, as it often only swings back the doors at weekends or when there's a group booking. The food is predominately Middle Eastern and there's occasional live music.

**Mumbai Durbar** (Map p458; Baghdad St; meals YR1000) Dishing out spicy subcontinental dishes, this is one of Yemen's lonely Indian restaurants.

#### Quick Eats

Food stalls selling simple but delicious fare that's cheap as chips can be found in the streets immediately south and east of Midan at-Tahrir, such as around the junction of Ali Abdul Mogni and Qasr al-Jumhuri Streets. If you want to see a side of Yemen sitting at the polar opposite of the tourist brochure clichés then head to the bright lights of Hadda Street and its strip of garish Western-style fast-food outlets which culminate in a Pizza Hut and KFC (Map p458).

#### Self-Catering

**Al-Hoda Supermarket** (Map p458; Az-Zubayri St) This is good for provisions or picnics, or if you're just hankering after Western goodies, such as chocolate or bikkies. It also stocks shampoo, sanitary towels and – usually – nappies.

#### DRINKING

Various Turkish-style coffeehouses can be found around Bab al-Yaman, including the coffeehouse next to the wall, immediately to the left of the gate as you enter the old city (look out for the awning).

Open to all are the excellent fruit-juice stalls dotted around town, such as **Al-Asdeqa** (Map pp460-1; Qasr al-Jumhuri St; juices around YR70) not far from the Crédit Agricole Bank.

#### ENTERTAINMENT

San'a's entertainment is limited to tourist-class restaurants putting on occasional evening shows, such as **Al-Fanoos** (Map p458; ☎ 441042; off Hadda St). The hardcore qat and *sheesha* crowd of **Arafat Lakonda** (Map pp460-1; near Bab al-Yaman) might appeal to some but it's not for the timid (or women).

**Cinema Al-Ahly** (Map pp460-1; Al-Laqiya St; admission YR100) screens original language films from Egypt, India and America.

#### SHOPPING

Popular souvenirs include the *jambiya* and traditional jewellery. Prices are negotiable, but note that Yemenis aren't the ardent hagglers found in other Arab countries. Aggressive bartering on the part of the buyer may offend.

The **National Women's Centre for Development Handicrafts** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 482454; Samsarat al-Halaqah; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm Sat-Thu) and **Hope in their Hands** (☎ 482455; Samsarat al-Halaqah; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-7pm Sat-Thu) are two non-profit organisations located inside the same building with the joint aim of increasing the financial independence of Yemeni women. This is done through workshops where the women, who are often widowed or divorced, learn skills such as sewing and weaving. The resulting products are then sold in the two downstairs shops, which are the best places in San'a to buy souvenirs. If you're lucky, you might be allowed upstairs to watch the women at work. Even without these centres the building itself, a renovated caravanserai (a traditional lodging house for traders travelling the old trade routes), is worth a visit.

Yemeni honey is well known – and justly so. Honey shops are found throughout the capital (including Az-Zubayri St), though it's not cheap: around YR2500 for 500g, YR5000 to YR6000 for 1kg. Beautiful honeycombs (conveniently packaged in sealed metal discs) cost YR2000 to YR8000 (depending on quality). A decent honey shop in the old city is Tariq Honey Shop, near the Sheba Art Gallery, where the gift of bees is also likely to come with gifts of Islamic literature.

Rows of shops selling gold and silver jewellery can be found on Gamal Abdul Nasser St. Also well worth a look (or a sniff) are the perfume and spice shops. **Yahsob Spice** (Map p458; ☎ 294319; Az-Zubayri St) has a good collection of the latter.

For photographic requirements, **Fuji Film** (Map p458; ☎ 224983; Al-Wahdah Rd) offers products and development services.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

For restrictions on independent travel, see Travel Permits (p518).

### Air

The national carrier, **Yemenia** (Map pp460-1 & Map p458; ☎ 201822; www.yemenia.com), has various offices around town. It offers one-way flights to Aden (US\$65), Al-Hudayda (US\$50), Ar-Rayyan (Mukalla) and Sayun (US\$80), Suqutra (US\$60), Ta'izz (US\$50) and Al-Ghayda (US\$60).

### Bus

The bus company **Yemitco** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 242366; Az-Zubayri St) runs a service to Al-Hudayda (YR1500, five hours, two daily), Aden (YR1400, six hours, five daily), Al-Mukalla (YR2000, 12 hours, one daily) and Ta'izz (YR1250, five hours, two daily).

**General Land Transport Company** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 281318; Bab al-Yaman) and **Madne Buses** (Map pp460-1; Bab al-Yaman) have daily services to Say'un (YR1400; 14 hours), which travel via Ma'rib and can, technically at least, be used by foreigners as long as they don't disembark at Ma'rib, which is currently the site of tribal tensions. In reality, though, you probably won't be allowed to travel.

At the time of writing, there was no bus service to Sa'da.

### Car

For car hire, **Europcar** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 270751; www.europcar.com; Al-Qiyadah St), located inside the Sam City Hotel, rents cars/4WDs with limited/unlimited mileage. Similar services (and a franchise of Hertz) are available from **Universal Rent a Car** (Map p458; ☎ 447714; www.hertz.com; 60 Metre St; ☎ 24hr), which also has a branch at the airport.

### Taxi

Shared taxis usually leave from spots on the outskirts of the city on the road leading to their destinations (see Map p458 and Map pp460-1 for taxi hub locations). To reach these departure points, take a minibus from Bab al-Yaman (YR20).

Shared taxis run west to Manakhah (YR500, three hours, many daily), and Al-

Hudayda (YR1000, 4½ hours, six daily). North to Amran (YR400, one hour, several daily), Hajja (YR600, two hours, six per day) and south to Ta'izz (YR1000, five hours, lots throughout the day). Tourists are not permitted to travel by taxi to Ma'rib or Sa'da.

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

For the airport (16km from the city centre), minibuses (YR30) depart from outside Al-Shalal restaurant in the Al-Hasabah area. Contract taxis to the airport charge YR2000 from the old town.

## Car & Motorcycle

San'a's traffic is frenetic, few road rules are enforced, little etiquette is observed and few vehicle 'appendages' (such as mirrors and indicators) are used. Parking can also be a problem and traffic police (issuing parking fines) patrol the city centre. Almost no signposts (in Arabic or English) exist, so it may be best to leave the car at home unless you know the city well. Accidents are common.

## Public Transport

Minibuses (which operate from 6am to 1am) run all around town and are quick and cheap (around YR20). Nippier still are motorbike taxis, which charge YR100 to YR150 for hops around town.

## Taxi

Meters are not normally used, so fares should be negotiated in advance. Short hops around town cost YR30 in a shared taxi, YR100 (tourists will be asked YR300 to YR500) in a contract taxi.

## AROUND SAN'A

### 07

A couple of places just outside town formerly made popular and pleasant excursions. However, the ever-expanding capital has almost swallowed these once separate and tranquil villages. Nevertheless, for those who have limited time but are keen to see something out of town, brief stops are still worthwhile.

Lying 8km north of the San'a city centre is the settlement of **Ar-Rawda**, once known for its high-quality grapes. The area is also

known for its distinct, adobe-based architecture and an attractively decorated 17th-century mosque. **Bayt Baws**, 7km south of the San'a city centre, is a naturally fortified village typical of the region.

## Wadi Dhahr

وادي ظهر

The most popular afternoon excursion from San'a is to the palace of **Dar al-Hajar** (admission YR500; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-6pm) in the fertile Wadi Dhahr. Constructed as a summer residence for Imam Yahya in the 1920s, the palace has become something of a symbol of Yemen, and it's not hard to see why – it erupts forth off its rock table like a giant red-and-white toadstool.

Inside, you will find that few of the rooms are furnished, but for most the main attractions are the great rooftop views and the stunning stained-glass windows throwing flecks of multicoloured light across the floor. Don't miss the ancient subterranean wells that go right through the rock (one is apparently 275m deep).

If you charter a taxi from San'a, your driver will probably take you to one of the viewpoints overlooking the wadi. Most of the time the car park here is loaded with touts and salesmen and is well worth avoiding, but Friday often brings carloads of high-spirited wedding parties out to celebrate by firing their guns into the air.

The palace lies around 1km north of the village of Wadi Dhahr (which is 14km from central San'a). Shared taxis run without much frequency to San'a (YR115, around 20 minutes) or you can get a seat in a shared taxi to **Shemlan** (YR15), from where there are connections every few minutes to the city centre. Alternatively, you can charter a taxi for around YR1000. There are no hotels in Wadi Dhahr, but there is a restaurant in the palace grounds, though it rarely seems to be open.

## THE HARAZ MOUNTAINS

جبال حراز

Rising abruptly off the steamy Red Sea coastal plains the sheer-sided Haraz Mountains have, for centuries, acted as a cultural fortress protecting the Yemeni heartland from interfering foreigners. Today the sus-

picion of outsiders is largely a thing of the past, but what hasn't changed one jot is the grandeur of the mountains and the beauty of their tapestry of terraced fields and fortified villages, all huddled together on the most unlikely crags. The Haraz Mountains are prime trekking territory. For those with the spirit of adventure and a little self-sufficiency, it's possible to spend days, or even weeks, weaving along the mule trails that link up the different villages.

## SHIBAM

شيبام

Not to be confused with the town of the same name in eastern Yemen, this ancient village lies 2300m above sea level, at the foot of Jebel Kawkaban (2800m). It's an almost compulsory stop on every visitor's Yemen trip, but despite this it retains a chilled-out, welcoming attitude and makes a good first stop in rural Yemen. Dating from the 2nd century AD, Shibam became an important capital for the local Yafurid dynasty in the 9th century, when its grand mosque – one of the oldest in Yemen – was built.

## Sights

Non-Muslims are, as normal in Yemen, forbidden from entering the **mosque**, but even so its exterior walls and solid minaret are pleasing to the eye. Other eye candy is the old **town gate** and the bustling little **souq**, which is the site of a very colourful **Friday market** (☎ 6.30am-1pm). Attracting people from all around, it's well worth a visit if you're in the area.

If you're wondering about the little 'caves' hollowed into the mountainside, they're old tombs – an ancient local tradition. Jebel Kawkaban is also known for its **birdlife**, particularly raptors.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hameda Hotel** (☎ 450480; per person with breakfast & dinner YR1600) This newly built hotel about 1km out of town on the road to Kawkaban offers clean, foreigner-friendly rooms with gorgeous window carvings, ant-sized bathrooms and soft, comfortable beds. A good breakfast and dinner is thrown in with the bargain-basement price.

**Hanida Tourist Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 450480; lunch YR1000) Lying around 200m south of the taxi stop, this traditional tower-house restaurant is run by the same family as the

Hameda Hotel. Every afternoon its beautiful *mafraj*, full of colourfully carved panels and glowing stained-glass windows, plays host to a lunchtime banquet fit for a king. It's best to reserve in advance.

### Getting There & Away

Shared taxis run to Al-Mahwit (YR250, 1½ hours, three to four daily), At-Tawila (YR150, 40 minutes, 10 daily), Kawkaban (YR100, 15 minutes, five to seven daily), San'a (YR150, 30 minutes, four to five daily) and Thilla (YR50, 15 minutes, 10 daily).

### KAWKABAN

كوكبان

Perched dramatically on the top of Jebel Kawkaban and lording it over Shibam, some 350 vertical metres below, is the remarkable village and fortified citadel of Kawkaban. During the 15th century, it served as a capital to the Bani Sharaf Al-Deen dynasty and was once renowned for its school of music. In times of conflict the citizens of Shibam would scurry up here to join their brothers and, thanks to some huge grain silos and water cisterns (which can still be seen today), everyone was able to continue going about their life largely unperturbed by any siege. In fact it wasn't until the civil war of the 1960s and the coming of air power that Kawkaban was finally conquered.

### Activities

The main activity in Kawkaban is **hiking**. The manager of the Hotel Jabal Kawkaban is a good source of information and can also act as guide (or help find one) and organise camping trips (YR1500 to YR2000 per person per day). Donkeys can also be hired (YR3000 per day). There are no set trekking routes or facilities for foreign walkers and for all except the hour-long hike down the mountain to Shibam, you will need a guide. It's best to explain to your guide how long and difficult you would like to make your hike and let him suggest something suitable. The countryside around here consists primarily of gentle plateaus interspersed with soaring peaks and the hiking is generally fairly easy, though this also means that the scenery doesn't match places such as Manakhah (p470). If the mere thought of a hiking boot makes you puffed out, content yourself with a leisurely stroll through the

village to check out both the cisterns and the eagle's-eye view off the edge of the escarpment down to Shibam.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Jabal Kawkaban** (☎ 733971662; per person incl breakfast & dinner YR1500) Simple dorm-style rooms full of soft cushions and a warm welcome await. The manager, who speaks good English and French, is something of a one-man tourist office. Lunch costs YR900.

**Hotel Al-Taj Tourism** (Planet's Tower Hotel; ☎ 450170; dm incl breakfast & dinner YR1800, s/d with bathroom, breakfast & dinner YR2600/4000) Small and clean rooms come with larger than average bathrooms, a strangely forlorn atmosphere and a lobster and typewriter on the wall! English speaking and friendly. Sample the lunch for YR800.

**Kawkaban Hotel** (☎ 450154; fax 450855, s/d incl breakfast & dinner YR2500/3900) It's real luck of the draw here as to whether you get one of the dark and dastardly cell like rooms or one of the spacious and comfortable double rooms. Either way the price remains fixed. Lunch and dinner cost YR900 each.

### Getting There & Away

From near the Grand Mosque in Shibam, there is a steep footpath leading 2.5km up to Kawkaban.

Shared taxis use the circuitous 7km road to Shibam (YR100, 15 minutes, five to seven daily). For taxis further afield, go to Shibam first.

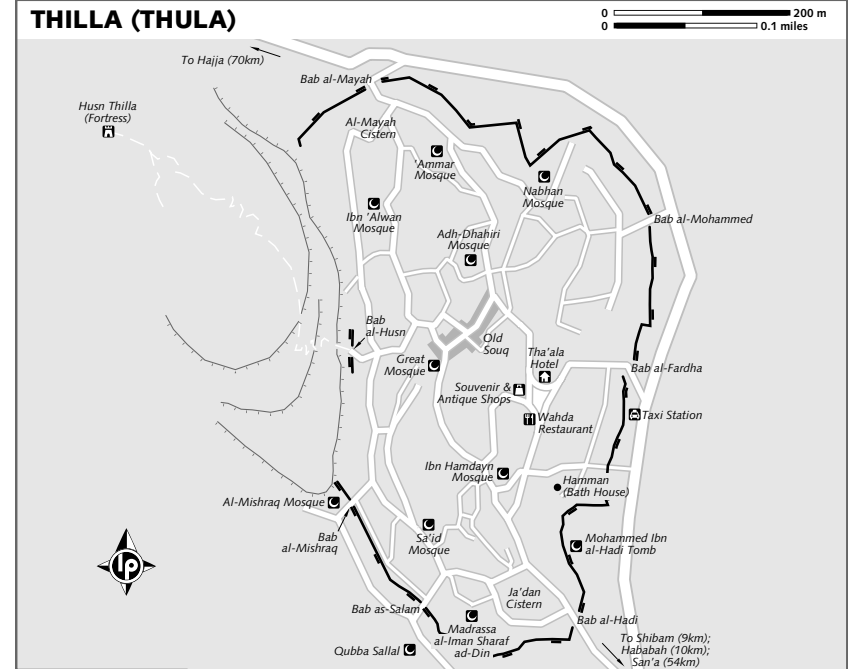
### THILLA (THULA)

تل

Set against a great pillar of rock mounted to a fortress, the chameleon-camouflaged town of Thilla, about 9km north of Shibam, was once an important theological centre. Today it's known more for its lovely architecture than books of learning. An impressive stone wall surrounds the town, making for a memorable arrival through one of its seven gates.

### Information

You might be assailed by kids wishing to act as guides, but it's all very low-key and they are just as interested in having a chat as making a sale. Should you want a tour of the town a guide will charge a negotiable YR500.



### Sights

Thilla is one of those classic Yemeni mountain towns that appears almost organic, so perfectly does it meld into its setting. There are few formal attractions, but a walk through the dusty streets is highly enjoyable. Look out for the 25 **mosques** and **tombs**, which dot the town (some are marked on the map), including the **Great Mosque** (Al-Jami'a al-Kabir Mosque), with its distinctive stone minaret. Many of the houses have added a little razzmatazz to their largely grey-brown exteriors by adding brilliantly whitewashed stone window frames and heavy, carved wooden doors. The little souq also brings some colour to the village.

From town, an old and beautifully constructed stone staircase leads up to **Husn Thilla** (admission YR500; ☀ sunrise-sunset). The fort remained unconquered by the Ottomans, and though the exterior is impressive, the interior is sadly devoid of life. There are memorable views, and inside the fort walls are tombs, cisterns and granaries. It's about a 45-minute uphill (very much uphill!) walk from the village.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Tha'ala Hotel** (☎ 77885095; Main Sq; s/d with shared bathroom, breakfast & dinner YR1600/3200) This traditional tower house is almost the focal point of the village and offers tasty rooms with soft mattresses laid out straight onto the floor. The bathrooms aren't too pretty, but the owner is friendly.

Opposite the hotel is the Wahda Restaurant, where a meal of hummus, *fool* and tea comes in at YR400.

### Getting There & Away

Thilla is an easy hike from Shibam or Kawkaban.

Shared taxis (which leave from in front of Bab al-Fardha) run to San'a (YR250, about one hour, five to six daily) and Shibam (YR70, 20 minutes, over 50 daily).

### HABABAH

Although similar in style and architecture to Thilla (and lying 10km away), Hababah has a special feature: a large, oval **water cistern**, where people still come to collect water, drive their animals to drink or even have

a swim (it's not a good idea for foreigners to join in). With the old tower houses reflected in the still water, it makes for an extremely picturesque scene. There are no facilities for sleeping or eating.

Shared/contract taxis run to Shibam (YR50/250, 15 minutes, 10 daily).

## AT-TAWILA & AROUND

About halfway between Shibam and Al-Mahwit is the village of At-Tawila. The village, and its tumbling terraced fields, is stunningly located at the base of a series of rock needles, around which the afternoon mist and clouds play games of hide and seek. If you have the time, it's well worth stopping off for a walk along one of the many trails that lead up behind the village.

A few kilometres back towards Shibam, another village worth stopping at is **Ar Rujum**, whose old quarter consists of a bundle of whitewashed houses thrown up on top of a huge boulder.

Should you want to stay the night then the **Hotel Rest-Alhana** (☎ 07-456369; per person incl breakfast & dinner YR2000) in At-Tawila has a couple of basic rooms with communal bathrooms. It's on the main road through town.

## AL-MAHWIT

### المحويت

The bustling market town of Al-Mahwit is the largest of the mountain towns to the west of the capital, but it has little to offer the traveller bar the beautiful 125km journey from San'a. Al-Mahwit lies in the centre of some of the most fertile country in Yemen and the road from San'a takes you past numerous fruit, coffee, tobacco and qat fields.

Like At-Tawila, Al-Mahwit was once an important coffee-collecting centre, as well as an administrative town during the 16th-century Ottoman rule.

## Sights & Activities

The **old town**, perched on a hilltop, marks the site of the Ottoman regional capital and is worth a walk, as is the town's **souq**. There is good **hiking** potential in the attractive surrounding countryside but a guide would be required for anything more ambitious than a quick stroll – the staff at the Hotel Mahweet should be able to sort one out for you.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Friendship Hotel** (☎ 777728530; s/d YR750/1200) Situated about 200m down the hill from the taxi stand and 50m off the main road (turn right after the bank), this well-named hotel is OK for those on a tight budget, though it's a bit tatty.

**Hotel Mahweet** (☎ 404767; fax 404591; s/d YR5500/6500) Lying about 400m downhill from the taxi stop, this hotel has large, well-maintained rooms with piping-hot water in the bathrooms. The only real drawback is that it lacks character. The attached restaurant (open 8am to 2pm and 3.30pm to 11pm) is easily the most civilised place to eat in town, with hearty breakfasts (YR1000), pasta (YR350 to YR500) and chicken curry (YR700).

**Al-Waha Restaurant** (meals YR500; ☎ 6am-10pm) Along the road behind the Hotel Mahweet, this place is great for lovers of all parts of the animal – liver, head, wings or just straight mashed-up meat with onions and chilli. It's better than it sounds!

## Getting There & Away

Shared taxis go to San'a (YR500, three hours, four to five daily) via At-Tawila (YR200, 30 minutes) and Shibam (YR400, 1½ hours). There are occasional taxis to Khamis Bani Sa'd (YR1500), where you can change for Manakhah and so save a long backtrack. The route, along a rough wadi bed, isn't always possible after rains.

## MANAKHAH

### مناخة

☎ 01

The largest commercial centre in the high mountains, Manakhah might be a non-descript town, but it's the centre of Yemeni trekking. From here everything from gentle hour-long rambles to serious multiday expeditions fan out across the highlands.

There's no bank in Manakhah, but you can change US dollars and euros (cash) at the foreign-exchange dealers in the market. There's also a telephone centre.

## Sights & Activities

Hikes lasting from one hour to three days or more are possible. The Manakha Tourist Hotel is a good source of information about hiking.

Local guides cost YR2000 per day, though they can be hired for shorter hikes, too.

Camping equipment (YR2000 per day per person), including tents, mattresses and all other necessities, can be hired through one of the hotels. A guide and a couple of donkeys to carry everything can be arranged for YR3000 per day. As in Kawkaban, everything to do with trekking here is a bit DIY – there are no set trails, no Nepali-style mountain lodges and no guarantees that everything will go smoothly. However, for those who want to get to know the soul of Yemen, a few days trekking is unbeatable. Trekking is a year-round activity, but during the summer monsoon period it can be uncomfortably hot, not to mention a little damp.

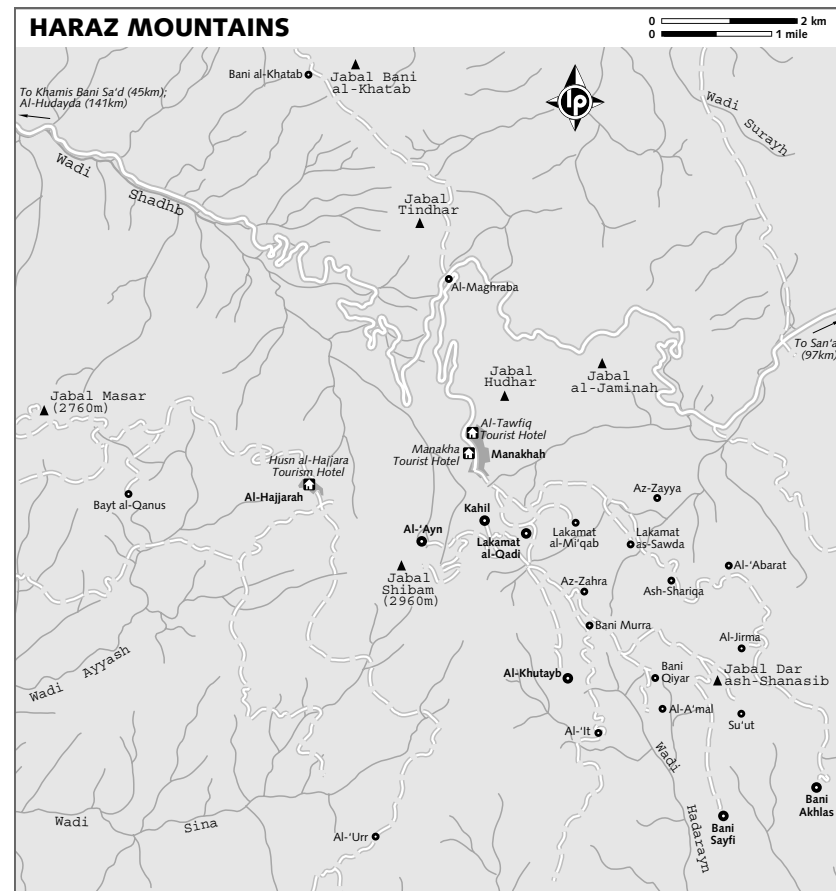
Away from blisters and bivy bags, attractions in Manakhah include the lively

Sunday morning market, which draws in all manner of characters from the surrounding villages. Alternatively, you can kick back in one of the tea shops and admire the views.

## Sleeping & Eating

There are currently no restaurants in Manakhah, but the hotels won't let you go hungry (breakfast/lunch/dinner YR400/1000/1000). Lunch boxes (YR500 to YR800) can also be prepared and further provisions bought at the market.

**Our pick** **Manakha Tourist Hotel** (Manakhah Askari Hotel; ☎ 460365; fax 460365; r per person YR800) The homely rooms are simple and pleasing and some have epic views over the valleys and peaks. The English-speaking owners are



very friendly, great cooks and full of trekking information, but take our advice and run away as soon as the musical instruments come out. Otherwise, they'll have you dancing about like a fool before you know it.

**Al-Tawfiq Tourist Hotel** (☎ 460085; per person with breakfast & dinner YR2200) Lying on the main Manakhah–San'a road, this hotel has slightly fancier rooms than the Manakha Tourist Hotel, but less atmosphere. They also like you to get your dancing shoes on, but if you choose not to you'll be in good company because the president didn't dance either when he came to stay.

