History

If there is one name in Arab history that most Western people will recognise, it's surely that of TE Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia – the same Lawrence, in fact, who wrote to his sceptical biographer that 'History isn't made up of the truth anyhow, so why worry'. This is an interesting question when it comes to the history of the Arabian Peninsula as there appears to be no definitive version of events. The story assumes a different shape – particularly since the beginning of the 20th century – according to whose account you read.

Lawrence's own account of Arabian history, so eloquently described in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom,* is a case in point. You might imagine, from what he writes, that Lawrence and Allenby single-handedly brought the modern Arabian Peninsula into being during the Arab Revolt from 1915 to 1918: 'on my plan, by my effort', he states triumphantly on the taking of Akaba.

But where are the Arabs in Lawrence's account? What did they make of the pale-skinned, blue-eyed eccentric? The central drama of one of the most famous pieces of 'historical literature' of the 20th century imposes an essentially Western complexion upon the Arabs' greatest moment of unification. Read Suleiman Mousa's account of the same campaign in *TE Lawrence: An Arab View* and you barely recognise the same moment in history: Lawrence's advice is ignored; while he is busy taking credit for little skirmishes, larger battles led by the Arabs are only briefly mentioned; Lawrence arrives triumphant in cities where the Arab leaders, Feisal and Auda have been waiting for days. Far from the great, white hunter, he is remembered in many Arab accounts as a sickly individual with boils who, like a spoof in a Western, shot his own camel by mistake. But then such is history from an *Arab* perspective.

The American journalist Lydell Hart made 'El-Lawrence' into a media superhero. *Sunday Times* of June 1968 hailed Lawrence as a 'Prince of Mecca, riding across Arabia'. Hollywood did the rest with a theme tune that more people can hum than can name the capital of Saudi.

We'll never know whether Lawrence was hero or sideshow. What the example illustrates, however, is the caution with which you need to approach the history of the Peninsula. In the early 21st century, this must surely sound familiar to anyone following current events in the region in local as well as Western newspapers. It's tempting to agree with Lawrence that history can at times be more about fiction than fact.

Given that the Peninsula is a compact region shared by countries of small population, you'd think it would have a common history. It doesn't – or only in the most general terms. What follows is therefore only a broad summary where sometimes a passing reference is made to an important historical event. See the History section of each country for the details.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

Stand in the middle of Wadi Fanja on the outskirts of Muscat and you may just uncover more than the toads and grasshoppers of today's arid vista. This was where archaeologists discovered a herbivorous dinosaur, not unlike Zalmoxes or Rhabdodon dinosaurs from France and Romania. What is interesting about this discovery is that it shows that the climate of eastern Arabia, some 66 million years ago, was far more verdant than it is today, with savannah-like grasslands and abundant rainfall. Crocodiles also inhabited places like Wadi Fanja, suggesting that permanent rivers helped to cut the deeply incised mountain rages of today's Peninsula.

BOSWELLIA SACRA (THE FRANKINCENSE TREE) & THE INCENSE ROUTE

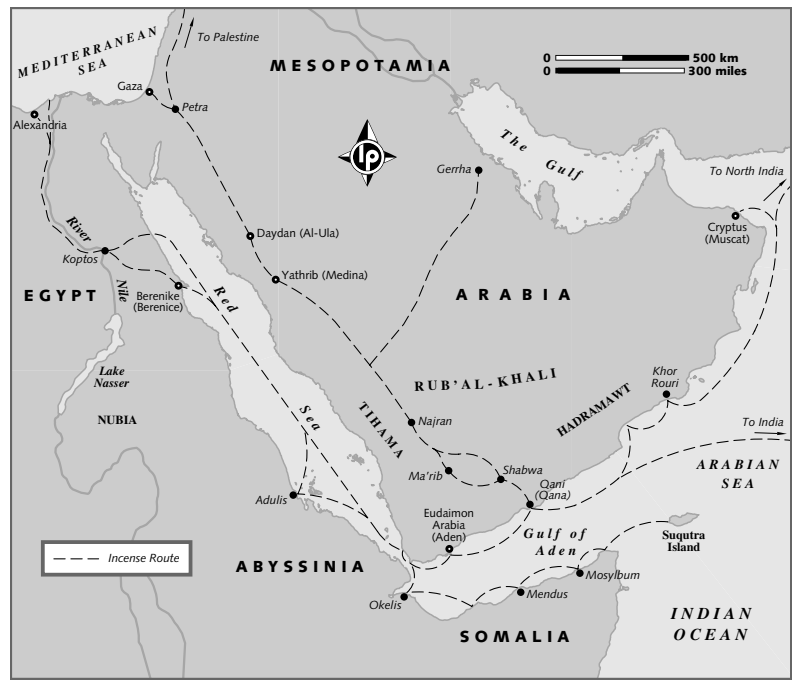
Drive along the road from Salalah to the Yemeni border, and you may be forgiven for missing one of the most important aspects of the Arabian Peninsula's history. Sprouting from the limestone rock as if mindless of the lack of nutrition, leafless and (for much of the year) pretty much lifeless, *Boswellia sacra* must be one of the least spectacular 'monuments' on a traveller's itinerary. With its peeling bark and stumped branches, the frankincense tree looks more like something out of *The Day of the Triffids*. Yet, hard though it is to imagine, its sacred sap sustained entire empires across the Peninsula; found its way into the inner sanctum of temples in Egypt, Jerusalem and Rome; is recorded in the Bible and the Quran and is used to this day in many of the world's most sacred ceremonies. According to Pliny, writing in the 1st century AD, it was thanks to the frankincense trade that the people of southern Arabia became the richest people on earth.

But what exactly is frankincense? It is formed from small beads of white- or amber-coloured sap that ooze from incisions made in the bark, which are then left to harden in the sun. It has a natural oil content, allowing it to burn well, and the vapour is released by dropping a bead of the sap onto hot embers. The pungent aroma is wafted at the entrance of a house to ward away evil spirits or to perfume garments. The sap has medicinal qualities and was used in just about every prescription dispensed by the Greeks and the Romans. It is still used in parts of the Peninsula to treat a wide range of illnesses, including coughs and psychotic disorders, believed to be the result of witchcraft.

Although the tree also grows in Wadi Hadramawt in neighbouring Yemen as well as in northern Somalia, the specimens of Dhofar in southern Oman have been famed since ancient times for producing the finest-quality sap. The tree favours the unique weather system of this corner of Dhofar, just beyond the moisture-laden winds of the *khareef* (summer season) but near enough to enjoy their cooling influence. As such it is notoriously difficult to root elsewhere.

Tradition dictates that the tree is a gift from Allah, and is thus not to be propagated, bought or sold, only harvested if it happens to be within your plot of land. Needless to say, that didn't stop people from trying. In an attempt to protect their precious resources, the Jibbali, descendants of the ancient people of Ad, honed the art of misinformation. Flying red serpents and toxic mists were just some of the mythical tribulations rumoured to protect groves from evil eye and thieving hand.

At the height of the trade in the 2nd century AD, no less than 3000 tonnes of frankincense were transported each year (mostly by sea) from south Arabia to Greece and Rome. The trade was centred on Sumhuram, which the Greeks called Moscha and which is now known as Khor Rouri. Today the ruins of this once great port are a short drive from Salalah, the capital of Dhofar and the second-largest city in modern Oman. Looking out to sea on a wet and windy day in July, when the grazing camels and flamingos shelter in the upper reaches of the lagoon and leave the violent shore to the ghost crabs, it's little wonder that easier ports would be found for readier cargo, and Khor Rouri left to slip back to nature.



Homo erectus was attracted to the rich hunting and gathering grounds of southern Arabia more than a million years ago, though quite where they came from no-one knows for sure. *Homo sapiens* arrived on the scene 100,000 years ago and began more organised settlement. Visitors to museums across the region, particularly the National Museum in Bahrain (see p122) and the newly opened Bait al-Barandar in Muscat (see p196) will see plenty of evidence of their distant descendants, dating from 10,000 BC, including charcoal burners and spear heads. Excavations at Thumamah, in central Saudi Arabia, have uncovered similar Neolithic finds, suggesting that early human settlement wasn't confined to the seaboard rim of the Peninsula.

It's hard to get too excited about any of the loose groups of stone-age or bronze-age individuals that followed, but it must have been a busy 7000 years because by 3000 BC an intricate set of trade routes had been established between Arabia and Mesopotamia (Iraq) and the Indus Valley. Copper was the main cargo, it was mined in Majan (the ancient name of Oman) and traded through the growing empire of Dilmun.

Arabia & the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam, by Robert G Hoyland, is one of the few histories of the Peninsula to describe the pre-Islamic period in detail.

Dilmun was the first great civilisation in the Peninsula, founded on the sweet waters of ancient springs off the coast of Bahrain and extending from Failaka Island (off the coast of present-day Kuwait) towards the copper-bearing hills of Oman.

It's easy to simplify the lives of the ancients but these early seafaring traders were no barbarians: they enjoyed complex legends, ate too many dates and suffered bad teeth; took the time to thread beads of carnelian to hang round their beloveds' necks; and expressed their interest in life through their administrations of death – much like their contemporaries in Egypt.

The Dilmun people were not the only ones to be fastidious about death. During a similar period of history in Oman (3000–2000 BC), the defiant tombs at Bat and Gaylah, dramatic in the waning sun, were erected along mountain ridges by the Hafit and the Umm an Nar cultures – people who belonged to the low-lying territories of the modern UAE (United Arab Emirates).

Death was on the mind of the Sabaeans of southern Arabia too, but in a more practical sense. The mighty Ma'rib dam (Yemen; see p449), upon which the livelihoods of 50,000 people depended, burst its banks in AD 570,

Travel to the museums of Pakistan and the Mediterranean and you'll be sure to find the small round seals that were the hallmark of Dilmun traders – their personal signatures – and evidence of the extent of their trading influence.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF A HOLY MAN

Accounts describe Mohammed as enjoying good health; being fond of milk, honey, plaiting his hair in two or four braids (like some inhabitants of the Asir today) and cleaning his teeth with a stick from the toothbrush tree – such as can still be bought in bundles from souqs across the region. Touchingly, he said that dearest to him were 'prayer, perfumes, and women', all in this world that is 'reminiscent of paradise'.

scattering the people of Adz in one of the most significant migrations in the Peninsula's history. Some settled in the north and helped drive out Persian invaders. Others settled in Oman's Dhofar region and no doubt helped in developing the frankincense trade.

Exuding from the ugliest and most famous tree of the Peninsula, frankincense was the chief export and economic mainstay of the region, carried by caravan across the great deserts of Arabia.

For the next 5000 years this aromatic resin, which to this day pervades homes across the region, made southern Arabia one of the richest regions of the ancient world. The gathering of the aromatic gum was not so glamorous, however. The collectors were often slaves or those banished to the area as punishment. They fell sick from deadly infections indigenous to the area and life beyond the monsoon catchment was a wickedly harsh affair.

Bahrain Island is a 'vast sea of sepulchral mounds', announced Theodore Bent, a traveller in the 19th century: 170,000 burial mounds cover 5% of the island's land mass, forming the largest ancient necropolis in the world.

Though the frankincense trade declined after the 3rd century AD, it kept south Arabia relatively wealthy well into the 6th century.

Arabia's wealth inevitably attracted attention, not least that of Alexander the Great who was on the point of mounting an expedition to the region when he died in 323 BC. One of his admirals, Nearchus, established a colony on Failaka Island, which later became an important commeracial centre maintaining trade links for several centuries with India, Rome and Persia.

During the 950 years between Alexander's death and the coming of Islam, much of the Gulf came under the influence of Persian dynasties: the Seleucids, the Parthians and, from the 3rd century AD, the Sassanians. The Peninsula was only of marginal political and economic importance to these empires, however. Central and western Arabia, meanwhile, developed into a patchwork of independent city-states, sustained either by the frankincense trade or by farming. Around 25 BC, a Roman legion marched down the western coast of the Peninsula in an attempt to conquer the frankincense-producing regions, but it met with little success.

Charismatic cities, such as the golden-pillared city of Ubar, were founded on the frankincense trade. Ubar (called by TE Lawrence, 'the Atlantis of the Sands') was only recently resurrected from the sands by using satellite imaging to locate it.

Between about 100 BC and AD 100 the Nabataean Empire controlled most of northwestern Arabia and grew extremely rich by taxing the caravans travelling between southern Arabia and Damascus. The remains of the Nabataean civilisation can be seen today at Madain Saleh (see p333) in Saudi Arabia, where the Nabataeans carved spectacular tombs into the desert cliffs, similar to those of their capital Petra (Jordan).

THE RISE OF ISLAM

Given that today four of every five people and three of every four countries are Muslim, there can be no greater moment of historical importance on the Arabian Peninsula than the birth of the Prophet Mohammed in the year AD 570 – the same year, incidentally, that the great dam at Ma'rib collapsed, signalling an end to the old order.

As one of the world's most influential spiritual leaders, it's easy to focus on Mohammed's teachings and forget his historical context, but in many ways the limited descriptions of his childhood give a good indication

of life in the desert at that time. As his father died before he was born, Mohammed became the poor ward of his grandfather. Although his family were settled Arabs, he was given to a Bedouin foster mother, as was the custom at the time, to be raised in the desert. Perhaps it was this experience that gave him a sense of moderation and the preciousness of resources. In the desert, too, there were no intermediaries, no priests and no prescribed places of worship – nothing separating people from the things they believed in. Mohammed went on caravans and became a trusted trader before returning to Mecca, which at that time was a large and prosperous city that profited from being the centre of pilgrimage. It was the home of the Kaaba (see p76), a sanctuary founded by Abraham but occupied by the images and idols of many other tribes and nations.

Frankincense permeates the great oral histories of the region. The Queen of Sheba is fabled to have laid it at the feet of King Solomon, and then there were a certain three wise men who took some of the precious resin to Jerusalem.

Mohammed received his first revelation in 610 and began to lay the foundations of a new, monotheistic religion that condemned the worship of idols. As such, with an eye to the annual pilgrimage income, it is not surprising that the Meccans took fright. Mohammed and a small band of followers were forced to flee Mecca for Medina in 622, a date that marks the beginning of the first Islamic state.

From 622 to 632, the new religion spread across the Peninsula and within a century Muslim armies commanded an enormous empire that stretched from Spain to India. As the Islamic empire grew, however, Arabia became increasingly marginalised. Within 30 years of the Prophet's death (in 632) the Muslim capital was moved to Damascus. By the early 9th century, Mecca and Medina were stripped of their earlier political importance but grew in importance as spiritual centres.

Frankincense & Myrrh: A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade, by Nigel Groom, is a lively account of how these exotic fragrances made Arabia rich, examining the region's connections with other great empires of the time.

As far as the rest of the world was concerned, the Peninsula was at this time something of a backwater. The European Crusades were focused more on the Levant and the Holy Land, and the old trade routes across Arabia more or less collapsed. From the 9th to the 11th centuries most of the Peninsula declined in wealth and importance. It remained an area of petty sheikhdoms bickering over limited resources, under the control of Tartar moguls, Persians and Ottoman Turks until the 14th century.

THE EUROPEANS ARRIVE

There is something satisfying about standing under the Tomb of Bibi Miriam in Qalhat (p217) in Oman and knowing that two of the world's great medieval travellers, Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, stood there too.

IBN BATTUTA – THE ARAB MARCO POLO

Ask anyone in the Arabian Peninsula to name a great traveller in history, and they'll be sure to mention Ibn Battuta, the 14th-century Muslim pilgrim born in 1304 in Tangier, Morocco.

Although it was the aspiration of all Muslims to attempt the pilgrimage to Mecca, most regarded it as the journey of a lifetime. Not so for Ibn Battuta: he set off on his travels at the age of 21 intending to perform the haj and study with the best scholars. But he reached Islam's holy cities having enjoyed the adventure so much that he simply kept on going. He quickly discovered that with a combination of his own wit and charm (as well as a certain amount of toadying), he could win the patrimony of rich merchants along the caravan routes. This, along with an Islamic education that gained him access to lodgings at the *madrassas* (Muslim theological seminaries), allowed him to prolong his time on the road. He could be called the world's first budget traveller!

During his lifetime, his insatiable curiosity regarding the customs and manners of those from 'foreign countries' led him to spend no less than 24 years travelling across Asia, including parts of modern-day Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Oman, clocking up an impressive 120,000km. As such, he far out-travelled his contemporary, Marco Polo.

Their travels prefigured a revival in Western trading interests in Arabia and it wasn't long before the pilgrim caravans of Mecca were once again transporting spices and drugs from the Orient to Europe via the ports of Istanbul and Venice.

Meanwhile, a great Omani seafarer, Ahmed bin Majid, helped Vasco da Gama navigate the Cape of Good Hope in 1498 and, in good faith, told him of his own wondrous country on the Straits of Hormuz. The Portuguese quickly understood the strategic significance of their 'discovery' and by 1507 Portugal had annexed the Yemeni island of Suqutra, occupied Oman and colonised Bahrain. Travel along the coast of the Gulf today and Portuguese forts appear with regularity: cut inland, and there's no trace of them. The Portuguese were only interested in protecting their trade routes and made no impact on the interior of these countries at all – a suitable metaphor for the negligible cultural exchange that took place. When they were eventually ousted by the mid-17th century, they left not much more than a legacy of military architecture – and the Maria Theresa dollar.

According to Pliny, only 3000 families had the inherited right of harvesting frankincense and could only do so under certain conditions: those in contact with a woman, for example, or who had recently been to a funeral, were not allowed to cut the trees.

'One great distinguishing feature of Muscat', wrote the English diplomat James Silk Buckingham in 1816, 'is the respect and civility shown by all classes of its inhabitants to Europeans.' It is an interesting comment because it appears to show that the intimate British involvement with Oman and the 'Trucial States' of the Gulf over the next two centuries was founded on mutual benefit rather than solely on colonisation and exploitation. On the one hand, the various treaties and 'exclusive agreements' that Britain signed with the sultan and emirs of the region kept the French at bay and thereby safeguarded British trading routes with India. On the other hand, the British navy helped maintain the claims to sovereignty of the emerging Gulf emirates against marauding Turkish and Persian interests.

The chief British officer in the region was the political resident based in Bushire, on the coast of what is now Iran. The resident supervised the political agents, usually junior officers, stationed in the various sheikhdoms of the Gulf. This system was designed to keep the British presence low-key, while permitting swift action if the need arose.

In the early years of the 20th century, two things threatened British interests in the Gulf. The first came from the north: the Ottomans (in allegiance with the Germans) were also keen to establish their presence in the region. The second threat came from within Arabia itself. In 1902 Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al-Saud, known as Ibn Saud, began a series of conquests which would eventually lead to the formation of the state of Saudi Arabia. By 1912 the Saudis posed a serious threat to the

THE TRAVELLING TRIBE

And is there then no earthly place
Where we can rest in dream Elysian,
Without some cursed, round English face,
Popping up near, to break the vision?

When the English poet, Thomas Moore, wrote these words about great Middle Eastern destinations in the 18th century, he could have no idea how relevant they seem today – at the pyramids in Giza, for example, or at Petra in Jordan. Interestingly, however, the Arabian Peninsula remains one of the less visited corners of the old Orient.

While trade brought European merchant ships to the ports of the Red Sea and the Gulf, for much of the four hundred years before WWII the interior of Arabia was largely the subject of speculation only – and intense curiosity. That curiosity provoked an extended era of Western exploration by serious scholars, on the one hand, and by adventurers on the other. The first group (including Niebuhr, Burckhardt, Palgrave, Doughty and Blunt) were intent on learning about a land that gave birth to one of the most compelling creeds on earth. The latter group included a marvellously colourful collection of characters, such as Burton, better known to his contemporaries as Ruffian Dick.

Though he was obliged in his *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* to make his 'love of adventure minister to the advance of a geographical science', Burton found plenty of time to learn Arabic fluently, dress in local clothing and pass himself off as a *haja* (pilgrim) in Mecca. He also found time to write copious, salaciously detailed footnotes to *The Thousand and One Nights* tales.

Men were not the only adventurers to the region. In the 19th century, Lady Anne Blunt accompanied her husband to the Peninsula in search of Arab horses, and on leaving her womanising husband, abandoned her stud farm in England for an apricot orchard in Cairo. Today, most Arabian horses, even those in Arabia itself, can be traced back to the Crabbet stock that she helped to establish – a fitting dispersal of influence for one of the 'travelling tribe'.

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THE PEARLING INDUSTRY

One of the mixed pleasures of visiting a Gulf jewellery shop is to hold a natural pearl in the palm of one's hand and see reflected in its gorgeous lustre the not so illustrious history of the region.

Although pearls have come to be associated with Bahrain, they were harvested throughout the Gulf – many cities, including Salalah, Doha and Manama, have famous modern monuments commemorating the lost industry. Each region gave rise to a specific type of pearl. Pteria shells, or winged oysters, were extensively collected for their bluish mother-of-pearl off the coast of Ras al-Khaimah. The large shells known in the trade as 'Bombay Shells' were found in Omani waters and chiefly exported to London for pearl inlay and decorative cutlery. With an annual export of 2000 tonnes, worth UK£750,000, the most common pearl oyster of the Gulf was *Pinctada radiata*, collected off the coasts of Kuwait, Bahrain and the UAE.

Given the volume of the trade, it is not surprising that it supported the local economies of much of the Gulf. Trading in pearls has existed since the 3rd millennium BC but it was only in the 19th century, with the collapse of other trade routes in the region, that pearls assumed their economic value.

The pearling season began each year in late May, when the boats would leave Bahrain and the other settlements around the Gulf for the pearl banks lying offshore. There they remained at sea, through the blistering summer, without interruption until mid-October. Supplies were ferried out by dhow.

Workers were divided into divers (who descended for the shells with a weight between their feet) and pullers (who would hoist the divers back up again by rope). Neither were paid wages. Instead, they would receive a share of the total profits for the season. A puller's share was half to two-thirds of a diver's. Boat owners would usually advance money to their workers at the beginning of the season. But the divers were often unable to pay back these loans and got further into debt with each year. As a result they were often bound to a particular boat owner for life. If a diver died, his sons were obliged to work off his debts for him. It was not unusual to see quite elderly men still working as divers.

British attempts in the '20s to regulate and improve the lot of the divers were resisted by the divers themselves. Many failed to understand the complex accounting system the British had imposed. Riots and strikes became a regular feature of the pearling seasons in the late '20s and early '30s.

Around 1930 the Japanese invented a method of culturing pearls. This, combined with the Great Depression, caused the bottom to drop out of the international pearl market. The Peninsula's great pearling industry petered out almost overnight; although the collapse brought great hardship to the Gulf in the decades before the discovery of oil, few had the heart to regret it. For more information on pearls, see p123.

Plants of Dhofar, by Anthony Miller and Miranda Morris, is an exquisitely illustrated scientific guide to the plants of the region. It includes a wonderfully eclectic account of the social and historical importance of the frankincense tree from a botanist's viewpoint.

Gulf sheikhdoms. Had it not been for British protection, there's little doubt that Saudi Arabia would today include most or all of Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE.

With the outbreak of WWI in 1914, the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany. Sultan Mohammed V, as leader of the empire, declared jihad, or holy war, calling on Muslims everywhere to rise up against the allied powers of Britain, France and Russia.

To counter the sultan, the British negotiated an alliance with Hussein bin Ali, the Grand Sherif of Mecca. In 1916 Sherif Hussein agreed to lead an Arab revolt against the Ottomans in exchange for a British promise to make him 'King of the Arabs' once the conflict was over. To the famous disgust of TE Lawrence, the British never had any intention of keeping this promise, preferring to negotiate with the French on the carving up of the Ottoman Empire.

Of even more significance for the future, Britain had also promised to assist the Zionist movement. Known as the Balfour Declaration (named after the British foreign secretary), Britain viewed 'with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people' after the war.

Meanwhile, Sherif Hussein was forced to confine his kingdom (and his dreams of pan-Arabism) to the Hejaz. Less than a decade later, this region was also overrun by Ibn Saud, who became 'King of the Hejaz and Sultan of Najd'. In 1932 Ibn Saud combined these two crowns and renamed his country the 'Kingdom of Saudi Arabia' (see p301).

It would seem that Ibn Battuta is once again to become a household name – and not wholly in a way he might have liked. The Ibn Battuta mall has just opened in Dubai, celebrating the great traveller in various themed entertainments (see p399).

The Maria Theresa dollar was a large silver coin used in currency in the region for several centuries after the Portuguese left. As it was made of very pure silver, it became a thing of value in itself. It was often fashioned into Bedouin jewellery.

OIL

During the first decade of the 20th century, a rare resource was discovered on the Peninsula that was to change the face of the region forever. The first commercially viable oil strike in the Gulf was made at Masjid-i-Suleiman, in Persia, in May 1908. On the Arab side of the Gulf, the search for oil began shortly after WWI.

PEAK OIL – FACT OR FALLACY?

In an address to OPEC in Vienna in 2006, the President of Saudi Aramco, Abdallah Jum'ah, stated that recoverable barrels of oil would last for 140 years at current rates of consumption: in other words, the world has only consumed about 18% of reserves. 'That fact alone,' he stated, 'should discredit the argument that peak oil is imminent and put our minds at ease concerning future petrol supplies'.

Put more simply, some would argue (albeit controversially) that there's more than enough oil to meet demand, and the Middle East, while having two thirds of *proven* oil supplies, controls considerably less *potential* oil supplies. In fact there is more oil outside the region than there is within it.

Why then are so many Western governments panicking about oil? Why have the policies of US and British leaders in particular been influenced by the perceived dependency of the West on Middle Eastern resources? George W Bush stated in 2002 that the 'dependency on foreign oil is a matter of national security. To put it bluntly [no surprises there] sometimes we rely upon energy sources from countries that don't particularly like us.'

Sentiment such as this has led to the shoring up of nascent oil industries in Africa and Russia, Norway and other countries. The irony is that this is leading to a faster depletion of non-Middle Eastern reserves, due to peak by 2025, which will lead to an even greater dependency on Middle Eastern reserves thereafter. As such, it's about time the old 'us and them' dialogue was replaced with a less diametrical rhetoric. In the current political climate, however, this doesn't seem very likely.

The British and the local rulers were initially very sceptical about the prospects of finding oil in the Gulf. Their interest only picked up after oil was found in commercial quantities in Bahrain in 1932. Among the Gulf's Arab rulers, interest in oil was spurred on by the collapse, around 1930, of the pearling industry, which for centuries had been the mainstay of the Gulf's economy.

Within a few years almost every ruler in the Gulf had given out some kind of oil concession in a desperate attempt to bolster their finances. The region's nascent industry was suspended temporarily during WWII but resumed soon after, increasing output to rival that of Iran, the world's biggest producer. By 1960 the Middle East was producing 25% of the non-Communist world's oil.

The 1960s brought the winds of change and by 1961, Kuwait gained independence from the British. In late 1971 Bahrain and Qatar followed suit and a few months later the small sheikhdoms of the lower Gulf combined to form the United Arab Emirates. Hand in hand with independence came a sense of national and regional identity; making decisions about how to spend the new oil revenue helped shape each regime into a more modern and inclusive political and social entity. Generous welfare programmes that emphasised primary health care and universal education were established and women began to have a voice in national affairs.

The new wealth, and the threat of cutting off oil supplies to Europe and the US, gave Middle Eastern countries an international influence they hadn't enjoyed for centuries. After each embargo, a surge in oil prices increased both their wealth and their power, triggering an enormous building boom in the Gulf. Western expatriates took part in the Black Gold Rush, providing engineering and financial expertise while hundreds of thousands of Asian expats were brought in as manual labour, the legacy of which continues to have profound effects on the indigenous populations (see p46).

Meanwhile, events in Iran (the revolution of 1979 and the Iran–Iraq war of 1980) began to cause concern, scaring off potential foreign investors, particularly in Kuwait, which lay only a few kilometres from the front line. In May 1981 Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in an effort not only to increase economic cooperation, but also in response to the perceived threat posed by Iran.

Despite regional cooperation, in 1985 the bottom fell out of the oil market and times began to change. To varying extents all of the Gulf countries had trouble keeping up their building programmes while maintaining the generous welfare states that their people had come to expect. In many senses it was a timely reminder to each of the GCC countries to consider their future. Various countries are anxious about nearing peak production and exploration of new potential oil sites, both on and off shore, has intensified over the past decade. Some countries, like Bahrain, fear that their days of oil production are numbered – giving rise to market panic in other parts of the world. The issue of peak oil, however, is very much open to debate and some would argue that the evidence isn't entirely conclusive (see boxed text, opposite).

While regionally each country is hopeful that new oil discoveries and improved methods of extraction will help provide for future security, none of the Peninsula governments can afford to be over optimistic. Hence, the buzz word of the past 10 years in particular has been 'diversification'. Diversification of regional economies has assumed various guises.

Explorers of Arabia, by Freeth and Winstone, is a readable book describing the adventures of European travellers from the Renaissance to the Victorian era who penetrated the Arabian Peninsula.

