

Destination Oman, UAE & the Arabian Peninsula

For centuries Arabia has excited the interest and inspired the imagination of Western countries. As early as 1829, Victor Hugo, in the preface to *Les Orientales*, wrote that Europe was 'leaning towards the East'. Since that time, an astonishing 60,000 books have been written about Arabia in Britain alone.

Thanks to this literary relationship, say the word 'Arabia' (rather than 'Middle East') and a set of images is instantly conjured: Queen of Sheba holding court at Ma'rib in Yemen; camel caravans of frankincense from Dhofar in Oman; dhows laden with pearls from Dilmun; ruins of empire picked over by crows in Saudi Arabia's Madain Saleh. The caravans and the dhows may be plying different trades these days on more mechanised routes, but the colour of a modern camel market in Najran, and the click of amber prayer beads in Doha belong to the lexicon of *The Thousand and One Nights* that brought Scheherazade's exotic and vulnerable world to English-speaking countries. This text continues to inform the way we relate to the modern countries of the Arabian Peninsula today.

What binds the seven countries of Arabia into a single entity for Western on-lookers are the elements that are most 'other' (to borrow Edward Said's term) to Western concepts. There's the emphasis on race, grounded in Bedouin roots and expressed through tribal allegiance, family values and hospitality; Islam and the haunting call to prayer rising above the daily grind; a shared language – not just any language, but God's own words, spoken through the Quran. And then there's the desert, a physical and metaphorical reduction of life to essential principles.

'No man,' wrote Wilfred Thesiger of his travels with the Bedu in *Across the Empty Quarter*, 'can live this life and emerge unchanged...He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert.' It is above all in the desert that the sense of 'otherness' is at its most powerful, and its austere allure has attracted Western travellers to Arabia for more than 400 years. Marco Polo, Jean Lewis Burckhardt, Charles Doughty, Wilfred Thesiger and Paul Theroux all reflect on their country of origin through their experiences of *Arabia Deserta* (Desert Arabia).

Standing on the utterly flat Jiddat al-Harrasis, with no tree, hill or boulder in sight, it is easy to share the exhilaration of the 19th-century writer, AW Kinglake, at being 'the very centre of a round horizon'. This egoism raises the great challenge of Arabia: it is hard not to go in search of self in the blank canvas of the Rub al-Khali (Empty Quarter); not to look for Aladdin's lamp in the souqs of San'a and Muscat; not to peer behind covered balconies in Jeddah and search for Sinbads in Gulf fishing villages', nor to imagine the face behind the mask in remote mountain villages. It is hard not to go in search, in other words, of a Western construct. In so doing, however, one can easily miss the modern reality of Arabia.

When asked what they most like about their land of sand dunes, the Bedu near Al-Hashman in Oman reply: 'Coming to town'. Town! This is the Arabia of the 21st century, built on oil and banking – sophisticated

communities looking to the future with vision and creating empires out of sand – or rather on land reclaimed from the sea.

As a traveller to Arabia, it's easy to become aware of the responsibility towards the fragile structures of the desert, but there is a greater responsibility to see a region for what it is rather than how the media, literature or tradition portrays it. The Peninsula Arabs are proud of their heritage but they are not sentimental about infant mortality rates, lack of education and the desiccating summer months without air-conditioning. If they are not sentimental about the passing of the past, then neither perhaps should we be.

Getting Started

Tell your neighbour you're off to the Arabian Peninsula for a holiday and they'll probably think you have a death wish. Many people think of the Peninsula under the generic term 'Middle East' and immediately assume that it's virtually a no-go area. For the most part, however, this is not the case. Even in countries that continue to give the visitor cause for concern and where it's imperative to check with your embassy before travelling (namely, Saudi and Yemen), there is an overwhelming determination to increase tourism. Hand in hand with that determination is a greater commitment to the visitor's safety (see p532). Even in Kuwait, on the doorstep of Iraq, you would never know that this is a country bordering a war zone.

Pockets of political troubles aside, the Arabian Peninsula is actually one of the *safest* places you're likely to visit: crime rates are low, people run after you with shopping you've left on the shop counter, unlocked cars are still there when you get back, and people mostly want to give (a greeting, coffee, some dates) rather than take.

So how easy is it to visit? Most countries in the region now offer visas on arrival. Only entering Saudi Arabia remains challenging – particularly for single women (see p366). With some planning, however, it's possible to obtain a Saudi transit visa, giving you the ability to travel overland between most Peninsula countries.

