

Saudi Arabia

aspires to new tourism prospects

> A. S. Shakiry

I recently visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the invitation of Mr. Nawaf Mohamed Bin Saud, the kingdom's ambassador to London, to visit tourist sites, and see the natural heritage of his country. I was part of a delegation of writers and travel journalists, which included: Messrs. Sir Alan Munro of the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce, a former British ambassador to Saudi Arabia and currently President of the Saudi-British Society; Gwyn Williams, CE of Eisteddfod; Mark Stratton, a writer and travel photographer; Mrs Cath Urquhart, travel editor of the Times; Miss Karin Maree, editor of MEED magazine, Mrs. Ionis Thompson, from the Saudi-British Society; and myself, A. S. Shakiry, publisher of Islamic Tourism Magazine. We introduced ourselves to each other at Heathrow airport, and flew to Riyadh on Saudi Airlines.

The first day: Riyadh Marriott Hotel

We arrived at 8 pm and were greeted by representatives of the High Commission for Tourism, headed by Mr. Majid Ben Ali Al-Sheddi, General Director of Communications and Public Relations. The ladies were given beautiful cloaks to comply with the Islamic dress code and were taken to the Riyadh Marriott Hotel.

The second day

We began our visit to Riyadh with a tour of the historic city of Ad-Dir'iyyah, located 20 km to the west. It is the birthplace of the



The publisher at the Faisaliah Tower
الناشر في برج الفيصلية



A view from the top of the Faisaliah Tower showing the Kingdom Tower in the background

صورة من أعلى برج الفيصلية ويظهر في الأفق برج المملكة

Saudi state and the Al Saud dynasty. Their rise to power came through the alliance between Mohammed Ibn Saud and Sheikh Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahab, the founder of the Salafi movement in 1158 H/1744. Given the historical significance of this city, which was the former capital, it was reconstructed in accordance with the architecture of the great Islamic cities, with palaces, fortresses, walls, gates, public places, baths and bazaars.

During the time of the late King Fahd Ibn

Abdul Aziz, there was a will to resurrect this historic city, and the King issued a decree to this effect. The Heritage and Museum Agency and the Ministry of Culture had the task of recording and documenting the heritage sites, selecting materials for the maintenance and restoration of the mud buildings in terms of their capacity for resistance to erosion and the local environment. The restoration was extensive and included the walls and towers of the Tarif district, the palace of Saad Ibn Saud, ▶



A meeting with the High Commission for Tourism

اجتماع أعضاء الوفد مع المسؤولين في الهيئة العليا للسياحة

the walls and towers of Ad-Dir'iyya, the Tarif bath and the guest palace in Ad-Dir'iyya.

The officials continued the three-stage development plan of Ad-Dir'iyya in coordination with the High Commission for Tourism and the province of Ad-Dir'iyya and its municipalities. It was a partnership between the executive committee, the private sector, local residents and some related government departments. The first step is the founding of the museum of Ad-Dir'iyya, the restoration of the mosque of Imam Mohammed Ibn Saud, building the Foundation of Sheikh Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahab, the place of sound & light in the museum of Ad-Dir'iyya, and preserving the mud houses. It will be a historical museum focusing on the social life of the province. A historical documentation of Ad-Dir'iyya will be compiled. Traditional commercial shops, an administrative complex, a tourism information centre, a visitors centre, and public parks will be built. Investment projects for the first phase, to be completed before the end of 2009, include the building of traditional Tarif and Al-Bajari hotels, fast-food carts, Tarif train, a street of cafes, a traditional Saudi restaurant, a health centre, apartments, commercial buildings and traditional souks selling agricultural products. The work of this first phase is to be completed before the end of 2009.

