

# TOURIOSITY®

T R A V E L M A G

*Desert*  
Touriosity

*25 Deserts*  
*around the world*



India



Turkmenistan



Oman



Saudi Arabia



UAE



Egypt



Morocco



Mongolia



Glimpses of all deserts of the world



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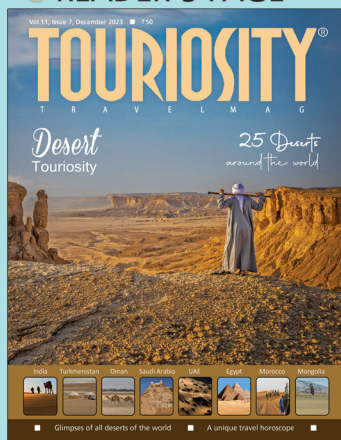
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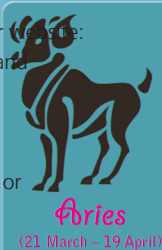
### Touriosity Travelmag December 2022 Issue

Dear Reader,

For all the wonderful experiences with us, please feel free to contact us with your write ups, articles, anecdotes, photos and others. Good pictures will be acknowledged and published in the Reader's Click section. For the Travel Humour section, you can send us any travel related funny photos or sketches.

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**Aries**  
(21 March – 19 April)

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Ali, the driver, posing at the Edge of the World in Saudi Arabia.

Photo by Grete Howard, UK



**Gemini**  
(21 May – 20 June)

*The views and opinions expressed in the articles are solely those of the writers and contributors. Touriosity Travelmag is not responsible for any personal views expressed by the authors or contributors.*



*This issue of Touriosity is dedicated to deserts and it is a true repository of desert attractions around the world. The issue is like an encyclopedia of deserts and includes glimpses of all the 25 deserts of the world and their attractions with pictures and map. From the lesser known Syrian Desert and Chihuahuan Desert to the oft-visited Gobi, Sahara and Arabian Deserts, this issue provides a peek into many beautiful dunes. There are some articles about unusual desert destinations, some of these being more pictorial in nature.*



**Taurus**  
(20 April – 20 May)



**Cancer**  
(21 June – 21 July)



This is that time of the year that reminds us of the sun. So we decided to do a theme on deserts around the world. The unique landform of deserts have aroused the curiosity of mankind since time immemorial. As for me personally, nothing beckons me as much as deserts do. And I have been extremely lucky to have lived and worked in some very beautiful desert locations around the world. From where I stayed in the Thar desert of Rajasthan and Gujarat, the Pakistan border was close by. For miles from there there were no settlements, "but just sand and lands. I would make sure to pack my bags at the slightest chance I got and set off to explore the many things the vast wasteland had to offer. Later on I also lived and worked in Dubai for some time that gave me more chances to explore the dunes.

## AN APPEAL TO TOURISTS

Deserts around the world beckon us and provide us with many attractions to indulge in. The issue lists many of such attractions for the readers. However, the dunes come with inherent risks as well. Quick sand, poisonous reptiles, remoteness of locations from settlements and unavailability of food and water are some of the risks known to us. There are also dangerous sports options available here. As tourists, it is important for us to take care. **LET US BE RESPONSIBLE TOURISTS!**

Besides the natural beauty of the deserts, there are also a number of civilisations that grew up here. With rich history ascribed to it, the people and the associated culture, their ways of life, homes, festivals, cuisines are unique and worth exploring. The Inuits of the Arctic, the tribes of the Kalahari, the villages of Thar and their festivities, all have so many things to see about them. I am sure our readers will be delighted to see and read this issue.

In this issue, there is an elaborate snapshots article on all the 25 deserts of the world with details about what to see in each of them. There are glimpses from some of the most unusual desert nations of the world. There is also an article on Mali and its adobe brick buildings that are inspired by the desert around. The article on Saudi Arabia by Greta Howard provides a list of the most unusual locations in a country that fairly has explored till date.

Hence I have been able to do justice to this wonderful geographical landform, which has its own charm, mystery and stories. Always intrigued, isn't it?

We hope our readers will find pleasure in turning the pages of this issue cover to cover. Please do send us your thoughts, feedback and suggestions at [tmag\\_editorial@gmail.com](mailto:tmag_editorial@gmail.com) as usual. Also do write to us about your adventures and experiences around the world. Touriosity would be more than happy to publish your stories for the world to read.

Happy dunebashing!

Dr. Pantosh Nandi





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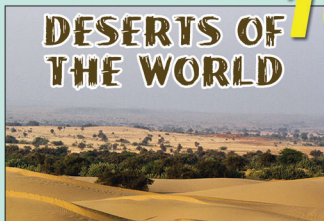


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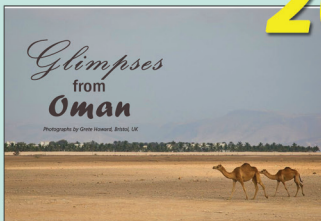




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## Deserts of the World

All the 25 deserts of the world come with a set of uniqueness in terms of terrain, activities, location, weather, culture and cuisine. This article lists the 'must do' things in these deserts.



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## Oman

This photo feature presents the beauty of the Middle Eastern country of Oman through some beautiful captures by Grete Howard during her recent trip there.



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## Mali

Mali has a unique Sudano-Sahelian architecture inspired by the Sahara Desert. Its main component are mud brick buildings that has earned it the status of a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



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## Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia aspires to find a place in the Top 10 tourist destinations in the world by 2030. If you fancy the feeling of pioneering travel, now is the time to visit here, before mainstream tourists do.

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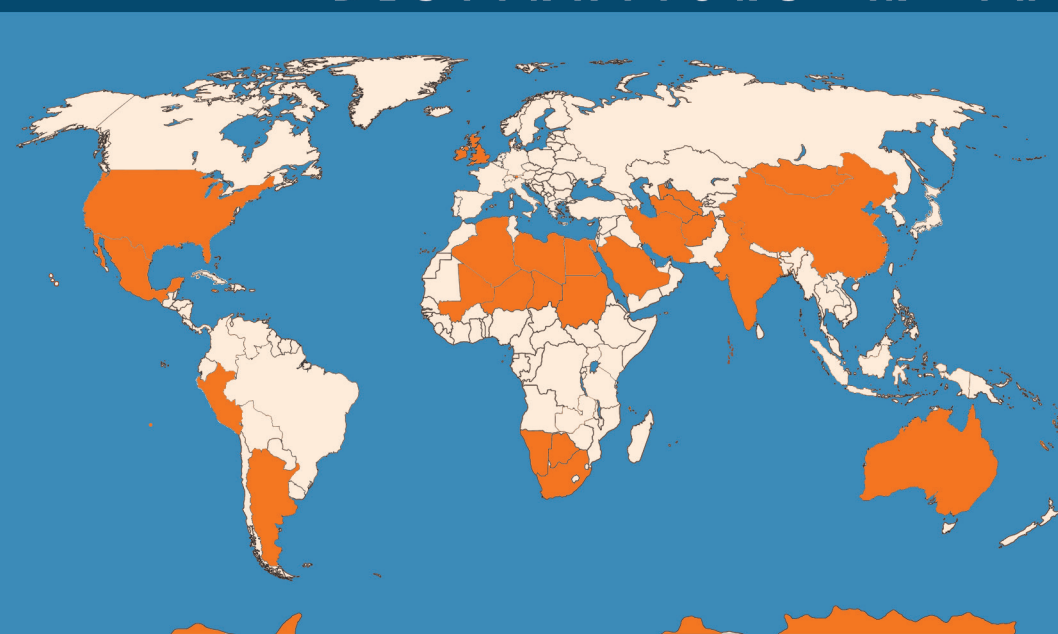
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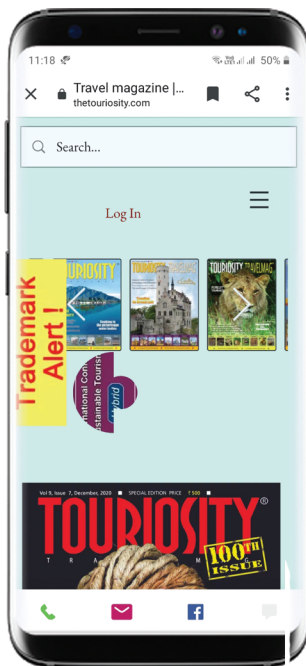
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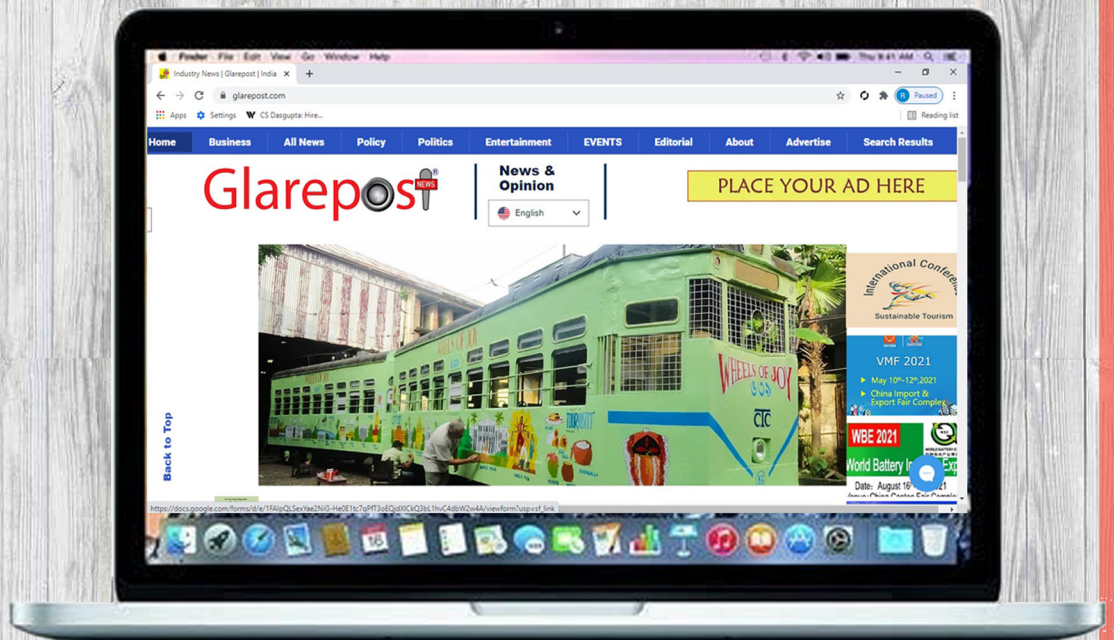
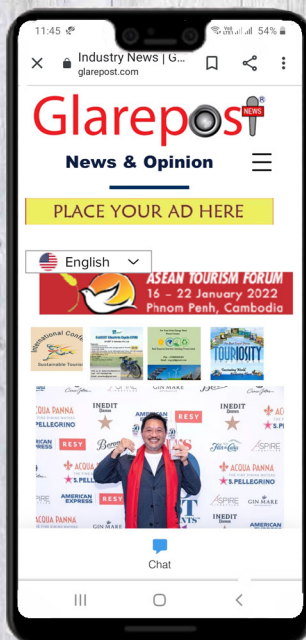




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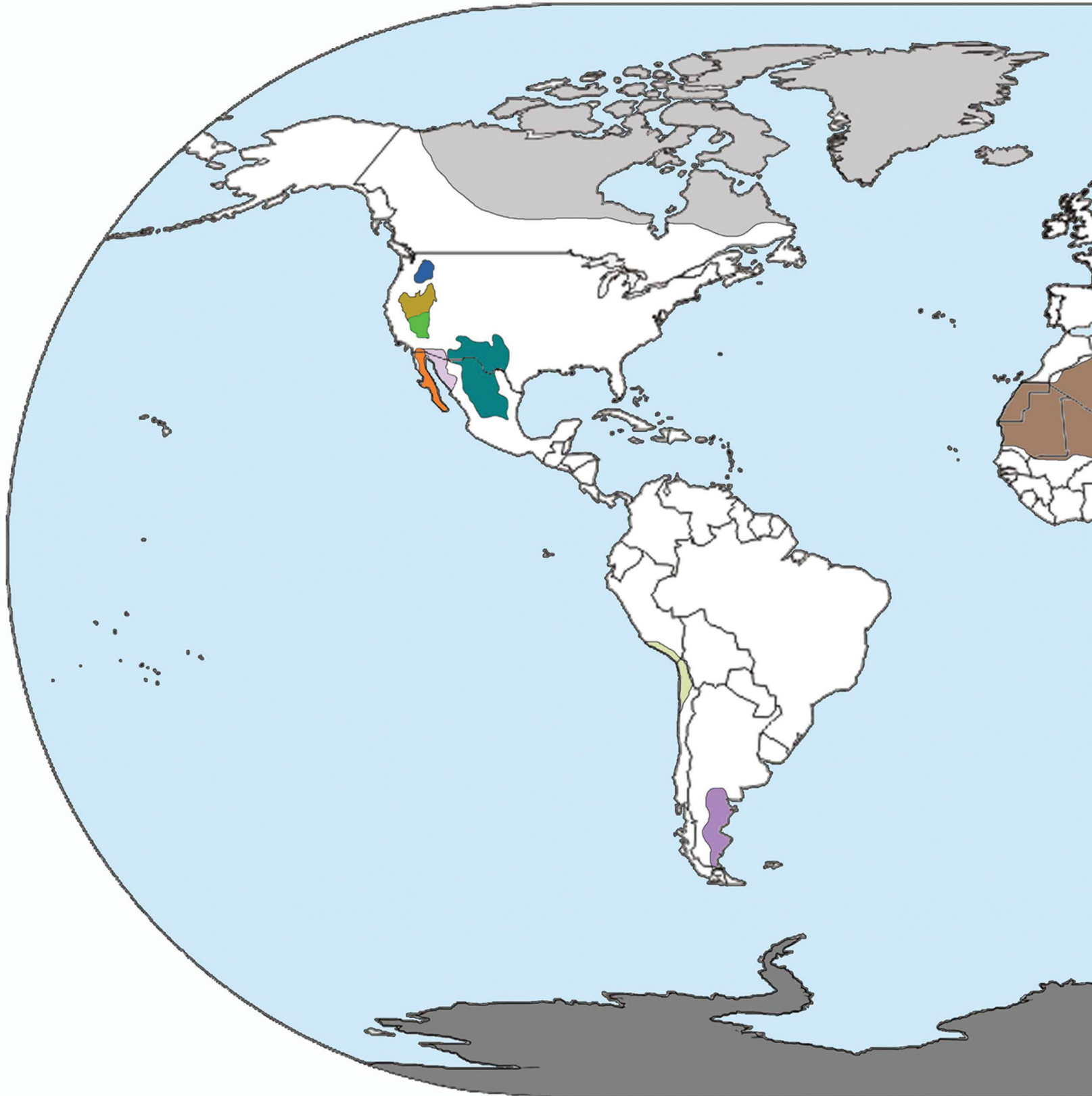