The world-class hotels and restaurants of the Gulf States are no secret, but for those who remember films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* it may come as some surprise that the Peninsula is crisscrossed with an excellent set of roads. With widespread electricity, clean water provision and access to car hire, you can penetrate mountain villages and desert wilderness with a minimal lack of creature comforts.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT

The following items shouldn't be overlooked when packing for the Arabian Peninsula:

- **Appropriate clothing** (p51) People of the Peninsula are usually impeccably dressed and you may feel embarrassed without something smart; long sleeves, trousers (not jeans) and a head scarf (for women) are useful for visiting mosques or family homes. Pack some warm attire too: this may seem odd in a region with some of the hottest temperatures on earth but many places of interest in the region are above 2000m (including San'a, Abha and Jebel Akhdar) and at ground level the air-conditioning can be ferocious.
- **International Driving Permit** (p553) Some regional car-hire companies won't accept your home licence.
- **Mosquito net and repellent** Mosquitos are an irritating problem of low-lying areas in the region.
- **Personal items** While condoms and tampons are available in the big cities, they are hard to find elsewhere.
- **Travel insurance** (p553) With a high regional incidence of road traffic accidents, health insurance is strongly advised.
- **Vaccinations** (p560) Thankfully few are essential for the region.
- **Visas** (p541) Anyone carrying an Israeli passport or an Israeli stamp in their passport may be denied entry.

The challenge the Peninsula presents for the visitor is more in terms of cost. To make the best of the region, you ideally want to be staying in four-star hotels and hiring a 4WD. Facilities have been deliberately developed for the affluent tourist and there's almost no tradition of backpacker travel. Public transport seldom leads to sites of interest, there are no 'cheap-and-cheerful' hostels where budget travellers can meet each other and *foul madamas* (a bean dish with olive oil) is more likely for breakfast than banana pancakes.

Yemen is something of an exception: with a much less developed infrastructure, tourism (particularly of the outdoor-adventure kind) has for decades been targeted as a useful source of income. Even here, however, most tourists rely on hiring a vehicle or taking a tour.

So, does this mean you shouldn't go if you can't afford Northern European prices? If you can muster a group of four to share the cost of car hire, pack camping equipment and eat locally (kebabs and salad), it's possible to target areas of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, and Yemen especially, for prices similar to a touring holiday in the USA. In addition, package tours from Europe are making Dubai and Salalah more affordable.

If you're aiming to work in the Peninsula, it's usually better to find a job before you arrive; bear in mind too that it's illegal to work on a 'visit visa'. If you do find casual work (in Dubai or Muscat) you will most likely be recruited on local pay rates. This usually means no air tickets home, less salary and less leave. If you arrange a job in advance, your sponsor will take care of your visa, housing arrangements and furniture, and can advise on schooling if you're bringing the family. Setting up house, opening bank accounts and buying a car are easy in any of the cities throughout the region. It's worth picking up a copy of *The Complete Residents' Guide* to your country (published by Explorer). See also the Expats chapter (p91) for more information.

WHEN TO GO

The Peninsula is ideally visited between November and March. At this time, the temperature hovers between 25°C and 35°C, occasional rains bring a blush of flowers to the desert and the interior can be explored without the worry of heat stroke.

Winter may be optimum but it's not the only time to go. If you want to know the real meaning of desert, then the summer (which regularly reaches 50°C) is certainly an experience: this is when you can spot mirages, visible heat waves and melting roads; when you appreciate the importance of the afternoon siesta, and when you finally understand why water, not oil, is the lifeblood of the region. Without water (and without a hat) heat exhaustion is an everyday hazard.

There are two other advantages to travelling in summer: firstly, this is considered off-season in most parts of the Peninsula (except for Salalah in Oman) and hotel prices are considerably lower. Secondly, in Salalah and parts of Yemen, the summer brings light drizzle, cooler temperatures than the rest of the Peninsula and a magnificent green landscape. For more information on weather, see the Climate sections in the individual country chapters.

Travelling during the region's religious festivals can be an interesting experience. During Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, visitors are more restricted (eating or drinking during the day must be kept hidden, and restaurants are often closed for the month). There's the chance, however, to try night-time culinary treats in the Ramadan tents

One night in the top suite at the Burj al-Arab seven-star hotel in Dubai costs US\$7000.

See Climate Charts (p530) for more information.

When the temperature reaches 50°C, employers in the Peninsula are meant to send workers home. National weather centres, however, seem to be stuck on 49.9°C.

FAVOURITE FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Mention the word 'holiday' while at work in the Arabian Peninsula and your colleague will have left the building before you've got past the letter 'h'. The people of the Peninsula love their holidays and make the most of them, usually with some kind of traditional celebration such as camel racing, dancing or poetry recital. Most of these occasions are small, ad hoc affairs: a spontaneous gathering of *sheiba* (old men) in a fishing village, singing the ancestral songs of toil and harvest; or the convergence of young cousins on a mountainside to drum up good omens for a wedding. If you chance upon one of these events in your travels, it is sure to be a highlight, as no-one will let you stand on the sidelines. They provide a particularly exciting opportunity for women travellers to gain a window onto a world of henna-painted hands and feet, intimate discussions about married life and the jubilant wearing of magnificent gold.