The second and third stages will begin shortly after. They include the construction

of traditional museums and souks, restoration of mosques and historic houses and the foundation of a centre for research and training in the field of cultural heritage, a convention and exhibition centre and the building of resorts and tourist complexes. Through this plan and ambitious projects, officials of the Ad-Dir'iyyah Development Committee are trying to transform this historic city from ruins and mud houses into a heritage city of global significance, which will eventually be included in UNESCO's World Heritage List.

After visiting Ad-Dir'iyyah we went to the headquarters of the Supreme Commission for Tourism, whose many departments deal with all aspects of tourism. We were given a warm welcome by the young staff, who were working with modern equipment.

The General Director of Media and Public Relations, Mr. Majed Ibn Ali Al-Sheddi, told us about the potential and prospects of the High Commission for Tourism (HCT). The meeting went into several sessions and we were briefed about the visions and ambitious programs for the development of various forms of tourism: heritage, eco and cultural. The kingdom, with its vast territory of 2,240,000 sq km -two thirds of the USA and the equivalent of Western Europe - is particularly rich in all these aspects. It houses more than 6300 attractions of all kinds. The HCT is quite confident it will be able to attract millions of tourists, in addition to pilgrims, without compromising the values and fundamental role of religion



Mr. Majid Ben Ali Al-Sheddi

السيد ماجد بن محمد علي الشدي



The Faisaliah Tower

برج الفيصلية

and morality in the everyday life of the country.

The Tourism Information and Research Centre (MAS), part of the HCT, conducts research and compiles statistics on the kingdom's tourist industry. Its mission is to prepare plans and formulate policies for the



Illuminated trees

أشجار مزينة بالأضواء



The Riyadh's Airport Mosque

مسجد مطار الرياض

development of tourism. It is characterized by a high level of organization, technology information and communications equipment, such as geographic information systems and digital maps. The centre is also on national and international websites related to tourism.

A tour of Riyadh was next on the programme. From the giant Faisaliah Tower we surveyed the architectural landmarks of the city. The second giant tower, the Kingdom Tower, was in front of us. We also visited the museum, with one hundred date palm trees, decorated with bright lights, symbolizing the centenary of the founding of the kingdom. In the evening, we dined in a

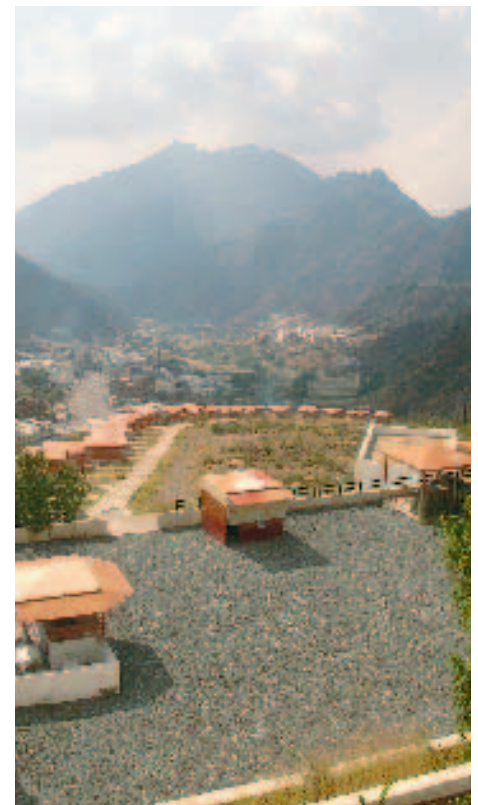
Chinese restaurant, which had a pleasant atmosphere and exquisite dishes. It also had a large gold fish pond.

The third day

After breakfast, we flew to the city of Abha, the capital of Asir and to the region of Rijal Alma'a, located 45 km west of Abha. The term "Rijal Alma'a" is used both to describe a province of Saudi Arabia and the historic city in its centre. Its historical significance and current importance comes from its specialisation in trade. It was also a scientific centre, attracting many researchers and students from the southern areas, some of whom became prominent scholars and men of letters.

