CULTURE

The culture of Saudi Arabia is a rich one that has been shaped by its Islamic heritage, its historical role as an ancient trade center, and its Bedouin traditions. Saudi society has experienced tremendous development over the past several decades, and the Saudi people have taken their values and traditions and adapted them to the modern world.

The Crossroads of the World

Located at the center of important ancient trade routes, the Arab people were enriched by many different civilizations. As early as 3000 BC, Arab merchants were part of a far-reaching trade network that extended to south Asia, the Mediterranean and Egypt.

They served as a vital link between India and the Far East on one side, and Byzantium and the Mediterranean lands on the other.

The introduction of Islam in the 7th century AD further defined the region’s culture. Within a century of its birth in the Arabian Peninsula, Islam had spread west to the Atlantic Ocean and east to India and China. It fostered a dynamic period of great learning in culture, science, philosophy and the arts known as the Islamic “Golden Age.”

Every year for the past 14 centuries, Muslim pilgrims from around the world have traveled to holy sites in Makkah and Madinah, further enriching the region’s culture. The pilgrims brought ivory from Africa and carpets from the East, and took local goods back to their homelands.

When the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was formed in 1932, King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman Al-Saud dedicated himself to preserving Arab and Islamic traditions and culture, and his sons and successors have done the same.

Arab and Islamic Traditions

Saudi traditions are rooted in Islamic teachings and Arab customs, which Saudis learn about at an early age from their families and in schools. The highlights of the year are the holy month of Ramadan and the Hajj (pilgrimage) season, and the holidays that
follow them. The holy month of Ramadan, during which Muslims fast from dawn to dusk, culminates with the Eid-Al-Fitr holiday, in which it is customary to buy presents and clothes for children and visit friends and relatives.

The other highlight is the Hajj season, during which millions of Muslim pilgrims from around the world come to Makkah. The Hajj season concludes with the Eid Al-Adha holiday, in which it is traditional for families to slaughter a sheep or goat in memory of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son.

Arab traditions also play an important role in Saudi life. These age-old traditions have evolved over the millennia and are highly regarded. They include generosity and hospitality, which every Saudi family offers to strangers, friends, and family.

The simplest expression of hospitality is coffee – even its preparation is an intricate cultural tradition, and it is often served in small cups along with dates and sweets. Another gesture of hospitality is the burning of incense (oud) to welcome guests.

**Dress**

Saudis prefer traditional clothes to Western styles of dress, and generally wear modern adaptations of age-old designs. The loose, flowing traditional garments are practical for the Kingdom’s hot, windswept climate and in keeping with the Islamic ideal of modesty.
Men wear an ankle-length shirt of wool or cotton known as a thawb. On their heads, they wear a large square of cotton (ghutra) that is folded diagonally over a skullcap (kufiyyah), and held in place with a cord circlet (igaal). The flowing, full-length outer cloak (bisht), generally made of wool or camel hair, completes the outfit. In the old days, the bisht was also used as a blanket while traveling.

Women customarily wear a black outer cloak (abaya) over their dress, which may well be modern in style. On their heads, Saudi women traditionally wear a shayla – a black, gauzy scarf that is wrapped around the head and secured with circlets, hats or jewelry. Traditional dress is often richly decorated with coins, sequins or brightly colored fabric appliqués.

Some Saudi women wear veils made of sheer material. The practice of wearing a veil is an ancient one that dates back at least two millennia before the advent of Islam. In a harsh desert environment, a thin veil provides protection from exposure to the sun, which can damage the skin and eyes. Today, a veil is also a sign of modesty and virtue.

**Jewelry**

Jewelry has been an essential part of Arabian dress for thousands of years. More than just personal decoration, jewelry symbolized social and economic status. For the migrant Bedouins, it was also a form of wealth and security that could be transported easily.

Traditional jewelry was mostly made of silver, although gold was also used. Jewelers used stones such as turquoise, garnets and amber from the Kingdom’s rich mines, and pearls and coral from the coastal areas. Tiny bells, coins and chains were also used for decoration. Designs primarily evolved from Islamic calligraphy and motifs, and featured intricate patterns of geometric shapes, leaves, crescents and flowers.