For a more formal version of these kinds of local festivals, it's worth timing your visit around **Muscat Festival** (p204), held annually in January/February in Oman. The festival is a pageant of traditional craft making, moneymaking and merrymaking, with dancers from Sur (Oman), Egyptian caftan-sellers and clowns from Eastern Europe all sharing in a cultural exchange that has typified the region for centuries.

Then there is **Jenadriyah National Festival** (p314) outside Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in late February and early March, where the King's Cup (an epic camel race) takes place with all the fluffing-up of plumage, and smoothing of coats that one would expect of the accompanying falconry displays and horse-racing events.

In the summer months, Emiratis, Bahrainis, Kuwaitis and Qataris migrate south to Oman's Dhofar region to chew on camel kebabs under the rain in the **Khareef Festival** (p257), held annually in August in Salalah. In December each year, the Dubai International Film Festival takes place under the auspices of Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed al-Maktoum. Inaugurated in 2004, this not-for-profit event attracts prominent figures from the film industry from over 45 countries. Dubai is even being slated for use as a location in one or two high-flying future film projects.

And let's not forget the region's two great annual shopping festivals: the **Hala Shopping Festival** (p166) held in Kuwait City during the third week of February and the **Dubai Shopping Festival** (www.mysdf.com), usually held between December and February (see p442). While the bargains attract people from around the world, there is no greater gathering of regional people (other than during the haj, of course) on the Peninsula. Like the bazaars of ancient times, it matters little what is on sale or under what kind of roof: people come instead to ask '*Shay akhbar?*' (What's the news?), and on hearing there's no news, settle down for a week's tea and talk.

attached to hotels. Public transport can be erratic, driving habits deteriorate and business hours are reduced but, as if to compensate, the nights involve great socialising and public congregation. The two *eids* (Islamic feasts) tend to be family occasions but there's usually an opportunity to catch local dancing, singing and poetry recitals. See p534 for the dates of religious holidays, and When to Go sections in individual country chapters.

HOW MUCH?

Kebab snack	US\$0.70
Local newspaper	US\$0.55
Litre bottle of water	US\$0.40
Litre of petrol	US\$0.35
Packet of <i>khobz</i> (Arabic bread)	US\$0.25

COSTS & MONEY

It's hard to generalise about costs across the entire Arabian Peninsula as different countries are good value for different things. In Saudi, for example, domestic airfares are reasonably priced; in Oman, street food and quick eats haven't increased in price for ten years; in Yemen, accommodation is cheap; in the Gulf countries, electrical goods are markedly lower than in Western countries. The table (opposite) gives an idea of some typical prices in each of the region's countries. Minimum daily expenses are based on a cheap eat, budget hotel and public transport; maximum daily expenses reflect dinner, top-end accommodation and car hire.

ATMs are found in most major cities and even in many rural towns. Except in Yemen, credit cards are widely accepted. A combination of cash and credit cards is the best bet with a few travellers cheques tucked in the sock for an emergency! For more details, see p536.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

There are some wonderful publications about the Peninsula, covering every kind of subject including history, the Bedu and wildlife. Included here are some highlights. See also Books in the Directory of each country chapter.

- *The Arab World: Forty Years of Change*, by Elizabeth Fernea and Robert Warnock. A wide-ranging and readable overview of the recent history of the Middle East.
- *Arabia Through the Looking Glass*, by Jonathan Raban. One of the most readable of English travel writers, Raban's observations on expatriate life in the region are as valid today as they were when he visited the region during the oil boom of the 1970s.
- *Arabia Without Sultans*, by Fred Halliday. A detailed and incisive account of the development of the Arab Gulf countries in recent decades.
- *Arabian Sands*, by Wilfred Thesiger. One of the last great adventurers, Thesiger was as much anthropologist and ethnographer as traveller. In this classic book he records the nomadic life of the Bedu before the discovery of oil changed the region forever.
- *A History of the Arab Peoples*, by Albert Hourani. This comprehensive and insightful history, written with the author's characteristic sensitivity, is a must for anyone keen to understand the peoples of the Peninsula.
- *The Merchants*, by Michael Field. Possibly the best single overview of life, business and culture in the Gulf.
- *Orientalism*, by Edward Said. This seminal discourse on the nature of the relationship between Arab lands and the West examines the stereotypes behind the mythologised view of the region in Western literature and media.
- *The Prize*, by Daniel Yergin. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, this book is an epic history of oil.
- *Sandstorms*, by Peter Theroux. A memoir of the author's seven years stationed as a journalist on the Peninsula (chiefly at Riyadh), it's a witty and candid portrait of culture and politics in the Middle East.
- *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, by TE Lawrence. The account of the Arab campaign of 1915–18 is widely regarded as the most evocative description ever written about Arabia and the foundation of the modern states of the Peninsula.