Because of its proximity to Yemen, this province has many similarities with the architectural forms, habits and customs of that country. We visited its mountains, plains, fortresses and original buildings. The unique architectural style requires a great deal of effort and substantial financial resources to turn ideas into buildings. These fortresses of different ages, are linked to homes, with a joint use of terraces and entrances. Construction of houses in the traditional style was encouraged for security reasons and the village looks like a military barracks. Following its buildings, we cannot but appreciate the professional quality, creativity and civility of its inhabitants. Each mountain, wadi, fortress, mosque, souk, or corner of this bewitching province has a history, a name and an event, which would take too long to describe in this article.

The houses in this village are characterized by internal decorations representing an art form in their own right and a strong symbolic dimension, based on natural life. The women had the task of decorating the interior of their homes. Some are totally



Reaching Rijal Alma'a الوصول إلى منخفض رجال ألمع



Rijal Alma'a

decorated from the inside, so it's almost like being in front of an art mural whose motifs seem engraved and decorated as if to welcome the visitors.

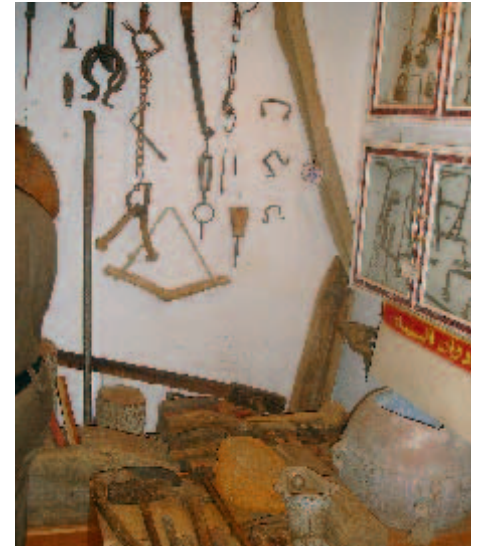
We ended the visit with a tour of the village museum created collectively by all the men and women to preserve their rich heritage. It also plays the role of the largest cultural tourism site in the region, visited by tens of thousands annually. A locally funded guest house welcomes visitors. This reflects a spirit of cooperation and the solidarity of the locals. When I wanted to buy a photo album, which featured the heritage of this

جدارية تمثل بلدية محافظة ألمع

beautiful province, Mr. Yahia Abullah Ahmed Al-Morshidi, a police officer insisted on paying.

The ambition or the dream of the inhabitants of this village is that it will be fully converted into a heritage site of multiple services, following the restoration of its palace buildings. We hope this dream will become a reality as soon as possible.

Like Asir's other provinces, Rijal Al-Ma'a is characterized by a healthy mountain climate and magnificent natural landscapes, which make it the best summer resort for the Saudis, who want



The museum of Rijal Alma'a

متحف رجال ألمع

to escape from the strong, oppressive heat of other regions.

The trip to Rijal Al-Ma'a was striking. We took the cable cars, connecting the Souda Mountains summit to an area near the village, holding our breath during the long ascent and descent at an altitude of 3300 m. This gave me some breathing discomfort and circulation problems but the splendid view of the landscape, mountains and valleys made us forget these few inconveniences. We had a packed lunch in the valley. In the evening, we returned to Abha Palace Hotel. ▶



Old forts and buildings in Rijal Alma'a

حصون ومباني رجال ألمع



The Prophet's Mosque

المسجد النبوي الشريف



Khaybar's Dam

سد خيبر



The writer with an Australian delegation at Al-Ula Hotel

الناشر مع وفد سياحي أسترالي في فندق أراك العلا

The fourth day: Medina, Al-Ula

We arrived on an afternoon flight to Medina. While the rest of our party were having lunch at the Meridian Medina Hotel I was able to convince our tour guide, Mr. Mazine Ahmed Al-Jouayad, to allow me to visit the mosque of the Prophet Mohammed to say my prayers. I felt a deep happiness reciting the verse of Yassin between the tomb and minbar of the Prophet's mosque. I also visited the graves of Baqi'a, where Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet's family) and the Companions of the Prophet, who fought to defend the

message of Islam, are buried.