Today, Saudi women still receive gifts of jewelry from their husbands when they marry or have children. Unlike their ancestors – who received large amounts of bracelets, rings, earrings and necklaces as part of their dowry – modern Saudi women wear jewelry in traditional and contemporary designs with a variety of precious metals. Solid gold bracelets remain a traditional gift for girls.
Folk Music and Dance

A living piece of the country’s history, Saudi folk music has been shaped by the nomadic Bedouins and the pilgrims who brought musical influences from around the world. It varies from region to region – for example, in the Hijaz, the music of al-sihba combines poetry and songs of Arab Andalusia, a region in southern Spain, while the folk music of Makkah and Madinah reflects these two cities’ influences from throughout the Islamic world.

Dance is also popular among Saudis. The national dance is the men’s sword dance known as the ardha. An ancient tradition with its roots in the country’s central area known as the Najd, the ardha is a combination of singers, dancers carrying swords and a poet or narrator. Men carrying swords stand in two lines or a circle, with a poet singing in their midst, and perform the traditional dance.

Poetry

Poetry is especially important to Arab cultural life, and has long been considered one of the highest expressions of literary art.

In the days when the Bedouin were constantly traveling, poetry was primarily an oral tradition. People would gather around a storyteller, who would spin tales of love, bravery, chivalry, war and historic events. This was both entertainment and an oral preservation of history, traditions and social values.
The Holy Qur’an took the Arab love of language and poetry to new levels. It exemplifies the perfect use of the Arabic language, and is generally considered to be the ultimate literary model.

Poetry remains popular among Saudis today. They gather at cultural events, notably the Jenadriyah National Culture and Heritage Festival, and avidly read the works of established poets that are printed in Saudi Arabia every year. There is also a popular televised poetry competition.

**Calligraphy**

Dating back 1,400 years to the first century of Islam, calligraphy is a revered art in Saudi Arabia. Because its primary subject matter has historically been the Holy Qur’an, calligraphy is considered to be the quintessential Islamic art form. It is a dominant theme in metalwork, ceramics, glass, textiles, painting and sculpture in Saudi Arabia and the Muslim world. Today, Saudi museums collect and display rare manuscripts, and organizations hold competitions to encourage new generations of artists.

**Architecture**

Historically, building designs and materials in Saudi Arabia were dictated by the climate, geography and resources available. For example, builders in the central areas preferred adobe for its malleability, availability and insulating qualities. In western Saudi Arabia, stone and red brick were common, while Jeddah’s builders used coral from the Red Sea.

*The King Fahd Stadium in Riyadh is an example of modern Saudi architecture*
Contemporary Saudi architects are increasingly looking to traditional building designs and Islamic concepts for inspiration. This combination of tradition with the ultra modern strengthens the link between a cherished past and an innovative future.

Historic preservation is extremely important to Saudi Arabia. Numerous restoration projects have been undertaken to safeguard the Kingdom’s architectural heritage, including restoring historic buildings and neighborhoods.

As the birthplace of Islam, the Kingdom places special emphasis on preserving its Islamic architectural heritage. Many mosques have been meticulously restored, including the Holy Mosque in Makkah and the Prophet’s Mosque in Madinah.

**Jenadriyah Heritage and Culture Festival**

The most famous cultural event in Saudi Arabia is the Jenadriyah Heritage and Cultural Festival, organized each year by the National Guard. First held in 1985, the festival highlights the Kingdom’s commitment to keeping its traditional culture and crafts alive.

The two-week festival opens with a camel race, and includes almost every aspect of Saudi culture. Artisans such as metalsmiths, basketweavers, potters, blackssmiths and jewelers demonstrate their crafts in small shops, giving visitors a glimpse into the past.