### Getting There & Away

Shared taxis run to Al-Maghraba (YR50, around five minutes, 10 daily), the little village on the main San'a–Al-Hudayda road at the turn-off to Manakhah, or direct to San'a (YR500, 2½ hours, 10 daily). Al-Hajjarah is just a moment up the road (YR10) or a nice half-hour walk.

For Khamis Bani Sa'd, go to Al-Maghraba first, where you can also find shared taxis to Al-Hudayda (YR500, around two hours, 20 daily).

### AROUND MANAKHAH Al-Khutayb (Al-Hoteib)

Lying 6km south of Manakhah and perched on a solitary hilltop is the pilgrimage site of Al-Khutayb. Dedicated to a 12th-century preacher revered by followers of the Ismaili sect, the shrine attracts pilgrims from as far afield as India, and in fact the complex has a slightly Indian look and feel to it. Ask a Yemeni about this place and they will no doubt gleefully regale you with stories about all the immoral activities that take place here – very little of which is probably true! You can walk around the area, though the shrine is fenced off to non-Muslims. There's no public transport to the village, but you can hike or take a chartered taxi from Manakhah.

### Al-Hajjarah

الهجرة

Lying 5km west of Manakhah, and a little higher up the mountain, is the 11th-century village of Al-Hajjarah. The Ottomans found its strategic position useful when defending the roads from the coast to San'a. Nowadays its spectacular setting and century-old stone and whitewashed tower houses (some

up to eight storeys) have caught the eye of visitors with mountain-walking in mind.

### INFORMATION

Unfortunately, Al-Hajjarah is one of the very few places in Yemen where you'll be assailed by guides. But they're not exactly persistent, and once in the village proper you'll be left in peace. Some overnight visitors have reported a strange atmosphere here after dark.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Until recently, the **Al-Ba'aha quarter** was inhabited by Jews. Above this is the old **Muslim quarter**, with its huge entrance gate. Look out for the painstakingly constructed **terraces**, which permit the villagers to eke out an impossible living from the very steep slopes of the mountain.

If you're interested in **hiking**, then English- and French-speaking **Ahamed Ali** (☎ 711901680) is your man. He has been guiding tourists round these mountains for 20-odd years and can organise anything from a one-day hike to a three-week mission. Both he and other guides charge YR3000/5000 per 12/24 hours with a picnic lunch included. Donkeys and camping equipment are also available for a similar price to Manakhah (see p471).

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Husn al-Hajjara Tourism Hotel** (☎ 460210; alhajjarah-hotel@y.net.ye; per person with shared bathroom, breakfast & dinner YR2000) Al-Hajjarah's only hotel is a great place in which to hide away for a few days and experience Yemeni mountain life at its best. The rooms are clean and comfortable with thick mattresses laid out on the floor and piles of heavy blankets. Staff can also prepare lunch (YR1000) or a picnic (YR200 to YR800) for you.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Shared taxis (YR10) scuttle between Al-Hajjarah and Manakhah all day.

## NORTHERN YEMEN

The rough-and-ready north has always been Yemen's hardest and proudest region and even today its fierce tribes are regarded with trepidation and respect by the rest of the country. Parts of this area seem

to plunge constantly in and out of dispute and armed conflict. At the time of writing, almost the entire Sa'da province was out of bounds, though the city itself and the road to San'a were just about open. (The situation is highly unstable and changes on a daily basis.)

North of Sa'da a violent uprising has dragged on since 2003 between government forces and a group of Zaydi fighters calling themselves the 'Believing Youth'. Led originally by Hussein Badreiddin al-Houthi and, following his death, by his identically named father, this anti-Western, anti-government group is fighting to overthrow the Yemeni government, which they claim is too pro-Western. The result has been heavy casualties on both sides. The group's support base is north of Sa'da, but areas to the south of the city, including towns and villages on the road to San'a, also show a degree of support for the uprising. Therefore many areas, including the route to Shaharah and anywhere further north, are currently quite tense. Though the government has recently reopened some areas to tour groups, you should consider the situation carefully – there are many equally impressive places in Yemen where the reception is likely to be much warmer.

### AMRAN

☎ 07

First impressions of ancient Amran, situated on an old trading route 52km northwest of San'a, aren't good. The town appears to be a rash of half-completed modern developments and seems to offer little reason to stop, but once past this you'll discover a fruity and flavoursome old quarter with something of a wild west feel to it. The town is also known for the quality of its leatherwork.

### Sights

The quiet **old town** is in remarkably good shape and the locals do a sterling job of keeping the streets clean. If you've been in Yemen for sometime, you probably won't think much of Amran, but if you're new to the game, you'll think its proud adobe houses and masses of excitable children quite enchanting. The highlights of a visit are walking along the city walls, which virtually surround the old quarter, and inspecting the eastern **entrance gate**. Look out

### STANDING GUARD

If you're pondering the little watchtowers that dot the landscape with their cylindrical towers and slit windows, they're standing guard over the hectares of qat plantations that spread around them. Inside are armed owners ready to fend off thieves who may come in the night!

for the **ancient stone inscriptions** around the entrance to the town as well as on some of the house façades. The souq in the new town is a riotous affair.

### Sleeping & Eating

Most people stop in Amran for only an hour or so en route to Sa'da. There's little reason to stay overnight.

**Tourist Goold More Hotel** (☎ 604407; Sa'da St; d YR1500) On the noisy main road from Sa'da this hotel certainly doesn't include lots of 'goold', but it's the best of a couple of ropery numbers. It's not at all used to foreign guests and boasts small rooms and smaller bathrooms.

**Restaurant Fath Arahman** (☎ 604285; meals YR400) Lying on the main San'a to Sa'da road, this place is packed with locals who relish its tasty chicken and meat-based meals.

### Getting There & Away

Shared taxis go to Hajja (YR500, 2½ hours, 10 daily) and San'a (YR100, one hour, 20 daily).

### AROUND AMRAN

Between Amran and Hajja lies **Kuhlan Affar** and its hilltop fortress, positioned dramatically above the road. Admission to the **fortress** (☎ 9am-6pm) is by donation (YR100 to YR200 is recommended). It's around 15 minutes' walk from the 'car park' above town to the fort, which is one of the most heavily fortified in Yemen. There's not a great deal to see inside, but the walk is pleasant enough.

### HAJJA

☎ 07 / pop 24,645

Modern Hajja can't be described as attractive, but the journey there – which takes you over, around and along crest after crest of magnificent mountain – certainly is.

## Information

**Al-Ikhwah Telecom Centre** (Al-Hudayda St)

**Al-Manar Internet Centre** (Main Rd; per min YR2;

☎ 10am-10pm) Located above a pharmacy 100m west of the main square.

**Yemen Bank for Reconstruction & Development**

(☎ 220401; Main Sq) Can change US dollars and euros in both cash and travellers cheques.

## Sights & Activities

Perched on the hill overlooking town is the **Al-Qahira fortress** (admission YR100; ☎ sunrise-sunset), which over time both the Ottomans and Zaydi *imams* have used. It's occupied by the army, who will do their utmost to wangle several hundred riyal out of you. Aside from the impressive views over the town, there's not much to see. However, by hunting around, you might find the British-made WWII cannons, the water cisterns that could keep the fort going in times of siege and the entrance to the secret passageway (opposite the tower on the eastern side), which allowed the *imam* a swift exit in an emergency.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Baabel Hotel Tourist** (☎ 222075; fax 220818; s/d/tr YR2000/2500/3000) Despite a general air of rot, the rooms at this cheap hotel are kept fairly clean, and it makes a good budget bet. The Baabel is located just off the main square.

**Ghamban Hajja Hotel** (☎ 220424; fax 220423; s/d YR3500/4000) Excellent-value midrange hotel with clean, quiet and well-maintained rooms and scorching-hot showers. Breakfast costs YR400, while lunch and dinner cost YR1200. It lacks any character, but its soft beds do guarantee a good night's kip. It has a commanding location on a hill overlooking town.

**Golden Al-Nawras Restaurant and Broast** (San'a St; meals YR250-500; ☎ 7am-11pm) Tasty and filling portions of all your Yemeni favourites are served in this highly popular streetside restaurant.

## Getting There & Away

Hajja makes a good backdoor route to the Red Sea coast if you're coming from Yemen's far north. Shared taxis make the run to Hudayda (YR700, three hours, five daily) and San'a (YR700, three to 3½ hours, 20 daily), via Amran (YR500, 2½ hours).

## SHAHARAH

شاهارة

Fortified mountain villages are two-a-penny in Yemen, but Shaharah is the pick of the crop. Incredibly inaccessible, Shaharah has been a thorn in the side of any invading army and a bolthole for retreating *imams* for centuries. It wasn't until the civil war of the '60s that the village was finally conquered through the use of air power. In addition to its defensive fame the village has a long tradition of learning (dating back to the time of the Zaydi dynasty in the 9th century). Its scholars were known throughout south Arabia.

The village lies at 2600m and overlooks mountainous bulging swells to the south and shimmering hot plains to the north. The climb up from these plains to the village takes you through some of the most jaw-dropping scenery in the country. In addition the adventure of getting to Shaharah is half the fun of a trip there.

Most tour operators recommend a stay of just one night. In some ways this makes good sense – aside from admiring the views and walking a little way back down the mountain, there is nothing much to do. However, on the flip side, getting to Shaharah is such a mission (it's six hours minimum from San'a) that when you arrive it's getting dark. You then leave at first light, which doesn't really allow time to appreciate the place. Unfortunately, there is nowhere safe to stay between Amran and Sa'da (drivers of tourist cars don't even like to halt for a photo along some sections of the road), so breaking your journey is also not possible.

## Sights

Shaharah's very beautiful 17th-century suspended **bridge** lies around 15 minutes' walk from town. Constructed with limestone blocks, it was commissioned by a local lord, keen to connect two villages separated for centuries by the deep gorge. Every kid in town will want to show you the way.

You can also climb up to the **fort** on the top of the mountain beyond the bridge. The village, including its fat **stone houses** and 23 beautifully constructed **water cisterns**, turns on its charms in the soft light of evening and early morning. Otherwise, Shaharah's a great place for catching up on diaries, postcards and books, curled up with a cup

of tea in the cosy confines of your *funduq* (hotel).

## Sleeping & Eating

There are no restaurants in Shaharah but all three hotels lay on gut-busting dinners and breakfasts, which are included in the room price.

**Funduq Wazir** (bed per person YR1000) A friendly, English-speaking woman runs this traditional, though slightly tatty, *funduq*. Some rooms have stunning views over the mountains but the best reason to stay here is for the opportunity it allows to talk with a Yemeni woman.

**Funduq Khaled** (☎ 07-628133; bed per person YR2000) This is a simple, well-loved *funduq* with a stripy red-and-white interior whose owners will keep you happy. The drivers who bring you up the mountain will automatically drop you off here, as they get paid a commission.

**Shahara Bridge Tourist Hotel** (☎ 07-628097; fax 07-628248; bed per person YR2500) A new hotel on the edge of town. Though lacking the authentic air of the other two, its sparkly rooms are certainly a lot more comfortable than its competitors.

## Getting There & Away

Villagers won't allow any tourist vehicles to travel up to Shaharah, so visitors are obliged to charter a local 4WD (often elderly, battered and not totally safe) for YR8000 (return) per vehicle. The departure point is at the village of Al-Qabi, which lies around 10km (around 1½ hours) below Shaharah. The incline is very steep and the road shocking. Be prepared for a rough journey.

At the time of writing independent travellers were not permitted to travel to Shaharah, but the situation changes frequently. When allowed, you should ask any taxi or bus on the San'a-Sa'da road to drop you off at the Huth taxi stand (118km from San'a), from which you may be able to find pick-up trucks going to Al-Qabi or even Shaharah. All tourist cars will be given a police escort for at least some sections of the journey.

## SA'DA

☎ 07 / pop 21,6721

Ancient Sa'da was once a city of major importance on the trade routes north to Damascus, as well as one of Arabia's original,

and most devoted, Islamic cities. It remains to this day the most conservative and traditional town in Yemen. Sa'da (and its region) is known for its particular style of adobe architecture, which gives the houses the impression of having a coat of mud tiles. The town also has some impressive fortifications, including a remarkable 16th-century adobe wall and its original gates. Due to the ongoing troubles in this region, visitors should tread very carefully and women would be advised to stay well covered up.

## Information

**Al-Hada Exchange** (☎ 515261; ☎ 8am-10pm Fri-Wed), next door to the Al-Aokhuah Hotel, can change US dollars. **Top Internet Café** (per min YR2; ☎ 9am-10pm) has slow connections.

## Sights

The journey to Sa'da from San'a, over a desiccated and rock-strewn landscape, and the town's raw and wild air are as noteworthy as its physical sights. Indeed, many people find Sa'da to be just another hot and dusty old town, and something of an anticlimax. Certainly, since tourists were banned from the legendary arms market of **Suq at-Talh** (p477) there is far less reason to traipse up here, but that doesn't mean a visit is totally worthless. The old town is one of the few in Yemen that remains completely encased by a **defensive wall**, which you can walk along for nearly 3.5km. It boasts no less than 52 defence towers, four gates, and 16 staircases and is up to 8m high. The souqs are a lot of fun; look out for the livestock market on the western edge of the old town and the *jambiya* sellers, with rows of blades glinting in the sun. If you're looking for an antique *jambiya*, Sa'da is a good place to buy one.

The **Great Mosque** (Al-Hadi Mosque), which dates to the 9th century, is considered one of the oldest in Yemen and is the centre of the Zaydi universe in Yemen. It's home to valuable manuscripts and to a number of important tombs, including that of its namesake, Al-Hadi Yahya bin al-Husain, founder of the Zaydi dynasty in the 9th century. It remains an important centre of Islamic scholarship. Nonbelievers are not allowed to enter, so you will have to content yourself with a surreptitious glimpse through the beautifully inscribed gateway. The city contains many other mosques,

though aside from the minarets there is nothing for non-Muslim travellers to see.

The large **Zaydi cemetery**, close to Bab as-Salam, is famous for its gravestones, which detail the lives and 'virtues' of the deceased below them. It's sometimes possible for respectful foreigners to enter.

Sa'da is also famous for its Jewish population, distinguished by their long, curly side-locks. Sadly, much of this once substantial population has left for better times in Israel, and today you'd be lucky to meet any Jews.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Rahban Tourism Hotel** (☎ 512848; fax 512856; Main St; s/d YR2184/3248) Smelly and stained rooms, which aren't exactly a bundle of laughs to stay in, but are still better than anything the competition can come up with. Some rooms have views over the old town. English speaking.

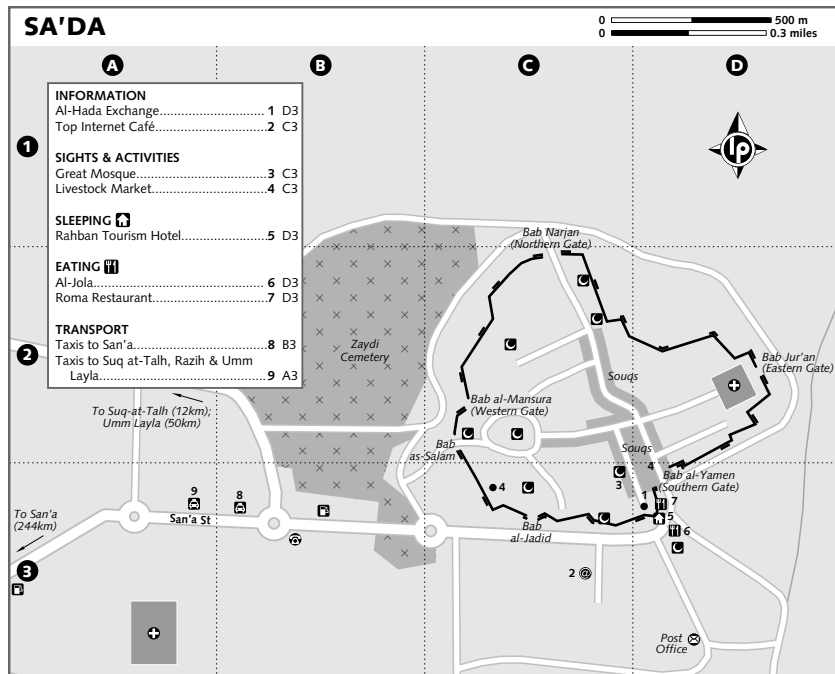
**Al-Jola** (Main St; mains YR300) Tasty Yemeni favourites come with a smile in this brightly decorated café full of tacky posters. The café's sign is in Arabic only.

**Roma Restaurant** (Main St; meal YR400) Easily the town's hottest spot, this narrow and funky restaurant has tables and chairs for the civilised, and floor space for the rebellious. It serves up generous portions of all the basics and there's a beautiful mountain 'backdrop'. Note that the sign is in Arabic only.

### Getting There & Away

For almost all the period between 2003 and late 2006, Sa'da was completely out of bounds to all tourists due to the highly unstable security situation. In early 2007 the city, and the city alone, was reopened to foreign visitors, but only to those travelling in a tour group. Even then, the situation was highly unstable and the town and roads leading to it could be opened and closed on a daily basis.

Should the situation ever improve, shared taxis run to San'a (YR650, four hours, 20 to 30 daily) via Amran (YR650, three hours). At the time of research, there were no buses at all connecting Sa'da to the capital.



### BOYS WITH TOYS

The abundance of weapons in private Yemeni hands is legendary, with estimates of 60 million weapons in the hands of 21 million citizens. The most visible form of gun is the Kalashnikov, but you can also take your pick from a wide assortment of pistols, rifles, hand grenades, large jeep-mounted weaponry, surface-to-air missiles and even anti-aircraft guns. While the trade in such heavy weapons is a little more discreet, the sale of machine guns, grenades and pistols is very open and obvious. For the average Yemeni, with his strong tribal background, guns are an essential of daily life. Blood feuds between tribal groups can continue for years and at times reach levels of almost all-out warfare. These ethnic vendettas result in around 2000 deaths per year.

However, guns are more than just a means of defence: they are a status symbol in the same manner that souped-up cars are for young men in the West. The easy availability of weapons in Yemen stems from the numerous wars fought in and around the country. With the never-ending instability in the larger region, it's no surprise that gun running is big business here. (During the 1994 Civil War, it's thought many of the victorious northern tribal leaders got their hands on all manner of ex-Soviet equipment including tanks.) Even the Yemeni government has recently been caught smuggling weapons into Somalia, and Yemeni firepower has been found throughout eastern Africa. But it's the Middle Eastern market that's proving to be the real headache. The Yemeni/Saudi border has always been a fairly porous and loosely defined affair, and with the tribes holding more power than the central government, in this region smuggling has long been a mainstay of the economy. Though there is no way of knowing where many of these weapons end up, most observers agree that Al-Qaeda can, has and will take advantage of this easy weapons supply. This has been demonstrated on a number of occasions in the past few years when the weapons used in Al-Qaeda-backed terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere have been found to have originated in Yemen.

It's partially for this reason that in early 2006 the Saudis began construction of a huge security fence along their border with Yemen. Unfortunately, part of the planned route runs through a 20km stretch of disputed no-man's-land, which has so infuriated Yemeni tribesmen that they have vowed to fight any construction work.

### AROUND SA'DA

There are many picturesque villages in the environs of Sa'da, and the area is also known for its large number of rock drawings and paintings dating to the Stone Age. However, at the time of research, and for several years preceding that, all the following places, except As-Sinnara and parts of the Wadi 'Abdin, were out of bounds to tourists. Consequently, aside from the two places mentioned above, we have been unable to confirm any practical travel information for the following.

#### As-Sinnara & Wadi 'Abdin

Visible on a hilltop to the southeast of Sa'da is the ruined 19th-century fortress of As-Sinnara. Built by the Ottomans and also used as a retreat by the *imams* in times of trouble, it continues its military tradition by providing a base for the modern state's army. It's often possible to visit, though you will still need police permission (apparently it's dangerous – despite

or perhaps because of the army occupation!). It makes an enjoyable afternoon's outing, but a bigger draw than the slightly sorry fort is the impressive Wadi 'Abdin, over which it towers. The narrow sides of this wadi are filled with lush green fields and tall mud-brick houses that are in fact much more impressive than many of the houses of old Sa'da. The wadi has a passing resemblance to the Wadi Hadramawt. You will need your own transport to get out here and police will not allow you to walk around any of the villages of the wadi.

#### Suq at-Talh

The famous Suq at-Talh market, which lies around 12km from Sa'da, is the biggest in Yemen. It takes place just off the main road. Friday is the main market day. It's known for its extensive arms market, but as the town is the centre of the uprising it's highly unlikely that any foreigners will be allowed here for some time.



## Umm Layla

Lying around 50km to the northwest of Sa'da is Umm Layla, the most important of the castles on the pilgrims' and incense routes and, according to ancient inscriptions, long the site of a settlement.

## Jabal Razih

At 3658m, Jabal Razih is one of the highest mountains in Yemen. A trip up to the mountain takes you through some beautiful scenery and isolated mountain villages often cloaked in mist.

# TIHAMA (RED SEA COAST)

The flat and featureless Tihama is the chalk next to highland Yemen's mountainous cheese. The contrasts are more than just geographical. With Africa being only a stone's throw away, the flamboyant influence of that continent seems to be present everywhere. The clothing is so bright sunglasses are needed to look at it, the solid stone houses of the mountains have turned into African-style mud-and-thatch huts, the weekly markets are even more animated and the overall attitude is so liberal that unveiled local women feel free to chat and flirt with unknown men. All in all, the final package is a fascinating contrast to the rest of the country – just don't attempt to explore it during summer, when it becomes so hot and steamy that even the deserts of the Empty Quarter start to seem a little chilly.

## AL-HUDAYDA

☎ 03 / pop 298,452

With its wide and clean streets, parks full of shady, snooze-enticing benches and pleasant pavement cafés, Al-Hudayda, capital of Tihama, is probably Yemen's most European-flavoured city and is an enjoyable place to rest up for half a day or so. However, its often-touted description of being the 'bride of the Red Sea' is a little over optimistic and probably says more about the state of someone's wife than the beauty of the town.

## History

Settled originally by immigrant fishermen, Al-Hudayda later became known for two

things: the export of coffee (from the 17th century) and the export of pearls. But it wasn't until the Ottomans were looking for a safe port in the southern Red Sea that Al-Hudayda was really developed. The city was largely destroyed during WWI and rebuilding didn't commence with any passion until after the 1994 civil war. Since then the city has boomed and visitors will notice a decidedly more upbeat air to Al-Hudayda than to Aden. Today the town is the fourth largest in Yemen, but the centre has managed to retain a quiet small-town atmosphere.

## Orientation

The Hadiqat ash-Sha'b (People's Garden) marks the town centre and it's here that many of the town's restaurants, hotels and facilities are found.

## Information

Foreign-exchange offices are found on San'a St. Other services include the post office and, opposite, an International Telephone Centre.

**Arab Bank** (☎ 201254; San'a St) Changes cash and travellers cheques, and has an ATM.

**Arab Net** (per hr YR70; ☎ 9am-midnight) Good internet connections.

**Bin Thabet Centre** (per min YR2; ☎ 9am-11pm) Fast internet connections.

**Saba Islamic Bank** (☎ 201496) Next to the Hadiqat ash-Sha'b. Has an ATM.

**Universal Travels & Tourism** (☎ 208691; San'a St; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 4-7.30pm Sat-Thu) Travel bookings and car hire.

## Sights & Activities

The Al-Hudayda **fish market** (☎ 6am-noon), 2km southeast of the centre of town, is a slippery and smelly must-see that's frenetic, cocky and fun. Come early in the morning to watch the day's catch being unloaded in front of a hectic, seagull-like mob of buyers and sellers. The daily trawl nets everything from plump prawns and glistening groupers to huge hammerhead sharks. The traditional dhow boats are also very photogenic. The old and, it must be said, very decrepit Turkish quarter is another possible goal, as are the nearby **souqs**.

Maybe the best way to pass an afternoon in Al-Hudayda is to do as the locals do: buy an ice cream and stroll along the **sea front** (look out for Ottoman and Southeast

Asian-influenced buildings) or laze about with a book in one of the town's parks.

There are some pleasant beaches in the region, such as at **Urj**, 36km north of town on the Salif road.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Darcum** (☎ 226500; San'a St; d YR2500) This excellent budget hotel has clean and comfortable rooms that are kept smelling fresh thanks to liberal use of incense.