British administration in the Gulf fell under the jurisdiction of the British Raj in India and, until India became independent, the rupee was the common currency of all the Gulf States. After 1948 it was replaced by a 'Gulf rupee' – in circulation until 1971.

What came to be called the 'oil weapon' (the embargo by the Gulf States of oil supplies to the West) was first used to powerful effect during the Arab–Israeli war of 1973 to protest against the West's support for Israel.

Oman, which has limited oil supplies, has developed gas and shipping industries and is involved in major port projects. The UAE has attracted international investment through high-flying projects like the film festival inaugurated in 2004, residential developments such as Palm Island and the World, and a Disneyland is in the making. Bahrain is marketing itself as a commercial and banking hub, and is currently building its showpiece Financial Harbour in Manama. Qatar has promoted itself as the Middle East's international forum for sports, holding the Asian Games in 2006, and all countries, including the heavily oil-dependent states of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, are looking to tourism as a major future source of income. To this end, large commercial, cultural and tourist developments are taking shape across the region, including some of the most expensive and prestigious hotel and resort complexes in the world (see the Economy sections of each country for further details of diversification).

Seafarers of the Emirates, by Ronald Codrai, is a remarkable record re-creating the lives of pearl divers, merchants, ship builders and seafarers, with photos taken in Dubai in the middle of the 20th century.

HOSTILITIES IN THE REGION

When Iran and Iraq grudgingly agreed to a ceasefire in August 1988, the Gulf breathed a collective sigh of relief but this was merely the calm before the storm. In August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait and a few days later annexed the state. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia appealed to the USA for help and the US and Allied Forces launched Operation Desert Storm. After a six-week intensive bombing campaign and a four-day ground offensive, the Iraqis retreated, leaving in their wake hundreds of burning oil wells and an environmental disaster (see p154). Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, previously supported by the West in the war against Iran, suddenly became public enemy number one.

Abu Dhabi's oil is predicted to last for 100 to 130 years. Dubai's oil, on the other hand, is rumoured to run out in 20 years. Dubai is borrowing $10 billion to improve infrastructure and for new developments in a bid to keep big multinationals on side.

Many Western newspapers described the war as a 'clean war', a demonstration of precision bombing. This wasn't true. It was feared and fought over on the streets of Kuwait City; it rattled the walls of Indian-run corner stores; it stopped Pakistani taxi drivers flying home to their loved ones; it plucked young Arab Muslims from the streets and threw them behind the lines of brother Arab Muslims. The Kuwait House of National Memorial Museum (p163) is an interesting place to visit from this point of view because it reminds the visitor that this may have been an Allied war (and the museum is quick to give thanks where due), but it was first and foremost a humiliating, traumatic experience for the people of Kuwait and their fellow Arabs across the region. Indeed, there is a touching sequence in the animated displays of the museum: lit up against the shell-shocked night sky is a group of women, marching resolutely into gunfire. They played an important role in the resistance to the invasion and lost a generation of their sons in unaccounted-for prisoners of war.

After Desert Storm, despite the strong sense of solidarity between Peninsula countries and Western allies, there was a feeling among many in the region that they were pleased with the help but not the way it was delivered. The infamous 'turkey shoot' of trapped convoys returning to Baghdad up Mutla Ridge was an ominous case in point.

War in a Time of Peace, by David Halberstam, is an engaging and easy-to-read modern history of the Middle East by a Pulitzer prize–winning journalist.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the US in 2001, people in Oman, Saudi and the Gulf countries watched with horror as the atrocity unfolded. Al-Jazeera television in Qatar showed footage of Saddam Hussein applauding the attack (just as many other Western TV channels were to do thereafter) and the broadcasters were accused – with little justification – of being apologists for terrorism (see p294).

As the US response to 9/11 over the succeeding years led first to the high-handed removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan and then the invasion

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of Iraq on the flimsiest of pretexts, the trust that was won in the 1990s quickly evaporated. Interestingly, photographs played a large part in that process – of mistreated prisoners at Abu Graib, of Saddam Hussein being checked for dental problems after being pulled from hiding, and the final horror show released on video of his hanging on the first day of *eid* (Islamic feast) in 2006 – these made a huge impact on the ordinary person in the street. 'How could we celebrate *eid* with our families,' many said, 'with such indignities being heaped on that man?' Overnight, many who had no sympathy for the 'Butcher of Baghdad' declared him a martyr, a symbol of the bullying of the Arab world by Western powers. If ever there was a mismanaging of public relations in a war, it was surely evidenced during the hostilities of the past seven years – the late condemnation by Western governments of the bombing of Beirut in 2006 included.

Yitzhak Rabin was tragically assassinated in 1995 by an Israeli extremist. Relations between Israel and Palestine descended into chaos for much of the next decade as he was replaced by hardliners like Binyamin Netanyahu and Ariel Sharon.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH ISRAEL

The fact that most Arabs are desirous of peace with *all* their neighbours comes only as a surprise to those reading Western newspapers. Many people across the Peninsula were suspicious of Israel's role in 9/11 and conspiracy theories abounded in the coffeehouses of the regions' capitals. Students continue to write political slogans across college notice boards in support of the Palestinian people, but despite these local 'posturings', when it comes to Arab–Israeli interaction at a grass-roots level, most Peninsula Arabs express a wish to see peace and accommodation in the region for all.

Many initiatives have occurred over the past couple of decades between Peninsula countries and within the Arab–Israeli peace process. After the historic 'Oslo Accord', for example, between the PLO's Yasser Arafat and Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, the latter was welcomed in Muscat by Sultan Qaboos. In early 2002 the Saudis put forward a radical peace plan proposing recognition of Israel in exchange for the establishment of a Palestinian state on the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem (based on pre-1967 boundaries). Unfortunately, it failed to impress either side; the Saudis' recent initiative in 2007 has met with American disapproval, and so the stalemate continues.

A History of the Middle East, by Peter Mansfield, is a well-regarded account that is particularly enlightening on the politics and economics of the modern Arab world.

Palestinians who work in leadership roles throughout the region express their frustration, but even they can't articulate a solution. While there is a great deal of sympathy for their predicament, the nationals of the Peninsula are not silly: they have enjoyed the benefit of several decades of education (often in the UK or the USA), good commerce, fine housing and comfortable lifestyles and that's a lot to put on the line for a neighbour, however just the cause.

BUILDING REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT

Quite quietly and in the least expected corner of the Peninsula, while everyone else was busy with Iraq or Iran or both, Yemen made regional history by becoming the first multiparty democracy on the Arabian Peninsula. It may have been the first but it is certainly not the only country to espouse a more open style of government and now all countries in the region have some kind of *majlis ashura* (public representation) that advises or contributes to public policy.

Sheikhdoms of Eastern Arabia, by Peter Lienhardt and Ahmed Al-Shahi, gives an insight into how oil wealth has altered Arabia's tribal structure, gender relations and the interaction between ruling sheikhs and their subjects.

The last decade has been a good time for women in this respect. Every Arab man knows, even in Saudi Arabia, that there is only one governor when it comes to the household and control of the private purse, and that's his wife. Now to the chagrin of more traditional men, women are beginning to join the ranks of government ministers, propelled ahead of

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their male colleagues by a greater willingness, on the whole, to work at their education and with less sense of being constrained by matters of *wusta* – the nepotistic system of (traditionally male) influence.

This doesn't mean to say that everyone thinks that democracy is a good idea. In many ways, the countries of the Peninsula, with their prosperous, well-fed, well-educated, well-housed, well-looked after and peaceful populations are reasons to be cheerful about alternative systems of governance. Ironically, the only exception is the relatively poor, relatively unstable, democratic country of Yemen.

The Merchants: the Big Business Families of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, by Michael Field, is a brief sketch of the rise of Dubai as a trading centre, illustrating the role played by its powerful tribal relationships – relationships that affect the entire region.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Grandparents across the Peninsula can remember when a trip to the capital or the interior of their country meant a long journey by camel, donkey or on foot; when education was reserved only for the rich or well connected and when housing was hot, dusty and inadequate. In addition, droughts brought further hardship, and infant mortality rates were heart-breakingly high and life expectancy disappointingly low. If born into one kind of life, it was difficult to aspire to any other as families were tied to the land or dependent on the sea for their livelihoods.

Within the space of 50 years, and considerably less in Oman and Yemen, the condition of people's lives in most of the Peninsula has changed beyond all recognition. This is of course largely due to the discovery of oil but it's also due to a willingness to embrace a different way of life on behalf of the 'ordinary' person.

Of course there are problems. The process of diversification is slow; large industries draw people away from their villages; the social pattern of rural life thereby unravels; unfamiliarity with critical thinking hampers education; swapping to indigenous workforces entails hardship on immigrants and less efficiency in the short term. Frustrations with the entire process of modernisation and the perceived threat of encroaching ideologies inevitably lead to political repercussions – a situation that Al-Qaeda and other fundamentalist groups are quick to exploit.

Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror, by Rohan Gunaratna, is a comprehensive and courageous account of the inner workings of Al-Qaeda and the religious fervour and alienation which drives attacks on the West.

But read any book on management and it will be sure to highlight the challenges involved in implementing change. If it is difficult to manage change within a small business environment, how much more difficult must it be to manage change for an entire nation? The populations of all the countries in the region have encountered the shock of the new, anger at the passing of valued traditions, rejection of external pressures, but they are beginning to complete the cycle with an acceptance of their new lives. The healing process will be complete when each country finds a way in which to honour its heritage within newfound environments.

It's easy to be patronising about Arabia – thinking of it growing like a child. But how foolish is that? For centuries it has attracted Western academics, enthralled creative minds, enriched Western study of mathematics, medicine and literature. Above all, it has given birth to the world's most holistic religion. TE Lawrence summed up the spiritual core of the Peninsula: 'It is the old, old civilisation, which has refined itself clear of household gods and half the trappings which ours hastens to assume.' What a pity we're still peddling the trappings.

The Culture

'The manners of mankind,' wrote the 18th-century, British traveller Lady Wortley Montagu, 'do not differ so widely as our voyage writers would make us believe.' Lady Montagu's common sense account of the 'customs and manners' of the people she met in Arab lands in the 18th century, however, were a disappointment to many of her contemporaries who had hoped to read about the people of literary speculation: the wild men of the desert, the passionate Islamic fundamentalist, the dusky-eyed maiden. Montagu was even tempted 'to add a few surprise customs' of her own invention to placate readers. It's to her credit that she resisted.

It's easy to focus on the elements of difference between cultures, but the more one travels in Arab lands, it's the similarities that prove more persuasive.

Geographia at www.geographia.com contains interesting features on the peoples and cultures of the Arabian Peninsula.

PEOPLE

The Western stereotype of the male Peninsula inhabitant has changed over the last century. Where once he was characterised as gaunt, austere in habit and fierce of temper, he's now portrayed as rich and extravagant; invariably fat; Arab-nosed; an owner of two camels, four wives, eight children and six cars; and robed in sheet and teacloth. Male youths are wiry and neurotic, wearing Semtex vests. Women only feature in relation to the hejab (veil) debate and in cartoons they appear as indefinable black shapes.

Let's see if any of these absurd stereotypes have a grain of truth.

In *The Arabs: Myth and Reality*, by Gerald Butt, the ex-BBC Middle East correspondent traces the geopolitical history of the region and examines its complex relationship with the West, including the stereotypical images of the Peninsula Arab.

Lifestyle (Rich & Extravagant?)

Drive through the suburbs of Peninsula cities and you'll see domed villas with spangled concrete that glistens in the sun. Walk through the gold souqs and you'll see women with Gucci handbags, buying diamonds and pearls. Park outside the Ritz-Carlton in Manama, Burj al-Arab in Dubai and you'll be embarrassed to be driving a Toyota Echo. Undoubtedly, huge private fortunes have been made in the oil rush and building expansion.

But that isn't the whole picture. Universal education and the mass media have increased expectations, and people who were content with one floor, now want two. Cement and steel prices have doubled in a decade and the burgeoning Arab 'middle class' frets over securing loans to finish the house. If shopping before pay day is anything to go by, most families are left with little at the end of the month.

The rest of the picture is completed by stepping out of the city altogether. Lives in mountain villages, in desert oases, on the dunes or in coastal fishing villages may seem to have been little impacted by city incomes, but then you spot the satellite dish attached to the *barasti* (palm frond) walls; the electricity poles marching up the wadis (often-dry river beds); the communally owned truck that has allowed settlement to replace nomadic existence. Water, electricity, roads, education and health care, this is the real wealth of the region today and it is remarkably evenly spread given the challenges of geography and topography.

In a straw poll run by student nurses in Muscat, 99% listed heart disease and obesity as possible outcomes of increased fatty food and reduced exercise. However, 95% said they eat hamburger and fries at least twice a week. 'It's too good to give up,' one said.

Health & Life Expectancy (Invariably Fat?)

A more modern lifestyle, be it in the city or the interior, has brought changes to the health of many Peninsula people. Not all those changes

PENINSULA LIVES

Ahmed is a fisherman near Shwaymiya in Oman. He gets up before dawn, performs his ablutions and walks to the mosque for dawn prayers. By the time he returns, his sons have dragged the boat to the water's edge. His wife has prepared something light to break the night's fast and will have rice waiting on their return from sea; his daughters are out collecting firewood. A flotilla of 10 or 20 boats tears up the calm waters on the age-old hunt for tuna. Half asleep in the middle of the afternoon, the day's work accomplished, the catch drying in the sun or dispatched to town in the freezer truck, his family arranged around him in various states of slumber and repose, Ahmed asks why anybody else would want another life: 'I have my children, my wife and my fishing. What more could a man wish for?' What indeed? But they do wish for more, and that's why two of his seven sons are now enrolled in the military, and his eldest daughter is hoping to train in Salalah to become a nurse.

Fatima is married to Faisal, an administrator in the Wildlife Commission in Riyadh. Fatima remembers the days when her father took her brothers on hunting parties looking for houbara bustard (near-endangered large birds prized for their meat). She never imagined she'd marry someone involved in their protection. She's not quite sure what all the fuss is about but the steady income helps pay for the education of their two children. She was adamant about that: both daughters were to have the best. One is studying pharmacy and the other is good with figures and will make an able accountant. She could do with some help with the family accounts – especially with the investments she's made. She recently bought a part share in a truck for one of the construction companies. It's already returning a profit. She dons her *abeyya* (body-covering black robe) and sinks into the street outside, glad to be anonymous – she'll have to sort out the feud with the neighbours soon because Faisal is clearly never going to muscle up to that task!

are for the better. Take the statistics regarding diabetes, for example: four of the five countries with the world's highest rates of diabetes are the UAE (United Arab Emirates; 20.1%), Qatar (16%), Bahrain (14.9%) and Kuwait (12.8%).

A sweet tooth is partly to blame. Dates play an inextricable role both in the Arab diet and in matters of hospitality. No-one is eating fewer dates, but everyone now eats ice cream and burgers as well – just as unremitting TV advertisements bid them to.

Thanks to immunisation programmes and increasing standards of health care, the Peninsula Arab has a healthy average life expectancy of 72 years (up to 79 for Kuwaiti women) – considerably more years in which to die of a heart attack than their predecessors.

But it's not all doom and gloom! Wander the terraces of southern Arabia 20 years ago, and you'd see women bent double in the fields, baked by the sun, arthritic in the mud, or weighed down with herbage, trudging back to their homes, pausing to stack stones in the crumbling terrace walls. For many of the Peninsula inhabitants, it's hard to be too nostalgic about the passing of hard manual labour, even if it comes at the price of an extra kilo or two carried around the hips.

Population & Ethnic Diversity (Arab-Nosed?)

In the Gulf, people with a hooked nose are teased in a region that admires straight noses. Noses tell a lot about who is from where, and each country is acutely mindful of such distinctions: 'with a name like that, he must be a Baluchi (not real Emirati); he speaks Swahili so he must be Zanzibari (not real Omani); he's from the coast (not real Yemeni).' And so it goes on until you wonder if there's any such thing as a 'real anybody'. Such gossiping about ethnicity makes you realise that Arab allegiances are linked to tribe before nation.

There are over 50,000 Western expats in the UAE alone.

Centuries of trading and pilgrimage have resulted in an extraordinarily mixed population and only a few pockets of people, such as the Jibbalis of southern Oman – the descendents of the ancient people of Ad – or Jews in the northern parts of Yemen, can claim ethnic 'purity'.

Oddly, for the visitor, it is not always Arabs you'll notice much anyway. The indigenous population of the entire Peninsula numbers less than 20 million.

The large presence of other nationals on the Peninsula came about after the discovery of oil. Many thousands of expatriate workers were brought in to help develop the region's industries, and provide skills and knowledge in creating a modern infrastructure. Although none of these nationals were permitted citizenship, many have stayed a lifetime and set up businesses under local sponsorship, changing the demographics of the entire Peninsula.

The issue now is how to reduce the dependence on expatriate labour and train the local population to fill their place: inevitably, few expats willingly train locals to take over their jobs.

In many Gulf countries, foreigners outnumber locals: in the UAE about 80% of the population is made up of foreign residents; in Qatar, the government vowed not to allow their own nationals to be outnumbered by immigrants, but the indigenous population currently represents only 25%.

Bedouin Roots (Owners of Two Camels?)

Some Arabs still own two camels. In fact, many own considerably more. The donkey played just as important a role in transportation in the mountains of the Peninsula, but no-one is breeding those for fun. Of course, racing has something to do with it, but the camel is more deeply involved in the Arab psyche than mere racing. Camels evoke ancient nomadic lifestyles, the symbol of community through hardship and endurance – the inheritance, in short, of Bedouin roots.

Bedouin: Nomads of the Desert, by Alain Keohane, is a beautiful photographic and textual testimony to the Bedu, including descriptions and images of their lifestyle, traditions, arts and customs.

The term 'Bedu' (Bedouin in singular and adjectival form) refers not so much to an ethnic group as to a lifestyle. Accounting for their appeal to Western imaginations in the 18th century, the Danish explorer Niebuhr claimed that man is 'fond even of the very shadow of that liberty, independence, and simplicity which he has lost by refinement'. City Arabs today, stressed by familiar modern anxieties regarding wealth and how to keep it, are similarly wistful of a bygone era, even if they are more likely to be descendants of townspeople and seafarers.

Most Bedu have modernised their existence with 4WD trucks (it's not unusual to find the camel travelling by truck these days), fodder from town (limiting the need to keep moving), and purified water from bowsers.

EXPAT PECKING ORDER

Though officially treated equally, there's clearly a pecking order among the Peninsula's expats. At the top of the order are the Westerners. For the hundreds of thousands of Western expats, life is a tax-free merry-go-round, usually with rent and annual airfare home included in generous packages. The life, at least in the big Gulf cities, includes sun, sea, sand and a good social life in a lifestyle few could afford back home.

Next come the middle-income workers from other Middle Eastern countries. Their first and foremost preoccupation is to save money. Typically these expats stay just long enough to stockpile enough dollars to build a house back home and send their children to college. In some countries such as Egypt and Yemen, remittances from nationals working abroad constitute the backbone of the economy.

Languishing at the bottom are the labourers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. While a minority (around 5% to 10%) enjoy a standard of living similar to the Western and Peninsula communities, the majority are manual labourers. Though working conditions are tough – digging roads in 45°C heat or working on building sites that lack any safety provisions – many prefer this to poverty back home. Often a single labourer can support his entire extended family in his home country from his monthly pay packet. Some Asians remain on the Peninsula for up to 20 years, only seeing their families for two months once every two years. Wealth is highly relative it would seem.

THE BEDU – SURVIVAL OF THE MOST GENEROUS

Meaning 'nomadic', the name Bedu is today a bit of a misnomer. Though thought to number several hundred thousand, very few Bedu are still truly nomadic, though a few hang on to the old ways. After pitching their distinct black, goat-hair tents – the *beit ash-sha'ar* (literally 'house of hair') – they graze their goats, sheep or camels in an area for several months. When the sparse desert fodder runs out, it's time to move on again, allowing the land to regenerate naturally.

The tents are generally divided into a *haram* (forbidden area) for women and an area reserved for the men. The men's section also serves as the public part of the house, where guests are treated to coffee and dates, or meals. It's here that all the news and gossip – a crucial part of successful survival in a hostile environment – is passed along the grapevine.

The Bedouin family is a close-knit unit. The women do most of the domestic work, including fetching water (sometimes requiring walks of many kilometres), baking bread and weaving. The men are traditionally the providers in times of peace, and fierce warriors in times of war. Though most Bedu are more peaceful these days, warring still goes on in northern parts of Yemen.

The hospitality of the Bedu is legendary, even in a region known for its generosity. Part of the ancient and sacrosanct Bedouin creed is that no traveller in need of rest or food should be turned away. Likewise, a traveller assumes the assured protection of his hosts for a period of three days, and is guaranteed a safe passage through tribal territory. Even today the Bedu escort travellers safely across the desert in Yemen (though now you pay for the service).

The philosophy is simple: you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours – only in the desert it's a matter of survival. Such a code of conduct ensures the survival of all in a difficult environment with scant resources. It allows the maintenance of a nomadic lifestyle and the continuation of trade. It's a kind of survival, in other words, of the most generous.

Some have mobile phones and satellite television, and most listen to the radio. Many no longer move at all. Bedouin customs, dating from the earliest days of Islam, remain pretty much unchanged, however – especially their legendary hospitality towards strangers.

Camels were memorably first called 'ships of Arabia; their seas are the deserts' by the British diplomat, George Sandy, in 1615.

Marriage & the Role of Women (Four Wives?)

Islam allows men to have four wives, but only if a man can treat each equally. In reality, there are few Peninsula Arabs who can afford the luxury of two houses, two sets of gold, two extended families of in-laws – let alone four. Nor, with the greater demands of the modern work place, can many aspire to satisfying more than one partner in equal share – though only wives will let you in on this secret.

But it's not just about expense either. While law permits a man four wives, even two centuries ago no 'man of quality' would make use of this and no 'woman of rank' would suffer it. In fact, Peninsula women are far more empowered than might be supposed, and they don't like sharing their husbands and his income any more than Western women. If the wife doesn't like something, she can and often does make the man's life a misery and, as controller of the household, often co-opts the children into her camp. Divorce is easily enacted and is becoming less of a taboo, especially in Oman and the Gulf countries, because women will put up with less these days. Modern Peninsula women are educated, usually far harder working at college than men and therefore often more successful in the workplace. They are entitled to earn and keep their own income (unlike the man who surrenders his salary to the household) and as such have an independence unthinkable by their grandmothers.

The Bedu are found across the Arabian Peninsula, mostly on the fringes of the great Rub al-Khali, in Oman's Sharqiya Sands, Khor al-Adaid in Qatar and on Kuwait's plains. Exact numbers are unknown due to the difficulty of taking a census of nomadic peoples.

Or was it ever thus? 'The Europeans are mistaken in thinking the state of marriage so different among the Mussulmans from what it is with Christian nations,' wrote Niebuhr in the 18th century. 'Arabian women enjoy a great deal of liberty, and often a great deal of power, in their families'.

It's hard to imagine women letting go of their tight-knit sisterhood, but now that they also want a slice of the man's traditional role too, something's got to give. The time-honoured, slightly mystical respect shown by men to wives and mothers, sanctified in Islam, may be one casualty of the redefining of roles that most Arab women haven't considered yet.

The Bedu are known for their sense of humour, which they list – alongside courage, alertness and religious faith – as one of the four secrets of life, encouraging tolerance and humility. So beware: if stuck in the sand, expect to be laughed at!

Family Size & Welfare (Eight Children?)

The family, guided by Muslim principles, is still at the centre of the Arab way of life. The family is an extended unit often comprising whole villages, united around a common tribal name. Avoiding actions that may bring shame to the family is of paramount importance. Saving face is therefore more than a reluctance to admit a mistake, it's an expression of unwillingness to make a family vulnerable to criticism. Equally, promotion or success is not calculated in individual terms, but in the benefits it bestows on the family. Of course, everyone knows someone who can help in the collective good, and accruing *wusta* (influence) is a Peninsula pastime.

The efforts of one generation are reflected in the provision of education and opportunity for the next. This comes at a cost and few Arabs these days can afford eight children; indeed the average is around 3.3 children.

The governments of each country have made generous provision for families across the region – in terms of free education and health care – but the resources won't last forever and the younger generation are beginning to see that they have to work hard to secure the same opportunities for their children.

The 18th-century traveller, Lady Montagu, noted that Arab women were more at liberty to follow their own will than their European counterparts and that the *abeyya,* the 'black disguise', made it easier for women to take a lover.

Travel & Pilgrimage (Six Cars?)

When tax is minimal and petrol cheaper than bottled water, owning two cars isn't the extravagance one might imagine. The car is a status symbol but it's also a symbol of travel. The Arabs love to travel – to family members at the weekend, foreign countries for honeymoons, and of course to Mecca for haj or *umrah* (literally 'little pilgrimage'). See p70).

Dress & Fashion (Robed in Sheet & Teacloth?)

The very thought of calling the quintessentially cool and elegant dress of the Arabs 'sheet and teacloth' would appal most inhabitants of the Peninsula. Men take huge pride in their costume, which, in its simplicity and uniformity, is intended to transcend wealth and origin.

A loose headscarf, known as *gutra,* is worn by many Peninsula males: in the Gulf States it is of white cloth, while in western Kuwait and Saudi Arabia it is checked. The black head rope used to secure the *gutra* is called *agal*. It's said to originate in the rope the Bedu used to tie up their camels at night. The Omanis and Yemenis usually wear a turban, wrapped deftly about a cap. In Oman these are pastel-hued and decorated with intricate and brightly coloured embroidery.

Nine Parts of Desire, by Geraldine Brooks, is an objective and well-balanced investigation into the lives of women under Islam, covering various countries of the Middle East.

Most Peninsula men also wear the floor-length 'shirt-dress' which in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar is known as a *thobe,* and in Kuwait, the UAE and Oman as a *dishdasha.* Most are white, and some have collars and cuffs, while others are edged with tassels and white-thread embroidery at the neck. On ceremonial occasions, the dress is completed with a finely wrought belt and ceremonial dagger, and a silk outer garment. In Yemen and cold areas in the winter, men wear tailored jackets.

Women's dress is more varied. It often comprises colourful long dresses or an embroidered tunic with trousers and heavily decorated ankle cuffs. In the cities, modern dress is common. Over the top, women usually wear a black gown known as an *abeyya*. This can either be worn loose and cover the head as well (as in Saudi Arabia) or it can be worn as a fashion item, tailored to the body (as in Oman). In Yemen, the women's outer costume comprises a startling layer of coloured cotton cloth.

All Arab women cover their hair but they don't all wear the *burka* (veil) – in Oman and the UAE, they mostly do not cover the face. Veils can be of a thin gauze completely covering the face; a cloth which covers the face but not the eyes; or a mask concealing the nose, cheeks and part of the mouth – in Sana'a, women wear striking red and white tie-dye cloth to cover the face.

Six children is about the average number of children per family in poorer and rural regions of the Peninsula, where children are seen as a resource, not an expense – another pair of hands to work the land or provide support in old age.

Many Western people assume that men force women to cover up. In fact, this is generally not the case. Women often opt for such coverings in order to pass more comfortably through male company. Nor is it a stated part of Islam. Indeed, Bedu women maintain that the custom, which protects the skin and hair from the harsh penalties of sun and sand, predates Islam.

Arabian Youth (Wiry, Neurotic Youths?)

The Peninsula's low crime rate is partly due to sociological factors, such as wealth and low unemployment; it is mostly attributable, however, to strict codes of moral conduct expounded by Islam; a legal system sometimes rigorously enforced; traditional Arab values; and the concept of honour.

They wear baseball caps with the peak reversed, they've got the latest iPods and Blackberries, they stay out late with friends and are rude to their elders. A few drink, fewer take drugs. They watch unsavoury things on satellite TV and they communicate 'inappropriately' via the internet. They sleep a lot and aren't interested in learning. In this regard, Arab youth are no different from any other youths. The difference in Arab countries is that really wanton behaviour is rare and the period of abandonment relatively short.

Religious Zeal (Semtex Vests?)

Only a tiny minority of people on the Peninsula are involved in religious fundamentalism, and most of those channel their zeal into peaceful attempts to reconcile the liberties of modern life with the traditional values of Islam. Those who resort to violence to accomplish largely political aims are mistrusted by their own communities and considered misguided by most religious leaders. It is unfortunate that this small minority gain maximum media coverage and are the very people upon whom the entire culture of the mostly peaceful, amiable, adaptable and tolerant Arabian Peninsula is judged.

MEETING LOCALS

Etiquette plays a very important part in Arab culture. Even though Arabs are forgiving of foreigners, they also greatly appreciate the visitor who tries to master a few civilities. It's worth remembering too that the Peninsula is still highly conservative in terms of public behaviour. This particularly applies to dress; even in more liberal cities like Dubai, the locals are easily affronted by the sight of too much flesh.

Guests are usually seen to the door, or even to the end of the corridor or garden. Traditionally this represents the secure safe passage of guests from your tribal territory to theirs. Be sure to do the same, if you have Arab visitors.

