



## **Discovery of Saudi Arabia, Hegra, Al-'Ula, Riyadh, Jeddah** **11 days/10 nights**

### **D 1 – Sunday - Your destination - Riyadh**

Flight to Riyadh.

Overnight in Riyadh.

### **D 2 – Monday - Riyadh**

Riyadh, the "garden", located on a desert plateau in the heart of the country, was only a village before the Saud family settled there and made it, in 1932, the capital of the country. It offers visitors striking contrasts. Iconic skyscrapers and gigantic shopping centers coexist with an older historic center dominated by the clay towers of Fort Masmak.

In the morning, after a late breakfast in the form of brunch, we will go to the National Museum, a long avant-garde curve whose shape and color recall the dunes of the desert that surrounds Riyadh. Its important collections retrace the entire history of the country, from pre-Islamic times to the unification of the kingdom by King Abd al-Aziz at the beginning of the 20th century. We will focus more particularly on the remains and objects found during excavations carried out in major archaeological sites. Inaugurated in 1999, the museum is part of a historical complex that includes the Murabba Palace - the last home of King Abd al-Aziz - whose construction in 1938 marked the first extension of Riyadh.

We will then leave for Dariya - located about twenty kilometers from Riyadh - to discover the site of At-Turaif, the first capital and cradle of the Saud dynasty. Founded in the 15th century, its political and religious role continued to grow. It was from Dariya that, since the middle of the 18th century, Wahhabi Islam spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula. Remarkable example of a fortified urban complex within an oasis, it counts among its vestiges palaces, houses and a citadel, all of this architectural and decorative Najdi style characteristic of the center of the Arabian Peninsula.

Returning to the heart of Riyadh at the end of the afternoon, we will climb to the top of the Al Faisaliah tower, a pyramidal skyscraper surmounted by a glass globe designed by the architect Norman Foster. Inaugurated in 2000, it offers visitors a spectacular view of the Saudi capital.

Overnight in Riyadh.

### **D 3 – Tuesday - Sakaka - Jabal Burnous - Al Qarah - Al Rajajil – Sakaka**

In the morning, flight to Al-Jawf located in the northwest of the country. A contact zone between Mediterranean and Asian cultures, the region of Al-Jawf is, for this reason, of major importance in the history of Arabia and the ancient Near East. Its capital, Sakaka, was a prosperous oasis from Nabataean times before it became an important trading center for the Bedouin tribes of northern Arabia. Towering over the city from its rocky outcrop, Qalat Za'abal Castle is exemplary of those desert fortresses with Spartan layout erected in the 19th century. The nearby Bir Saisra well was probably dug by the Nabataeans.

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We will then set off to discover several protohistoric sites which all attest to the age of human presence in the region. The anthropomorphic rock carvings at the Jabal Burnous site date from the Neolithic period; the site of Al Qarah is rich in rock engravings and Thalmudean inscriptions traced in this South Arabian script, prodromal of the Arabic alphabet. We will then go to Al Rajajil, a mysterious site whose standing stones have raised many questions ... The most recent archaeological excavations have revealed that it was a burial site dating from the 5th to see the 6th millennium Before our era.

Overnight in Sakaka.

#### **D 4 - Wednesday - Dumat Al Jandal - Jubbah - Hail (420 km)**

The morning will be devoted to Dumat Al Jandal, located at the crossroads of the caravan trails that crossed the Arabian Peninsula and mentioned from the 8th century BC in the annals of the Assyrian kings then in the Nabataean and Roman texts. Recent archaeological research has revealed a human presence there from the Neolithic era. A lush oasis, the city grew thanks to a complex hydraulic system of wells, canals and underground tunnels - the qanats. We will discover its imposing wall, probably erected in the Nabataean and Roman times, before entering its medieval heart built of dry stones and dominated by the Qasr Marid fortress. Below, the mosque of Omar, erected in the 7th century, is one of the oldest in the world. It is surmounted by a curious five-storey pyramidal minaret topped by a pyramidion. Finally, we will visit the archaeological museum which exhibits objects and remains discovered during excavations carried out in the region.

In the afternoon, our road will take us through part of the Nefoud desert. In this red sand erg, the wind gives the high dunes the shape of crescents; we also see sandstone outcrops with strange silhouettes sculpted by erosion.

