



ACADEMY
TRAVEL

TAILORED
SMALL GROUP
JOURNEYS

Elephant Rock, AlUla

SAUDI ARABIA

JEWEL OF THE DESERT

OVERVIEW

Discover the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, rich in attractions and stirring symbolism. This vast desert country's absorbing cities, rich archaeological past and breathtaking landscapes offer unique experiences for adventurous travellers.

Our 18-day tour led by Chris Bradley begins in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's hyper-contemporary capital city. From there we'll take a northwestern route through rugged deserts, stark volcanic landscapes and refreshing oases as we travel through the city of Hail to the northernmost point of our journey in Sakaka.

The journey south follows the mountainous coast of the Red Sea, taking us from the futuristic urban project of NEOM through Tabuk and the colourful canyons and monumental tombs of AlUla. We'll stay in one of Islam's holiest cities, Medina, and follow in the footsteps of Lawrence of Arabia along the Hejaz Railway, before making our way to the coastal town of Jeddah and finally to Abha, a region rich in Asir cultural heritage and architecture.

From Neolithic rock inscriptions to plans for the most futuristic city on the planet, you'll find the full gamut of experiential wonders in this complex country.



TOUR LEADER

Chris Bradley has extensive experience leading group tours in the Middle East. A fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, he regularly gives lectures around the world on Islamic and early Christian art.

TOUR DATES

October 8-25, 2024

TOUR PRICE

\$21,690 per person, twin share
\$3,710 single supplement

TOUR DEPOSIT

A **\$1,000** non-refundable deposit is required per person to confirm your booking on tour.

GROUP SIZE

Maximum number of **16** in group

ITINERARY

Riyadh (2 nights), Hail (2 nights), Sakaka (1 night), Tabuk (3 nights), AlUla (2 nights), Medina (1 night), Jeddah (2 nights), Baljurashi (2 nights), Abha (2 nights)

INCLUSIONS

17 nights' accommodation in centrally located 4-star hotels. All breakfasts, 16 lunches and 10 dinners. Services of an expert tour leader and an experienced tour manager throughout. All ground transport, entrance fees and tipping.

DETAILED ITINERARY



Start & Finish

The tour starts at 3.00pm on Tuesday 8 October, at the Joudyan Hotel by Elaf in Riyadh.

The tour ends early afternoon on Friday 25 October, on arrival to King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh.

Included meals are indicated with B, L, D.

Tuesday 8 October

Arrival in Riyadh

If you have booked your air travel through Academy Travel, we will organise a transfer to our hotel. In the afternoon we'll gather in the lobby of the hotel for introductions before making our way to the city's tallest skyscraper Kingdom Centre – a symbol of modern Riyadh since it was completed in 2002. Taking the high-speed lift up 99 stories to the Sky Bridge, suspended 300 metres above the city, we'll get a sense of this hyper-contemporary capital's scope with spectacular views across the Riyadh skyline and beyond. Descending back to earth, we enjoy a welcome dinner in one of the many restaurants of the complex. Overnight Riyadh (D)

Wednesday 9 October

Riyadh

After a brief post-breakfast welcome, we'll pay a visit to the town of Ad Diriyah, located on the north-western outskirts of Riyadh. One district (At-Turaif, 1727-1818) was the birthplace of the first Saudi state and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We'll learn more about the region's distinctive mud-brick architecture and details of life in the first Saudi dynasty. Next we'll explore the 150-year-old Al Masmak Fortress, located in the heart of the old town; and we'll learn more about Saudi history at Murabba Palace and the National Museum of Saudi Arabia. The day ends by exploring two hubs of Arabian commerce, the Souq al Zel and Souq Bisht. You may wish to purchase an Abaya or headscarf for your travels (though their use is completely voluntary for foreigners), or just enjoy intermingling in these traditional marketplaces. Overnight Riyadh (B, L)