DAILY EXPENSES (US DOLLARS)

Country	Cheap Eat	Dinner	Budget Hotel	Mid Hotel	Top Hotel	Car Hire	Min. Expenses	Max. Expenses
Bahrain	\$4	\$39	\$47	\$66	\$184	\$37	\$66	\$261
Kuwait	\$5	\$50	\$83	\$200	\$333	\$53	\$100	\$437
Oman	\$4	\$38	\$64	\$167	\$282	\$38	\$77	\$359
Qatar	\$5	\$27	\$110	\$192	\$330	\$44	\$69	\$401
Saudi Arabia	\$5	\$27	\$27	\$80	\$133	\$43	\$40	\$203
UAE	\$5	\$20	\$68	\$136	\$218	\$44	\$82	\$282
Yemen	\$2	\$5	\$14	\$24	\$0	\$60	\$16	\$90

- *Travels With a Tangerine*, by Tim Mackintosh-Smith. This readable set of extracts from the journals of Ibn Battuta, a 14th-century Arab Marco Polo, traces his journeys across the Arab world.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There are a wealth of good websites connected with the region. A good place to start is **Lonely Planet** (lonelyplanet.com), where succinct summaries on travelling to the Peninsula are combined with travel news and 'postcards' from other travellers. The Thorn Tree forum allows you to ask questions before you go or dispense advice when you get back.

Al-Bab (www.al-bab.com/arab/countries/egypt.htm) Meaning 'The Gate', this is indeed a gateway to the Arab world with links to dozens of news services, country profiles, travel sites and maps.

Al-Jazeera (www.al-jazeera.com) The controversial satellite service runs this very popular news-and-views-oriented website (see p294).

Arab Cafe (www.members3.boardhost.com/arabcafe/) A lively message and discussion board on Arab-world related issues (as well as adolescent Arab preoccupations).

Arabia.com (www.arabia.com) Self-styled as the 'Arab world's leading online destination', it has chat forums and covers a wide range of subjects including news, shopping, travel, women and entertainment.

Arabnet (www.arab.net) Useful Saudi-run online encyclopaedia of the Arab world. It collects news and articles, and links to further resources, organised by country.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Travelling sensitively often means following local custom (see p50), especially in choosing what to wear or how to interact socially. There are times, however, when following local custom is not such a good idea. Saving water, turning the air-conditioning off when leaving a room, avoiding buying items such as turtle shell and coral, and disposing of litter appropriately are not always a priority of locals, but they are commonsense measures that can help protect the environment.

We've all heard the saying 'take only pictures; leave only footprints', but it's not always that simple. In the Arabian Peninsula, people (women in particular) are very sensitive about being photographed and it's worth asking before clicking. Military sites are another touchy subject; quite what the visitor can reveal from a photo that Google Earth cannot is not a conversation you want to have with a policeman.

Footprints may seem harmless enough but if you can see them, chances are you've just cut a new trail across the desert – in all probability over seeds that were lying dormant, ready to germinate at the first hint of rain.

In addition to pictures and footprints, one could add 'Bag it and bin it'. But bear in mind that bagging live shells is banned across the Peninsula and avoid binning your rubbish in receptacles that are never emptied.

In summary, perhaps the best advice is 'take it or leave it as found'!

Parts of the classic film *Lawrence of Arabia*, based on the life of TE Lawrence, were filmed in the sand dunes of South Wales in the UK.