**Cultural Institutions**

A variety of institutions have been established to preserve Saudi Arabia’s cultural heritage. One of the largest is the Department of Culture at the Ministry of Culture and Information, which sponsors a range of programs including literary and drama clubs, folklore classes, library events, arts and crafts.

Other institutions that promote culture are the Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts, which sponsors artists; the King Fahd Library, home to one of the largest collections of rare manuscripts on Islamic and Arab literature; the King Faisal Foundation, which awards annual international prizes in various fields; and the Department of Museums and Antiquities, which oversees the Kingdom’s museums, notably the National Museum in Riyadh.
TOURISM

Saudi Arabia offers both natural and historical wonders, from the mountain resorts of Taif and the majesty of ancient Nabatean tombs to the multicolored coral reefs of the Red Sea.

While Saudi Arabia has been a travel destination for centuries, with millions visiting the Kingdom each year from around the world, most visitors have historically been Muslims undertaking pilgrimages. Today there is a new emphasis on tourism in Saudi Arabia, and in 2000, the Supreme Commission for Tourism (SCT) was established to promote tourism in the Kingdom.

Riyadh

Saudi Arabia’s capital city, Riyadh, is the geographic and cultural hub of the country and its largest city. Once surrounded by mud-brick walls, modern Riyadh is a contemporary city with an ever-expanding network of modern roads, high rises, residential suburbs and industrial parks.

Despite being a modern city, Riyadh retains much of its traditional appeal. The historic Qasr Al-Hokm district has been carefully preserved and renovated to make it the city’s cultural, commercial and social center. A highlight of the district is the historic Masmak fortress, which King Abdulaziz recaptured in 1902 – setting the stage for the foundation of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Another highlight is the Murabba’ Palace, a former home of King Abdulaziz that has been renovated as part of the King Abdulaziz Historical Center in Riyadh.

Twenty miles outside Riyadh lies the walled city of Diriyah, the ancestral home of the Al-Saud family.

Jeddah

The Kingdom’s second largest city, Jeddah is a sparkling, modern commercial center that is considered one of Saudi Arabia’s most vibrant cities. It is alive with more than 300 gardens, and is home to one of the world’s tallest fountains.

One of Jeddah’s loveliest features is the Corniche, promenades that extend miles along the Red Sea with parks, fountains, lakes and kiosks. Its coastal location near the spectacular Red Sea coral reefs makes it a popular spot for water sports.
The city also has a number of beautifully restored historical buildings, including the Naseef House (*Bayt Naseef*), with more than 100 rooms and a broad staircase to allow camels access for unloading.

Jeddah is Saudi Arabia’s main Red Sea port. For centuries, its large harbor has handled ships carrying cargo to ports throughout the world, as well as vessels bringing pilgrims to the Hajj.

**Eastern Province**

The capital of the Eastern Province, Dammam – along with nearby Dhahran and Khobar – is an important hub for shipping, oil, commerce and industry, and the home of the national oil company, Saudi Aramco. It was in Dhahran in 1936 that the famous Dammam #7 oil well was discovered, proving beyond doubt that the Kingdom was sitting on vast oil fields.

Dammam is linked to Bahrain via the King Fahd Causeway, an engineering masterpiece that stretches 15.5 miles across the sea and reclaimed land.

**Asir Province**

Located in the southwestern part of the Kingdom, Asir Province is an extensive region of steep mountains, lush greenery and cool breezes.
The picturesque regional capital, Abha, is noted for its brightly colored mud houses built in the traditional style. Residents paint their homes each year, usually in preparation for the *Eids*, the religious holidays that follow *Ramadan* or the *Hajj*.

The Asir National Park, which at 1.1 million acres is larger than the state of Rhode Island, is a paradise for botanists, zoologists and ornithologists who come to study indigenous plants and wildlife. New varieties and species are still being discovered there.

**Taif**

The mountain resort city of Taif is located 5,600 feet above sea level in the southwest region of Saudi Arabia. Its pleasant climate, lush parks, sunny skies and exotic wildlife have long drawn Saudi families to this resort town each summer.