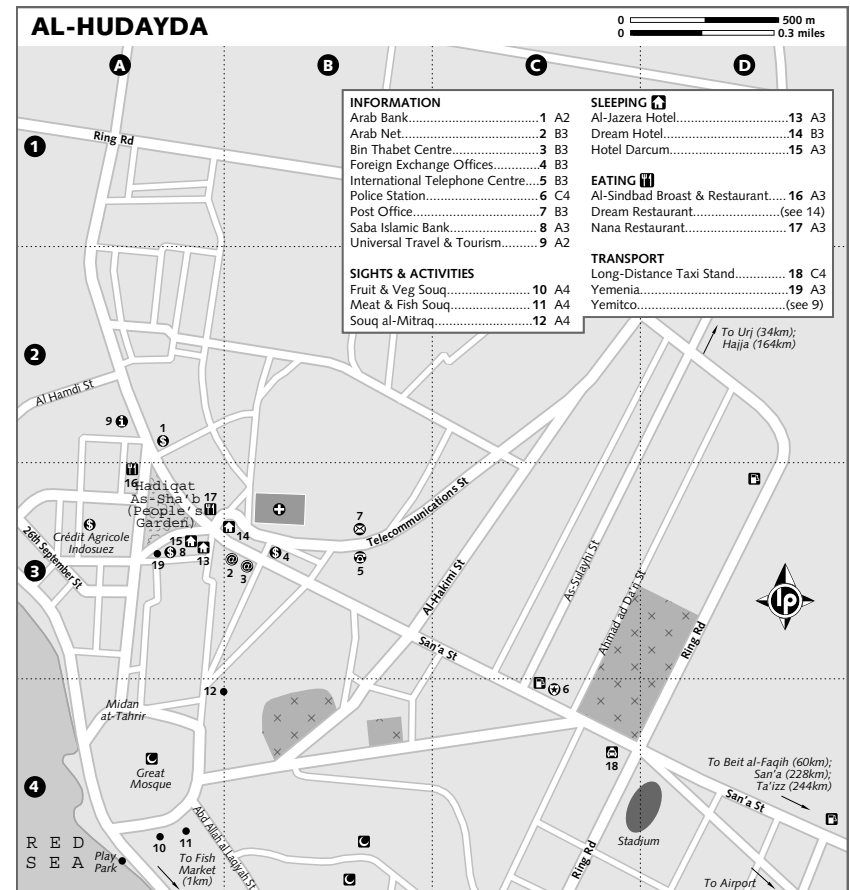
**Al-Jazera Hotel** (☎ 201404; fax 201401; s/d with fridge YR3000/4000) The best feature of this hotel, and one that makes up a lot for the dreary rooms, are the doors that speak to you as you enter the lobby! Centrally positioned and with English-speaking staff.

**Dream Hotel** (☎ 200381; fax 217986; off San'a St; s/d YR3500/4000) A neat new hotel that comes with clean tiled rooms and a flurry of cushions and sofas to lounge about on. It's on a quiet side street just off the main square, so you might actually get to do some dreaming in this hotel. English-speaking and great value.

## Eating

**Nana Restaurant** (San'a St; meals YR300; ☎ 6am-1pm) An ideal spot to chill out on one of the outdoor tables while feasting on the delicious *fool*.

**Al-Sindbad Broast & Restaurant** (☎ 2072720; meals YR400; ☎ 6am-2am) Clean central restaurant with a wide-ranging menu (in English)



that includes some breaks from the chicken and rice routine.

**Dream Restaurant** (☎ 200381; meals YR600; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Located in Dream Hotel, this restaurant is one of the few places outside of San'a where you might like to waste time over a meal. Good seafood and friendly service. A full meal of starter, main and juice shouldn't cost more than YR1000.

### Getting There & Away

The national carrier **Yemenia** (☎ 201474; www.yemenia.com.ye) has one-way flights to San'a (US\$50, four weekly).

The bus company **Yemitco** (☎ 208668) has services to Aden (YR1300, six hours, two daily), San'a (YR1100, five hours, two daily) and Ta'izz (YR1000, four hours, two daily). For Al-Khawka, go to Hays first.

Shared taxis run to Aden (YR1800, seven hours, one to four daily), Beit al-Faqih (YR250, one hour, 10 daily), San'a (YR1000, four hours, many departures throughout the day) and Zabid (YR500, 1½ hours, 10 daily).

### BEIT AL-FAQIH

بيت الفقيه

For much of the week Beit al-Faqih lies as dormant and quiet as a winter seed, but come past early on a Friday morning and you'll think spring has sprung in the most outrageous manner possible. This is because each Friday every villager, trader and farmer from miles around turns up to be a part of the biggest, brightest and boldest weekly market in Yemen. For the average rural Yemeni, daily life revolves around a series of weekly markets – they're places to stock up on supplies, catch up on gossip, seal a deal and have a bit of fun. This is especially true in Tihama, which has taken the system of nomadic weekly markets to heart. As a sight it's spectacular and as an experience unforgettable. A morning here spent bartering over spices, clay pots and even goats and camels will certainly be a highlight of any Yemeni adventure.

The famous market was first established in the early 18th century, when it served as a coffee exchange, attracting merchants and traders from India, Morocco, Egypt, Iran, Constantinople and Europe. After the deals were signed and sealed, the coffee beans were packed up and shipped around the world from the nearby ports of Al-Hudayda

or Al-Makha. With the collapse of the coffee trade, Beit al-Faqih sought to diversify – today coffee makes up only a tiny fraction of the items on sale. Instead, it's the day-to-day needs of the Tihama villager that form the bulk of the trade.

While wandering around you might be lucky enough to come across the 'cuppers' (due to local sensibilities we won't tell you exactly where in the market they can be found). This ancient form of medical treatment involves bleeding the illness out of a patient through the use of small horns. The doctors involved in this are (just about) tolerant of respectful foreigners stopping by to watch for a few moments, but don't overstay your welcome and under no circumstances should you attempt to photograph the proceedings.

The market kicks into gear just after dawn every Friday morning and by lunchtime everyone's heading back home for the week. Try to arrive as early as possible (if only to beat the heat) and give yourself at least two hours to explore properly. Should you be unlucky enough to pass through on a different day of the week, you could stop off to watch the town's famous **weavers** at work (from 7am to 1pm and 4pm to 6pm daily, except Friday). There are no hotels in town, so it's best to stay overnight at Al-Hudayda (62km to the north).

Shared taxis run to Al-Hudayda (YR250, one to 1½ hours, 10 to 12 daily) and Zabid (YR100, 30 minutes, one or two daily, except Fridays when there are lots). For San'a, go to Al-Hudayda and change.

### ZABID

زبيد

Zabid is Yemen's third Unesco World Heritage site, but unlike flirty Old San'a and tarty Shibam, Zabid likes to keep her secrets well hidden.

The countryside around Zabid has been inhabited since virtually the dawn of humanity, with Zabid itself built around AD 819 on the orders of Mohammed ibn'Abdullah ibn Ziyad, the local Abbasid governor. Not content with founding a city, he also established the first in Zabid's long and distinguished line of *madrassas* (Quranic schools). The city soon became known – both inside and outside Yemen – as a centre of Islamic and scientific learning, and between the 13th and 15th centuries, when it also served as the

capital of Yemen, Zabid played host to over 5000 students in more than 200 colleges.

The last 500 years have been less kind on Zabid and the town has gradually faded in importance. Don't feel sorry, though, because this is just karma paying Zabid back for the pain caused to school children the world over: it was a scholar from Zabid who was responsible for that refined torture called algebra!

The walled town was declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 1993, and in 2000, with over 40% of the old city houses replaced with new structures, Zabid was registered on the organisation's 'Danger List', requiring urgent funds for restoration.

Finally, as if algebra and Unesco recognition wasn't enough, Zabid has another dubious claim to fame. It's reputedly the hottest town on earth.

### Sights & Activities

The dazzling whitewashed, low-rise town is a shy place and keeps most of its best features tucked away out of view. Without a bit of local help, a visitor will probably leave with staid impressions, having seen little but a series of plain exterior walls. Fortunately, help is at hand in the form of a friendly and generous local population. Walk the sweltering streets, stopping to speak with anyone you see and an invitation for tea in somebody's house is almost a given. As soon as this happens, the hidden world of Zabid opens up before you. Plain on the exterior, the interior of the walls, which face onto small courtyards, are nothing short of carved and sculpted works of art in a hundred different patterns and geometrical designs. If you're lucky enough to be invited into someone's home, bear in mind that it's just that, a home, and be discreet with your camera. You should also leave a tip (YR200 for a group of two or three should be sufficient). An even easier way of gaining entry to some of the more beautiful homes, as well as the mosques, is to employ the services of one of the young guides who may greet you on arrival. They can also take you to weaving workshops.

Built around the central souqs, the residential areas of the city were originally divided into different quarters for the different professional classes – merchants, artisans, dignitaries and scholars. The city

retains much of its low defensive wall and also some of the original gates, including **Bab as-Siham**, **Bab ash-Shabariq** and **Bab an-Nakhl**. Various ornate buildings, such as the **Nasr Palace**, testify to the town's former prestige and wealth.

Zabid boasts 86 mosques (one for every 10 houses) and two *madrassas*, including the **Al-Asha'ir Mosque** and the **Al-Jami'a Mosque** (Friday Mosque), which dates to the 16th century. Look out, also, for the white, 13th-century **Al-Iskandar Mosque** in the **citadel** on the edge of town. Unusually in Yemen, it's often possible for non-Muslims to quietly enter some of the mosques with a guide.

Formerly the citadel's granary, the restored **Zabid Granary Museum** (admission YR200; ☀ sunrise-sunset) now serves to 'explain the history of Zabid' and exhibits the finds of the archaeological mission working here since 1983. The six sections are themed (mainly historically) and contain a wide range of artefacts, from cannon balls and fragments of fine pottery to Ottoman pipes and lovely Islamic woodcarving.

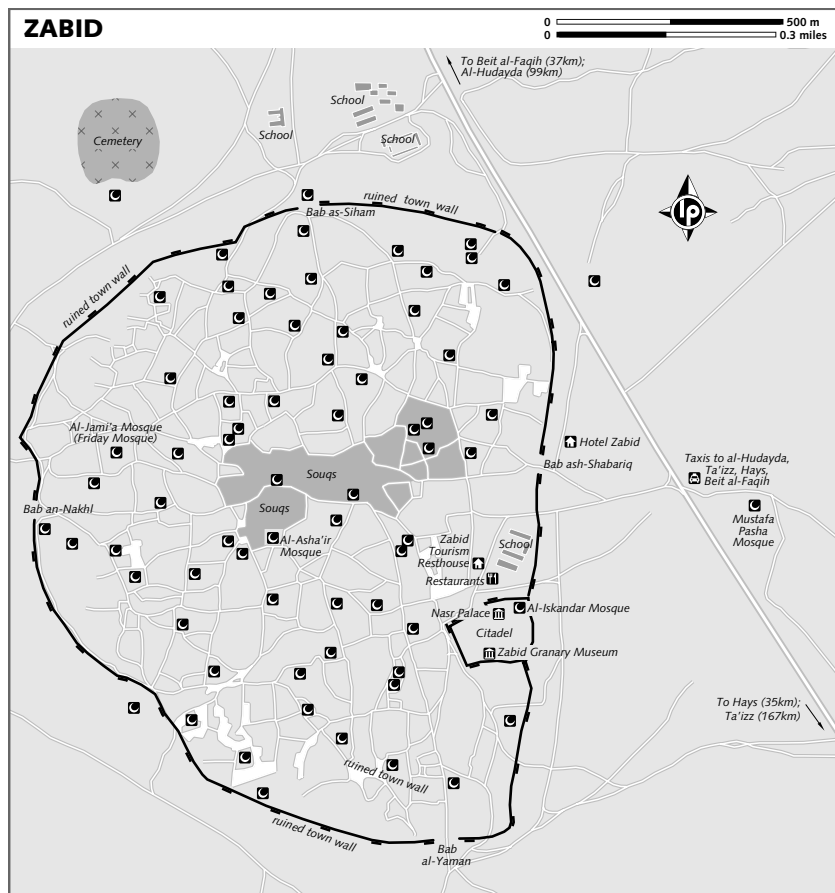
The Zabid Tourism Resthouse can arrange **camel** or **donkey tours** (per person per day US\$75) around the old town, as well as further afield to places such as **Al-Faza**, a beautiful beach around 25km away.

While exploring Zabid, you will probably notice that the women here seem to play a much greater role in public life than many other parts of Yemen, and many are not just unveiled but also prepared to start conversations with foreigners of either sex. This is partly to do with the outward-looking attitude common to people all along the Yemeni coast and also the strong, and liberal, African influence.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Zabid** (☎ 341461; s/d YR2000/2500) Brand-new hotel opposite the Bab ash-Shabariq. The rooms are sterile and the singles have common bathrooms only, but it's more comfortable than the competition and you'll get a much better night's sleep.

**Zabid Tourism Resthouse** (☎ 340270; s/d with fan & shared bathroom YR2500/5000) Traditional, communal-style rooms are set around a shady central courtyard with rope charpoy beds and walls painted with scenes of everyday Yemeni life. Popular with tour groups and has a good restaurant (meals YR1000).



### Getting There & Away

Shared taxis run to Al-Hudayda (YR500, 1½ hours, at least every hour) and Ta'izz (YR1200, 2½ to three hours), Beit al-Faqih (YR100, 30 minutes, every half-hour). For Al-Khawkhah, go to Hays (YR200, 30 minutes, every half-hour) and change there; for San'a, change at Al-Hudayda.

### AL-KHAWKHA

☎ 03

Touted with pride by Yemenis, Al-Khawkhah was once an important coffee-exporting port, but today it's Yemen's answer to the Maldives. Well, that's what the tourist board like to think anyway. In reality, it's not a fully fledged beach destination but

rather a simple place that offers a relaxing evening after exploring Zabid and the Friday market at Beit al-Faqih.

**our pick** **Moka Marine Village** (☎ 362770; mokatours@hotmail.com; s/d YR3000/4000) is the best of the beach 'resorts' by far. Lying on the seafront around 1.5km off the Al-Khawkhah-Hays road, the 'village' consists of 10 bungalows, each with a bathroom and two double bedrooms (making them perfect for bickering couples), which are lovingly maintained and set in a pink-and-green garden. The reception area has old granny sofas to lounge about on and the restaurant has a delicious menu of fresh fish (dinner YR1000). In fact, it'd be a perfect place to have a real beach holiday, but for the

fact it's missing an essential element: a beach. Instead of soft white sand and clear blue seas you'll find a vast tidal mudflat – excellent for birding but not so good for swimming. Book ahead.

A kilometre or so north, **El Khoka Tourism Village** (☎ 362779; fax 362780; s/d YR3000/3500, with breakfast & dinner YR1800/3600) is definitely the poor relation. It has the air of a '50s Butlins Holiday Camp and the paper-thin walls provide no real privacy. One huge plus is that it almost, and only almost, has a beach where you can swim – though even this involves striding 100m over rocks and mudflats.

In both of these camps snorkelling equipment costs YR1500 per hour, for which you also get a boat ride out to an offshore reef and island. In the past it used to be possible to head out on diving trips to the Hanish Islands by boat, but sadly the government has recently put a halt to such fun and games due to an ongoing dispute with Eritrea over ownership.

### Getting There & Away

Nearby Hays (shared taxi YR100) is the main transport hub; shared taxis run from here to Zabid (YR200, 30 minutes).

### AL-MAKHA

☎ 04

Ask most people what mocha means and they'll instantly reply, 'coffee' or 'Starbucks'. So it's somewhat ironic that Al-Makha, the original coffee port, is one of the few towns on the planet without a branch of Starbucks or its ilk. In fact, Al-Makha doesn't have a lot of anything these days – except flies and heat.

#### THE PECULIAR INCIDENT OF THE GOAT & THE BERRY

Most of us need our early-morning caffeine kick to get going, but have you ever wondered who discovered coffee? Well, according to the Yemenis, it wasn't a person at all but rather a humble goat. It's said that a shepherd was out in the Yemeni hills with his goats when he noticed that one of them, having eaten some peculiar berries, started behaving strangely. Mystified by this sight, the old man took a bite himself and within moments felt 20 years younger. Astonished by this discovery, he raced back to his village and spread the news. One of the people he told was a poet who accompanied the shepherd back into the mountains to try them for himself. After swallowing a few of the berries, the poet felt so enlightened that he immediately composed a poem in praise of this odd shrub. It was this poem that spread the fame of coffee around the world. And the goat we all have to celebrate for our morning rituals? Rumour has it that in thanks he was eaten for lunch the next day.

The history of Al-Makha stretches way back to the days before Islam (and Starbucks), but its heyday was during the 17th century when it became the world's foremost coffee-exporting centre and had a population of some 20,000. Nowadays it's a forlorn and windblown town of a few hundred hardy souls who make their bread and butter through fishing and smuggling. Africa is only a hop and a skip away and the chaos in Somalia provides an endless source of income for the unscrupulous. Alcohol, weapons, drugs, consumer goods and, most disturbingly, people all enter and leave Yemen through this narrow back door.

Al-Makha won't appeal to everyone. To some, it's as close as you can come to the gates of hell. To others, well, it's as close as you can come to the gates of hell, yet it also has a strangely alluring and melancholic air. Either way, it will certainly bring back memories next time you order a coffee.

### Sights & Activities

Reminders of past glories are few and far between. The most impressive building is the **Masjid ash-Shadhil**, a blazing white 15th-century mosque. Nearby is an old **minaret**, a few piles of rubble that were once **merchant villas** and, miraculously, one still-standing villa that looks as keen as mustard to join its buddies in a heap on the ground. The newer part of town has a **qat market**, a **beach** with a few garishly painted boats and a large **fish market** and a weighing room, whose floors are ankle-deep in thick, black squid ink.

### Sleeping & Eating

If, for some perverse reason, you want to stay the night in Al-Makha, you'll find the

**Al-Rashid Hotel** (☎ 4362357; shawky\_nagi@yahoo.com; s/d YR2500/3500) on the main road into town. It has small, well-maintained rooms and very uninviting communal bathrooms. The nearby **Al-Waffa Restaurant** (meal YR300) serves oven-baked fish that's way better than its coffee, but be prepared to do battle with the flies over every morsel.

### Getting There & Away

Shared taxis run to Ta'izz (YR500, two hours, twice daily).

## SOUTHERN YEMEN

Yemen's south is the richest and most developed region of the country. It's also the greenest and most fertile and has long been considered the breadbasket of Arabia. There is a huge amount of historical, cultural and geographic variety in this area. In the far south is the run-down, sweltering port of Aden, the former British colony and old capital of the south. Like many port towns, it's much more liberal and relaxed than the interior (symbolised perhaps by the Adeni women who do not cover their faces, as well as the availability of alcohol).

Further north, and in complete contrast, are the lush and cool highland towns of Ibb, Jibla and Ta'izz, where rain falls year-round and Islam and scholarship are more the keys to life. Overall this is the safest and easiest part of the country in which to travel, particularly for those reliant on public transport.

### Ibb

☎ 03 / pop 103,312

Situated 194km south of San'a, Ibb boasts a strategic position on a high hill in the western foothills of the Ba'adan Mountains. Settled since early Islamic times, the town grew into an important administrative centre during the time of the Ottomans. Today it's largely, and unjustifiably, ignored by most travellers. This is a shame because its chaotic market area and pretty old town are a pure delight to explore, and when combined with nearby Jibla, Ibb makes for a perfect overnight pause on the journey between San'a and Ta'izz.

Ibb and its governate enjoy one of the highest rainfall levels in Yemen, which

has given rise to the nickname 'the green province'.

The Saba Islamic Bank on the main road has an ATM, which accepts foreign cards.

### Sights & Activities

The large and boisterous central market area in Ibb is a noisy clash of colours, sounds and smells that feels more Indian than Yemeni. It's one of the most enjoyable markets in the country. Immediately behind the market is the whitewashed old quarter, which, aside from around the qat market, is a much more staid but no less rewarding place to explore. The stone houses, designed in a style unique to Ibb, are typically four to five storeys high, with façades decorated with geometrical friezes and circular *qamiriya* (usually moon-shaped, stained-glass windows).

In the middle of the old town, **Al-Jalaliya Mosque** dates to the time of the Ottomans, while the gaudy nearby **art centre** (☎ 9am-noon Sat-Thu) and dull **museum** (admission fee negotiable but YR100-200 should suffice; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-7pm Sat-Thu) are much more contemporary affairs. The **fortress** perched on the hill nearby is, sadly, closed, but you can get good views of the town from **Jabal Rabi**, around 700m from the town centre. Close to the market area is a small **park** full of fairground rides, a teashop and a depressing row of monkey cages.

### Sleeping & Eating

There are a couple of basic hotels in the market area, one being the **Al-Rabie Tourist** (rYR400), which are as cheap as chips. It's much better to stay out on the road to Ta'izz, on the edge of town, where there are a bunch of cleaner, quieter and far superior hotels.

**Saba Tourist Hotel** (☎ 418892; Al-Wdin St; s/d YR1000/2000) This is eccentrically disorganised and with a highly flexible price, but it's easily the cleanest and best-value budget hotel – even if it does retain the cheap Yemeni hotel requirement of a shower placed directly above the toilet.

**Al-Riyad Hotel** (☎ 419997; fax 419996; Al-Wdin St; s/d/ste YR2500/3000/6000) Ibb's newest hotel has a memorable reception full of plastic-coated chairs, fake chandeliers and garish wall decorations. The large and comfortable rooms offer great value for money.

**Tihama Restaurant** (Al-Wdin St; mains YR500) A dozen or so metres from the main round-

about at the entrance to town on the San'a-Ta'izz road is Ibb's favourite restaurant. Its Yemeni standards are anything but standard and all the ingredients are displayed in a hygienic manner on an outside table. Go for the kebabs and hummus – it's ace! The restaurant's sign is in Arabic only.

### Getting There & Away

Shared taxis run to Jibla (YR50, 15 minutes, 30 daily), San'a (YR800, four hours, three daily) and Ta'izz (YR300, 1½ hours, 15 daily). For Jabal Rabi and trips around town, taxis charge YR200. The taxi stand lies on the edge of town on the road to Ta'izz. Ask your shared/contract taxi to drop you off at your hotel.

### JIBLA

☎ 04

Situated 8km southwest of Ibb, Jibla is stunningly placed at the summit of a hill. The town served as the capital for much of highland Yemen under the Sulayhid dynasty in the 11th and 12th centuries, and was particularly prosperous under the benevolent and impossibly long-named Sayyida al-Hurra Arwa bint Ahmad al-Sulayhi. Fortunately this mouthful was quickly reduced to plain old Queen Arwa, but by the time of her death at the age of 92, she had proved she was anything but plain. By building numerous schools, roads, bridges and mosques, her policies of investing the kingdom's treasury in projects for the good of the average person mean that she's still remembered fondly today as a 'Little Sheba'.

It was thanks to this investment in education that the town gained a reputation as a centre for Islamic learning, and even today the annexe next to Queen Arwa's Mosque serves as a *madrasa*. More recently, Jibla has attained local fame for its excellent **qat market**.

About 1.5km up from the taxi stand at the southern end of the village are the twin minarets of the 11th-century **Queen Arwa Mosque** (admission by donation). Non-Muslims can normally take a look around if accompanied by the gatekeeper. Take a peek at the lovely, if rather decrepit, carved ceiling of the prayer hall and look out for the exceptionally long string of old, amber beads. Queen Arwa's silver tomb is found inside the mosque.

Across the village from the mosque – and accessible through the narrow lanes of the souq – is the solitary minaret of the 16th-century **As-Sunna Mosque**. The town has an incredible 48 further mosques, 30 of them for men, the remainder for women. Nearby is Arwa's crumbling **Dar as-Sultana Palace**, which was rumoured to have had 365 rooms, one for every day of the year. Some people disagree with this statement, saying that a woman like Queen Arwa would never be so ostentatious as to have such a building, and that it must instead have been constructed by one of her male predecessors. Whatever the truth, due to the dangerous state of the structure, entry is forbidden.

Close to the palace is the **Queen Arwa Museum** (☎ 440900; admission YR500; ☎ 7am-6pm). It houses a fairly unexceptional collection of items belonging to the queen and her father (but look out for the lovely annotated manuscripts). Opening times are very flexible.

Besides the basic dormitory-style **Asamit Arwa** (☎ 440021), where a mattress on the floor costs YR150, there's no accommodation in Jibla. It's best to come on a day trip from Ta'izz. Shared/contract taxis run to Ibb (YR50/500, 10 minutes).

### TA'IZZ

☎ 04 / pop 317,517

Ibn Battuta, the great 14th-century Arab traveller, once described Ta'izz as 'one of the largest and most beautiful cities'. It's still large – Yemen's third-largest city – but for beauty you need to look a little harder. The city has suffered heavily from unplanned urban growth, which has left it without any real central soul. On a positive note, Ta'izz is one of the most cosmopolitan centres in the country, thanks no doubt to its large student population. It also has one of the most eccentric and interesting museums in the country, as well as an excess of friendly people with time for a chat.

### History

The hills around Ta'izz have been occupied virtually forever, but the city itself didn't make any recorded appearance until the 11th century. From the 13th to 15th centuries Ta'izz attained particular prominence when it became the capital of the Rasulid dynasty. Much later, Imam Ahmed bin Yahya Hamid al-Din chose the city as the



capital, and reigned here from 1948 until his death in 1962. Much of Ta'izz is an entirely modern affair of drab and poorly constructed buildings, which seem to start collapsing before they're even completed. The compact old quarter contains more majestic reminders of the past, including a handful of beautiful mosques.

### Orientation

Ta'izz consists basically of three streets. Gamal Abdul Nasser St and 26th September St run parallel to one another, east to west. Bisecting both streets and running north to south is At-Tahrir St, at the end of which lies Bab al-Kabir, the souq and old town.