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

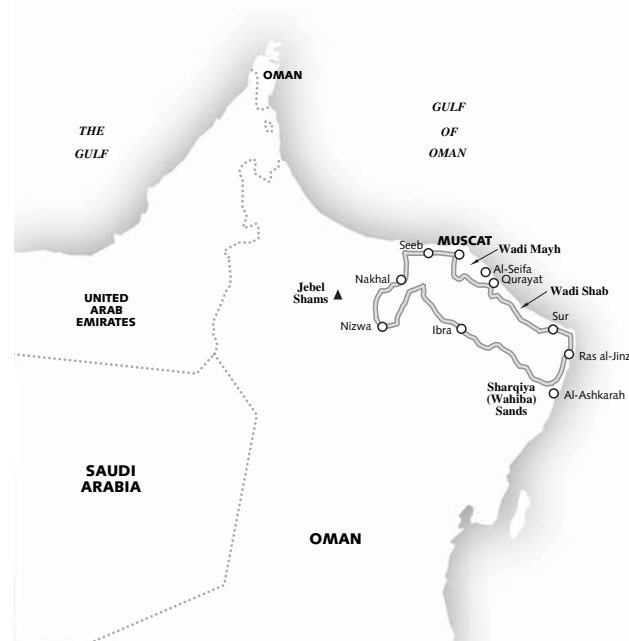
Itineraries

BEST OF THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

OMAN

Puzzle out **Old Muscat** (p197) for two days and get lost in Muttrah's gossipy, garrulous **souq** (p197). On day three, experiment with a trip on the wild side to **Al-Seifa** (p213), returning via **Wadi Mayh** (p212). If you felt at home in the wilderness, hire a 4WD and follow the gulls from **Qurayat** (p213) to **Sur** (p217) on day four, pausing to wade with the toads in **Wadi Shab** (p215). Spend day five inspecting Sur's boat-builders and potter round to **Ras al-Jinz** (p221) on day six. Rise at dawn on day seven to salute last-minute turtles. Swim with the sardines near **Al-Ashkara** (p222) and reach for the stars at a desert camp in **Sharqiya (Wahiba) Sands** (p225). Follow the resourceful Bedu into nearby **Ibra souq** (p226) on day eight and drive to **Nizwa** (p231), Oman's spiritual heartland. During days nine to 11, head for high places on **Jebel Shams** (p234), slide down under in **Al-Hoota Cave** (p233), and on day 12 go over the top on the **mountain road** (p233) to the formidable **Nakhla Fort** (p238). Celebrate the journey's end with a squid kebab in **Seeb** (p210).

Two Weeks



Unveil the very soul of the desert in this two-week, 1000km round trip to some of the Peninsula's loveliest sands, seas and souqs. This is the chance to see what Chelsea Tractors (4WDs) were made for.

YEMEN**Two Weeks**

Spend the first couple of days savouring the sublime townscape of **San'a** (p459) before heading out on a day trip to the improbable rock palace of **Wadi Dhahr** (p467). Hike through the terraces to nearby fortified mountain villages such as **Kawkaban** (p468). The following morning leave San'a and clamber breathlessly through the Haraz Mountains for a couple of days of trekking around the cheerful town of **Manakhah** (p470). Wind down the escarpment to the hot and dusty plains of the **Tihama** (p478). Pause at the steamy port of **Al-Hudayda** (p478) and search out a fish supper. Aim to arrive here on a Thursday afternoon and let the noisy, early morning crowds at the Friday market in **Beit al-Faqih** (p480) sweep you off your feet. Spend the rest of the day searching for shade in the narrow lanes of Unesco-listed **Zabid** (p480), the hottest town in the world. Pause for a day or so in the cosmopolitan university town of **Ta'izz** (p485), which gives a radically different view of Yemen, and then head back to San'a for a night.

The following morning take your sanity and better judgement by the hair and head for wild and crazy **Ma'rib** (p494) for a date with the Queen of Sheba. From Ma'rib take a deep breath and, plunging into the Empty Quarter, let your armed Bedouin escort lead you to the ruined city of **Shabwa** (p498) and the exciting desert trail to **Wadi Hadramawt** (p505). Spend the last couple of days recuperating among the magnificent mud palaces and tower blocks of Arabia's largest wadi before flying from **Sayun** (p507) back to San'a.

Meet the Queen of Sheba in the oral legends of Arabia's hot and heady heartland. Height is what this 2000km, two-week route around Yemen is all about: high buildings of mud, high mountain terraces, high tribal tensions, and the mythical qat-chewing high.

**SAUDI ARABIA****Three Weeks**

Challenge preconceptions of Arabia in the desert city of **Riyadh** (p311) with its 21st-century **Kingdom Tower** (p313) and dizzying **Sky Bridge** (p314). Wind the clock back a century by visiting **Masmak Fortress** (p313) and put the famous 1902 raid by Ibn Saud into a wider context at the **National Museum** (p313). After three days in Riyadh, take the long-distance bus to the **Al-Ula** (p333), with its distinctive wind-blown desert formations. Save Saudi's best-kept secret for the morning: chances are you'll have the Nabataean site of **Madain Saleh** (p336) to yourself. Catch evocations of TE Lawrence along the ruins of the Hejaz railway, then fly to liberal **Jeddah** (p322) at the start of week two. Bake on the **beach** (p325), or shop in the city's **souqs** (p324). Better still, meander through **old coral houses** (p324) in Jeddah's balconied merchant quarter and learn who lurked behind the shuttered windows at the **museums** (p325). End week two by exploring the pristine underwater world of the **Red Sea** (p332). Journey south via the misty mountain tops of **Abha** (p340), and relax the eye among neat crops, impossibly green after the burnt-earth tones of the desert fastness. Begin week three in **Najran** (p344), with its cantankerous camels, part-Yemeni locals and mud-brick fortresses framed by shady palms. Travel north towards **Al-Khamasin** (p351) and step into the uniquely remote Empty Quarter, with memories of Thesiger and the Bedu pacing through the shifting dunes. Look out for other desert inhabitants, including magnificent Arabian oryx, in the shimmering sands of **Uruq Bani Ma'arid Protected Area** (p349). Return to Riyadh, stopping briefly to visit the ruins of **Dir'aiyah** (p318), a lonely remnant of Al-Saud's rapid rise to power.



Feel the allure of the desert firsthand in this three-week, 3000km epic that dances along the backbone of Arabia and unwraps the secret side of Saudi. The distances are great but so are the footsteps you'll be following.