We continued our journey by car to Al-Ula. Along the way, we stopped at one of the dams in the province of Khaybar, 170 km north of Medina, famous for its forts. Strolling through the ruins, you get the impression of walking through living history. It is as if the mountains, fortresses, dams and engravings, all speak to you. The mountains have been blessed with the eyes of the Prophet and the soil was mixed with the blood of martyrs among the Companions of the Prophet at the battle of Khaybar, which contributed

to the spread of the message of Islam.

We arrived at night at Al-Ula after a long drive always accompanied by a police car or tourism security.

Situated in the northwest of the kingdom, Al-Ula is rich in historical heritage, reflecting one of the earliest human civilizations. Today it is one of the most important historical and tourist sites of the kingdom, with a promising future due to the beauty of the surrounding scenery, mountains, valleys and nature. We spent the night at Al-Ula Arac Hotel. ▶

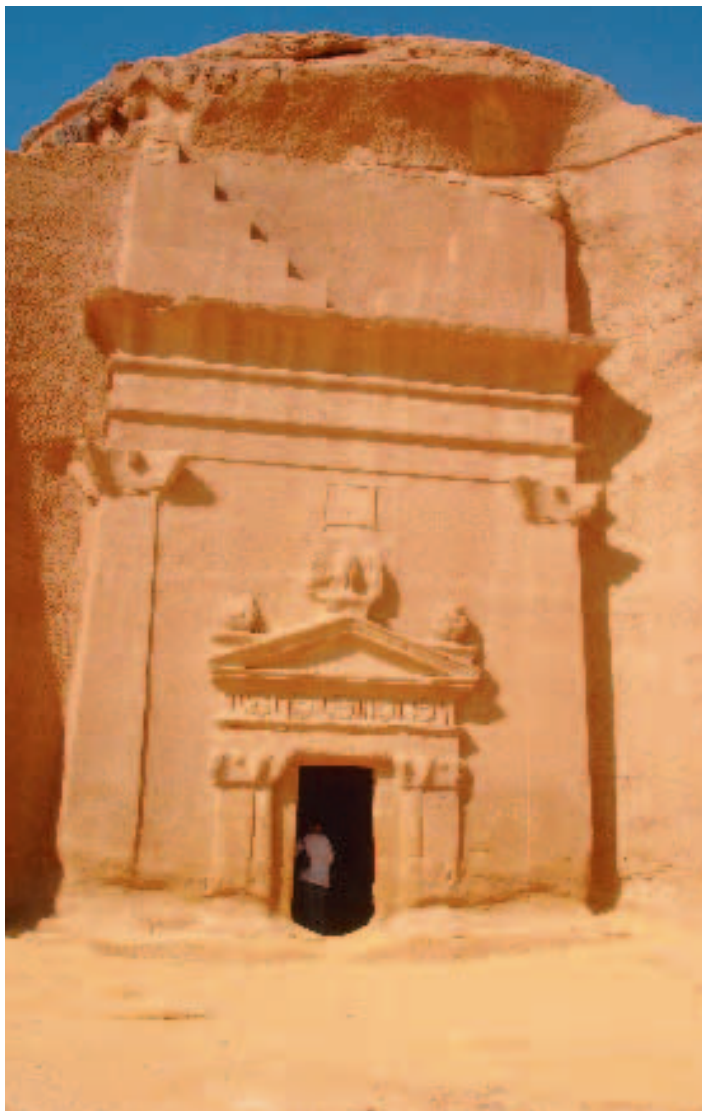
The fifth day: Hijaz Resort – Madain Saleh

