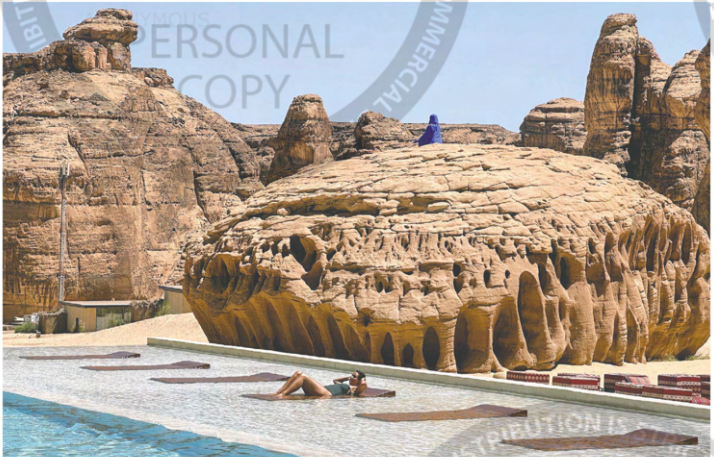


TRAVEL

Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, Hegra is the crown jewel of a remarkable zone of archeological wonders, otherworldly landscapes and artistic inspiration called AlUla that has just begun to welcome the outside world. **Mark Sissons**



Nestled within an ancient oasis in Saudi Arabia's Ashar Valley, Habitas AlUla offers villas and a fantastic pool. **MARK SISSONS**

# EXPLORING THE PETRA OF SAUDI ARABIA

Desert oasis of AlUla melds archeological wonders, modern art and luxury

**MARK SISSONS**

As the hot air balloons soared at sunrise over the Arabian desert, monumental tombs carved into surreal sandstone rock formations appeared far below. This was Hegra, a city founded nearly two thousand years ago by the Nabataeans, the mysterious civilization of Arabic traders that also built Petra in Jordan.

Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, Hegra is the crown jewel of a remarkable zone of archeological wonders, otherworldly landscapes and artistic inspiration called AlUla that has just begun to welcome the outside world.

I was here to experience the AlUla Skies Festival, a celebration of all things airborne. Each morning, dozens of hot air balloons drifted across AlUla's cloudless cerulean skies. By day, hundreds of colourful kites twirled through the air



Also known as Elephant Rock, Jabal Alfi is one of AlUla's most popular natural attractions. **ROYAL COMMISSION FOR ALULA**

and sightseeing helicopters circled over AlUla's landmarks and heritage sites. At night, illuminated drones formed choreographed patterns, the stargazing was stupendous and a pop-up outdoor cinema projected Hollywood movies against a stark canyon backdrop.

Part of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Vision 2030 plan to transform the world's largest oil exporter into a

more diversified global trade and tourism hub, AlUla represents the kingdom's attempt to woo Westerners with a mix of archeological wonders, postmodern art installations, unique and sustainable luxury resort experiences and Arabic hospitality.

Aware of their infamously austere and conservative country's image problem in the West, the people marketing AlUla to the wider world are content to attract only a relatively small number of well-heeled, intellectually curious travellers willing to journey well off the beaten track.

"The fact that Saudi Arabia remains mysterious to a lot of people is an advantage because there is curiosity along with trepidation," said Rami Almoallim, an executive with the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU), which oversees tourism here.

SEE SAUDI ARABIA ON D2

**IF YOU GO**

Air Canada has year-round, non-stop flights from Toronto to Dubai, and will offer non-stop service from Vancouver to Dubai starting in late October. FlyDubai offers a daily connection between Dubai and AlUla. There are no direct flights from Canada to Saudi Arabia.

Canadians over the age of 18 can apply for an eVisa costing around \$160, valid for one year, and offering multiple entries of up to 90 days each.

The Traveling Panther offers a variety of bespoke AlUla itineraries. (1tpanther.com)

**Where to stay**  
Banyan Tree AlUla is a luxury all-villa tented resort featuring two restaurants, a spa and rock pool, yoga classes and more. (banyantree.com/saudi-arabia/alula)

Nearby Habitas AlUla also offers villas, a fantastic pool and an even more Bedouin-like vibe. (ourhabitas.com/alula)

**Where to eat**  
Tawlet Fayza offers traditional Arabic food. Perched on the Harat Viewpoint, OKTO offers upscale Greek cuisine with spectacular views of the AlUla Oasis and the surrounding desert.



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# WHERE PAST, FUTURE INTERSECT



Hot air balloons soar at sunrise over the Arabian desert in AiUla. **MIKE MASSARO**



Banyan Tree AiUla is a luxury all-villa tented resort featuring two restaurants, a spa and rock pool, yoga classes and more. **MADANI SINDI**

## SAUDI ARABIA FROM DI

For millennia, AiUla's verdant valley was an important oasis along the incense trading networks that criss-crossed the Arabian Peninsula, its canopy of palm and citrus groves offering caravan traders, pilgrims and travellers coolness and shelter from the desert heat.

