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Our Glorious AFS Itinerary

18 September - Depart USA to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Air details to come in trip tips later.

19 September - Welcome to Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or KSA Kingdom of Saudi ! (Land portion officially begins)

Welcome to Jeddah, the largest city in Saudi Arabia. A major port, a historical Red Sea trading point, and a gateway for the thousands of yearly pilgrims heading to Mecca or Medina, the city has a bustling atmosphere with enticing entertainment venues.

On arrival, airport transfer to our hotel. We'll be free to explore the city - the Islamic Museum is one of our options, a veritable showcase of Arab history and tradition. Later you may wish to go for a walk along the beautiful Corniche, which is a key spot for locals to socialise, stroll and enjoy the sea breeze.

Overnight at Hyatt House, Jeddah (2 nights)

20 September - Exploring Jeddah Tour

After breakfast we'll explore Jeddah today, beginning with a visit to the enormous fish market. Seafood is essential to the economy of Jeddah, and a visit to this thriving fish market puts this into perspective. We'll also explore Jeddah's Corniche, which extends many miles along the Red Sea coast - this long sea front incorporates parks, mosques and playgrounds, and is lined with sculptures that culminate at the small open-air sculpture 'museum' in the north of the city. We'll walk a section of it, aiming to see the amazing 'Floating Mosque' along the way.

After lunch we had to the UNESCO-listed old town of Al Balad this afternoon. A quirk of Saudi culture is that many places only come alive after 4pm, with souks, shops and cafes opening late into the night. This is no different in Al Balad. Founded in the 7th Century, Al Balad was once the city centre of Jeddah and an essential Red Sea port. This wonder of architecture is famous for its wooden and coral carved 'roshans' (intricately carved facades), or Ottoman townhouses which provide fascinating photos. During our guided tour of Al Balad we'll enter some of the houses for a perspective on how people lived and worked in old Arabia. See the 300 year old mosque still active and vendors selling traditional delicacies of fresh bread, Arabian coffees and smoothies. We'll also have some free time to explore the maze of narrow streets that lead into the Souk Al Alawi section of Balad - in the late afternoon this area is transformed into a busy network of shops selling rugs, art, herbs, silver and perfume, as well as a lively street market with everything from okra and rice to meat and chilli peppers.

Our Welcome Dinner this evening will give us the opportunity to sample what Jeddah is really known for – fish! We will go to one of the cities popular fish restaurants for the catch of the day. Normally the menu includes a creamy fish together with hummus, vine leaves, rice and trimmings. It's a fitting start to our Saudi Arabian journey.

Overnight at Hyatt House, Jeddah. B, D

21 September - Fly to Al Ula for full day Tour

After breakfast we head to the airport for our flight into another world of glorious Al Ula. On arrival at 1PM, we check into our stunningly located desert resort which will be our base for the next two nights. During our time in Alula we will certainly discover why this area is becoming a must-visit location for anyone interested in the scenery and rich cultural heritage of Arabia.

Al Ula is located in the Wadi Al-Qura, a valley oriented north-south between the lava fields of the Harrat 'Uwayrid, and the sandstone massif of the Jibal Ath-Thumayid. Its' underground water resources and its' strategic location along the frankincense road meant this valley played a major role in the history of the Arabian Peninsula.

The birthplace of two ancient Arabian kingdoms: During the 1st millennium BCE, Al-Ula saw the rise of the ancient city of Dedan that became the capital of two successive kingdoms, Dedan and Lihyan, that ruled over the northwest of the Arabian Peninsula. At the end of the 1st millennium BCE a new power coming from the north, the Nabateans, installed their southernmost outpost and second most important city 20 kilometers to the north of Al-Ula, in Madain Saleh. North of this is the Nabateans city of Petra.

This afternoon, we will explore various archaeological sites and the UNESCO World Heritage site of Hegra (aka Mada'in Saleh). Second, only in size to Petra (in neighboring Jordan), this strategically sited Nabatean city has over one hundred ornately decorated royal tombs, including the striking Qasr Farid, dating back to the 1st century CE.