After breakfast we visited the famous Hijaz Resort. Afterwards, we had various choices, and members of the delegation opted for a visit to Madain Saleh, because of its historical importance encompassing more than 120 family graves with signs on white marble bearing the names of people who built it and dedicated it their families. The ink decorated engraving was fading making it difficult to decipher the words. I hope that the ink will be restored because the graves are a treasure of information. I understand that it will take hard work, given the large number of signs, but it could be a good exercise for students. ▶



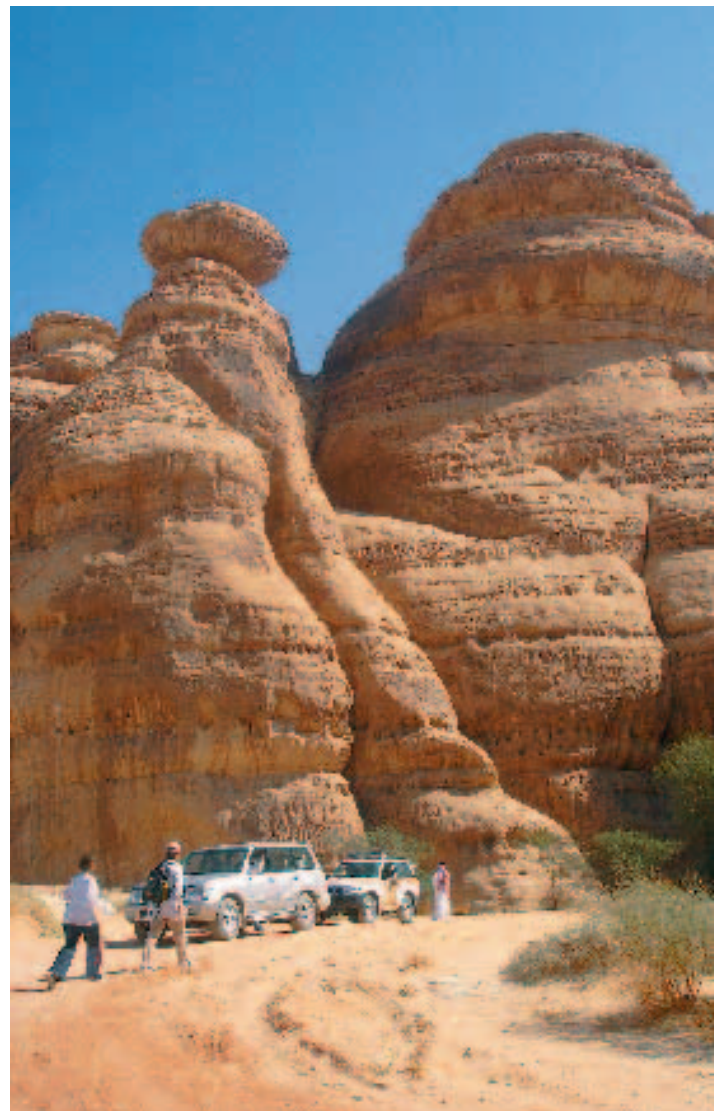
Madain Saleh

مدائن صالح



Madain Saleh

مدائن صالح



Fantastic rock formations

الصخور ذات التكوينات المدهشة

The sixth day: The desert and Mecca

After breakfast it was time to discover the desert area with an abundance of rocks of various shapes and colours. It is a landscape of endless forms, which anyone can discover by using his imagination. I was dazzled and bewitched especially when the sun's rays were reflected on the golden sands of the dunes.

After this pleasurable tour, where drivers skillfully prevented the four-wheel drive from sinking into the sand dunes, we returned to our hotel before noon to have lunch and get onto a plane to Jeddah. We arrived there at night, after an hour's flight.

Located in the middle of the Red Sea coast, Jeddah has been nicknamed the "Bride of the Red Sea", and is regarded as the economic and tourism capital of the kingdom. After registration formalities at the Jeddah Rosewood Hotel, we went to the crowded family Date Palm Restaurant, at the invitation of Mr. Ahmed Ali Mustapha, DG of The Sad As-Samalqi Company, who facilitated this trip for us.

