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Say hello to the new Saudi Arabia

It welcomes visitors with sandstone
monoliths, modern skyscrapers, a
mirrored cube in the desert and more



John Tan

SAUDI ARABIA – She has a PhD degree from the United States, speaks fluent English and would prefer arranged marriages for her two daughters who are entering the marriage bracket soon.

A single male colleague eavesdrops on our conversation and quickly volunteers himself for consideration as a candidate.

She politely turns him down, citing the two-decade age gap. He sighs but brightens up when I mention the dating app Tinder.

Dating is tricky in Saudi Arabia with arranged marriages still the norm, and any meeting of parents is almost tantamount to them deciding to marry off their kids. "I am the modern Saudi Arabian woman. I hold my traditional beliefs, but embrace change," she tells me.

The 40-year-old university lecturer and mother of two, who looks a decade younger, confesses to occasional Botox jabs. She moonlights as a tour guide to "be connected with the world" and to play a role in the fast-opening tourism market of the oil-rich kingdom.

As I look outside the windows of our dinner venue, the Dar Al Taqwa Hotel at Madinah, there is an end-

less stream of worshippers spilling out of The Prophet's Mosque.

I remind myself that it is the second-holiest site in the Islamic world. Religious beliefs remain steadfast, but I sense some cultural changes.

Saudi Arabia, long closed to travellers except for pilgrims and business visitors, opened its doors only in 2019 – part of the bold reforms introduced by Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud.

Colloquially known as MBS, he masterminded the Saudi Vision 2030 to reduce dependence on oil money and steer new investments towards technology and tourism.

Under his watch, women's rights have been elevated, the male-guardianship system re-weighted and the power of the once-feared religious police chipped away.

Mysterious Saudi Arabia has always been on my bucket list. It conjures up images of scorching deserts in palettes of mustard yellow and rust red. Hollywood epics portray the swashbuckling, romantic exploits of Lawrence of Arabia.

Westerners, in particular, stereotype the country as conservative and restrictive. It is rarely ranked high up in lists of desirable destinations.

Yet, I see modern skyscrapers reaching to the heavens. During the evening rush hour, highways clog up with monstrous sport utility vehicles, many with women behind the wheel. Swanky resorts pop up in the deserts, complete with lap pools.

I also see precision-cut tombs that are sandstone monoliths taller than office buildings. And I experience chill coffee culture in lieu of rowdy, smoky bars.

At road crossings, the cops stop traffic for us and drivers honk – but not in irritation. They are smiling, waving locals keen to welcome tourists.

Here is why Saudi Arabia is now one of the newest bucket-list destinations. So, go before the mass tourists appear, and travel with cultural awareness when you are there.

Travellers are treated like royalty

My introduction to Saudi Arabia starts in the skies. Barely 30 minutes into my flight between Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Saudi capital of Riyadh, the passenger next to me invites me to his home.

"My wife will cook for you an Arabian dinner," offers Mr. Abdulaziz Alowfi, who runs a chain of

coffee shops and dabbles in real estate. We exchange travel tales and he is smitten by some of the photo collections in my phone.

Two nights later, under the Arabian stars, Mr. Abdulaziz, his 70-year-old uncle and I chat about how Saudi Arabia's price per litre of petrol jumped 500 per cent over 10 years to 2.33 Saudi riyal (83 Singapore cents) now.

We discuss galloping taxes, frothy real estate, exotic camel auctions and falcon racing.

I artfully dodge the uncle's questions on Iran and Qatar while we sip Saudi coffee past midnight (the government has decreed this specific name since the beginning of 2022, to make distinctions among the regional versions).

Great hospitality is customary in this part of the world. In the souks, merchants offer espresso-size cups of coffee and burn aromatic incense while they patiently explain their wares.

I learn that the traditional Saudi coffee culture is elaborate, like the Japanese tea ceremony. And local shoppers teach us how to dress like an Arab.

The shopkeepers are completely devoid of any sales tactics, and I feel almost guilty for leaving empty-handed.

This is a far cry from the touristy

destinations in the region, such as Marrakesh, Dubai, Cairo or Istanbul.

Dressing in spotless white and dusky pink

"I change my white tunic twice a day, depending on the heat. It costs about US\$1 (S\$1.30) to launder it," says my local guide. I am impressed with the spotless and impeccably ironed long tunic that the men wear.

Women don the hijab head-covering and the abaya, a long cloak that covers them from the neck to the toes. Their abaya is not always black – I spy shades from regal maroon to dusky pink.

Female tourists are not bound by the religious-cultural dress code, but it is best to practise common-sense modesty.

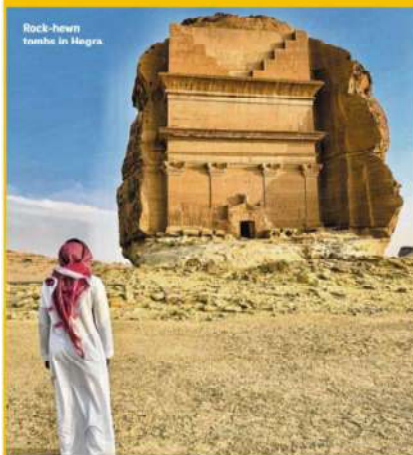
"I choose what is appropriate for the occasion. It is my choice," says the guide from Madinah. Her husband, she adds, does not dictate her wardrobe.