UAE

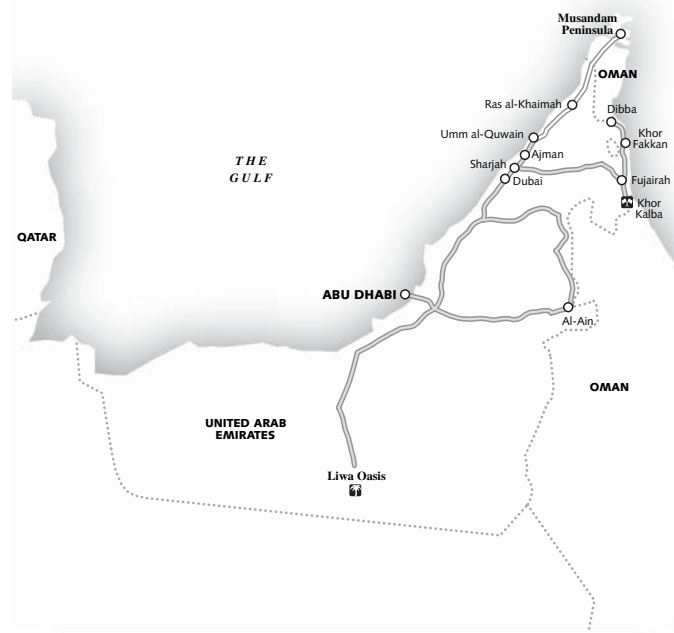
Two Weeks

Indulge in the 21st-century experience in the happening city of **Dubai** (p381), cruise the **Dubai Creek** (p387) and admire head-in-the-clouds **Burj al-Arab** (p389) from **Jumeirah Beach** (p390) for three days. When the shopping wears thin, transfer to the more sophisticated city of **Abu Dhabi** (p417), capital of the UAE. Save enough funds for a pastry in **Emirates Palace** (p422) – the hotel where chandeliers and light bulbs outnumber people. On day five, escape on an overnight trip to enjoy lights of a different kind under the starry skies of the **Liwa Oasis** (p428), exploring the apricot-coloured dunes in the morning.

Having acquired a taste for the desert, try another overnight trip to **Al-Ain** (p429) on the Omani border, and wander through souqs of grumbling camels and date plantations for a sense of life in the slow lane. On day nine, give your desert experiences some context in the excellent **Heritage Area** (p405) and **Arts Area** (p407) in Sharjah. Move up the coast to **Ajman** (p410) on day 10 to relax at the **Ajman Kempinski Hotel & Resort** (p410). If you can tear yourself away from the *sheesha* (water pipe used to smoke tobacco) on the corniche, wander up the coast to **Umm al-Quwain** (p412) and explore the old town.

You then have the option of spending the last few days heading north to Oman's **Musandam Peninsula** (p242), pausing to visit the well-curated **National Museum of Ras al-Khaimah** (p414) or travelling across the country to the beautiful east coast. Make the bull-butting town of **Fujairah** (p433) your base and explore the fishing village of **Dibba** (p439), dive or snorkel off **Snoopy Island** (p437), or laze on the lawns of **Khor Fakkan** (p436).

Discover the Bedouin head behind the modern façade in this 1500km, two-week circuit through the Emirates. This is one country where you can enjoy the sublime to the ridiculous (top dollar chic and shared loo camp sites – or vice versa) within 24 hours.



VENTURE FURTHER

THE TOWER TOUR: DUBAI TO SAN'A

Start this journey in Dubai under **Burj al-Arab** (p389), symbol of the Gulf's modernity. After a couple of days exploring the city's new multi-floored architecture, go in search of its inspiration in the wind-tower constructions of Sharjah's **Heritage Area** (p405). See how the theme is redefined in the **Ajman Kempinski Hotel & Resort** (p410). Cross to the east coast and search for sand towers: ghost-crabs build these around the bays of any eastern Peninsula beach. Enter Oman via **Khatmat Malahah** (p242) and overnight in **Sohar** (p240), home to Oman's white-towered fort. Cut inland on a circuit through the Hajar Mountains via **Rustaq** (p238) and **Nakhal** (p238), two former capitals famous for their forts and watchtowers, before spending two days in **Muscat** (p192). Travel the coast road to **Sur** (p217) and see how the lighthouses of **Ayjah** (p219) guide dhows to safe haven. Complete your second week at the turtle sanctuary in **Ras al-Jinz** (p221). Head for culture-capital **Nizwa** (p231) via a stop over in **Sharqiya (Wahiba) Sands** (p225) and spend four days in the mountains of Jebel Shams. See Yemeni tower houses in the old village of **Al-Hamra** (p234). Hop on the bus to Salalah, and pass the **Sarfait border** (p254) to see more tower houses, particularly in **Wadi Hadramawt** (p505). Finish week three at **Shibam** (p505), which British explorer Freya Stark called the 'Manhattan of the Desert'. Spend four days in the skyscraper villages of mud in the **Haraz Mountains** (p467), leaving time to see the whitewashed window frames in the towers of **Old San'a** (p459).