### Information

**Al-Hadha Exchange Co** (Gamal Abdul Nasser St) Foreign-exchange facilities.

**Mamoon Internet** (Gamal Abdul Nasser St; per min YR2; ☎ 9am-11pm)

**Net Sky** (At-Tahrir St; per min YR2; ☎ 10am-10.30pm Sat-Thu)

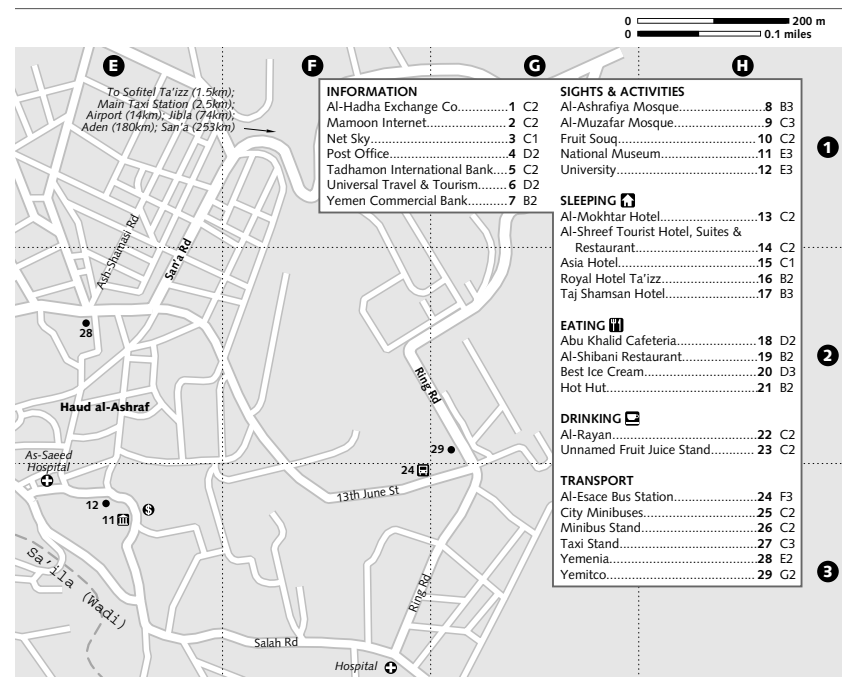
**Post Office** (☎ 229618) Lies just north of 26th September St.

**Universal Travel & Tourism** (☎ 252457; Gamal Abdul Nasser St) Acts as a voluntary tourism service in the absence of a tourist office. Also offers the usual tours.

**Yemen Commercial Bank** (☎ 251822; Gamal Abdul Nasser St) Has an ATM.

### Sights & Activities

Not really a museum at all, but more the petrified palace of Imam Ahmed, the **National Museum** (☎ 215302; 26th September St; admission YR500; ☎ 8am-1pm Sat-Thu) preserves the life and times of its previous and slightly peculiar owner. Among the exhibits – which are intriguing, bizarre and comical in equal measure – are a large collection of gifts and purchases from Europe, including an Etch-a-Sketch, hundreds of bottles of *eau de cologne* (in which the *imam* apparently bathed), a personal cinema (despite TV and films being banned under *Imamic* law) and an electronic rocking bed that must be the envy of Hugh Hefner. Among his many quirks, the *imam* claimed not just to have magical powers that protected him from all evils, but also to be bulletproof. Interestingly, he dropped this claim after someone



shot him. The results of this attack can still be seen in his bloodstained clothing on display here. Guides speak Arabic only, but some of the signs are in English, French and German.

The impressive **Qalat al-Qahira** is majestically perched on a hilltop like a Lord of the Rings fantasy castle. You can enter the courtyard and gasp over the views, but the interior is undergoing renovations and is off limits.

Ta'izz has a reputation for style when it comes to mosque construction, and at the southern end of the old town are the twin minarets of the beautiful **Al-Ashrafiya Mosque**. Originally constructed in 628, it was rebuilt in the 12th and 13th centuries. Other mosques include the pre-13th-century **Al-Muzafar Mosque**, southwest of Bab al-Kabir, and the Turkish **Al-Mutabiya Mosque**, about 200m south of Al-Ashrafiya Mosque. Non-Muslims are not permitted to enter any of the mosques.

Bab al-Kabir is the main entrance to the **old town**, but only parts of the original 13m-high wall remain, including two of its gates –

**Bab al-Musa** and **Bab al-Kabir**. Well worth a wander particularly in the early evening are the bright and brash **souqs** spread around Bab al-Kabir. Look out for the local cow's cheese (little white disks laid out in rows) and the sacks of delicious dried dates. Beyond the souqs and mosques, the old town architecture is unlikely to do much for you. Back in the newer streets there's a large and very lively **fruit souq** off Gamal Abdul Nasser St. Ta'izz is a good place to buy textiles and *jambiyas*. Look out also for the famous women merchants of Ta'izz, who traditionally do the buying and selling.

It's not exactly a tourist attraction but the **university**, next to the museum, always has groups of students (men and women) hanging around outside the entrance gates wanting to practise their English and French and make friends with foreigners.

### Sleeping BUDGET

**Asia Hotel** (☎ 254463; asiahotel@hotmail.com; At-Tahrir St; d/YR1500/3000) One of the few hotels in Ta'izz with any real character. The communal

areas are loaded with sofas, handicrafts, pictures and even fish tanks. The rooms, which are a bit of a letdown, smell like a packet of Marlboros. English-speaking staff.

**Al-Mokhtar Hotel** (☎ 253643; As-Saifraya St; s/d YR2000/3000) With neat and tidy rooms and a superb location not far from the old town, the Al-Mokhtar is a great budget choice.

## MIDRANGE

**Al-Shreef Tourist Hotel, Suites & Restaurant** (☎ 252958; At-Tahrir St; s/d YR2000/3500) A short walk from the centre, this new hotel offers excellent value for money with disinfected clean rooms, colourful little windows above the doors, views over the town (granted, they're not very nice views) and small, well-maintained bathrooms. English-speaking.

**Royal Hotel Ta'izz** (☎ 250876; fax 250875; Gamal Abdul Nasser St; s/d YR3500/4200) Easily the best in its class. The friendly and helpful English-speaking management have turned this into something of a travellers' centre. The rooms are in good nick, though the bathrooms could do with a tidy. Try and get one of the rooms on the upper floors overlooking the main road, from where you can watch all the Schumacher wannabes racing about town.

## TOP END

**Taj Shamsan Hotel** (☎ 236513; tajshamsan@y.net.ye; s/d US\$61/79; ☎) A sterile but eager-to-please hotel with a good position very close to the old town. Rooms are comfortable and the beds heavenly. In-house health club, restaurant and coffee shop.

## Eating

**Al-Shibani Restaurant** (☎ 251759; Gamal Abdul Nasser St; meals YR500) The fast-talking owner (who speaks brilliant English) will have you ordering everything on the menu in no time at all. Don't let this worry you – it's all top nosh, but the fish is best.

**Hot Hut** (☎ 265360; Gamal Abdul Nasser St; meals YR700; ☎ 9am-1am) You'll probably be craving something a little different by the time you get to Ta'izz, in which case this new and clean restaurant with burgers that aren't a bad imitation of those back home should pass the test. Super sweet ice creams (YR120 to YR140) are another favourite.

**Abu Khalid Cafeteria** (☎ 226113; Gamal Abdul Nasser St; ☎ 7am-11pm) Clean, peaceful and with pleasant window seats, this is a good place for fruit juice and cakes and lingering conversations. Popular with students.

**Leyali Al-Arab** (Arabian Nights Restaurant; ☎ 210193; Asayfarah St; mains YR150-500) Spot-on Yemeni and Lebanese dishes that are regarded by all and sundry as the best eating experience in Ta'izz. Don't miss the homemade crème caramel – it gives those of any Parisian restaurant a run for their money.

**Best Ice Cream** (26th September St; per bowl YR100) The dozen or so cool, fruity flavours of ice cream on sale here are perfect on a hot day.

## Drinking

Ta'izz has many excellent juice bars. Normally decorated with curtains of fresh mangoes and oranges, these respites from the heat and chaos outside provide delicious, healthy drinks. A couple of good ones are the **Al-Rayan** (At-Tahrir St) and the busy, unnamed one next to the Tadhamon International Bank on Gamal Abdul Nasser St.

## Getting There & Away

The national carrier **Yemenia** (☎ 217126; Gamal Abdul Nasser St) has one-way flights to San'a (US\$50); for a return flight, double the fare. The airport lies around 15km from town and a contract taxi should cost around YR1500.

The bus company **Yemitco** (☎ 233873; Ring Rd) runs services to Aden (YR700, two hours, two daily), Al-Hudayda (YR1200, four hours, two daily) via Zabid (YR500, three hours) and San'a (YR1200, five hours, two daily) via Ibb (YR300, 1½ hours).

Private buses run to the most major centres in the highlands from the Al-Esace bus station. For Al-Khawka and Al-Mukalla, take shared taxis.

Shared taxis run to Aden (YR700, 2½ hours, 20 to 30 daily), Al-Hudayda (YR1000, four hours, 30 daily), Ibb (YR300, 1½ hours, 20 daily), San'a (YR1000, 4½ hours, five daily) and Zabid (YR700, three hours, 30 daily) via Al-Makha (YR500, two hours, two or three daily) and Al-Khawka (YR700, 2½ hours, two or three daily). The main taxi station is about 4km northeast of the town centre.

Hops around town by contract taxi cost YR150 to YR200, while hops by minibus

are YR30 (just flag one down). A minibus to the airport costs YR30. Shared taxis to Al-Hudayda leave from a spot along the Hodeida Rd, about 4km west of the town centre.

## AROUND TA'IZZ

At 3070m, **Jabal Sabir** is one of the highest mountains in Yemen. A fairly good but steep road leads the 4km from Ta'izz up to its summit. Unfortunately, at the time of research it was only possible to drive three-quarters of the way up the mountain, as a police station had been positioned here. Locals like to cruise up here in the afternoons to chew qat with a view.

## ADEN

☎ 02 / pop 589,419

Aden is where insular Yemen puts on its cosmopolitan dress and calls out to the rest of the world to stop by. Since the year dot, the winter capital has been regarded as one of the world's finest natural ports, and in the tradition of fine natural ports, it has long had a reputation for being seedy and slutty. However, this reputation is more than a little overblown – bars and prostitutes certainly aren't two a penny here – but what is true is that Aden is more liberal than anywhere else in Yemen. For the visitor, this is most noticeable in the mix of races on the streets and the visibility of unveiled women.

If you are in Yemen for a while, you shouldn't miss out on Aden, but come at the end of your trip when you've had time to adapt to the rest of the country. If, however, you were to visit nowhere else, then you would leave Yemen with a highly lopsided view of the country.

## History

According to legend, Noah's Ark was built and launched in the area, and Cain and Abel hung out for a while. Inscriptions dating to the 6th century BC are the first concrete mentions of the town, but it's clear that it has long served as an ancient trading centre. Since the 10th century Aden has also been one of Yemen's largest towns, and by the 13th century its inhabitants numbered some 80,000 people.

Initially serving as the capital of a series of local dynasties, Aden was later taken over

by the Ottomans, followed by the British in 1839. After the opening of the Suez Canal in the middle of the 19th century, its strategic importance grew, and it soon numbered among the largest ports in the world and as one of the stars of the British Empire.

Aden served as the capital of the PDRY from 1967 until reunification, when it was declared a free-trade zone. Although badly damaged in the 1994 War of Unity, it made a brief recovery of sorts with the government pouring money into developing and modernising the port. Just as things began to look shipshape, disaster again struck when terrorist groups aligned to Al-Qaeda attacked the US warship the USS *Cole* and effectively scared away most international shipping.

## Orientation

Aden spreads around the base of an extinct 551m-high volcano, which is joined to the mainland by an isthmus. To the west lies the colonial port of At-Tawahi joined to the commercial centre known as Crater (which lies below the volcano) by residential Ma'alla. The airport is found in the area known as Khormaksar to the north, with the industrial region of Sheikh Othman and all the main long-distance bus and taxi stands lying beyond.

## Information

A visit to the **tourist office** (Mapp492-3; ☎ 202580; Al-Muhsen St) can't be called worthwhile – a lonely brochure will be your only joy. Travel agencies, such as Universal Travel & Tourism (Map pp492-3), may offer more help and can be found on the main Ma'alla road.

**Centre Al-Ateer** (Map p491; ☎ 259683; per min YR2; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-10pm Sat-Thu, 4-10pm Fri) Provides internet access.

**Crédit Agricole Indosuez** (Map pp492-3; ☎ 247403) In Ma'alla; offers the best foreign-exchange service.

**International Telecom Center** (Map p491; ☎ 7.30am-midnight) Next door to the post office.

**National Bank of Yemen** (Map p491; ☎ 259171; Queen Arwa Rd) Can change euros and US dollars, but not travellers cheques.

**Post Office** (Map p491; ☎ 8am-noon & 4-8pm Sat-Thu, 8am-noon Fri) Off Esplanade Rd.

**Tahawi Net Centre** (Map pp492-3; ☎ 206947; per min YR1; ☎ 8am-midnight) In At-Tawahi. From 2pm to midnight, the rate increases to YR2 per minute.



**Sights & Activities**

On paper Aden appears to have plenty of things to see, but in reality most are of very limited interest and the city's main attraction is its liberal (for Yemen) outlook on life. The boisterous streets and markets of Crater are well worth a wander as are the colonial throwbacks of At-Tahawi. Look out for the bizarre façade of the legendary Crescent Hotel and the Big Ben-style clock tower on the hill above At-Tahawi; but Steamer Point, the entrance and exit gate to Britain's colonial gem, is now nothing more than a collection of out-of-bounds warehouses.

Not exactly overwhelming is the recently renovated **National Museum for Antiquities** (Map p491; ☎ 253161; off Al-Aidrus St; admission YR500; 🕒 8.30am-1.30pm Sat-Wed), which has exhibits dating from prehistoric times to the early Islamic period. The highlights are the wonderful range of Sabaean relics.

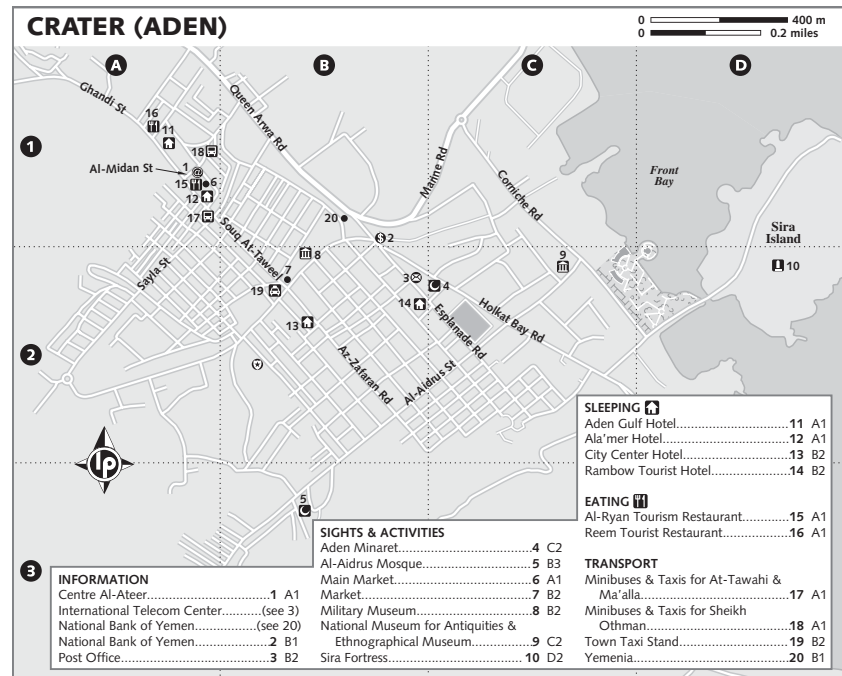
Upstairs on the 1st floor is the **Ethnographical Museum** (Map p491; admission free with National Museum ticket; 🕒 8.30am-1.30pm Sat-Wed), which has a musty and poorly displayed

collection of traditional dress from across the country.

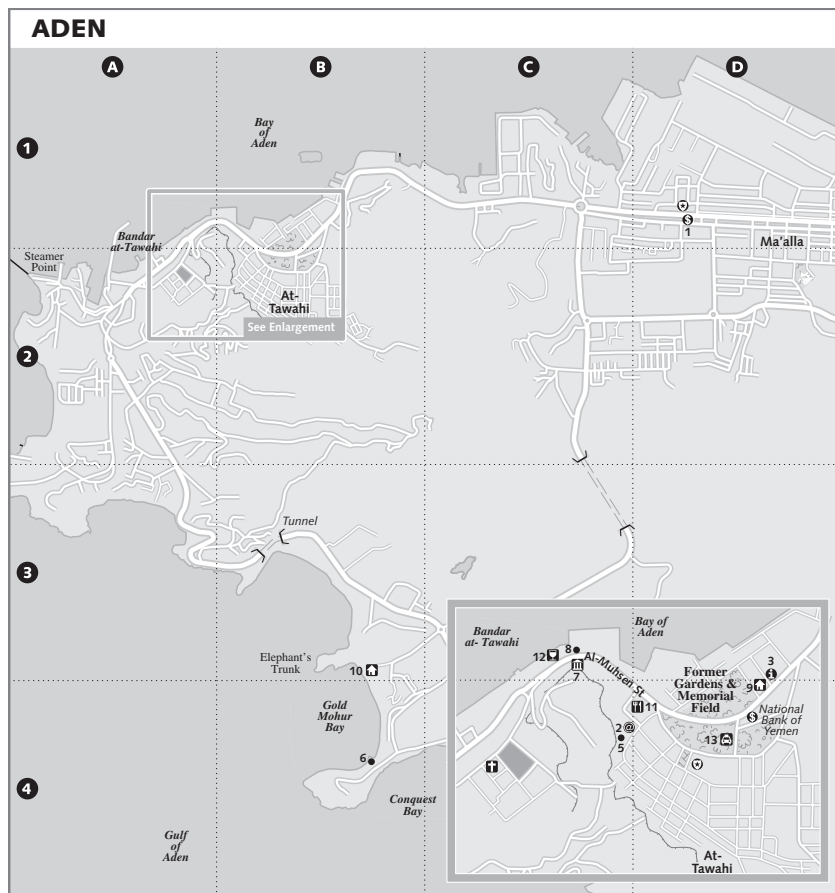
The **Military Museum** (Map p491; ☎ 253243; Sayla St) was closed at the time of research and seemed unlikely to ever open again, but it's worth cruising past and checking just in case.

Believed to date from the 1st century, **Aden Tanks** (☎ 251409; end of Sayla Rd; admission YR100; 🕒 8am-6pm) were designed not just to collect precious water for the city, but also to remove water in times of flash flooding. A series of ingenious steps, arches and conduits channels the rainwater into a set of beautifully built cisterns. The 13 cisterns (all that remain of the original 53 tanks) have a total capacity of 20 million gallons. Developed by succeeding dynasties, the tanks eventually fell into disuse, until uncovered in the mid-19th century by the British, who, despite their best efforts and modern technology, never did manage to get them to work again.

The **Tourist Harbour** (Map pp492-3; Prince of Wales Bldg/Pier; Al-Muhsen St; admission free) and its **pier** is a colourful place for a stroll, especially early







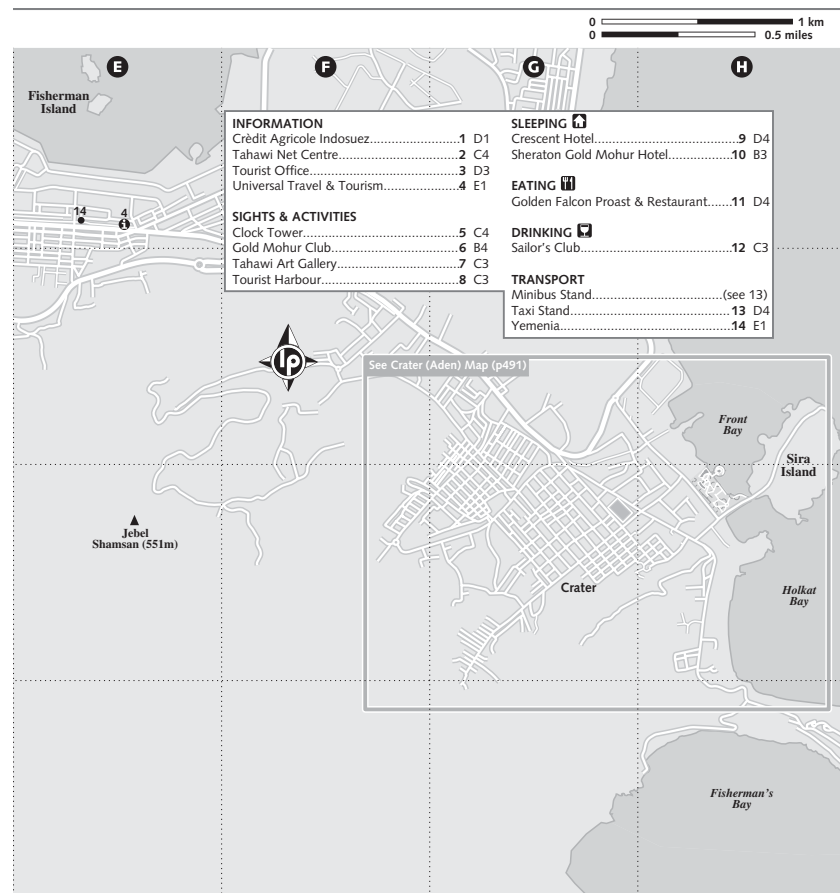
or late in the day when boats, which range from traditional *sambuqs* (local boats) to giant supertankers, are coming and going in greater numbers. Opposite the harbour is the **Tahawi Art Gallery** (Map pp492-3; ☎ 204123; Al-Muhsen St; admission free), which exhibits the work of local artists.

If you're desperate for a dip – or a drink – the **Gold Mohur Club** (Map pp492-3; ☎ 204174; fax 204393; week/weekend YR1000/1500; 🕒 8am-8pm), part of the Sheraton Gold Mohur Hotel, provides refreshment in both ways on a private but muddy beach. Admission buys you free use of the shower and changing facilities, as well as access to the hotel's restaurants. You can also put your sea legs on and head out in a boat (per boat half-hour/

hour YR6000/8000) to view Aden the way it should be seen.

Among the town's mosques that are worth a peek are the **Al-Aidrus Mosque** (Map p491; Holkat Bay Rd), built in the mid-19th century on top of 600-year-old ruins, and the strange little **Aden Minaret** (Map p491; Holkat Bay Rd), which is all that remains of a mosque built in the 8th century. Non-Muslims won't be allowed inside either.

The walk across to **Sira Island** is a pleasant one, but the 11th-century **fortress** (Map p491) is occupied by the military and out of bounds. Also worth a stroll are the **walls and towers** of the old city wall, also dating to the 11th century, but renovated in parts by the British.



## Sleeping

**BUDGET**  
**Aden Gulf Hotel** (Map p491; ☎ 253900; fax 251710; Gandhi St; s/d YR2500) This bog-standard hotel has polished rooms with Qurans and prayer mats provided, and pretty San'a-style stained-glass windows.

**Rambow Tourist Hotel** (Rimbaud; Map p491; ☎ 255899; Esplanade Rd; r YR2500) This could be one of the better budget hotels in Yemen but any character it may once have possessed has vanished under a layer of rot. Even so, with its high ceilings, carved wooden beds and seedy air, it's precisely the kind of place where you would expect to find a down-at-heel poet like Rimbaud – who is supposed to have made his base here.

## MIDRANGE

**City Center Hotel** (Map p491; ☎ 257700; fax 251056; off Az-Zafaran St; s/d/stc YR3500/4000/7000) Very sterile, but possibly the friendliest hotel in Aden. Rooms are as clean as a whistle and the suite is a good bet if you're travelling in a group.

**Alamer Hotel** (Al-Amer Hotel; Map p491; ☎ 250000; alamer\_group@y.net.ye; Al-Midan St; d with breakfast YR4500) Lacks any real zing-zang but the impressively clean rooms and friendly management make this a firm favourite in the midrange category.

**Crescent Hotel** (Map p490-1; ☎ 203471; fax 204597; Steamer Point; d from US\$35) This grand old hotel is a museum piece in the making. With portraits of a very young-looking Queen



Elizabeth II, lazily spinning fans and oodles of character, a stay here is guaranteed to bring the days of Empire to mind. Unfortunately, the rooms, which are large enough to lose a herd of elephants in, are as fading as the memories the place evokes.

#### TOP END

**Sheraton Gold Mohur Hotel** (Map pp492-3; ☎ 204010; www.sheraton.com/goldmohur; Gold Mohur Bay; d US\$120) Prices vary, but considering it's a five-star they're not bad at all. Even so, it's not one of Sheraton's better offerings. One big bonus is the private beach where sunbathing Western women won't cause a scandal.

#### Eating

**Reem Tourist Restaurant** (Map p491; ☎ 254436; Ghandhi St; mains YR200-800; ☎ 7am-midnight) Step into the noisy belly of this local institution and you're in for a treat. Good atmosphere, smartly turned-out waiters and heavenly banana juices (YR150) are just some of the highlights. The kebabs (YR200) are also worth a pop.

**Golden Falcon Proast & Restaurant** (Map pp492-3; ☎ 206808; Ar-Rayisi St; meals YR400-600) There are two very good reasons to eat here. Number one is the superb fried fish and number two the chance to escape chaotic Crater and relax in the altogether more genteel surroundings of At-Tawahi.

**Al-Ryan Tourism Restaurant** (Map p491; ☎ 256758; mains YR400-700; ☎ 6am-1am) It doesn't have the Reem's hordes of fans but those in the know keep coming back for the Middle Eastern staples and clean kitchens. Try the excellent *araysi*, which is more dessert than drink! It's opposite the bus station.