At my hotel in the mountainous city of Abha, the female receptionist wears a trendy nose-ring, but when I ask her to pose with her male supervisor, they both maintain an appropriate distance from each other while smiling in delight.

Mirror, mirror
on the walls
of the Maraya
Concert Hall.
PHOTO: JOHN
TAN

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Say hello to the new Saudi Arabia



Rock-hewn tombs in Hegra.

Destination shaped by history, nature and deep pockets

FROM CI

3 Fearsome flower men of the mountain towns

Saudi Arabia is not all shades of yellow and brown. In the deep south-west, close to Yemen, lies the temperate region of Asir and its capital Abha, surrounded by 3,000m-tall mountains bathed in green, like the national flag.

Among the mountains are pockets of historic villages with mud-brick houses, precariously perched on the cliffside. Escaping from the Ottoman Turks some 400 years ago, the Qasbi tribe made its home in these remote places.

A highlight, the Hanging Village of Habala, was accessible only by ropes until a cable car was added – but its operations are unpredictable.

Here, the winds howl and the mountain air is chilly.

And in the mist-cloaked valleys, the “flowermen” of the indigenous Asiri tribe deck their heads with colourful wreaths of local flowers and herbs. With a dagger at their waists, they are an uncanny fusion – reclusive, fierce warriors who love flowers.

Cashing in on this



unique culture, the authorities organise a Flowerman Festival every August in Hija Almasa, a village dotted with 60 palaces. Known locally as “forts”, they are made from clay, stone and wood.

Old meets new in the festivities that include folk dance, traditional music and heritage markets as well as glitzy light shows and video-mapping of the Unesco World Heritage Site. For more information, go to stzsg/wfsk.

4 The other Petra: Precision-cut tombs of ancient incense traders

If there is only one reason to make the journey to Saudi Arabia, it is Al Ula (www.experiencealula.com).

This is a living museum: tombs hewn into towering rocks. Once a thriving trading outpost, Al Ula housed thousands of people between dramatic rocks and shifting sand dunes.

In winter, we snap selfies against the stylish mirrored cube of the Maraya Concert Hall. In the evening, we troop back to its rooftop for dinner at Maraya Social (marayasocial.com) by Jason Atherton. The British Michelin-starred chef turned down a lucrative offer in the capital Riyadh and chose the stunning desert location instead.

His optimism is boosted by the affluent niche tourists who soar around in helicopters over the tombs and monuments of Hegra, which is also known as Mada'in Salih. I steal a look at my group of travellers, each paying more than \$2,000 a night over the nine-day trip planned by bespoke travel organiser Intriq Journey.

The area is an archaeological goldmine, with tombs and meeting places hand-cut into rocky outcrops and boulders bigger than a small building.

On the ground, like an Indiana Jones movie, we bounce around in Land Rovers between some of the “opened” tombs. There, carved statues of eagles, snakes, lions and the magical sphinx adorn the walls and doorways of the monuments.

I run my hand along the walls and touch thousands of years of history. I think about how ancient nomads peddling precious spices, frankincense and myrrh got so wealthy, then evolved into pioneers of architecture, engineering and



Chill out at Elephant Rock, a 50m-tall geological wonder.



(Left) The luxury villas at Habitas Alula resort are framed by canyons and craggy rocks.

(Below left) A “flowerboy” of the indigenous Asiri tribe, whose members deck their heads with wreaths of flowers and herbs. PHOTOS: JOHN TAN

water harvesting.

Unlike its more famous sister site, Petra, 550km up north in Jordan, this second city of the Nabataean kingdom is not overrun by tourists wielding selfie sticks and remains well-regulated. Left forgotten for almost 2,000 years, it was unveiled to the world only in 2020.

Later, towards the end of an exhilarating day, we linger on lounge seats sunken into the sand and remains well-regulated. Left forgotten for almost 2,000 years, it was unveiled to the world only in 2020.

With chill-out music playing gently in the background, the vibes are more Ibiza-Café del Mar than a staid country. The only thing missing is an ice-cold beer.

5 Hotels that are castles in the sand

When a nation with very deep pockets is building a destination from scratch, the sky is the limit. Saudi Arabia, like its ambitious

Gulf neighbours, has no shortage of game-changing projects. Build, and they will come – as the real estate developers say in neighbouring UAE.

Already, luxe hotels are in place and Intriq Journey spares no effort to book the best accommodation for us.

In Riyadh, we stay at the Four Seasons Hotel which straddles the upper floors of the Kingdom Centre, also nicknamed the “Bottle Opener”. In the winter high season, a luxury stay at its Superior Room starts at 3,975 Saudi riyal before taxes.

Its breakfast buffet is a class act, with a spread of Western, Middle Eastern and Asian cuisine. At its gym, I am wooed when attendants come around to offer wet towels and drinks during my workout.