Thursday 10 October

To Hail

This morning we depart by highspeed train, crossing northwest through the rocky desert landscape for the four-and-a-half-hour trip to the ancient Arab capital of Hail. Upon arrival we'll visit A'arif Fort, a well-constructed rectangular mud-and-clay citadel perched on top of a mountain of the same name. Along with its military function, during Saudi rule the fortress served as a place to spot the moon, signalling the start and end of Ramadan. Following check-in to our hotel, the evening is at leisure before dinner. Overnight Hail (B, L, D)

TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

Hegra, the 'Southern Petra'

The sister-city of Nabatean Petra, explore this important archaeological site of over 110 astonishingly well-preserved tombs set in a stunning desert landscape on the southern border of the old Nabatean Kingdom.

Holy Medina

See the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad and spend the night in the holy city of Medina, an important historical stop along the ancient Incense Trade route.

Abha

Get a feel for the Yemeni Highlands in Saudi Arabia's Hijaz mountain region of Abha – a popular summer getaway for Saudis, with its distinctive art, culture, and traditions.

Tabuk

Learn about the remote Northwest's rich heritage of all Abrahamic faiths and get a glimpse of the future of Saudi urban life with the planned NEOM project.

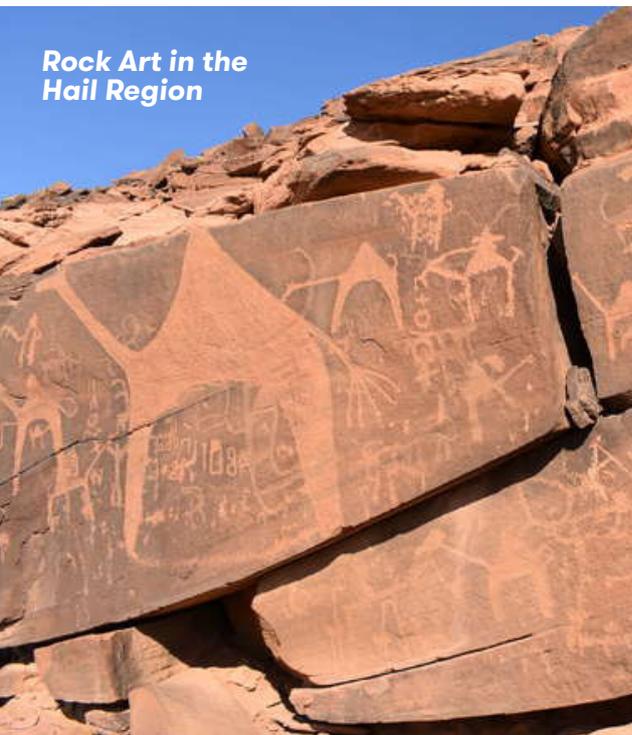
Jeddah

Step into the 'Gateway of Arabia,' which for centuries has welcomed merchants, travellers, pilgrims and diplomats. This laid-back mixture of Red Sea coastal architecture and landmarks makes for a pleasant, relaxed stay.

**Kingdom Centre,
Riyadh**



**Rock Art in the
Hail Region**



**Al Rajajil
Standing Stones**



Friday 11 October

Hail & Environs

Our first visit of the day is to the stark landscape of Harrat Al-Hutaymah, Saudi Arabia's eastern-most lava fields and home to a visible volcanic crater. We'll then head to Fayd, an archaeological site and former oasis at the crossroads of several important towns. The town is characterised by the large cisterns that collected and stored water from the nearby Harrat Umm Hurruj. The afternoon is spent at the Fayd Museum, which offers a trove of artifacts unearthed from the ancient fortress and its surroundings, including millstones, jewels, earthenware jars, pottery, coins and more, before we return to our hotel with the evening at leisure. Overnight Hail (B, L)

