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## **Saudi Arabia**

### **Discovery of Saudi Arabia**

#### **11-Day Itinerary**



Majestic Wonders

AL-'Ula

7 Mezher Street Antelias Beirut - Lebanon

Tel: +961 4 712037 Fax: +961 4 715196 P.O. Box: 60-233 Zip Code: 1241 2020 R.C. 1035 Baabda VAT No. 8721-601

[www.ventnouveau.com](http://www.ventnouveau.com)

[info@ventnouveau.com](mailto:info@ventnouveau.com)

### **Day 1 – Arrive Riyadh**

Upon arrival at Riyadh International Airport you will clear immigration and customs. A meet and greet service will then take you to your vehicle and you will be transferred to your hotel for check-in and overnight.

### **Day 2 – Monday / Riyadh**

Riyadh, 'The Garden', located on a desert plateau in the heart of the country, was once only a village before the Saud family settled there and made it the capital of the country in 1932. It offers visitors striking contrasts. Iconic skyscrapers and gigantic shopping centres coexist with the old historic centre, which is dominated by the clay towers of Fort Masmak.

In the morning after a late breakfast/brunch we travel to the National Museum, a long *avant-garden* building whose shape and color resemble the dunes of the desert that surrounds the city. 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 20<sup>th</sup> century. We will focus 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 continue on our exploration of Riyadh and its surroundings by driving out to Diriyah, located about twenty kilometers from the city to discover the site of At-Turaif, the first capital and cradle of the Saud Dynasty. Founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, its political and religious role continued to grow. It was from Dariya that, since the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Wahhabi Islam spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula. See the remarkable example of a fortified urban complex within an oasis, which counts among its vestiges, palaces, houses and a citadel. All of these architectural and decorative Najdi style characteristics are from the centre of the Arabian Peninsula.

Return 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. It was inaugurated in 2000 and it offers visitors a spectacular view of the Saudi capital.

### **Day 3 – Tuesday / Sakaka – Jabal Burnous – Al Qarah – Al Rajajil – Sakaka**

In the morning, fly 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 Nabatean 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 an example of those desert fortresses with Spartan layout erected in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The nearby Bir Saisra Well was probably dug by the Nabateans.

We then continue 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 travel 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 5<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C.

### **Day 4 – Wednesday / Dumat Al Jandal – Jubbah – Hail (420km)**

The morning will be devoted to Dumat Al Janda, located at the crossroads of the caravan trails that crossed the Arabian Peninsula and which are mentioned for the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., in the annals of the Assyrian kings then in the Nabatean 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 called qanats. We will discover its imposing wall, probably erected in the Nabatean and Roman times, before entering its medieval heart built of dry stones and dominated by the Qasr Marid Fortress. Below it is the mosque of Omar, erected in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and 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 which were discovered during excavations in the region.

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

Drive to 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 for animals and people. These latter ancestors of the Arabs left remarkable petroglyphs here, in particular a large number of human and animal representations as well as an exceptional number of Thamoudean inscriptions.

### **Day 5 – Thursday / Ha'il – Al-'Ula (440km)**

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 19<sup>th</sup> century the city was the capital of a powerful emirate controlled by the Al-Rashid family, rivals of Al-Saud until the creation of the /Saudi Kingdom. Enjoying a strategic position, Hail was protected by three fortresses. We will visit that A'arif, the oldest, built from the 17<sup>th</sup> 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 1940's 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 Nefud 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.

### **Day 6 – Friday / Al-'Ula – Hegra**

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

The day will be devoted to the discovery of the Nabatean site of Hegra, which today is known as Madain Saleh. The Nabataeans, who came from Petra, Jordan settled there in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. The remarkably preserved 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 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, the Assyrian, Egyptian, Phoenician and Hellenistic decorative and architectural influences are combined. The numerous inscriptions are in Lihyanite, Thamoudean, Nabataean Greek or Latin languages. Hegra vividly testifies to this confluence of influences and inspirations, concomitant with trade flows.

Close to the site stands the ruins of the Hejaz No. 21 station, one of the stages on the railway line built by the Ottomans in 1900 linking Damascus to Medina in a mere three days instead of the camel ride of forty days. This extension of the railway was abandoned due to the First World War.

At the close of the afternoon we will drive to Elephant Rock, Jabal Al-Fil. Erosion has given this spectacular sandstone outcrop, more than 50 meters high, and surrounded by hundreds of monoliths, the shape of a giant elephant whose trunk touches the ground. Enjoy the mesmerising change of colors in the rock, created by the light of the sun setting.

### **Day 7 – Saturday / Dedan - Al-'Ula – Jeddah**

Our day begins by travelling to the archaeological site of Dedan, capital of the Lihyanite Kingdom since the second millennium and erected at the foot of the cliffs of Jebel Ath-Thumayd. Its strategic location and its abundant underground water resources made it a cry 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.

Return to Al-'Ula to discover its old town whose origins date back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century and which was inhabited until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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, the houses were designed to be attached to one another, providing fortification, which hints to defence being a priority for the city's early inhabitants, 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, there is a magnificent view of the valley from the top.

In the afternoon fly to Jeddah and overnight.

### **Day 8 – Sunday /Medina – Taif (185km)**

We will leave in the morning for Taif located at an altitude of 1,800 meters in a valley of the Hejaz 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 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 126<sup>th</sup> 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 centre of the city, we then discover the Shubra Palace, the 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 this mercy. We will end our afternoon with a walk in the Tailors Souk.

#### **Day 9 – Monday / Taiff – Jeddah (240km)**

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 Osmani, one among the thousands of strongholds that the Ottoman Turks who considered themselves the guardians of the holy places of island erected for control of the Hejaz Corridor when Arabia was under their administration.

We return to Jeddah for overnight.

#### **Day 10 – Tuesday / Jeddah**

In the heart of the Hejaz, 'The Door of Mecca', which has now become a cosmopolitan city and the economic capital of Saudi Arabia, with its rising skyscrapers facing the Red Sea. From the 7<sup>th</sup> 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 and squid. A walk will allow us to discover the history district of Al Balad characterized by very specific architectural traditions. We will see these tower houses built at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the mercantile elites of the city and which combine the coral buildings traditional of the Red Sea coastal region and those of the craftsmanship of the traders belonging to 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 temporary 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 light from 500 projectors.

Overnight Jeddah.

#### **Day 11 – Wednesday / Jeddah – Onwards Destination**

Transfer from your hotel to the airport for your onward destination.

End of services.

**Note:**

*Saudi Arabia is a dry country; alcohol is absolutely forbidden (as are narcotics and pornographic materials). Dress is modest and women do not need to cover their heads but must wear long gowns, called abayas at all times (these will be provided by your local hosts in Saudi Arabia). Please be advised that upon arrival in the country, the immigration process includes having fingerprints taken, along with a retinal scan.*

*Also be aware that everything in the kingdom closes down between noon and 3pm each day as well as for prayers. During such occasions, you will return to your hotel for free time. In addition, occasionally sites may be closed for unforeseen reasons. Local authorities can also deny visits to certain places without prior notice. We are not responsible for any such events.*