General Etiquette

When meeting either for the first time or on subsequent occasions, people usually stand up and shake hands. In some areas (Saudi being one), people may touch their heart after and in other areas they may kiss on the cheek (as in the Gulf States), or even knock noses (as in areas of Oman). For the male visitor, a handshake is sufficient, but don't shake a woman's hand unless she offers hers first. Some devoutly religious men will not touch a woman's hand; the key is to take your cue from the other person.

TEA & TALK

A *diwaniya* (gathering), usually conducted at someone's home – in a tent or on cushions just outside it, to be precise – is an important aspect of Gulf life, and any visitor who has the chance to partake in one will find it the best opportunity to observe Arab social life first-hand. The object of the gathering is to drink endless cups of hot, sweet tea – oh, and to chew the political cud, of course. It is usually a 'man thing'. As one Kuwaiti woman explained, the women of the house are usually too busy living life to waste time discussing it.

Before any kind of transaction – at the checkout in a supermarket, if the traffic police stop you, before a meeting begins, on the telephone between strangers – people greet each other thoroughly and preferably enquire after the other person's health. As a visitor, you should never 'get down to business' without at least a few polite exchanges regarding family health. Men, however, should never enquire after another man's wife or daughters.

The Thousand and One Nights, translated by Richard Burton, is a collection of tales that originate from Arabia, India and Persia. The narrator, the beautiful Scheherazade, entertains the brutal King Shahryar with tales of genies and magical transformations, including the stories of Ali Baba and Aladdin.

Shoes should be removed before entering a mosque or someone's house. The soles of feet are considered unclean and it's insulting to point them at anyone. This means taking care not to stretch your legs out. The left hand is used for ablutions, so always use the right hand when touching, or when offering things. It's impolite to beckon with a finger.

Guests are always offered coffee or tea on social or business occasions. As a guest, it's impolite to refuse at least one cup (see p84).

What to Wear

Nothing offends Arabs quite as much as inappropriate clothing. Here are a few tips on what travellers should wear to avoid offending anybody.

MEN

Traditional dress has acquired complex nationalist connotations, visually setting apart natives of the region from the large population of foreigners. As such, Western men should avoid wearing local *thobes* or *dishdashas* – at best, Arab people think it looks ridiculous. Locals dress smartly if they can afford to and visitors are similarly judged by their dress. Some hotel bars and nightclubs have a strict dress code and on the whole it's unacceptable to be seen anywhere in public, including hotel foyers and souqs, in shorts and vests.

The Son of a Duck is a Floater, by Arnander and Skipworth, is a fun collection of Arab sayings with English equivalents. It's worth buying just to see how wisdom is universal – not to mention the thoroughly enjoyable illustrations.

WOMEN

Wearing an *abeyya* and covering hair denotes that a woman is Muslim. Except in Saudi Arabia where foreign women are obliged to wear an *abeyya* (but not cover their hair), it is better for Westerners to avoid this practice, as it can lead to uncomfortable conversations about religion. There are some exceptions – for example, when visiting mosques or attending traditional weddings. Female visitors should wear loose-fitting clothing that covers their knees, shoulders and cleavage. On public beaches, women may feel more comfortable in shorts and a t-shirt than in swimming costumes. Bikinis (except in tourist resorts) cause a local sensation.

Forms of Address

'Drums were beating, and the crowd swaying,' wrote Bertram Thomas in *Alarms & Excursions in Arabia*, 1931, 'quivering sword blades flashed in the sun as sword dancers leapt hither and thither.' Travel in the Peninsula today during a festival, and the scene is very similar.

Correct address is an important part of Arab etiquette. Use Arab given names, as opposed to family names when addressing Arabs in the Peninsula. Instead of Mr Hussein, it's Mr Saddam. In the same way, a foreign visitor will become 'Mr John' as opposed to 'Mr Smith', or 'Mrs Jane' as opposed to 'Mrs Smith'. The correct formal address (or equivalent of 'Mr') is usually *'asayid'* (meaning 'Sir') or *'asayida'* for a woman.

Codes of Conduct

Arab people don't like confrontation. They prefer to smile during 'difficult' conversations and then let off steam later. Equally, the word 'sorry' is not a big part of their vocabulary. Such behaviour is part of the custom of 'saving face' and visitors are better respected if they also refrain from public outbursts of anger or from forcing an apology. Note too, that it's an offence in many Peninsula countries to gesture rudely while driving. Just smile sweetly and mutter under your breath, like they do!

ARTS

In the souqs of Oman, silver jewellery is often sold according to weight measured in *tolahs* (1=11.75g). *Tolahs* are sometimes called *thallers* after the Maria Theresa dollar, an 18th-century Austrian coin used in much of Arabia's currency in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

If you chose one feature that distinguishes art in the Arabian Peninsula (and in the Arab world in general) from that of Western tradition, it would have to focus on the close integration of function with form. In other words, most Arab art has evolved with a purpose. That purpose could be as practical as embellishing the prow of a boat with a cowry shell to ward off 'evil eye', or as nebulous as creating intricate and beautiful patterns to intimate the presence of God and invite spiritual contemplation. Purpose is an element that threads through all Peninsula art – craft, music, architecture and even literature.

Literature

Nothing touches the heart of a Peninsula Arab quite like poetry. Traditionally dominating Arab literature, all the best-known figures of classical Arabic and Persian literature are poets, including the famed Omar Khayyam, the 11th-century composer of *rub'ai* (quatrains), and the 8th-century Baghdadi poet, Abu Nuwas. All great Arab poets were regarded as possessing knowledge forbidden to ordinary people and, as such, they served the purpose of bridging the human and spirit worlds.

To this day, poetry recitals play an important part in all national celebrations, and even the TV-watching young are captivated by a skilfully intoned piece of verse.

The Craft Heritage of Oman, by Richardson and Dorr, is a comprehensive survey of all craft industries in the Sultanate. It makes valuable reading for travellers in any part of the Peninsula as many of the crafts are common to other Arabian countries.

Poetry is part and parcel of the great oral tradition of story telling that informs the literature of all Peninsula countries, the roots of which lie with the Bedu (see the boxed text, opposite). Stories told by nomadic elders to the wide-eyed wonder of the young serve not just as after-dinner entertainment, but as a way of binding generations together in a collective oral history. As such, story telling disseminates the principles of Islam and of tribal and national identity. It extols the virtues of allegiance, valour, endurance and hospitality – virtues that make life in a harsh environment tolerable.

Modern Arab written literature, in the form of novels and short stories, is a relatively recent addition to Peninsula arts. No-one of the calibre of the Nobel prize winning Egyptian, Naguib Mahfouz (the most important writer of Arabic fiction in the 20th century), has yet emerged from the Peninsula but the Saudi writer, Abdelrahman Munif (who wrote *Cities of Salt*) has a reputation in the West.

ARABIC WHISPERS – ORAL LITERATURE ON THE PENINSULA

For the nomadic Bedu of Arabia, life is lived on the move. Permanence is virtually unknown – even the footsteps that mark their passing shift with the sands. The artistic expression of their culture has evolved to be similarly portable – weaving that can be rolled up and stowed on a camel, beadwork that can be tucked in a pocket, stories unfurled round the campfire at night.

Bedu tales, and their endless digressions, serve not just as entertainment. Allegories and parables are used to clarify a situation, to offer tactful advice to a friend, or to alert someone diplomatically to trouble or wrongdoing. More often, they lampoon corrupt leaders and offer a satirical commentary on current affairs – particularly those of the mistrusted 'townspeople'. They can be very funny, highly bawdy and verging on the libellous, depending on the persuasions of the teller.

On the Peninsula, there is said to be a tale for every situation. Travellers may be surprised how often the Bedu resort to proverbs, maxims or stories during the course of normal conversation. It is said that the first proverb of all is: 'While a man may tell fibs, he may never tell false proverbs'!

Sadly, the modern world has encroached on the oral tradition. The advent of television and other forms of entertainment has meant that the role that storytelling plays in Bedouin life has diminished. Now this valuable oral patrimony is in danger of disappearing forever.

Music

Like the oral tradition of story telling, Arabian song and dance have also evolved for a purpose. Generally, music was employed to distract from hardship – like the songs of the seafarers, marooned on stagnant Gulf waters, or the chanting of fishermen hauling in their nets. There are also harvest songs and love ballads, all of which are either sung unaccompanied or to syncopated clapping or drum beats. East African rhythms, introduced into Arab music from Arab colonies, lend much Peninsula music a highly hypnotic quality and songs can last for over an hour.

Geoffrey Bibby's book, *Looking for Dilmun,* gives a very good account of *barasti* housing in the region.

While the austere sects of Wahhabi and Ibadhism discourage singing and dancing, no wedding or national celebration in the Peninsula would be the same without them. Men dance in circles, flexing their swords or ceremonial daggers while jumping or swaying. If they get really carried away, volleys of gunfire are let off above the heads of the crowd. Women have a tradition of dancing for the bride at weddings. Unobserved by men, they wear magnificent costumes (or modern ball gowns) and gyrate suggestively as if encouraging the bride towards the marital bed.

It shouldn't be supposed that just because traditional music plays a big part in contemporary Arab life, it's the only form of music. Pop music, especially of the Amr Diab type, is ubiquitous and nightclubs are popular. There's even a classical orchestra in Oman and there are bagpipe bands.

Crafts

Contemporary Architecture in the Arab States, by Udo Kultermann, is billed as the 'first comprehensive reference on the modern architecture of the Middle East'. The book is well written and well illustrated.

If there's one area in which function and form are most noticeably linked, it's in the craft traditions of the Peninsula – in the jewellery, silversmithing, weaving, embroidery and basket-making crafts that form the rich craft heritage of the Peninsula. Take jewellery, for example – the heavy silver jewellery, so distinctively worn by Bedouin women, was designed not just as a personal adornment but as a form of portable wealth. Silver amulets, containing rolled pieces of parchment or paper, bear protective inscriptions from the Quran, to guarantee the safety of the wearer. At the end of the life of a piece of jewellery, it is traditionally melted down to form new pieces as an ultimate gesture of practicality.

GENUINE BEDOUIN – MADE IN INDIA?

One of the highlights of the Peninsula is undoubtedly a trip to the covered souqs and bazaars, some of which (especially in Jeddah, Doha, Muscat and Sana'a) have occupied the same chaotic labyrinthine quarters for hundreds of years. In these forerunners of the shopping mall, merchants sit behind piles of dates and olives, gold, frankincense and myrrh, in small shops often no bigger than a broom cupboard. Passing in between them are the water-sellers, itinerant cloth vendors, carters (complete with wheelbarrow in Kuwait) and carriers.

The scene (of haggling and gossiping, pushing and shoving, laughing and teasing) may not have changed much in centuries, but many of the goods have. Mostly practical items are on offer – aluminium pans, plastic trays, imports from China – but if you look hard, you can usually find items of traditional craft, even in the most modern of souqs.

There are *kilims* (rugs) and carpets; cotton clothing including *gutras* (white head cloth), *thobes* or *dishdashas* and embroidered dresses; Bedouin woven bags; decorative daggers and swords; copperware and brassware; olive and cedar woodcarvings; kohl (black eyeliner); old trunks and boxes; water pipes; embroidered tablecloths and cushion covers; leather and suede. But, the question is, is it real?

All tourists have seen them: the Roman coins from Syria, the Aladdin lamps from Cairo, the Bedouin jewellery torn from the brow of a virgin bride – the stories attempt to make up for the shameless lack of authentic provenance on the part of the item. While the region is home to some magnificent craft, only relatively few pieces make their way to places like Souq Waqif in Qatar, Mutrah Souq in Oman or Bab al-Bahrain in Bahrain. The vast majority of items on sale to tourists is imported from India, Pakistan and Iran and either sold as such, or more frequently passed off as 'genuine Bedouin' by less-scrupulous shopkeepers.

Recognising that this is lamentable and a wasted opportunity, one country in the region is actively doing something about it. The Omani Heritage Documentation Project was launched in 1996 to document Oman's great craft heritage and envisage ways to ensure its survival. The resulting two-volume book, *The Craft Heritage of Oman,* is the definitive guide to Oman's cottage industries and took eight years to complete. It is an inspiration to anyone with an interest in the arts and crafts of Oman and an invitation to other Peninsula countries to follow suit.

Islamic Arts, by Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, is a lavishly illustrated introduction to Islamic arts from weaving and calligraphy to architecture and the decorative arts.

The sad fact of practical craft is that once the need for it has passed, there is little incentive to maintain the skills. Where's the point of potters in Al-Hufuf in Saudi Arabia and Bahla in Oman making clay ewers when everyone drinks water from Masafi branded bottles? Aware of this fact, many governments throughout the region have encouraged the setting up of local craft associations in the hope of keeping alive such an important part of their heritage. Some of the best-supported ventures in the region are the Bedouin weaving project at Sadu House (p161) in Kuwait City, the Oman Craft Heritage Documentation Project (p188) and the women's centres in Manama (p129) and Abu Dhabi (p422). Inevitably, however, when craft is hollowed of its function, when it provides a mere curiosity of the past or is redefined as souvenirs for tourists, it becomes only a shadow of itself.

Architecture

The veneration for the written word is reflected in the treatment of the calligrapher who until recent times was the most sought-after and highly paid artist in a community.

Styles across the region vary so considerably, it's hard to talk about Peninsula architecture under one umbrella – there's the multistorey mud edifices of Yemen and Southern Saudi; the round mud huts more akin to sub-Saharan architecture on the Tihama; the *barasti* dwellings of eastern Arabia; the coral buildings of Jeddah; or the gypsum decoration of Gulf design.

In common with other arts, Peninsula architecture is traditionally steered by purpose. The local climate plays an important role in this.

The wind towers of the Gulf, for example, not only look attractive, they function as channels of cooler air (see boxed text, p56); the gaily painted window frames of Yemeni and Asir dwellings in Saudi help waterproof the adobe. Security is another issue: the positioning of forts around and on top of rocky outcrops in the Hajar Mountains gives a foundation more solid than anything bricks and mortar might produce. And then there's the question of space: in the mountain areas of Saudi, Yemen and Oman, whole villages appear to be suspended in air, perched on top of inaccessible promontories, storeys piled high to save from building on precious arable land.

Islamic Architecture, by Robert Hillenbrand, looks at religious buildings across the region. Covering the period from about AD 700 to 1700, this well-illustrated volume is a definitive guide to the subject.

The one 'art form' that a visitor to the Peninsula can hardly miss is the modern tower block. In many Gulf cities, cranes almost outnumber buildings in the race to build the most extravagant confection of glass and steel. In the process, Peninsula architecture has become diverted from the traditional principle of functionality. Take the magnificent Emirates Palace hotel in Abu Dhabi, for example, where you need to pack your trainers to get from bed to breakfast.

The Bahrain Arts Society's interesting and involving website, www.bahartsociety.org.bh, chronicles not just Bahrain's art scene but Arabic culture in general.

Increasingly, architects are expected to refer, in an almost talismanical way, to the visual vocabulary of Arab art: hence the pointed windows, false balconies, wooden screens and tent motifs of modern buildings across the Peninsula. Perhaps this is because many traditional buildings, with their economy of style and design, achieve something that modern buildings often do not – they blend in harmoniously with their environment.

ARCHITECTURAL HIGHLIGHTS

The architecture of the Arabian Peninsula may not be as well known as that in neighbouring countries, but it does have some gems. The following is a highly subjective top 10 of architectural wonders, ancient and modern, that adorn the region (listed approximately by age):

- **Ma'rib Dam, Yemen** (p496) Though there's not much to see, the sense of one of the largest building projects of the ancient world lingers round the standing stones.
- **Madain Salah, Saudi Arabia** (p333) Imagine having Petra to yourself: the Nabataean monuments of this 'petit Petra' lie in a wind-sculpted desert of sandstone.
- **Nakhal Fort, Oman** (p238) It's impossible to choose just one of Oman's 1000 forts but the setting of Nakhal Fort, at the knee-bend of mountains and plains, is hard to beat.
- **Houses of Shibam, Yemen** (p505) Called 'Manhattan of the Desert' by Freya Stark, this medieval town is where the art of high-rise began.
- **Beit Sheikh Isa bin Ali, Bahrain** (p135) This house has the best example of the air-conditioning wizardry of 18th- and 19th-century wind-tower architecture, prevalent in the Gulf.
- **Arab Fund Building, Kuwait** (p162) For a demonstration of the unity of Islamic art, there's no finer modern example than the interior of this discreet 20th-century building.
- **Muscat Grand Mosque, Oman** (p201) There are many spectacular mosques across the region, but the elegant, understated masterpiece in Muscat has the largest hand-loomed carpet in the world.
- **Burj al-Arab, UAE** (p389) For the quintessential postmodern experience, a tour of this iconic tower is a must.
- **Bahrain International Circuit, Bahrain** (p133) Evocative of a Bedouin tent, this Formula One racetrack is a good illustration of the way modern building design incorporates traditional design.
- **Doha Corniche, Qatar** (p275) A monument to 21st-century modern architecture, the buildings that grace Doha's corniche set the benchmark for daring and diversity.

THE ART OF AIR CONTROL

Called *barjeel* in Arabic, wind towers are the Gulf States' own unique form of non-electrical air-conditioning. In most of the region's cities a handful still exist, sometimes attached to private homes, and sometimes carefully preserved or reconstructed at museums. In Sharjah (the UAE) a set of massive wind towers is used to cool the modern Central Market building.

Traditional wind towers rise 5m or 6m above a house. They are usually built of wood or stone but can also be made from canvas. The tower is open on all four sides and so can catch even the breathiest of breezes. These mere zephyrs are channelled down a central shaft and into the room below. In the process, the air speeds up and is cooled. The cooler air already in the tower shaft pulls in and subsequently cools the hotter air outside through a simple process of convection.

Sitting beneath a wind tower on a hot and humid day, the temperature is noticeably cooler with a consistent breeze even when the air outside feels heavy and still.

Islamic Art

There can be no greater example of function at the heart of art than Islamic art. For a Muslim, Islamic art remains first and foremost an expression of faith, and to this day people are cautious of 'art for art's sake', or art as an expression of the self without reference to community. Ask Arab students to draw a picture, and they'll often draw something with a message or a meaning, rather than just a pretty picture.

The *masjid* or *jamaa* (mosque) is considered 'the embodiment' of the Islamic faith, and the Peninsula is home to Islam's holiest: the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Several times larger than any football stadium, each accommodates many thousands of worshippers.

A good example of instructive or inspirational visual art is calligraphy. Arabic is not just a language for Arabs – for Muslims throughout the world it is the language of the Quran, so it's a cohesive and unifying factor, imbued with a reverence that is hard for non-Muslims to understand. Islamic calligraphy, the copying of God's own words, is seen by many as a pious act and remains to this day the highest aesthetic practised in the Arab world. All over Arabia one can see magnificent examples of this highly refined art (see especially Beit al-Quran in Bahrain; p122) with its repetition of forms and symmetry of design.

The most visible expression of Islamic art, however, is surely the mosque. It too is built on mostly functional principles. In fact, the first mosques were modelled on the Prophet Mohammed's house. To this day the basic plan in providing a safe, cool and peaceful haven for worship has changed little – there's the open *sahn* (courtyard), the arcaded *riwaq* (portico), and the covered, often domed, *haram* or prayer hall. A vaulted niche in the wall is called the mihrab; this serves to indicate the qibla, or direction of Mecca, towards which Muslims must face when they pray. The *minbar* (pulpit) is traditionally reached by three steps. The Prophet is said to have preached his sermons from the third step. Abu Bakr, his successor, chose to preach from the second step, and this is where most *imams* (prayer leaders) stand or sit today when preaching the Friday sermon.

Betting is against Islamic principles, but at camel races, vast sums of money change hands in terms of prize money, sponsorship and ownership. A prize-racing camel can fetch over US$100,000.

The first minarets appeared long after Mohammed's death. Prior to that time, the muezzin (prayer caller) often stood on a rooftop or some other elevation so that he could be heard by as many townsfolk as possible.

Traditionally, mosques had an ablution fountain at the centre of the courtyard, often fashioned from marble. Today most modern mosques have a more practical row of taps and drains alongside.

The mosque serves the community in many ways. Groups of children receive Quranic lessons or run freely across the carpet; people sit in quiet contemplation of carved wood panels, tiled walls and marbled pillars; others simply enjoy a peaceful nap in the cool. As such, there is no greater expression of the way that art remains at the service of people – something that surprises secular, Western onlookers. By the same token, it will be interesting to see what Muslims make of the decorative art of Europe – the Jean Nouvel–designed 'Louvre of the Desert' is about to open in Abu Dhabi (see p422), showcasing work from the Louvre in Paris. The decadence of the project, never mind the work on display, is bound to ruffle conservative feathers and challenge Peninsula people to reconsider what else could be meant by the term 'Art'.

SPORT

The people of the Arabian Peninsula love sport, and some Gulf countries, especially Qatar, are trying to promote themselves as venues for international events. This is no new phenomenon. For centuries, Arab men have been getting together in flat patches of desert to demonstrate their prowess in agility, speed and courage. Most of these traditional games, which involve bare-foot running, ball games, wrestling and even rifle throwing, are hard for a visitor to fathom, but since 2007, the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries have been trying to encourage greater participation in these kinds of sports and they may well receive more popular promotion in future.

The Dubai Cup offers prize money of US$6 million, making it the richest horse race of its kind in the world.

Many traditional sports involve skill in handling animals. To this day, camel racing and horse racing are popular events, and falconry is of course the fabled sport of kings. A curiosity of the east coast of Arabia (in the UAE and Oman) is bull-butting – the kindly pitching of one Brahmin bull against another in a contest of strength, non-harmful to the animals involved. It takes place in a dusty arena where the animals are nudged into a head-down position, and push and shove from one side of the arena to the other. The bulls are precious to their owners and much beloved so the minute the going gets tough, thankfully the tough get going. As such, it isn't exactly the most spectacular sport to watch, though it always draws a huge crowd of locals. The best places to see bull-butting are near Muscat in Oman (see p237) and at Fujairah in the UAE (see p434).

It is estimated that 2000 falcons are still 'worked' across the Peninsula today. The Bedu use them for hunting.

Camel Racing

Camel racing is a grumbling affair of camels (who'd really rather not run) and owners (who make sure they do). The rider, traditionally, is almost immaterial. Racing usually involves a long, straight track (camels are not very good at cornering) with very wide turns. Camel fanciers race alongside in their 4WDs to give their favourite camel encouragement.

Camel racing can be seen throughout the region from October to May, although authorities are sensitive about the bad press associated

CAMEL ON COMMAND

Traditionally, camels were raced by child jockeys, who were often 'bought' from impoverished families in Pakistan and Bangladesh, trained in miserable conditions, kept deliberately underweight and then exposed to the dangers of regular racing. The plight of these young boys has attracted international condemnation over the years. Qatar and the UAE, among other Gulf States, recently banned the use of child jockeys but were then left with the problem of finding something similarly light-weight to replace them. Their novel solution could best be described as 'robo-rider'. These robotic jockeys are remote-controlled, look vaguely humanoid and can crack an electronic whip. The camels appear to respond just as well (or just as badly) to their new mounts, and future versions of this gadget will sport bug-eyes from which the corpulent owner can pretend he's thin again as he takes virtual strides at 60km/h around the racetrack.

BENDING IT LIKE AL-BECKHAM

One sure-fire entrée into conversation across the region is to talk about Beckham – or rather Al-Beckham – and football in general back home. Peninsula men are obsessed with the game. But what distinguishes the sport in Arabia is not so much the players or the fans, but the extraordinary places where it's played.

There are pitches between fast lanes in Bahrain; motorway intersection pitches in Kuwait; shifting pitches, like the one in the UAE sand dunes, which has usually blown away before kick-off.

It's in Oman, however, that pitches are taken to new heights – like the one on the top of Jebel Shams, with goals strung out between two locally woven rugs, redefining the term 'mile-high club'. Omanis specialise in wet pitches, like the one near Bandar Khayran where the goalkeeper's job is to keep out the incoming tide or the one cradled in the mouth of Wadi Shab and cropped by donkeys. Soccer even stops traffic in Oman. Best in the road-stopping category is the pitch bisected by the road from Hat to Wadi bani Awf. When a game is on, all traffic on the only road that links both sides of the Hajar Mountains has to stop until half-time – a full 40 minutes of holding up one goat and me!

with the recruitment of young jockeys (see boxed text, p57) and less keen to promote races for tourism. Nonetheless, visitors can see races in Al-Shahaniya in Qatar (see p290) and Nad al-Sheba Camel Racecourse in Dubai (see p391).

Horse Racing

The highlight of the year for many fanatics is the Gulf Cup, which involves all the Peninsula countries. When a national team wins a game, the capital city comes to a standstill with horn-blowing, flag-waving and even gun-firing in the interior.

The breeding of horses, shipped from ports like Sur in Oman, has been a source of income in Arabia for centuries. Now, partly thanks to the efforts of Lady Anne Blunt, a 19th-century British horse-breeder, the fleet-footed, agile Arab horse is raced all over the world.

Horse racing is a major spectator event for Peninsula people and the event doesn't get more glamorous than the Dubai Cup (p392). Heads of states, royalty, celebrities and top international jockeys gather for the occasion. Like Ascot in the UK it's *the* place to be seen.

Falconry

The ancient art of falconry is still practised across the Peninsula. It dates back at least to the 7th century BC when tradition has it that a Persian ruler caught a falcon to learn from its speed, tactics and focus. Modern owners continue to admire their birds and lavish love and respect upon them.

Many raptors are bred for falconry on the Asir escarpment in Saudi but the easiest place to see a peregrine up close is in the Falcon Souq in Doha (see p285). The magical spectacle of birds being flown can be seen in Dubai (see p389) and at most festivals, such as the Jenadriyah National Festival in Riyadh (see p314).

Modern Sports

A range of modern sports are popular in the region, including rally-driving, quad-biking, volleyball, cricket (especially among Asian expats), hockey and even ice-skating (see p204). In Dubai, locals have even taken to the slopes on real snow (see p391).

You can't possibly talk about sports in the area, however, and not mention football. At 4pm on a Friday, the men of just about every village in Arabia trickle onto the local waste-ground to play, all hopeful of joining international European clubs one day like some of their compatriots. Football is usually a shoeless business, on a desert pitch (see boxed text, above), played in *wizza* (cotton underskirt) and nylon strip.

Islam

You don't have to stay in the Arabian Peninsula for long to notice the presence of a 'third party' in all human interaction. Every official occasion begins with a reading from the Holy Quran. A task at work begins with an entreaty for God's help. The words *al-hamdu lillah* (thanks be to god) frequently lace sentences in which good things are related. Equally, the words *in sha' Allah* (god willing) mark all sentences that anticipate the future. These expressions are not merely linguistic decoration, they evidence a deep connection between society and faith.

Turkey is the only Muslim country that has formally separated the religious sphere from the secular sphere.

For most Muslims, in other words, Islam is not just a religion, it's a way of life. It suggests what a Muslim should wear and what a Muslim should eat. It directs how income should be spent, who should inherit and by what amount. It guides behaviour and suggests punishment for transgression. Few other religions are as all-encompassing.

It is hard for most people in Western countries, where church and state are rigorously separated, to understand that for Muslims, there's little distinction between politics, culture and religion: each flows seamlessly through the other.

'Travelling is a portion of punishment.' The Prophet Mohammed.

Understanding the religious integrity of Peninsula people makes sense of certain customs and manners. In turn, it guides the traveller in appropriate conduct and minimises the chance of giving offence.

HISTORY

The Birth of Islam

Islam was founded in the early 7th century by the Prophet Mohammed. Born around AD 570 in the city of Mecca, Mohammed began receiving revelations at the age of 40 that continued for the rest of his life. Muslims believe these revelations, some received in Mecca, others in Medina, came directly from Allah through the angel Gabriel.

AND YOUR RELIGION IS...?

After exchanging pleasantries with acquaintances on the Peninsula, the conversation inevitably tends towards three subjects that most Western people shy away from: sex, politics and religion. The level of frankness involved in some of these discussions can come as a surprise. Forewarned is forearmed, however, and there's no better way of getting under the skin of a nation than talking about the things that matter most in life.

While all three subjects may seem like potential minefields (don't talk about sex with the opposite gender, especially if you're male; if you're talking politics, avoid saying 'you' when you mean 'your government'), religion is the one topic of conversation that takes a bit of practice. Christians and Jews are respected as 'People of the Book' who share the same God (see p65). Many a Bedouin encounter begins with a celebration of that fact with greetings such as 'Your God, my God same – Salam (Peace)!'

For most Muslims, however, tolerating Hindus, Christians or Jews is not the problem – knowing what to do with a heretic is the problem. Stating you don't believe in God is as good as saying you doubt the very foundation of a Muslim's life. So how do you say you're an atheist without causing offence? Try saying 'I'm not religious'. This will likely lead to understanding nods and then, on subsequent meetings, a very earnest attempt at conversion. Words like 'You'll find God soon, God-willing' should be seen as a measure of someone's like for you not as a rejection of your 'position'; as both of you have equal chances of being right, a reasonable response would be *shukran* (thank you).