#### Drinking

**Sailor's Club** (Map pp492-3; ☎ 203209; Al Muhsen St; admission before 11pm free, after 11pm YR2000; ☎ 8pm-2am Sun-Fri) When in a seedy port, do as is done in seedy ports and come to a smoky, seedy nightclub. This one is full of Somali prostitutes and hard-drinking locals and is hardly representative of Yemen. But for some travellers, a highlight of Aden is the chance to sip a much-missed beer. Spirits cost YR700; beer YR1000.

#### Getting There & Away

The national carrier **Yemenia** (Map p491; ☎ 253969; fax 252528; Queen Arwa Rd) has flights

to Al-Mukalla (US\$70), San'a (US\$65) and Suqutra (US\$50). Quotes are for one-way fares; for return fares, double the cost.

Buses and shared taxis leave from terminals (Map p490) in Sheikh Othman. As is normal, the private bus companies offer the best service and their offices can be found around the main long-distance taxi stand. Sample fares and times include Al-Hudayda (YR1500, seven hours), Al-Mukalla (YR2000, 12 hours, one daily), San'a (YR1400, seven hours, five daily) and Ta'izz (YR600, two hours, two daily).

Shared taxis go to Al-Hudayda (YR1400, six hours, 20 daily), Al-Mukalla (YR1800, 12 hours, five daily), San'a (YR1400, 7½ hours, three daily) and Ta'izz (YR700, two hours, around 50 daily).

#### Getting Around

Shared taxis and minibuses link Crater, Ma'alla, Sheikh Othman and At-Tawahi regularly from various stations around town. A taxi to the airport costs YR400 to YR500. From Crater, shared taxis charge YR30 (contract taxis YR250) to Ma'alla, YR30 (YR240 to YR300) to Sheikh Othman, YR15 (YR150) to At-Tawahi and YR25 (YR250) to Khormaksar. Short hops cost YR10 (YR100).

## EASTERN YEMEN

Eastern Yemen is one of the few places left in Arabia where the desert world of Thesiger still clings on, albeit with increasing precariousness. Home of nomadic Bedouin tribal people, ruined cities of legend, startling oases and more than a hint of danger, this massive chunk of apricot dunes and bleak stonescapes is for many the most romantic corner of Yemen.

### MA'RIB

☎ 06

It's hard to imagine that this rotting desert town was ever a seat of power, but it was from these very same streets that a woman of intense beauty once came forward and changed the story of Arabia. Bilqis, guardian of the frankincense trade routes, lover of Solomon, mother of the throne of Abyssinia, daughter of the devil and known to the world simply as the Queen of Sheba is

rumoured to have based her capital here. The Quran relates other, equally fantastical stories of Ma'rib, famously describing it as a paradise on the left bank and a paradise on the right bank. Yet by all accounts this was a true description – the city, built on taxes from the incense trade, was impossibly wealthy and, thanks to its famous dam, very fertile. It's said that a person could walk for four days in any direction and not leave the shade of the palm groves and orange trees. However, if you're coming to Ma'rib expecting to find archaeological sites to rival Egypt or Greece, you are going to be sorely disappointed, as almost nothing remains from the glory days of the great queen. This doesn't mean a visit here isn't worthwhile, far from it. Ma'rib is a Yemeni highlight – it's just that around these parts it's all about atmosphere, and that's something Ma'rib has in abundance. A visit here is nothing short of surreal...

Note that because of tribal tension in the area, tourists are given a compulsory police escort while travelling to, around and in the town of Ma'rib. After sunset, a curfew comes into force: you're obliged to remain in your hotel until sunrise.

#### History

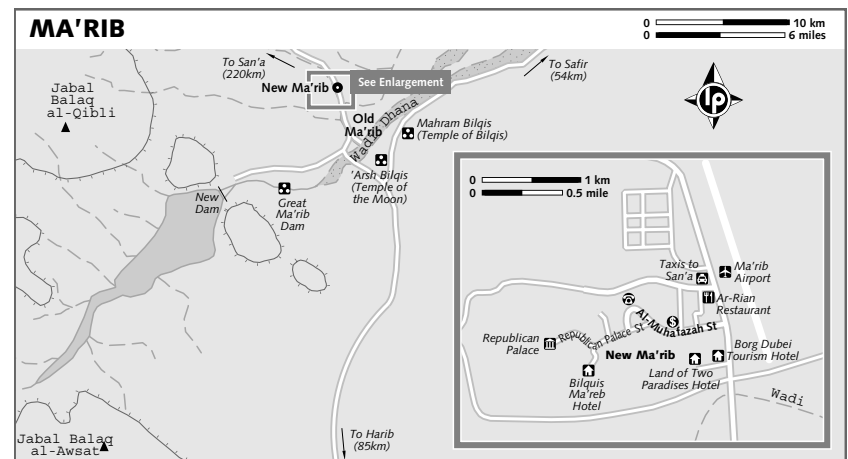
Ma'rib has been inhabited almost since the dawn of time and is one of the world's oldest towns. It is, of course, famous above all else for being the supposed home of the Queen of Sheba (see boxed text p496),

though whether or not she really did grace the streets of Ma'rib is unknown. What cannot be doubted is that the Sabaean capital quickly became the most important staging post on the frankincense trade route, and it was during this period that the dam was constructed (see boxed text p498). The good times couldn't last, though, and with the bursting of the dam the people of Ma'rib scattered across the deserts of Arabia, and the town virtually ceased to exist. It wasn't really until the modern age and the discovery of oil that the fortunes of Ma'rib started to revive – a point that has been made most clear with the construction of a new dam and the greening of the desert. The last few years haven't been all plain sailing, though, and Ma'rib is consistently one of the most troubled places in Yemen. For a visitor this is most obvious in the sheer quantity of serious artillery visible on the streets and a distinct undercurrent of something you cannot quite put your finger on.

#### Sights

All sights listed here are, theoretically, open from sunrise to shortly before sunset.

In Ma'rib itself, a walk around the threadbare streets and the **market** is well worthwhile. There is nothing much to actually see, but the atmosphere will leave your head spinning for days. Note that the legendary **arms market** has been shut down and the others in the region are highly dangerous and utterly out of bounds to foreigners. You are



### WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS?

The most beautiful and alluring woman ever to live had hairy legs and the cloven foot of the devil. Her fame has lasted three thousand years, yet nobody remembers her name. She's a player in the ancient legends of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, yet no-one knows where she lived. She's the most famous daughter of Yemen, mother of the throne of Ethiopia and the original Jerusalem pilgrim. Even today, she remains a household name, and any girl seen to be getting above herself can expect to be compared to her. She is, of course, the Queen of Sheba, but she may never even have existed.

Legend holds that the Queen of Sheba's first public appearance was when she paid a visit to the court of King Solomon in 10th-century-BC Jerusalem. The reasons and results of her visit vary depending on whether you are using Jewish, Christian, Islamic or Ethiopian accounts, but the general consensus is that it was rumours of Solomon's wealth and wisdom that drew her to his court. The best-known story in the West is the Ethiopian tradition that recounts how Solomon became enraptured with her beauty and devised a plan to have his wicked way with her. He agreed to let her stay in his palace unmolested only on the condition that she touched nothing of his. Shocked that he should consider her capable of such a thing, she agreed. That evening the king laid on a feast of spicy and salty foods, and after all had eaten well, Sheba and Solomon retired to separate beds in his sleeping quarters. In the night Sheba awoke thirsty from all the salty food she had consumed and reached across for a glass of water. The moment she put the glass to her lips Solomon awoke and triumphantly claimed that she had broken her

likely to find yourself sent straight back to your hotel if you attempt to walk anywhere around Ma'rib without an escort.

Lying 8km southwest of town is the extraordinary **Great Ma'rib Dam** (admission YR100, payable to the well-armed Bedouin kids sitting by the entrance), justly Yemen's most famous monument. The dam is believed to date to at least the 8th century BC. It was periodically repaired; the last recorded time that major works were carried out was in the 6th century AD, after which it probably fell into disuse. Sadly, much of the remaining walls have been used to build the new town. Only two sluice gates (look out for the Sabaean inscriptions) remain. The vast stones, used for the dam's foundations, were covered in a kind of 'waterproofing' consisting of clay and plastered with stones and gravel on the sides. At the tip of the dam, two gaps in the wall channelled the water into the irrigation canals. Unfortunately, unless you have an archaeological or historical background, you'll need an awful lot of imagination to picture how things once were.

The road continues to the sleek **New Dam**, built in 1986 by the President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan an-Nahyan, who was able to trace his ancestry to here. Three times smaller than the Great Dam, it certainly throws the engineering feat of the latter into perspective.

Lying on the Safir road, the ancient and enigmatic **'Arsh Bilqis** (Bilqis Palace/Bilqis Throne/Temple of the Moon) is the site of the famous five-and-a-half columns often seen in tourist brochures. Although linked to the legend of the Queen of Sheba, archaeologists now believe that the temple predates the queen and is actually around 4000 years old and was dedicated to the moon.

The temple consists of a square with an open courtyard, at the centre of which lies the old sacred well. Twelve steps lead from the open area to the hall, and there's a row of fixed marble seats on the western side and a plinth on which a 6m statue of the Sabaean Holy Oxen once stood. The gates are normally kept locked so you'll need to track down the gatekeeper in one of the nearby houses.

Around 4km further along the same road is the kidney-shaped **Mahram Bilqis** (Temple of Bilqis/Awwam Temple). It's believed to date from at least 800 BC and was dedicated to the sun god. Measuring 94m by 82m, it is the largest of all the Sabaean temples. Remains include a 9m-high wall, a hall with columns and a row of eight, 12m-high columns. The temple (which was only partly excavated in 1952) requires much archaeological work and is normally closed to the public – though if you can find the man with the key in one of the nearby houses, he

vow. 'But it's only water,' she cried. To which Solomon replied, 'And nothing on earth is more precious than water.'

Ethiopian tradition holds that the child that resulted from the deceitful night of passion that followed was Menelik I, from whom the entire royal line of Ethiopia claim direct descent. Though all the ancient sources agree that a meeting took place between the two rulers, things become a little murky after that point. The Bible doesn't even give Solomon's mysterious visitor a name, Jewish legend kindly gives Sheba hairy legs and a cloven foot and Quranic accounts say that Solomon heard rumours of a kingdom ruled by a queen whose subjects worshipped the sun. He commanded a jinn (spirit) to bring her to him, and when Bilqis, as she is known in the Arab world, arrived at Solomon's crystal palace, she immediately accepted the Abrahamic tradition of worshipping one god alone.

Finding out whether Sheba existed and where her capital was located has not proved easy. The strongest claims have come from Ethiopia, which believes that Axum was her capital, and Yemen, which says it was Ma'rib. Both cities were important trade and cultural centres and it's likely that both were, if not ruled by the same monarch, then closely tied through trade. So far neither has any evidence to suggest that the Queen of Sheba ever existed. For a long time Axum had the edge, but today most scholars believe that Yemen is the more likely candidate. Others claim she came from northwest Arabia or even Nigeria. Whatever the truth, the legend persists and every Yemeni will swear that Ma'rib was the home of the most beautiful cloven-footed woman to ever live.

will be able to open up the exterior gates so you can get a little closer.

Rising like a spectre from the surrounding landscape is the eerie silhouette of **Old Ma'rib**. Originally built long before the 1st millennium BC and sitting on foundations that are vastly more ancient, it suffered much damage from bombs during the 1962 civil war, but for the layperson it's the most romantic of the archaeological sites. A couple of years ago the last family finally moved out (a widow and her children who are often to be seen wandering, ghost-like, across the site) and with their departure one of the oldest inhabited towns on earth effectively ceased to exist.

### Sleeping & Eating

Tour guides may try and tell you that foreigners are not allowed to stay anywhere but the Bilqis Ma'rib Hotel out on the edge of town. This is not true. You can stay anywhere you want, but wherever you stay you will not be allowed outside after dark.

**Borg Dubei Tourism Hotel** (☎ 303850; s/d YR2000/3000) The brightly coloured rooms are worth a look if you're on a very tight budget, but they are somewhat spoilt by a lack of cleaners. Remember to leave your guns at the reception desk.

**Land of Two Paradises Hotel** (Aradh Al-Jannataun Hotel; ☎ 302309; fax 302306; s/d YR2500/3500) The

rooms certainly won't remind you of the land of milk and honey, but they'll pass for the night and it's easily the best budget bet. Be a little careful in the showers – they can be electrifying! It's recently gained a new manager, the legendary Hassan Mubarak, the best desert guide in Arabia and the man to talk to about a safe escort to Shabwa and Hadramawt. Breakfast costs YR300; lunch and dinner YR800.

**Bilqis Ma'rib Hotel** (☎ 302372; fax 302371; s/d main bldg US\$84/90, d budget annexe YR4800; 📺 📺) Popular with tour groups, this huge '70s hotel complex was built for a tourist gold rush that never happened. Nowadays it's fading fast and is overpriced. Highlights are the central courtyard pool and truly memorable portraits of the president 30 years ago! The budget annexe is better value. The restaurant has such unlikely dishes as roast beef with Yorkshire pudding (YR700). There's also a souvenir shop selling a selection of mementos and books.

**Ar-Rian Restaurant** (meals YR300) On the main road into town from San'a, the Ar-Rian boasts tasty Ma'rib staples such as roast chickens, sheep heads and plenty of friendly tribesmen with Kalashnikovs.

### Getting There & Away

The situation changes constantly, but for the past few years a police escort for all

### THE GREAT DAM & THE IRON RAT

Ma'rib's great dam was enormous, measuring 720m long, 60m wide and about 35m high. It was capable of irrigating about 70 sq km of desert and sustaining a population of between 30,000 and 50,000 people.

The ingenuity of the dam lies not just in the choice of its site (where water collects at the base of a number of valleys), but also in its brilliant and complex construction. Aside from the dam there was a complex and sophisticated series of drains and channels surrounding it.

However, the dam was eventually destroyed by a rat with iron teeth chewing away the base of the dam (apparently the rat made its way down from Syria by jumping from hump to hump along a huge camel caravan). One silver lining to this cataclysmic event was that with the destruction of the dam the people of Ma'rib were turned into nomads who set off to conquer and colonise every corner of Arabia, and if some medieval texts are to be believed, they even got as far as Tibet.

tourist cars has been compulsory on the San'a to Ma'rib road. If you are travelling with a tour company, you needn't concern yourself with the logistics of this. But if you are travelling by public transport and are granted a travel permit for Ma'rib (which is normally not allowed), you have to pay a fee of around YR500 at every roadblock, for which the police will then escort you to the next checkpoint. Whatever the case, all vehicles are expected to line up punctually at a police checkpoint to the east of San'a by 9am on the day of travel. If there are sufficient tourist cars, you will travel onwards in a tight convoy to Ma'rib. More often, though, there will only be one or two vehicles, in which case the police will either follow you in their own jeep or they'll pile in beside you.

Travelling eastward to Sayun you have two possible routes – both of which are thrilling desert adventures. The easiest and cheapest route is along the new surfaced road, which takes you through spectacular scenery, past some of the Yemeni oil installations and up towards the Saudi border. Taxis and buses run this route daily (YR1400), but foreigners are unlikely to be granted permission to travel this way. The only exception to this rule might be if you take a bus direct from San'a to Sayun. Once again, an escort is required, and these boys don't mess about; don't be surprised if you're trailed by a couple of cannon-mounted jeeps full of armed soldiers.

The second option takes you, via Shabwa, straight across the middle of the Ramlat as-Sab'atayn desert. To say this is an impressive journey is a major understatement.

Streaming for hours with armed Bedouin escorts over cathedral-sized dunes to the ruined city of Shabwa is something that will live with you forever. En route, you'll get to jeep surf down the side of huge dunes and stop at Bedouin encampments to take tea under their woven, goat-hair tents. The Bedouin are currently charging US\$250 per group to take you all the way to Sayun. Yes, it's expensive but as it's one of the most exciting desert crossings in all Arabia, it's worth every penny. To organise this crossing, it's best to either go through one of the San'a tour agencies or call Hassan Mubarak (he only speaks Arabic) at the Land of Two Paradises Hotel. You will need to give at least a day's notice, and remember, the above price does not include the cost of a car and driver.

### SHABWA

شبوأ

Shabwa, situated on the bank of Wadi Arma, has been described as 'a city forever beyond the hills', and it's an appropriate description. Fantastically remote, the seemingly never-ending journey to the political, economic and religious capital of the ancient kingdom of Hadramawt is high adventure even today. When you finally arrive – hot, tired and thirsty – it may come as something of a surprise to learn that time hasn't been kind on Shabwa, and there's little but a few mounds of rubble left. However, further exploration will reveal that this state of affairs is fortunate indeed, for there can be few more romantic ancient ruins anywhere in the world, and certainly none where you can scramble about picking up shards of pottery that have lain in the sand

for Sheba knows how long. As for an exact age, nobody really knows for sure, but a foundation date of sometime between 1500 to 1200 BC is generally accepted.

The town was an important collection point for the camel caravans traversing the desert. Traditionally, the caravans were obliged to pay the high priest of Shabwa one-tenth of the total value of their load. As a result, the city grew rich – rich enough to turn the surrounding desert into a 4800-hectare garden of trees, fields and flowers. In modern times Shabwa has been left largely to its own devices, but not so long ago a few Bedouin families built houses here out of the remains of older buildings. It's these that are still just about standing today.

Much of Shabwa awaits further excavation, but for the moment you can see the remains of the old **city walls**, the ruins of an **ancient temple**, various **storerooms** and what is said to be the **royal palace** to the east of the site.

Shabwa is in the proverbial back of beyond, and there are no hotels, restaurants or facilities of any sort. If you want to stay, you'll have to be completely self-sufficient and be prepared to pay a significant additional amount to your Bedouin escorts. The nearest real town is 'Ataq (p501), some 100km to the south, but it's currently not safe to stay there nor to travel from there to Shabwa. Almost all visitors content themselves with a short hour-long pause on the journey over the desert from Ma'rib to Sayun.

### AL-MUKALLA

المكلا

☎ 05 / pop 122,359

Dating from the 8th century, the shining white capital of Hadramawt, Al-Mukalla, is one of Yemen's most important ports and fastest-growing cities. There's little to encourage the traveller to stay long, but its flavour of faraway lands makes for an interesting change of scene from the conservative interior.

### Information

The post office, several banks and foreign-exchange offices are all found along Al-Mukalla St. **M II Internet Cafe** (Corniche; per min YR2; ☎ 9am-10pm) offers internet access.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Al-Mukalla's mosquitos can be voracious. Give yourself a good dousing of repellent

before going out, and before bed if you're staying at a cheap hotel. Added to this, Al-Mukalla is also a huge holiday destination for zillions of flies who carpet everything throughout daylight hours.

### Sights & Activities

Al-Mukalla's **old town** and **corniche** are interesting. The former is reminiscent of Zanzibar and India, and has an exotic (but incredibly dirty) feel to it. It's not at all like an inland Yemeni town. The recently redeveloped Corniche has a more European flavour and makes a great place for an evening walk and a drink overlooking the boats bobbing about in the bay.

Occupying part of the elegant former Sultan's Palace, the **Mukalla Museum** (☎ 303001; Corniche; admission YR500; ☎ 8.30am-noon Sat-Thu) contains displays relating to the sultan and to the town's history. Most explanations are in English, but the huge white building is probably more arresting than its contents.

Based in the Hadhramout Hotel, **Extra Divers** (☎ 777953153; www.extra-divers.de; ☎ 8.30am-5pm 15 Dec-30 Apr) offers diving or snorkelling trips. Reef/boat/night dives cost US\$25/35/40 per person. There's a 15% discount if you subscribe to 10 or more dives. Complete equipment hire costs US\$25 per day; mask, fins and snorkel is US\$15 per day.

'Rocky Banks' is a particularly good dive site. You can also dive a cargo boat wreck. For nonguests, the Hadhramout Hotel charges a 'water facilities admission fee' of US\$5, including use of towels, restaurant, showers and the hotel pool.

When arriving or leaving Al-Mukalla, look out for the 19th-century **Husn al-Ghuwayzi** (fortress) perched on a cliff top on the northern airport road. It was only about a decade ago that this building was a fair hike out of town – Al-Mukalla is growing at an extraordinary rate of knots.

### Sleeping

Al-Mukalla fills up quickly during the holidays, as many Saudis like to come here to dip their toes in the sea. Book ahead at such times. Many of the cheaper hotels aren't all that keen on taking foreigners, but the following are all tourist friendly.

**Half Moon Hotel** (☎ 302767; halfmoonhotel@yemen.net.ye; Al-Ghar al-Amar St; r YR2500) Standing head and shoulders above a cluster of



nasty neighbours, this hotel offers small and tasty rooms that, for once, aren't suffering from the effects of the tropical heat. Some rooms have views over the redeveloped waterfront.

**Al-Salama Hotel** (☎ 305210; Al-Mukalla St; s/d YR2500/2800) A solid old-fashioned Al-Salama hotel with a lot more jazz than many of the newer midrange places. It's centrally located, offers excellent value for money and is very friendly. The only minus point is that the staff are big Manchester United fans!

**Ryboon City Hotel** (☎ 303606; www.Rc-hotels.com; Fouah St; s/d YR4580/5235; 📺) Smart hotel at the top of town. It offers good value for money, but the rooms could do with a lick of paint.

Friendly, English-speaking staff. A filling breakfast is included in the price.

**Hadhramout Hotel** (☎ 303442; hadmot.htl@net.ye; s/d with breakfast US\$83/97; 📺 📺) The over-priced and sloppy rooms have crumbling carpets and as much style and charm as a rotting fish. Despite this, it remains popular with tour groups, and the location, right beside a little cove, is good. Pool is open to nonguests for US\$5.

### Eating

Along the Corniche are a string of enjoyable teashops/café, which get lively in the evenings with locals taking in the sunset views. The Abu-Taj at the western end is one of the better ones.

**Al-Kharyam Restaurant** (Al-Khiam Brost Restaurant; ☎ 303552; Al-Mukalla St; meals YR500-900) A noisy and chaotic restaurant that is a long-standing Mukalla institution, and when you taste its gorgeous barbecued fish, you'll understand why.

**Alsafina** (☎ 380559; mezze from YR200, mains YR900; 📺 noon-11pm) Sail away on this boat-shaped restaurant and enjoy its range of Lebanese starters and dips and seafood mains. If you've emerged from a stint in the countryside, it's probably going to be the first restaurant in a long time where you might want to relax over dinner.

Other cheap-and-cheerful restaurants can be found around the bus stations.

### Getting There & Away

The national carrier **Yemenia** (☎ 303444; fax 352365; Al-Ghar al-Amar St) has flights to Aden (US\$70), San'a (US\$80) and Suqatra (US\$50). Quotes are for one-way fares; for return fares, simply double the price.

Buses run to Aden (YR2000, around 10 hours, one daily) and San'a (YR1800, 12 hours, two daily). For Sayun, take a shared taxi.

Shared taxis run to Aden (YR2000, 10 hours, several daily), Bir 'Ali (YR500 or YR3000 contract, two hours, two daily), and Sayun (YR1500, five hours, three daily). Note that for all these journeys a travel permit is required (and should have been obtained in San'a first, though if you've just arrived from Oman you can get one at the police station here), and for the Aden and San'a routes a police escort.

The airport (based at Ar-Rayyan) lies 40km from Al-Mukalla. Contract taxis cost YR1200 (and take 30 minutes), but negotiate the fare before hopping in.

Almost as common as the flies are the minibuses, which provide a cheap form of intercity transport. Travellers might want to make use of them to get from the old centre to the far end of the Corniche. Journeys cost YR20 and to hail one just wave it down.

### THE SOUTH COAST

The road between Aden and Al-Mukalla is a long, hard slog taking a minimum of 10 hours. There are few towns in which to stop and fewer still in which a stop is recommended. On the bright side the scen-

ery is wild and spectacular – leaving Aden and the coastal plain, the road traverses a warped volcanic wasteland of searing black rock and volcanic cones. Beyond this the land becomes a little more welcoming and fissured gorges and gravel plains are interspersed with luminous green wadis. It's in this area that the only major settlements between Aden and Al-Mukalla can be found.

The modern and uninspiring centre of 'Ataq, some distance north of the main road, is the first of these. Despite its enticing status on the map, with roads heading northeast to Shabwa and northwest to Bayhan, it's not a place anyone is likely to either encourage or allow you to visit. The town is generally considered unsafe and the roads leading northward away from it can be plain old treacherous. Back on the main road is attractively placed **Habban**, but at the time of writing it was completely out of bounds due to the threat of kidnapping (a group of French tourists were held captive here in late 2006). Next in line is tiny fly-blown 'Azan, whose disintegrating old centre police will escort you around if you ask. A few kilometres after the town of 'Azan, are the impressive and rather ghostly looking ruins of **Naqb al-Hajar**. Because of local tension, it's not always possible to visit them; most people content themselves with a photo from the roadside. When it is possible, you can usually contract a 4WD and police escort from 'Azan (YR2000 return, including a half-hour or so visit).

After 'Azan the road wends its way back to the coast and things become less tense. Just before the village of Bir 'Ali, around 128km southwest of Al-Mukalla, you'll come to a side road marked with yellow signs that snakes to the base of a volcanic outcrop at the very edge of the sea. This is the ancient site of **Qana**, the old port of the Hadramawt. The pleasant stretch of beach known by tour agents as **Bir 'Ali** is after the nearby village.