Four Weeks



Travel back in time on this ambitious 4000km, four-week route along the eastern rim of the Arabian Peninsula. Towers are the theme of this three-country trip: from UAE's glass-and-steel tower blocks, to Oman's crenulated watchtowers and Yemen's historical tower houses.

PAN-PENINSULA: SIX COUNTRIES IN SIX WEEKS 1½ Months

Fly into **San'a** (p456) and get acquainted with the sensory vocab of Arabia: haggling souqs, haunting call to prayer, wafts of *sheesha* and chaotic driving. Learn more about the lexicon of Arabia at Queen of Sheba's **Ma'rib** (p494) and chase other legends through **Wadi Hadramawt** (p505) along ancient frankincense routes. In week two, cross the **Sarfaït border** (p254) into Oman to find your own **Boswellia sacra** (frankincense tree; p34) in the hills of **Dhofar** (p247) and visit **Khor Rouri** (p252) where the aromatic resin was exchanged for spices from India. Cross the desolate desert to **Muscat** (p192), noticing how a modern exchange between Arabia and Asia involves money and expatriate workers. In the towns of the **Al-Batinah Region** (p237), where many Omanis speak Baluchi and Farsi, see how ethnic integration is no new phenomenon. Cross into the UAE at the **Wajaja border** (p242) in week three, and discover how overseas trading powers the modern cities of the Gulf. Visit **Palm Island** (p378) and downtown **Abu Dhabi** (p417) and walk on water – or at least on reclaimed land. In week five, fly to **Doha** (p272) and see more land reclamation in the **Al-Corniche** (p275) and **Pearl Qatar** (p268). See how pearls gave the Gulf its former livelihood by flying to Bahrain in week six, visiting the **Museum of Pearl Diving** (p122) and buying loose pearls from **Gold City** (p129). Land is responsible for Arabia's modern wealth: see where it all started in **Bahrain's Oil Museum** (p134) before flying to Kuwait City and counting the cost of black gold at the **Kuwait House of National Memorial Museum** (p163). Trace similarities between the countries you've just visited in the stunning ethnographic collection of **Tareq Rajab Museum** (p163).

Trace the social history of the Peninsula from Yemen to Kuwait on an epic 5000km, six-week journey, focusing on the region's high-lights. If you're lucky enough to get a Saudi visa, continue overland from Kuwait to Riyadh for a 'seven countries in seven weeks' experience.



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE FAMOUS

IBN BATTUTA

Follow me – though in imagination only! I'm the legendary ghost of the Arab world's most famous traveller. I was born in Morocco in 1304 and at the age of 20, set out for Mecca. What started as a pilgrimage grew into a journey that lasted three decades and 120,000km, and took me from North Africa to China. But it was Arabia, and the land of the holy cities that drew me back. To this day, my shadow keeps crossing the flame of desert campfires and in the true oral tradition of my fellow Arabs, my travels lengthen the more each generation embellishes them for me.

I began my Arabian adventures in **Al-Ula** (p333), where Syrian Christians must end their journey and only Muslims may continue on the path of Abraham to Medina. From here I travelled on in pilgrim clothes to Mecca (p70). It was a pious journey filled with prayer in which I was conscious that the 'burdens of sin are effaced' by the merit of pilgrimage.

It was some years before I returned to Arabia – I arrived in **Jeddah** (p322) in a year of little rain. I took a *jalbah* (boat) from here. It was my first time at sea and I was fearful of the troublesome camels and of the high waves that threw us off course. We landed on the **Tihama** (p478) and drank water from ostrich shells. The merchants of Al-Yemen were open-handed and generous, and assisting of pilgrims. We rode to the great city of **Zabid** (p480) amid luxuriant gardens and where the women were of exceeding beauty. They travelled in camel litters and had an exceeding 'predilection for strangers' whom they agreed readily to marry. I left, without a wife, for **Ta'izz** (p485) and **San'a** (p456), a 'large and well-constructed city of bricks and plaster'. Then I set sail for East Africa from the port of **Aden** (p489), returning many moons later to **Al-Baleed** (p247) where people ate bananas and coconuts and fattened their livestock on plentiful sardines. In **Hasik** (p253) Arabs gathered gum from incense trees and lived in houses built with fish bones and roofed with camel hides.

From here I sailed in violent winds past **Masirah** (p228) – where people ate nothing but fish and cormorants, killed in an improper way – and landed at **Sur** (p217). I hired an Indian guide to take me to the great city of **Qalhat** (p217), which we reached in a state of great exhaustion – partly from trying to hinder the guide from making off with my garments, and partly through thirst, 'this being the season of heat'. I visited the **Tomb of Bibi Miryam** (p217) and then, after six days of traversing the desert, reached **Nizwa** (p231). At the foot of the mountain 'with fine bazaars', it had 'corrupt women' for whom the men showed no jealousy nor disapproval. I travelled next to Hormuz in Persia but stepped once again into Arabia, landing in **Bahrain** (p109) to watch **pearl divers** (p122) and shelter from the ravages of the sun in orchards of pomegranates and citrons. From Al-Bahrain I returned to Mecca and was honoured by God to perform the pilgrimage again.