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# TOURIOSITY Deserts



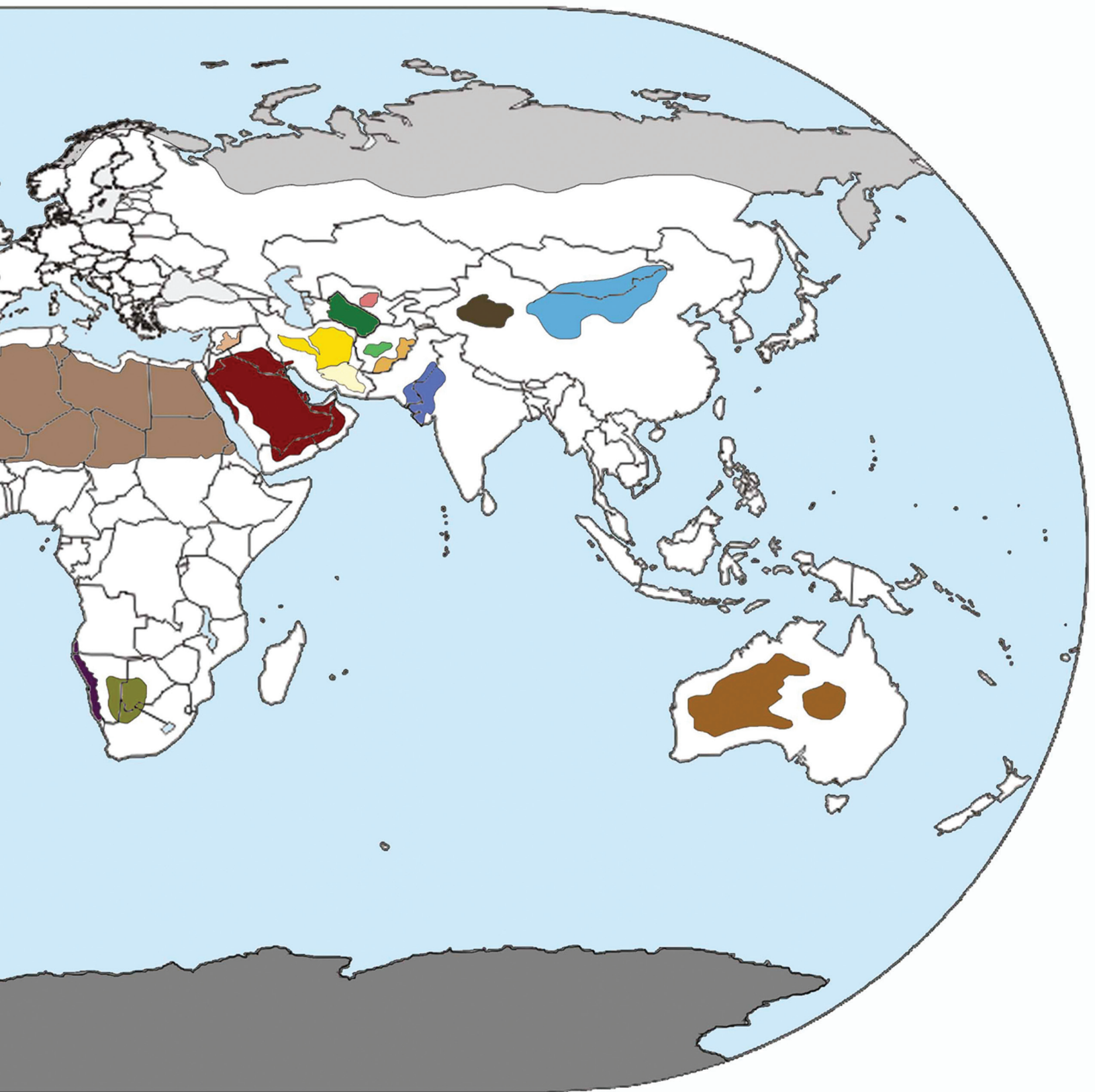
Arctic Desert  
Antarctic Desert  
Sahara Desert  
Australian Desert  
Arabian Desert  
Kalahari Desert

Syrian Desert  
Chihuahuan Desert  
Sonoran Desert  
Thar Desert  
Dasht-e Margo  
Registan Desert

Mojave Desert



# of the World



Dasht-e Kavir  
Dasht-e Loot  
Gobi Desert  
Patagonian Desert  
Great Basin  
Karakum Desert

Colorado Desert  
Kyzylkum Desert  
Taklamakan Desert  
Columbia Basin  
Atacama Desert  
Namib Desert





# DESERTS OF THE WORLD



*Thar Desert*



This snapshot lists for our readers the various attractions across all the 25 deserts of the world in alphabetical order. This should be your master list of deserts for a lifetime.

### Antarctic Desert

Antarctica, the whole continent, is a desert owing to its arid nature. It is one of the biggest deserts in the world. The fauna and breath-taking landscapes of Antarctica attracts the traveller. There are also a number of activities that can be done here like watching penguins closely, swimming at the Deception Bay, taking a Zodiac cruise, sending a postcard from the southernmost post office of the world, Port Lockroy in Antarctica, admiring the wildlife of South Pole (like seals, penguins, albatrosses and whales) at their best in their natural icy habitat, kayaking and camping under the blue sky and on the white snow, seeing the Southern Lights or Aurora Australis at a temperature of -50 degrees and so on.

### Arabian Desert

It is a vast desert area in Western Asia that stretches across the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, Oman, Jordan and Iraq and most of the Arabian Peninsula. It is the third largest desert of the world. It has a large number of attractions and is a major attraction for tourists in this region. Dune bashing, camel riding, sand boarding, Quad Biking, taking a Land Rover safari or a helicopter or a hot air balloon ride, witnessing cultural programmes or a falcon show are some of the activities to indulge in.

### Arctic Desert

It is the northernmost point in the world. Due to lack of vegetation, it can be classified into a desert, but a cold Tundra desert that is covered with frost permanently. The polar region is a destination for spotting the best northern lights or the Aurora Borealis, the most picturesque landscapes and Arctic wildlife. The area consist of some of the northernmost parts of countries like US (Alaska), Finland, Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Russia, Canada and the Arctic Ocean. The best places to see the dancing waves of lights are almost all the countries included in the Arctic circle – Finland, Iceland, Northern Canada, Russia and so on. However, it can get uncomfortably cold at night. It also has to be a clear night, so keeping a track on weather forecasts is imperative before planning to see the lights. Whale watching, exploring the petroglyphs left behind by the early man, sighting the Polar Bear, the largest land carnivores, experiencing the indigenous cultures like the Inuits, exploring the Viking past, kayaking, bird watching, exploring the massive icebergs and ski mountaineering are some of the other activities to engage in.

### Atacama Desert

The Atacama Desert is a desert plateau in South America covering a 1000 km strip of land on the Pacific coast, west of the Andes Mountain. Stargazing, viewing sunsets at the Coyote lookout point located above the Moon Valley, visiting the El Tatio geyser nested among the Andes Mountains, sighting the Vicuna, a rare endangered desert species, taking a ride along the 30,000 kilometres long Pan American Highway across amazing views through deserts, forests and higlands, visiting the Los Flamencos National Reserve, the Death Valley National Park, Valley of the Moon, Salar de Atacama, the largest salt plain in the Atacama desert, the famous Rainbow Valley or the Licancabur volcano at San Pedro, relaxing



*Antarctic Desert*



*Arabian Desert*



*Arctic Desert*



*Atacama Desert*





*Australian Desert*

at the salty Cejar Lagoon or sighting the flying flamingos are some of the other activities to engage in at Atacama.

### Australian Desert

This desert covers 18% area of the Australian mainland and is the fourth largest desert in the world. It provides stunning landscapes and a number of activities and attractions including the sand dunes of Great Victoria Desert and Great Victoria Desert Nature Reserve, Nullarbor National Park and Flora and Fauna Conservation Park, the Great Sandy Desert with the Rudall River National Park and Ulur-Kata Tjuta National Park where the famous Ayers Rock is located. The other smaller deserts within its area are the Tanami Desert, the Simpson Desert, the Gibson Desert, the Little Sandy Desert, the Strzelecki Desert, Sturt Stony Desert, Tirari Desert and the Pedirka Desert.

### Chihuahuan Desert

This is a desert that stretches over parts of northern Mexico and southern United States. It is also significant for being an eco-region with the presence of diverse flora and fauna. The region includes the following attractions: Fort Davis National Historic Site, the Davis Mountains State Park that abodes white winged doves, white tailed deer and rock squirrels, the Wild Rose Art Gallery, the Rattlers and Reptiles museum with an amazing collection of live rattlesnakes and other desert animals, the Jeff Davis County Library and the 4.5 mile long Madera Canyon Hiking Trail.



*Chihuahuan Desert*

### Colombia Basin

The Colombia Basin is an arid zone in Colombia. The Tatacoa Desert is an important part of the Colombia Basin. It has two parts – The Red Desert in Central Colombia and the Grey Desert. Things to do here include visiting the Moore Observatory, taking a bike tour, visiting the Red Desert, the Villavieja Park or the Los Hoyos area for spectacular landscapes and experiencing the rocky Grey Desert filled with stoney outcrops and surreal rock formations giving impressions of walking on the moon.



*Colombia Basin*

### Colorado Plateau Desert

This is a physiographic and high desert region located in the United States. The region also has scattered forest areas and the famous Grand Canyon lies close by which is also the reason why the desert's landscape looks similar to that of the Grand Canyon. The Rocky Mountain National Park is one of the most visited national parks here. With majestic peaks in every direction, wildlife roaming the valleys and some of the most incredible outdoor adventures on earth, it is no wonder that millions flock to the park each year. Other attractions here include renowned ski resorts, the Mesa Verde National Park that preserves and interprets the archaeological heritage of the Ancestral Pueblo people who made it their home for over 700 years, from 600 to 1300 AD (the park protects nearly 5000 known archaeological sites), the Garden of the Gods Park which is a registered National Natural Landmark with 300 towering sandstone rock formations, the Pikes Peak in Pike National Forest with hiking, biking, horseback riding, camping, picnicking, fishing, boating and off-highway travel facilities, the San Juan Skyway Scenic Byway and the Million Dollar Highway (the stretch from Silverton to Ouray of the Skyway is called the 'Million Dollar Highway'), the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness, the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Pre-



*Colorado Plateau*



serve, the Mount Evans Scenic Byway (the highest paved road in North America), the Colorado National Monument, the Dinosaur National Monument and so on.

### Dasht-e Loot

Dasht-e Loot or the Lut desert is located in Iran. The word means 'Emptiness Plain' and refers to the arid desert land. It is one of the world's driest and hottest areas. The best way to do an Iranian desert tour is by taking a 4x4 vehicle safari. These are available as packages by various tour operators. It takes one through ancient Persian villages providing a taste of the Persian cultures, as well as caves in the desert. The hottest part of this desert is Gandom Beryan, which is a dark plateau covered in dark lava. It recorded over 70 degrees in 2003 and 2009. In 2016, this desert was given the status of UNESCO World Heritage Site due to its unique sand formations and ridges called Kaluts. This desert has the longest Kalut system in the world. It also has rock paintings and unique sand dunes. The winds here are said to sculpt the dunes in the shape of stars and polygons. The view of these wind-sculpted star dunes look otherworldly and are a must see attraction. A small collection of meteorites has been discovered in Lut desert and the same is known as the 'Valley of Meteorites'. It lies 100 km from the village of Deh Salm

### Dasht-e Margo Desert

Dasht-e Margo is a desert in Afghanistan and is also known as the desert of death because one cannot survive for long in this region. The desert consists of large sand masses, rocky clay plains, with solonchaks (salt marshes), takirs (dried and cracked salt flats) and a few oases. Dasht-e Margo is majorly situated in the provinces of Helmand and Nimruz. The Helmand River is fed by the Hindukush glaciers, and is the largest watershed. There are also some picturesque freshwater lakes that one can explore.