Saturday 12 October

To Sakaka

Departing Hail this morning, our journey to Sakaka takes us north through the Al Nafud desert, where a sea of red sand dunes replace any sign of civilization. Along the way we'll stop by the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Jubbah, once home to a lake that supported the ancestors of today's Arab populations, now featuring some well-preserved and finely detailed Neolithic rock inscriptions of people, animals and daily activities. Upon arrival in Sakaka we'll admire the contrast of red sand dunes and verdant olive plantations from Zaabel Castle – a centuries-old hilltop fort built from mud and stone. Tonight we enjoy dinner together. Overnight Sakaka (B, L, D)

Sunday 13 October

To Tabuk

Our destination today is Tabuk, an oasis city near the Jordanian border and the Gulf of Aqaba. We first come across Saudi Arabia's answer to Stonehenge, the Al Rajajil Standing Stones. These towering sandstone columns are the site of an ancient burial ground with fascinating traditions dating back to the 6th century BCE. We'll then explore the impressive 1st-century CE Marid Castle, a military fortress that sits above the ancient city of Dumah Al Jandal, 620m above sea level. Known for its conical towers, the castle comprises buildings of different architectural styles spanning from the Nabataean period, through the post-emergence of Islam, until the most recent construction 80 years ago. Continuing our journey to Tabuk, we'll arrive just in time for a sunset stroll through the city streets with their distinctive Ottoman architecture, followed by dinner in a local restaurant. Overnight Tabuk (B, L, D)

Monday 14 October

NEOM (from Tabuk)

Using Tabuk as our base, we'll spend the day exploring the new planned urban area known as NEOM. Ten times the size of the Australian Capital Territory, NEOM features revolutionary planned projects like 'The Line' – a 200m wide 'cognitive city' stretching from the mountains to the Red Sea. Our tour takes us through the future and also the past of the region, marked by historical remnants of travellers. Next we reach the excavation site of the city of Al Bada'a, where the Nabatean people took refuge. We'll view some Nabatean rock art inscriptions at the

**Catalina Seaplane wreck,
near the cape of Ras Al-Sheikh**



site of Maghaeib Shoaib and dip our feet in the refreshing waters of ‘Musa’s Spring,’ said to be the spring of Moses. After a picnic lunch break at the stunning cliff formations of Tayeb Al-Ism, where legend has it that Moses and his flock arrived after parting the sea, we continue down the coastline stopping by the Catalina Seaplane wreckage. For more than 50 years, this World War II seaplane has remained marooned on the remote sandy cape of Ras Al-Sheikh Hameed, abandoned by a German adventurer family after the locals mistook them for hostiles and opened fire. Returning to the hotel, the evening is at leisure. Overnight Tabuk (B, L)

Tuesday 15 October

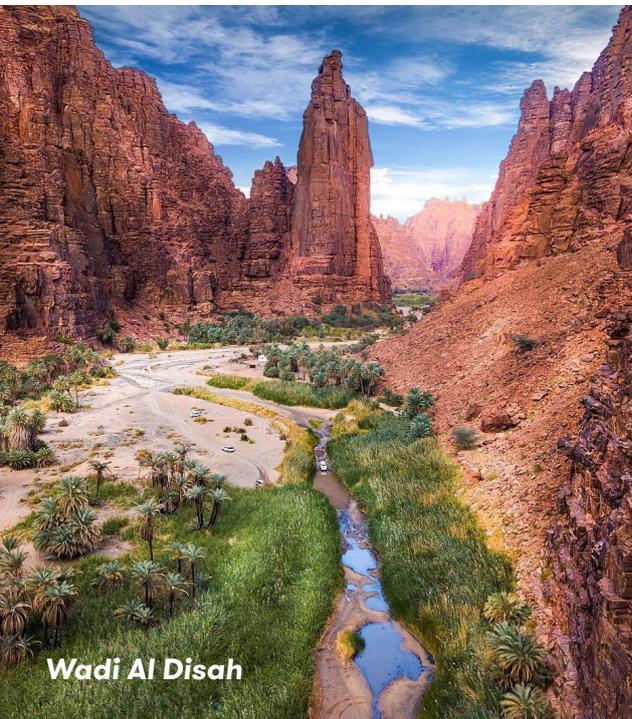
Tabuk

The gateway to Saudi Arabia’s northwest, Tabuk has long been a resting point for Jordanian and Egyptian pilgrims on their way south to Mecca and Medina. The Tabuk market, which we’ll explore this morning, is evidence of Tabuk’s place at the crossroads, with ‘smach’ shops and all-purpose stores selling everything a Bedouin may need to cross the desert. Following a leisurely lunch together at a local restaurant, the afternoon and evening are yours to enjoy. Overnight Tabuk (B, L)