WHO WAS MOHAMMED?

Very little is known about the early years of Mohammed, other than that he was born around AD 570. His biography was written a century after his death and is more adulatory than factual.

Mohammed's early life doesn't appear to have been easy. His father died before he was born, and his mother when he was six years old. Adopted by his grandfather, who shortly also died, he was eventually sent to live with his uncle. With few means, the boy was obliged to work early as a caravan trader. Mohammed's honesty, integrity and efficiency, however, didn't escape the eye of a much older, wealthy widow called Khadijah, who soon took him on as her agent. Eventually the couple married and had four daughters. After Khadijah's death, Mohammed married several other wives (polygamy was acceptable) for political and altruistic reasons. In addition he had at least two concubines.

As Mohammed came from an oral tradition, he memorised the revelations, rather than writing them down, and then repeated them to friends and family. His contemporaries recognised the revelations as divine and they formed the basis of the Quran (meaning 'recitation' in Arabic). In turn, the Quran, as well as a series of suras (verses), became the basis of the new religion of Islam.

Sunnis & Shiites

Islam split into different sects soon after its foundation, based not so much on theological interpretation but on historical event.

Al-Bab (www.al-bab.com) is a comprehensive site providing links to information on and discussions of Islam.

When the Prophet died in 632, he left no instructions as to who should be his successor, or the manner in which future Islamic leaders (known as caliphs) should be chosen. The community initially chose Abu Bakr, the Prophet's closest companion and father-in-law, as the new leader of the Muslim faith but not everyone was happy with this decision. Some supported the claim of Ali bin Abi Taleb, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law. They became known as *shi'a* ('partisans' of Ali). Ali eventually became caliph, the fourth of Mohammed's successors, in 656. However, five years later he was assassinated by troops loyal to the Governor of Syria, Mu'awiyah bin Abu Sufyan (a distant relative of the Prophet) and Mu'awiyah became caliph.

From that point hence, the Muslim community separated into two competing factions. The Sunnis on the one hand favoured the Umayyads, the dynasty which was established by Mu'awiyah. According to Sunni doctrine, the caliph was both the spiritual leader of the Muslim community and the temporal ruler of the state. So long as a Muslim ruled with justice and according to the Sharia'a (Islamic law), he deserved the support of the Muslim community as a whole. Shiites, on the other hand, believed that only a descendant of the Prophet through Ali's line should lead the Muslims. Because Shiites have rarely held temporal power, their doctrine came to emphasise the spiritual position of their leaders, the *imams*.

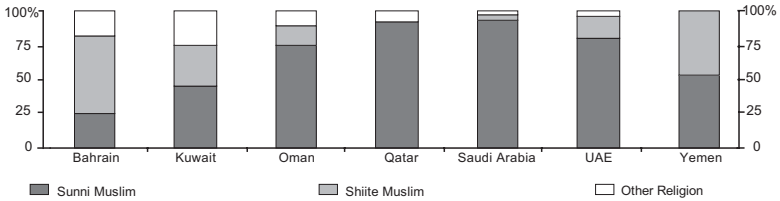
Muhammed: A Biography of the Prophet, by Karen Armstrong, is a sensitive, well-researched and highly readable biography of the Prophet set against the backdrop of modern misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam.

In 680, Ali's son Hussein was murdered in brutal circumstances at Karbala (in today's southern Iraq), an event that further widened the gap between the two factions. The division and hostility between the two sects continues to this day.

As with any religion approaching one billion adherents, Islam has produced many sects, movements and offshoots within the traditional Sunni–Shiite division. The two most important Sunni sects in the Gulf States are the Wahhabis (see p307), whose austere doctrines are the official form of Islam in Saudi Arabia, and the Ibadis (see p187), who also espouse a strict interpretation of Islam and are the dominant sect in Oman.

DISTRIBUTION OF SUNNIS & SHIITES ACROSS THE PENINSULA

The following graph shows the approximate distribution of Sunni and Shiite Muslims across the Arabian Peninsula. For updates of this information, consult www.populstat.info.



TEACHINGS

Despite modern connotations with fundamentalism and the violent beginnings of Islam in the Peninsula itself, Islam is an inherently peaceful creed. The word 'Islam' means 'submission', or 'self-surrender'. It also means 'peace'. Taken as a whole, Islam is the attainment of peace – with self, society and the environment – through conscious submission to the will of God. To submit to the will of God does not just entail paying lip service to God through ceremony, but through all daily thoughts and deeds.

Around 90% of all Muslims are Sunnis. In the Arabian Peninsula, however, Shiites constitute a clear majority in Bahrain (though Bahrain's ruling family are Sunnis), and there are significant Shiite minorities in Kuwait, the UAE (United Arab Emirates) and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

The principal teaching of Islam is that there is only one true God, creator of the universe. Muslims believe that the God of Islam is the same god of Christians and Jews, but that he has no son or partner and he needs no intermediary (such as priests). Muslims believe that the prophets, starting with Adam, including Abraham and Jesus, and ending with Mohammed, were sent to reveal God's word but that none of them were divine.

Historically, this creed obviously had great appeal to the scattered people of the Peninsula who were given access to a rich spiritual life without having to submit to incomprehensible rituals administered by hierarchical intermediaries. Believers needed only to observe the transportable Five Pillars of Islam in order to fulfil their religious duty. This is true to this day and is perhaps one of the reasons why Islam is one of the world's fastest growing religions.

The Five Pillars of Islam

SHAHADA

This is the profession of faith that Muslims publicly declare in every mosque, five times a day across the land: 'There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet'. To convert to Islam, one needs only to state this with conviction three times.

SALAT

Muslims are expected to pray five times a day: at sunrise, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and night (usually 1½ hours after sunset). It's acceptable to pray at home or at the office, except for Friday noon prayers, which are performed preferably at a mosque. Prayer involves prostration in the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca (arrows in aircraft and in hotel rooms indicate the right direction) and the ritual recital of passages of the Quran. Before praying, a Muslim must perform 'ablution' (washing arms, hands, head and feet with water or sand) to indicate a willingness to be purified in spirit.

Over the centuries Sunnism has developed into the 'orthodox' strain of Islam and today comprises about 90% of the world's more than 1100 million Muslims. There are large Shiite minorities, however, spread across the Middle East.

ZAKAT

This is the duty of alms giving. Muslims must give a portion of their salary (one-fortieth of a believer's annual income to be exact) to those in greater need than oneself.

Zakat (the giving of alms) is the responsibility of the individual. Nonetheless, today, zakat often works as a kind of welfare system, collected by the state as an annual tax and redistributed through mosques or religious charities.

RAMADAN

It was during the month of Ramadan that Mohammed received his first revelation in AD 610. Muslims mark this special event each year by fasting from sunrise until sunset throughout the month of Ramadan. During this time, Muslims must abstain from taking anything into their bodies, whether related to eating, drinking, having sex or smoking. The idea behind the fast is to bring people closer to Allah via spiritual and physical purity.

Some people are excused the rigours of Ramadan, including young children and those whose health will not permit fasting. Travellers on a journey are also excused, although they are expected to fast on alternative days instead. (For more details on Ramadan, see p534.)

HAJ

Every Muslim capable of doing so (whether physically or financially) is expected to perform the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, the holiest of cities, at least once in their lifetime. For a pilgrimage to qualify as a 'true' haj, it can only be performed during a few specific days of the Muslim year. Visiting Mecca at any other time of the year is known as *umrah* (the 'lesser pilgrimage' or 'visitation'). Performing the haj is richly rewarded: all past sins are forgiven. Additionally, pilgrims are entitled to call themselves *al-haj* and doing so still evokes much respect in the community. See the Haj chapter for a fuller description of haj.

Sharia'a

As there is no distinction between life and religion in Islam, it follows that a set of principles or 'laws' based on Islamic teaching should shape the general conduct of life. The 'legal' implications of those principles is referred to as Sharia'a, although it is not 'law' in a Western sense and is widely open to differences of interpretation.

In matters of dispute, or where someone breaks the moral code of Islam, Muslim scholars turn either to the Quran or to the Sunnah, a body of works recording the sayings and doings of the Prophet (and some of his companions) for guidance. However, there are many Sunnah authorities, and their reliability is in turn determined by different schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

Sharia'a law has come to be associated with extreme forms of punishment meted out to transgressors in some Arab countries: amputation of limbs for repeat-offending thieves, flogging of those caught committing adultery, public beheading for murderers. These punishments, associated mostly with the austere Hanbali school of jurisprudence in Saudi Arabia, are intended as a deterrent first and foremost and are seldom enforced.

In some instances the Sharia'a is quite specific, such as in the areas of inheritance law and the punishments for certain offences. In many other cases it provides only guidelines. A learned scholar or judge has to determine the proper 'Islamic' position or approach to a problem using his own discretion. This partly explains the wide divergence in Muslim opinion on some issues – such as today with regard to jihad.

Jihad

If there is one term that is more misunderstood than Sharia'a by people in the West, it is the term 'jihad'. This has come to be seen as the rallying cry-to-arms of so-called Muslim fundamentalists against Western regimes and is assumed to apologise for acts of terrorism. It is true that for some fundamentalists jihad represents a violent struggle to preserve the Islamic faith from the encroachment of a different set of moral values (or, as they would see it, a lack of moral values). For these people, it also represents a struggle against what they consider to be the bullying of countries whose political and economic dominance impinge upon the rights and freedoms of Islamic peoples – in Palestine and Iraq in particular.

The interpretation of jihad as being solely about waging war on alternative ways of governance and of living, however, is a very narrow definition that most Islamic people wholeheartedly reject. Indeed, violent behaviour runs counter to Islamic teaching regarding justice, tolerance and peace. In fact, the word jihad means 'striving' or 'struggle' and has much broader connotations than the translation usually ascribed to it by the Western media. Far from 'holy war', it more often means 'striving in the way of the faith' – struggling against one's own bad intentions, or rooting out evil, 'indecency' or oppression in society. Islam dictates that this struggle should occur through peaceful, just means and the prevailing of wisdom, not through anger and aggression.

Jihad in a political context, as the 'struggle to defend the faith', has been the subject of intense debate among Muslim scholars for the last 1400 years. In as much as it refers to the right of a nation to defend itself against oppression, there isn't a nation on earth that wouldn't claim the same right. Nevertheless, for most scholars (both past and present) jihad refers primarily to a spiritual rather than nationalistic, political or military concept.

THE QURAN

Muslims believe that the Quran is the literal word of God, unlike the Bible or Torah which they believe were inspired by God but were recorded subject to human interpretation. For Muslims, the Quran is therefore not just the principal source of doctrine in Islam, but also a source of spiritual rapture in its own right. It is recited often with emotional elation, as a blessing to the reciter and the hearer. The use of the 'sacred' language of Arabic, with its unique rhythms, gives the recitation a sacramental quality that eludes translation, and many Muslims around the world still learn large portions of the Quran in its original form to feel closer to God's words.

Given the belief in the Quran's physical sacredness, Islamic law forbids the touching or reciting of an Arabic Quran without special ablution. Travellers should be aware of this when visiting mosques and refrain from touching the holy book.

CUSTOMS & CEREMONIES

Other areas of Islamic belief and practice that attract heated Western commentary are those concerned with daily life, and in particular, marriage, the role of women, dress and diet. When looked at from an Islamic or even a historical perspective, however, none of them seem to deserve the reproach they receive. For the social implications of each of these elements of Peninsula life, see the sections on marriage and the role of women (p48), and dress (p49) in the Culture chapter, and Habits & Customs (p85) in the Food & Drink chapter.

Marriage

It is true that a Muslim is permitted by Islam to have up to four wives (but a woman may have only one husband). As with many things within Islam, however, this came about through consideration of a particular historical context where women were left without a provider through war, natural disasters or divorce. Uniquely, it allows a 'certain latitude of nature' on behalf of men within the framework of the law, but holds men responsible for their actions.

Marriage has to be entered into freely on behalf of both the man and the woman or else it is invalid.

Role of Women

Islam regards women, whether single or married, as individuals in their own right, with the right to own property and earnings without anyone dictating how they dispose of that income. A marriage dowry is given by the groom to the bride for the woman's personal use and she keeps her own name in marriage.

Although Islam permits four wives, each wife must be treated equally: 'if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly, then only one.' Modern Muslim interpretation emphasises the impossibility of loving two wives equally, thereby resigning the practice to history.

Mothers are highly honoured in Islam and far from being excluded from the mosque, as is sometimes believed by non-Muslims, they are exempted the duty to make it easier to fulfil their function as carer of children. Most mosques have separate prayer halls where women can worship without feeling uncomfortable by the presence of men. Men are never permitted to enter the women's prayer hall but in some of the Grand Mosques, women are permitted, except during prayer times, to enter the men's prayer hall. In Mecca, all Muslims, male and female, stand shoulder to shoulder in the sacred places and pray together.

Dress

Islam prescribes modest dress in public places for both men and women, which involves covering the legs, arms and head for men, and the hair and neck for women. It does not, however, mention the use of a veil. It is unclear where the custom of covering the body originated from; it certainly predates Islam and to a large degree makes excellent sense in the ravaging heat of the Arabian Peninsula where exposure to the midday sun is dangerous to health.

Diet

Muslims are forbidden to eat or drink anything containing pork or alcohol. Nor are they permitted to consume the blood or the meat of any animal that has died of natural causes. These strictures made good sense in the Arabian Peninsula where tape worm was a common problem with pork meat and where the effect of alcohol is exaggerated by the climate.

Meat must be halal (permitted) or in other words slaughtered in the prescribed manner, involving consideration of the animal and minimal cruelty.

A BATTLE FOR BODY & SOUL *Jenny Walker*

I remember travelling with my father on the Peninsula, 20 years ago, and often being the focus of a bizarre bidding war involving the price of marital upkeep weighed against a number of camels. My own father only stopped the bidding (an unavoidable topic of conversation between men over coffee in a Bedouin tent) when a shipping bill for two dromedaries arrived at our house in Surrey and there clearly wasn't going to be enough grass to graze them.

Gone are those days, thankfully, but solo women travelling in the Peninsula today may still be surprised at the number of times they receive a marriage proposal. Before assuming that this is a ruse to engage in sexual relations, you may find that your suitor is after your soul as much as your body. The sight of a single woman brings out the protective instincts of many a Peninsula male – and besides they earn more points in heaven if they extend the security of their name and home to a woman in need.

One day at work in Muscat, a young Arabic woman came looking for a job. I left her in the company of one of my team while I collected an application form. When I came back a few minutes later, he'd married her! I asked whether the speed of attachment to wife number three was anything to do with her youth, or her beauty, or her talents. My colleague was pleased his new wife could cook, he said, but his prime motivation was, with the grace of Allah, to scoop her out of harm's way. Such is the confidence of man!

ISLAM & THE WEST

In his Introduction to the new *Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Professor Huston Smith quotes a *Newsweek* journalist commenting on the 1979 US–Iran crisis: 'We are heading into an expansion,' ran the article, 'of the American relationship with that complex of religion, culture and geography known as Islam…no part of the world is more hopelessly and systematically and stubbornly misunderstood by us.'

The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam, by Cyril Glasse, is a definitive volume regarding the Islamic religion, detailing an A to Z of facts, concepts and premises in a factual, authoritative style. An essential point of reference for anyone wanting to become better acquainted with this world religion.

These are strong words and they reflect 1000 years of misinformation, mistrust and misrepresentation of the Muslim world by the West and vice versa. But to what extent can the same comment be made today when each country in the West has a sizable Muslim community, large proportions of Gulf students attend Western colleges, and expat workers from Peninsula countries return with a different story? For once in the history of East–West relations, the ordinary person in the street is better informed about alternative cultures than ever before. So why does the myth-making persist?

Historically, Muslims and Christians confronted each other during the Inquisition, the Crusades and in numerous encounters throughout history. Religious propaganda was used as a way of helping each side achieve its purpose and those prejudices persist to this day. Add to this the behaviour of a small minority who call themselves Muslim but who are not good ambassadors for the faith, and it would appear that the religion is doomed to be 'hopelessly and systematically and stubbornly misunderstood' for millennia to come.

With about one billion people professing the faith, Islam is the world's second-largest religion after Christianity; around 50 countries have Muslim majorities and another 35 have significant minorities. Six million Muslims live in the USA – around 2% of the population.

On the other hand, if there is one positive outcome of the tensions between Islam and the West since 9/11 it is surely the high-profile dialogue between ordinary people on what constitutes Islam and how it relates to Western culture. In newspapers and TV programmes in every country of the West, the lexicon of Islam is becoming less alien and less needful of definition. Debates about the wearing of the hejab (veil) that dominated many media stories in 2006, for example, start with the premise that people are no longer ignorant of the custom.

Of course the dialogue hasn't always been a comfortable one as the publication of derogatory cartoons in Denmark showed, nor has the outcome always made good sense, as with censoring Christian expression in case it causes offence to Muslims. Nonetheless, slowly but surely, each 'side' is lurching towards a better understanding of the limits of tolerance expected by the other, and the threatening aspect of the encounter is receding in the process.

This may not be entirely welcome to the governments on either side of the equation. Surely there's an element of political convenience involved in anti-Islamic rhetoric at national levels. After all, how does a power persuade its people that it needs to invade another without drawing on old animosities? Where those old animosities came from in the first place is the subject of the following paragraphs.

Contrary to general expectation, Indonesia, not Arabia, has the largest Muslim population, followed by India.

Shared Foundations of Monotheism

When in 2003 US general William Boykin, referring to a Muslim soldier, said 'I knew that my God was real, and his was an idol', it offended the

Muslim world not so much because of the implied hierarchy of deities but because of the heretical nature of the comment. For all Muslims there is no God but God, and this uniqueness of God is the defining principle of all three major monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

A Middle East Mosaic, by Bernard Lewis, is a fascinating miscellany compiled from many and varied sources, a grab bag of impressions of the 'other' by Muslim, Christian and Jewish observers through the ages.

Islam, Muslims believe, is not a new religion but the refinement and ultimate manifestation of the monotheistic religions. As such, Muslims are respectful of the other two religions and their adherents (known as the 'people of the book'), and acknowledge the debt to the revelations of the Bible and Torah that came before the Quran.

The three religions have much in common as they all revere Jerusalem (the third holiest city after Mecca and Medina for Muslims) and they share the same prophets, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Crucially, however, Islam denies the divinity of any of these figures and teaches that Mohammed was the last prophet who will come before the Day of Judgement.

Foray into Europe

The monotheistic faiths became powerful cultural and political entities in the world because they broke the geographic confines of their origins. Islam is no exception and it soon spread across neighbouring countries, shifting capitals from Mecca to Damascus and thence peacefully to Jerusalem. From here traders from Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean and North Africa were exposed to the new religion and recognised in it a practical, portable faith which they voluntarily took home with them.

The knights of the Spanish Reconquista expelled the last Muslim monarch from Spain in 1492, the very year coincidentally that Columbus reached the Americas, signalling the waxing of the cross and the waning of the crescent in a new world order.

The first major impact that Islam made on the West was through the campaigns of the Muslim armies who spread into Spain from North Africa in 711 and settled in Andalusia. During their occupation of this part of Spain, they built the great citadels and mosques of Granada and Cordoba and entered into a creative and largely peaceful dynamic with Christendom that lasted for seven centuries.

This early Islamic encounter with Europe resulted in much cultural cross-pollination. The scholars of Muslim Spain translated the classical works of medicine, astronomy, chemistry, philosophy and architecture from Greek and Roman sources, lost to the Europe of the Dark Ages, and thereby helped bring about the Renaissance, upon which modern Europe is built.

HAPPY CHRISTMAS IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Living in the Arabian Peninsula and reading about the annual whipping that Western countries give themselves over Christmas, it's hard not to chuckle at the underlying misconceptions involved.

In Britain particularly, where there are laudable intentions on behalf of local councils to be equitable to Islamic immigrant families, there are thoroughly daft outcomes: three out of four small firms banned Christmas decorations in 2006; the Royal Mail scotched religious stamps; carols were called 'seasonal songs', nativity scenes banned in public places and cards sent with 'Season's Greetings'. In Birmingham they even tried to call Christmas 'Winterval'.

While Britain tiptoed round a Weary Winterval, however, the Arabian Peninsula immersed itself in a 'Merry Christmas'. In the malls and shopping centres, there were lights and carols, mangers with babies and neon cribs, cards with angels and the three wise men, and Arab Muslims queuing up to take little Ahmed to see Santa.

Even for atheists it's hard to see why, if Muslims can celebrate the birth of their prophet, Jesus, why on earth can't Christians?

MUSLIM CONTRIBUTORS

Muslims contributed widely to the world's body of knowledge at a time when Europe was lost in the Dark Ages, but few of their names are recognised by people in the West today. Here are four of the many that deserve a better billing in Western history books:

- **Al-Khwarizmi** (AD 780–850), known as the 'Father of Algebra', combined Indian and Greek mathematical traditions and introduced Arabic numerals to Europe. He also built on Ptolemy's work to produce the first map of the world.
- **Ibn Sina** (AD 980–1037) was a great medical scholar who wrote the *Book of Healing* and the *Canon of Medicine* – a medical encyclopaedia which was used throughout the West for over 600 years.
- **Ibn Khaldun** (AD 1332–95), who wrote *The Book of Examples and Collections from Early and Later Information Concerning the Days of Arabs, Non-Arabs and Berbers,* was the first historian to write on the philosophy of history and civilisation.
- **Ibn Battuta** (AD 1304–69) was a famous traveller whose pilgrimage to Mecca became a journey of 120,000km across North Africa, the Middle East and Asia (see p31).

The Crusades

Not everyone was pleased with the Muslim legacy, however, and pockets of resistance to the spread of Islam finally took a militant shape in the form of the Crusades. In the ominous name of a 'just war', Christian zealots wrested the Holy Land from the Muslims in 1099. Unfortunately, the Crusades attracted not only the pious but also every kind of adventurer and miscreant out looking for a fight, and victory was marked by wanton bloodletting.

Despite the atrocities, later travellers to the Holy Land were surprised to find Christians and Muslims settled into comfortable cohabitation, with the former imitating many of the customs and manners of the latter.

Muslim Arabs introduced the concept of zero into European mathematics – without which there would be no computer age – not to mention other civilising influences such as coffee, papermaking and chess.

Ottoman Expansion

The second great Islamic excursion into Europe came with the Ottoman Turks. They've come to be seen as an oppressive people, but during the height of their reign – in an empire that stretched from Hungary to Libya – they treated Christians and Jews with the respect accorded to monotheistic faith by the Quran.

Meanwhile in Arabia's arid Najd region, a new spirit of 'fundamentalism', or return to pure Islamic principles, was taking shape in the form of Abd al-Wahhab. The Wahhabis' various bids for political power based on Islamic zeal prefigured movements such as the Brotherhood of Islam two centuries later.

Colonialism

When Napoleon's armies took aim at the Sphinx in the early 19th century, it marked a turning point in the relationship between the West and the Muslim world. The great powers of Europe, self-assured and wealthy, with large overseas colonies built on the industrial revolution, began to make incursions into Arab territory that were more to do with strategic influence than with faith. The Middle East became the puppet of European ambition for over a century, suffering a mortal blow in 1948 with the founding of the state of Israel (p37).

Infidels, by Andrew Wheatcroft, is a study of Islam and Christianity's troubled relationship from the birth of Islam to the 21st century.

There were positive interactions during the era of colonialism, however. European explorers came to Arabia with a genuine interest in a

culture that seemed less tainted by the effeteness of Western society. By the mid-20th century, the desire for learning drifted in the opposite direction, with many wealthy Muslims studying in Europe. They returned to their own countries bearing Western ideas, including democracy and individualism.

The Desert and the Sown, by Gertrude Bell, first published in 1907, gives an account of Arabia through the travels of this extraordinary woman at the turn of the last century that is remarkable for its common sense and objectivity.

Pan-Arabism

European control of the Middle East diminished with the Suez Crisis of 1956 – the era in which Nasr became President of Egypt, bringing with him the notion of pan-Arabism. First appearing in 1915, pan-Arabism was a movement for unification among the Arab nations of the Middle East. It was a secular and mostly socialist movement with national overtones that opposed any kind of Western influence or intervention in Arab affairs. Unity based on race only fulfilled half the equation and soon unity based on Islam became a more suggestive prospect. Movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, led by the radical Sayyid Qutb, pursued a universal Islamic society through whatever means necessary, including violence and martyrdom. With this movement, an entirely different dynamic towards the West came into being. The revolution in Iran, in which the monarchy was replaced by Muslim clerics, was a further indicator of a new expression of the old alliance of faith and the sword.

The Crisis of Islam – Holy War and Unholy Terror, by Bernard Lewis, is a new book examining the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, and tracing the origin of Islamic resentment, frustration and terrorism.

'The War on Terror'

The politics of oil since the 1970s has dominated relations between the West and the world of Islam. From a Muslim perspective it was the prime motivator behind the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The wealth that has resulted from oil has been equally divisive, giving rise to fundamental Islamic elements who perceive in this relationship a threat to traditional Islamic and Arabic values.

The other major area of confrontation that continues today is resentment regarding the plight of the Palestinians, coupled with the perceived Western bias towards Israel. Until a solution to the relentless problem of cohabitation between Jews and Arabs is reached, the entire region will remain in a state of flux.

George W Bush's use of the term 'crusade' in the early days of the so-called War on Terror was a fundamental tactical error. It reopened old wounds between the West and Islam and reminded Arabs that the provocation for war in this region has generally been the bullying of the weak by the powerful.

KEEPING THE FAITH TODAY

Covering Islam – How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World, by the late Edward W Said (an expert on the Middle East), examines the way in which the media portrays the Islamic world.

It's 11pm on the last Thursday night before Ramadan, and last orders were called half an hour ago. On the bar, lined up in discreet carrier bags, are the takeaway orders of the last remaining men in the bar: there are six Tigers, Pocari Sweat for the non-drinkers, a box of fried king fish and some packets of Heinz tomato ketchup. No-one is moving very far because the evening is convivial and the crack of cue on ball on the billiard table, or the thud of dart on board, is reassuringly familiar and male. The inevitable – the move downtown to a nightclub, watching skimpy-skirted women from the Philippines or from Egypt, in thick tights, gyrating mechanically on stage to Zairian music – is delayed. 'Moving on' always involves a lecture from the wife in the morning, so perhaps tonight everyone will give it a miss.

Perhaps they'll buy some kebabs with chopped cabbage and tongue-curling pickles from the coffeehouse and eat them on the waste ground

OTHER RELIGIONS ON THE PENINSULA TODAY

All the indigenous people of the Peninsula today are Muslim. One or two Muslim converts to Christianity wander in a state of miserable purgatory on the periphery of society, barred from all social interaction with family and friends by a decision that most Muslims would consider not just heretical but also a rejection of common sense, history and culture.

This is not the case with expatriate Christians whose religion is respected and provision for worship catered for in Church services across the region. In Kuwait a huge church stands in the middle of downtown. In Oman a Christian mission set up the first hospitals in Muscat and in consequence, Christian worship is respectfully tolerated with many services in English, Malayalam and languages of other local expats, conducted throughout the week. There are also Hindu and Buddhist temples tucked away in small suburbs of the region's big cities and travelling missions visit expat camps in rural areas to bring comfort to those separated from the familiar props of their home communities. Small enclaves of Jewish people who have lived on the Peninsula for centuries are given private latitude in Yemen as part of the Muslim culture of religious tolerance.

Saudi, as keeper of Islam's holiest shrines, is the exception: no religious observance is permitted other than Islam. That said, a blind eye is turned towards pockets of private worship among Christians. In fact, the key word regarding non-Islamic religious observance in the Arabian Peninsula today is discretion: whatever worship happens behind closed doors and which doesn't interfere with the beliefs of Muslims is a matter between the individual and their conscience.

and enjoy the stars, because God is good, and chat about not very much. If they time it right, by the time they get home, the maid will have put the kids to bed and perhaps it's a no headache night for the wife. Perhaps she's finished her MBA assignment and made it to her friend's wedding in the red dress – the one that hangs off the shoulders and that no other man will ever see. Then again, the football's tempting: the flat screen TV in the corner of the family room will still be on, no doubt, competing quietly with the hum of the air-con. Tonight as every night it's showing the national team being fouled by the neighbouring Gulf team. Everyone knows the referees are a biased bunch of cheating ... well it can be said tonight, but tomorrow, tomorrow is different.

Such is the scene in modern Peninsula cities throughout the Gulf, throughout most of the region in fact – maybe only minus the booze. The men in one place, the women in another, enjoying public company but coming together for family, intimacy and private time – this is the age-old pattern of Arab communities, indulging human passions but reining them in with the unconscious guidance of religion and culture and looking forward to the self-denial of Ramadan.

Modern life requires daily compromises with religion, but then it always has. As such, there's not much that separates a Peninsula life from a Western one, except perhaps in the degrees of temptation and opportunity.

The Haj: the Ultimate Traveller's Tale

The haj. Nothing quite compares. In religious as well as cultural and commercial terms, it is the single largest event in the world. Comprising one of the Five Pillars of Islam (see p61), the pilgrimage to Mecca (or haj, as it is known in Islam) is a duty every Muslim must perform at least once in their lives (so long as they are physically and financially able).