At sunset, we board our 4 x 4 Jeeps again to head for a visit to the iconic Elephant Rock. Set in golden desert sands and climbing at a height of 52 meters into the Saudi Arabian sky, the awe-inspiring Elephant rock is one of Al Ula's many geological marvels. Unlike the ornate, hand-carved facades of nearby Hegra's Nabataean tombs, the "trunk" and "body" of this monolithic red sandstone beast were shaped by natural forces over millions of years of wind and water erosion. The beauty of the unrefined structure is enhanced by a landscape of golden sands and studded with rocky outcrops of interesting shapes and figures. Time for refreshments at the café here and for photographs as magical lights make this site dramatically impressive.

(Please note that many of the activities in and around AlUla are controlled by the Royal Commission for AlUla which includes the times and durations allowed for visiting the sites. Google Condé Nast Traveler magazine, October 2022 for a great historical story featured on Alula.)

Overnight at Shaden Resort, Al ula (2 nights) B/D

22 September . Al Ula Mountains & Tombs

After breakfast, morning to relax by the beautiful swimming pool or hike the surrounding canyons.

Later we visit by Jeep the Lion Tombs of Dadan. In the ancient oasis Dadan, close to today's city of Al-Ula in Madinah Province, a kingdom flourished from at least the 6th century until the 2nd century BCE. There, the kings of Dadan and later Lihyan reigned over a territory that spread from the city of Iathrib (today's Madinah) to the Levant. In their capital Dadan, remains of these brilliant kingdoms have been excavated, including an impressive necropolis whose tombs were dug into the side of Jebel Dadan that overlooks the city on the east. These tombs are square-shaped holes, cut at different heights out of the side of the mountain, their cavities being about two meters deep. They are approximately dated to the 5th century BCE, the probable period of the Lihyanite takeover of the region. About 1 kilometer south of the main excavation site of Dadan are two exceptional tombs located some 50 meters above the wadi where the ancient oasis was centered. Those are the only tombs that are decorated with two carved lions each, showing the importance of their owners, being governors or influential people. These sculptures of lions are an outstanding example of the Mesopotamian influence and are the proud iconic figures of this ancient oasis.

Don your sneakers, for a wonderful canyon hike as we continue to Jabal Ikmah (mountain). In a beautiful desert landscape, the world's largest "Open Library" is tucked away in a remote canyon. Dadan was a caravan way station for many peoples, and one of the clues that Al Ula was truly a crossroads of civilizations is Jabal Ikmah. It was visited by those wishing to leave their inscriptions and offerings en-route through Al Ula. It's like a giant message board for pilgrims to communicate. Records kept here are in the form of hundreds of inscriptions and carvings lining the cliff faces and rocks and ensured that Jabal Ikmah would be remembered throughout the ages. The inscriptions are thought to date as far back as the 1st millennium BCE. Gazing at its rock art of humans, musical instruments and animals, you can discover what was important in the daily lives of people in the "Dadanite," "Lihyanite" and other civilizations of Al Ula. Long after Al Ula's ancient people walked this site, researchers and historians visited Jabal Ikmah to study its centuries-old imprints. You will feel the historic power of this magnificent site.

Farm visit - Enjoy a unique lunch at a local farm. I love this special farm with miles of date and fruit trees. Ali and his dogs greet us with juice and coffees before we walk the orchards that supply produce from here around the world. Pick what you like and then we head to his Bedouin camp. His mother prepares us a feast of delicious local dishes. Our visit here supports the local community with jobs and sustainability of this huge plantation.

Harra View Point at sunset - embarking on a 4WD ride scaling the black lava stone terrain of Harrat Uwayrid, to be rewarded with views over Dadan, Ula oldtown, AlUla Fort and the AlUla Oasis.

Our day ends with a stroll through the outdoor Old Town Market featuring local artisans, entrepreneurs, handicraft stores, local specialty foods, cafes and more. AlUla Old Town is still being renovated for tourism. T.E. Lawrence (aka Lawrence of Arabia) lived here in 1916. Travelers stayed here for the 12th to 20th centuries. Learn more at www.experiencealula.com

Overnight at Shaden Resort, Al ula (2 nights) B/D

23 September Caravans at Habitas! <https://www.ourhabitas.com/caravan-alula/>

Today we will check in to Caravan Habitas. So much buzz on this place for upscale hipsters seeking a wilderness adventure like no other. Caravan by Habitas is a one-of-a-kind glamping experience set among the majestic sandstone cliffs in AlUla designed to set free the inner child in all of us!... 22 silver Airstreams, infinity pool, 4 food trucks, huge community tented area, scattered art installations and unique adult play stations for fun, like swings to trampolines.