### Dasht-e Kavir

Dasht-e Kavir is an Iranian desert. It means the 'Great Salt desert'. The Masjed-e Jameh or the Jameh mosque of Isfahan is a grand Persian mosque in Iran and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. It is a wonderful example of Persian architecture and grandeur. There are beautiful domes and decorative gates in this mosque in the Kavir desert. Narin Ghale is a dilapidating castle in Bayazeh in the Kavir desert. The crumbling precipices of the mansion add a lot of old world charm to the desert village of Bayazeh. An interesting attraction here is the Kavir Ethnology Museum housed in a wonderful mansion in Na'in. It has majestic work of painted ceilings and decorative artworks. The small museum shows the rich ethnological history of Persia.

### Gobi Desert

This arid desert stretches across China and Mongolia and is said to have singing sand dunes. It is home to some rare and endangered animals including the snow leopard. Dinosaur fossils have also been unearthed from here. Yurt facilities are available there in the Gobi Desert for experiencing the nomadic style of living like milking a cow or goat, learning to make Mongolian traditional food and playing traditional games. Khongor sand dune, one of the largest and most spectacular sand dunes, is 7-8 km wide and about 180 km long. The dunes rise up







**Great Basin**

between a spur of the Altai Mountains to the south, and springs, oases and lush green valley on the north. Climbing the dunes is breath-taking, not only for the view at the top, the dunes are also said to make a singing sound while climbing. Bayanzag red sand cliffs, better known as 'flaming cliffs' due to their ochre and red colours, are located about 100 km to the northwest of Dalanzadgad. Gobi is the perfect place to experience the fun of camel riding as they walk slowly and gently, and one can sit comfortably between the two humps of the Bactrian camels. With its iconic sand dunes, ice canyon and stunning mountain vistas, Gurban Saikhan National Park is understandably one of Mongolia's most popular national parks. Most travellers see only a fraction of it, sticking to the main sites. But with more time, it is possible to drive to the remote western area whose eerie landscape is so lacking in life that you may feel like having landed on Mars.

#### **Great Basin Desert**

Located in the United States in the states of Nevada, Utah, California, Idaho and Oregon, this is the tenth largest desert in the world. The Lehman Caves National Monument with their unique geology and ecology is protected in under the ground of the Great Basin National Park. The Island Forest Trail is a self-guided trail in this National Park. It is approximately 0.4 miles long (round trip) and takes around 1/2 hour to complete. Just outside the Lehman Caves at Great Basin National Park is the Mountain View Nature Trail, a short and easy informative trail that takes visitors through a pinyon-juniper forest. The trail runs 0.3 miles and has a few species of trees marked with interpretive panels. The scenery is pleasant. The Great Basin is called International Dark Sky Park! On a clear, moonless night, thousands of stars, five of our solar system's eight planets, star clusters, meteors, man-made satellites, Andromeda Galaxy, and the Milky Way can be seen with naked eye. The area boasts some of the darkest night skies in the US. Low humidity and minimal light pollution, combined with high elevation, create a unique window to the universe. A successful trek to the Wheeler Peak, the top of the tallest mountain in the range, through alpine meadows, rewards you with a 360 degree breath-taking view. Other attractions include the Pole Canyon Trail, the Bristlecone Pine Trail, the Baker/Johnson Lake Loop Trail, the Lexington Arch Trail, the Baker Archaeological Site and the Pictograph Cave with paintings by Fremont Indians that lived in the Snake Valley from about 1000 to 1300 BC.

#### **Kalahari Desert**

Stretching over the countries of Namibia, Botswana and South Africa, this semi-arid sandy desert dominates southern Africa. It is not strictly a desert as it receives sufficient rainfall, but the water precipitates leaving the soil dry and thirsty and making it a desert. The diamond ghost town of Sperrgebiet is known as Pomona. This desert is famous for its diamonds and is known for diamond rush in the past. Now the destinations are abandoned. Bogenfels is a rocky arch with one end on the Atlantic Ocean and the other on the African country of Namibia. It is possible to take a 4X4 tour through the desert or go for freewheeling quad bike adventures. Exciting game viewing opportunities occur at sunrise and sunset, and again at night after dinner when the sky shimmers with thousands of stars.

#### **Karakum Desert**

This is a desert located in Central Asia. 70% of this desert lies in the country of Turkmenistan alone. The name means 'black sand' which relates to the black soil of the desert in the layer below the topmost sandy one.

**Kalahari Desert**



**Karakum Desert**



**Kyzylkum Desert**





Often stated to be the remotest part of the world, a drive across the Karakum Desert is worth experiencing. One can hire a 4WD to make the trip. On this journey one comes across a multitude of terrains from the picturesque Yangikala canyon to the vast and imposing Karakum desert. One can also explore the UNESCO ruins of Gonur Depe and Merv. This area has been inhabited since Neolithic times, and can testify to some of the early empires of the world. Some say it is the site of the fifth great ancient civilization, in addition to Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, China and Egypt. An interesting attraction of this desert is the Darvaza gas crater, a large burning hole in central Turkmenistan, just 8 kms from the main road between Ashgabat and Dashoguz. It is often dubbed as the 'Door to Hell'. Located near a village called Derweze, it is a natural gas field that collapsed into an underground cavern. Camping on the Karakum Desert is also a great experience. It is a great idea to camp in the shelter of the sand dunes close to the gas crater in order to enjoy the experience of seeing it at both sunset and sunrise.

### Kyzylkum Desert

Located in Central Asia, this desert spreads over the countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and has reddish sand. The best way to explore the deserts of Kyzylkum is by taking a camel ride through sand dunes and villages. Yurt camps, with all facilities, are located near the Aydar Lake in Kyzylkum. There are about 20 yurts here. A bonfire by the lake, and folk performances under the starry sky is all that the camping is about. Aydarkul Lake, a manmade lake in Kyzylkum desert, is rich in Central Asian migratory birds.

### Mojave Desert

Mojave desert is the driest desert in North America. It spreads across California and Nevada. Lovely sunsets and landscapes make it a perfect travel destination. The Mojave National Preserve is situated in southern California between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. It has singing sand dunes, Joshua tree forests, wildflower carpets and volcanic cinder cones. This national preserve is a whopping 1.6 million acres in land! There are canyons and mountains which contain abandoned mines, homesteads and military outposts. Kelso sand dunes, the ghost town of Kelso, Shadow Valley, Marl Mountains and Cima Cone Lava Beds are some attractions here. Kelso Dunes is the largest sand dune in Mojave. It has eolian sands, made of quartz or feldspar, with migrating dunes, sand sheets and sand ramps. The Joshua Tree National Park is located near San Bernardino and Palm Springs in California. The Park is named so because of the bounty of Joshua trees in it, which is native to the Mojave desert. There are a number of activities one can do here – hiking, camping, birding and even astronomy! Amboy Crater located in Mojave Trails National Park is an extinct cinder cone volcano, located near the Amboy town of California. The volcano is over 80,000 years old with a lava lake inside. Another attraction is the Mount San Jacinto state park with beautiful rock formations and trees. One has to take a wilderness permit to visit the wilderness here, since the plant life is seasonal and survives for a very short time. One can camp out in the open. Winter is the best time to visit as the snowfall lends a different charm to this place.

### Namib Desert

Namib is a coastal desert along the Atlantic coastline of South Africa. It is the oldest desert in the world. The Skeleton desert is a part of the



*Mojave Desert*



*Namib Desert*



*Patagonian Desert*



*Registan Desert*





**Sahara Desert**



**Syrian Desert**



**Sonoran Desert**



**Taklamakan Desert**

Namib desert, where the bones of whales and seals used to wash up to the shore. Namib desert has some of the world's highest sand dunes which provide an opportunity for many activities. One of the most exciting yet calming experiences in the Namib desert is the hot air balloon ride. The hot air balloon soars and sails in the sky over the reddish sand dunes of the Namib desert. It lasts for about 3.5 hours and offers an aerial view of the deserts and the sand dunes. Other activities are horse riding, skydiving in Swakopmund (tandem as well as freefall), sandboarding in the large sand dunes in Swakopmund and Walvis Bay and taking Dolphin cruises in the Walvis Bay lagoon. The dolphins on the Atlantic side eagerly leap out of the water to amuse the bystanders. One should take a boat cruise to see the dolphins more intimately. There are also pelicans, cormorants and flamingos for company! The best way to explore the Namib desert is to take a quad bike safari! It is easy to ride, offers the thrill of cruising up and down the sand dunes and provides a wonderful view of the sandy desert around. The Dune Seven, highest in the area, offers the best quad biking experience. There are a number of wildlife species in the Namib desert. The best ones are available in the Namib Rand Nature Reserve. There are jagged mountains on one side and sand dunes on the other. There are lizards, beetles, spiders, oryx, giraffes, ostrich and many more animals in this area. One can drive around and see these animals up close. The location of the Namib desert makes both sunset and sunrise extra special.

#### **Patagonian Desert**

Also known as Magellanic Steppe, this desert is the eighth largest desert in the world and lies in Argentina and Chile and extends from the Andes to the Atlantic Ocean. This desert is mainly composed of gravel plains and plateaus with sandstone canyons and clay shapes dotting the landscape, sculpted by the desert wind. The prehistoric artwork painted on the walls of this desert cave is not only ancient, but beautiful. There are three distinct styles to be seen, believed to have been created by different people at different time periods. These forms of human art are approximately 10,000 years old. Although the Patagonia desert has a harsh environment, there are many animal and plant species scattered around it. Most of the animals live on the outskirts of the desert due to the abundance of food and less harsh environment. Foxes, mountain cats and pumas are found in abundance. The different regions of the desert have their own characteristics of vegetation.

#### **Registan Desert**

Registan desert in Kandahar and Helmand in Afghanistan is a sandy desert. It is very dry with little vegetation. Although the Helmand river is nearby, life in the Registan desert is very difficult. It is inhabited only by Nomadic people. The desert is characterized by small red sand dunes. The Arghandab river flows through Kandahar city along with the Helmand river. The two rivers have joined to create some shallow lakes in the desert.

#### **Sahara Desert**

Sahara Desert, spanning across North Africa, is the hottest desert in the world. With the most extreme temperatures on both hot and cold side, as well as some of the highest sand dunes, Sahara is a desert with a lot to offer to the traveller. Egypt and Morocco are the best countries to explore the Sahara Desert. Farafra in Egypt is also known as the White



Desert. It is the largest desert in the western desert of Egypt. The chalk rock formations of white or cream colour cover this desert, lending it the name. The desert is mostly inhabited by Bedouins with their fascinating traditions and culture. The breathtaking beauty of the desert is accompanied by a lake and hot springs. The Siwa Oasis in Egypt was home to an Oracle of Ammon in the ancient times. Its ruins are very popular among travellers. It is also known as the oasis of Amun Ra because of the oracle temples of Ammon. The Farafra oasis is a triangle-shaped depression in the white desert. Locally made handicrafts by the Bedouins are very popular here. Roman ruins are also found here around the fortress Qasr el-Farafra. There are hot springs at BirSitta. The unique seaside Bahariya Oasis in Egypt is located in the desert and surrounded by many mountains and springs. In recent times the Golden mummies have been unearthed from Bahariya. Both the White and Black desert are accessible from here. Other attractions here are the UNESCO World Heritage site of Wadi Al Hitan or the valley of whales, the Fayoum Oasis, the Dakhla Oasis, the Temple of Hibis, the Temple of Qasr Dush, Deir El Hagar Temple, Temple of Nadura, Amun Temple Siwa, Temple of Ain El Muftella, Valley of El Haiz, the Cleopatra's Bath natural spring, ancient Roman fortress of Qasr El Labeka, the Gebel Al-Mawta burial ground or the Mountain of the Dead, the Monastery of Saint Paul, the Monastery of Saint Anthony, Al Mizawaka Tombs, the Valley of the Golden Mummies with over 10,000 mummies from Greco Roman era, the man-made Magic Spring oasis in the Dakhla Oasis, the Kharga Oasis, the Mut Ethnographic Museum providing insights in to the lives of ancient people of Egypt, the Merzouga and M'Hamid villages in Morocco and so on. A cruise along the historic Nile River stopping at the right places for a walk through the ancient times is a wonderful way to explore the pyramids of Giza, Luxor, Aswan Dam and Egyptian cuisine.

