Saudi Arabia - Fascinating!

In February our 9-strong Saudi Arabia Horizons group completed a fascinating journey through this remarkable Arab country - Far Horizons’ third visit to the birthplace of the Islamic world since 2005.

Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman is the driving force behind Saudi Arabia’s new-found commitment to its tourism industry. While there is still much to be done, the gradual relaxation of travel and dress restrictions (for visitors and Saudi citizens alike), the opening of world class hotels in smaller cities and towns, the prevalence of modern transport on good quality national highways, and many other developments are contained within the Saudi ‘Vision 2030’ plan to reduce the Kingdom’s dependence on oil, diversify its economy, and develop public service sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, recreation and tourism.

During our visit it became apparent that the many attractions - including remnants of ancient and pre-Islamic civilizations, that of the early 20th Century unification period and modern period - are receiving the much needed attention they require to protect, preserve and restore them under the 2020 Transformation element of ‘Vision 2030’.

Our group entered Saudi Arabia on some of the first electronic tourist visas issued. Indications are that these streamlined, easy to obtain ‘e-tourist’ visas will open the country to smaller groups and even individual travellers wishing to explore the length and breadth of the country (excluding Mecca and Madina, which remain closed to non-Muslims).

In addition to the rich history, remarkable scenery and diverse culinary offerings, our interaction with and welcome by the many Saudi nationals we encountered throughout the tour left a lasting, very positive impression of our visit, which encourages future tours and, in time, the possibility of offering individual travellers the opportunity to visit on ad-hoc, tailor-made programs.

Clockwise from top right:
- Dammam corniche, invited to tea!
- Rock formations, Jubbah petroglyphs
- Invited to lunch at a desert camp, Sakaka
- Qasr Al Bint, Madain Saleh
- Rooftop loungeroom, Nasif House, Jeddah
- Farewell dinner at our guide Saad’s house
- Al-Rifa’ai Turkish house, Farazan Island

We return to Saudi Arabia in November 2020. In addition to adding extra nights in Riyadh, Buraydah, Al Ula and Abha our 2020 tour continues south from Abha to the stone villages of Najran then spends three nights at a comfortable tented camp in the ‘Empty Quarter’ of the Rub al Khali - the largest contiguous desert in the world. Covering some 650,000 sq km and more than a third of the Arabian Peninsula, the harsh environment, tribal encounters and sand dunes up to 250m in height are described in great detail by Wilfred Thessiger in his 1959 book ‘Arabian Sands’. 
Ethiopia Horizons
26 days departing 27 December 2019

Ethiopia was one of the earliest nations to adopt Christianity - in the first half of the fourth century and its historical roots date to the time of the Apostles. The northern town of Lalibela is one of Ethiopia’s holiest cities and is famous for its rock-cut monolithic churches (Bete). The churches themselves date from the seventh to thirteenth centuries, and are traditionally dated to the reign of the Zagwe king Gebre Mesqel Lalibela (r. ca. 1181–1221).

Orthodox Christmas is one of the greatest and most colorful festivals on the Ethiopian calendar. At Lalibela it is celebrated with greater devotion, chanting, dancing, and singing around the rock-hewn churches. Tens of thousands of people from all walks of life make the pilgrimage to Lalibela each year. Most walk barefoot for days or weeks to share the Christmas blessing. Different ceremonies are held at different rock-hewn churches.

We spend three nights at Lalibela to explore the remarkable rock-hewn churches and attend the Christmas Eve ceremony during which priests and deacons dance while pilgrims clap and ululate to the beat of drums. At midnight a candlelight ceremony commemorates the birth of Jesus.

We also witness the ceremony when priests line up with their drums on the cliff edge while others stand at the bottom, representing the shepherds and the angels announcing the birth of Jesus.

From $26,560 per person [share twin] ex Sydney or Melbourne. For further details request our descriptive brochure.

North East India Horizons
26 days departing 15 November 2019

Our journey through India’s remote and less visited North East starts in the Assamese capital Guwahati before criss-crossing the states of Meghalaya; Arunachal Pradesh - crossing the Sela Pass to Tawang and the second largest Buddhist Monastery (after the Potala in Lhasa), then visiting the beautiful Ziro Valley with its remarkable tribal culture; back into Assam to cross the mighty Brahmaputra River and explore Majuli, the world’s largest sand island; Nagaland to spend time at the annual Hornbill festival at Kohima; and reenters Assam once more to undertake jeep and elephant safaris deep into Kaziranga National Park, home to a healthy population of Indian One-Horned Rhino.

The week-long Hornbill festival unites one and all in Nagaland, where people enjoy the colourful performances, crafts, sports, food fairs, games and ceremonies. Traditional arts which include paintings, wood carvings, and sculptures are on display. Festival highlights include the Naga Morungs (tribal houses) exhibition and the sale of arts and crafts, herbal medicine stalls, fashion shows, traditional archery, Naga wrestling and indigenous games. Song and dance performances by the many indigenous Naga tribes dressed in traditional costumes, are a major highlight not to be missed.

At the end of the tour there is an option to fly to Agartala (Tripura state) and travel overland through Bangladesh to Kolkata, visiting the Sunderbans tiger preserve and several ancient and historical sites along the way.

From $18,810 per person [share twin] ex Sydney. For further details request our descriptive brochure.

In Addis Ababa, we witness the equally engrossing Timket (Epiphany) festivities during which large crowds assemble at the ritual site as the holy ark is escorted back to its church in colorful procession. The clergy, bearing robes and umbrellas of many hues, perform rollicking dances and songs; the elders march solemnly with their weapons, attended by middle-aged men singing; and the women, dressed up in their finest, chatter excitedly. The young braves leap up and down in spirited dances, tirelessly repeating rhythmic songs.