Its largest and most famous public garden is the King Fahd Park, which includes a lake, playgrounds, walking paths, and a mosque. Visitors can also take in the Shubra Palace, the former summer residence of King Abdulaziz and the most famous historical building in the city. Shoppers in Taif can browse its traditional market (souq) for handcrafts, gold, silver, spices, perfumes and other trinkets.

**Makkah and Madinah**

The holy city of Makkah is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad. Millions of pilgrims from around the world visit Makkah each year to perform the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage that is the religious high point of a Muslim’s life. The Holy Mosque in Makkah houses Islam’s most sacred shrine, the Ka’abah, to which Muslims around the world turn in prayer five times a day.

Muslims are drawn to Madinah not as a religious duty as with Makkah, but out of love and respect for God’s last Prophet, who established the first Islamic community there. Madinah is also where the Prophet Muhammad spent the last years of his life, and where he and many of his companions are buried. The city is home to the Prophet’s Mosque, another of Islam’s holiest sites.

Both Makkah and Madinah are open only to Muslim visitors.
Najran

In the ancient trading center of Najran, the capital of Najran Province, old and new buildings stand side by side, giving the oasis city a special charm.

Visitors can enjoy several museums, including the ruins of the Al-Ukhdood settlement, a former commercial center that thrived from 500 BC to the 10th century AD.

Al-An Palace, a former governor’s residence, is a remarkable example of local architecture with its circular towers with white ramparts. For shoppers, Najran’s souq (market) is known for its traditional crafts such as colorful baskets, leather products and old Bedouin silver jewelry.

Also of interest is the Al-Madik Dam in Najran Province, the second largest dam in Saudi Arabia. It has become a tourist attraction with parks at each end and a variety of palms, flowering shrubs and citrus trees.
Hail
The historic oasis of Hail, with its expansive boulevards, parks, playgrounds and refreshing climate, regularly draws large numbers of Saudi families.

In ancient times, Hail was a stopping point along the famous Darb Zubaydah caravan route stretching from Mesopotamia, Persia and Central Asia to Makkah and Madinah. Built 12 centuries ago and named after the wife of the Abbasid Caliph Harun Al-Rashid (763-809 AD), the caravan route included hundreds of wells and cisterns. Remnants of these can still be seen in Hail today.

Al-Jouf
Located in the northern part of Saudi Arabia, Al-Jouf is famous for its ancient ruins, which show evidence of the presence of Assyrians and Nabateans in the region. The city was an important crossroads for traders heading into the Arabian Peninsula from Iraq and Syria.

Al-Jouf also has a special significance in Islamic history. Following its conquest by Muslims in the third year of the Hijrah (the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Makkah to Madinah in 622 AD), Al-Jouf became a staging post for Muslim armies setting out to spread the message of Islam.
RECREATION

Saudis enjoy a wide range of leisure activities. Families can relax at hundreds of parks, campsites, picnic grounds and other facilities throughout the country. Long stretches of coast and spectacular coral reefs make water sports such as snorkeling and wind surfing easily accessible. In addition, the Kingdom has a network of national parks and preserves so that visitors can observe protected wildlife and ecosystems.

Parks and Preserves

The crown jewel of Saudi Arabia’s national parks system is the 1.1 million acre Asir National Park. Visitors can hike, camp, climb hills and other outdoor activities in this cool, green paradise. The Kingdom’s largest preserve is Al-Khunfah, where visitors can take in spectacular views and observe wildlife such as gazelles and oryx in their natural habitat.

In the cities, people can relax in hundreds of urban parks. Riyadh – which derives its name from the Arabic word for garden, rowdhah – has 50 public parks. The waterfront corniches of Jeddah and Dammam are also popular places for picnics, swimming, fishing and other watersports.

Camping

Camping is a popular activity among Saudis. Families pitch tents in the middle of the desert, along the coast or in one of the Kingdom’s parks, and enjoy the beauty of nature. These camping trips are popular during the Eid holidays and for family reunions, especially after the rainy season when the desert blooms.