### Syrian Desert

Also known as Syrian or Jordanian Steppe, this desert stretches over parts of Middle East and is the ninth largest desert in the world. It is a dry, flat desert. It stretches over four countries - Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. There are quite a few ancient ruins in Syria. Palmyra, near Damascus, contains the ruins of a great ancient city. Palmyra is an oasis in the Syrian desert and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. In these ruins, architecture of Persian and Graeco-Roman styles are blended. The Temple of Ba'al, Diocletian's Camp, the Agora, Theatre, other temples and urban quarters are now in ruins. Travellers should take advantage of Syria's vast desert region and embark on an authentic desert safari. Many companies organize tours through this arid region, stopping off at major archaeological sites along the way and camping underneath the stunning Syrian sky. Camping is a possibility when visiting Syria.

### Sonoran Desert

Bordering the Mojave Desert and Colorado Plateau, this desert covers part of the United States and Mexico. It is rich in flora and fauna. A desert hike is one of the best ways to learn about and gain an appreciation for the Sonoran Desert. Several good hiking and walking trails are either in Chandler or a short drive away. There are also plenty of exciting off road / racing-styled adventure in Arizona's Sonoran Desert which cannot be missed. Horseback riding is also available in Sonoran Desert which offers views of Goldfield and Superstition Mountain.

Hot Air Balloon rides provide breath-taking 360-degree views of the famous Sonoran Desert landscape. Various water sports like jet skis, kayaks, paddle boards, pedal boats, and wake boards are available and can be taken full advantage of for exploring the beauty to be found at the oasis in the Sonoran Desert.

### Taklamakan Desert

Contiguous to the Gobi Desert, this desert is located in China and is infamous for extreme weather, sand storms and poisonous snakes. Taklamakan desert is located on the Silk route in China. It is surrounded by the Kunlun mountains, Pamir plateau, Tian Sian mountains and the Gobi desert. The perfect way to explore it is through a camel trek. There are different routes one can take for the trek. Whether it is watching sunrise over the sand dunes or marvelling at the starry night sky, a trip here is indeed memorable.

### Thar Desert

Also known as the Great Indian Desert, this is an arid region located in the Indian subcontinent that spreads over India and Pakistan. Covering an area of 200,000 sq.km, the desert forms a natural boundary between the two countries. The lovely desert cities of Thar come with their own uniqueness. Each city has its own share of fort and palaces. The Pink city of Jaipur, blue city of Jodhpur, golden city of Jaisalmer, the city of lakes of Udaipur are all royal desert cities of the Thar, in the state of Rajasthan in India. The desert is inhabited by tribes like the gypsies, Bishnoi, Garasians, Bhils, Saharias, Minas, Lohars and Rabaris. The villages that are inhabited by these tribes are desert villages of Khuri, Kanoi and Sattasar. The dance and songs of these tribes are simply captivating. Camel safari in the Thar is majorly done in the sand dunes of Jaisalmer. The best way to explore the desert is by taking a camel safari. A camel safari during the sunset when the golden sands turn reddish, is a splendid experience.

One would be surprised to see the large variety of plants in Thar where vegetation is very low. Sangri and Kair are widely used in native cuisines. The birds in the desert are aplenty. The most common is the Indian Peacock with its colourful plumage. The bird sanctuary at Bharatpur is also rich in birds. A host of birds migrate from Central Asia, Siberia to the desert in winter. The great Indian bustard, largest flying bird, is found in the Thar Desert. The most common desert animals are the blackbuck, chinkara, Indian bustard and desert snakes. A variety of lizards and beetles are also found in the sand dunes. There are quite a few national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in the Thar. The most popular ones are the Ranthambore National Park, Sariska Tiger Reserve, Desert National Park in Jaisalmer and the Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary.

The cultures of the Thar desert are rather colourful. One finds here different tribes, dressed in their most colourful attires and singing the most melodious folk tunes. Traditional dances, cuisines and jewellery are a heritage treasure. Fairs and festivals of the Thar are colourful and packed with action. Dancing, singing, puppetry, folk performers, snake charmers, selling of handicrafts, camel displays are all attractions of such festivals. These festivals are usually held in winter. Desert festival in Jaisalmer and Camel festival in Pushkar are especially unique and popular.





**Aries**

(21 March – 19 April)

You can create opportunities for yourself, take advantage of ones presented to you, and take charge of your life, starting a whole new journey. You can fulfill some commitments you've made, or give up on them. Having balance in your life becomes more important in keeping yourself sane.

Places to visit: St. Lucia - Lush rainforests, majestic mountains and romantic resorts are all reasons to visit this Caribbean island.

Bodh Gaya - The place is bustling with pilgrims all through the year who come to pay their homage in the monasteries, shrines and temples. It was here under the Bodhi tree that Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment.

Favourable Dates: Jan 3, 9, 12, 18, 21, 27

Favourable Colours: Blue & Grey

You may now put focus on your sense of self-esteem, self-worth, and your value system. This can be a good time for going out a lot, meeting someone new or rekindling romance, being creative and inspired, and being enthusiastic about what you find fun in.

Places to visit: Jackson Hole, Wyoming, USA - Jackson Hole sees an influx of winter travelers looking to hit the slopes at upscale ski resorts.

Hawa Mahal - A stunning pink and red sandstone five-story structure stands in the heart of Jaipur. It was a place where royal women could view street activities outside while hidden from view.

Favourable Dates: Jan 1, 2, 10, 11, 19, 20

Favourable Colours: White & Purple



**Taurus**

(20 April – 20 May)



**Gemini**

(21 May – 20 June)

You feel most like yourself and enjoy yourself when you're focusing on the serious aspects of your life, getting closer to others, and obsessing over something. If single, you're attracted to powerful people. You may come across as dark, brooding, and seductive.

Places to visit: Banff, Alberta - From hiking and whitewater rafting to skiing and snowboarding, Banff offers travelers an abundance of year-round outdoor activities.

Havelock Island - Ecotourism is encouraged at Havelock Island, the largest island in Ritchie's Archipelago in the Andaman Islands due to its great beaches, casual atmosphere, snorkeling and scuba diving opportunities

Favourable Dates: Jan 7, 8, 16, 17, 25, 26

Favourable Colours: White & Black

This is a time for feeling personally hopeful, emotionally satisfied, and socially popular. Friendships might be renewed or revitalized. However, there can be a strong temptation to impulsively act on a secret desire.

Places to visit: Great Barrier Reef - Travellers can see these amazing natural structures from the air or underwater. Seeing wildlife in its habitat is a goal for many travellers.

Bandhavgarh National Park - Bandhavgarh provides an opportunity to see leopards, barking deer, sloth bears, hyenas, and Indian bison and wolves, but Bengal tigers are definitely the star attraction

Favourable Dates: Jan 1, 6, 10, 15, 19, 24

Favourable Colours: White & Grey



**Cancer**

(21 June – 22 July)



**Leo**

(23 July – 22 August)

You have more energy and can stick with something more easily if it's a mental task. Anything that requires physical energy will be hard for you. If you've been putting in hard, smart work, acting responsibly and making good decisions, you can make progress in career.

Places to visit: Park City, Utah - Popular upscale mountain resorts, specifically Deer Valley and Park City Mountain, provide some of the best ski conditions in the U.S.

Dharamsala: Dharamsala means a spiritual dwelling or place for pilgrims to rest, which is appropriate since so many Tibetans live here and is worth seeing.

Favourable Dates: Jan 1, 3, 19, 21, 28, 30

Favourable Colours: White & Purple

You feel most like yourself and enjoy yourself when you're in the spotlight, getting attention from loved ones, and putting yourself out there. You can be recognized for something you've done, and presented with a new opportunity.

Places to visit: Costa Rica - It is home to a diverse landscape of tropical rainforests, volcanic mountains, pristine beaches and wildlife reserves

Ranakpur Temple is an imposing and highly decorative Jain temple that is famous for its art and architecture, considered some of the world's best. Extremely intricate carvings highlight the interior.

Favourable Dates: Jan 10, 12, 19, 21, 28, 30

Favourable Colours: White & Yellow



**Virgo**

(23 August – 22 Sept)



**Manish Kumar Arora** is a renowned KP Astrologer, Numerologist, Tarot Reader and Vastu Consultant. He will be with Touriosity Travelmag to bring to our readers monthly predictions based on zodiac signs with special emphasis on travel predictions. Our readers can plan their tours accordingly. He can be reached at [manish@manishastrologer.com](mailto:manish@manishastrologer.com)



You have an easier time facing the past, your issues, your subconscious, and your karma, and work on letting go. You find that as you let things go, more opportunities come into your life. Your initiative is stronger and your taste for the new and untried is powerful.

Places to visit: Tahiti, French Polynesia - From luxurious bungalows suspended over clear turquoise waters to lush vegetation and stunning waterfalls, Tahiti is all about basking in the colorful landscape.

Varkala Beach - Its sandy beaches along impressive cliffs are perfect for beachcombing, sunbathing and swimming, just some of the reasons

Favourable Dates: Jan 1, 8, 10, 17, 19, 26

Favourable Colours: White & Yellow

You're more serious and focused on the things you hold deep inside of yourself. You have more energy, confidence, stamina, and drive when you have someone by your side. You can focus on your relationships, and try to see what you can do to make them better.

Places to visit: San Sebastian, Spain - Known for its gorgeous beaches and unique culture, San Sebastian offers a small-town atmosphere influenced by Basque Country.

Darjeeling - It is a town in northeast India that is famous for tea, trains and scenic beauty.. Farther up in the skyline, travellers can see the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayan foothills

Favourable Dates: Jan 2, 9, 11, 18, 20, 27

Favourable Colours: Green & Yellow



You put more emphasis on your relationships, and like having a partner. You'll likely begin an important new partnership, personal or professional, and it's something that opens you up in new ways.

Places to visit: Phuket, Thailand - In Phuket, you'll find wide sandy beaches, limestone caves and distinctive rock formations.

Mysore Palace - Visitors to Mysore Palace are in for an awesome experience at the second most popular tourist attraction in India. The seven palaces that make up the Mysore Palace complex are nothing short of spectacular.

Favourable Dates: Jan 4, 9, 13, 18, 22, 27

Favourable Colours: Blue & White

This is an excellent time for starting new projects and taking action on plans. You appreciate unconventional methods and are willing to push yourself outside of your comfort zone.

Places to visit: Serengeti National Park - This is home to The Great Migration - the annual movement of millions of animals in search of food and breeding. Once inside the walls, visitors will find beautiful, highly decorated palaces grounds

Mehrangarh Fort - It is a most imposing, a stern-looking fort, one of the largest in India, that sits atop a hill overlooking Jodhpur. and visitors can still see cannonball imprints on one of the seven entrance gates

Favourable Dates: Jan 4, 5, 13, 14, 22, 23

Favourable Colours: Red & Green



This month brings a shift of focus to more creative, sociable, and pleasure-seeking activities occurs. Surprises are in store, and they're pointing you in new directions.. You feel creative, inspired, and want to have some fun.

Places to visit: Bali, Indonesia - This Indonesian island offers some of the best beaches in the world, along with volcanic mountains, elephant sanctuaries and a wealth of five-star resorts.

Amber Fort - It is most famous for the Mirror Palace, a fabulous room with a pure glass ceiling so the queen could view the stars before she fell asleep.

Favourable Dates: Jan 2, 5, 11, 14, 20, 23

Favourable Colours: Green & Yellow

This is a good time for going back to a career you used to be in, or taking up a goal you used to have. This can be a good time to focus on your spirituality, and strengthen your spiritual self.

Places to visit: Santorini, Greece - Shorelines at Santorini Island are sprinkled with colorful beaches, including black sands at Kamari Beach, a crimson-hued shoreline at the aptly named Red Beach and cobalt waters everywhere.

Meenakshi Amman Temple - It is an impressive Hindu temple that dates back to the sixth century, though most of the present structure was built a thousand years later.

Favourable Dates: Jan 3, 6, 12, 15, 21, 30

Favourable Colours: White & Yellow







# Glimpses from Oman

*Photographs by Grete Howard, Bristol, UK*











# Unique architecture of MALI



*inspired by the desert*

For a long time the fabled town of Timbuktu was covered in myths leading to debates as to whether it at all existed or not. The name Timbuktu literally means 'middle of nowhere'. It comes from the fact that the locals resisted the entry of Westerners into the town for a long time, until the last century. So, while all knew about the existence of the place from Islamic Scholars who wrote about it in their works, the westerners could never actually reach it. The town has played an important role in the ancient southern trans-Saharan trade route and salt, dyes, books, spices and gold were the main items traded here.

Timbuktu, with all its historical significance, sits covered in mud-brick buildings of great importance, on the edge of the Sahara Desert, about 20km away from the Niger River, in the land-locked Western African country of Mali. It is one of the important towns of this 8th largest nation in Africa. The town has been settled since 5th century BC, but the current population is less than 70,000.

Mali has a unique architecture that is inspired by the Sudano-Sahelian architecture prevalent in West Africa. Its main component are adobe (or mud brick) buildings. Timbuktu is known for a host of mud-brick buildings and mosques that has earned it the status of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The following are some of the most important mud-brick buildings of Timbuktu:

## University of Timbuktu

The University of Timbuktu is not a university in the strict sense

of the term, but a loosely organized scholastic community that endured during the medieval period. It is thus not a single building but a collective term for the teaching associated with three mosques of Timbuktu. These mosques are the Sankore Mosque, the Djinguereber Mosque and Sidi Yahya Mosque. These mosques were great centres of learning in the medieval times, for many centuries, and has produced some of the most famous works in Islamic Africa, collectively referred to as the Timbuktu Manuscripts.