It was the prophet Ibrahim who first founded the tradition over 4000 years ago. Since then, pilgrims have been coming from all corners of the world to carry out their religious obligation.

Many Muslims save all their lives to make this journey. For most, the haj is a profoundly spiritual experience: performing the haj cleanses them of previous sins, serves to reaffirm their faith, and often brings a new meaning and direction to their lives. Additionally, pilgrims who complete the haj return to reverence and respect in their home countries. For most Muslims, the haj is the greatest achievement of their lives.

In this way, the haj has historically played a key contribution to the social cohesion of one of the world's great religions. Mecca, and nearby Medina – which many pilgrims also visit – are considered Islam's two holiest cities. Because of their status, the towns are off limits to non-Muslims, and a wall delineating the *haram* (forbidden) area surrounds the two cities.

HAJ HISTORY

Pilgrims who successfully complete the haj are permitted to prefix their names with 'Al-Haj'. In communities around the world, this appellation still invites much respect, though Islamic teachers warn that the haj should be performed as a mark of religious commitment, not as a way of attaining a higher social status within the community.

Until quite recently, the haj represented a dangerous, drawn-out and difficult enterprise from which there was no guarantee of safe return. In the days before air travel and mass tourism, many pilgrims walked; for some it could take up to two years just to arrive. Still living today are pilgrims across the world – in Africa, Asia and elsewhere – who proudly retell their remarkable journeys.

Hardship was not just endured in the past, it was expected. Before setting off, pilgrims would draw up wills and appoint executors, in case they should fail to return. Many did not make it back home. Bandits, highwaymen, robbers, warring tribes, kidnappers and disease were some of the hazards pilgrims were exposed to.

The journey could also prove very costly, even for wealthier pilgrims. Some rich travellers brought with them slaves on the journey, some of whom were sold along the way, cashed like an early form of travellers cheque in order to pay for expenses.

Merchants sometimes funded their way by bringing goods to barter. This tradition continues even today. In Jeddah, Saudi Arabia's 'gateway to the holy cities', you can find pilgrims selling home-grown products straight out of their suitcases – rolls of brightly coloured cloth from West Africa, coffee from Yemen, saffron and pistachios from Iran, spices from India, kites and toys from Indonesia, juicy dates from Tunisia, and before the days of bird flu, bright-green parrots from Africa.

It was King Abdul Aziz, the founder of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, who first concerned himself with the safety, security and comfort of the pilgrims. One by one, accommodation, health care, sanitation and transportation became the focus of his attentions. It was not all philanthropic: no ruler could claim real control of his domain without guaranteeing the safe passage of pilgrims.

Even today, the haj is considered a massive exercise in PR terms for the Saudis as a nation and for the Al-Sauds as a family, reinforcing as it does the state's image as the self-proclaimed protector of the two holy cities (Mecca and Medina), and the head of Islamic nations.

HAJ TOURISM

Pilgrim Numbers

During 2006 (1427 Hejira), a record-breaking 2.4 million pilgrims officially performed the haj. A large proportion of these (33%) came from Saudi Arabia itself, though many were actually non-Saudi residents. Factoring in the unofficial figures as well (every year, hundreds of thousands of locals slip into Mecca without official permits), the real total probably nears the three million mark.

Just over 50 years ago, the number was not thought to exceed 10,000 pilgrims. In the last decade alone, the number is up 36%, and figures are expected to keep rising.

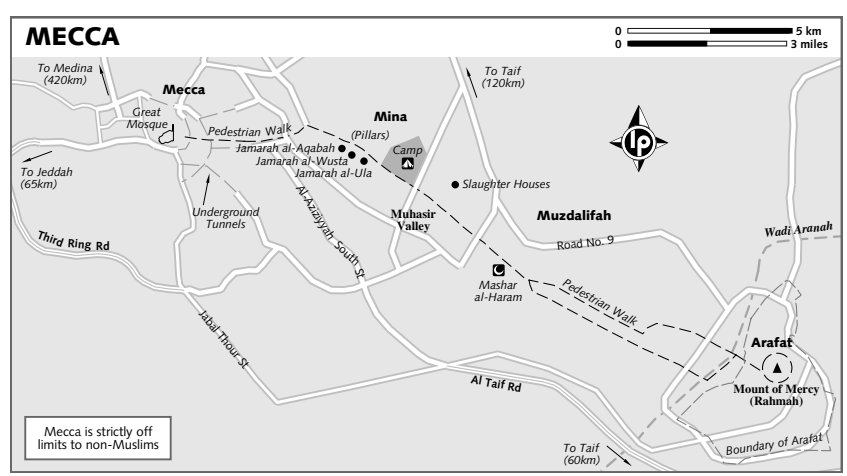
Millions more around the world also watch the haj live on TV and via the internet. Like the pilgrims, TV crews come from across the world, working for networks including the BBC, Fox News and CNN. Since 2004, Saudi radio has transmitted a round-the-clock coverage of the haj in eight languages, including Turkish, Farsi, Hausa, French, Indonesian and Urdu.

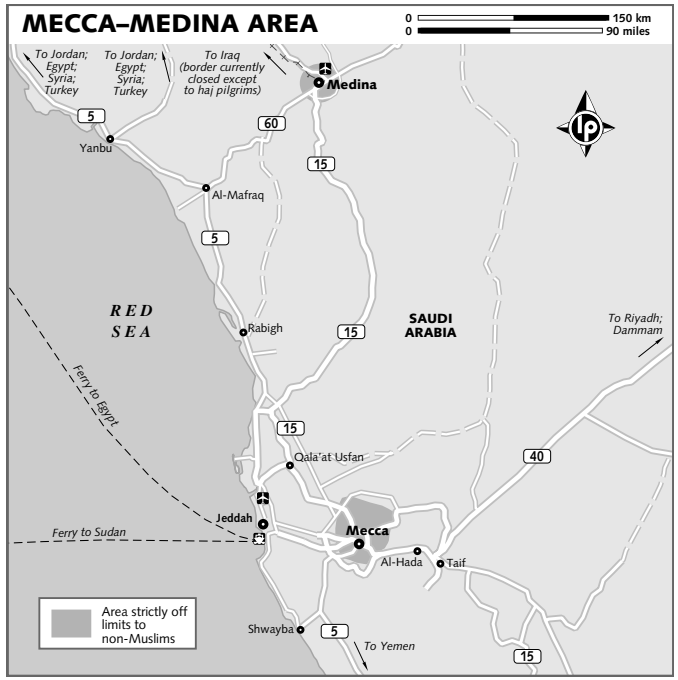
Pilgrim Origins

In 2006, pilgrims arrived from over 160 countries stretching from Mali to the Sudan, from Algeria to Azerbaijan, and from Russia to Bangladesh and Indonesia. An estimated 24,000 pilgrims came from the UK; 16,000 from the US.

Pilgrim Economics

Before the oil era, the haj was the economic backbone of the whole country. Nowadays, with its vast oil resources, Saudi Arabia is no longer dependent upon the event.





Nevertheless, the haj is still a vital source of income for the Kingdom's private sector. Millions of dollars are generated annually by the event and Saudi's service industries (including hotels, restaurants and travel agencies) benefit greatly, as does the retail industry. Across the desert in Saudi Arabia, vast camel caravans can be seen crossing the Kingdom on their way to Mecca. It's a profitable time, as prices rise dramatically: camels can change hands for up to SR10,000 (around US$2700) or more.

In commercial terms, the haj season is like a colossal Christmas. There is no value-added tax in the Kingdom, and after performing the pilgrimage, many *hajis* (one who has made the haj) go on a shopping spree, particularly for luxury goods (including jewellery and perfume) that they can't afford at home, or for medicine and other commodities that they can't obtain in their home countries.

The haj also provides much-needed jobs for locals. In 2006, for example, over 1500 students were hired to accompany the haj arrivals on their pilgrimage.

The haj also impacts upon the economies of the countries from which the pilgrims come, particularly those that supply large numbers of pilgrims such as Indonesia, Pakistan and Nigeria. Local airlines and travel agencies benefit from the high demand for flights, for example, and many pilgrims return with their suitcases bulging with products to sell upon their return.

Islam is the only religion that requires its followers to make a pilgrimage: 'Pilgrimage to the House is a duty to God for all those who can make the journey' *(sura 3:98)*.

HOSTING THE HAJ

Logistics

The logistical challenges of hosting the haj – the Saudi Arabian equivalent of 25 World Cups or 30 simultaneous Super Bowls – are absolutely mind-boggling.

'Health and Safety' for example takes on a new meaning in the Kingdom. With the coming together and close contact of so many people from so many countries (some still wracked by infectious disease), the haj is the ultimate breeding ground for infection.

If an epidemic were to occur, it could be catastrophic, not just for the pilgrims and Saudi Arabia but across the world, as infected pilgrims return to their home countries. A famous phenomenon among pilgrims is the 'haj cough', akin to the school cold picked up in the playground and passed around the whole household – but on a global scale.

One of the biggest challenges therefore is the control of this health risk. In order to qualify now for a haj visa, pilgrims are obliged to have certain vaccinations. Certificates are checked meticulously upon entry to Saudi Arabia and if pilgrims are found without them, they are administered on the spot. If pilgrims refuse, they are deported.

During the 2006 haj, no less than 9600 doctors, nurses and medical technicians assisted with this and other health-related matters. All medical treatment is administered free of charge.

As many pilgrims are elderly (some have saved all their lives to make the trip) and others are already ill (keen to make the haj while they still can), serious illness and even death are not uncommon during the pilgrimage. In Mecca and Medina alone, 21 hospitals (each with 3932 beds) remain on constant stand-by during the haj.

Other logistics include the organisation of the following:

- 50,000 armed security men who patrol the whole area using high-tech communication equipment. In the past, the haj has been targeted by terrorists (see Haj Hazards, p74).
- Over 26 fire brigades, 27 rescue units, 11 monitoring towers and 1224 fire-fighting points at the mountain of Arafat alone.
- The distribution of free food and drinks (and alms to those in need).
- The replenishing of the Zamzam well. Supplying the pilgrims' needs for centuries, today the well must be refilled before the pilgrims arrive.
- The laying on of special pilgrim flights by Saudi Arabian airlines. At the height of the haj, planes arrive at Jeddah airport every minute. Planes also fly pilgrims direct to Medina airport (which only opens during the haj). Boarding passes are issued two months in advance, and multilingual cabin crew are posted to assist pilgrims with their flights. Some pilgrims have never been in an airplane before and require help even operating the plane's toilets.
- An entire government department (the Ministry of Haj) dedicates itself solely to the annual organisation of the haj. As soon as one haj ends, preps for the next begin. The reputation of ministers and civil servants are made or mangled by the outcome of a single haj. For the accomplishment of a successful haj, the king shows his appreciation by handing out gifts, including promotions, cash bonuses and even expensive cars, to those involved.

Hajj: Reflection on Its Rituals, by Ali Shariati, is considered a masterpiece. Translated from the original Persian, the writer discusses the significance of each step of the haj.

One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing About the Muslim Pilgrimage, by Michael Wolfe, relates 20 accounts of the haj, spanning 10 centuries, through the eyes of people who have undertaken the journey.

STANDING ATOP THE MOUNT OF MERCY AT ARAFAT

I'm lucky. I've travelled a lot, seen a lot, done a lot. But that day that I stood on the Mount of Mercy topped everything: nothing else comes close. Stretching out beneath me were over two million people, all calling upon God to forgive their sins and bestow upon them his great blessings. The emotion I felt was overwhelming. As I came down that mountain, I realised that I was sobbing.

Haj Abdi Hussein, a British Muslim who performed his haj in 2006.

HAJ CALENDAR

The table below shows the dates of the haj. *Yawm 'Arafat* (the main haj day) is actually on the 9th of the month, but most pilgrims are already in Mecca by *yawm al-tarwiyah,* the 8th of the month.

Islamic Calendar	Estimated Equivalent in Western Calendar
8–14 Dhul Hijja 1428H	18–24 Dec 2007
8–14 Dhul Hijja 1429H	6–12 Dec 2008
8–14 Dhul Hijja 1430H	25 Nov–1 Dec 2009
8–14 Dhul Hijja 1431H	14–20 Nov 2010
8–14 Dhul Hijja 1432H	4–10 Nov 2011
8–14 Dhul Hijja 1433H	24–30 Oct 2012

Haj Hazards

With millions of people surging from one pilgrimage station to the next, many desperate to set eyes upon the holy sites they've travelled so far to see, or to perform the prescribed rites within the prescribed time, it's perhaps inevitable that accidents should happen at the haj.

The term 'mecca' has come to be used in English to mean any place that draws a large number of people. As Mecca is the holiest city of Islam, many Muslims find this use of the term offensive, and travellers should be sensitive to this.

One of the worst hazards in the past has been the stampedes of panicking people. The Jamarat Bridge that leads to the stone pillars in Mina Valley has seen some of the worst incidents. In July 1990, 1426 pilgrims were trampled to death in a tunnel on their way to the plains of Arafat.

Other hazards include fire (in July 1997, 343 pilgrims were killed and 1500 injured when a tent caught alight); road accidents (in December 2006, a coach carrying pilgrims from Medina to Mecca crashed, killing three Britons and injuring 34 others); and disease (there was an international outbreak of meningitis following the haj in 1987).

With the huge international media coverage the event attracts, the haj has also proven a tempting target for terrorists, or for political protest and activity. In July 1987, Iranian Shiite pilgrims rioted, leading to the death of over 400 people; in July 1989, two bombs attributed to Kuwaiti Shiites exploded, killing one pilgrim and wounding 16 others.

For some, the mere physical effort required in making the haj, or the stress and excitement it can generate, can be a hazard. Before the haj had even got under way in December 2006, 243 pilgrims had died (the majority elderly) as a result of heart attacks apparently brought on by heat exhaustion, fatigue or excess physical exertion. The Nigerian government reported the death of 33 of their nationals 'as a result of hypertension, diabetes, heart attack and pneumonia' (2006 was the coldest winter for 20 years).

In the 1980s, the Saudi government changed the spelling of Mecca to Makkah, or more officially, Makkah al-Mukkaramah (The Holy City of Makkah). This spelling has yet to be adopted world-wide and throughout this book we have used Mecca.

OVERSTAYERS & OFFENDERS

The biggest headache for Saudi authorities are the 'overstayers' – foreigners who enter the Kingdom on a haj visa, but who do not exit at the end.

It's now well known that many Third World citizens use the haj visa purely as a means of sneaking into the Kingdom. Recent research indicates that over 50% of haj 'pilgrims' coming from some Third World countries are actually Christian.

Of those that enter the Kingdom, an estimated 9% to 20% are believed to fail to return to their homelands annually. In real terms, this means an increase in the Saudi Arabian population of at least a quarter of a million people every four years.

Crackdowns on illegal immigrants include dawn raids on houses suspected of harbouring illegal immigrants, and tight checkpoint controls at strategic points around Mecca and Medina. In 2006, the Saudi Arabian government stopped issuing *umrah* (the 'lesser pilgrimage' or 'visitation' to Mecca outside the haj season) visas to those individuals under 40 travelling alone from any of nine South Asian and African countries (Bangladesh, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan and Yemen).

Since these overstayers cannot find legal work, some resort to illegal activities such as selling goods (especially clothes, shoes and toys) brought with them from their home countries.

A few resort to other crimes including prostitution, theft, mugging or burglary; the manufacture of illegal *raki* (firewater); or smuggling (firearms, alcohol or qat – the mildly narcotic leaf), despite the severe penalties if apprehended (the amputation of hand or feet for thieves caught three or more times, and an immediate death penalty if caught smuggling, or for armed bank robberies). Many of the public executions held in Saudi Arabia are of such unfortunates.

The holy stone, built into the Kaaba, is believed by some non-Muslims to be a meteorite (measuring around 30cm in diameter). In fact, it was long revered in pre-Islamic times by the local Bedu of the desert, who constructed a shrine around it.

PICKPOCKETS

In the pilgrim areas themselves, pickpocketing has become rampant. According to the Ministry of Justice, specialised gangs from abroad now operate, arriving especially in time for the haj. Over 100 arrests are made every year and punishments are strictly imposed.

TROUBLESOME TRAVEL AGENCIES

Unscrupulous foreign haj agencies pose another problem. Some promise guides, transport and even accommodation that never materialise. In Jeddah, disappointed pilgrims can often be seen sleeping on the streets around town.

The Ministry of Haj registers complaints, investigates them and has the power to withdraw haj operator licences, but with more than 1000 agencies worldwide, it's a tall order.

CARCASS CLEARANCE

Another problem peculiar to the haj is the disposal of the thousands of animals sacrificed annually at Mina, as part of the haj ritual.

In the past, pilgrims were permitted to keep only what they themselves could eat during the Eid al-Adha (the holiday immediately following the end of the haj). The rest of the animal was buried in huge pits.

Recently, Islamic banks have set up official abattoirs on the holy sites. On the payment of a fee, the bank will vouch to slaughter an animal on behalf of the pilgrim on the appointed day, and additionally export the meat to Third World countries around the world, so combining personal piety with international charity.

THE GREAT LEVELLER OF MEN

For many Muslims, the haj is considered the ultimate leveller of men. Pilgrims may share food, water, a corner of a prayer mat or even a bed with a king, emperor or statesman and never know it.

Dressed in the same, simple white cloth (the *ihram*), performing the same rituals and making the same sometimes challenging and exhausting journey, all people – of whatever class, colour, culture, material means or Muslim creed – are equal within the surrounds of the holy cities.

For the same reason, the haj is also said to be a kind of 'dress rehearsal' for Judgement Day when, according to the Quran, 'all people will stand equal before God'.

THE ORIGINS OF THE HAJ

The tradition of the haj extends back centuries. Ibrahim (known by Christians as Abraham) is considered the haj's founding father. The story goes like this:

During his lifetime, Ibrahim had his faith put to the test many times. One of the most testing trials was when he took his wife Hajar and infant son Ismail (Ishmael) to Arabia. Obeying Allah's command to leave them in Allah's hands, Ibrahim left Hajar and Ismail in a dry valley with little food. Soon, the supplies ran out and Hajar began to roam the valley in a frantic search for sustenance. Eventually, failing to find anything, she fell to the ground in despair.

Pilgrims today commemorate that search for water by performing the sa'ee, walking seven times between the two hills of Safa and Marwah.

Hajar's baby, Ismail, was now crying from hunger and thirst, so Hajar began to pray to Allah to help her. As Ismail wailed, he stamped his foot upon the ground, and suddenly up gushed a spring of water.

They named the spring Zamzam and in time, caravans and nomads began to stop in this valley to water their camels. A desert city began to spring up around the well of Zamzam.

That city was Mecca, and Zamzam is the only natural source of water in the city to this day.

But Ibrahim's greatest trial was still to come. Allah commanded him to take his son Ismail to the mountains and there slay him. Grief stricken, Ibrahim took his son and left Mecca. But Ibrahim's faith was stronger than his despair. On the way to the mountains, however, Shaitan (the Devil) tempted him not to kill his son. He harried Ibrahim, cajoling, taunting and mocking him. Ibrahim, finally despairing, began to throw stones at Shaitan.

This act is commemorated by the stoning of the jamrah (pillars) in Mina today.

When Ibrahim arrived at the appointed place and so passed his test of faith, Allah commanded him to allow Ismail to live, and to sacrifice a ram in his place.

This is remembered during the Eid al-Adha, or Festival of Sacrifice, when pilgrims of the haj and Muslims all over the world sacrifice an animal.

Ibrahim continued to visit Mecca. One day, Allah commanded him to build a house of worship and call all who believed in him to make a pilgrimage there. With Ismail's help, Ibrahim constructed the Kaaba, a cube-shaped building, for worship.

This is the building which, to this day, the pilgrims go around when performing the tawaf (circling).

After the death of his father, Ismail continued to maintain the Kaaba and kept up the pilgrimage each year. Gradually, however, as idolatry began to spread throughout Arabia, worship at the Kaaba began to descend also into paganism. Before he died, Ismail prayed: 'Our Lord! Send amongst them a messenger of their own, who shall recite unto them your *aayaat* (verses) and instruct them in the book and the Wisdom and sanctify them.' (sura Al-Baqarah 2:129)

Many prophets were sent through the ages. Then, in AD 570, a man by the name of Mohammed ibn Abdullah was born in Mecca. For 23 years, the Prophet spread a message of obedience to Allah and a law of peace and order in Arabia.

Initially, the Meccans (many of them powerful merchants) objected to the rise of Islam, as the new religion jeopardised profits and revenues collected from visiting pilgrims.

Mohammed was finally forced into exile in Medina in 622, and there he established a model Islamic community. Six years later, however, he returned to Mecca with thousands of followers. Destroying the idols, he purified the Kaaba and rededicated the House for the worship of Allah alone.

Thousands of followers gathered to hear his sermon at the haj. There he expounded the concept of a united Muslim community. The Kaaba had once again become the centre of Islam.

Holy City Expansion

Each successive monarch since the time of King Abdul Aziz, the founder of modern-day Saudi Arabia, has sought to make his mark on the holy cities. Through the haj, the monarchs hope to secure a place not just in history, but also in heaven.

As the 'Head of Operations', the king must take personal responsibility for the pilgrimage, and every year the king, along with his entire government, uproots lock, stock and barrel from the capital in Riyadh to Jeddah, the 'gateway to the haj' on the Red Sea.

In the past, the greatest royal preoccupation has been simply how to increase the pilgrim-holding capacity of the holy cities. The evolution is startling.

Richard Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* is a classic of its genre and offers a rare (and politically incorrect) Western insight into the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Growing from little more than a dusty, desert shack, the Great Mosque in Mecca now boasts a total area of 356,000 sq metres, with a capacity for 773,000 people (and up to a million people during the haj season). A straight comparison with the largest stadiums or arenas in the Western world (the UK's Wembley Stadium holds 90,000 people; the Dolphin Stadium in Miami, which hosted the 2007 Super Bowl, holds 74,512 people) gives some indication of the cosmic scale and size of the holy sites.

The buildings are also designed to impress. With soaring minarets, acres of marble, and celestial proportions, many pilgrims are completely overawed by their first sight of the cities.

Some of the big plans billed for the future include the development of a state-of-the-art port in the new 'King Abdullah Economic City', planned to be constructed north of Jeddah, which will boast a dedicated haj terminal capable of receiving over half a million pilgrims every haj season.

THE PILGRIMS

The Visa

Currently, one visa is issued per 1000 Muslim inhabitants of a country's population, with a total of 800,000 haj or *umrah* visas issued annually. Recently, restrictions on Saudi pilgrims have been introduced in order to allow more foreign Muslims to visit. Saudis can now perform the haj no more than once in every five years.

In order to obtain a haj visa, pilgrims must first have a medical check-up and obtain certain compulsory vaccinations, such as meningitis.

The wait for a haj visa varies from country to country, but some pilgrims have claimed they've waited 20 years or more. Every year, reports emerge of rampant corruption existing in some countries regarding the issuing of haj visas. Although the Saudi Arabian authorities charge nothing for them, haj visas abroad are reported to change hands for thousands of dollars, or else are used as useful political leverage by politicians.

The Hajj, by FE Peters, gives firsthand accounts of travellers to the haj, together with a history and detailed steps of the ritual.

Why Perform the Haj?

For most Muslims, the haj represents the greatest spiritual encounter of their lives. Many are profoundly affected by it both spiritually and psychologically; some claim to be changed forever by the experience.

Apart from reaffirming religious commitments, one of the major draws of haj for many Muslims is the element of redemption. After successfully performing the haj, Muslims are traditionally washed of their sins and emerge like 'newborns'. Some Muslims, who in the past led relatively secular lives, or who indulged in un-Islamic activities such as drinking, gambling or womanising, actively seek redemption and determinedly try to lead an altered life as a result of completing the haj.

Other Muslims – particularly the young – prefer to wait a few years before doing the haj until they feel fully ready and prepared to implement these changes in their lives.

If you break one of the rules of *ihram* during the haj, you must pay a *kaffarah*. Depending on which rule you've broken, there are three ways to redeem yourself: by offering a sacrifice; by feeding six impoverished people; or by fasting for three days.

Famous Faces

The haj holy cities have seen many famous faces pass through their portals. Past pilgrims include Ibn Battuta, one of history's greatest travellers, American heavyweight boxer Mohammed Ali, British pop singer Yusuf Islam (aka Cat Stevens), King Abdullah of Jordan, President Nasser and Pakistani cricketer Imran Khan.

One such personality who famously wrote about his experience was a certain 'Al-Haj Malik el-Shabazz', otherwise known as Malcolm X, the American black activist. Writing a letter to his followers back in Harlem, he declared: 'Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colours and races here in this ancient Holy Land.'

Mirroring the experience of many Muslims, the haj had a profound effect on Malcolm X both personally and in his thinking and writing (see boxed text, p80).

The Cultural Exchange

With the meeting of over two million minds from all parts of the planet, the haj could be described as the most cosmic conference on earth.

The 12th-century courtier from Arab Spain, Ibn Jubayr, performed the haj and stayed in Mecca for a period of eight months. His *Travel of Ibn Jubayr* recounts his experiences and is considered the first traveller's diary in Arabic.

Indeed, for scholars in the past the haj was as much about a voyage of learning and exchange of ideas as it was a spiritual journey. Some scholars took advantage of the opportunity to buy books, meet with colleagues and even attend courses. For a few, the haj marked a turning point in their thinking, or a new direction in their school of thought, such was the impact of the intellectual experience.

Among the many momentous events attributed to the haj was the launch of the Almoravid dynasty, catalysed by a visit to Mecca by one of its leaders, Yahya ibn Ibrahim, at the beginning of the 11th century.

THE HAJ STEP BY STEP

The haj, one of the Five Pillars of Islam (see p61), consists of a series of ancient and elaborate rites that are carried out over the course of several days.

Performed at the Great Mosque of Mecca and its immediate surrounds (Mina, Muzdalifah and Arafat), the haj takes place annually at a predetermined date, which advances some 10 days annually according to the lunar calendar on which the Islamic calendar is based (see the Haj Calendar, p74).

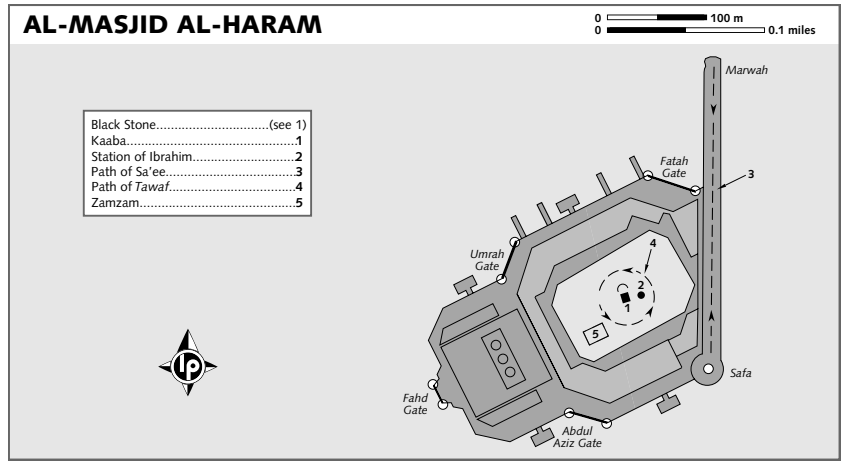
HAJ HOPES

As we travelled, we talked and as we talked we gradually grew to know one another. One day, without any warning or explanation, Omar decided that we should get married.

'One day, when we are old, when we are bent like old donkeys, when we have legs like crooked sticks, and old shoes, we will do the haj together. Your hand in my hand, we will hold onto one another as best we can and we will be swept along with the crowd. We will be happy,' he declared turning towards me his face full of emotion.

I never did discover why Omar thought I would make him a good wife, but the beauty of that image stuck in my mind for a long time afterwards.

From the author's diary during a trip to Yemen



The haj is obligatory for those who can 'make their way' – that is, those who are of sufficient health and have the financial means to be able to do so. Following is a (greatly simplified) description of some of the most important events and ceremonies that make up the haj.

The First Day (8th Dhul Hijja)

Known as *yawm at-tarwiyah* (the day of deliberation or reflection), pilgrims must put on the *ihram* (the two seamless, unsown sheets that symbolise the state of consecration) at a place outside Mecca, and recite the *an-niyyah* (the stating of intent).

Pilgrims then perform the *tawaf al-qudum,* the circling seven times of the Kaaba. After praying between the Black Stone and the door of the Kaaba, pilgrims head to the Station of Ibrahim for more prayers.

Next, pilgrims drink some of the holy waters of Zamzam, before proceeding to the ritual *sa'ee*. This is the famous running and walking seven times back and forth between the two hills of Safa and Marwah (though this can also be performed after the second ambulation, *tawaf al-ifadah*). This ritual is the re-enactment of Hajar's frantic search for food and water, before Ismail stamped his foot and a spring gushed forth.