We will thus join Jubbah, the most famous rock site in Saudi Arabia. Located in the Umm Sinman range of hills, Jubbah overlooked a lake that provided fresh water to animals and people. These latter - ancestors of the Arabs - left remarkable petroglyphs there, in particular a large number of human and animal representations, as well as an exceptional number of Thamoudean inscriptions.

Overnight in Hail.

#### **D 5 - Thursday - Hail - Al-'Ula (440 km)**

Its central position - on the Nejd plateau - and its many wells, fed by water from the neighboring mountains, made Hail another major stopover on the caravan routes from the pre-Islamic period. In the 19th century, the city was the capital of a powerful emirate controlled by the Al-Rashid family, rival of Al-Saud until the creation of the Saudi kingdom. Enjoying a strategic position, Hail was protected by three fortresses. We will visit that of A'arif, the oldest, built from the 17th century on top of a rock from which we have a magnificent view of the city. Built of mud and clay, it housed, in addition to soldiers, a residential area, a mosque, warehouses and baths which allowed those who took refuge there to spend long months. We will also pass the fortress of Al-Qishlah built in the 1940s by Prince Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saoud, a two-story mud palace with long walls punctuated by eight watchtowers.



Continuing our journey through the vast expanses of sand of the Nefoud Desert, we will head towards Al-'Ula. Shortly before our arrival, we will stop at the Harrat belvedere, located at the end of the basalt plateau of the same name, which dominates the valley of Al-'Ula to the west. It offers a spectacular view of the Lihyanite necropolis of the ancient city of Dedan.

Overnight in Al-'Ula.

#### **D 6 - Friday - Al-'Ula - Hégra**

Emerald green enclave surrounded by high massifs jagged ochre sandstone on one side, black basalt on the other, the valley of Al-'Ula has, thanks to its underground water resources, thousand-year-old oases. Since Antiquity, it has been at the crossroads of these caravan trails which transported herbs, myrrh and frankincense.

Most of the day will be devoted to the discovery of the Nabataean site of Hegra - today Madain Saleh. The Nabataeans, who came from Petra, settled there in the 1st century BC. Remarkably preserved, the necropolis of Hegra brings together a hundred monumental tombs of the Nabatean elites, with architectures and decorations directly carved in the sandstone rock. We will focus more particularly on those of Qasr al-Bint and Qasr al-Farid the greatest and most ambitious of all. We will discover the small Siq, the main place of worship in the necropolis. Everywhere, Assyrian, Egyptian, Phoenician and Hellenistic decorative and architectural influences are combined. The numerous inscriptions are in Lihyanite, Thamoudean, Nabataean, Greek or Latin languages as well. Hégra vividly testifies to this confluence of influences and inspirations, concomitant with trade flows.

Very close to the site stand the ruins of the Hejaz No.21 station, one of the stages on the railway line built by the Ottomans in 1900 to link Damascus to Medina in three days - instead of the forty days to back of a camel. Its extension to Mecca was abandoned due to the First World War.

At the end of the afternoon we will drive to the Elephant Rock, Jabal Al-Fil. Erosion has given this spectacular sandstone outcrop more than 50 meters high - surrounded by hundreds of monoliths - the shape of a giant elephant whose trunk touches the ground ... We will enjoy the special colors that give to the rocks the light of the setting sun.

Overnight in Al-'Ula.

#### **D 7 - Saturday - Dedan - Al-'Ula - Jeddah**

We will start the day at the archaeological site of Dedan, capital of the Lihyanite kingdom since the second millennium, erected at the foot of the cliffs of Jebel Ath-Thumayd. Its strategic location and its abundant underground water resources made it a city of great importance as evidenced by its remains. We will discover in particular those of a fortified palace, a residential area and a large sanctuary. Dedan is also renowned for its necropolis made up of square-shaped tombs, dug at different heights in the side of the cliff overlooking the city.