From $26,560 per person [share twin] ex Sydney or Melbourne. For further details request our descriptive brochure.
Hidden Gems of North India
29 days departing 28 February 2020

India’s long, rich history stretches back for thousands of years. More recently (mere centuries) - during the times of the Mughals and Maharajas, the British Raj and modern era - Palaces and Forts were constructed at important cross roads and cultural or commercial capitals to house and protect the myriad Royal, wealthy and elite families.

Today many of those remarkable buildings lie neglected or in ruins. But many more have been exquisitely restored to their former glory and are now operating as Palace or Heritage hotels across this vast country.

Our ‘Hidden Gems’ tour wends its way south from Delhi to Hyderabad and Mumbai, then heads north into Rajasthan - along the way visiting many of the magnificent palaces and forts, temples and historical, religious or cultural sites that make India so fascinating.

We stay in luxurious former palaces, converted forts, havelis and Heritage hotels - literally living like Maharajas.

For first time visitors to ‘incredible India’ this tour is a luxurious introduction to some of the remarkable attractions and destinations not normally visited on a standardised itinerary. The tour can be joined in either Delhi or half-way through in Mumbai which could suit anyone who may have visited India previously.

Kamchatka & The Two Koreas
30 days departing 29 May 2020

As North Korea looks to its slow emergence into regional (if not global) affairs and relations with Russia and South Korea continue to ‘warm’ this tour incorporates South Korea, Chinese Manchuria, the Russian Far East / Kamchatka Peninsula and North Korea.

From Seoul we visit the DMZ/JSU (De-Militarized Zone/Joint Security Area) and the city’s important attractions before driving to Mt Seoraksan National Park and Andong to explore the UNESCO World Heritage sites of Hajhoe Folk Village, Gyeongju, Seokguram Grotto and Confucius Folk Village, taking the Bullet Train back to Seoul for a final night.

In Harbin we see the Saint Sophia Cathedral and Siberian Tiger Park before driving to Mudanjiang and Jingpohu for a cruise to Diaoshuilou waterfall and visit Beishan Park. We then cross the China/Russia border to Vladivostok and fly to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski for five nights, undertaking full day heli-tours to the Valley of the Geysers, Kurril Lake and Avachinsky Volcano, picnic at Camel Rock and visit an indigenous snow-dog kennel.

We fly from Vladivostok to visit the many attractions of Pyongyang, including Nampo and the West Sea Barrage. We take a charter flight to Lake Chona and Mt Paekdu - where Kim Jong Il was ‘officially’ born, drive to Kaesong and the DMZ at Panmunjom, and drive to Mt Myohnyang to visit the International Friendship Exhibition and stroll in the Sangwon Valley.

Papua New Guinea Horizons
16 days departing 8 August 2020

Large-scale song and dance festivals in Papua New Guinea, known as ‘Sing Sing’, can last for days and often continue through the night. Body decoration and adornment are key features, using a rich variety of materials such as pigments, feathers, leaves, bone, shell and animal skins. Although Sing Sings are based on traditional large-scale gatherings, their modern form was devised in the 1950s and 1960s in an effort to promote peaceful interactions between warring tribes.

The largest and best known festival is the Mount Hagen Show, which is held every August and can attract as many as 100 different tribal groups. The Goroka Sing Sing is another important festival, and there are numerous smaller gatherings, such as the one we will attend at Paiya (near Mount Hagen).

These smaller gatherings tend to be organized around harvest times, where vegetables such as yams are shown, compared and traded. Festivals are also held to celebrate social events such as weddings. Often one village will host the event, which will be held in the centre of the village near the spirit house. Dancing is important on such occasions, along with music and song. Careful attention is paid to make-up and costume, on which judgements the reputation and prosperity of the village’s Big Man very much depends.

With few roads in the mountainous and jungle covered interior, we rely on light aircraft, river boat and 4WD vehicles as we travel between our comfortable hotel and lodge stays.
Hard on the heels of our February 2019 tour, and with developments in Saudi Arabia moving forward as part of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman’s ‘Vision 2030’ plans, this tour both duplicates and enhances our previous (Far Horizons’ 4th) visit by adding extra nights in Riyadh, Buraydah, Al Ula, Jeddah and Abha.

As Saudi Arabia undergoes ‘generational change’ under the guiding hand of the Crown Prince, ladies are no longer required to wear scarves or facial covering and the full length ‘abaya’ is now considered optional.

Encompassing a wide variety of highlights and attractions, we travel in air-conditioned comfort along well maintained highways to all corners of the Kingdom and stay predominantly in five star hotels and two luxury desert camps.

Ancient pre-Islamic historical attractions include the 6,000 - 10,000 year old petroglyphs at Jubba; the remarkable ‘standing stones’ at Rajajil; and the southern Nabataean capital of Madain Saleh.

Many of the towns and cities we visit feature centuries old forts, battlements and palaces, traditional souk (markets) and architectural wonders from a bygone era.

With expectations of a resolution to the current conflict to the south in the near future, we have added extra days to head south from Abha to the city of Najran with its high mud-brick ‘Yemeni’ houses, ancient fortifications and palaces.

From Najran we then head east, deep into the so-called ‘empty quarter’ of Rub al Khali, where we stay three nights in a luxury tented camp and undertake 4WD safaris into this huge desert which covers more than a third of the Arabian Peninsula.

Expressions of interest welcomed.

A descriptive brochure on this tour will be available soon.

Please call or write for a brochure or to register your interest in a future tour, a particular destination, or to organise a private group or individual travel program.