Later, pilgrims head to the Great Mosque for the performance of more rites, before leaving for Mina to spend the night until summoned for the dawn prayer.

Islamic protocol dictates that 'PBUH' (Peace Be Upon Him) follow every mention of the Prophet's name. Travellers are advised to show the same sensitivity and respect when discussing the Prophet (PBUH).

The Second Day (9th Dhul Hijja)

Named the *yawm al-wuquf* (the day of standing), or *yawm 'Arafat* (the day of Arafat), pilgrims head for Arafat after the dawn prayer at Mina. Forming a key component of the haj, the *wuquf* (standing) involves pilgrims passing part of the day and night there.

Most stay from noon until after sunset, during which time pilgrims are expected to pray and recite frequently the *talbiyah* (the main, ritual, recitation of the haj, and the words attributed to Ibrahim when he first summoned mankind to Mecca). Traditionally, this day is one of solemnity, reflection and the examination of conscience for pilgrims.

Some pilgrims like to climb the Mount of Mercy (Rahmah) at Arafat (though the crowds often prevent most from doing so). Later, most

UMRAH – THE LITTLE HAJ

Umrah (the 'lesser pilgrimage' or 'visitation') is a shortened version of the haj. The rituals can be carried out in around two hours.

The *umrah* can be performed at any time of year (except during the haj itself), at any time of day and night. Pilgrims are also allowed to perform *umrah* on behalf of someone else.

Though not a requirement of the *umrah* (or the haj), pilgrims often travel to the city of Medina as well in order to visit the Prophet's tomb and that of his daughter, Fatima.

Many pilgrims who make the *umrah* say that the experience is a much quieter, more peaceful and contemplative experience than the haj, and worth experiencing (in addition to the haj) for this reason.

pilgrims head off for Muzdalifah as part of the *nafrah* (rush) or *ifadah* (overflowing).

There, pilgrims pray together and pass the night.

The Third Day (10th Dhul Hijja)

Called the *yawm an-nahr* (the day of sacrifice), pilgrims head to Muzdalifah for the dawn prayer. Later, they collect small pebbles 'about the size of a chickpea' – 49 pebbles if they're planning to remain in Mina for two days, 70 pebbles if they're staying for three days.

In Saudi Arabia today (particularly in Medina, Mecca and Jeddah), some citizens, and many residents, are old pilgrims (or their descendents) who have chosen to stay on after the haj and make their homes there.

At Mina, pilgrims then throw seven stones at the *jamarah* – the pillars symbolising the temptation of Ibrahim by the devil (see boxed text, p76).

Afterwards, pilgrims are free to perform the required sacrifice, which must take place any time up until the end of the 13th Djul Hijja. A camel is considered the worthiest sacrifice, but an ox or ram are also acceptable.

It is at this point that the pilgrim's hair is clipped. Though only a lock of hair is required to be cut, many men choose to have their whole heads shaved (look out for them all over the Muslim world and beyond after the end of the haj). The shaving is a symbol of rebirth – showing that the sins of the pilgrim have been cleansed through the successful completion of the haj.

Though *ihram* is now over and pilgrims can wear ordinary clothes again, they must still abstain from those things proscribed during the state of *ihram*. In greatly simplified terms, these boil down to three basic tenets: not disturbing or harming other living things; not indulging in any form of sexual behaviour; and not beautifying or adorning oneself.

Men are also not allowed to wear sewn clothes, or anything that covers the whole of the foot or the head. Women are not allowed to cover their faces with any kind of veil.

THE SAME PLATE

During the past 11 days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass and slept on the same rug – while praying to the same God – with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the deeds of the white Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan and Ghana.

We were truly all the same – because their belief in one God had removed the white from their minds, the white from their behaviour, and the white from their attitude.

From 'The Autobiography of Malcolm X' by Alex Haley

FOR GOD & COUNTRY

Home to the two holiest cities of Islam (Mecca and Medina), Saudis consider themselves supremely set apart. This blessing is also viewed as the gravest and most onerous responsibility. The opportunities offered by hosting the haj are also seen as a strong force for good. By serving its own citizens (such as by employing young people as guides), it aspires to serve the pilgrims (by providing an organised and enjoyable haj), and ultimately serve God (in facilitating his worship on earth).

On this day or the following, pilgrims head for the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca to carry out the *tawaf al-ifadah* (or *tawaf az-ziyarah;* the second circling), and the *sa'ee* (if it hasn't been carried out earlier).

The Final Days (11th, 12th & 13th Dhul Hijja)

Known as *ayyam at-tashriq* (the days of drying meat), pilgrims spend their remaining days at Mina, each day casting seven stones at the three symbolic stone pillars between sunrise and sunset.

Before leaving Mecca, pilgrims usually perform the *tawaf al-wada* (circling of farewell).

FAMOUS NON-MUSLIMS IN MECCA

For a long time, the forbidden cities of Mecca and Medina fascinated European travellers. Arousing in them an incurable curiosity, some set off to try and penetrate the cities, even on threat of death should they be discovered. Among the most famous of these was Richard Burton (1821–90), who disguised himself as a Qadiri Sufi from Afghanistan, and who, it is said, even went as far as getting himself circumcised.

Other famous 'haj explorers' included the Swiss scholar, John Lewis Burkhardt (1784–1817), and the British eccentric Harry St John Philby (1885–1960), who was a convert to Islam. His close friendship with King Abdul Aziz permitted him access to almost all areas including Mecca and Medina, which allowed him to explore, map and describe more of the Arabian Peninsula than any other traveller.

Food & Drink

Anyone who has read of the lovers' feast prepared by Keats' Porphyro in the *Eve of St Agnes* may be fairly lusting to venture into the land of 'lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon', 'Manna and dates', not to mention 'spiced dainties' from 'silken Samarkand to cedared Lebanon'. The Arabic Orient has long been the fabled land of extravagant feasting and to this day eating is a central part of Peninsula life, love and community. The delicacies and staple dishes may not immediately appeal to a Western palette, but with a little knowledge of some of the customs that lurk behind their preparation, they can take on a whole new flavour.

The world's oldest cultivated fruit has been the staple diet of millions of Arabs for centuries and they are grown in every country in the Peninsula. Indeed, of the 90 million date palms growing in the world, 64 million are in Arab countries.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Arabian

For most Arab people on the Peninsula, breakfast means eggs in some shape or form and locally produced salty white cheese with a glass of buttermilk or *laban* (thin yogurt) and tahini sweetened with date syrup. It might come with *foul madamas,* a bean dish lubricated with olive oil, garnished on high days and holidays with pickles and eased along with olives. There may be lentils, heavily laced with garlic, to the chagrin of co-workers, and of course bread.

Known generically as *khobz,* bread (in up to 40 different varieties) is eaten in copious quantities with every meal. Most often it's unleavened and comes in flat disks about the size of a dinner plate (not unlike an Indian *chapati*). It's traditionally torn into pieces, in lieu of knives and forks, and used to pinch up a morsel of meat, a scoop of dip and a nip of garnish.

Lunch means one word only, and that is rice. Rice is often flavoured with a few whole cardamoms (one of which always lurks beguilingly in the last mouthful) and at feasts with saffron and sultanas. Buried in or sitting on top of the rice will be some kind of delicious spiced stew, with ladies' fingers or grilled and seasoned chicken, lamb, goat or even camel – but of course never pork, which is *haram* (forbidden) for Muslims (see p64). Popular seasoning includes some or even all of the following: cardamom, coriander, cumin, cinnamon, nutmeg, chilli, ginger, pepper and the all-important, health-giving and almost flavourless turmeric. In Yemen no-one can escape the bitter, livid green froth of fenugreek used to put a punch in a minimal broth or bean dish.

Pork is *haram* (forbidden) to Muslims but it's sometimes available in Gulf supermarkets. Pork sections are easy to spot: customers slink out with a pork sausage wrapped in the *Gulf Times,* as if it's something naughty for the weekend. At Gulf prices for pork, high days and holidays are about the only time most people can afford to eat it.

Not surprisingly for a Peninsula with such a rich coastline, fish (fresh or dried) is an equally important lunchtime staple. Hamour (a species of grouper), *beya* (mullet), king fish, Sultan Ibrahim and tuna are grilled, fried or barbecued and served with rice and chopped raw cabbage with the essential half lime or lemon. Sardines, piles of which spangle the shore in season and are raked into malodorous heaps between houses, are seldom eaten: they're usually dried for animal fodder.

Peninsula people are not big on 'puddings', preferring fruits after (or often before) the meal, and thick fruit juices, but on high days and holidays baklava (made of filo and honey) or puddings, including *mahallabiye* (milk based) and *umm ali* (bread based), might put in an after-lunch appearance.

The evening meal is a ragged affair of competing interests – children clamouring for hot dogs or burgers, maids slipping them 'keep-quiet food', mothers going for a sandwich in Starbucks and grandmothers making sweetmeats and aubergine dips, nibbling on dates and trying to persuade 'bother-it-all' fathers from going out for a kebab or a *shwarma*.

City people in the Peninsula enjoy going out and they are as likely to dine on Mongolian lamb chops, crab rangoon or spaghetti bolognaise as any other city dweller. More often than not, however, they'll opt for Lebanese food with its copious selection of hot and cold appetisers known as *mezze*. The peeled carrots, buffed radishes, whole lettuce and bunches of peppery spinach leaves, provided complimentary, are a meal in themselves.

Locals invariably entertain guests at home and go out to eat something different. For travellers to the region, it can therefore be difficult finding indigenous food. Ask locally where to sample indigenous food and you may find you're taken home for supper.

Every town has a baklava or pastry shop, selling syrupy sweets made from a mixture of pastry, nuts, milk powder, honey, syrup and sometimes rosewater. Sweets are ordered by weight and 250g is generally the smallest amount sold – more than enough for one person.

Asian

All across Arabia large populations of expatriate peoples have brought their own cuisine to the Peninsula. For many Asian expats – often men on nonfamily contracts – breakfast, lunch and dinner consists of the same thing: rice and dhal, or rice and meat or vegetable curry, separated into three round metal lunchboxes, stacked one on top of the other, and including a bag of rolled up *chapati* (Indian flat bread).

Providing a cheap and cheerful alternative to 'the lunchbox', and serving samosas, biryani or spicy mutton curry, a whole string of Indian and Pakistani restaurants have sprung up across the region, catering for hungry workers who would normally be looked after by wives and daughters. Those who do have their families with them enjoy as varied a cuisine as their nationality and local supermarket allow. British teachers eat roast beef for Friday lunch, Filipino nurses make chicken *adobo,* Sri Lankan maids try to win over their adoptive families to furious fish curries. In many of the big cities, the traveller can sample all these delights too, often in world-class restaurants.

Bedouin

When round him mid the burning sands, he saw
Fruits of the North in icy freshness thaw
And cooled his thirsty lip, beneath the glow
Of Mecca's sun, with urns of Persian snow.

Thomas Moore

Thomas Moore's 19th-century description of Bedouin delicacies, elaborated with sherbets and dainties, sounds enticing but the reality is far more prosaic. TE Lawrence memorably describes a feast with the Arab Sheikh, Nasir, in which he dips his fingers into a mess of boiling-hot lamb fat while ripping the meat from the carcass. This was probably *kebsa* – a whole lamb stuffed with rice and pine nuts. The most prized piece of this dish is the sheep's eyeballs, which irreverent hosts delight to this day in waving towards horrified Western guests.

Mostly, Bedouin food consists of whatever is available at a particular time, and hunger and thirst are far more attendant on a day's travelling in the desert than sumptuous feasting. Camel's milk and goat's cheese are staple parts of the diet as are dried dates and of course water. Water takes on a particularly precious quality when it is rationed and the Bedouin are renowned for consuming very little, particularly during the day when only small sips are taken, mostly to rinse the mouth.

In a good Lebanese restaurant the number of *mezze* (hot and cold appetisers) offered can run to 50 or more dishes and include chopped liver, devilled kidney, sheep brain and other offal. These are considered great delicacies across the region.

THE COFFEE CARRY-ON

Throughout the Peninsula there is an old and elaborate ritual surrounding the serving of coffee. In homes, offices and even at some hotels, you may well be offered a cup. To refuse is to reject an important gesture of welcome and hospitality, and you risk offending your host. 'Arabic' or 'Bedouin coffee' as it's known, is usually poured from an ornate, long-spouted pot known as a *dalla,* into tiny handleless cups. You should accept the cup with your right hand.

It's considered polite to drink at least three cups (the third is traditionally considered to bestow a blessing). More may be impolite; the best advice is to follow your host's lead. To show you've had sufficient, swivel the cup slightly between fingers and thumb.

The legendary hospitality of the Bedu will mean that travellers in the Empty Quarter (in Saudi) or the Sharqiya Sands (Oman) who bump into a Bedouin camp are bound to be invited to share 'bread and salt'. At the least this will involve Arabic coffee, camel's milk and a thatch of dried meat, usually with a host of flies dancing in the bowl. The flies don't harm the Bedu and it's unlikely they'll bother the traveller much either, but the milk can upset a sensitive stomach.

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic Drinks

On highly significant Bedouin occasions, in an emir's tent in Saudi, or in an extravagant gesture in the Qatari interior, a camel is stuffed with a sheep, which is stuffed with a goat, which is in turn stuffed with a chicken.

If you want to try camel's milk without the stomach ache, you can often find it in supermarkets – next to the *laban,* a refreshing drink of yogurt, water, salt and sometimes crushed mint.

The best part of travelling in the region is sampling the fresh fruit juices of pomegranate, hibiscus, avocado, sugarcane, mango, melon or carrot – or a combination of all sorts – served at juice stalls known as *aseer*. Mint and lemon or fresh lime is a refreshing alternative to sodas.

Tea, known as *shai* or 'Chi-Libton', could be tea *min na'ana* (with mint, especially in Saudi and Yemen), tea with condensed milk (in the Gulf) or plain black tea (in Oman), but whatever the flavour of the day, it will definitely contain enough sugar to make the dentist's fortune. The teabag is left dangling in the cup and water is poured from maximum height to prove what an able tea-maker your host is.

Coffee, known locally as *qahwa,* is consumed in copious quantities on the Peninsula and is usually served strong. Arabia has a distinguished connection with coffee. Though no longer involved in the coffee trade today, Al-Makha in Yemen (p483) gave its name to the blend of chocolate and coffee popularly known as 'mocha'. The traditional Arabic or Bedouin coffee is heavily laced with cardamom and drunk in small cups. Turkish coffee, which floats on top of thick sediment, is popular in the Gulf region.

If as a traveller you try to opt out of the fifth spoonful of sugar in your tea or coffee, you will inevitably be assumed to have diabetes. From the Arab's perspective, why else would anyone think of drinking tea without sugar?

Nonalcoholic beer is widely available. Incidentally, travellers shouldn't think that cans of fizzy drink will suffice for hydration in the desert: they often induce more thirst than they satisfy.

Alcoholic Drinks

Despite its reputation as a 'dry' region, alcohol is available in all Peninsula countries, bar Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and some of the Emirates (where both possession and consumption for locals and foreigners is strictly forbidden).

In the more liberal countries (such as Bahrain and Qatar and some parts of the UAE), bars, cocktail bars and even pubs can be found; in others (such as Yemen and Oman) usually only certain hotels (often mid-

or upper range) are permitted to serve alcohol. Wine is served in most licensed restaurants in Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the UAE.

Officially, no Peninsula country produces its own alcoholic drinks, though rumours abound where dates ferment. Where alcohol is available it's imported from the West and the high prices are intended to keep consumption low – not very successfully. The legal age to be served alcohol is usually 18 years old. You can't buy alcohol to take off the premises unless you are a resident and are eligible for a monthly quota.

You may prefer to taste Saudi 'champagne', which is less exciting than it sounds: it's a mixture of apple juice and Perrier water!

HABITS & CUSTOMS

The main meal for most Peninsula people is usually a home-cooked family affair involving rice. There the similarities end. Here are a few snapshots of differing eating habits across the region.

When it comes to customs and manners, there's one thing all Peninsula families have in common: after you eat, you leave. After the main meal of the day, once the coffee has been served, all anyone wants to think about is sleeping.

Let's start with a 'middle-class' Qatari family on a weekend. Mohammed is dispatched to the Thursday wholesale market on Salwa Rd to buy 'live chicken' and he takes his two kids to see the pink and green chicks. His wife is meeting with friends at Eli France for pastries, half to be left on the plate. The maid boils the rice, strips the vegetables and fries the spices. Dinner will be set formally on a high, polished dining table under the crystal chandelier. When the in-laws arrive, the men lounge in the tent in the garden with freshly squeezed fruit juice, while the women occupy the sofa in the family room and the kids play on the computer. There's a hand-washing alcove in the dining room with soap, which everyone uses before having lunch.

In common with the Qataris, it's principally the man's role to go shopping in Oman. Moosa, whose family lives in a village on Jebel Akhdar but who works for the government in Muscat, loads the Carrefour trolley with six packs of long-life milk, industrial-sized buckets of yogurt, and sacks of tea and sugar before his weekly three-hour drive

EATING ETIQUETTE

Sharing a meal with a Peninsula Arab is a great way of cementing a newly formed friendship. But Arabian eating etiquette is refined and complex. Here are a few tips. Note that food is traditionally shared by all from the same plate without the use of cutlery.

Eating in Someone's House

- Bring a small gift of flowers, chocolates or pastries, fruit or honey.
- It's polite to be seen to wash hands before a meal.
- Don't sit with your legs stretched out – it's considered rude during a meal.
- Use only the right hand for eating or accepting food. The left is reserved for ablutions.
- Don't put food back on the plate: discard in a napkin.
- Your host will often lay the tastiest morsels in front of you; it's polite to accept them.
- The best part – such as the meat – is usually saved until last, so don't take it until offered.

Eating in a Restaurant

- Picking teeth after a meal is quite acceptable and toothpicks are often provided.
- It's traditional to lavish food upon a guest; if you're full, pat your stomach contentedly.
- Leave a little food on your plate: traditionally, a clean plate was thought to invite famine.
- It's polite to accept a cup of coffee after a meal and impolite to leave before it's served.

SHEESHA CAFÉS

In any city across the Peninsula, two sensations mark the hot and humid air of an Arabian summer's evening: the wreaths of scented peach-flavoured smoke that spiral above the corner coffeehouse and the low gurgle of water, like a grumbling camel, in the base of the water pipe. Periodically banned by governments concerned for public morality (the pipes are not narcotic – only time-wasting), and inevitably returned to the street corners by the will of the people, *sheesha* cafés are an indispensable part of Arabian social life.

In most countries in the region, these cafés are a male affair: men perch under a tree in Yemen, or lounge on white plastic chairs in the souqs of Doha, and indolently watch the football on the café TV, occasionally breaking off from the sucking and puffing to pass a word of lazy complaint to their neighbour, snack on pieces of kebab, or hail the waiter for hot coals to awaken the drowsy embers of the *sheesha* bottle.

In Dubai, Manama and Muscat, however, the *sheesha* cafés are beginning to attract mixed company. Here, women in black *abeyyas* (full-length robe) and sparkling diamante cuffs, drag demurely on velvet-clad mouthpieces, their smoking punctuating a far more animated dialogue as they actively define the new shape of society.

home. The weekend is starting already with returned children from school, neighbours (mostly relatives) bringing the season's pomegranates, elders sitting in the corner contentedly coughing and swatting flies off the newborn. The kitchen is alive with his wife Khadija's busy preparations, tomatoes and onions dispatched deftly into a pan, while sisters-in-law moan and giggle over inconsistent husbands and grind herbal potions plucked from the hillside. There are special guests today, so incense curls around the house and eating is in batches. Ahmed, the eldest son, is deputed to spread the plastic cloth on the carpet in the *majlis* (sitting room), and pour *laban* while Moosa kneels to peel mango for the male guests, lounging against the goat-hair cushions. The guests eat first, using their right hand to dip into dishes that are carried in one by one throughout lunch. The women are already tucking in next door. Moosa and the boys will join the feasting as the guests begin to flag. A dish of rose-water, the petals harvested that spring, marks the end of the meal.

There's much etiquette involved in date-eating. Eat them when half ripe, biting the fruit lengthwise, savouring the bitter zest with the melting, decadent ripe part. Discard the pip discreetly: Sinbad spat his out and blinded the son of a genie who then claimed mischievous revenge.

Wedged between the ruby sand dunes of Zilfi, Abdullah selects a kid from the herd and with one clean slice across the throat, lays the animal down gently to die, staying until the life is gone. He thanks Allah for the blessing and then hangs the carcass by the back leg under an acacia and begins the meticulous process of unzipping the animal from its coat. The skin is carefully set aside for washing and the organs preserved for cooking. Abdullah prides himself on a job well done; he's disdainful of town folk who can't cut cleanly and leave piles of entrails on the street corners. The women are preparing the spicy date paste that will coat the meat, while the lads poke at the underground oven. The meat will be ready *'bukara insha'allah'* (tomorrow, God-willing) and be so tender it'll fall off the bone. Everyone – the women semienclosed in their half of the tent, the men open to the gritty wind in theirs – will be so hungry by then, there won't be much decorum. The men eat first from a huge round aluminium *fadl* (dish), reserving the choicest parts for the women whose eager black-hennaed hands and licked fingers tear at the flesh with hunger, practice and gusto. In the absence of spare water, sand suffices for cleaning both hands and dishes and then there'll be the usual arguments as to who watches what on the satellite TV under the date palm.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

One of the undoubted pleasures of the modern cities of the Peninsula is the variety and quality of the restaurants. In the Gulf in particular, there is world-class dining in magnificent surroundings. One way for a visitor to experience some of the best of these dining experiences is to skip breakfast on a Friday and visit the local five-star hotel for Friday brunch – a regional speciality much beloved by locals and expats alike. A spectacular array of local, Middle Eastern and international dishes will be on display, decorated with ice carvings and garnished extravagantly, for a relatively modest price. Similarly, many hotels arrange weekly seafood nights often with belly dancing or local entertainment. Again, this is often a more economic way of sampling the region's famous oysters, lobsters and prawns than reserving a table at an exclusive seafood restaurant.

The venue of preference for 'that special meal' for many Peninsula families is a well-lit grassy verge on a highway, in the company of relatives. Picnicking takes on a whole new meaning when kebabs are brought in by the kilo (see p252).

On the whole, restaurants are open (mostly for expats) during lunch; they're closed in the afternoon and open from about 6pm to midnight to cater for the late-night eating habits of most people across the region. In Saudi Arabia restaurants must comply with certain strict regulations (regarding segregation of men and women and the observation of prayer hours for example).

In very local restaurants, seating is sometimes on the floor on mats. Shoes should be left outside the perimeters of the mats. Food is served from a communal plate placed on a tray.

One pleasant, practical advantage of travelling around the Arabian Peninsula is the easy availability of street food. Across most of the Peninsula, small eateries sell kebabs, *shwarma,* felafel and other types of sandwiches, usually served with some form of salad. These meals are quick, cheap and usually safe to eat, as the food is prepared and cooked in front of you.

Visitors to *sheesha* cafés are welcome in all but the most traditional coffeehouses and even for nonsmokers there's a rich sense of union in sharing a pipe among strangers. In Yemen the pipe extends halfway across the room, so no-one needs to move to pass it on.

There's also a good range of well-stocked supermarkets (selling many international foods) in the large cities and, increasingly, food halls are found in the malls.

SEASONAL SPECIALITIES

The traveller who wants to eat truly local, seasonal food could have enormous fun on the Peninsula. With no worries about time, visas and border crossings, these could be some of the treats in store.

Start your tour at the top of the Green Mountain in Oman at the beginning of spring for citrus delights such as oranges, sweet lemons and limes. Descend to the coast near Dhofar for the sea's annual harvest of abalone and conches. Sample the delights of the Gulf coastal plains for fresh corn and irregular but delicious local tomatoes, capsicums and chillies. Cut across to Al-Hasa region in Saudi and sink your teeth into the first exquisite ripening of dates (p304).

Search the plantations for papayas and green mangos, salted and pickled, and eaten with lamb stew. Follow the Toyota trucks carrying watermelons across their asphalt caravan routes, and watch as a melon rolls off and smashes on the road like a mini firework. Ascend the Asir Mountains in time for the *mishmish* (apricot) season and then just as the hot months decline, venture into the hornbill-frequented wadis of Yemen for pomegranates, almonds and walnuts.

For Ramadan, hop on a plane to the Gulf cities and choose a different hotel each night: they will all have a Ramadan tent for Iftar supper where regional date-filled, coconut-rolled, honey-dipped and sesame-seeded sweetmeats help ease the hungry guest into an evening of seasonal dishes.

Let's hope that someone invites you home for *eid* (feast) in the desert towns of the interior where killing the fatted calf is often more than just a metaphor.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

In most Peninsula countries mixed dining is common in more expensive or modern city restaurants. In smaller establishments men eat on the ground floor, while women and families eat upstairs in a section reserved for them. Women travellers are advised to follow suit.

While Arab people are traditionally thought of as full-blooded, red meat eaters, the reality is that meat for many of the poorer sections of the community across the region, especially in Yemen, is a treat for high days and holidays. This fact, coupled with the influence of southern Indian cuisine introduced by large expat communities of vegetarian Hindus, means that vegetable dishes appear more often than might be expected on a restaurant menu.

Vegetarian staples include many bean and pulse dishes such as soup, foul and dhal, or lentil stews. Chickpeas, either fried into felafel or ground into a paste with oil and garlic *(hummus)*, are a ubiquitous ingredient. Aubergines and okra are used in many delicious stews, and salad vegetables are usually locally grown and organic.

EATING WITH KIDS

Eating out as a family is becoming an increasingly popular pastime in the Peninsula for Arabs and expats: whole minibuses of relatives arrive to the outdoor, seaboard city venues, particularly in the winter months when huddling round a mobile stove is part of the fun. Equally, many parents join their children for a 'MacArabia' chicken roll-up or a beef pepperoni pizza in the spreading rash of Western fast-food outlets.

Vegetarians beware! Some Peninsula carnivores (including chefs) may regard vegetarianism either as an incomprehensible Western indulgence or even a kind of culinary apostasy. Given that soups and stews are often based on meat stock, and to avoid uncomfortable conversations about ingredients, stick to Indian restaurants.

Children are welcome in restaurants across the Peninsula, except in the more exclusive, chic establishments of the Gulf, and many midrange restaurants provide children's menus. High chairs are not commonly available.

Fresh milk or powdered milk is widely available except in remote areas. Ice cream and yogurt are considered safe to eat except during the summer in rural areas, where a break in the power supply often results in partial defrosting.

EAT YOUR WORDS

For country-specific food-and-drink information, see the Food & Drink entries in the individual country chapters.

Useful Phrases

Do you have…?	*haal indaak…?*
Arabic coffee	*kawah arabeeya*
with/without sugar	*ma'a/bidoon sukkar*
with/without milk	*ma'a/bidoon haleeb*
I'd like …	*ana areed…*
Does anyone here speak English?	*haal yoogaad ahad yatakaallam ingleezi?*
Do you have a table for one/two?	*haal indaak tawilah lil waahid/'ithnayn*
What do you recommend?	*bi maza tinsahnee?*
May I have the menu?	*ana areed al-kaart?*
Do you have vegetarian dishes?	*haal indaak akl nabati laahm?*
Nothing more, thanks.	*kafee mashkur* (UAE)*/yakfee shukran* (Saudi)
Water please.	*maa min fadhlach*
I'd like the bill please.	*ana areed al-hisaab min fadhlach*
That was delicious.	*kan al-aakl lazeez*
It's to take away.	*sa 'aakhodho maa'ee*

Food Glossary

Note that because of the imprecise nature of transliterating Arabic into English, spellings will vary; for example, what we give as *kibbeh* may appear variously as *kibba, kibby* or even *gibeh*.

There are over 600 species of date and each country contends it has the best variety. Most experts, however, claim the best come from Al-Hasa, near Hufhuf in Saudi Arabia, where a variety called *khlas* is presold to regular customers before it's even harvested.