With the growth of trade in Timbuktu starting from the 12th century, it also became wealthy and this paved the way for it to become a center of learning, attracting many important Muslim scholars and resulting in important manuscripts. The mosques thus became centres of learning.

The main focus here was on study of the Quran and other Islamic subjects; but subjects like Arabic and African languages, medicine and surgery, anatomy, botany, evolution, physiology and zoology, astronomy, anthropology, cartography, geodesy, geology, mathematics, physics, chemistry, philosophy, geography, history, art, commerce and business ethics were also taught. On graduation, students were awarded special turbans symbolizing wisdom, knowledge and excellent moral conduct. At its peak, the University of Timbuktu had about 25,000 students, while the total city population was only 100,000. It produced many notable scholars who helped propagate the Islamic culture.

Following the Battle of Tondibi, the town was invaded by the rulers





of Marrakesh in 1591 AD, many of its important scholars were arrested on charges of disloyalty and killed or exiled. This led to the decline of the university.

### Djingarey Ber Mosque

One of the three mosques with which the University of Timbuktu was associated was the Djingarey Ber Mosque. It was initially built in 1327 AD after Sultan Musa I's return from a pilgrimage to Mecca. It was built of mud, fibre, straw and wood and has three inner courts, two minarets, twenty five rows of pillars and a huge prayer hall that can accommodate up to 2,000 people. The Sultan was so impressed that he gifted the architect Abu Es Haq Es Saheli 200 kg of gold. The mosque was reconstructed between 1570 and 1583 AD by Imam Al Aqib, the Qadi of Timbuktu. During this reconstruction, the southern part and the wall surrounding the cemetery were added. The minaret of the mosque is one of the most noticeable landmarks of the town and dominates its skyline. In 1988, the mosque got the UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

### Sankoré Mosque

The Sankore Mosque was built during the final years before the fall of the Mali Empire, in the early 14th century. It was also

restored by Imam Al Aqib between 1578 and 1582 AD. The mosque is especially significant for its huge pyramidal mihrab. This mosque became a very important centre of learning in the Islamic world under the patronage of its founder Emperor Musa I of Mali and the Askia Dynasty that ruled until their defeat in the Battle of Tondibi in 1591. By the end of the rule of Musa I, the Sankoré Masjid had been fully converted into a staffed Madrassa and had the largest collections of books in Africa ever since the fall of Library of Alexandria. It was one of the largest libraries in the world with around 7,00,000 manuscripts.

### Sidi Yahia Mosque

Located close to the Sankore Mosque, this mosque came up much later, around 1440 AD. It was built in anticipation of the emergence of a holy man some forty years later as Cherif Sidi Yahia, who would be chosen as the Imam. Imam Al Aqib also undertook the restoration of this mosque between 1577 and 1588 AD. This mosque is smaller in comparison to the other two mosques and is therefore in a better state of upkeep. However, after the Battle of Gao and Timbuktu, the two mausoleums inside the mosque, that of Sidi Yahia, the first Imam of the mosque and

Mohamed Naddah, the then Governor, were completely destroyed.

The mosques of Timbuktu and scholars based here have played a vital role in the expansion of Islam in the African continent during the Medieval period. They were also benefitted by the trading route, wherein Timbuktu was a stop for merchants from the Middle East and North Africa who were mostly muslims. They started visiting the mosques and these became places of exchange of ideas, learning and books. The result was huge libraries in the mosques as well as in the houses of local scholars.

The architecture of the mosques using sun-dried mud bricks makes it unique. Due to proximity to the desert and because of erosion due to weather, these buildings are however very much vulnerable to damages. They have to be replastered every year and the local people enthusiastically take part in it. There are timbers jutting out of the surface of the buildings for support during annual replastering. The timbers add to the unique look of the buildings.

Mud is also used in Mali for creating the unique Bogolan cloth. This is more popular around Djenné. Mud from the

Niger River is fermented and used to paint cotton fabrics that have been dyed with local vegetable dyes. The mud reacts with the natural dyes producing a rich black colour. The mud is then washed off. The entire procedure is cumbersome and involves baking, boiling, soaking and drying many times. This cloth is exported worldwide and used in fashion and garments industry.

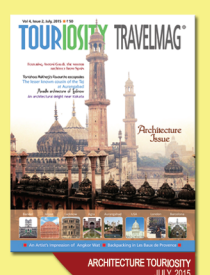
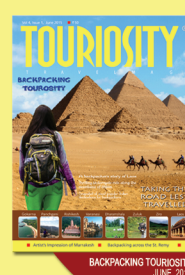
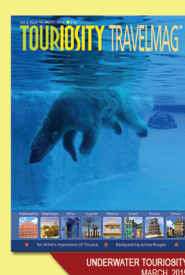
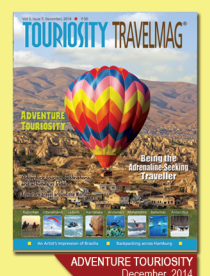
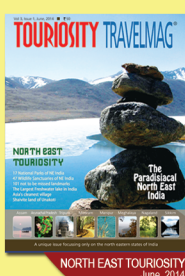
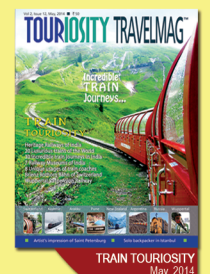
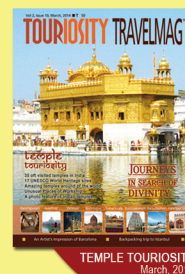
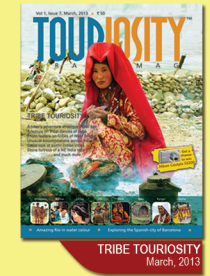
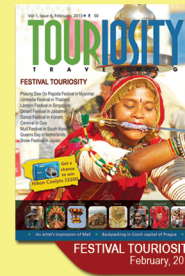
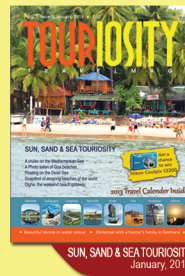
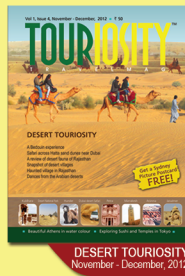
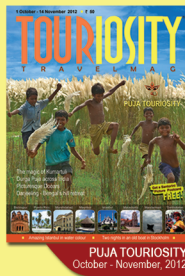
Although home to UNESCO World Heritage Sites and despite being on the bucket list of tourists from around the world these days, the name of Timbuktu is almost a misnomer even today. There has been literally very less development in this place, and once you are here, you feel like having reached the ancient world, in 'the middle of nowhere' literally. The heritage sites in the town are also in danger due to the sands from the desert.

Apart from Timbuktu, there are other notable places in Mali which are known for their adobe buildings. The most prominent among them is the Great Mosque of Djenné, which is the largest mud building in the world. Built in 13th century, this mud brick mosque building was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988. Djenné, located on the floodplains of the Bani River, was at one time, ancient Timbuktu's sister city.



# Touriosity Travelmag brings to you

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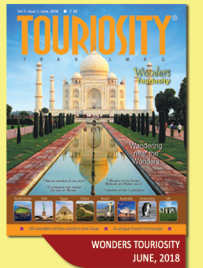
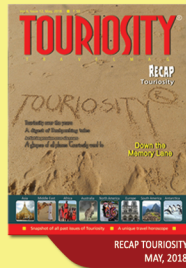
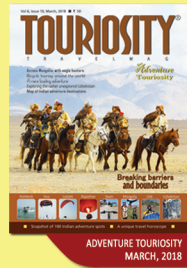
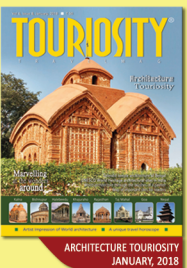
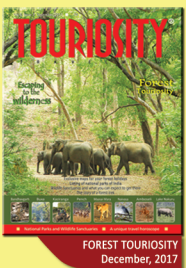
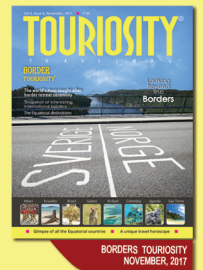
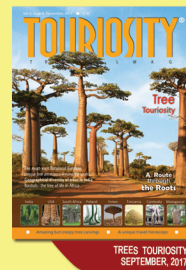
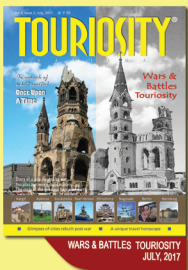
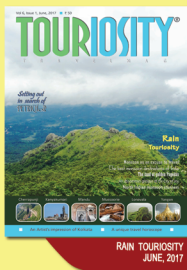
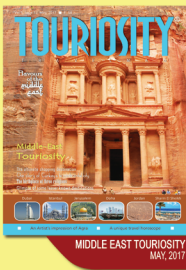
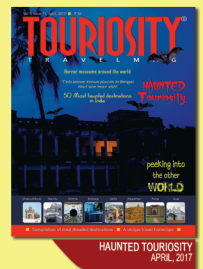
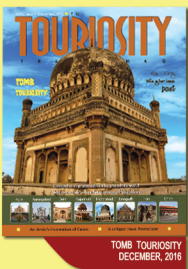
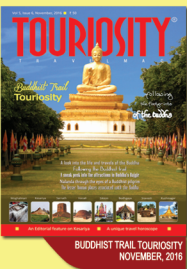
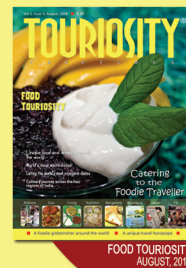
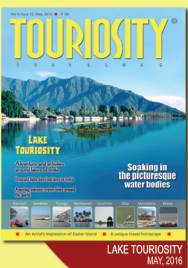
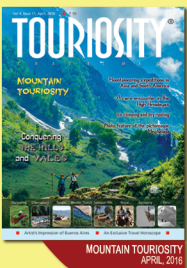
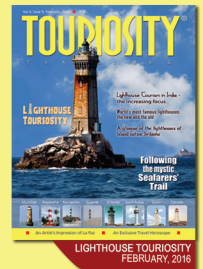
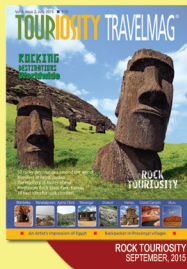
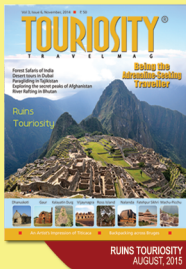




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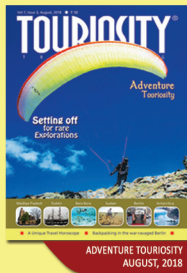