Wednesday 16 October

Wadi Al Disah to AlUla

We depart Tabuk this morning for the six-hour journey south, stopping halfway to soak up the beauty of Wadi Al Disah, one of Saudi Arabia’s most spectacular natural attractions. Loosely translated as ‘Valley of the Palm Trees,’ the site boasts colourful mountains, along with freshwater springs that feed the date and mango farms. Lunch is served under the fruit trees as we learn about agriculture in this arid climate. Afterward, we’ll adventure via 4x4 through the stream that winds between towering rock walls to a section of the valley with facades of Nabatean tombs and remains of walls with Kufic script. Our journey then continues to AlUla, home to Saudi Arabia’s first UNESCO World Heritage Site with remarkable natural rock formations and canyons, pre-Arabic rock art and immaculately preserved Nabatean tombs. After checking in to our resort hotel nestled among magnificent sandstone formations, we end the day with a sunset viewing across Elephant Rock – one of AlUla’s most impressive geological marvels – before enjoying dinner together. Overnight AlUla (B, L, D)

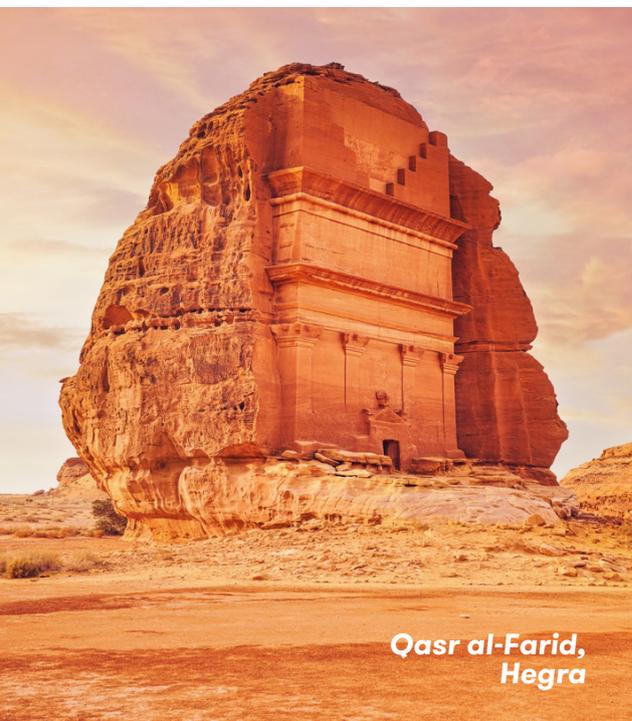


Wadi Al Disah

Thursday 17 October

Hegra & AlUla’s Old Town

Today begins with a visit to Hegra, the southern capital of the Nabatean kingdom, dating back to the first century BCE. We’ll follow a ‘rawee’ or storyteller to explore some of the more than 100 well-preserved monumental tombs with their elaborate facades carved from desert rock formations. Our tour will include the famous Qasr al-Farid, the ‘Lonely Castle’ of the Nabataeans. Next we’ll visit the historic old town, a magical mix of ancient alleys and trendy restaurants. We’ll continue with a pleasant stroll through the valley with its numerous farms to colourful Al Jadidah, also known as ‘the new or art town.’ The remainder of the day is yours to enjoy. Overnight AlUla (B, L)