We will then return to Al-'Ula to discover its old town whose origins date back to the 7th century and which was inhabited until the beginning of the 20th century. After the Muslim conquest, Al-'Ula became an important stopover on the pilgrimage route from Damascus to Mecca where pilgrims stopped to buy food and water. We will walk in the maze of its narrow and shaded streets, lined with houses of various hazards, the ground floor of which was used for the storage and reception of majlis while the first floor was reserved for private use. The old town is dominated by the small fort of Musa Ibn Nusayr, whose origins undoubtedly date back to the Lihyanite period. Accessible by a staircase, you have a magnificent view of the valley from its summit.

Flight to Jeddah in the afternoon.  
Overnight in Jeddah.

#### **D 8 - Sunday - Jeddah - Taif (185 km)**

We will leave for Taif located at an altitude of 1,800 meters in a valley of the Hedjaz mountains, a coastal corridor dotted with oases which has always been the preferred route between Arabia and the Levant. The thousand-year-old city sits at the crossroads of two historic routes: the Caravan Trails of the Incense Route and the Mecca Pilgrimage Route. We will take the "pants route", the only road authorized for non-pilgrims, which bypasses the holy city and owes its name to the clothing worn by Westerners.

Often referred to as the "Hejaz garden" for its climate and fertile land, the Taif region is a popular holiday resort for the Saudis. This is where the famous thirty-petalled Damascus rose grows, possibly transplanted from the Balkans by the Ottomans who conquered the region at the beginning of the 16th century. Rich in oil - attar - with a subtle scent, both robust and spicy, it is sought after by the most prestigious perfumers. We will begin our discovery of Taif with a visit to a rose grower's farm.

In the center of the city, we then discovered the Shubra Palace, former summer residence of King Abd al-Aziz, built in 1905 and retracing the history of this city highly coveted for its strategic position and its heritage. According to tradition, she was even doomed to destruction by Allah for refusing asylum to the Prophet and owed her salvation only to his mercy. We will end our afternoon with a walk in the tailors' souk.

Overnight in Taif.

#### **D 9 - Monday - Taif - Jeddah (240 km)**

An excursion to the south, in the foothills of the Arabian plateau, will take us to the Samallagi reservoir dating from pre-Islamic times. Admirably preserved, it blocks the valley for more than two hundred meters of its granite blocks cut and carefully adjusted. Impressively long and tall, it is remarkable proof of the antiquity of hydraulic works in the Arabian Desert.

Heading north towards Taif, we will discover the remains of the Ottoman fortress Qala'at Osmanli, one among the thousands of strongholds that the Ottoman Turks - who considered themselves the guardians of the holy places of Islam - erected for control the Hejaz corridor when Arabia was under their administration.

We will then continue our journey to Jeddah.  
Overnight in Jeddah.



### **D 10 - Tuesday - Jeddah**

In the heart of the Hejaz, Jeddah, "the door of Mecca" which has now become a cosmopolitan city and the economic capital of Saudi Arabia, rises its skyscrapers facing the Red Sea. From the 7th century, a major port developed there for the trade routes of the Indian Ocean and for the transport of goods to Mecca, which also became the gateway for Muslim pilgrims arriving by sea.

We will go to the fish market - one of the largest in Arabia - whose stalls offer dozens of species caught in the Red Sea, from hammerhead sharks to groupers, parrot fish to squid. A walk will then allow us to discover the historic district of Al Balad characterized by a very specific architectural tradition. We will see these tower houses built at the end of the 19th century by the mercantile elites of the city and which combine the coral building traditions of the Red Sea coastal region and those of the craftsmanship of the caravan routes. The light and fragile coral stone is protected from humidity and salinity by layers of finely crafted plaster. We will visit the Nassif house, a former home of rich merchants. Magnificently renovated and transformed into a museum, it notably exhibits a precious collection of Arabic calligraphy.

We will end the day with a walk on the Corniche, which has become the beating heart of Jeddah, with its restaurants, amusement parks, picnic areas and mosques. It also exhibits twenty-six bronze sculptures in the open air, works by great modern and contemporary artists, such as Henry Moore and Vasarely. In the distance, we will see the Fatima Al-Zahra mosque built in the sea and which, at high tide, seems to float on the water. We will of course also see the famous fountain of King Fouad, with the highest water jet in the world, visible even at night from all areas of the city thanks to the lighting of 500 projectors ...

Overnight in Jeddah.

### **D 11 - Wednesday - Jeddah – Your destination**

Flight from Jeddah to your destination.