MIDDLE EASTERN MEZZE

baba ghanooj	smoky-flavoured dip of mashed, baked aubergine, typically mixed with tomato and onion and sometimes pomegranate
batata hara	hot, diced potatoes fried with coriander, garlic and capsicum
börek	pastry pockets stuffed with salty white cheese or spicy minced meat with pine nuts; also known as *sambousek*
fatayer	small pastry triangles filled with spinach
fattoosh	a fresh salad of onions, tomatoes, cucumber, lettuce and shards of crispy, thin, deep-fried bread
fool	a kind of paste made from beans, tomatoes, onions, and chilli; also spelt *foul*
hummus	chickpeas ground into a paste and mixed with tahini, garlic and lemon
kibbeh	minced lamb, bulgur wheat and pine nuts shaped into a lemon-shaped patty and deep fried
kibbeh nayye	minced lamb and cracked wheat served raw
kibda	liver, often chicken liver (*kibda firekh* or *kibda farouj*), usually sautéed in lemon or garlic
labneh	a yogurt paste, heavily flavoured with garlic or mint
lahma bi-ajeen	small lamb pies
loubieh	French bean salad with tomatoes, onions and garlic
mashi	baked vegetables, such as courgettes, vine leaves, capsicums, or aubergines, stuffed with minced meat, rice, onions, parsley and herbs
mujadarreh	a traditional 'poor person's' dish of lentils and rice garnished with caramelised onions
muttabal	similar to *baba ghanooj,* but the blended aubergine is mixed with tahini, yogurt and olive oil to achieve a creamier consistency
shanklish	a salad of small pieces of crumbled, tangy, eye-wateringly strong cheese mixed with chopped onion and tomato
soojuk	fried, spicy lamb sausage
tabouleh	a bulgur wheat, parsley and tomato based salad, with a sprinkling of sesame seeds, lemon and garlic
tahini	a thin sesame seed paste
waraq aynab	vine leaves stuffed with rice and meat

MIDDLE EASTERN & ARABIAN MAIN COURSES

bamiya	an okra-based stew
fasoolyeh	a green-bean stew
felafel	deep-fried balls of mashed chickpeas, often rolled in Arabic bread with salad and hummus
hareis	slow-cooked wheat and lamb
kabbza	lamb or chicken cooked with onion, tomato, cucumber, grated carrot and other fruit
kebab	skewered, flame-grilled chunks of meat, usually lamb, but also chicken, goat, camel, fish or squid; also known as *sheesh* or shish kebab
kebab mashwi	meat paste moulded onto flat skewers and grilled
kebsa	whole stuffed lamb served on a bed of spiced rice and pine nuts; also known as *khuzi*
kofta	ground meat peppered with spices, shaped into small sausages, skewered and grilled
makbus	casserole of meat or fish with rice
mashboos	grilled meat (usually chicken or lamb) and spiced rice
mashkul	rice served with onions
mihammar	lamb cooked in yogurt sauce and stuffed with nuts, raisins and other dried fruit
muaddas	rice served with lentils
mushkak gamel	seasoned camel meat grilled on a skewer – usually tough as old boots!

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samak mashwi	fish barbecued over hot coals after basting in a date purée
shish tawooq	kebab with pieces of marinated, spiced chicken
shuwa	lamb cooked slowly in an underground oven
shwarma	the Middle Eastern equivalent of Greek *gyros* or Turkish *döner kebap;* strips are sliced from a vertical spit of compressed lamb or chicken, sizzled on a hot plate with chopped tomatoes and garnish, and then stuffed or rolled in Arabic bread
ta'amiyya	see felafel

MIDDLE EASTERN PASTRIES & DESSERTS

asabeeh	rolled filo pastry filled with pistachio, pine and cashew nuts and honey; otherwise known as 'ladies' fingers'
baklava	a generic term for any kind of layered flaky pastry with nuts, drenched in honey
barazak	flat, circular cookies sprinkled with sesame seeds
isfinjiyya	coconut slice
kunafa	shredded wheat over a creamy, sweet cheese base baked in syrup
labneh makbus	sweet yogurt cheese balls, sometimes made into a frittatalike creation or rolled in paprika; sometimes eaten for breakfast
mahallabiye	milk-based pudding
mushabbak	lace-work shaped pastry drenched in syrup
umm ali	a bread-based pudding made with sultanas and nuts, flavoured with nutmeg
zalabiyya	pastries dipped in rosewater

Expats

FROM HARDSHIP POSTING TO DREAM JOB

Fifteen years ago, a job in the Arabian Peninsula was considered to be a 'hardship posting'. While working in the Gulf was financially lucrative, with short hours and easy work, the conditions – the unbearable heat for much of the year, the conservative environment, the personal restrictions, the lack of a social life – made life difficult. Although the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is still a tough place to live, especially for women, life in the rest of the Gulf is relatively easy and, in places such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Bahrain, it's even exciting. So much so that a position on the Peninsula is now considered a dream job.

Ironically, inflation is on the rise, rents are higher than they've ever been, and wages haven't increased in years (and are now only slightly higher than salaries in the West). For many, these conditions are offset by the fact that the salary is tax free, and that myriad perks are still considered standard in many expat packages, such as a relocation allowance, annual plane tickets home, housing, health insurance, kids' education allowance, professional development grants, long paid holidays, and generous gratuity payments for when you decide you've had enough.

'The greatest thing has been finding a whole international gang of new friends. I now have a huge network from nationalities I had never in my life encountered before.'
Rachel Ball, English, six months abroad

THE WORLD IS YOUR OYSTER

These days many people are moving to the Gulf for reasons that are less to do with financial reward, and more to do with job satisfaction and being part of the exciting developments that are taking place in the region. The opportunities are limitless. Expats don't have to be here long before they get that 'the world is my oyster' feeling. Competition exists, but it's nowhere near as tough as it is back home.

Here it's possible to create your own opportunities. If you do your research, network well, make friends in the right industry, and are flexible, prepared to start at the bottom and work hard, you'll probably land a great job, be quickly promoted and may even have a position created for you. An Australian we recently met in Dubai started out with accounting qualifications and a dull financial job before deciding to throw it all in to teach English in Japan; she then secured a position as a flight attendant with Emirates Airlines, and recently became a production manager on a morning TV breakfast show. She's started doing a masters degree in journalism by distance and is planning a career in TV.

'I've developed a stronger personality, become more mature, I'm a better decision maker, and am fully independent. I appreciate life more.'
Hoda Beckdash, Lebanese, one year abroad

THE NEW EXPAT

Whereas the expat of the oil-boom days was in his or her 40s or 50s, white, middle class, and more than likely worked in oil, gas, petroleum, construction, nursing, teaching or foreign relations, times have changed. The new expats come in all ages, races, nationalities and classes, and work in every sector of industry, including in jobs that didn't exist in the Gulf a few years ago. You're just as likely to meet a mature male Indian IT CEO or a female middle-aged Danish hotel general manager as you are a 30-plus female South African TV editor or a 20-something male Bulgarian snowboard instructor.

These days the work itself is more glamorous, with the most coveted opportunities being in tourism, hospitality, marketing, PR and advertising, real-estate development, project management, architecture, interior design, fashion and entertainment. While the work itself is

'I love meeting people from all walks of life. But I hate those "my maid/driver" conversations and people who feel they have some right to be vaguely colonial, even racist, in a way they never would back home.'
Antonia Carver, English, six years abroad

exciting, the opportunity to work on fantastic projects is even more so – some of the world's biggest and whackiest housing projects, buildings, shopping malls, cities and even islands are being developed in the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia, ranging from floating cities in Bahrain to pearl-shaped developments in Qatar to an island development shaped like the world in Dubai.

'The best thing is the travel. We've seen more of the world in two years than most people see in a lifetime.'
Greg Unrau, Canadian, six years abroad

A COSMOPOLITAN LIFE

For many expats, the multicultural environment in which they're able to work is more attractive than the job itself. Expatriate populations outnumber national populations in all Gulf States. There are over 10 million expats in the Gulf, with expats comprising 88% of the workforce in the UAE, 83% in Qatar, 81% in Kuwait, 72% in Saudi Arabia, 55% in Bahrain and 54% in Oman. The Arabian Peninsula is one of the most multicultural places on the planet.

Companies in the Gulf boast about how many nationalities they have working for them. A director of one women's university gets up at the first staff gathering of every new academic year to proudly announce where his new recruits have come from and how many countries they've travelled to – the more obscure the country they're from and the greater the number they've visited, the bigger the director's smile will be. Proudly displayed in the lobby of one city hotel are little cut-out photos of the staff, which are pinned on to their home countries on a big map of the world – most of North and East Africa, nearly all of the Middle East and Asia, and much of Europe is scattered with their smiling faces.

'Coming here was the best thing that we ever did. No matter how hard we worked there we were only moving backwards. Even though it takes a lot of effort to settle in, we're able to support our families and invest back home.'
Ann Scrilec, Filipina, two years abroad

Another young graduate we met, fresh out of a media degree in London and working in hotel PR, had barely been six months in the Gulf when she was offered work as a radio presenter, a job she would be waiting years to get in the UK. While she admitted that she's earning less than she would be in an assistant role in the media in London, she said she's here more for the experience. She too boasts of the number of nationalities she works with and the Argentine boyfriend she's dating; he's only been speaking English since he arrived here a few months ago, and she's now learning Spanish as well as Arabic. An acquaintance who is a cocktail bar manager tells us that he loves the fact that he can have a dinner party with friends from Iraq, France, South Africa and Australia, and his girlfriend is from the Philippines – none of this would be possible in his home of Serbia.

THE OPPORTUNITY TO TRAVEL

What the 21st-century expat does have in common with the expat of the last century is their motivation to travel. A trading hub a thousand years ago, when camel caravans used to crisscross Arabia transporting frankincense, gold, spices and dates, the Gulf is now one of the world's busiest travel hubs, at the crossroads between Europe and Australasia, Africa and Asia. While Bahrain's Gulf Air leads the way in the airline stakes, and Dubai's Emirates Airlines has pioneered new air routes and markets, the UAE's Etihad Airways, Qatar Airways and Oman Air are fast catching up – as are newer lower-budget airlines such as Air Arabia and Jazeera.

'The best thing about living in the Gulf region is its close proximity to many exciting and exotic travel destinations.'
Mostafa Tawfik, Egyptian-American, three years abroad

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) tourism figures for 2006 were impressive, with the UAE having welcomed nearly 7 million visitors by January 2007, Bahrain over 800,000, Oman 750,000, Qatar 650,000 and Yemen 390,000. Even with these figures, all of the Gulf States have ambitious long-term tourism strategies in place aimed at dramatically increasing numbers of tourists.

The same airlines are not only bringing tens of millions of tourists to the region each year, and scores of millions to duty-free shops as they wait for connections, they're providing expats with myriad opportunities to travel. While the older expat used to focus on seeing the Middle East region if they weren't using their leave to visit family back home, the new expats are spending their five-day *eid* breaks in the Maldives or Mumbai, and their longer summer holidays (when the temperatures soar and every expat evacuates) doing Europe, Africa and Asia. These days, the older expats are taking more adventurous trips, with Ethiopia, Yemen and Iran currently topping the list.

'The greatest challenge is to not be too work oriented. Many people move here and end up putting in long hours at the office. Companies then have an expectation that their staff will "live to work" – meanwhile the desert and the beach beckon.'
Antonia Carver, English, six years abroad

A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

A recent change to laws in the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain to allow foreigners to own property and, in the process, get a residence visa has seen new expats buying small studios in marina-tower developments and the older expats buying villas on green golfing estates, creating a second home away from home.

Unfortunately, while everyone talks up the multicultural aspects of living in the Arabian Peninsula, when it comes to affording these properties the divide between the educated Western expat and the often equally educated Asians becomes apparent. Westerners (mostly Europeans, North Americans and Australasians) work in highly skilled jobs for which most locals are only just receiving their qualifications, while non-Western expats (primarily Pakistanis, Afghanistanis, Bangladeshis, Indians and Sri Lankans) perform much of the unskilled labour (taxi driving, construction work, domestic help). While there are exceptions to the rule (the burgeoning Indian middle class, for example), the expat divide still exists.

YOU'RE MOVING WHERE? *Terry Carter*

When my wife Lara was offered an interview for a job in Abu Dhabi nearly 10 years ago, I admit that I did have to look it up in an atlas. Sure we'd travelled extensively and Lara was just back from South America, but this was potentially quite a sea change. Friends offered advice. Some of it was good ('Just do it! You can always come back if you don't like it.'), some of it misguided ('You'll be living in a compound and you'll have to smuggle in alcohol!') and some of it was negative ('You're going *where*?'). But we decided to do it anyway. We didn't want to spend our whole working lives only living in Australia, and despite having a well-paid position as a design manager in Sydney, the whole inner-city work-hard-play-hard lifestyle was not as appealing to me as it once was.

By the time Lara was offered her position, I was already packing up the apartment and just had to hit 'send' on my carefully crafted resignation letter – no bridge burning, just in case! Arriving in Abu Dhabi was surreal and life continued to be so for the first few months, with a thankfully in-tune call to prayer punctuating the air several times a day as a constant reminder that we were somewhere very different than Kings Cross, Sydney! While some things took a while to adjust to – such as dealing with bureaucracy, the fan-forced-oven summer heat, the woeful cinema offerings, our favourite magazines with the 'racy' photos ripped out of them, and hard-to-find ingredients for our favourite meals – the complete change of lifestyle was welcome. Sure there were some bigger problems: working with power-crazed expat managers (ironically, some from Australia), taking a position only to never see a contract (I walked out of that dysfunctional disaster after two weeks), and the lurking feeling that if one of us were fired we'd probably be leaving the country, perhaps hastily. But in hindsight we wouldn't change a thing – except maybe arriving in the Arabian Peninsula in one of the hottest months. That *really* makes you doubt your sanity!

LIVING IN A FOREIGN CULTURE

A major motivation for many people to move overseas is the opportunity to live within another society, and to experience the rich and fulfilling process of becoming familiar with a foreign culture. The Middle East, Islam and Arabs have all been the subjects of unprecedented and often negative Western media coverage since 9/11. Living in the Gulf allows you to make up your own mind through first-hand experience.

'The opportunity to live and work in a place where you can contribute to its dynamic social and developmental change is very rewarding.'
Susan Brown, American, three years abroad

If you're prepared to enter the country with an open mind and learn a little about Islam, Arab culture and Bedouin society, the opportunity to enjoy the rich traditions and gracious hospitality of Arabs can be a rare privilege.

Learn as much as you can about your host nation's culture and Islam. Read (p99), do a cross-cultural course or participate in cultural activities run by local organisations such as the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding (p388), which runs visits to Jumeirah Mosque (p389), the only mosque in the UAE that non-Muslims can enter. The centre also runs cultural breakfasts and lunches, where you get to meet locals over a casual meal and ask them everything you always wanted to know about their culture and religion. Local museums and heritage villages – there's one in virtually every city in the Gulf – are a great place to learn about the history, heritage and culture of the country.

While Arabic is by no means essential to communicate in the Arabian Peninsula – and in fact, Urdu, Hindi or Tagalog would probably be more useful – you'll have a much greater chance of making friends with Gulf Arabs if you can at least learn the lengthy greetings. Few expats take up the opportunity to learn Arabic, and most end up regretting it. Don't make the same mistake.

'We were living in Kuwait when I got a job offer in the UAE. We knew that Dubai was the best place in the Gulf to live, in terms of quality of life, so it was an easy decision.'
Steve Terney, American, 19 years abroad

Life on the Arabian Peninsula

Life in Oman, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait isn't as 'foreign' as life in Yemen or Saudi Arabia, and new expats rarely suffer the kind of culture shock they did 10 years ago. While there are some aspects of life in the Arabian Peninsula that are distinctly Arabic (such as the language and cuisine) or very much Arabian (such as the tradition of hospitality, the architecture and the Bedouin heritage), the countries are much more multicultural than most expats would expect – much more so, in fact, than the UK, the USA or Australia.

Expats are therefore not only adjusting to the Middle East and Arab way of life, they're also adjusting to living with myriad cultures. If you live in the neighbourhood of Mankhool in Dhabi, for example, you'll probably live in a building that predominantly houses middle-class Indians; you're more likely to see the celebrations for the Diwali festival than for the Muslim festival Eid al-Adha.

'The best thing is the accessible luxury – I earn very little money, yet I'm able to treat myself to gourmet-standard food and drink for much less than it would cost me in the UK.'
Rachel Ball, English, six months abroad

Everyday life in most of the Gulf states contrasts dramatically with life in Saudi Arabia. While all are Islamic states practising Sharia'a (Islamic law), most have civil courts and penalties often aren't as harsh. Most Gulf Arabs – particularly Omanis, Emiratis, Bahrainis and Kuwaitis – are very open and tolerant. You can live wherever you want; compounds don't exist outside of Saudi Arabia. You can eat pork in most good restaurants and buy it in many supermarkets. You can get a licence to buy and drink alcohol, although you shouldn't drink and drive, and you certainly shouldn't stagger through the streets if intoxicated; to do so will most definitely land you some time in jail. Affectionate behaviour, even among married couples, is a no-no in all states and should be especially avoided during Ramadan.

Negotiating the arcane workings of the legal system and government bureaucracy across the Gulf will test the nerves of the most patient of people. Long arduous lines at government offices, and the feeling of being ushered from one place to the next are compounded by the frequent lack of courtesy shown by officials. The best advice is to be patient; losing your temper only creates a confrontation, which you cannot win and certainly will not defuse the situation, even if it does make you feel better at the time.

While historically Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait, have not seen anywhere near the number of expats as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, they are increasingly becoming attractive to expats as the UAE becomes more expensive and crowded, and Saudi becomes less secure. Qatar is the country of the moment, having attracted the eyes of the world during Doha's extravagant Asian Games event in late 2006. Over the last few years, it has been developing an outstanding educational sector, with prestigious universities from all over the world setting up shop there. Oman is popular for its laid-back lifestyle, traditional culture and natural beauty, while Bahrain is seen as the most open and tolerant society.

'The most wonderful thing about living in Dubai is the opportunities that are opened to you by being part of a process of a town no-one has heard of turning into a global city that everyone has heard of.'
Antonia Carver, English, six years abroad

Life in the UAE

Life in the UAE is appealing for most expats – despite the traffic problems, the soaring rents and the inflation. Dubai is an exciting city, with shops, hotels, restaurants, bars and clubs that have as much style, glamour and sophistication as any you'll find in Sydney, London or New York. And Abu Dhabi seems to be following suit with the announcement that the city will host a Formula One race, while construction of a Guggenheim Museum and a branch of the Louvre will commence soon.

The UAE's cities are also uniquely Arabian, with as much Emirati heritage and culture as any in the Gulf – it's just hard to find in Dubai.

'While I look forward to going home, there's this feeling when you're there, you start to miss the friends and cycle of life you've got accustomed to in Dubai. I simply enjoy my period here because when I go home for good, there'll be no coming back. There are still so many places to see.'
Bessie Sagario, Filipina, three years abroad

Life in Saudi Arabia

Money has obviously been the biggest incentive for expats to move to Saudi Arabia but the trade-off has been the lack of a social life; the restrictions of living in a country that has adopted a puritanical form of Islam that segregates society by gender, outlaws alcohol, forbids women from driving, and requires all women to cover up; and in recent years, the all-important issue of security.

Entertainment is thin on the ground, and there are neither cinemas nor bars. Within the compounds (and in some workplaces), you're generally free to do as you like, but the Saudi authorities are very serious about enforcing social segregation outside the compounds, and if you're caught there's a high probability of spending time in jail. The possibility of transgressing some seemingly obscure local law is a constant worry.

On the other hand, the opportunity to experience first-hand the fascinating social and geographical landscape of Saudi Arabia is attractive to the intrepid. For many, the opportunity to live in a country which is all but closed to tourism carries personal rewards which ultimately outweigh the financial factor.

'The best and worst thing about being an expat is being an "outsider".'
Liz Maxwell, Australian, eight years abroad

EXPAT LIFE FOR WOMEN

Expat women are generally treated with a great deal of respect in the Arabian Peninsula, outside of Saudi Arabia. You're just as likely to see a woman (local or foreign) in a management position as you are a man. Women can drive and there's no problem with women having male friends – although women shouldn't live with men they're not married to or related to.

THE ACCIDENTAL EXPAT *Lisandro Palabrica,*

I came to Dubai accidentally and I've been here for two-and-a-half years now. I love and hate Dubai at the same time. Actually, I hate two things and love many things about Dubai! I hate the traffic and the never-ending construction. I love the dynamic environment, the food, the sun, the sea, and the people I've met from many different cultures. People from different walks of life; some who only care how beautiful their tan looks on Jumeirah Beach, people who work hard to send money to their family back home while living in a small room in Satwa or Karama just to save rent, others with an Imeldific [named after Imelda Marcos, the shopaholic former First Lady of the Philippines, known for her colossal shoe collection] attitude who shop every week, a female CEO from an investment company who is a volunteer in a charity that takes care of African kids, or even the people I've met from the dance clubs scattered around the city, partying like there is no tomorrow! Dubai is a big oasis in the middle of the desert. A one-time chance for some to change their lives and have a better life, and a quicksand for others who are unlucky to end up in a situation where they are sinking and have no choice but to pack up and go home.

I let go of the things I have been accustomed to when I set foot in Dubai for the first time – culture, traditions, beliefs, my family, friends and environment back home. Yet there never was a moment of incongruity. Not a moment of hesitation or regret. I knew it would be a challenging journey for me, finding a home away from home, and I always believe that life is not a matter of chance, but a matter of choice. So I struggled, trying to survive the challenges and reach for my goals, though deep inside me I missed my family and friends (sometimes spending Dh300 a month on phone calls) until I started to explore and meet wonderful new friends, and became attached and breathed new air in a strange land.

Now, plans have changed. For three years I have been waiting to move to Canada, thinking that the honey tasted sweeter on the other side of the world. My wait is now over, as I've been granted an immigrant visa and might move there in April, letting go of the things I've started in Dubai. The hardest part of letting go will be not seeing the future of Dubai, the skyscrapers which I have witnessed laying their foundations and the dust from their construction that I have breathed when I've travelled around Dubai. I'll miss the weather, the sun, my dear friends who are my extended family and, importantly, the career opportunity of growing with the city.

Life must go on. Life is a choice. I'm sure I will be back here and if that happens, I will never again be an accidental expat in Dubai.

Lisandro is a Filipino marketing and public-relations executive, who spontaneously gave his CV to a recruiter and was packing his bags two weeks later.

While women are free to wear what they want, female expats should dress respectfully (p544) as, after all, you're a guest in an Islamic country. You'll also be treated with greater respect if you dress modestly.

While some women take offence to designated 'ladies queues' in banks and government departments, and to being shunted off to 'family rooms' in cheap eateries, expats who've been around for a while know to take advantage of the privilege of speedy service and the refuge from the occasional leers of guest workers who haven't seen their wives in a long time.

Saudi Arabia is a different story. Segregation between male and female is the norm, and public life is an uncompromisingly male domain that women cannot freely enter. Apart from the indignity of such treatment, this can seriously inhibit the freedom of movement for women.

MEETING PEOPLE

One of the biggest complaints of expats living in the Gulf is that they rarely befriend nationals, and in some cases never get to meet them at all. Compound life and the strictly segregated nature of Saudi society make it especially difficult in Saudi Arabia, but it's not so hard in the other Gulf countries if you make an effort.

Start by avoiding the formal expat groups. From the time you arrive you'll be inundated by invitations to attend Australia-New Zealand (insert your country here) Club get-togethers and embassy barbecues to celebrate national holidays, and to join global expat organisations such as the Hash House Harriers. Sporting clubs and charities, while worthwhile and fun, also provide few opportunities for meeting nationals, who tend to prefer to exercise privately (ladies' clubs are the exception), and to donate to their local mosque and community rather than work in a formally organised charity.

Instead, focus on meeting nationals and expats from countries other than your own. There's nothing stopping you from going to the Indian Social Club or the Iranian Club. Dance clubs also have ethnic club nights where you get to party with expats from that particular country and make friends in the process. For instance, Tuesday nights at SAX (p427) in Abu Dhabi is a great way to meet Lebanese as you dance to a live Lebanese band and Lebanese DJ. Restaurants provide the same opportunity, and there are generally a few where different nationalities congregate. If you want to meet Gulf nationals and Arab expats, head to a *sheesha* café – but go late. Local sports matches, popular activities such as barbecuing in parks (late again!), and local hobbies such as shopping (also late) all present opportunities to meet Gulf nationals. While you may have to make the effort first – and that's where those Arabic greetings come in – once you receive an invitation to coffee, accept immediately!

'I really enjoy the multicultural nature of life here and the cultural events. I've learned so much about many different cultures and made friends from all over the world.'
Monica Gallant, Canadian, 11 years abroad

CHILDREN

For anyone, an international experience is a life-changing experience for the better, but for kids this is especially the case. Many expat parents say they'd rather bring their kids up in the Gulf than in the UK/USA/Canada/Australia, citing myriad reasons ranging from education to safety.

The standard of international schools in the Arabian Peninsula is excellent. You find schools from all countries, from America to Britain, Australia to New Zealand, and Germany to France, all offering identical or similar curriculum to that in their home countries, enabling a smooth transition into universities and colleges back home. In Saudi Arabia, large companies like Aramco and British Aerospace also operate their own schools; other expats send their children to boarding schools in their home countries. Many employers provide an allowance for education, whether it's taking place locally or abroad. Enrolling a non-Muslim, non-Arabic-speaking child in a local school is generally not an option.

BRINGING UP THE BUTLER BABIES

Leigh Butler is an expat academic who generously runs a website (http://dwc.hct.ac.ae/expatinfo/index.htm) that helps recently arrived expats settle into their new lifestyle. Having lived abroad with his wife Trish and their two daughters for 11 years, Leigh sees their family as a stronger unit for living overseas. The friendships the children form are stronger as well, although this comes at a price. 'The downside is that friends move far more often than at "home" and they have been broken hearted at times [at] losing their best friend.' The location of 'home' is itself also an issue and when travelling back to Australia their accents are often mistaken for British or American accents, leading to the problematic question of 'Where am I really from?'. While Dubai is an especially safe place to live, Leigh feels that the kids lack street smarts that similar-aged children in big-city Australia would have. 'They could catch a plane to Germany without a problem, but to catch a tram or train in Melbourne would be a major operation.'

Crime across the Arabian Peninsula is extremely low by Western standards. In small towns in Oman, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar and Yemen, people still leave their cars unlocked when they go to the shop. (And even in Saudi Arabia, compounds have high levels of security.) Expat kids may find that they have more freedom in the Arabian Peninsula than they do back home, as parents feel safe in the knowledge that they are not going to be preyed upon in parks or offered drugs.

'The best thing about living here is learning about different cultures and making new friends from around the world. The worst thing is feeling lonely, not alone; work takes up most of your time.'
Hoda Beckdash, Lebanese, one year abroad

Children meet kids from all over the world at school and in the many sporting and extracurricular activities, including international trips. Growing up in a multinational surrounding gives them a broader view of life, creating more open-minded and tolerant young people who are accepting of other cultures.

There have been some outstanding books written specifically about the expat experience for children:

- *Raising Global Nomads: Parenting Abroad in an On-Demand World,* by Robin Pascoe, draws on her family's personal experiences of living in a dozen countries over 25 years. Pascoe frankly shares her own family's trials and tribulations, and how they coped with the difficulties of adapting to expatriate life.
- *When Abroad – Do as the Local Children Do: Ori's Guide for Young Expats,* by Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich and Bettina Kaltenhauser, is intended to help children of expat families overcome the challenges of living in a foreign country. This colourful kids' book contains activities to help children build the confidence to explore and embrace their new environment.

'The most difficult thing is getting used to the different ways of doing things, such as telling people how to get to your place when there aren't any street addresses, but you somehow adapt.'
Helen Pearce, Canadian, four years abroad

- *Club Expat: A Teenager's Guide to Moving Overseas,* by Aniket and Akash Shah, deals with the everyday intricacies of expatriating (from what to take to what to leave at home) while looking at the bigger picture. This engaging read by two expat brothers prepares teens for the negative aspects of moving while showing them how to focus on the positive, thereby helping teens make the most of their international experience.
- *Unrooted Childhoods: Memoirs of Growing Up Global,* edited by Faith Eidse and Nina Sichel, is an anthology of enlightening essays by writers who grew up mobile, whether as diplomats' kids or army brats – the people Pico Iyer calls the 'privileged homeless'. Writers from Isabel Allende to Ariel Dorfman write about their experience of being rootless, of the impact of their international education, and how it opened their minds to cultures around the globe.
- *The Third Culture Kid Experience: Growing Up Among Worlds,* by David C Pollock and Ruth E Van Reken, is an enlightening read examining the 'third culture', the shared common expat lifestyle that is different to both the expats' own 'home' cultures and that of their host culture. It looks at the challenges faced by people who have spent a significant part of their development years in this 'third culture', and explains why they get bitten by the travel bug, and are drawn back to the place or the places they lived in.

'The worst thing is missing family, especially during a crisis back home, and the good people who come into your life, and then leave soon after…it's the expat shuffle.'
Greg Unrau, Canadian, six years abroad

DOING BUSINESS

New arrivals hoping to do business in the Gulf States should be aware of differences in outlook, particularly with regard to the favourite Western preoccupation of 'getting things done'.

Arabs are famous for their fatalism, which stems from Islam and their belief that only God can determine their fate. When you make an appointment, agree to undertake a project together, or just arrange to have dinner, you'll more than likely hear the response *insha'allah.* Literally meaning 'if Allah wills it', it means the outcome is in God's hands. Although not necessarily, it can permit both a procrastination and a polite 'no'. Unlike Westerners who often masochistically flog a problem to death, an Arab enjoys patiently pondering a situation or simply walking away.

Equally, Western business practices such as good timekeeping, decisiveness, prompt action, accepting blame and designating responsibility are all lost on Gulf Arabs. Instead, hard bargaining, the ability to find loopholes and the honouring of one's word are dearly cherished.

