

# Saudi Attractions



David Frost finds another side to Saudi Arabia

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**“H**ave you ever been to the West?” I asked Munif. “No, it’s too dangerous,” was his reply. He was nonplussed when I told him that was the image many people in the West had of his country.

The image of a society without any form of entertainment is just not true. Of course there are no bars, not even cinemas, although a blind eye is turned to the satellite TV dishes which you see everywhere on even the most ramshackle buildings, including some which look barely habitable.

Certain areas are more liberal than others, notably Jeddah and the Eastern Province. Al Khobar, on the Gulf coast, has a thriving art group which holds an annual exhibition. Yes, exhibitions of paintings are allowed in Saudi Arabia, although frowned on by some Saudis as being contrary to Islam, and there are Saudi artists. This is a cosmopolitan town, and the exhibition includes the works of painters from many countries. But not everywhere is like Al

Khobar. For me one of the pleasures of living in Saudi Arabia was being in a country totally untouched by tourism, unless you consider the pilgrimages to Mecca for the Haj, and the lesser Umrah pilgrimages, to be tourism. It is still very difficult to obtain a visa except for work, business or a pilgrimage, or possibly a transit visa, although tourist boards have been established, and there is talk of opening the country up to tourism.

However, for the present, you are in virgin territory. Imagine a place where they refuse to sell you a long-distance bus ticket because you haven’t got your passport or iqama, the residence and work permit. This happened to me in Yanbu Al Bahr, on the Red Sea Coast, in the Hijaz region.

During the two months I spent in Yanbu Al Bahr the only Westerners I saw in the town were the six English teachers who lived there, four pipefitters on a short-term contract at the oil installations, and a Canadian couple in the one and only

supermarket, who lived in a compound out of town. Western newspapers were totally unavailable.

How many places are there in the world like this, but where you can drink the tap water and safely walk the streets at night? Wandering along dimly-lit alleyways in the old town I attracted glances as an oddity, but was invariably greeted with a friendly “salam” by men wearing traditional thobes.

Even in Riyadh you don’t see a lot of Westerners unless you live in an enclosed compound, which I didn’t, or go to one of the modern shopping centres such as the one below Al Mumlaka (Kingdom) Tower, a spectacularly tall, pale blue building shaped like a giant bottle opener. The shopping mall has a Starbucks and Western stores such as Debenhams and Saks Fifth Avenue.

A little distance away is another tower, Al Faisalia, again with a shopping mall below it. Although everything closes four times a day for prayers, you can sit at the



tables outside the fast-food restaurants during prayers and finish your meal. Al Faisalia tower has an enormous bronze-coloured globe near the pointed top, and inside this globe are a restaurant and coffee shop, both expensive, but with superb views over the city.

This modern Olaya district is the part of Riyadh which Saudis want to show you. Nawaf, a Saudi friend, took me to the nearby Black House Café, its illuminated name in huge English letters. The place was bizarre. Saudi men (no women, of course) sat around tables in the semi-darkness, their thobes a luminous bluish white under ultraviolet lights.

On the walls were luminous stars and crescent-moons and the odd ringed planet with the

Ad Deira souq with its jewellery and crafts, and the larger Al Bathaa souq, with its big gold section.

At Dir'ayah Oasis, thirty kilometres north of Riyadh, are the sprawling ruins of the ancestral home of the ruling Saud family, full of streets lined with light brown mud buildings, the whole area surrounded by walls with a walkway on top, and with a restored fortress at the centre. A site like that elsewhere would be thronged with tourists but there was just a handful of Saudis and two French women.

The camel market, outside the city, are a lot of paddocks scattered around bumpy tracks, where groups of men in thobes haggle for the animals, which then suffer the

things which some Saudis consider to be "haram" (forbidden) such as music and dancing and an art exhibition. Exhibitions are held in permanent pavilions, built in the styles of different regions, there are reconstructions of traditional old Arabic rooms around a courtyard, an antiques fair, and stalls with food.

Apart from the two colleagues I was with, I saw only one Westerner all day. We were treated like celebrities, stopped and interviewed by the editor of the local paper, Ar Riyadh, and photographed. Stallholders insisted on giving us food and then refusing to charge, strangers said "hello", and children shouted "Amreekee" at us, but not in an unfriendly way.

In a traditional room we sat on the floor and had coffee and dates. Then it was prayer time, and everything stopped and we had to leave. Outside dozens of long carpets were rolled out, and hundreds of men prayed in the open.

There are special days during the festival for women and families, but a Saudi friend told me that there is a dispensation for Western women, who are considered courtesy-men and allowed to go on the men's days if suitably clad and accompanied by a male, although I didn't see any women.

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globe projecting. Hanging from the ceiling were a plastic airplane and luminous coloured bones. There was a big TV screen and a smaller one, both showing sport without sound, at first a football match from Jeddah and later American football and ice hockey from Boston. The menu, in Arabic only, listed various types of coffee and tea, soft drinks, non-alcoholic cocktails and ice cream. There was recorded music: a strange mixture of Saudi, Lebanese, Moroccan, Cuban and Sting.

Much more interesting for me is the old centre of Riyadh that the Saudis don't want to show you, with the old fortress which King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al Saud stormed in 1902 to regain control of the city, the nearby

indignity of being winched up onto trucks to be transported away.

Camel races take place at a track on the outskirts of Riyadh. The riders are all very young children, seven being considered retirement age for a camel jockey. At the end of the track, after the finishing line, there is a short rise in the sand to slow the animals down and give camel handlers a chance to grab the reins and stop them, as the kids riding them don't have enough strength to do this. One young rider fell off and was caught, but the camel just continued loping off into the desert.

Highlight of the cultural year in Riyadh is the National Culture and Heritage Festival, held at Janadriah, on the edge of the city, which includes