A beachfront restaurant in Jeddah offers magnificent views of the Red Sea
Both traditional and modern sports are popular in Saudi Arabia. The people of the Arabian Peninsula have enjoyed sports for thousands of years, including horse and camel racing, falconry and hunting with hounds. Today, modern sports are also popular – especially soccer.

A special effort has been made to encourage sports and make them accessible to the public. Hundreds of facilities have been established throughout the Kingdom so that all Saudis can exercise regularly or enjoy popular spectator sports. In addition, all levels of the Saudi education system – from kindergarten through university – emphasize the importance of sports.

**Traditional Sports**

Horse racing was, and remains today, one of the most popular sporting events in Saudi Arabia. Locals have for centuries bred the animals for racing and transportation. The famous Arabian horse has a bloodline that dates back thousands of years, and is one of the world’s most sought-after breeds. There are modern racetracks in the Kingdom, although betting is prohibited.

Camel racing is also a popular traditional sport. Traditionally the desert sport of Bedouins, camel racing is a major spectacle. In the past, races involved thousands of
camels speeding across the open desert. Today, the rules have been modified for modern racetracks, and camel races are held every Monday during the winter at the stadium in Riyadh.

Other traditional sports include hunting with hounds and falconry. The swift saluki hound, named for an ancient city in southern Arabia, is generally considered by historians to be the world’s oldest domesticated dog. Falconry in the Kingdom today is carefully regulated in order to protect the game fowl that is the falcon’s traditional prey.

**Modern Sports**

Soccer is by far the most popular modern sport in Saudi Arabia. Saudis of all ages have taken the game to heart, from children scrimmaging on playgrounds to international matches battled out in spectacular modern stadiums.

There is a professional Saudi soccer league that is wildly popular among Saudis. Friends and families often gather to cheer on their favorite teams, both on television and in stadiums. The highlight of the Saudi soccer league is its championship tournament known as the King’s Cup. Fans also avidly follow the Saudi Arabian national soccer team in World Cup competition.

In addition to soccer, other organized sports have gained a following among Saudis, including volleyball, gymnastics, swimming and basketball.
Water sports are also popular. Saudi Arabia’s coastal areas are home to some of the world’s most beautiful living coral reefs, making the area a paradise for divers and snorkelers. The Red Sea also offers some of the world’s best deep-sea fishing. Other water sports include wind surfing, sailing, and waterskiing.

Saudi Arabia has a number of first-class golf courses. American expatriates introduced golf to Saudi Arabia in the late 1940s when they created a course in the sand near Dhahran. They mixed oil with the sand to keep the course from blowing away, a method that is still used in the Kingdom. Today, there are lush, green courses in Saudi Arabia that look like they belong in the tropics.

The Kingdom is also home to several Little League baseball teams, one of which has qualified over a dozen times for the Little League Baseball World Series in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

**Sports Facilities**
The Kingdom has a number of different types of sports facilities, ranging from major sports complexes to neighborhood facilities and clubs.

The huge sports complexes, called Sports Cities, are located in large population centers. Each complex has a stadium that can seat between 10,000 and 60,000 people,
an indoor stadium seating 5,000, Olympic-size swimming pools, indoor and outdoor courts, playgrounds, conference halls, and sports medicine clinics.

Smaller than the Sports Cities, neighborhood sports facilities and playgrounds were built in large urban areas so that young Saudis can play sports like basketball and volleyball near their homes. These centers offer parks, open spaces, and facilities for indoor activities.

Local sports clubs are located in all cities and towns. They offer a range of facilities for different sports, including soccer fields, indoor and outdoor courts, swimming pools, playgrounds, recreational areas and accommodations for youth camps. These clubs organize local events throughout the year.

**Regional and International Competition**

The Kingdom’s extensive sports programs have dramatically improved the quality of Saudi athletes. Since 1972, national teams have proudly represented the Kingdom in an increasing number of regional and international competitions. For example, the Saudi soccer team made its first appearance in the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, and has qualified several times for the World Cup.