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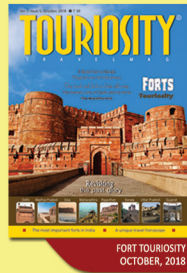
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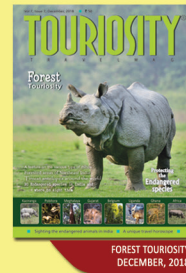
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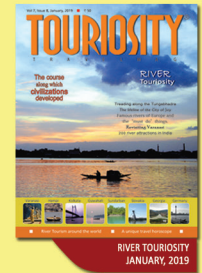
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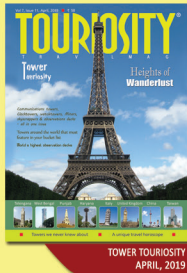
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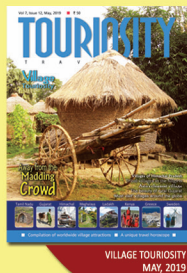
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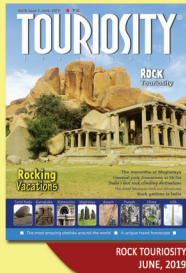
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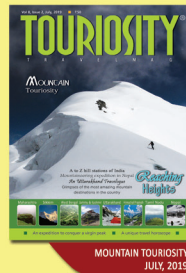
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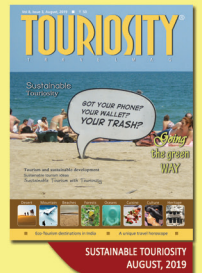
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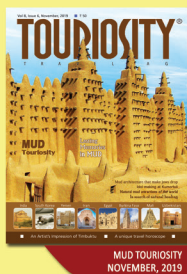
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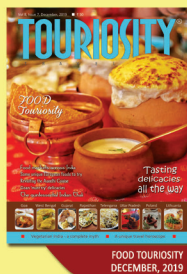
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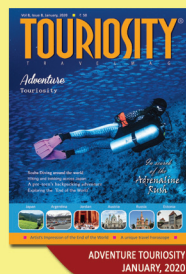
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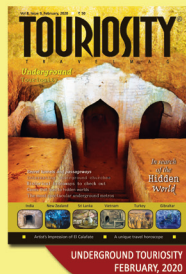
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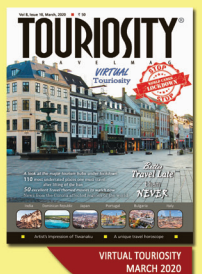
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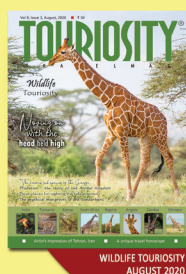
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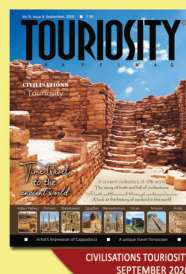
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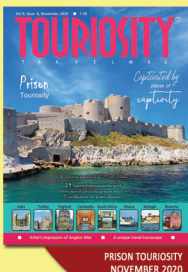
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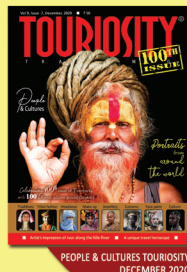
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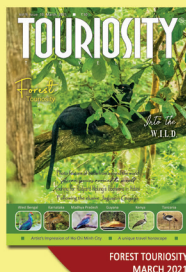
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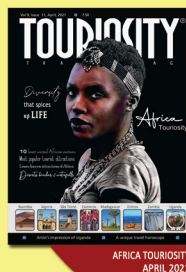
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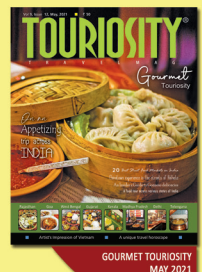
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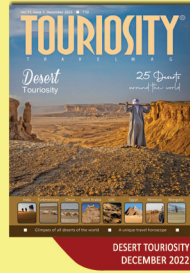
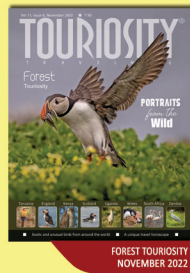
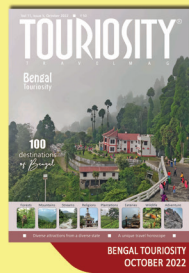
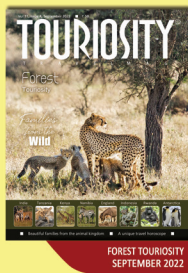
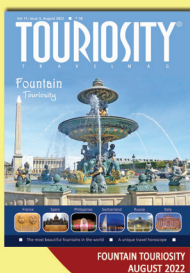
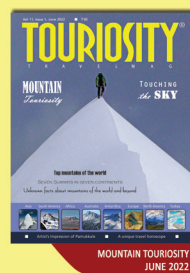
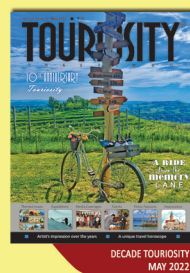
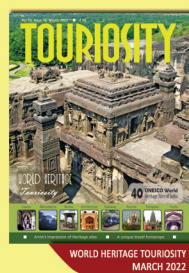
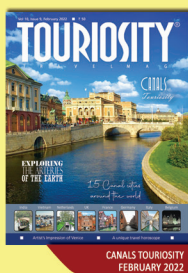
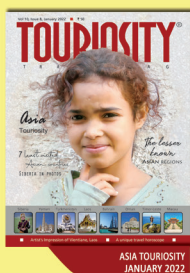
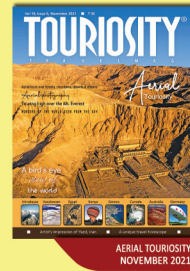
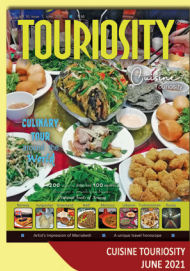
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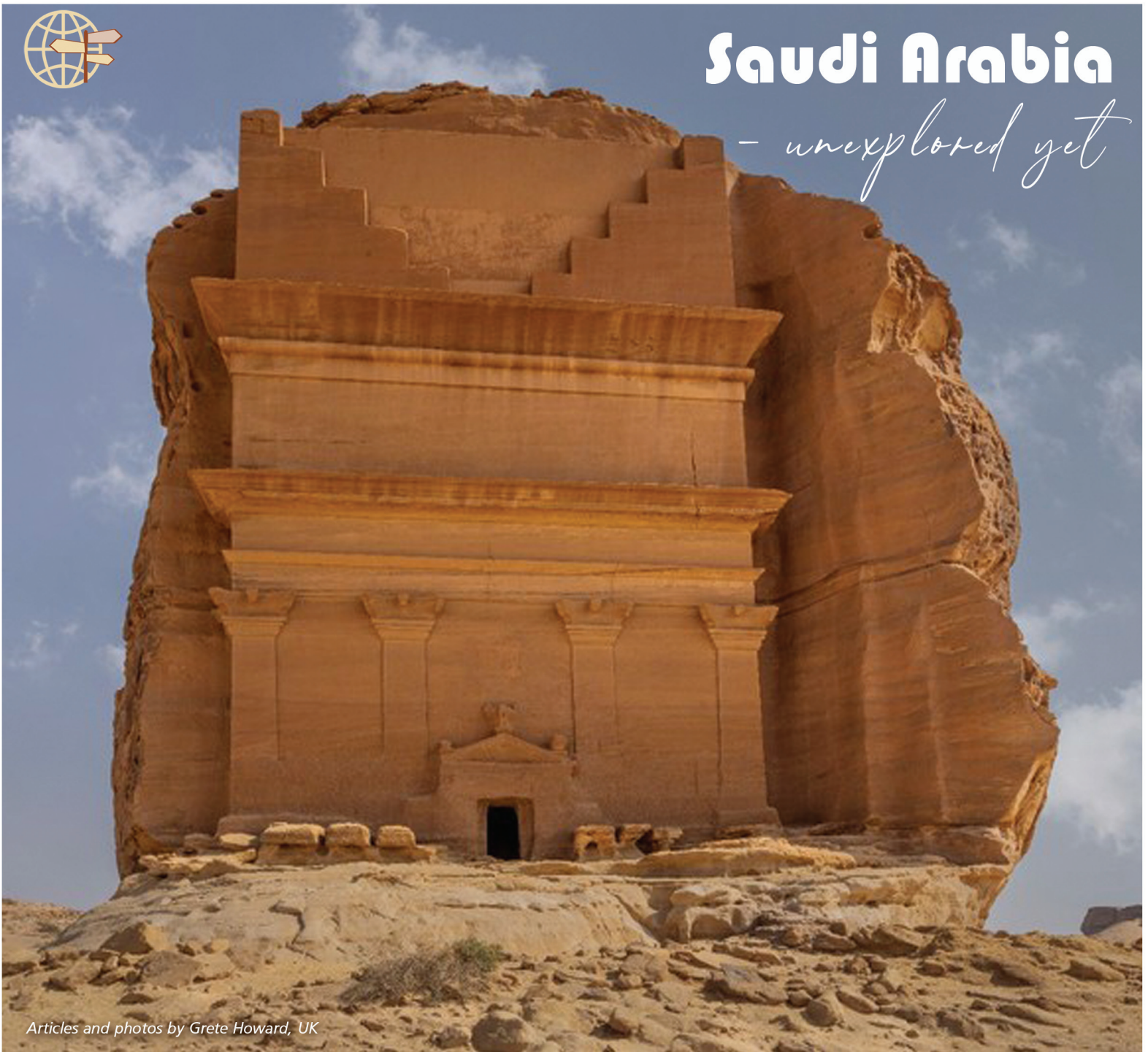
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# Saudi Arabia

*- unexplored yet*



Articles and photos by Grete Howard, UK

This is a travelogue based on our recent trip to Saudi Arabia. The map provided herein indicates the places that found place in our itinerary, and these are not necessarily the best places to visit in this Middle Eastern country. However, these locations were chosen by Undiscovered Destinations, an agency that planned and arranged the trip for us. We are grateful to them for arranging this fascinating and thoroughly enjoyable trip to a little-visited, and lesser-known nation. Tourism is in its infancy here; so just like us if you also enjoy visiting unusual places, Saudi Arabia should definitely be on your list!

## The Edge of the World

The Edge of the World, is a nickname given to Jebel Fihrayn, a spectacular cliff edge that is part of the 800-km-long Tuwaiq Escarpment. It is a very popular place for an afternoon excursion, especially during weekends. The cliff presents stunning views.

## Riyadh

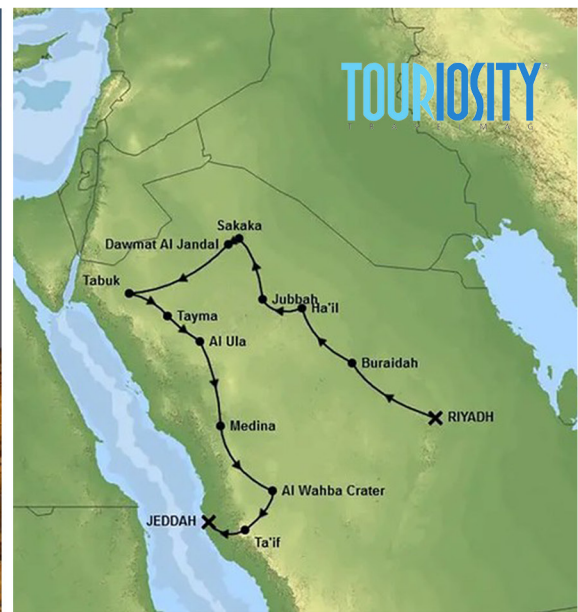
This modern city of Saudi Arabia is its capital and financial hub. Earlier known as Hajr al-Yamamah, Riyadh is located on a plateau in the heart of the Arabian Desert.

It is surrounded by rocky mountain and vast expanses of barren desert. It has many parks, manicured gardens and green spaces. Riyadh is also the cultural capital of Saudi Arabia and has many cultural centres. The business district of Riyadh has the 302 metres-high Kingdom Tower and the 267 metre-high Al Faisaliah Centre with a glass-globe summit. Riyadh has both modern and old world attractions, some of which are as follows:

## Masmak Fort

This fort is not very old, dating back only some 150 years. It does, however, hold





a very special place in the history of Saudi Arabia, as it was here, in 1902, that King Abdulaziz captured the fortress and took control of Riyadh after having lived in exile in Kuwait. From here he conquered and united the different kingdoms and provinces that make up the Saudi nation as we know it today.

#### Imam Turki Bin Abdullah Grand Mosque

With a capacity of 17,000 worshippers, this is one of the largest mosques in the country. Non-Muslims are not permitted to enter this modern-looking mosque located near Masmak Fort, as is the case of most mosques in KSA.

#### Murabba Palace

It is a historic building located in the Al Murabba district of Riyadh. It was the first building to be erected outside the Old City walls. It has a perfect square shape (400 metres by 400 metres). It abodes a museum inside.



#### Kingdom Tower

This large, up-market complex houses the Four Seasons Hotel, and surprisingly, it is the only place we have seen any luxurious cars here in Riyadh, with a gorgeous bright yellow Mercedes sports car drawing David's attention. Our reason for being here, is the view from the 99th floor of the building affectionately known as the Bottle Opener, for obvious reasons. It's an impressive building, covered with 85,000 square metres of glass. The 302 metres-high building has a sky bridge connecting the two towers.

#### Riyadh Camel Market

Located 30 km outside the city, this is a hap-





Ushayqer Heritage Village



Ushayqer Heritage Village



Kingdom Tower



Riyadh Camel Market

pening place where the Bedouins show off their beasts and haggle over their prices. This market used to be near the centre of the town, but as Riyadh expanded, the officials decided to move it further out of the city, partly because of all the dust the camels and trucks generate. Both male and female camels are sold here for breeding purposes. When looking for a camel stud, prospective buyers assess the camels mainly on their physical appearance. A section of the market is reserved for camel accessories.

### Ushayqer Heritage Village

Located about 200 km from Riyadh, this is a heritage village. Initially settled by nomads 1500 years ago, the current buildings we see here are largely no more than 400 years

old. The village is built in a traditional design, with outer walls (now mostly demolished), and an inner courtyard where the market would have been held. The village is a labyrinth of narrow alleyways, shaded pathways, and timber-framed walkways, crossing between hundreds of houses made from wattle and daub mud bricks. Restoration is in progress, and bricks are still made the traditional way by digging out the mud, adding straw, and drying the bricks in the sun.

### Al Qasab Salt Flats

Located about 160 km from Riyadh, these are said to be the largest salt flats in Saudi Arabia, producing 200,000 tons of salt annually. It is the primary source of salt in Saudi Arabia, and has been famous since ancient

times for its high quality. Large holes are dug in the ground and filled with water. As the water evaporates in the fierce desert heat, a crusty layer of salt is left behind. Nearby the salt flats is the ancient city of Al-Qasab which was famous since pre-Islamic times.

### Ha'il

Ha'il, a city in north-western Saudi Arabia is situated between Mount Shammar on the north and Mount Salma on the south. It is located on one of the main pilgrimage routes from Iraq to Mecca. It is the largest city of Ha'il Region. In the late 19th century, the city was the most powerful one in all of Arabia. Family feuds and constant wars brought about its downfall in the 20th century.