WILLIAM GIFFORD PALGRAVE

I am no ghost – as an Englishman and Arabic scholar of the mid-19th century, I don't believe in them. I'm no scientist either: unlike many of my topographically minded contemporaries, I prefer to study 'the men of the land, rather than the land of the men'. I don't have the colourful genius of my compatriot, Richard Burton, under whose popular shadow my own figure has faded, but I am sincere in my desire to reveal the Arab temperament. Follow me through my *Personal Narrative of a Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia*, if you care – and if you dare.

I had the courage to pass through Wahhabi territory in disguise and stay in Riyadh for six weeks where Burton eight years earlier was too scared to enter. I'm not scared of anything, not even criticism – minor exaggerations improved the story of my travels as well they might improve yours.

I trained as a Jesuit and when Napoleon III sponsored my mission to Arabia, Pope Pius IX summoned me to Rome to test my missionary zeal. Dressed as a middle-class merchant from Syria, with my assistant (a Greek I asked to be ordained for the purpose of accompanying me) and speaking Arabic passably well, I arrived in the heart of Arabia. My first great test was crossing the Nafud, 'an immense ocean of loose reddish sand'. In the midsummer heat, it was not unlike a scene from Dante's *Inferno*.

We reached **Jubba** (p321) thirsty and exhausted,

our leather bottles empty on the camel's flanks. In **Hail** (p320), enclosed by high mud walls, the people showed us Bedouin courtesy – and so we stayed. I ministered to the sick and watched the market erupt into life like the dawn chorus, and noted the humanity of Islamic daily life. When we came to leave, 'we carried with us the goodwill of all the court'.

It took us time to find guides willing to escort us to **Riyadh** (p311). The Najd is genuine Wahhabi country and 'to the rest of Arabia a sort of lion's den, on which few venture and fewer return'. Faisal's great city was surrounded by a sea of palm trees and echoed with the 'singing droning sound of waterwheels'. Fearful of spies and infidels, the old king fled on news of our arrival. After a month, Faisal's son Abdullah discovered we were Christian and threatened to have us killed. We negotiated a safe departure and left for the prosperous city of Hufuf, in the heart of a great oasis.

We took a ship to **Bahrain** (p109) and in January 1863, I bid farewell to my companion and sailed again for **Qatar** (p264). From here I tried several times to make the voyage to Oman and succeeded at length in reaching **Sohar** (p240). I was shipwrecked soon after and in **Muscat** (p192) suffered great weariness and depression which I blamed on my year and 10-month's journey. I was in fact suffering from typhoid. In March 1864 I returned to Europe and retreated to a monastery in Germany; a year later I renounced my Roman Catholic faith but remained an Englishman, spending my remaining days as a diplomat.



On the Road



JENNY WALKER Coordinating Author

Here in Oman, 'lovely weather' refers exclusively to rare days of rain. On such occasions, people leave work early to rejoice in the sudden appearance of water. And that's what I'm doing here – catching the precious moment of flood in gorgeous Wadi Bani Awf. I'm looking pensive because I wasn't the only one enjoying the unexpected deluge: a viper slithered out of the rocks, flicking his tongue at the end of my shadow. I was just wondering whether he could swim when my husband, Sam, took the photo. The viper swam – and so did I!



STUART BUTLER This photo was taken in Suqutra during my first surf trip to Yemen. That morning we'd been chased out of the water by an eight-foot hammerhead shark and this photo was taken in the afternoon as I tried to pluck up the courage to go back in. The kids wanted me to take fishing nets in and try and catch one of the numerous sharks. The kids in Suqutra are nuts!



LARA DUNSTON I'd lived in the UAE for years, seeing Emirati women gracefully gliding about in their elegant *abeyyas* and *shaylahs*, but the first time I wore local dress was on this research trip to Jumeirah Mosque. Unfortunately it wasn't as flattering on me as it is on the gorgeous local girls I know, but I enjoyed wearing it. Just as my Emirati friends always told me, it's wonderfully freeing rather than inhibiting.



TERRY CARTER Ajman is a tiny laid-back emirate with a lovely resort. We were on the white-sand beach at sunset waiting for the classic photo op of a camel framed by a brilliant sunset. A couple of hours later we were watching a Chinese waitress carve up a Peking duck at our dinner table before heading out for *sheesha* with the locals. Welcome to the UAE.



FRANCES LINZEE GORDON I've always been fascinated by the ancient art of falconry. Coming to Saudi Arabia was the chance I've always craved to see it practised. Since time immemorial, the Bedu have used falcons to seek out the scant resources of the desert. To my delight, an interview with a royal official resulted in an invitation to see his own birds. I shall never forget that day in the desert with them.

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