Another adjustment expats need to make is to the notion of time and the segmentation of the day, which is more pronounced in some countries than others. While Dubai has adjusted to Western practices, with straight work days in the private sector, businesses everywhere else in the Gulf will often close in the afternoon so people can head home for lunch and a siesta.

In Saudi Arabia, there are also breaks for prayer, with each lasting for about 25 minutes, although these don't usually affect health-care workers.

Avoid doing business in the Gulf during the month of Ramadan, when nationals work considerably reduced hours and many offices run on skeleton staff.

For practical information on doing business and working in the Arabian Peninsula, read *Living and Working in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia* by Robert Hughes, a comprehensive, practical 'how-to' guide to everyday work and study; *Live and Work in Saudi and the Gulf* by Louise Whetter, a good general introduction to starting a business, working and buying a property in the Arabian Peninsula; and *The Arab World Handbook* by James Peters, which gives a good overview of the region, including business opportunities and available employment.

'The multicultural environment is what's best about life here. You hear every language spoken in the streets and see people in Western, Asian, African and Arab clothing, and it's all just so natural and normal. No-one is a foreigner.'
Steve Terney, American, 19 years abroad

'The hardest thing about coming here was leaving our family and friends. To quote my mother: "You are taking my granddaughters *where?*" She didn't care about my wife and me.'
Leigh Butler, Australian, 11 years abroad

FURTHER READING

Read everything and anything you can about the country you're moving to before you leave, especially about the culture and Islam. Nothing beats talking to someone who has lived or is currently living in the Arabian Peninsula, and there are some excellent expat websites with discussion forums where you can get advice and share experiences. There are also a lot of informative books about the expat experience, both personal narratives and practical resources.

Once you've arrived, get a copy of one of the many excellent local expat guides available, such as the *Explorer* series, which cover all the practical details, from doing business, to setting up your house, and getting your kids into school.

Books

Arabia by Jonathan Raban chronicles the author's journey through the Gulf during the oil-boom years of the 1970s, introducing us to the early cities and villages, to the rich and poor, sheikhs and Bedu. It's essential to understanding how dramatic the changes have been in the region in the last few decades.

Sandstorms: Days and Nights in Arabia, by Peter Theroux, was written after the Iran–Iraq War and before the first Gulf War, and provides an excellent introduction to the complexities and contradictions of politics, religion, society and alliances in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia.

'Dealing with people who use their nationality as an advantage against some expatriates here can be challenging. In our first year we encountered all different people who could be brutally unethical. It's hard if you're Asian. Only whites get most of the privileges.'
Ann Scrilec, Filipina, two years abroad

SOLVING THE EXPAT SOJOURN SLUMP

When you've been living the expat lifestyle for a while, it's easy to get into a routine of visiting the same restaurants, bars, shops, neighbourhoods and friends. Here are our Top 10 tips for breaking the pattern.

- Leave the car at home. If something is within walking distance, walk. Like the song on *Sesame Street* says, find out who the people in your neighbourhood are.
- Take a drive to an interesting destination, such as Nizwa in Oman, or Al Ain in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but stop at every small town on the way. Find out what the rural areas of your country of residence are really like.
- Skip the big supermarkets. Head to the corner grocery store – chances are you'll find out far more about how other expats and locals live by not visiting the 'pork room'.
- Eat locally. Don't understand the menu? Go right in! Find out why that local Pakistani/Indian/Sri Lankan/Iranian eatery is so popular! Do one a week, every week.
- Be a tourist for the day. Got guests? Don't just write them a list and send them off for the day. If you haven't done all the local sights, make a point of visiting them all; you might be surprised at how much you know – or don't know – about where you live.
- Expand your circle of friends. So, just who do you hang out with? Make a list now. Are all of your friends from the same country, or in some cases, city? Expand your horizons. Make friends with expats from other parts of the world.
- Make local friends. While this one might appear to be the most obvious of tips, you'll be surprised how many expats leave the Arabian Gulf without one local name on speed dial. Don't let that be you, you'll regret it!
- Have a multicultural meal. Invite these new friends to dinner at your place – mix expats from a variety of backgrounds with some locals. Make sure you cater for everyone and then let the cross-pollination of ideas, opinions and dreams begin.
- Learn a language. Some basic Arabic is a great idea, but Tagalog, Hindi or Farsi can open doors that you might never have dreamed of.
- Visit a local park on the weekend. Instead of having a barbecue in your backyard, why not head to the local park and mix it with other weekend chefs cooking up their local specialities. Find out why kebabs taste better when cooked with a battery-powered fan hovering over them!

Expats: Travels in Arabia, from Tripoli to Teheran by Christopher Dickey, a former *Newsweek* Middle East bureau chief, draws on interviews with compelling characters, ranging from oil-tanker captains to diplomats, to provide a fascinating insight into expat life in the Middle East in the late '80s. Read this and you might make more of an effort to chat to that craggy-faced old English bloke propping up the bar at Hemingways in Abu Dhabi, or any other expat pub in the Gulf.

A Moveable Marriage: Relocate Your Relationship Without Breaking It, by Canadian journalist Robin Pascoe, recounts the challenges to her marriage as she follows her diplomat husband to 25 countries, writing very frankly about their ups and downs, and how they kept their relationship alive.

Leaving Paradise: My Expat Adventures and Other Stories by Sonia Harford, a journalist for Australia's *Age* newspaper, recounts her years working as a foreign correspondent and what it's like to be an Australian living abroad, reflecting on everything from the glamour of expat life to the pain of nostalgia. She also investigates the boom in Australian expatriatism and examines why one million Australians now live overseas.

lonelyplanet.com

GenXpat: The Young Professional's Guide to Making a Successful Life Abroad by Margaret Malewski is the first book aimed at helping the new generation of culturally mobile global professionals – the kind of young creative types who work the freelance desks at Dubai Media City – succeed overseas.

Websites

There are countless websites and discussion forums managed by and aimed at expats.

Expat Exchange (www.expatexchange.net)
Expat Forum (www.expatforum.com)
Expats in Saudi Arabia (www.expatsinsaudiarabia.com)
Living Abroad (www.livingabroad.com)
Survive Abroad (www.surviveabroad.com) Has a useful 110-frequently-asked-questions section about Saudi Arabia.

Environment

The harsh lands of Arabia have for centuries attracted travellers from the Western world, curious to see 'a haggered land infested with wild beasts, and wilder men… What could be more exciting?' writes Burton, 'What more sublime?'

To this day, people come to the desert expecting 'sand, sand, sand, still sand, and only sand and sand again'. The traveller who wrote those words (Kinglake), curiously had only passed through gravel plains at that point, but so strong is the connection between the words 'desert' and 'sand', he felt obliged to comment on what he thought he should see rather than on what was there.

For anyone who has travelled extensively in Arabia, or had the privilege of being in the region after exceptional rains, it quickly becomes apparent that the lands of the Peninsula are far from a monotonous, barren wasteland of undulating sand dunes. They are richly diverse and support a remarkable range of carefully adapted plants and animals. Indeed, one of the principal joys of the region is the exceptional landscapes that form the backdrop for dramas of survival and endurance by all that makes the desert fastness home.

The Al-Hasa Oasis, near the town of Al-Hofuf in eastern Saudi Arabia, is the largest oasis in the world. Covering 2500 sq km, it's home to over three million palm trees.

THE LAND

Geology

The Arabian Peninsula is a treasure trove for the geologist. Though not particularly rich in minerals or gems (though copper is found in northern Oman), the Peninsula is highly revealing of the earth's earliest history (see boxed text, p239), supporting theories of plate tectonics and continental shift. Indeed, geologists believe that the Peninsula originally formed part of the larger landmass of Africa. A split in this continent created both Africa's Great Rift Valley (which extends from Mozambique up through Djibouti, into western Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Jordan) and the Red Sea.

As Arabia slipped away from Africa, the Peninsula began to 'tilt', with the western side rising and the eastern edge dropping, a process that led to the formation of the Gulf.

Geologists speak of the Peninsula in terms of two distinct regions: the Arabian shield and the Arabian shelf. The shield, which consists of volcanic sedimentary, rock makes up the western third of today's Arabian Peninsula. The shelf is made up of the lower-lying areas that slope away from the shield, from central Arabia to the waters of the Gulf.

Extensive flooding millions of years ago led to the remains of marine life (both planktonic plants and micro-organisms) being deposited in layers of sediment across the tilted landmass – as the rich fossil remains found across Arabia indicate. When sufficient dead organic matter is laid down and trapped under the surface in conditions where a lack of oxygen prevents it from decaying to water and carbon dioxide, the raw material of hydrocarbons is produced – the origin, in other words, of oil and gas. The conversion from dead organic matter to a hydrocarbon, described as maturation, is subject to many other conditions such as depth and temperature. Arabia's geology is uniquely supportive of these conditions, and 'nodding donkeys' (drilling apparatus, capable of boring holes up to 5km deep) can be seen throughout the interior of the Peninsula, and offshore platforms dot the Gulf, tapping into hidden seams of 'reservoir rock', to which hydrocarbons have migrated over time.

Newspapers across the region agonise over if and when the reserves will reach their peak (see boxed text, p40). Given that the economies of all the Peninsula countries rely to a lesser or greater extent on oil and gas, this is one issue that can't be left to *insha'allah* (God's will). As such, Peninsula countries are busy diversifying their economic interests (see p40) in case their reserves run out sooner rather than later.

Geography

Stand on top of Kuwait Towers and the eye roams unhindered along flat country. The low-lying coastal plains and salt flats stretch all along the limp waters of the northern Gulf, barely managing to make a mountain out of a molehill until the Mussandam Peninsula brings the plain to an abrupt close. This is the land of mudhoppers and wading birds and long stretches of dazzling-white sands.

Gulf Landscapes, by Elizabeth Collas and Andrew Taylor, is a beautifully illustrated book that shows there's much more to the Gulf than its high-profile cities.

Much of the interior is flat too but some major mountain ranges, like the Hajar Mountains of Oman and the Haraz Mountains of Yemen, bring an entirely different climate and way of life to the high ground.

There are no permanent river systems in the Peninsula. Water-laden clouds from the sea break across the mountains, causing rainfall to slide along wadis with dramatic speed. Smaller tributaries of water collect in the wadis from natural springs and create oases in the desert. In much of the Peninsula, the water table is close enough to the surface to hand-dig a well – a fact not wasted on the Bedu who survive on a system of wells and springs discovered or made by their forefathers. Irrigation, in the form of elaborate ducts and pipes (called *falaj* in Oman – see p216), helps channel water through plantations, allowing more extensive farming in the region than might be supposed (see p87).

ECOSYSTEMS

The Desert

There's such awe in the words 'Arabian desert'. It's been described by so many famous writers and travellers, it's bound up so inseparably in Western fantasies of escape, that it's hard to begin a description of it. The

LANDSCAPES TO CRY FOR

The following Top 10 list of spectacular landscapes in the region are stunning enough to raise a tear or two.

- Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia (p333) – Copper-coloured wind-eroded sandstone at sunset.
- Al-Soudah, Saudi Arabia (p343) – Peregrine-eye views of the coastal plain from soaring escarpment summit.
- Uruq Bani Ma'arid, Saudi Arabia (p349) – Wind rustling sand over the dunes of the Empty Quarter.
- Wadi Dhabat, Oman (p252) – Camels and cows sharing abundant herbage in seasonal mists.
- Wadi Ghul, Oman (p234) – Vertiginous peeps into the Grand Canyon of Arabia.
- Sharfat al-Alamayn, Oman (p233) – Panoramic mountain vista of vertical cliffs and fertile wadis.
- Mughsail, Oman (p253) – Blowholes piping sardines beneath the dramatic undercliff.
- Shaharah, Yemen (p474) – Switchback glimpses of livid green, terraced fields.
- Suqutra, Yemen (p502) – Floating islands of cormorants off pristine coastline.
- Khor al-Adaid, Qatar (p287) – Sun sparking off the inland sea, netted by dunes.

very words 'Empty Quarter' invite imaginative speculation, a pull towards exploration and discovery. 'Quarter' is about right: the Rub' al-Khali, as it is known locally, occupies a vast area in the heart of the Peninsula, straddling Saudi, Yemen, Oman and UAE; but 'empty' is not the case.

Arabian Wildlife at www.arabianwildlife.com is the online version of the *Arabian Wildlife Magazine* and covers 'all facets of wildlife and conservation in Arabia'.

The sands dunes of the Empty Quarter may be the most famous geographical feature but they are not the only desert of interest. Much of the Peninsula is made up of flat, gravel plains dotted with outcrops of weather-eroded sandstone in the shape of pillars, mushrooms and ledges. Fine examples of these desert forms can be seen in Saudi Arabia, near Al-Ula (see p333), Bir Zekreet in Qatar (see p289) and Duqm and the Huqf Escarpment in Oman (see p246).

There are many other kinds of desert too, including flat coastal plains and the infamous volcanic black Harra of northern Arabia. The stoic traveller, Doughty, described the area as 'iron desolation…uncouth blackness…lifeless cumber of volcanic matter!' Even camels hate to cross it as the small rocks heat in the sun and catch in their feet.

Once upon a time, ostriches roamed the savannah-like plains of Arabia and crocodiles lurked in the rivers, but changing climate and human encroachment has resulted in a change of inhabitants.

Travels in Arabia Deserta, by CM Doughty, was first published in 1926. Described by one critic as 'Big book, big bore', the powerful, eccentric descriptions of the author's laborious travels across Arabia have a long list of devotees, including TE Lawrence.

Nowadays, camels (few of which are wild) and feral donkeys dominate the landscape of thorny acacia (low, funnel-shaped bush) and life-supporting *ghaf* trees. Sheltering under these trees, and licking the dew from the leaflets in the morning, are fleet-footed gazelle, protected colonies of oryx, and a host of smaller mammals – hares, foxes and hedgehogs – providing supper for the raptors that wheel overhead. Easier to spot are lizards, snakes and a network of insects that provide the building blocks of the desert ecosystem (see p225).

See the National Parks section (p107) for the location of some of these species, many of which are endangered.

Mountains

They may not be the mightiest mountains in the world but the ranges of the Peninsula are nonetheless spectacular. This is partly because they rise without preamble from flat coastal plains.

The Peninsula has two main mountain ranges. In western Arabia, the Hejaz range runs the length of Saudi Arabia's west coast, generally increasing in height as it moves southwards. The term 'mountain' may seem a misnomer for much of the range. Saudi's landmass looks like a series of half-toppled books, with flat plains ending in dramatic escarpments that give way to the next plain. The last escarpment drops dramatically to the sea. If you follow the baboons over the escarpment rim, from the cool, misty, green reaches of Abha to Jizan on the humid, baking plains of the Tihama, the effect of this range is immediately felt. The settlers of the fertile mountains in their stone dwellings live such a different life to the goat herders in their mud houses on the plains, they may as well belong to different countries.

Peninsula species have adapted to the demands of desert life. The sand cat, sand fox and desert hare have large ears, giving a large surface area from which to release heat, and tufts of hair on their paws that enable them to walk on blistering desert floors.

The Haraz Mountains of Yemen are home to Jabal an-Nabi Shu'ayb (3660m), the highest peak on the Peninsula. Forming part of the Rift Valley, the landmass of Yemen is predominantly mountainous, commonly rising 2000m or more and making farming a challenge. To compensate, Yemeni farmers cut elaborate terraces up the hillside to keep soil from washing away. These are shored up by stones and the maintenance of the terrace walls is a constant concern now that younger generations head for town for easier work than farming.

Arabia's other principal mountain range is found in the east of the Peninsula. Here, Oman's Hajar Mountains protect the communities around the Gulf of Oman from the encroachment of deserts from the interior. Terracing similar to that of Yemen can be seen on Jebel Akhdar and on pocket-handkerchief scraps of land in the Mussandam Peninsula. The southern mountains of Oman, in the hills of Dhofar, catch the edge of the monsoon from India. Light rains bring the otherwise arid hills to life during the summer when most of the rest of the Peninsula is aching under the heat.

This is where the elusive leopard, one of Arabia's most magnificent animals, stalks. It's the largest but not the only predatory mammal of the Peninsula: caracal, striped hyena and sand cat are all resident (though in small and diminishing numbers) in the mountains and wadis, preying on rodents. In Oman, the many wolf-traps dotting the Hajar Mountains (see p233) are still sometimes used if a wolf harasses herds.

Handbook of Arabian Medicinal Plants and *Vegetation of the Arabian Peninsula,* both by SA Ghazanfar, are good, illustrated guides to their subjects.

The mountains are the best (though far from the only) place to see wild flowers. After rains they bloom in abundance. In the wadis there are delights like pink-flowering oleander and tall stands of Sodom's apples; on the mountainsides there's juniper, wild olive, lavenders and many plants with medicinal properties.

DESERT YES – DESERTED NO

Visiting any wilderness area is a responsibility and no more so than in a desert, where the slightest interference with the environment can wreak havoc with fragile ecosystems. The rocky plains of the interior may seem like an expanse of nothing, but that is not the case. Red markers along a road, improbable as they may seem on a cloudless summer day, indicate the height of water possible during a flash flood. A month or so later, a flush of tapering grasses marks the spot, temporary home to wasp oil beetles, elevated stalkers and myriad other life forms.

Car tracks scar a rock desert forever, crushing plants and insects not immediately apparent from the driver's seat. Rubbish doesn't biodegrade as it would in a tropical or temperate climate. The flower unwittingly picked in its moment of glory may miss its first and only opportunity for propagation in seven years of drought.

With a bit of common sense, however, and taking care to stick to existing tracks, it's possible to enjoy the desert without damaging the unseen communities it harbours. It also pays to turn off the engine and just sit. At dusk, dramas unfold: a fennec fox chases a hedgehog, a wild dog trots out of the wadi without seeing the snake slithering in the other direction, tightly closed leaves relax in the brief respite of evening and a dung beetle rolls its reward homewards.

ON THE WING IN ARABIA

The Peninsula is an ornithologist's dream, as it is positioned on migration routes between Asia, Europe and Africa. The Gulf is a particularly attractive stopover and, in Dubai alone, there are annually recorded sightings of over 400 different species. Similarly, Muscat in Oman is dubbed 'Eagle capital of the world' on account of the large numbers of raptors that can be spotted during the annual migration in November. The Hawar Islands (Bahrain) and Suqutra Island (Yemen) are important indigenous breeding grounds. The houbara bustard, a sort of desert-camouflaged crane, still roams areas of the interior despite being hunted to near extinction.

For those with a casual interest in birds, flamingos, spoonbills, kingfishers, hoopoe, cormorants, herons, green parrots and Indian rollers are some of the more colourful and characterful birds that grace the desert and towns of Arabia.

Several organisations are helpful in learning more about Peninsula birds and their haunts: **Oman Bird Records Committee** (PO Box 246, Muscat); **UAE Emirates Bird Records Committee** (☎ 9714-472 277; fax 9714-472 276; PO Box 50394, Dubai); **Yemen Ornithological Society** (☎ 01-207 059; cyos@y.net.ye; San'a).

Seas

Remote and isolated Suqutra Island (p502) in Yemen, is particularly interesting botanically with 300 endemic species.

The Peninsula is bordered by three distinct seas, each of which has its own character.

The Red Sea, with its magnificent underwater wonderland, is mostly calm, and its shores flat and sandy. It teems with a thousand species of fish. Grouper and wrasse, parrotfish and snapper nose round the colourful gardens of coral, sea cucumbers and sponge, while shark and barracuda swim beyond the shallows, only venturing into the reefs to feed or breed.

Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia, by Michael C Jennings, gives comprehensive details on each of the 268 breeding species, plus general ornithological and conservation information.

The Arabian Sea, home to dolphins and whales and five species of turtle, many of which nest along the eastern Arabian shore, has a split personality. Calm like a pussy cat for much of the year, it rages like a tiger in the *khareef* (summer monsoon), casting up the weird and wonderful on some of the most magnificent, pristine, uninterrupted beaches in the world. Rimmed by cliffs for much of its length, this sea is punctuated with fishing villages that continue a way of life little changed in centuries, supported by boiling seas of sardine and tuna.

The Gulf is a different kettle of fish. Flat, calm, so smooth at times it looks solid like a piece of shiny coal, it gives onto the shore so gently that fishermen can be seen standing only waist-deep, a kilometre from the shore. With lagoons decorated with mangroves this is a heron's delight. It's also a developer's delight: much of the rim of the Gulf has been paved over or 'reclaimed' for the improbable new cities at its edge.

TELLING YOUR CONES FROM YOUR COWRIES

Walk on any beach in the Peninsula and it doesn't take long before you start noticing that it is strewn with a remarkably wide variety of shells. Over a thousand species of mollusc occur off the east coast alone, several hundred of which are virtually microscopic. Learning how to identify them may seem a bewildering task and tackling a shell guide disappointingly complex, but even a rudimentary knowledge of a few major families helps to enhance the enjoyment of beachcombing.

The first feature to look out for is the 'segmentation' – does the shell consist of one part (like a snail) or does it have two parts hinged in the middle? The former is known as a 'gastropod' and the latter is known, predictably, as a 'bivalve'.

Some major families within the gastropods include murex, which have an assortment of spines and protrusions; cones, which are conical in shape and gorgeous in colour and pattern; cowries, which are hump-backed, glossy-coated beauties, and top shells which have a variety of flattened or elongated whirls on a flat base. It's hard to generalise but gastropods are often found on rocky shores, thrown up onto the dry tide-line.

Some major families within the bivalves include ark shells with their long straight hinges; outrageously colourful oysters with unequal halves pinched together or fused onto a neighbouring shell; fan shells like those used to edge a cottage garden, and heart shells that, in profile, live up to their name. Many bivalves live in sand where you'll find them burrowing as you walk on the low tide-line, or else opened up and winkled out by gulls.

Shells are localised and seasonal so there are no guarantees. The following, however, are fairly easy to see: look for the architectonic whorls of wentletraps in the muddy banks of the western Gulf; the fragile, crumbly shells of oysters, upon whose nacreous mother-of-pearl interiors whole nations relied, off the coast of Bahrain; sun-bleached ark shells on the sandy coasts of eastern UAE; Venus clams popping seductively out of the sand at dusk in northern Oman; and drifts of tiny pink top shells, tinging the beaches of southern Oman.

It's very tempting to form a collection but remember that collecting live molluscs is illegal and some shells are toxic and dangerous to handle (especially some of the cones). In addition, you may assemble your collection around the tent at night only to find they've walked off by the morning: hermit crabs are very quick to make a home of a stray gastropod.

No-one has told that yet to the molluscs, whose gorgeous shells keep rolling up the tide-line.

NATIONAL PARKS & OTHER PROTECTED AREAS

Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife at www.breedingcentresharjah.com is a site dedicated to programmes preserving the endangered species of the Peninsula.

The idea of setting aside areas for wildlife runs contrary to the nature of traditional life on the Peninsula which was, and to some extent still is, all about maintaining a balance with nature, rather than walling it off. The Bedu flew their hunting falcons only between certain times of the year and moved their camels on to allow pasture to regrow. Fishermen selected only what they wanted from a seasonal catch, and threw the rest back. Goat and sheep herders of the mountains moved up and down the hillside at certain times of the year to allow for regrowth. Farmers let lands lie fallow so as not to exhaust the soil.

Modern practices, including settlement (of nomadic tribes), sport hunting, trawler fishing and the use of pesticides in modern farming, have had such an impact on the natural environment over the past 50 years, however, that all governments in the region have recognised the need to actively protect the fragile ecosystems of their countries. This has resulted in a rather spasmodic setting up of protected areas (less than 10% of regional landmass) but, with tourism on the increase, there is a strong incentive now to do more and many fine initiatives are in place.

A multinational initiative to tag tuna in the Arabian Sea was launched in 2007 in response to concerns about over fishing. So far 120,000 tuna have been tagged in a project that hopes to assess the stocks.

Most countries have established conservation schemes. Five per cent of the Emirate of Dubai is a protected area, thanks to the example set by the late Sheikh Zayed, posthumously named 'Champion of the Earth' by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2005 (see p381). Saudi Arabia's Asir National Park (p343) is the largest on the Peninsula, comprising 450,000 hectares of Red Sea coast, escarpment and desert. In addition, Saudi authorities have designated 13 wildlife reserves (which amount to over 500,000 hectares) as part of a plan for more than 100 protected areas. Suqutra in Yemen has recently become a Unesco biosphere reserve and there are plans to designate the forests around Hawf (p511) and the Bura'a Forest in the Tihama into national parks. The Hawar Islands, home to epic colonies of cormorants and other migrant birds, are protected by the Bahrain government (see p136).

Although it has no national parks as such, Oman has an enviable record with regard to protection of the environment – a subject in which the sultan has a passionate interest. His efforts have repeatedly been acknowledged by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (see p191). Sanctuaries for oryx (see p246), the internationally important turtle nesting grounds of Ras al-Jinz (see p221) and the leopard sanctuary (see p253) provide protection for these endangered species.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

To make the most of the Arabian Peninsula's extensive coastlines, pick up the handy *Collectable Eastern Arabian Seashells* by Donald Bosch, or the magnificent definitive guide *Seashells of Eastern Arabia,* which he co-authored.

The major concern for all Peninsula countries, particularly those of the Gulf, is water – or rather the lack of it. Good rains in 2007 brought relief to an area that has suffered drought for five years, but not enough fell to make much difference to the depleted water table. Saudi Arabia will run out of ground water long before it runs out of oil. Bahrain's freshwater underground springs have already dried up, leaving the country relying on expensive desalinated water. Yemen's ground-water levels have in recent years dropped dramatically, due to use of pumps for irrigation. Higher demand for residential use is another factor forcing countries to rethink ways of managing water. Modernisation of irrigation systems appears to be the way forward although public awareness has a role to play too. At present, it would be unthinkable to impose a hose-pipe ban

GO LIGHT ON THE LITTER

There's a wonderful tale in *The Thousand and One Nights* that describes the inadvertent chain of devastation caused by a merchant spitting out his date pip and unknowingly blinding the son of a genie. It may not be immediately apparent to a visitor watching pink and blue plastic bags sailing in the breeze that Peninsula authorities are making concerted efforts to clean up the countryside. It's immensely difficult not to add to the rubbish, especially when local attitude still maintains that every soft-drink can thrown on the ground represents one more job for the needy. Attitudes are beginning to change, however, thanks in part to educational schemes that target children and the adoption of Environment Days in Oman, UAE and Bahrain. 'Bag it' and 'out it' is a pretty good maxim as, hardy as it seems, the desert has a surprisingly fragile ecosystem that once damaged is as difficult as a genie's son's eye to mend.

(such as marks most summers in rainy Britain) on municipal and private gardens as flowering borders are considered the ultimate symbol of a modern, civilised lifestyle.

That said, mostly gone are the days when you could cross parts of Saudi and see great green wealds dotted across the desert. There was much to regret in the attempt to make the desert bloom: while Saudi became an exporter of grain, it used up precious mineral deposits and lowered the water table, and to no great useful purpose – the country can easily afford to import grain at the moment; there may be times to come when it cannot, and many experts are of the opinion it's better to retain precious resources for an emergency.

The Gulf War and the Environment, edited by Farouk El-Baz and RM Makharita, is a provoking analysis of the long-term environmental consequences of the Gulf War: thankfully, the recuperative powers of nature have exceeded expectation.

In a region where oil is the major industry, there is always a concern about spillage and leakage, and the illegal dumping of oil from offshore tankers is a constant irritation to the countries of the Gulf. The oil spillage following the Gulf War (see p154), however, mercifully did not result in the environmental catastrophe predicted and is now, thanks to international rescue efforts, completely cleaned up.

Two other issues pose an environmental threat. As one of the Peninsula's fastest-growing industries, tourism is becoming a major environmental issue – as seen at the turtle beaches of Ras al-Jinz (see p191), where many tourists show a dismal lack of respect for both the turtles and their environment. The other issue is rubbish: indeed, for several decades the Arabian Peninsula has been affected by the scourge of the plastic bag. Bags are unceremoniously dumped out of car windows or discarded at picnic sites and can be seen drifting across the desert, tangled in trees or floating in the sea. Many Peninsula Arabs don't feel it is their responsibility to 'bag it and bin it' – that would be stealing the job, so the argument goes, of the road cleaner. You can see these individuals on a scooter or even walking in the middle of summer with a dust pan and brush and a black bin liner, 100km from the nearest village. The idea that Arabs have inherited the throw-away culture from the Bedu and can't distinguish between organic and non-biodegradable is often cited but lacks credibility. As the aged and illiterate will delight in telling you, an orange peel, let alone a coke can, does not decompose in a hurry in the dry heat of the Peninsula.

According to an article in a British newspaper in 2007, the average person uses 167 plastic bags a year. Plastic bag usage in the Arabian Peninsula cannot be far behind, a fact that has prompted Friends of the Earth Middle East to run a 'Say No to Plastic Bags' campaign. For more information, see www.foeme.org/projects.

The Arab response to litter, like the Arab response to conservation in general, probably has more to do with a lack of interest in the great outdoors for its own sake. But times are changing, and school trips to wild places may just be the answer.

See Responsible Travel (p24) for advice on how travellers can minimise their effect on the environment.