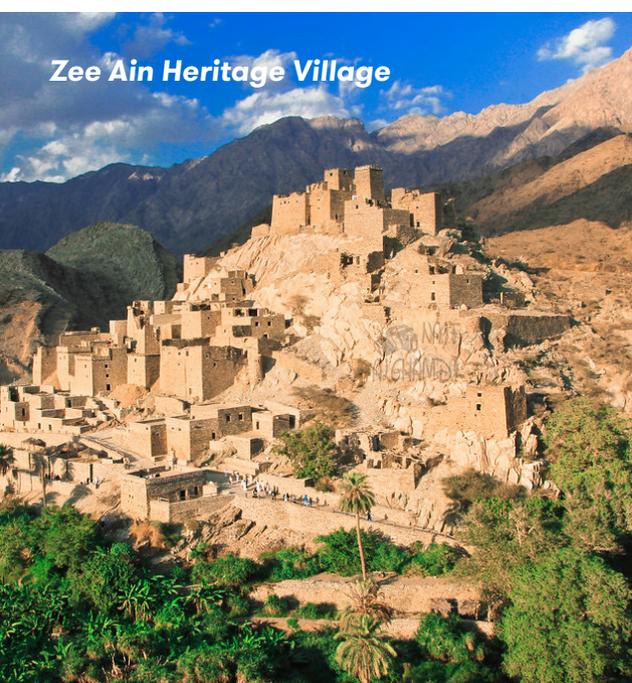
**Qasr al-Farid,
Hegra**



Al Masjid an Nabawi, Medina



Al-Balad, Jeddah



Zee Ain Heritage Village

Friday 18 October

To Medina

Today we'll depart AlUla and travel along an ancient pilgrimage route to Medina, a volcanic area rich in historical significance. With Mecca, Medina is one of the two holiest cities in Islam, centred around Al Masjid an Nabawi, a huge ten-minaret mosque that can accommodate a million people. We'll join the throngs of pilgrims in the heart of the city, enjoying exterior views of the mosque, before visiting the terminus station of the Hejaz Railway, which once brought pilgrims to Medina from as far away as Damascus in Syria before it was destroyed by Lawrence of Arabia. At sunset we'll visit Mount Uhud, a major pilgrimage site and viewpoint across the Holy City, before enjoying dinner together. Overnight Medina (B, L, D)

Saturday 19 October

To Jeddah

This morning is free to enjoy Medina's bustling central market, perhaps satisfying your sweet tooth at stalls selling goodies like ma'amoul (butter cookies stuffed with pistachios, walnuts, almonds or dates), luqaimat (hot, crispy dumplings drizzled in honey) and kunafa (a sweet cheese pie made with semolina pastry and rose water syrup). After lunch we'll board a high-speed train for the two-hour trip to the coastal city of Jeddah. After checking in to our hotel, the afternoon is spent on the city's attractive Corniche on the Red Sea. Home to numerous gardens, play parks, sculptures and even the world's tallest fountain, we stroll along the beachwalk before enjoying dinner in one of the area's excellent restaurants. Overnight Jeddah (B, L, D)

Sunday 20 October

Jeddah

A commercial hub with the second busiest seaport in the Middle East, Jeddah is also the principle gateway to Mecca. Over a million pilgrims per year stop by Jeddah on their way to perform the Hajj. Jeddah is perceived to be the most liberal city in Saudi Arabia and offers the beauty of ancient architecture mixed with the latest luxuries. Today we'll start by exploring some real-size examples of Saudi and Jeddawi building styles at the Tayebat Museum, along with everyday tools and utensils, art and historical details of the two Holy Cities, Medina and Mecca. A short walk takes us to the Sheikh Abdul Raouf Khalil Museum, featuring manuscripts and exclusive antiques found nowhere else in the entire Middle East. We'll next stroll through Jeddah's atmospheric old town of Al-Balad, with its traditional multi-story buildings, merchant houses and picturesque alleyways, before an evening at leisure. Overnight Jeddah (B, L)

Monday 21 October

To Baljurashi via Taif

Our journey south continues today, with a stop at the city of Taif, whose cooler climate marks the transition between the coastal plain and the Sarawat mountains. Known as the 'City of Roses,' Taif is famous for the fragrant flowers that grow in the city and surrounding valleys, and a stop at the Al Shiokh Factory allows us to learn about the manufacturing of products based on rose oil extract. Continuing our travels, we arrive at

HOTELS

Hotels have been selected principally for their central location. All hotels are four-star standard.