For those with their own transport, it's worth resting here for the night and enjoying the rich turquoise waters and spotless white sands. If you are using public transport, a stop might be more hassle than it's worth, as finding an onward ride the next morning will be difficult. If you have the energy, you can also climb to the top of the outcrop known as **Husn al-Ghurab** (Husn

al-Ghurfa), where you'll find the remains of an ancient fortification and control tower, which once overlooked the port. Don't attempt the climb in flip-flops, as the loose scree and sheer drops make it unsafe.

On the beach, the **Qana Tourist Complex** (☎ 211169; per person hut/r YR1500/2000) has basic Thai-style beach huts or stuffy rooms that make for an enjoyable place to stay for a day or so. The staff should be commended for their (successful) attempts to keep the beach clean. Excellent fish dinners (YR800) can be whipped up with a little notice.

## SUQUTRA

☎ 05 / pop 160,000

The secret of eternal life shouldn't be something that's easy to stumble across and by cleverly hiding it out on Suqutra the gods have certainly taken that thought to heart. At 3650 sq km Suqutra is easily the largest Yemeni island, as well as one of the most inaccessible. Lying 510km southeast of the mainland, close to the ravaged shores of Somalia, the island has developed in near total isolation from the rest of the world. Rumoured to have once been a refuge for dragons, it continues to provide a refuge for all manner of extraordinary fauna and flora, much of which is found nowhere else. Because of the number of its endemic plants and creatures, it's been described as the 'Galapagos of the Indian Ocean'. While this is a little optimistic, there is no denying that Suqutra is a unique and otherworldly

سقطرى

island. It's the kind of place where people speak a language unknown to anyone else, where the knowledge of how to make fire by rubbing sticks together is still common and where the elderly recall days when money didn't exist.

Until the construction of an airport in 2002, the island remained almost as unknown as it did in the days when adventurers came here to do battle with dragons in their search for the secret of eternal life. Today the dragons might be gone, but the trees are said to still bleed for their memory, and the secret of eternal life remains hidden away in a cave somewhere on stupendous Suqutra.

### Information

Most services are found in the capital, Hadibu. Two excellent publications on Suqutra are *Soqotra – the Birds & Plants* and *Saving Socotra – The Treasure Island of Yemen*. Both cost US\$10 and are available in Hadibu and at the airport.

The **Soqotra Eco-Tourism Society** (☎ 660132; www.socotraisland.org.com) was set up in early 2003 with the aim of promoting and developing tourism and infrastructure projects on the island in a sustainable manner for the benefit of all. It can advise on itineraries and help in the planning of your trip either by telephone or email in advance of a visit, or in person at the Visitors Information Service in Hadibu (opposite). It also has its own excellent four-night tour of

### AN ARABIAN EDEN

The remote Suqutran archipelago has been described as an Arabian Garden of Eden and is known for its high level of endemic plants and animals. There are around 850 plant species, of which approximately 230 to 260 species are endemic. The Haggeher Mountains and the limestone plateaus contain the richest variety of endemic plants. The most famous of these is the stumpy Dragons Blood Tree, whose red sap was for years sold as dragon's blood. Another favourite is the Cucumber Tree, the only cucumber plant to grow in tree form. In total 52 of Suqutra's endemic plants are included on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

The fauna also includes a large proportion of endemics. Only seven types of terrestrial mammals call the island home and most of these were introduced. Two, a bat and a shrew, are considered endemic. The bird life is more spectacular and consists of 178 species, six of which are endemic. These are the Socotra warbler, Socotra bunting, Socotra sunbird, Socotra starling, island cisticola and the Socotra sparrow. The most visible bird on the island, though, is the Egyptian vulture. There are 24 reptile species, 21 of which are endemic.

the island (US\$320 per person, minimum group size two), which ensures that you get the most out of your stay. Should you have anything more unusual in mind, it can provide guides, jeeps, camping equipment and supplies.

**Al-Salami Net** (Hadibu; per min YR6; ☎ 9am-9pm Sat-Thu) The island's only internet connections.

**National Bank of Yemen** (☎ 660192; Hadibu; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Sat-Thu) Changes US dollars and euros cash.

**Post Office** (☎ 660298; Hadibu; ☎ 7am-1pm & 3.30-5pm Mon-Thu)

**Telephone Centre** (Hadibu; ☎ 6am-11pm) Calls to the mainland/Europe cost YR20/250 per minute.

**Visitors Information Service** (☎ 660132; Main St, Hadibu; ☎ 7am-1pm & 4-8pm Sat-Wed) The official HQ for the Soqotra Eco-Tourism Society, it has some maps and brochures. Ring before visiting, as its opening hours are erratic. There's a branch office at the airport, which opens for flight arrivals.

### Sights & Activities

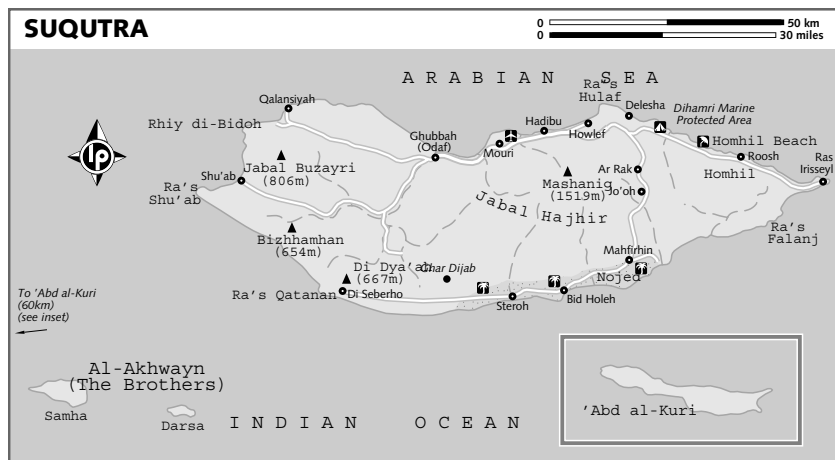
Tourism is a new concept to the island, but in a very short space of time an admirable range of tours and activities has become available. There's little to see or do in Hadibu, so try to organise everything in advance to avoid wasting time there. With no organised public transport and, outside Hadibu, no hotels or restaurants, it would be very hard to explore Suqutra in a truly independent manner. Therefore, virtually everyone uses the services of either the Soqotra Eco-Tourism Society or a San'a-based agency (p520).

For most people the island highlights are the exhilarating hiking and divine beaches.

The best beach by far is the deserted bridal-white sands and blissful blues of **Detwah Lagoon** by **Qalansiyah** in the west of the island. There's a small and well-run **camp site** here with pre-erected tents for YR1000. Not far behind on the beach stakes is **Homhil**, in the east of the island, where fresh and salt waters mingle beneath mountainous dunes. The diving (US\$35 per dive with all equipment) in Suqutra is world-class, with the attraction being fish rather than corals. Some of these fish grow very big indeed and include curious schools of dolphins, comical turtles (both in the summer only) and lots of very large and decidedly less friendly sharks! Most of the dive sites in Suqutra are virtually unexplored. For the less aquatic, there's excellent snorkelling (YR500 equipment rental), with Dihamri Marine Protected Area, around 15km from Hadibu, being the best place for peering under the waves.

There is great hiking potential, with the green hills and granite outcrops of the 1500m **Haggeher Mountains** providing dragons, cave dwellers and views. Unless you're planning a long trans-island hike, you'll need a vehicle to reach some of the best walking areas.

The following activities are much more specialised and will certainly require the aid of an experienced tour company. Serious naturalists and botanists will appreciate the knowledge of a guide – Soqotra Eco-Tourism Society will be able to sort you out with someone who knows where and what to look for even if they don't know too much detail. Caving is a new activity for



which Suqutra (and the Dhofar Mountains around Hawf, p511) has immense potential. The island is thought to boast one of the world's largest cave systems, though they remain almost entirely unexplored to date. The **Dogub Cave** on the south coast has huge stalagmites and stalactites, and is one that everyone can enjoy. With day-in day-out strong to gale-force winds through the May to September monsoon season and heavy swells, Suqutra could one day be a massive name in the windsurfing world. For the moment it's just for the hardcore. Surfers will also find some excellent breaks hidden in the remoter reaches of the island, but the same heavy winds that are such a delight for windsurfers are anything but for surfers. However, wind-related problems will be the least of a surfer's worries. It's the sharks that are the real problem!

A more sedate time can be spent exploring the ramble of half-built streets in Hadibu, as well as the **research centre** (Airport Rd) 2km out of town, which contains a small collection of specimens of Suqutran flora and fauna, that includes shells, shark mandibles and crustaceans, and a small but excellent herbarium. Panels (in English, Italian and Arabic) provide information on Suqutran birds, wildlife and environmental hazards.

## Sleeping

Though Hadibu has the only hotels and restaurants, you should aim to spend as little time as possible here.

Camping is not permitted everywhere (so check first). Some good, established spots include Wadi Dae'rho near the fresh-water pool, Nojed on the south coast, Homhil and Dihamri in the east and Detwah Lagoon in the west. Facilities vary in all of these 'camp sites' and go from a toilet and some pre-erected tents and huts (Dihamri and Detwah Lagoon) to nothing at all. At most of these sites someone can be found to cook an evening meal (though not always, so it's good to be prepared). Pitches cost YR1000 per person. It's often possible to arrange to stay in villages, though this sort of thing is hard to organise in advance. If you are invited to do so, be generous with how much you donate (YR2000 per person should be sufficient – more if meals are provided).

If you need to hire camping gear, the Summer Land Hotel and Soqotra Eco-Tourism Society can provide all the standards for US\$7 per day.

In Hadibu itself there are a couple of overpriced hotels.

**Al-Jazeera Hotel** (☎ 660447; fax 660443; Hadibu; d YR4000) A small hotel that offers the cheapest rooms in town. The rooms could do with a sweep more often but otherwise they're perfectly acceptable.

**Hafej Hotel** (☎/fax 660469; Hadibu; d YR5000) This clean and conventional 15-room hotel will give you a restful night's sleep, and though it lacks much character it does offer good value for money for those who cannot stretch to the Summer Land.

**Summer Land Hotel** (☎ 660350; Hadibu; s/d US\$25/30) Run by the president's nephew, this travellers' centre has been recently refurbished and is, perhaps not surprisingly, the biggest name in Suqutran tourism. It's a reputation that's well deserved because its rooms, though not memorable, are clean and peaceful. More importantly, the staff know the island well and can sort you out with tours, car hire and camping equipment.

## Eating

There are few eating options in Hadibu and none at all outside the town.

**Shaboa Restaurant** (☎ 660515; Hadibu; meals YR400; ☎ 4am-9pm) Next door to Yemenia, simple and boisterous Shaboa is the local preference. It serves chicken or goat with rice, as well as vegetable-only dishes.

## Getting There & Away

The national carrier **Yemenia** (☎ 660123; fax 660510; ☎ 7am-noon & 3.30-5.30pm) flies from Suqutra to Al-Mukalla (US\$50), Aden (US\$50) and San'a (US\$60) twice a week. It's essential to book well in advance.

In theory it's possible to charter a dhow to Suqutra from Al-Mukalla, but doing so is hardly recommended. The weather is unpredictable, the sea high and the dhows often overloaded. No boats operate during the summer monsoon season.

## Getting Around

Yemenis say that Suqutra is President Saleh's little baby, and he's certainly enthusiastically promoting the island and pump-

ing cash into it. One of the biggest projects currently under way is the construction of an island ring road, as well as linking trans-island roads. Work is progressing at a rate of knots and the tarmac has already reached Qalansiyah and the Dicksam plateau among other places. By the time you read this there is a good chance that the ring road will be completed. Despite this there is currently no public transport whatsoever, so you will need to rent a jeep (US\$70), which can be done through the Soqotra Eco-Tourism Society, Summer Land Hotel or a San'a tour agency (p520).

# WADI HADRAMAWT

## وادي حضرموت

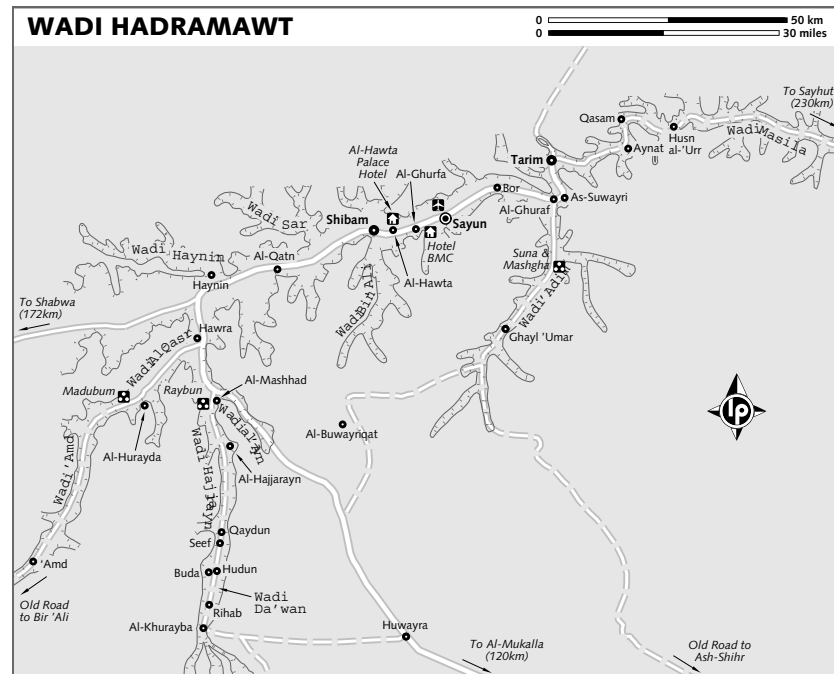
☎ 06 / pop 1,028,556

After so much sun-blasted desert, arriving in the vast Wadi Hadramawt, a dry river valley lined with lush oases, is like entering another world. In an instant, sterility is replaced by fertility and ochre browns give

way to disco greens. It's the sort of place where stories can grow tall and magic and mystery seem to permeate the very air. It was originally populated by a race of giants called 'Ad who, according to legend, were given wealth unlike anyone else. But instead of thanking God for his generosity, they wasted their time worshipping idols, building fabulous cities and generally running about living life like it was meant to be fun. In retaliation for this behaviour God sent violent winds, tremendous sandstorms and, according to some sources, a plague of dog-sized ants who tore the 'Adites apart limb by limb. With a past like this, it's hardly surprising to learn that this magic kingdom has skyscrapers built of mud, camels that turn into rocks and honey that tastes of liquid gold.

## SHIBAM

As you get closer the heat haze lifts and you realise that what you are looking at is not really a group of fossilised giraffes rearing up out of the palms, but something even more improbable. It's Shibam, a 2500-year-old



city of seven- and eight-storey tower blocks built entirely out of mud and faith. It will leave you breathless.

## History

Shibam is thought to date from the 4th century BC, but was built on the ruins of an even older city. It was later settled by citizens of old Shabwa after their city was destroyed. Later the town grew to boast the most important market in the region, and served for centuries (right up to the 16th century) as an important capital for local dynasties. In 1982 the town was declared a Unesco World Heritage site.

## Sights & Activities

Shibam is a silent and reserved place and in the mid-afternoon heat, when everyone else is safely tucked away indoors, it can feel a little like a museum or a library. Don't be mistaken, though, because away from the eyes of nosy travellers the city is alive and kicking. And thanks partially to tourism, it's experiencing something of a revival. Although Shibam covers a

very small area, it manages to pack over 500 dwellings into this confined space. The exterior of the buildings tends to be dull and featureless, but keep an eye open for the magnificent decorative doors and windows. It's worth taking a late evening stroll along the city walls, which date from the 17th century, and out into the fields of date palms. Other worthy sites include the **Sultan's Palace** (☎ 9am-1pm Sat-Thu), built in AD 1220, and the various **mosques** (none of which are open to nonbelievers), including the **Sheikh ar-Rashid Mosque** (also known as the Al-Jami or Great Mosque), which dates from the 10th century. At the **souq** next to the mosque, look out for the frankincense that has been sold here for centuries and have a game of dominoes with the elderly men who gather outside the teashop every evening. **Bait Jarhum** (☎ 420054; ☎ 10am-noon & 4-5.30pm Sat-Thu) is a traditional tower house renovated by Unesco. Inside you'll discover a mediocre photo exhibition, some vague views over the town and beautiful window and door frames. Ask for directions locally. Nearby is the similar, but privately run,

**Al-Bait Al-Tagleedi** (☎ 420400; admission YR300; ☎ 8.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-5.30pm Sat-Thu). Tea or coffee is included in the price.

A bit of a tourist tradition is to climb the rocky hill above the 'suburb' of Sahil Shibam, opposite the town, to watch the sun fall behind the city.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Shibam Motel** (☎ 420425; alhawtahtl@y.net.ye; s/d/tr US\$25/35/45) A quiet hotel with freshly painted and well-maintained rooms that are a step above most Yemeni hotels, as well as just a step from Shibam itself. It's one of the Universal chain's better offerings. You can get breakfast for YR500, and lunch and dinner for YR1200.

**our pick** **Al-Hawta Palace Hotel** (☎ 425010; alhawtahtl@universalyemen.com; s/d/tr US\$100/130/150; ☎ ☎) Lying around 7km from Shibam and 12km from Sayun centre, the Al-Hawta is probably Yemen's best hotel. It claims the unusual distinction of being the only 1st-class hotel in the world built entirely of mud and clay. Full of domes and arches, it's beautifully designed both inside and out and carefully maintained. The comfortable rooms are sparingly decorated but full of class, and the swimming pool complex and gardens are simply perfect. All in all, it would be hard to imagine a better-value top-class hotel anywhere, but there is a downside – the restaurant. The food is badly cooked and overpriced (breakfast US\$5; lunch and dinner US\$10), and the 'free' breakfast will be an unexpected and none-too-cheap addition to your bill.

## Getting There & Away

The bus and taxi stand lies just outside the entrance to the village. Shared taxis run regularly to Sayun (YR100, 20 minutes, around 20 daily) and Tarim (YR200, one hour, five to 10 daily).

## SAYUN

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Sayun has a distinguished history. From the earliest days, it was developed by the local Hadramawt clans and dynasties and since the 15th century has been the wadi's capital. Today, despite being the heart and soul of Hadramawt, dusty Sayun is a town with a slow beat and lots of friendly people. For the traveller, Sayun offers a decent range

of accommodation and a picturesque setting of adobe brick houses against a background of hills and palm trees. Aside from the palace/museum there is little to see as all the mosques and graveyards are closed to non-Muslims.

## Information

There's a telecommunications office near the post office.

**Abdulqadr Mahdami** (☎ 406409) For a private guide to the towns of Hadramawt.

**Al-Jazirah Restaurant** (per min YR2; ☎ 8am-9pm Sat-Thu) Internet access.

**National Bank of Yemen** (☎ 402142; ☎ 7am-1pm Sat-Wed) It's northwest of the cemetery.

**Universal Travel & Tourism** (☎ 404288; seiyun@universalyemen.com; Central Sq; ☎ 8am-noon & 4-7.30pm Sat-Thu) Can organise a wide variety of tours and activities in the area.

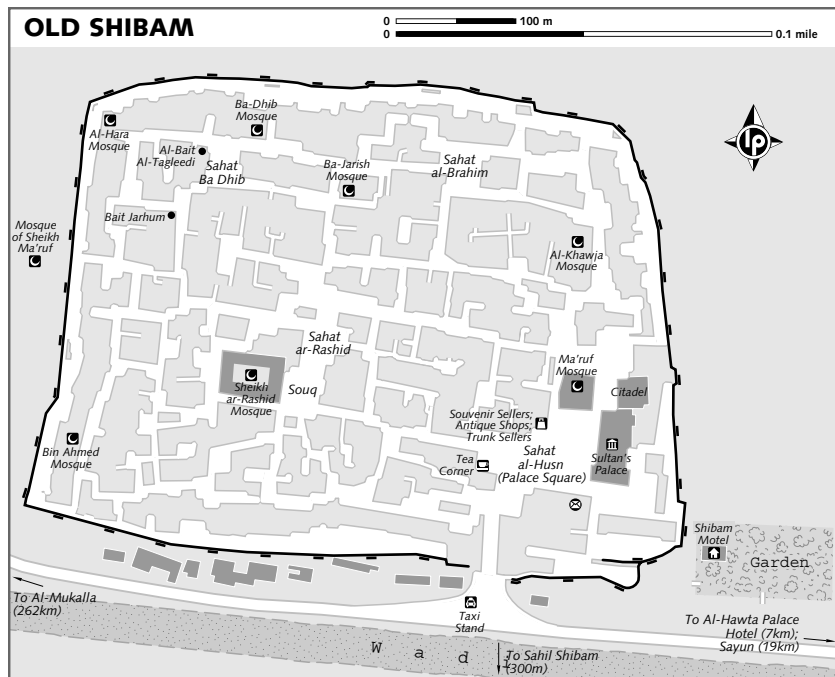
## Sights

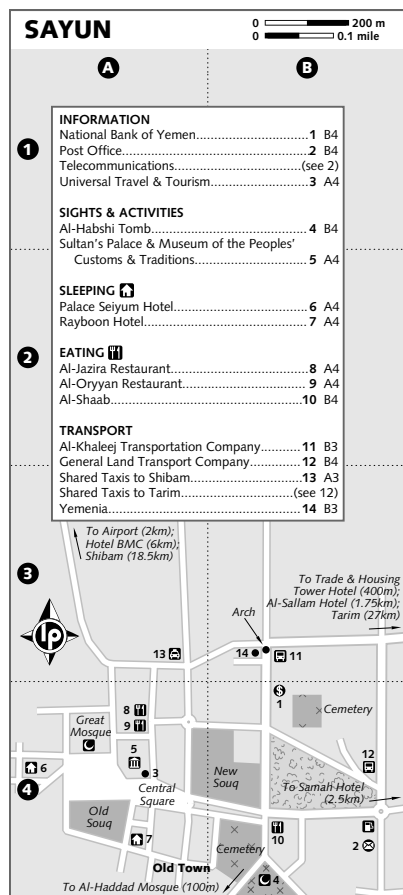
Originally built as a 19th-century defensive fort, the **Sultan's Palace** (☎ 402285; Central Sq; admission YR500; ☎ 8.30am-1pm Sat-Wed) was converted into a residential palace by the Sultan Al-Katheri in the 1920s. The Sultan wasn't a subtle man and his house, containing a mere 90 rooms, towers over Sayun like an exaggerated wedding cake. It now houses one of the best museums in the country.

This treasure trove of relics will stir the imagination of even the most museum-weary and includes Bronze Age statues, such as the 'sphinx', ancient frankincense jars (found buried at a nearby necropolis) and tablets inscribed with beautiful Himyarite and Semitic script (dating from as early as the 8th or 9th century BC). Most of the items on display were found in and around Hadramawt – proving just how long this area has been inhabited.

The 2nd floor of the palace is supposed to house changing exhibitions, though for the past few years it's exhibited a wonderful collection of photographs of the region taken in the 1930s by travellers to the Hadramawt (among them the intrepid British traveller Freya Stark).

The 3rd floor houses the far less interesting **Museum of the Peoples' Customs & Traditions**, which contains staid examples of traditional Hadramawt arts and crafts. Don't leave without a visit to the roof of the palace: there are great views across the town.





Sayun is also home to a number of interesting mosques and tombs, such as the **Al-Habshi Tomb**, opposite the cemetery, and the 16th-century **Al-Haddad Mosque**, south of the cemetery. Unfortunately, you won't be allowed to enter any of them. Also well worth a wander are the alleyways of the **old souq**, where you can pick up a *madhalla* – the 'witch's hat' worn by the Hadramawt herders, as well as bright basketry.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

**Palace Seiyum Hotel** (☎ 405566; fax 402371; s/d YR1500/2000) Don't be put off by the prison-cell doors, because the rooms are pretty pleasing. Some come with tiny balconies

and larger than normal bathrooms. The staff think foreigners are hilarious, but you probably won't find the loudspeakers on the nearby mosque quite as funny.

**Rayboon Hotel** (☎ 405393; fax 402686; r YR1700) Situated in an atmospheric old quarter this new hotel has tatty rooms at a price you can't knock. This place is more accustomed to foreigners and their strange habits than the Palace Seiyum and is therefore a little more welcoming.

## MIDRANGE

**Al-Sallam Hotel** (☎ 403208; fax 403181; Tarim Rd; s/d YR1800/2400) With rooms well past their best, Sayun's original hotel has fallen on hard times, but the staff are friendly and eager to please. The 'pool' is as dry as a Yemeni bar.

**Trade & Housing Tower Hotel** (Funduq al-Burg/al-Borg; ☎ 403750; fax 403575; Al-'Aam St; s/d YR2100/3000; 🚰) Cheap rooms that sure ain't cheerful, but the swimming pool is the best in town and the towering bougainvillea plants even better. The murky rooms might appeal to a more refined type of backpacker.

**Hotel BMC** (☎ 428040; fax 428042; Al-Ghorhaf St; r YR4000; 🚰) The rooms in this well-maintained hotel a few kilometres west of town are spick-and-span and the receptionists bouncing with enthusiasm. There is a small pool and a restaurant (mains YR300 to YR500) that isn't such a highlight.

## TOP END

**Samah Hotel** (☎ 402777; samahhotel@yahoo.com; s/d US\$30/35; 🚰) Sayun's top hotel is 2.5km east of the town centre. The rooms are comfortable and well kept, but the dreary Soviet design doesn't do it any favours. It offers occasional live music and a pool in which swimming is very difficult.

