

Saudi Arabia

Asir and Al'Ula

A Greentours Itinerary

Saudi's once closed borders were opened to tourists only a few years ago. And with the country's relaxed attitude to dress codes and its enthusiasm to embrace Western Tourism, we've now got a chance to explore some of the finest and yet little-known wildscapes in the World.

Day 1

Depart UK/Europe

We'll depart in the afternoon from the UK, the flight taking us to Jeddah and thence a short hop on to Abha.

Days 2 & 3

Abha and Jurf Radah (Raydah) Natural Reserve

The Asir Mountains of Southwestern Arabia are part of a globally important biogeographic hotspot that includes the mountains over the border in Yemen. These lush green mountains have been isolated for aeons by the deserts of the empty quarter and the arid lowlands of the Tihamat and the Red Sea itself. Saudi Arabians flock to the regional capital Abha, the base for our visit, during the summer months because of its greenery and relatively cool climate. The highest peaks close to the city reach nearly 10,000 feet above sea level and cloud and fog often cloak the florally extremely diverse escarpment. Dominant at these higher altitudes are forests of *Juniperus procera* but there is a range of trees such as *Celtis africana*, *Maytenus undata*, *Rhus rhetinorrhoea*, *Olea chrysophylla*, and the unusual and beautiful shrubby *Rumex nervosus*. There are plenty of floral surprises here from the magnificent purple pompons of *Centaurothamnus maximus* to the lovely yellow-flowered *Evotrochis verticillata* half *Dionysia* and half *Primula*. There are beautiful *Barlerias*, large *Plectranthus*, clambering *Ceropigias* and brilliant red *Hibiscus*. Near the top of the escarpment we'll see Bath White, African Clouded Yellow, Arabian Wall and Small Copper, butterflies all with very local distributions in Arabia! Hamadryas Baboons, African Paradise-Flycatcher and Sunbirds hint at the affinities with Africa as do woody plants such as a range of *Grewia* species, *Nuxia oppositifolia*, *Tarchonanthus camphoratus*, many *Vachellia* species, and the beautiful Tree Aloe *Aloe sabaeya*. Both Arabian and Philby's Partridges are common, as are Arabian Green Bee-eater and Rameron Pigeon. The Asir has many endemic birds and we'll see Yemen Warbler, Yemen Thrush, Yemen Linnet and Arabian Woodpecker as we descend slowly from the escarpment.

We've two whole days to explore the escarpment though we might be rather tired on the first day after the overnight journey. I am sure though we won't want to waste time sleeping when we can be exploring such a spectacular and unique

environment! The reserve is bisected by an excellent if incredibly steep tarmac road that descends from the very top of the escarpment to the wadi floor thousands of feet below and we'll spend much of the two days pottering slowly down this – never up! There's almost no traffic. Just the quiet of this unique Spanish Moss draped forest and the spectacular views over the wild ridges to the west.

During our stay in Abha we'll have the services of the larger-than-life (quite literally!) Abu-Turki, a redoubtable figure who is full of entertainment and stories. He has twenty-one brothers! Perhaps not surprisingly he knows everyone and so we'll get more than a glimpse of local life. For instance on both days in Raydah we'll stop for lunch at one of Abu Turki's friends. He lives in a beautiful old house built long ago in the traditional style and we'll enjoy some fine local food from his balcony which abuts the family's small coffee farm in the narrow valley behind the house. This is down in a valley both hot and dry and here the flora is quite different with many succulents such as *Caralluma* and *Sansevieria*, and the striking *Euphorbia cactus*. Here are *Carrisa edulis*, *Delonix elata*, the lovely purple blooms of *Cadia purpurea*, and we hope the single tree of the very rare *Dombeya torrida* will be in flower! Typical birds of these lower altitudes are Black-crowned Tchagra and African Grey Hornbill, whilst Arabian Babbler and Abyssinian White-eye are both common. Among the butterflies the Golden Piper is common and we'll see fast-flying Cream-bordered Charaxes, Golden Piper and several Pansy species.