The hotel (www.fourseasons.com/riyadh) can even arrange a private candlelight dinner at the 300m-high skybridge of the building (Marina Bay Sands is 209m tall) with a professional photographer to capture those special moments.

At the Shangri-La Jeddah, the stylish rooms are graced with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook

the Corniche, the sparkling Red Sea and the Formula One circuit. Rates for its City View Superior Room start at 1,270 Saudi riyal before taxes.

The Malaysian chef at its Shangri-La Jeddah (www.shangri-la.com/en/jeddah/shangri-la) whips up a 12-course dinner for our group, including Camel Xiao Long Bao, that makes us a tad homesick.

Unanimously, we agree that the prize goes to the desert villas of Habitas Alula (www.habitas.com/alula), a resort framed by its magical settings. Imagine this: luxury villas with private outdoor lounge decks plus indoor and outdoor showers under the moonlit sky.

The rooms are fully air-conditioned and Wi-Fi is speedy. I also like its state-of-the-art fitness centre with Technogym equipment and the swimming pool long enough for lap training. And when you wake up and draw the curtains, a stunning canyon view is unveiled.

Billed as “luxury for the soul”, a one-night stay starts at 3,450 Saudi riyal. Adventurous guests can zip around on electric bikes – 1 clock

3 TRAVEL TIPS

1. Singapore passport holders can apply for a one-year multiple-entry eVisa via visa.visitsaudi.com. The tourist eVisa, with mandatory health insurance, costs 535 Saudi riyal (\$\$190). The application is straightforward and I received approval in three minutes.
2. From Singapore, Dubai offers the best connections onwards to Saudi Arabia.
3. Winter, from December to February, is the best time to visit.

30kmh on my bike and do not get a ticket.

Shifting sands, changing times

Saudi Arabia's tourism is in its infancy. Along its master-planned zones, kilometres of billboards announce one project after another. With chunky land plots, buildings will emerge, too near to drive to but too far to walk.

Meanwhile, some smaller attractions appear to be hastily cobbled together, with non-descript private collections trying to pass off as museums.

Al Ula, however, is world-class and puts the country on any global traveller's must-do list. I will make a return trip for that.

Saudi Arabia has the resources to make things happen. Its tourism marketing is sophisticated and the authorities are cognisant that hardware must be supported by software.

With a strategic mindset, the wrinkles will be ironed out. And money can do some magic – just ask Portuguese footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, possibly Saudi Arabia's best paid expatriate, who recently signed a €200 million (\$286 million) contract with a local club.

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• The writer has visited more than 160 countries and Saudi Arabia has long been on his bucket list. The Middle East intrigues him and he once backed out of a dinner date in Iran when the woman said she needed her father's prior approval.

• The writer was hosted by Intriq Journey for the land-tour portion of his trip.

• Bucket list is a series of epic journeys.

Paying top dollar for convenience, adventure and personalised itinerary

All 12 of us on the Saudi Arabia trip have travelled to more than 50 countries. Several have crossed the 100-country milestone.

My fellow travellers include a lawyer, doctor, dentist, radiologist, retired mathematician and company director. Among them, too, are bankers and serial investors. Their annual travel budget is \$100,000, or more – perhaps my career path took a wicked turn.

But we all share an appetite for adventure and a yearning to see the extraordinary beyond the confines and routines of our daily lives.

Catering to these affluent travel lovers, a bespoke luxury travel organiser Intriq Journey (www.intriqjourney.com/home), co-founded by two Singaporeans and a Chinese from Beijing. Collectively, they have 60 years of travel experience.

“We create personalised travel itineraries and small-group pio-

neering expeditions, with an Asian touch,” says co-founder Lim Kok Yong, who is based in Hong Kong.

Intriq Journey battled strong headwinds when it was set up in the early days of the pandemic. Travel is now back with a vengeance. Its Singapore-based co-founder Jess Yap says: “We have gone from 100 bookings then to 2,000 bookings for trips or staycations for 2022.”

Many of its clients fork out top dollar for high-end trips. The Saudi

trip costs close to \$20,000 a person (single supplement) or an eye-popping \$2,150 a day, excluding airfare.

At that price, the itineraries are unique, the accommodation is top tier and the dining is special, says Ms Stella Fan, the co-founder based in Beijing.

Our travel concierge, Ms Koh Teck Heok, who accompanies the Saudi tour group from Singapore, takes customer service to the next level. She acts like a guardian angel

and, equally important, operates like a mobile mini-convenience store, offering instant noodles, drinks, Asian snacks and face masks – all complimentary. Her resume includes cooking porridge in exotic destinations.

Convenience, a reliable service, strong local connections and an understanding of their needs are the reasons cited by the travellers who return repeatedly to this group of travel experts.

A spillover effect of a group tour

is the bonding that takes place. Already, clients on 2022 are teaming up for future departures. For example, its East Turkey tour group in September 2022 has banded together to request a 2024 Tunisia tour.

Planning the intricate details of a journey may be part of the joy of travelling. But for these travellers, they want one single green button that works, and group camaraderie.