First settled around 5000 BC, the area has been home to layer upon layer of civilizations. The most enigmatic were the mysterious Nabataeans, nomads whose desert survival skills and forays into trading extended as far as India and China, where they dealt in spices,

gold, incense, exotic animals, ivory, perfumes and much more. More than 90 of their mammoth rock-cut tombs remain remarkably well preserved at Hegra amid wind-carved canyons, red-rock cliffs, giant boulders and fantastic sandstone formations surrounded by the desolate Hijaz Mountains and a sea of sand.

Unlike Petra, which now receives nearly a million visitors per year, Hegra remained virtually unknown outside Saudi Arabia before the kingdom started issuing tourist visas for non-Muslim visitors in 2019.

On the day I visited, only a handful

of other visitors wandered among the elaborate facades marking the entrances to the tombs of wealthy Nabataeans. Above one, an inscription carved in stone read: "May the lord of the world curse upon anyone who disturbs this tomb or open it."

Elsewhere around this still-thriving oasis, which produces 90,000 tonnes of dates annually from more than two million date palm trees, were more reminders of a distant past. At a site dating back to the kingdom of Dadan, which predated the Nabataeans by centuries, two pairs of lions cut into the cliffs kept an eternal vigil.

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The labyrinth of tightly packed streets and mud-brick buildings that makes up AIULA's Old Town offered a fascinating glimpse of life here a millennium ago. Depictions of humans, camels, livestock, harps, chariots and hunting and battle scenes graced the walls of AIULA's numerous rock art trails. And in a valley called Jabal Ikmah, more than 500 rock inscriptions in more than 10 different languages predating Arabic chronicled life across the ages.

"When I feel stressed, I come to Jabal Ikmah and find a sense of calm, surrounded by these inscriptions, feeling connected to my past," said Sulaiman Aljwayhil, who works for the RCU.

#### MODERN ARTROPOLIS

The past and future intersect in AIULA, with its legacy of cross-cultural exchange and ambitious plan to become an important modern-art melting pot. Launched in 2020, Desert X AIULA, an offshoot of the original contemporary art exhibition first held in Southern California's Coachella Valley, featured monumental works by Saudi and international artists set amid breathtaking desert landscapes.

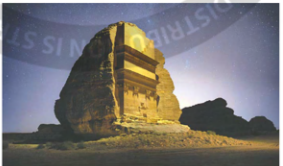
"Everyone is hungry for the best in contemporary art — and Desert X AIULA is feeding that appetite in an unprecedented way," said Raneem Farsi, co-artistic director of Desert X.

Equally impressive was Maraya, which means mirror or reflection in Arabic, the largest mirrored structure in the world. Nearly invisible from a distance amid the shimmering heat rising from AIULA's landscape, Maraya is the stunning centerpiece of AIULA's growing cultural scene, hosting performances from renowned performers such as Alicia Keys, Andrea Bocelli and Cheb Khaled, as well as pop-up art events and longer term exhibits like Fame: Andy Warhol in AIULA, which showcases the iconic artist's fascination with celebrity.

Elsewhere in AIULA, art of a more traditional kind is practised in places like Madrasat Addehara, Saudi Arabia's first girls' school, which opened in 1964. Today, it is an arts and handicrafts hub offering a range of workshops and



The Oasis of AIULA is a lush haven in the midst of the windswept Saudi Arabian desert. MARK SISSONS



Elaborate facades mark the entrances to the tombs of wealthy Nabataeans in Hegra. HOTEL COMMISSION FOR AIULA

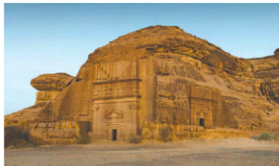
classes. Here, dozens of local women, most dressed in the traditional abaya — a long, loose gown with a black head scarf or niqab in public places — study traditional crafts like jewelry, pottery, wicker and ceramics-making under the tutelage of international artists in residence.

"Once you've learned the craft, you're then got to figure out how to turn it into a viable business,"

says Desmond Lazaro, a visiting artist and administrator. "We can teach them how to get a job at the end of it as a way of making a living."

#### ADVENTURE HUB

Adventure is also part of the new mix. From zip-lining and dune buggy excursions to Arabian horseback rides, mountain biking and trekking, the region is already



Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, Hegra's well preserved tombs are set in a dramatic desert landscape. ALI ALSHUKRIBANI

drawing active travellers keen to experience the Saudi desert.

One day, I explored the wild beauty of the Sharaan Nature Reserve on a vintage 4x4 safari, spotting endemic animals like Nubian ibex and Idmi gazelles. That evening, AIULA's remote location, clear skies, and an abundance of excellent lookout points made it a superb destination for some astrotourism.

As Saudi Arabia continues on its path toward opening up, AIULA is well positioned to become the epicentre of the kingdom's attempt to engage with the world through its extraordinarily well-preserved heritage and natural beauty.

Visit [experienceaulla.com](http://experienceaulla.com) for more information. The writer was hosted by Experience AIULA. This story was not vetted by the organization before publication.

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