Day 4

Rijal and the lower wadis

We'll visit the remarkable and stunningly beautiful 'gingerbread' village of Rijal. Hamadryas Baboons line the road hoping the motorists will ignore the signs asking them not to feed them -they are super-abundant along this road! Rijal Alma literally means "the brightest men." This is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Lying along a natural corridor linking Yemen and the Levant to Makkah and Medina made it an important regional commercial centre. Rijal's architecture is stunning. The Desert Rose *Adenium obesum* is found on the hillsides hereabouts and there are many colourful annuals flowering along the floor of the wadis. Arabian Scops Owl roosts in the large figs in the village and White-browed Coucal are frequent. This is a great area for butterflies. There are some really nice blues such as Fig Blue, Nurse's Sapphire and the wonderfully-named Pomegranate Playboy. In much of Arabia the Lime Butterfly, a swallowtail, is the Indian one, but in this area it's the African Lime Butterfly. There's a fine variety of Pierids too with some quite colourful species such as Arabian Mistletoe White, Small Salmon Arab, Blue-spotted Arab, and the gorgeous Scarlet Tip.

In the late afternoon we'll head north of Abha to an area of escarpment where we can find Arabia's rarest endemic bird, the Asir Magpie, especially to be enjoyed in the late afternoon light as the sun drops to the western coast behind ridge after blue ridge.

Day 5

Hapala Hanging Village, Aleemffar Village and Al Quroon Forest

An hour southeast of Abha we'll find ourselves driving across an arid plain. There's not much to tell us we are nearly 2500m above sea level as the flat dry land feels very desert like. There are isolated patches of the trunkless palm *Phoenix caespitosa*. Buff-breasted Wheatear, Pied Wheatear and Red-capped Lark are the typical birds. Suddenly we will reach the edge of the escarpment again. Remarkably a small village is perched right on the cliffside. It looks impossible to reach on foot from above and difficult from below. These 'hanging villages' were built as defensive positions and they would have been remarkably difficult to attack. A cable car takes us down amongst the buildings where we can explore the narrow streets and largely abandoned gardens now full of a remarkably luxuriant and very species-rich vegetation. Yemen Serins feed along the cliff top so too Arabian Serins and Yemen Linnets. Verreaux's Eagles cruise the thermals that rise from the vertical cliffs and Little Rock Thrush are very much at home on these cliff faces. Late we'll visit Aleemffar Village which is a delight of narrow streets through the impressive old mud-brick buildings. If time allows in the afternoon we'll stop at Al Quroon Forest. This is another west-facing escarpment forest where we'll spend some time walking down another well-made asphalt road with hardly any traffic. Long-legged Buzzard is frequent and we'll likely see both Philby's and Arabian Partridges here. Tristram's Starlings switch back and forth across the ridge tops in active fast moving flocks.

Day 6

Flight to Al'Ula

We'll take a breakfast-time flight, initially with the Empty Quarter stretching away to our east before following the ridge of the Hijaz Mountains to the remote desert fastness of Al'ula. Al'ula's fantastic and fantastical landscapes have caught the World's imagination in recent times with the result that there are now a number of very fine resorts nestling in the spectacular landscapes at the foot of the Hijaz Mountains. These wild and enigmatic desert landscapes of sandstone canyons, volcanic plains and fascinating rock formations are softened by luscious oases full of date palm and citrus trees. It has been conjectured that the Hijaz was the source of the ancient Pishon River thought to be one of the four rivers associated with the Garden of Eden. We will explore the beautiful canyons of the Sharaan Nature Reserve, the extraordinary black and white volcanos of Khaybar, and the heart of the region, the Oasis of the Wadi Al Qura.