A visit to Mecca was not programmed. I asked if I could get in a car to go to the holy city to perform Umrah, in the company of our guide, Mr. Al-Jouayad. My request was granted. ▶



A road in the middle of endless rocks

طريق بين الصخور المترامية الأطراف



Panoramic view of the rocks

بانوراما الصخور مشهد يفوق الخيال



The desert

صورة رائعة للصحراء



A mosque on the Red Sea

أحد الجوامع المطلة على البحر الأحمر في الوجه



The cost line of the Red Sea

ساحل البحر الأحمر

The seventh day: Jeddah

The seventh day was dedicated to the discovery of the historic heritage of Jeddah, where the 21st century and the traditional kingdom exist in a happy symbiosis. The city is a candidate for inclusion on UNESCO's heritage list. We visited the region of the old souks, called "al Madina" (city) and the historic Nasif house, equipped to be a heritage museum of the kingdom and of humanity. At noon, we dined at a Chinese restaurant which specializes in fish dishes.

In the afternoon, we went to the headquarters of Asharq Al Awsat newspaper and Arab News where we were met by Mr. Khaled A. Al- Maena, the editor-in-chief and Ms. Somayya A. Jabarti, director of the editorial department. For more than an hour we discussed various aspects of tourism in Saudi Arabia. This rich and instructive meeting was facilitated by Sir A. Williams, who had an old friendly relationship with the publishers when he was British ambassador to the kingdom.

In the evening, I went for a Umrah which lasted most of the night (finished at 3 am of the eighth day).

The eighth day: Return to London

After breakfast, we had a walk by the sea, where we discovered the tourist attractions of Jeddah, including statues representing

various beings, except human beings, which are not allowed on religious grounds. In the afternoon, we went to Jeddah airport to take our flight to London, where we arrived safely in the evening. Reflecting on the trip we were delighted to have been given the opportunity to visit Saudi Arabia. Getting a tourist visa was easy because we were official guests. But what are the prospects for Saudi tourism if getting a visa for ordinary travellers is a major hurdle?

We put this question to the authorities and the tourist guides of Japanese and Australian visitors we met. They told us that they obtained their visas through tourist companies licensed by the Saudi tourism authorities. We learned that the old system, which required an invitation from a Saudi resident was relaxed and replaced by the new system which is supported by 18 tourist companies. I hope that Saudi embassies and consulates will hold a public information campaign explaining the new measures, to facilitate travel to Saudi Arabia, with a view to consolidating tourism.

When talking to Saudi officials responsible for tourism I proposed the idea of "Islamic Tourism", combining religious tourism and other types of tourism as I have done on this trip (and Umrah). I was happy to hear that there is an ongoing study for the granting of tourist visas to Muslims

embracing religious tourism and other types of tourism.

I admired the artistic and architectural beauty of the various modern mosques in the kingdom and gained a great knowledge of the tourism sites, heritage, history, nature and religious significance that God bestowed on this land. Its was in response to an appeal by Patriarch Prophet Abraham that the Koran says: "And when Abraham begged: " And when Abraham prayed: My Lord! Make this a region of security and bestow upon its people fruits, such of them as believe in Allah and the Last Day, He answered: As for him who disbelieveth, I shall leave him in contentment for a while, then I shall compel him to the doom of Fire - a hapless journey's end!" (Al-Baqara (The Cow)/126).

I hope religious tourism will be the backbone of the kingdom's tourist industry. There are more than one and a half billion Muslims who wish to visit Mecca and the historic sites of Islam's first years in connection with the Prophet, Ahl al Bayt, Companions, and the believers who first brought the message of Islam.

Finally, I wish to thank HE The Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for his invitation, as well as everyone associated with the organising of this trip. I really enjoyed this visit and will live with its memories for a long time. ■