The Mirage- Optional visit by jeeps to the famous new Maraya. See the enormous cubed-shaped sculpture of mirrors that is an award-winning, state-of-the-art structure. Time to get your best Instagram photos ever!

Later in the evening, enjoy s'mores by the fire and popcorn with movies set against a mountain wall.

Overnight at Caravan by Habitas (1 night) B

<https://www.ourhabitas.com/caravan-alula/>

24 September Flight to Riyadh, Desert Journey to Edge of the World.

Early morning yoga session at Caravan Resort. Wellness is woven into the fabric of everything here.

Later transfer to airport for flight to Riyadh 11:40AM-1:15PM and head straight to our hotel to check in. The capital of Riyadh is a sprawling city, where ancient palaces and palm trees are found just a few traffic-laden streets away from bright, modern architecture. We'll get a feeling of both the old and new today.

In the late afternoon, we drive in 4WD vehicles into the Tuwalq Mountains and Jebel Fihrayn, also known as the Edge of the World! This dramatic set of cliffs, just one hour outside of Riyadh, rises vertically from the desert floor. Walk the towering clear cut rock riffs formed 150 million years ago by the Red Sea in this part of the Arabian Peninsula. Like Jurassic Park, keep an eye out for fossils. The horizon dances before us yet is somehow unobtainable - this visual illusion gives the wonder its name. We aim to be there for sunset, before driving back to the city.

Overnight at Crowne Plaza Minhal B

<https://www.ihg.com/crowneplaza/hotels/gb/en/riyadh/ruhsa/hoteldetail>

Riyadh Must See - The Diplomatic Quarter offers natural and cultural attractions within a self-contained recreational landscape. You can walk or cycle to the beautiful Wadi Hanifa, take a stroll around manicured parks and gardens and shop or dine in upmarket international plazas.

What's New - Riyadh's modern skyline is the perfect showcase for an architectural marvel. New skyscrapers are rising as the city continues to grow. While staying true to its rich cultural heritage, Riyadh continues to adapt a more contemporary feel attracting millions of travel enthusiasts travelers with city-wide events and entertainment festivals throughout the year.

Must Do - Riyadh is a shopper's paradise. From luxury brands in the modern Sahara, Hayat and Al Qasr malls, to the traditional souks of Deira and Al Owais, you can find all the latest designer goods and negotiate over truly unique and antique local artifacts. For adventure explore the desert. You can race across the dunes of the Thumama in a quad bike or

find endless calm in its sublimely desolate vastness. Hike the rust-red Sha'ib Luha valley, where the sweetly fragrant acacia trees bow above glass-green pools.

25 September Exploring Riyadh – Historic City Tour & Dune Bashing

Before the 1930s, Riyadh was a small, walled oasis town in what was then known as the Second Saudi State. After Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud conquered the state in the late 1920s he retook his family's ancient seat and brought together most of the Arabian Peninsula in what he went on to name 'Saudi Arabia'. We'll learn some of this history on a trip to the National Museum this morning - the museum is enormous so we will pick and choose some of the key exhibits. If you are staying longer in Riyadh it's well worth spending more time here.

Saudi Arabia's capital and main financial hub is on a desert plateau in the country's center. Landmarks include the 302m-high Kingdom Centre, with a sky bridge connecting 2 towers, and 267m-high Al Faisaliah Centre, with a glass-globe summit. In the historical Deira district, Masmak Fort marks the site of the 1902 raid that gave the Al Sauds control of Riyadh. We continue to visit Masmak Fortress, the most prominent remnant of the old walled oasis town of Riyadh. From here, we will visit the modern part of the city, taking the lift up the Kingdom Tower skyscraper for impressive views.

Red sand dunes - Later we'll continue to an adventure in the Red Sand Dunes! Located in northeastern Riyadh, Red Sand is an area of red desert dunes where you can enjoy numerous thrilling activities including sand-boarding, dune-bashing and buggy-riding.

Overnight at Crown Plaza Minhal (2 nights) B

26 September Riyadh onwards flight back to USA

Today here we say goodbye to beautiful and memorable Saudi, with flights back to the U.S. B