Riyadh, Joudyan Hotel by Elaf

(2 nights)

www.joudyanhotels.com

Hail, Holiday Villa

(2 nights)

www.holidayvillahotels.com

Sakaka, Al Nusl Hotel

(1 night)

www.alnusl-hotel.com

Tabuk, Holiday Inn

(3 nights)

www.ihg.com

AlUla, Shaden Resort AlUla

(2 nights)

www.shadenresort.sa

Medina, Millennium Medina

(1 night)

www.millenniumhotels.com

Jeddah, Shada Shatea Boutique

(2 nights)

www.shadahotels.com

Baljurashi, National Park Hotel

(2 nights)

www.nationalparkgroup.com

Abha, Aber Hotel

(2 nights)

www.boudl.com

WEATHER

October in Saudi Arabia is a hot but generally pleasant time to travel, with plenty of sunshine. Daily highs range from 35°C to 37°C, while overnight temperatures typically drop to around 23°C.

FITNESS REQUIREMENTS

Grade Three

This tour is among our most physically demanding. For all requirements, visit:

academytravel.com.au



Baljurashi, a small town located in the southwestern region known for its stunning mountainous landscape. The afternoon is at leisure before dinner tonight. Overnight Baljurashi (B, L, D)

Tuesday 22 October

Zee Ain & Raghadan Forest Park

Today's visit starts with the mountaintop village of Zee Ain, which features a unique urban heritage organisation and a picturesque view of the surrounding farms. Built on the summit of a mountain famous for the cultivation of banana, lemon, pepper and basil, the village has a small mosque and many forts used in its defence. Our next stop is Raghadan Forest Park, one of the most famous forests of the Arab world. Located on a rocky slope 1,700m above sea level overlooking Tihamah, the park is known for its tranquillity and natural beauty. Major redevelopment with new stone pathways allows visitors to gain easy access through the wooded areas. Returning to our hotel, the evening is at leisure. Overnight Baljurashi (B, L)

Wednesday 23 October

To Abha

We'll make our final journey south today, taking us along the mountain range to Abha, the capital of the Asir region. The mountains get taller and more rugged along the route, and we'll encounter traditional Asir houses and an impressive mosque as we take in the views at the village of Olayyan. In the town of Namas, we'll enjoy a picnic lunch in the airy park, featuring views into the deep valley outside town, before arriving in Abha in the late afternoon. Tonight we enjoy dinner together. Overnight Abha (B, L, D)

Thursday 24 October

Abha

Our final day begins with a trip to the peak of Jabal Sawda, the highest summit in Saudi Arabia. Next we learn about Asir culture and heritage with a visit to Rijal Alma, the architecture of which ranges from mud houses to watchtowers. Buildings are shielded from seasonal rains by an ingenious system using round boulders that protect their foundations. We'll enjoy a drink in the shade of a tree near the village café before driving back to Abha. There we'll delve more into Asir heritage at the Fatima Museum of Aseeri Women, which provides insight into Aseeri natural painting techniques. We finish the day with a stroll down the city's colourful and quirky Art Street before gathering for our farewell dinner. Overnight Abha (B, L, D)

Friday 25 October

Departure

After breakfast this morning, we'll transfer to the airport and fly to Riyadh in preparation for the journey home. (B)



ENQUIRIES & BOOKINGS

For further information or to secure a place, please contact **Jamal Fairbrother** on 9235 0023 or 1800 639 699 (outside Sydney) or email: jamal@academytravel.com.au