Day 7

Sharaan Nature Reserve

Sharaan is one of Saudi Arabia's flagship protected areas. It is huge – almost the size of the island of Tenerife. Several major re-introduction projects are currently underway, one the Arabian Leopard, and another with Arabian Oryx. The former we won't see but the latter we may. We'll drive a beautiful circuit through the western edge of Sharaan. The landscapes are stunning. Tall layered sandstone

buttes and mesas rise from the sands. Narrow wadis carve their way through the cliffs, and in other places the wadis are wide, sometimes with an appreciable amount of vegetation.

The mammalian fauna of Sharaan is still largely intact and we'll likely encounter Arabian Gazelles grazing between the great rock walls that characterize the landscape here. A careful watch on the clifftops might well reveal a stately Nubian Ibex. We'll visit at night on Day 8 and try to see some of the harder to see species! Birdlife is also wonderful. Sand Partridges scurry across the wadis, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse fly in little groups to far off springs. We'll see Namaqua Dove and several species each of Shrikes and Larks. Typical arid-land butterflies include Desert White, Golden Arab, Plain Tiger, Diadem & Yellow Pansy.

Day 8

Hegra World Heritage Site and evening to Sharaan Nature Reserve

The strange architectural *Cynomorium coccineum* and *Cistanche violacea*, colourful parasites both, emerge from the sands of the ancient Nabatean Site of Hegra now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This is the southern end of the same kingdom that ruled Petra and if anything is even more spectacular than that ancient site. Sinai Rosefinches and Tristram's Grackles inhabit every desert wadi here with plentiful Ménétries's Warblers and White-crowned Black Wheatears.

We're allowed to visit Sharaan Nature Reserve at night to have dinner under the stars and go star-gazing – the skies here are famously free of light pollution and crystal-sharp – but we'll also have our eyes set elsewhere as we look for some of the charismatic mammals that are found in Sharaan. Spotlighting our way out will give us a chance to look for two cat species that have good populations in the reserve - African Wild Cat and Sand Cat. There is quite a suite of rodents that are active at night here including the Arabian Jerboa. Blandford's Foxes hunt these. And we've a decent chance of spotting a Honey Badger or two.

Day 9

The Black and White volcanos of Khaybar

The volcanic field of Harrat Khaybar north of Al-Madinah, Saudi Arabia contains rare examples of white volcanoes comprised mainly of the calcium rich felsic rock comendite. The white volcanoes are surrounded by more recent black basaltic lava fields that follow the pre-existing topography and display both aa and pahoehoe lava flow structures. The jewels of the Harrat Khaybar are Jebel Abiadh and Jebel Bayda. Jebel Abiadh (literally "white mount") is the highest crater of the Harrah at 2093m whilst Jebel Bayda (in Arabic the feminine of "white mount") is the largest with a 1.5 kilometre diameter cone. The contrast between the whitish creamy lava of Jebel Bayda and the deep black one of Jebel Qidr is really very striking. The bird life here is more typical of the dry mountains with Blackstart very common and we can also see Hooded Wheatear, Mourning Wheatear and Striolated Bunting

Day 10

Local wadis and departure from Al'ula

The heart of Al'ula is the Wadi Al'Qura (or Valley of Villages), close to our hotel. The Al'ula Oasis is a lush haven that offers cool respite with its famous date palm groves and aromatic citrus trees along with harvests of wheat, barley, olives, figs, and oats. The Al'ula Valley thrives due to the drainage basin and the oasis's natural springs. Palestine Sunbirds are common whilst Scrub Warblers chatter from the crops. In the trees we can see no less than three bee-eater species - Blue-cheeked, European and Arabian Green Bee-eater.

Day 11

Arrive UK/Europe

If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

To Book a on this Holiday please fill in the booking form which you can download from www.greentours.co.uk (also found in the Greentours brochure) and post to Greentours, 8 Eliot Close, Armitage, Rugeley, WS15 4UP, UK. Tel +44 (0)1298 83563. After booking your place you'll receive a confirmation letter and a detailed information pack will be dispatched twelve weeks prior to departure. Flower, bird, mammal, frog, dragonfly and butterfly checklists are available!