Arabian Oryx in an enclosure within a resort



The A'Arif Fort

Initially built for defence purposes, the fort was then used to signal the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan to the citizens of Hail. Following restoration, it has been opened to tourists as a museum. From its lofty position atop a hill overlooking Hail, the fort offers a great view of the town below.

#### A'Arif Fort

Dating from the 17th century, this is the oldest historical building in the town. Initially built for defence purposes, the fort was then used to signal the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan to the citizens of Ha'il. Following restoration, it has been opened to tourists as a museum. From its lofty position atop a hill overlooking Ha'il, the fort offers a great view of the town below.

#### The Old Souq

The market is surprisingly modern in my opinion. Butter mixed with date syrup is stored in animal skins here – the smallest being that of a lizard, and the largest being from a camel. It tastes surprisingly good. Here we get to try the best dates of this season, which I must admit were absolutely amazing. I am not really a fan of dates, but these are delicious – the best I've ever tasted!



2000 years old Zaabal Castle

#### Jubbah

Jubbah city is located in the Ha'il Region in Saudi Arabia, about 90 kilometres Ha'il city. Surrounded by the vast Nefud Desert (a part of the larger Arabian Desert), Jubbah lies on the old caravan road between Najd and the eastern Mediterranean Sea. While there is still a settlement here in Jubbah, this was once a thriving oasis filled with people and wildlife, as documented in carvings on the rocks dating back 10,000 years. The carvings indicate that this area was once a savannah and home to numerous species of animals. The rock itself is made of sandstone, which I guess is reasonably easy to carve. It is thought that sharp pieces of basalt were used to make the inscriptions. The petroglyphs here cover three distinct time periods, dating from 10,000 years ago, 5,000, and 2,000. It is like an ancient

open-air library with its images and writing. They were such prolific carvers. I wonder why they all came to this particular place over the millennia? What drew them to these specific rocks?

#### Sakaka

Sakaka, a city in north-western part of Saudi Arabia near the An Nafud Desert, is the capital of Al Jawf Province. It is located on the old caravan route from the Arabian Peninsula to the Mediterranean coast.

#### Zaabal Castle

The name of the castle is translated as 'ribs', and refers to the fortifications protecting the city like the ribs protect the heart in humans. Although the fort originated some 2000 years ago, the





Sakaka Old Town

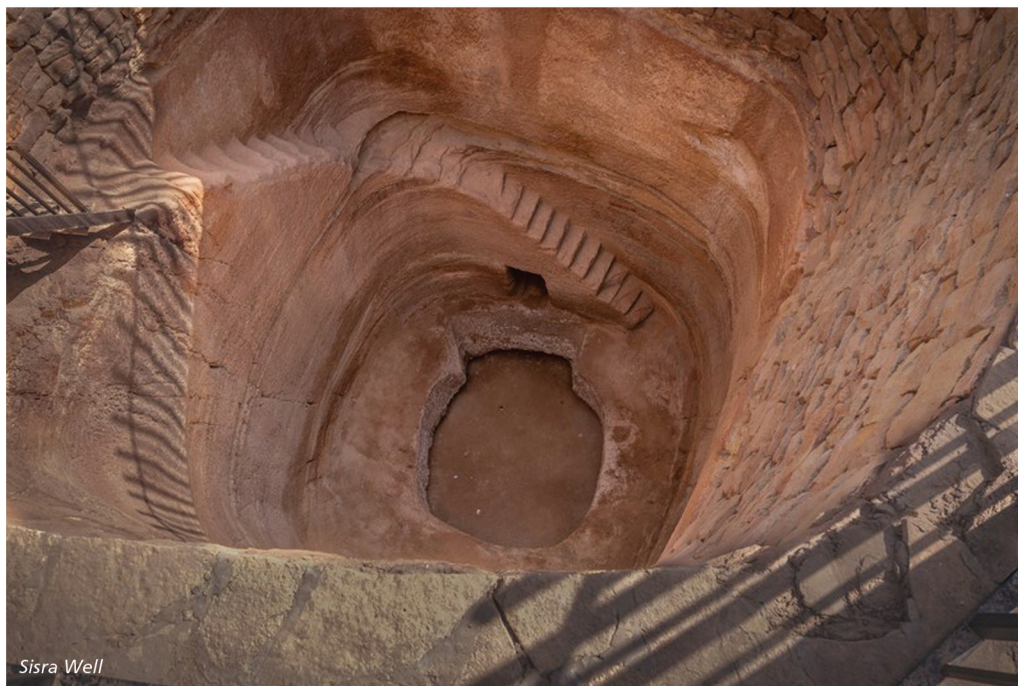
top has been added later. This was purely a military fort, used to defend the town below – it consists of only two rooms, no living quarters. The modern museum close to the castle, has a few interesting artifacts.

### Sakaka Old Town

As old as the castle, the town at its base was abandoned some 65 years ago, when the lure of modern houses with electricity and running water became too tempting for its inhabitants. Some houses have been restored, carried out by 'people from Riyadh', and the locals are said to be unhappy about how it is done, as they feel it is not in keeping with the authentic original local style.

### Sisra Well

The nearby well is believed to be older than the fort, dating from the Thamudic period, some 2,500 years ago. It is an unusual design, in that it is dug out of the rock rather than into the soil. Collecting water that ran off from the nearby rocky outcrop, the well features a 6km long underground tunnel to irrigate local agricultural areas that had no water of their own. The well itself is deeper than the tunnel outlet. To remove any stones washed off from the hills, steps provide access to the bottom of the well. Most of the tunnels have since collapsed, with the building of foundations for modern houses.



Sisra Well



Marid Castle

### Rajajil

Affectionately known as 'The Stonehenge of Saudi Arabia', these ancient stone pillars are part of a collection of around 50 groups of standing stones dating back some 6,000 years – that's a whopping 1,000 years older than its namesakes in the UK. Although these are nowhere near as large or imposing as Stonehenge, but they are still incredibly impressive and intriguing. Being close to these ancient monuments is humbling, and knowing that ancient people stood right in this very spot, admiring these pillars long before Stonehenge was even a glint in an architect's eye, sends shivers down my spine. Each of the groups are arranged in an East-West direction, and just like Stonehenge, the rocks are not local, but have been brought from 160km away. This

then triggers the question: how? Historians are unsure about how or why these pillars were erected or what purpose they served. Numerous human remains have been found, leading to suggestions that this may have been a burial site. It is understood that they were all of a similar age when they died, indicating possible sacrifice or maybe battles similar to the Roman Gladiators. A landmark or 'road sign' on a popular caravan route, or maybe astronomical structures have all been suggested. Inscriptions on the stones are in the Thamudic language, which has not been fully studied yet.

### Sakaka Museum

The bright and modern museum close to the castle has a few interesting artefacts that include: 250 million years old fossilised tree





Ancient carvings in Jabal Ikma

branches, 1,300,000 years old Quartz stone tools, 8,000 years old Neolithic pottery shards, 6,500 years old Neolithic pottery, 750 years old Abbasi pottery, 2,500 years old Thamudic carved writing, 5,000-year-old petroglyphs, various palm weave items used to collect dates, store dates etc. and ancient board games.

#### Dumat Al-Jandal

Dumat al-Jandal, also called Al-Jawf or Al-Jouf, was the historical capital of the Al Jawf Province of Saudi Arabia. It is an ancient city that lay in ruins now. Located 37 km from Sakaka city, Dawmat al-Jandal was once a large commercial town of Arabia, and a meeting point of routes from Central Arabia, Iraq and Syria. The Battle of Daumat-ul-jandal took place here in 633 AD between the Muslims and Rebel Arab tribes.

#### Marid Castle

Located about 50 km from Sakaka town in Dumat Al Jandal, this is a historic military

fortress. Excavations have revealed that the castle dates back to the Nabataean Period, from around the 1st century AD. The whole area was fortified with stone walls to repel attacks by invaders, while the fort itself was built on a strategic rocky outcrop overlooking the city.

#### Tabuk

Tabuk is the capital city of the Tabuk Region in north-western Saudi Arabia located close to the Jordanian–Saudi Arabia border. The region is known for a rich collection of antiquities and archaeological sites that include petroglyphs, inscriptions, forts and palaces. This oasis town being once an important station on the now defunct Hejaz railway, was historically a resting point for Jordanian and Egyptian pilgrims.

#### Wadi Disah

The magnificent canyon of Wadi Disah is located in a mountainous region in Tabuk Province. It is located in the Prince Moham-

mad bin Salman Natural Reserve. At the entrance to the canyon, we moved over into a four-wheel-drive vehicle for the fun forage into the verdant canyon. It was so very different from anywhere else we had visited in this country.

#### Tabuk Castle

It is an ancient castle in Tabuk dating back to 1559. Located in the Tabuk Region of Saudi Arabia, this castle has now been converted into a museum.

#### Tayma

Tayma is an oasis city in northwestern Saudi Arabia. It is located at the point where trade route between Medina and Dumah al-Jawf cross the An Nafud Desert. Historically (during the 1st century AD), Tayma was a fortified city inhabited by the Jewish community.

#### Haddaj Well

Constructed in the 6th century BC, this



Desert landscape in Saudi Arabia





Ruins of Hegra

enormous well has a diameter of 18 metres and is one of the largest water wells in the world. 75 camels were used to draw water from the well using pulleys.

### Al Ula Region

Al Ula is an ancient oasis city located in the Medina Province of north-western Saudi Arabia. It is notable for being one of the oldest cities in all of Arabia and is home to the ancient settlement and ruins of Hegra. Al Ula is a meeting point of incredible human as well as natural heritages. It is like an open air museum of tombs, sandstone formations, historic dwellings and monuments.

### Dadan Rock tombs

From afar, these look like simple dark rectangles. A closer look reveals skilfully crafted funerary monuments, including the seated lion sculptures that mark the famous Lion Tombs. Lions symbolised power and protection and may have marked the burial of an elite member of society, perhaps even a member of royalty. These tombs are up to 50 metres above ground level, spurring the imagination of how they were carved without modern construction equipment. It is said that the reason for constructing them high above the ground was to ensure an easy passage to heaven by being part way there already.

### Dadan Town

Dating back to between the late 9th and early 8th century BC, Dadan was one of the most developed 1st-millennium BC cities in northern Arabia as a result of its proximity to the frankincense trade route. First mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel (27:20) in the Hebrew Bible, it was described as the "beating heart of the kingdom and a trading partner of the city of Tyre" (in modern-day Lebanon).

### Jabal Ikma

This whole area, the capital of the ancient Dadanite and Lihyanite Kingdoms, is described as an open library of inscriptions, with rock art and petroglyphs set in a stunning desert canyon. Messages and notes were left by those who lived here, as well as by passing traders. Hundreds of inscriptions and carvings line the cliff faces and rocks, thought to date back as far as the 1st millennium BC, giving a glimpse into



Two tombs at Hegra

*Like Petra, Hegra is a metropolis that has turned into a necropolis: most of the remaining structures that can be seen today are tombs, with much of the architectural remains of the city waiting to be excavated or already lost, quite literally, to the sands of time. One theory is that the cities are buried under the desert surrounding these tombs.*



Ancient city of Al-Qasab.



the daily lives of people in the Dadanite, Lihyanite, and other civilisations of Al Ula. These carvings indicate that this area was once a savannah and home to numerous species of animals.

## Hegra

Once a thriving international trade hub, the archaeological site of Hegra was an important trading place for the Nabataens between the 1st millennium BC and the 1st millennium AD, and was considered the sister-city to the much more famous Petra in nearby Jordan. Like Petra, Hegra is a metropolis that has turned into a necropolis; most of the remaining structures that can be seen today are tombs, with much of the architectural remains of the city waiting to be excavated or already lost, quite literally, to the sands of time. One theory is that the cities are buried under the desert surrounding these tombs.

To some locals, however, the site has a more sinister reputation for being inhabited by jinns, or evil spirits. According to the Islamic text, the Thamudis who made their home here were punished by God for their idolatry, struck by an earthquake and lightning blasts. Thus, the site has earned a reputation as a cursed place. Carvings above the entrance to the tomb feature steps to guide the deceased to heaven. Visitors are shown around the site by guides known as Rawis – ancient storytellers and reciters.

Of the 131 tombs discovered to date, 86 have monumental façades. There are a further 700 simple holes in the mountains. Natural water pipes were built around the tombs to protect their facades from erosion, which, along with the dry conditions in the desert, have kept them well-preserved thousands of years after their construction.

Hegra's largest tomb, measuring about 70 feet high, is the monolithic Tomb of Lihyan Son of Kuza, sometimes called Qasr al-Farid. Its name means the "Lonely Castle" in English, because of its distant position in relation to the other tombs. It was left unfinished, with rough chisel marks showing in the lower parts of the tomb.

## Maraya

This structure holds the Guinness World Record for being the largest mirrored building on Earth. It has 9740 mirrored panels and is designed to blend into the desert landscape and rise from it like a mirage. The building features a restaurant, a concert auditorium, a wedding venue, a conference centre, and a place for art exhibitions to name a few.