## Eating

**Al-Oryyan Restaurant** (☎ 408330; meals YR80-600) This clean and busy joint is by far the pick of the bunch and its English-language menu makes ordering easy. The crushed beans with egg (YR120) is way better than it sounds!

**Al-Shaab** (☎ 402486; Central Sq; meals YR200-500; 🚰 lunch only) Located opposite the corner of the park, this brightly coloured restaurant has long served as the pit stop of choice at lunchtime. The menu offers no great surprises

The Al-Jazira Restaurant next door is almost identical, even down to the menu design.

## Getting There & Away

The national carrier **Yemenia** (☎ 402550; fax 404388) flies to San'a for US\$80.

A good highway connects Sayun to San'a (via Ma'rib). General Land Transport Company runs buses to San'a (YR1400, around 14 hours, one daily). Foreigners are often not allowed to travel this route by bus.

Shared taxis run to Al-Mukalla (YR1500, five hours, six daily), San'a (YR2300, eight to 10 hours, one daily), Shibam (YR70, 20 minutes, 30 daily) and Tarim (YR100, 30 to 40 minutes, around 20 daily). As with the buses, foreigners are often not allowed to travel to San'a via Ma'rib by taxi. For information on crossing the desert to Ma'rib via Shabwa see p497.

New roads have also been constructed heading eastward to Oman and it's now perfectly possible to travel overland to/from Sayun and Salalah in Oman (p247). **Al-Khaleej Transportation Company** (☎ 402188; opposite the Yemenia office) sends buses trundling to Salalah (YR5000, 16 hours) every Saturday and Tuesday morning. Book in advance and prepare for a very long day. The buses use the inland border crossing at Makinat Shihaan p512), where Omani tourist visas can be obtained with little fuss for most Western nationalities for US\$21. It's also possible to travel to Oman from Sayun via Al-Ghayda (p511) and the coast using local buses and taxis.

## TARIM

☎ 05

Situated 35km northeast of Sayun, the ramshackle town of Tarim has served as the seat of kings since ancient times, and was Wadi Hadramawt's capital before Sayun. It used to be famous as a centre of Islamic learning, as testified to by its library, and at one time had a mosque for every day of the year. During the past century many of the people of Tarim have set off to seek their fortunes abroad, and those who have succeeded have often returned to build sumptuous 'palaces' in and around the city.

## Sights

Tarim is famous for the quantity and quality of its mud-brick palaces, many of which

were constructed by Yemenis returning to their homeland after making their fortunes in the far east.

As-Sayed Omar bin Sheikh al-Kaf built the **Al-Kaf Palace** (Ish Shaa Palace; ☎ 417500; admission YR150; 🕒 8am-1pm), Tarim's most flamboyant, apparently using a book of different architectural styles as a template, in a kind of 'pick-your-own' project! The result is an unlikely mishmash of styles – Art Nouveau, Art Deco, baroque, South-east Asian and Hadrami. Back in its day, it must have been beautiful, but now it's a crumbling relic and a visit here is a little sad as you think about the marvellous lifestyle that this building once represented. Inside, there is a limited display of locally discovered antiques and a collection of old photos recalling happier days. The highlight is probably the stained-glass windows, which are as dazzling as the day they were fitted.

Housed in the back of the Great Mosque (or Masjid al-Jami), **Al-Ahgap Manuscript Library** (☎ 41522; admission free; 🕒 9am-1pm Sat-Wed) is the second-largest library in the country and contains over 5000 manuscripts, though most are hidden from prying eyes. Some of the more beautifully illustrated manuscripts are on display in glass cabinets. Unfortunately for English speakers, all captions are in Arabic. The large and dazzling-white **Al-Muhdar Mosque** was built in 1915 and boasts the tallest minaret in Yemen; it soars nearly 40m into the air.

## Sleeping & Eating

Tarim isn't much of a place to spend the night. There are only a couple of very basic *funduqs* with bare-bones rooms.

**Kenya Tourist Hotel Tarim** (☎ 417550; kenya\_hotel@yemen.net.ye; d YR1700) At the entrance to the town, the Kenya is Tarim's finest hotel, but that isn't saying much. The rooms are noisy and as crumbling as the Al-Kaf Palace.

**Al-Kazem Restaurant** (meals YR300) On the road into town this is a no-frills joint, but the food is tasty enough with the fried chicken being the star buy.

## Getting There & Away

Shared taxis go to Sayun (YR100 to YR150, 30 minutes, 20 daily) and Shibam (YR200, one hour, 10 daily).



## AROUND TARIM

Nineteen kilometres east of Tarim, **Aynat** dates from the 16th century and has some lovely old tombstones set in an extensive cemetery; it also boasts some beautifully constructed houses in a style of their own. To get there, take a taxi from Sayun (YR100, 35 minutes, two per day).

On the road west to Sayun, look out for the 10th-century **Tomb of Ahmed bin Eisa the Emigrant**, lying at the foot of the mountain around 10km from Sayun. Its distinctive zigzag shape, leg-aching flight of steps and bright whitewash are unmistakable.

## WADI DAW'AN

📞 06

It is hard to imagine how anywhere in the Yemeni desert could be more spectacular and mysterious than the Wadi Hadramawt, but sitting quietly in the sidelines, there is one such place. The Wadi Daw'an might only be small, but it packs one hell of a punch – everything you thought breathing-taking about the Wadi Hadramawt is here in force, but unlike the camouflaged mud villages of the main wadi, these villages come in a lush patchwork of shades and colours.

For most people Wadi Daw'an is experienced as a brief glimpse through the windows of a car racing along the back road between Sayun and Al-Mukalla, but it would be much more rewarding to spend a day or so here getting into the slow, agricultural groove of the valley.

وادي دوعن

Some of the wadi's most attractive villages, in a north to south direction, include **Al-Mashhad**, which, with the 15th-century **Tomb of Hasan ibn Hasan**, is a local pilgrimage site and a near-deserted village. Next down the line, and clambering up the side of a cliff, is maybe the most impressive village of them all, **Al-Hajarayn**, which is also among the oldest villages in the region. One of the biggest villages in the wadi is **Sif**, whose pastel-fringed houses sprawl across the wadi bed, and whose old quarter sits proudly atop a knuckle of rock. **Al-Khurayba** is the final village in the wadi and is famous for its massive acid-trip 'palace' of rainbow-coloured squares. It was built by a Saudi businessman with roots in the area, who is also responsible for a wave of new schools, clinics and roadworks. It's sometimes possible to spend the night here. The village has another claim to fame that it's a little less keen to promote: it's the ancestral home of the extended Bin Laden family.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Riboun Hotel** (📞 513590; Main St; r per person with breakfast & dinner YR2000) The only reliable accommodation in the region is this hotel located in the village of Sif. It's English-speaking and has a handful of hot and stuffy rooms.

**Riboun Restaurant & Hotel** (📞 73300716; r per person with breakfast & dinner YR2000) Excellent three-course meals (YR850) are provided at this nearby, and confusingly named, restaurant, which is run by relatives of the first

Riboun. It also has a couple of brand-new, bright-blue rooms that make you feel as if you're sleeping in a swimming pool.

## Getting There & Away

The road between Sayun and Al-Mukalla via Wadi Daw'an is surfaced all the way and in excellent condition, but currently there is no public transport along this route.

## AL-MAHRA

Remote even by Yemeni standards, the far eastern province of Al-Mahra is a tough desert landscape populated by an equally tough people, many of whom continue to live a largely nomadic existence. The tribes of this area are the original south Arabians and many inhabitants still speak the ancient language of Mahric, a Semitic language which predates Arabic. It was also in this region that the camel was originally domesticated, an event that was to transform Arabia forever.

Unless you're tackling the Omani border, there is little reason to head to Al-Mahra.

## AL-GHAYDA

Sun-baked Al-Ghayda is the state capital, though it's really no more than an overblown fishing village. Attractions are limited to a small but enjoyable fruit-and-vegetable souq and the chance to splash about on the soft white beach a few kilometres to the east of town.

## Sleeping & Eating

Facilities in Al-Ghayda are very limited and it's unlikely that you would want to spend more than a night here.

**Gulf Hotel** (📞 612498; fax 611466; s/d YR1500/1700) The large rooms here could definitely do with seeing a cleaner on a more frequent basis, but the beds are soft and the atmosphere tranquil.

Almost opposite the Gulf Hotel is an unnamed **restaurant** (meals YR300), where you eat straight off the floor and the food is much better than expected.

## Getting There & Away

The **airport** (📞 612122) is a few kilometres to the west of town. There are flights from here to San'a for US\$60.

## SEX & THE HIVE

Yemen may not seem like the land of milk and honey, but since ancient times Yemen has been famous for its honey, which you'll frequently be told is the best in the world. The top-quality honey comes from the Wadi Daw'an in the far east of the country, where nomadic beekeepers transport wooden hives around in search of 'ilb flowers for the bees to feed on. Honey in Yemen is appreciated for more than just its taste and is often used by tribes in order to seal a deal as well as in traditional medical practices. When mixed with myrrh, it provides relief from constipation and with carrot seeds supposedly becomes the perfect aphrodisiac!

**Al-Khaleej Co Buses** (📞 05-611222) runs to/from Al-Mukalla every Wednesday (YR2500) and also to Salalah in Oman (YR4000, Tuesday 1pm and Friday 3pm).

## HAWF

Sitting between high mountain and deep sea, the little border village of Hawf will either be a fond farewell to Yemen or an enchanting entry. Few people stay more than a couple of minutes and there are no hotels or restaurants, just one small teashop, which seems to have as many camels drop by as tea-drinking customers. It's a shame that Hawf doesn't have more tourist facilities because it's the most alluring coastal town in Al-Mahra, with a sprinkling of idyllic cove beaches (where those with their own transport can camp for a night or two) close by and the fascinating western tip of the Dhofar Mountains rearing up behind the village. Famous for frankincense, these mountains hide a huge slab of forest – the only real forest in Yemen. It's a protected zone and access isn't easy without your own set of wheels. It might be possible to organise something with a driver in Hawf or Al-Ghayda.

## Getting There & Away

There's no public transport to/from Hawf and most people will pass straight through the village on the direct Al-Ghayda–Salalah bus. The border is open 24 hours and Omani tourist visas are available for most Western and Arab nationalities for US\$21

## OF PETRIFIED CAMELS & TORTURED SOULS

Travel half a day east of Sayun, to the Wadi Masilah, and you will come across an extraordinary sight: a small town of prim and proper houses set at the foot of a tomb. This is the tomb of the Prophet Hud, and this is no ordinary town. The great-great-grandson of Noah, Hud was a giant of a man, the size of a palm tree according to some. He was sent by God to make the 'Adites – the race of giants who were the original inhabitants of Hadramawt – change their immoral and lax ways. This wasn't well received by the 'Adites. They chased Hud and his snow-white camel up to the far end of the wadi, where he eluded his pursuers by riding straight into the cliff face, which parted for him and all of his camel but its hump, which was instantly turned to stone.

It's said that Hud is the father of all south Arabians and his tomb, where the camel's hump can still be seen, is the location of an annual three-day pilgrimage. Aside from these three days, though, the tomb and its surrounding town is utterly deserted and lifeless, haunted it's said only by ghosts.

Not far away is rumoured to be the mysterious Well of Barhut, a bottomless well whose walls are lined with scorpions and snakes. It's said to be the place where fallen angels and the souls of infidels end their days.

on the border. If coming the other way, Yemeni tourist visas are available for most for US\$30. You don't need a travel permit or to be part of a tour group to cross over this border. Independent travellers can continue on to Sayun or Al-Mukalla on public transport without fuss, though once you reach either of those towns, you will need to register with the police and obtain onward travel permits.

### MAKINAT SHIHAN

The inland border village of Makinat Shihan is not a place to linger. Fortunately, the border is open 24 hours and procedures are identical to those at Hawf (p511). There are no facilities for tourists.

## YEMEN DIRECTORY

More general information on the following topics can be found in the Arabian Peninsula Directory (p524).

### ACCOMMODATION Camping

There are no established camp sites in Yemen, but it's possible to pitch a tent in most places (bar obvious restricted areas, such as near military bases). Popular places currently include the Haraz Mountains (p467) and the island of Suqutra (p502), where few alternative types of accommodation exist. Camping equipment can be rented from the San'a-based travel agencies (p520).

### Hotels

Although rock-bottom places can be unearthed in all of Yemen's towns (for YR400 to YR600), they're not really recommended. The filthy dormitory rooms have rope beds with no mattresses and, if you are lucky, rotten blankets. Qat chewers and itinerant merchants (invariably male) are the main clientele, so foreign men would raise an eyebrow and foreign women will simply be turned away.

Similar but cleaner and more accustomed to travellers of both sexes are the budget hotels, which offer singles/doubles with shared or sometimes private bathrooms for around YR1000/1400. Some of these are converted traditional tower houses,

which offer simple but attractive and cosy dormitory-style accommodation aimed squarely at foreign tourists. In the smaller towns and villages where few eating options exist, these traditional tower houses may also offer half-board for YR2000. TVs are a basic amenity in Yemen and most budget hotel rooms have them (though few offer satellite channels).

In all of the larger towns and in many of the smaller ones, there's usually at least a couple of midrange options where singles/doubles with bathroom cost from YR2500/4000. Cheap but clean, and occasionally well loved, they offer great value.

In the capital and one or two of the larger towns, there are a few top-end options, where rooms cost from YR8000 to just over US\$200. Some have all the four- or five-star flourishes you'd expect, including business and fitness centres.

Discounts in the low season (October to November and February to May) are usually negotiable, as well as for stays of a week or more. Don't be afraid to ask for them.

In this chapter, all the rooms listed come with private bathroom (and often a TV) unless otherwise stated.

### ACTIVITIES Diving

Decent diving can be had in both the Red and Arabian Seas. Although coral is less abundant at sites in the Arabian Sea (because of the lower sea temperature) and visibility can be more erratic, fish life is profuse. Visibility ranges from 5m to 25m depending on the season and weather. The best time for diving is between October and April.

Currently the only certified diving centre in Yemen is the German-run **Extra Divers** (☎ 350919; www.extra-divers.de) in Al-Mukalla (p499). Various diving day trips are offered and all diving equipment can be hired. There are decompression chambers in Al-Mukalla and Aden. Various Yemeni-based tour companies also offer diving tours (sometimes using the experience and boats of Extra Divers) to both coastlines and, increasingly, to Suqutra. Try the **ATG travel agency** (www.atg-yemen.com; just off Hadda St, San'a), **FTI Yemen** (www.ftiyemen.com/scuba.htm; Al-Qiada St, San'a) or **Marib Travel & Tourism** (www.marib-tours.com; Hadda St, San'a).

In Suqutra, diving trips can be organised to the unmolested, fish-infested reefs of the island through either San'a-based agencies or the **Summer Land Hotel** (☎ 05-660350; Hadibu) for around US\$35 per dive with all equipment.

### Hiking

Yemen's highlands offer endless potential for hiking. A popular spot is the Haraz Mountains, southwest of San'a, particularly around the villages of Al-Hajjarah, Kawkaban and Manakhah. There are no official hiking trails or maps, so you may need to rely on local guides. Donkeys (for riding or as pack animals) can also be hired.

Several San'a-based travel agencies specialise in hiking: see p520 for information.

### Swimming & Surfing

With two coastlines on two seas, there are many unspoilt beaches in Yemen. Except for those at Aden (p489) and Al-Khawkha (p482), beach resorts are almost nonexistent, and except at Al-Mukalla (p499), very few coastal hotels have private beaches. The waves generated by the summer monsoon have started to grab the attention of a few surfers – conditions are reportedly excellent in the east of the country. For further information on surfing in Yemen as well as occasional tours, see www.oceansurfpublishing.co.uk.

### BOOKS

For anyone hooked on Yemen's ancient history, *Arabia Felix – An Exploration of the Archaeological History of Yemen* by Alessandro de Maigret is considered the definitive introduction to the subject.

*J'étais Médecin au Yemen* (I Was a Doctor in Yemen) by Claude Fayein is a classic and charismatic memoir of a female doctor's experiences in Yemen in the 1950s. *Motoring with Mohammed* by Eric Hansen tells of action-packed and amusing travels around Yemen in the late 1980s. Award-winning *Yemen – Travels in Dictionary Land* by Tim Mackintosh-Smith is a modern classic: it's a witty, erudite but very wordy account of contemporary life. *Eating the Flowers of Paradise* by Kevin Rushby is a brilliant and, at times, hair-raising exploration of the world of qat in both Yemen and Ethiopia. *The Zanzibar Chest* by former

war correspondent Aidan Hartley focuses primarily on the battles of Africa, but includes many forays into Yemen and is one of the most powerful books you are ever likely to read. *Sheba* by Nicholas Clapp is an interesting and easy-to-read account of his search for the origins of the myth. *The Southern Gates of Arabia* is a travel classic written by English woman Freya Stark, who journeyed through the Hadramawt in the early 1900s.

A good textual and pictorial overview of the country is *Yemen – Land and People* by Sarah Searight. The glossy coffee-table book *Yemen: Jewel of Arabia* by Charles and Patricia Aithie whets the appetite before a trip and serves as a good souvenir after one. For those with a keener interest in art, *Queen of Sheba – Treasure from Ancient Yemen* by St John Simpson (ed), which accompanied the exhibition 'Queen of Sheba', contains 12 fascinating and well-illustrated essays on the country's artistic and cultural heritage. For more travel literature on the Arabian Peninsula, see p23.

### BUSINESS HOURS

Hours vary. Outside the central highlands, where the climate is hotter, there is often an extended midday break (but businesses open earlier and close later). Some businesses close at 1pm regardless and reopen around 6pm.

**Banks** 8am to noon Saturday to Thursday, open only until 11am on Thursday.

**Government offices** 8am to 3pm, although in practice many close by 1pm or 1.30pm.

**Post offices** 8.30am to 1pm and 3.30pm to 7pm Saturday to Thursday. Usually open for an hour from 7pm to 8pm on Friday.

**Restaurants** 7am to 11pm, although they may open earlier and close later in larger towns.

**Shops & private businesses** 9am to noon and 4pm to 8pm Saturday to Thursday. Some open on Friday as well.

**Telecom & internet centres** 7am to 11pm.

**Yemenia** 8am to 1pm or 2pm & 5pm to 7pm or 8pm Saturday to Wednesday, 9am to noon Friday.

### CHILDREN

Yemenis love children, and kids of both sexes are permitted freedom and liberties discouraged during adult life.

However, facilities for children aren't greatly developed. There are a couple of amusement parks (see p463) in San'a, and a

few small parks containing swings and slides in other towns. Other possible activities might include donkey or horse riding, swimming in the sea or a hotel pool, and water sports at some of the seaside complexes.

## COURSES

Yemen is a great place to learn Arabic. The cost of living is low, school fees are very reasonable, the Yemeni dialect is not too far removed from Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and relatively few Yemenis speak English. San'a schools (p463), which teach both MSA and the Yemeni dialect, in particular, have a good reputation and some have received glowing reports from travellers.

## CUSTOMS

Foreigners are permitted up to 2L of alcohol. Note that there is a prohibition on exporting items of artistic value. Anything that is – or looks like – an antique or is of archaeological value risks confiscation.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Despite salacious press reports to the contrary, Yemen is probably far safer than your own country. Petty crime, even in the big cities, is almost nonexistent and the chances of being caught up in a terrorist attack are highly unlikely. Despite this nobody can say that a trip to Yemen is entirely without risk, and Western governments currently advise against all travel to Sa'da province and also issue regular warnings about the dangers of overland travel in other areas of the country (Ma'rib, Shabwa and 'Amran are the current hotspots) due to the risk of kidnap.

## Mines

During the 1994 War of Unity, unknown quantities of land mines were planted. After a sustained anti-mining campaign, many have been cleared, but mines remain, particularly around the old North/South Yemen border. Although the risk may be minimal, hikers in little-explored regions should seek local advice before setting out.

## Terrorism

According to the US government, Yemen is home to a significant number of sympathisers and members of Al-Qaeda. However, the chances of being caught up in a terror attack in Yemen are considerably lower than

other parts of the peninsula (Saudi Arabia, for example) or even London. Expatriates working for international corporations are at a much higher risk than casual tourists, and dangerous areas of the country are quickly closed to foreigners.

Those arrested in the past for connection with terrorism have almost always turned out to be foreign Arabs living in Yemen illegally. Meanwhile, the Yemeni government has been at pains to express its absolute condemnation of terrorism, and the Yemeni people their disgust and horror of it. The last major terror attack was a foiled double-suicide bombing of the oil installations near Ma'rib and Al-Mukalla in September 2006. Prior to 2001, it's thought that Al-Qaeda maintained some large training camps in the country, but these have been swiftly disbanded and anyone suspected of links to terrorism is dealt with harshly. At least that's the official line, but consistent rumours speak of government and military corruption or even collusion with terror groups, which has allowed suspects to walk away without trial.

The war in Iraq has inflamed passions somewhat, and after his execution Saddam Hussein was turned into a hero. Many Yemenis will ask a foreigner their opinion on the war and the execution, but that's normally as far as it goes. George Bush is almost universally detested in Yemen, and if you're a fan, it would be wise to keep these opinions to yourself. On the whole, though, Yemenis are far too laid-back and hospitable to call their guests to account for the sins or mistakes of their governments.

## Traffic Accidents

Although traffic in Yemen is significantly quieter than in its more developed neighbours, drivers should definitely deploy themselves defensively! Mirrors and indicators are not used, car maintenance is practically nil and most road laws, including speed limits, are ignored. See also p522 and p555.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Yemeni Embassies & Consulates

Following are the Yemeni embassies and consulates in major cities around the world. For the addresses of Yemeni embassies in neighbouring Arabian Peninsula countries, see the relevant country chapters.

**Canada** (☎ 613-729 6627; fax 613-729 6627; 54 Chamberlin Avenue, Ottawa)

**France** (☎ 01-53238787; fax 01 47234295; 25 rue Georges Bizet, 75116 Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 030-897305-0; fax 030-897305-62; Budapest Str 37, Berlin 10787)

**Italy** (☎ 06-44231679; fax 06-44234763; Via Antonio Bosio, 10, 00161 Rome)

**Netherlands** (☎ 70-365 3936; fax 70-356 3312; Surinamestraat 9, 2585 GG, The Hague)

**UK** (☎ 020-7584 6607; fax 020-7584 3350; 57 Cromwell Rd, London SW7 2ED)

**USA** Washington DC (☎ 202-965 4760; fax 202-337 2017; 2319 Wyoming Ave, NW Washington DC 20008); New York (☎ 212-355 1730; fax 212-750 9613; Room 435, 866 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017)

## Embassies & Consulates in Yemen

If you're travelling independently, it's not a bad idea to register with your embassy in San'a and inquire about any current security concerns. For those countries without diplomatic representation in Yemen (such as Australia, Canada and Ireland) you can register at your embassy in Riyadh (see p363).

Most embassies and consulates open between around 9am and 1pm from Saturday to Wednesday.

**France** (Map p458; ☎ 01-268882) Off Khartoum St.

**Germany** (Map p458; ☎ 01-413177) Off Hadda St.

**Italy** (Map p458; ☎ 01-269165; Safiah Janubia St)

**Netherlands** (Map p458; ☎ 01-421800) Off 14th October St)

**Oman** (Map p458; ☎ 01-208874; Al-Hoboob Corp St)

**Saudi Arabia** (☎ 01-240429; Al-Quds St)

**UAE** (Map p458; ☎ 01-248777; Circular Lane)

**UK** (Map p458; ☎ 01-302450; Thaher Himyari St (Nashwan al-Himyari St), East Ring Rd)

**USA** (Map p458; ☎ 01-755 2000; Sa'wan St)

## HOLIDAYS

In addition to the main Islamic holidays (see the Arabian Peninsula Directory, p534), Yemen observes the following holidays:

**May/Labour Day** 1 May

**National/Unity Day** 22 May

**September Revolutionary/Anniversary Day** 26

September

**October Revolutionary/Anniversary Day** 14 October

**Evacuation/Independence Day** 30 November

## INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are mushrooming up over Yemen and are found in all the larger towns. However, connections vary greatly from

(usually) quite good in San'a to extremely slow in smaller towns. Rates are very reasonable, averaging YR2 per minute.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

The following websites provide useful information and links on Yemen:

**American-Yemeni Society** ([www.ays.org](http://www.ays.org)) Contains

interesting cultural information about Yemen.

**British-Yemeni Society** ([www.al-bab.com/bys](http://www.al-bab.com/bys)) Includes history and current affairs.

**TeleYemen** ([www.y.net.ye](http://www.y.net.ye)) Yemen's only Internet Service Provider (ISP). It acts as a kind of digital bibliography to all the sites it serves.

**US Department of State** ([www.travel.state.gov/travel\\_warnings.html](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel_warnings.html)) Contains – somewhat alarmist – updates on the security situation and current 'hotspots'.

**Yemen Gateway** ([www.al-bab.com/yemen](http://www.al-bab.com/yemen)) An overview of Yemen's attractions, history and culture. Lots of facts and figures, numerous articles on all subjects, as well as great links.

**Yemen Times** ([www.yementimes.com](http://www.yementimes.com)) Good for a quick perusal of what's hitting headlines in the country, plus a very useful archive of past articles.