## Old Al Ula Town

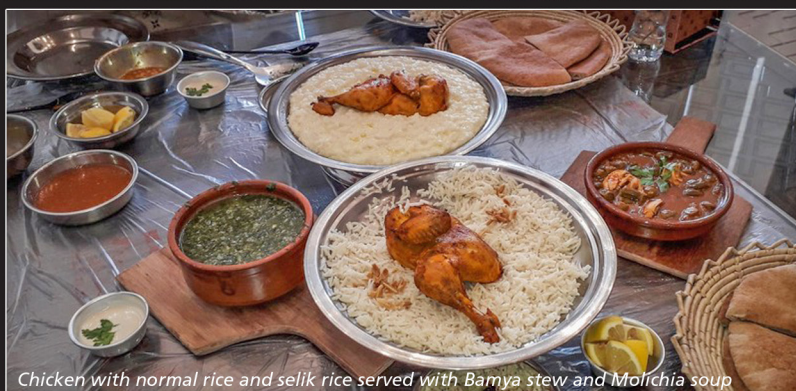
It's an extensive site and not much is left of the once-important city. It is said that Mohammed came through here on his way from Mecca and stayed for three days, which attracts a number of Muslims who come here to pray.



Labneh



Camel kebabs with bread and a yogurt sauce



Chicken with normal rice and selik rice served with Bamyia stew and Molichia soup



Another elaborate Arabic meal



One dark night, a lightning bolt illuminated the Oitn Mountain, revealing its magic beauty to the nearby mountain of Tamya. Promising eternal love, Tamya pledged to move herself to be nearer Qitn. As often happens in such love stories, a jealous mountain, Chlman, intercepted the move by shooting Tamya with an arrow. All that was left of the poor, unfortunate lover, was a great big hole in the ground.

migrated from Mecca to Medina where he made his home, is was the very first mosque to be constructed anywhere in the world. At the time, it had palm trees for pillars and leaves for the roof, and it was built by the Prophet himself and his companions. Over time, various caliphs have renovated and extended the mosque to the super-mosque we see today, with four minarets, 56 domes, and a capacity of 15,000 devotees.



A House in Al Ballad Old Town

## Medina

Medina is an oasis town surrounded by the Hejaz Mountains and volcanic hills. It is the place where Prophet Muhammad founded Islam after his escape from Mecca. In Medina, the body of the Prophet is also entombed. Medina is the second holiest city for Muslims after Mecca, and I am requested to wear an abaya and hejab as we tour the holy sites this afternoon.

## The Prophet's Mosque

Al-Masjid an-Nabawi or the Prophet's Mosque, is the second mosque built by Prophet Muhammad in Medina, after the one at Quba. It is the second largest mosque and holiest site in Islam, after Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, also in Saudi Arabia. Non-Muslims are not permitted to enter the mosque, but people of Islamic faith come to pray here from all over the world.

## Quba Mosque

Built in 622 AD as the Prophet Mohammed

## Alia Al Madina Farm

No trip to Saudi Arabia is complete without a visit to a date farm. We visit one here. First, we are shown how seats are made from rope and palm leaves, but, of course, the main items produced here, are dates. There are so many different dates, and we are shown the best ones in the area.

## Ta'if

Taif city is located in the Mecca Province of south-western Saudi Arabia. Situated on a table land at an elevation of 6,165 feet, it is the main summer resort of Saudi Arabia. Before Islam was founded, it was regarded as the seat of the pagan goddess Allat; today it is known more because of the tomb of a cousin of Prophet Muhammad and for the graves of two infant sons of the Prophet.

## Al Wahba Crater

At 3,000 meters in diameter, and 380m deep, Al Wahba Crater is the largest in the country. It is located 250 km from Ta'if, and a 4 hours' drive away from Jeddah. The bottom of the crater is covered in a layer of salt. As with so many other places, there is a legend attached to how this crater was formed. It is said that one dark night, a lightning bolt illuminated the Oitn Mountain, revealing its magic beauty to the nearby mountain of Tamya. Promising eternal love, Tamya pledged to move herself to be nearer Qitn. As often happens in such love stories, a jealous mountain, Chlman, intercepted





the move by shooting Tamyra with an arrow. All that was left of the poor, unfortunate lover, was a great big hole in the ground.

### Al Shiokh Rose Plantation

Taif is famous for its roses, and we continue to a rose garden, where we meet our new guide, Abdul Aziz. The factory here is run as a collaboration between 25 local families, each owning a small plot of land. They have 32 big vats between them. Rosewater is used mainly in skin care products, but is also used in cooking (I have a half-used bottle in my cupboard at home), and as a health benefit to aid digestion, as eye drops, it has antibacterial properties to help heal wounds, or to soothe sore throats. In each of these vats, 10kg of rose petals and 25l of water is placed, a fire is lit underneath with the steam helping to create the resulting rosewater. The whole process takes 2.5 hours.

### Al Shareef Museum

An excellent and well-laid-out museum, showing how life would have been like here in the past - including a small selection of vintage cars, all of which still work. Once a year, on their national day, the owner takes them out to take part in a parade.

### Jeddah

Jeddah is a port city on the Red Sea coast. It is a modern commercial hub full of resorts, hotels and beaches. It is famous for the Corniche, a seafront promenade anchored by the iconic King Fahd's Fountain. It is the second largest city in Saudi Arabia after Riyadh and the 100th largest city in the world by land area. Jeddah is the main gateway to the two Islamic holy cities of Mecca (65 km to the east) and Medina (360 km to the north).

### The Globe Roundabout

This sculpture by the Spanish artist Julio La Fente, was created in 1971, and is placed in the middle of a road junction. The huge globe rotates on an angle and is lit up at night.

### Jeddah Corniche

For 62 kilometres along the seafront, the seagull-themed promenade swirls around the bay and rocky shores, providing an area for walking, meeting friends, and taking selfies.

### Outdoor Sculpture Museum

Like the globe, these works of art used to be displayed on a roundabout, but when the city was expanded, they were moved to a park on the corniche.

### Al Ballad Old Town

This historic area dates back to the 7th century and retains traditional homes built from coral. This UNESCO-inscribed district of Jeddah is undergoing major restoration. The higgledy-piggledy buildings are affectionately known as 'dancing houses'. The titling is a result of shallow foundations – mostly just around a metre deep.



Shafee Mosque

### Shafee Mosque

The mosque is said to be 1422 years old, but was renovated some 500 years ago. The minaret is a mere 820 years old. It is the only mosque in Saudi Arabia where we, as non-Muslims, have been allowed to enter. Abir contacts the Imam who opens it up, especially for us.

### Other attractions of Jeddah

On our way to the hotel, we stop at the corniche again, in a different place this time, to see what is claimed to be the world's highest fountain, at 320 metres. Jeddah also boasts the world's highest flag pole and the biggest LED billboard.

Saudi Arabia has a lot to offer, and the people are extremely friendly and very welcoming to tourists. We have thoroughly enjoyed our time here, and if you appreciate places that see very few tourists, attractions are almost unheard of outside the country, and enjoy the feeling of pioneering travel, now is the time to discover Saudi, before mainstream tourists do. However, if you are put off by the lack of western facilities and tourist infrastructure, and expect everything to run like clockwork, it may be wise to wait a couple of years before visiting. The country aspires to find a place in the Top Ten tourist destinations in the world by 2030.





# Women Travel Network

ADVERTORIAL

Women have many roles to play in various arenas. Her place in society is punctuated with many tasks. While accomplishing such tasks she compromises with her love to explore the unknown. Kayaking through seas, relishing exquisite delicacies of various countries, experiencing deep water snorkelling or just seeing the world can be any woman's dream waiting to be fulfilled. Making such dreams come true for many women are the new era all-women travel services.

## Why Women Travel Network?

Many a times, when your skin thirsts for a touch of mist or dew drops and your heart yearns for an escape far from the daily life routine or the load of work in your respective jobs, you start seeking for people eager to accompany you. You try convincing your husband or children to take some time out of their busy schedules, but many times in vain. At those difficult times, the Women Travel Network (WTN) gives you the grand idea to set out alone to evaluate the passion of you. Personal safety is of great concern to these days, so maybe fearing to set sail for your

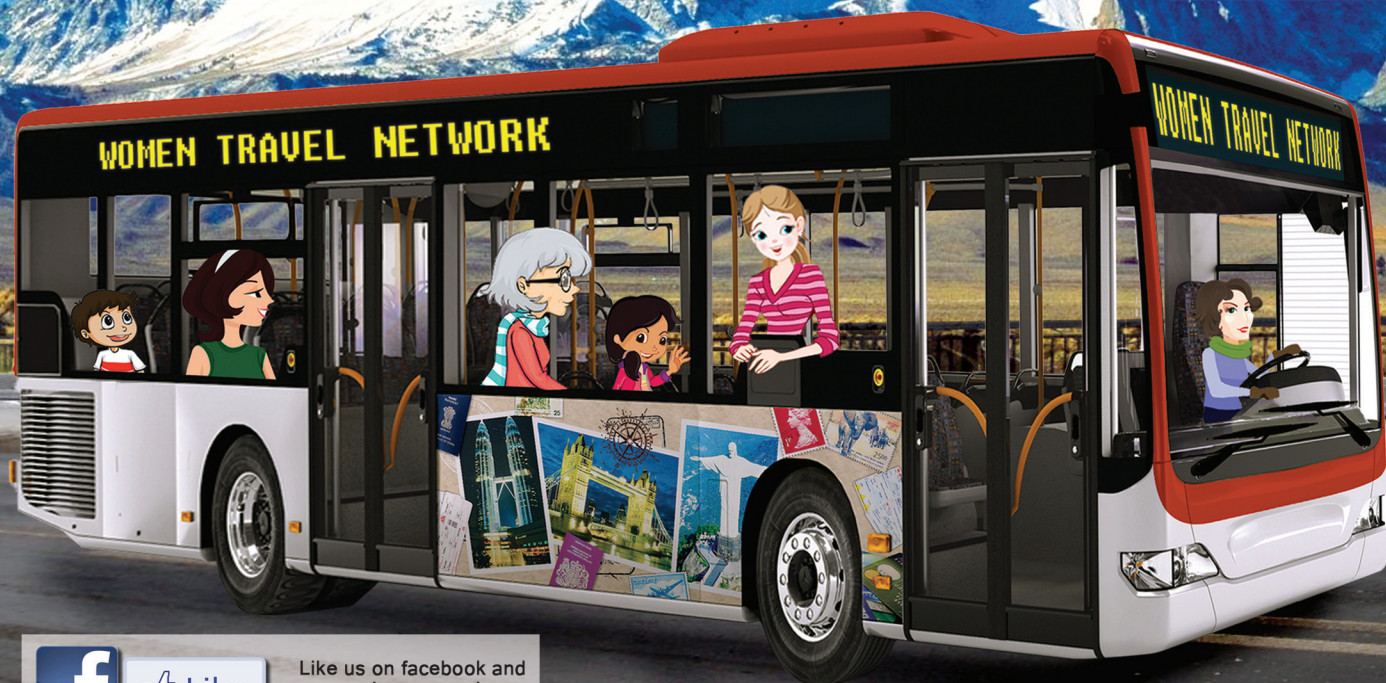
maiden venture all by yourselves. WTN takes this into account and enables you to indulge in thrilling vacations with a group of spirited women tourists of all ages all geared with the same vigour. Things can be made easy and trouble-free yet well organised by WTN as it reduces the prime inconveniences like buying tickets, booking for lodging and drawing up itinerary.

## What exactly WTN does?

With WTN you have the option of getting the best possible accommodation that would not harm your budget and the discretion of staying alone in rooms or sharing with someone. WTN also ensures that a suitable poise is maintained between seeing around and resting not making someone too fatigued with consistent tours. This network looks after all the formalities giving you a chance to pack your belongings without any hesitation. The organised travel plans will help gather fruitful travelling experiences in the company of like-minded women. WTN gives you the scope of bonding, and at the same time helps you make new friends. So if you are looking for a getaway, an escapade and your husband's/son's/father's/boyfriend's/friend's dates are bothering, Woman Travel







Like

Like us on facebook and get to know our latest exciting trip details.

Network is the best solution for you.

So what's so special about WTN?

Imagine meeting college friends after a huge gap of time, or getting chance to spend some quality time with kids or elders or just escaping the daily hustle and bustle of life in the company of colleagues or friends.

WTN offers to make those unfulfilled travel wishes come true for many women. With a number of national and international tour packages of WTN you can travel the world, alone, with your son (below 8 years) or your daughter (no age bar) and make unforgettable journeys. Whether you travel alone, or with a kid, friends, neighbours or relations, Women Travel Network can give you memorable trips. Absolutely hassle-free and comfortable, yet adventurous and safe fun trips are what this Network has in bag for you. A real boon for a woman!

If you have your own group of women

It is also possible to make your own preferred groups and Women Travel Network will take care of all the formalities of booking, ticketing and managing the tour. You just need to enjoy your trip and forget about everything else. So get geared up ladies and make your dream come true.

How to go about it?

Email us your requirements and plans. You will hear from us soon.

Contact

Email:

womentravelnetwork@gmail.com;

Call: +91-8420108693





# *Glimpses* from Turkmenistan

*Photographs by Grete Howard, Bristol, UK*









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