## LANGUAGE

The national language of Yemen is Arabic, and Yemenis are widely regarded as speaking the dialect closest to the pure Arabic of the Quran. Many Yemenis working in the tourist industry speak at least a smattering of English, French or Italian. For more, see the language chapter (p566).

## MAPS

Probably the most useful and widely available map is the **Freytag & Berndt** ([www.freytagberndt.com](http://www.freytagberndt.com)) road map *Yemen* (1:1,500,000), which includes insets of San'a. The Reise Know-How Verlag map *Yemen* (1:850,000) is also good.

In Yemen itself (and sometimes available in Europe) the best bet is the *Republic of Yemen Tourist Map* (1:1,250,000) published by IGN France/Yemen Survey Authority. It also has good insets of the major towns on its reverse side.

## MEDIA

### Magazines & Newspapers

The English-language weeklies, *Yemen Times* and *Yemen Observer* (YR30 each), are published in San'a and make interesting reading. Both are well regarded, the former for its political commentary and

regular columns, the latter (a more recent addition) for its commentary on social and cultural issues.

Day-old copies of the Saudi newspaper *Arab News* can sometimes be found in bigger towns, as can outdated editions of *Newsweek*.

## Radio & TV

Yemen Radio and regional radio stations broadcast English-language news bulletins twice a day (usually once in the evening and morning, though schedules change).

**BBC World Service** ([www.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/worldservice/psims/ScheduleSDT.cgi](http://www.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/worldservice/psims/ScheduleSDT.cgi)) can be picked up on short-wave radio (15.57Mhz), as can Voice of America (17.73Mhz).

The two government-run TV channels suffer from underfunding and poor technology. To obtain access to more channels, many homes subscribe to satellite TV. The middle and top hotels invariably receive Al-Jazeera, CNN or BBC News 24.

## MONEY

The unit of currency is the Yemeni riyal (YR), divided into 100 fils. Banknotes come in denominations of YR10 (rare), YR20, YR50, YR100, YR200, YR500 and YR1000. Each note is translated into English on one side. Only YR5 and YR10 coins remain, and though both sides of these coins are in Arabic only, they are of different sizes (the YR10 coin is the larger). Many people won't accept ripped or damaged banknotes.

Some midrange hotels, all top-end hotels and most travel agencies quote in US dollars or, increasingly, in euros. Where appropriate this book also quotes in these currencies, but payment is always acceptable in the Yemeni riyals equivalent.

## ATMs & Credit Cards

In the past couple of years ATMs have arrived in Yemen and now most of the bigger bank branches in the large towns have ATMs that accept foreign cards. Most will only allow you to withdraw the equivalent of US\$200 per transaction up to a daily limit of US\$600. Problems with foreign cards are very common and you shouldn't rely simply on them. There are several ATMs at San'a airport.

Credit cards (Visa commonly, MasterCard sometimes and Amex rarely) are ac-

cepted for payment by Yemenia airlines, some tour operators and some top-end hotels, but you'll incur a steep 5% to 10% surcharge.

## Cash

Cash is by far the simplest form of carrying your money, and as there is little petty theft, carrying around big bundles of money is not a huge worry. US dollars and euros are the currencies of choice.

Banks offer slightly lower rates for cash than foreign-exchange offices, but are more likely to change travellers cheques. There is no black market, so there's no advantage to changing money on the street.

## Exchange Rates

Country	Unit		Yemeni riyal
Australia	A\$1	=	YR152.06
Bahrain	BD1	=	YR519.08
Canada	C\$1	=	YR166.80
Euro zone	€1	=	YR254.44
Japan	¥100	=	YR160.97
New Zealand	NZ\$1	=	YR133.67
Oman	OR1	=	YR508.35
Qatar	QR1	=	YR53.76
Saudi Arabia	SR1	=	YR52.17
UAE	Dh1	=	YR53.28
UK	UK£1	=	YR381.74
USA	US\$1	=	YR195.70

## Moneychangers

Numerous (and well-signposted) foreign-exchange offices are found in the cities and larger towns. They offer shorter queues than the banks, faster service, longer opening hours (usually 9am to 9pm, except Friday) and almost always offer a better rate of exchange (at least for cash). Check with a couple first, as rates can vary slightly between offices. Commission is seldom charged, but check in advance.

## Tippling

Although tipping is not expected in local restaurants, the upmarket tourist establishments often add a 10% to 15% service charge. Service charges and government taxes (totalling 22% or more) are often included at top-end hotels and restaurants, too. Porters and waiters in these establishments will also expect tips (YR100 to YR200). For drivers and guides, travel

agencies recommend US\$5 to US\$10 per day per group. If there are only one or two of you, this can add substantially to the cost of your tour, and drivers can become difficult if they don't feel they have received a sufficient tip. For adults who play tour guides or offer other services, a tip of YR300 to YR500 (YR100 to YR150 for children) is fair.

## Travellers Cheques

Travellers cheques can be difficult to change outside the largest towns. Also, changing them generally incurs a 3% to 5% commission or more. If you must use cheques, Crédit Agricole Indosuez is the best bank to change with.

## PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Small memory cards are available in bigger towns, but they are expensive, so bring all you'll need with you. Print film is also available in the larger towns (ISO100/200 from YR300/350), with San'a offering the best selection. You can also find basic slide film there, such as Fujichrome Sensia (YR900), which is very rare elsewhere. Don't expect cards or films to be stored in optimum conditions.

## POST

Post offices can be found in the larger towns and villages. Services offered are fairly efficient and cheap: a postcard/letter to Europe costs YR100, USA and Canada YR120, and Australia and New Zealand YR150.

## TELEPHONE & FAX

The national telephone system is controlled by the government monopoly, Yemen Communications Company (commonly known as TeleYemen). Every city and town has a plethora of 'telecommunication centres'. Local calls cost around YR30/80 inside/outside town. The standard international charge is about YR200 per minute to anywhere in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. There are no off-peak periods offering discounted rates. Phonecards costing from YR500 to YR4000 are available. Some internet cafés in bigger towns offer internet calling.

Faxes can be sent from any telecommunication centre. Local/international faxes cost YR30/YR500 per page.

## Mobile Phones

The only two private suppliers of mobile-phone networks are **Spacotel** (Map p458; ☎ 01-420552; [www.spacetelyemen.com](http://www.spacetelyemen.com); Hadda St) and **Sabafon** (Map p458; ☎ 01-400001; [www.sabafon.com](http://www.sabafon.com); Az-Zubayri St), both in San'a. Reception is good in most areas, though mountain valleys can be problematic.

## Phone Codes

The country code for Yemen is ☎ 967, followed by the local area code (minus the zero), then the number. Local area codes are given at the start of each city or town section. For local inquiries, dial ☎ 118; for international inquiries, dial ☎ 152 or 155. The international access code (to call abroad from Yemen) is ☎ 00.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information is not Yemen's forte. You'll find dated and faded tourist brochures in Yemeni embassies abroad, and little better in Yemen itself. In fact, the capital still awaits its own tourism office, and they're as good as nonexistent in regions around the country. Some of the private travel agents (p520) do a very good job as surrogate tourism offices in the major towns, but it's best to supply yourself with information and maps before you arrive.

## VISAS

Over the past couple of years, visa regulations for foreign visitors have changed several times. They may well change again; check with your embassy or consulate.

Currently everyone, except citizens of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, requires a visa to enter Yemen. Tourist visas are easily obtained at San'a and Aden international airports and all land borders (though in reality this means just the Yemen/Oman border) for citizens of all European Union nations, Scandinavian nations, the USA, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Russia and several other countries. The cost for all nationalities is US\$30 (or euro/Yemeni riyal equivalent) and the visa is valid for three months. Obtaining the visa in this manner is fast and painless, but it's still a good idea to check the latest rules with a Yemeni embassy in advance.

Everyone else should obtain visas from an embassy or consulate beforehand. Where there is none, you can obtain one from an embassy/consulate in a neighbouring country (neighbouring your country or neighbouring Yemen). Note that Israelis or travellers to Israel (with an Israeli stamp in their passport) will be denied a visa/entry to Yemen. Very occasionally there are problems at immigration for those with Pakistani or Afghani stamps in their passport. There is no official rule against having these stamps, so if you do encounter problems remain polite and insist on seeing someone higher up the chain of command.

If you're visiting on business or to study, you'll need to apply for a special business/student visa, and provide a letter of introduction from your organisation or college. These visas must be obtained through a Yemeni embassy in advance of your arrival.

Take note also of the travel-permit restrictions (below).

### Visa Extensions

A one-month tourist visa can normally be extended at the **Immigration Authority** (Map p458; ☎ 01-612767; fax 01-618240; Khawlan St; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sat-Wed) in San'a, where a one-month extension will be granted for YR1500. A tour operator can provide this service, but you may be charged a fee. Alternatively, an exit visa (valid for two weeks) is usually easily obtained on the last working day before the visa expires.

For residents or workers in Yemen, longer extensions can be granted, but you'll need to present a letter from your employer/organisation to the Ministry of Labour, which will then write a letter to the Immigration Authority.

### Travel Permits & Closed Areas

Due to tribal tension and conflict in some areas as well as problems with kidnapping, certain areas are completely out of bounds to foreign visitors or require the services of a tour company.

For several years following the September 11 attacks, it was not possible to travel independently in Yemen, and all visitors were required to use the services of a tour company. This has now changed and much of the country is open to independent travellers using public transport, though a

travel permit is required. Permits are quick and easy to obtain in San'a and most other big towns (where you should inquire in the police station).

The following table outlines which areas of the country were, at the time of research, closed to all foreigners and which were open only to those travelling with a tour company.

Area	Open to Tour Groups	Open to Independent Travellers
Al-Jawf	no	no
Sa'da city & road to San'a	sometimes	no
Sa'da province	sometimes	no
Shaharah	yes	no
Hajja	yes	yes
Ma'rib town & main roads	yes	sometimes
Barraqish	sometimes	no
Sirwah	no	no
Lahij	yes	yes
Abyan	main roads only	main roads only
Shabwa	normally, but not all areas	main coastal road only
Ah-Mahra	yes	yes
Bab al-Mandab	no	no

Note that the situation changes very fast. For much of 2003 to 2006, all of Sa'da province was closed, but at the start of 2007 the city and main road to San'a were reopened to tour groups only. Also, for a period in 2006, everywhere in Shabwa province was closed to all tourists.

You should not attempt to visit closed areas. Most of Yemen is very safe, but there are a couple of regions where foreigners are not welcome at all, and to attempt to visit them would be very dangerous. Fortunately, the police turn back the occasional foolhardy visitor long before they can put themselves and other people into serious danger.

To travel anywhere else in Yemen you require a permit, which is free and can be obtained from the **Tourist Police** (Map p458; ☎ 01-250203/4; Al Jam'aa al Arabia St) in San'a. Although officially open 24 hours, you're best advised to come to the office between 8am to 6pm Saturday to Wednesday, when you're more likely to get somewhere! To

gain a permit from the tourist police, you'll need the following:

- passport and photocopy of passport (including personal and visa details)
- itinerary (showing where you're travelling to, and for how long)
- means of transport, eg air, bus, car hire (including the name of the car-hire company or travel agency)
- names of everyone in your group
- details of your return journey home (date of departure, flight etc).

Take wads of photocopies of the permit (around seven or eight per day of travel), as you'll have to dish them out at the checkpoints across the country.

If you significantly change your itinerary, you should inform the tourist police and/or the travel agency within 24 hours. Alternatively, obtain another permit from the nearest major police station. If it's just a minor change, you won't have any problems.

If your first point of arrival is not San'a, try to get a travel permit through the first major police station on your route. Alternatively, you can fly to San'a from wherever you arrive and get a permit in the usual way there.

Note that if you are only flying around Yemen (and not using overland transport), you do not need travel permits.

### Police Escorts

At the time of writing, it was compulsory to take a police escort from San'a to Ma'rib and on to Sayun, and from San'a to Sa'da and Shihara, as well as from Aden to Al-Mukalla. However, this may well be relaxed in the future – check in advance. The police normally ask YR2000 to YR3000 per car for this service, though prices seem to be fairly open to negotiation.

### WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Yemen's attitude towards and treatment of foreign (and local) women is considerably more relaxed than its northern neighbour, Saudi Arabia. Female tourists can drive rented or private vehicles, and do not have to wear head coverings. In some remote areas as well as northern and eastern provinces, head covering is advised, if only as a gesture of respect (some readers have reported stone-throwing, spitting and glares

from local women and children when not dressed 'appropriately'). Conservative dress is expected. Female toilets can be hard to find, but many restaurants have 'family rooms' with toilet facilities.

See also the general advice for women travellers, p543.

## TRANSPORT IN YEMEN

### GETTING THERE & AWAY Entering Yemen

Immigration is an uncomplicated procedure, but slow. If arriving by land, you'll be required to do all paperwork at the border crossing. Proceedings can take hours, particularly if you're with your own vehicle.

### Air

Most international traffic arrives and departs from San'a airport. A few airlines, particularly from Middle Eastern countries, also use Aden. Work is currently under way on a new airport for San'a, which is scheduled to be completed by 2009.

**Aden Airport** (☎ 02-233999)

**Al-Hudayda Airport** (☎ 03-213254)

**Ar-Rayyan Airport** (☎ 05-354920)

**San'a International Airport** (☎ 01-345812)

**Sayun Airport** (☎ 05-842321)

**Ta'izz Airport** (☎ 05-218191)

Yemen's national carrier, **Yemenia** (☎ 01-232380; www.yemenia.com.ye; Hadda St, San'a), flies to dozens of destinations across the Middle East, Europe (including London, Paris and Rome), Africa and Asia. Yemenia has a reasonable safety record (see www.airsafe.com for details), though flights sometimes experience delays or cancellations (particularly during Ramadan and the haj pilgrimage), so reconfirmation is essential.

### OTHER AIRLINES FLYING TO/FROM YEMEN

**EgyptAir** (MS; Map p458; ☎ 01-275061; www.egyptair.com.eg; Az-Zubayri St, San'a) Hub Cairo.

**Emirates** (EK; Map p458; ☎ 01-444442; www.emirates.com; Hadda St, San'a) Hub Dubai.

**Gulf Air** (GF; ☎ 01-440922; www.gulfairco.com; Hadda St, San'a) Hub Bahrain.

**Lufthansa** (LH; Map p458; ☎ 01-213400; www.lufthansa.com; Az-Zubayri St, San'a) Hub Frankfurt.

**Qatar Airways** (QR; Map p458; ☎ 01-506030; www.qatarairways.com; Hadda St, San'a) Hub Doha.

**Royal Jordanian Airlines** (RJ; Map p458; ☎ 01-446064; www.rja.com.jo; Hadda St, San'a) Hub Amman.

**Saudi Arabian Airlines** (SV; Map p458; ☎ 01-506574; www.saudiarabianairlines.com; Az-Zubayri St, San'a) Hub Jeddah.

**Syrian Air** (RB; Map p458; ☎ 01-506020; www.syriaair.com; Hadda St, San'a) Hub Damascus.

## Land

### BORDER CROSSINGS

Though the border with Saudi Arabia is open to anyone with a visa, it's presently not possible for foreigners to cross the border. This is because of major security problems north of Sa'da leading to the whole area being closed to foreign tourists.

There are two standard border crossings for Oman, both of which are open to foreigners and neither of which present any major problems. Transport from Sayun tends to use the inland crossing at Makinat Shihan, while the coastal route uses the Hawf crossing. Whichever route you choose, the roads are brand new and in excellent condition and visas are available for most on the border. See p511 for further information.

See also information on visas and travel permits (p517) and additional information on border crossings (p547).

## BUS

For Oman, buses travel direct from Sayun to Salalah or from Al-Ghayda direct to Salalah. Though it's possible to make the same journey in a series of shorter hops using shared taxis and buses, it will take much longer, cost more and, with very little to see en route, serve little purpose. Two buses a week leave Sayun (YR5000, 16 hours) and two a week leave from Al-Ghayda (YR4000, nine hours). For more information see p509 and p511.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The usual documentation is required for border crossings and must be valid for all countries you intend to visit. Crossing borders can be time-consuming (procedures can take between one and two hours). A 'road tax' of around US\$55 is usually charged when crossing the Yemeni-Oman border in your own vehicle. Petrol stations are plentiful around the borders, and spare parts can normally be found. Note that unleaded petrol is unavailable in Yemen. See also p556 for information on road rules.

## Sea

Although cargo boats sometimes connect Yemen (the ports of Aden, Al-Mukalla and Al-Hudayda principally) to ports on the Peninsula, as well as to Egypt, Eritrea and Sudan, there are currently no regular services or timetables, and finding a vessel willing to take a foreigner can prove very difficult.

One option is to try and persuade a *sambuq* owner to take you aboard, but again your fate will largely be decided by the will and whim of the captain. Note also that *sambuqs* do not have the best health and safety records! Speaking Arabic will considerably increase your chances. Be aware that voyages are generally hot, humid, uncomfortable and time-consuming. There are frequent *sambuqs* between Al-Makha and Djibouti, but many of these are involved in smuggling and recently a number of boats carrying Somali refugees have been attacked by the Yemeni navy, which has resulted in heavy loss of life. For the time being, this is not a safe way of arriving in or leaving Yemen.

## Tours

Currently the vast majority of visitors to Yemen travel with a tour agency, and with the constantly changing security situation and travel-permit regulations, this is probably the best way to go. However, few tour operators outside the country offer tours to Yemen. Fortunately, there are a number of good local companies based in San'a that can help organise your trip (as much or as little as you want), from reserving an international flight to organising car hire and renting out full camping equipment.

The standard rate among travel agencies in San'a is US\$60 per vehicle per day. This is for a large 4WD and also includes the driver's fee, his food and accommodation, petrol and 230km to 250km free mileage per day. The rate increases to US\$75 per day for longer trips (ie more than 250km or about six hours' driving) and to US\$100 per day for journeys along desert trails (eg Ma'rib to Wadi Hadramawt) that involve police escorts. Good discounts can usually be negotiated for longer trips.

Guides (costing from around US\$30 to US\$40 per day, including food and accommodation) speaking English, French, Ital-

## SIGN & SOUND LANGUAGE

Few tour company drivers speak languages other than Arabic. If you must have one that speaks a language you can understand, request one well in advance of your trip. If you don't get one, don't despair. Most Yemeni drivers are exceptionally obliging, hardworking and eager to please. And you'll be amazed at how far you can get with signs and sounds!

ian, Spanish, German and Russian can also usually be organised.

Following is a list of some reputable agencies based in San'a.

**Arabian Horizons Travel & Tourism** (Map p458; ☎ 01-506007; horizon-tours@y.net.ye; Hadda St) Branches in Aden, as well as in the USA and Canada.

**ATG** (formerly YATA; Map p458; ☎ 01-441260; www.atg-yemen.com; just off Hadda St) Offers all the standard tours and specialises in diving (see p512).

**FTI Yemen** (Map p458; ☎ 01-253216; www.ftiyemen.com; Al-Qiada St) A slick professional outfit that can arrange almost any kind of tour almost anywhere in Yemen – including surfing tours in the remote east.

**Marib Travel & Tourism** (Map p458; ☎ 01-426833/8; www.marib-tours.com; Hadda St). A friendly and well-regarded tour company that values customer service and really goes out of its way to try and help. It can organise standard tours throughout the country as well as specialist trips, including diving in Suqutra, mountain hiking and travel for senior citizens. Highly recommended.

**Radfan Agency Tours** (Map pp460-1; ☎ 01-272231; fax 01-272231; Talha St) Specialises in hiking off the beaten track, including with camels.

**Universal Travel & Tourism** (Universal Touring Company; Map p458; ☎ 01-272861; www.universalyemen.com; off Midan at-Tahrir) The largest and oldest travel agency in Yemen, it offers all the usual tours, but specialises in cultural tours. It focuses its efforts on larger groups and there have recently been some complaints from individuals and small groups about the services they have received. There's an office at the airport (open 6am to midnight).

## GETTING AROUND

For current travel restrictions outside the capital, see p517.

## Air

The only airline offering domestic flights is the national carrier, **Yemenia** (☎ 01-232380; www.yemenia.com; ✈ usually 8am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu). It boasts a pretty extensive network.

See the Yemen country map (Map pp450-1) for Yemenia destinations (marked with an airport symbol).

Note that it's considerably cheaper to buy Yemenia tickets in Yemen through a Yemenia office rather than through a travel agency. For the cheapest fares, book flights well in advance. Yemenia offices can be found in all of Yemen's main towns, and accept Yemeni riyals, US dollars, euros and usually Amex, MasterCard and Visa credit cards.

Yemenia flights are prone to both delays and cancellations. Always reconfirm flights.

## Bicycle

As long as cyclists are reasonably fit (for mountainous terrain), self-sufficient (with lots of spare parts) and able to carry plenty of water, there's no reason not to bring a bike. Punctures are quite common, however, and you'll need to ride extremely defensively. Yemeni drivers aren't used to cyclists, and tend to 'bully' smaller traffic anyway. Make sure that your bike is registered in your passport upon arrival to avoid problems with customs on exiting the country.

## Bus

Buses travel to almost all the larger towns (sometimes several a day), and services are pretty punctual and safe.

The longest-established bus company is **Yemitco** (Yemen International Transport Company; ☎ 01-275088; ☎ 5am-8pm, in the south 9am-1pm & 3-8pm Sat-Thu, 4-8pm Fri), which offers comfortable seats in air-conditioned buses. In the last couple of years it seems to be losing out to a multitude of newer companies and now generally only runs a reliable service in the most-populated central areas. The biggest of the rival companies is **General Land Transport** (☎ 01-281318), which also has smooth, comfortable buses that are often a little cheaper than Yemitco.

Yemitco has just one class, but some of the other private companies (such as General Land Transport) offer 1st- and 2nd-class on some services (though the difference in price is usually marginal). Yemitco services work out to be YR3 to YR3.50 per kilometre. Examples of fares include San'a to Aden (YR1400, six hours) and San'a to Al-Hudayda (YR1100, five hours).

You can usually buy tickets in advance, and on Friday and other public holidays this is highly recommended, particularly for longer journeys (when three days in advance is not too soon).

### Car & Motorcycle DRIVING LICENCE

An International Driving Permit is recommended, though not legally required. A driving licence from your country of origin is normally accepted by car-hire companies.

### FUEL & SPARE PARTS

Although fuel is fairly widely available (still consider carrying spare fuel in remote parts), spare parts and repair shops are not. Unleaded petrol is unavailable. For general advice and some tips on desert driving, see p554.

### HIRE

Most car-hire companies are based in San'a (see p466). Drivers must be over 21 (sometimes 25 years old), and have a valid driving licence from their own country. There's a US\$200 deposit payable on all cars as a guarantee. Nowhere in Yemen rents motorbikes.

There are real advantages to hiring a car with a driver. It's safer, cheaper, more comfortable and more convenient. Additionally, a driver acts as navigator, mechanic, interpreter and sometimes guide. See p520 for tour companies that provide car and driver hire.

### INSURANCE

Third-party insurance is mandatory and is usually included in car-hire prices – but always check. Rented vehicles cannot be taken out of the country.

### ROAD CONDITIONS

In the last five years Yemen's road network has gone from fairly mediocre to something that would leave many Western nations green with envy. This is largely thanks to a huge upsurge in foreign investment, especially from the US government, which sees roads as an essential element in extending the central government's writ to even the most faraway areas. Even the furthest desert trails are starting to get a tarmac coating, and as long as you stick to established routes, it's now quite rare to need to switch into four-wheel drive.

### ROAD HAZARDS

The main hazard when driving in Yemen is probably the Yemenis themselves, who demonstrate an almost admirable disregard for road rules, as well as for needless car 'accessories', such as mirrors and indicators. The lack of signposts (in any language) is another problem.

Other hazards include animals wandering onto the road and children playing on them. If you have to drive at night, be extra vigilant. Many vehicles have no lights.

### ROAD RULES

Driving in Yemen is on the right side of the road. Seat belts are strongly advised, but are not legally required.

### Local Transport

#### BUS

Minibuses (which run from 6am to around midnight) ply the streets of all the major towns. They're cheap (YR10 to YR30 for a hop), but unless you know exactly where they're heading, taxis are an easier, faster and certainly more comfortable option.

#### Taxi

In a shared taxi, short hops around town cost YR30 and for a cross-town contract taxi you'll need to negotiate, but Yemeni taxi drivers are generally more honest than most of the world's cabbies! A journey across San'a, for example, would rarely cost more than YR400.

#### SHARED TAXI

Connecting all the main towns and villages, and operating very much like buses, are the shared taxis (known as *bijou*). Although rarely more comfortable than buses, they tend to be faster, and leave at more convenient times and more frequently. However, they only leave when full, so you can be in for a long wait. When travelling to more remote places, try and catch the first departure.

Fares are fixed (and generally cost about the same as the buses), and payment is made before the journey. Passengers on long-distance trips are often required to write their names and nationalities on a passenger list (English is OK). Foreigners must show their travel permit at each checkpoint.

Some travellers (particularly women) prefer to pay for the two front seats; you'll be a lot more comfortable if you do.

### CONTRACT TAXI

Taxis can also be contracted between cities and towns. The word 'special' is commonly used by drivers to describe contracted taxis. To contract your own taxi, you'll need to

pay for all the seats (usually six or 10), so to calculate the fare, multiply the prices quoted for shared taxis in this book.

### MOTORCYCLE TAXI

If you want to beat the traffic in the larger towns, you can always hop on the back of a motorbike taxi (YR100 to YR250 depending on the length of the 'hop').

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