

Carve out a niche for Yemen

Yemen's capital city, Sana'a, which is rich in Arabic history, attracts tourists seeking culture and a true flavour of ancient Arabia, as well as large numbers of business and VFR travellers from the Middle East.

Cheryl Mandy discovers how clued-up travel agents and tour operators can create tailor made special interest trips for adventurous tourists heading to Yemen

Yemen attracts a certain breed of tourist – the culture-seeking eco-aware visitor. Presently hailing mostly from Europe and America, these tourists arrive in small packs rather than unwieldy groups. Consequently, tour operators in Yemen are focusing on tailor made and specialised tours offering adventure travel, nature and hiking trips and cultural excursions. Popular are treks to mountaintop villages in 4x4 vehicles, camping and camel trips into the desert taking in Yemen's exotic scenery alongside visits to Arabian heritage sites. And then there is the sea – scuba diving and journeys in ancient dhows to unique sites such as the biologically isolated island of Socotra, sometimes dubbed 'the other Galapagos Islands'.

According to Yemen Tourism (the Ministry of Tourism Promotion Board) statistics, Yemen received 544,000 visitors during 2006, of which 262,358 originated from Middle Eastern countries.

Saudi Arabian visitors were the most prominent at 166,272, with the UAE contributing more than 50,000. The overall figures show a substantial growth compared to the 2005 figures of 203,000 visitors from the Middle East.

However, opinions on source markets and what contributes to visitor numbers differ; tour operators say the majority of their "real" tourists come from Britain, France, America and Italy. They claim some visitors, particu-

larly from Asia and the Middle East, are generally not "tourists", but people travelling on business or for family reasons.

Visitor arrivals growth of more than 10% is anticipated for this year, and to help meet these expectations, the destination's flag carrier, Yemenia Airways has introduced several new tour packages to attract more tourists from the Gulf and North Africa regions.

Five packages ranging from three nights to 10 nights are now available to Sana'a, from destinations including Abu Dhabi, Qatar, Bahrain and Dubai, as well as from Addis Ababa, Djibouti, Khartoum and also Kuala Lumpur.

Packages from Africa and the Middle East start from US \$294 per person per tour and include flights, half-board and accommodation in a choice of two-, three- and five-star hotels, transport by 4x4 vehicle or bus as appropriate, and will take in sights according to length of stay and customer choice.

This is the first time Yemenia Airways has offered these packages, and Taha Almahbashi, manager, Yemenia Holidays, says: "We look forward to welcoming people from the Gulf – it is only three hours flight from Dubai, and Yemen is an important part of Arab heritage."

PRESERVING YEMEN'S HERITAGE

The majority of Yemeni tour operators are fiercely proud of their land and some, like Arabia Felix, are increasingly concerned that

“Every Arab country has a role to play in protecting Yemen from over development or mass tourism.”

as investment in Yemen increases and the population expands, the ancient Yemeni heritage is threatened. The tour company believes that if Yemen wants to retain its soul, it has to encourage the involvement of all Arab countries to help Yemen protect what is precious.

Arabia Felix founder and managing director, Italian-born Marco Livadiotti, who moved to Yemen when he was five years old, is also the founder of established tour operator, the Universal Touring Company. Also a heritage conservation consultant, Livadiotti is seriously passionate about what he does and works hard to promote Yemen and its culture.

"The only way to save Yemen's heritage is via the Arabs. The rich cousins must help Yemen to help itself. It is the cradle of Arab civilisation – it is their identity – it is their roots," he says. "Every Arab country has a role to play in protecting Yemen from over development or mass tourism. It is not too late to save it."

TOURS GALORE

Arabia Felix, which has offices in historic Bastakiya Dubai as well as in Sana'a, encourages visitors to see "an Arabia without borders" by undertaking its 12-day tailor-made adventure tour, encompassing Dubai (the modern Arabia), across to Oman (where nature is a prominent feature), and along the old frankincense trading routes into Yemen (the historic Arabia).

Some tours operators handle a maximum of six people per tour, while others cater to a maximum of 30.

Future Tours Industries (FTI) says it is dedicated to providing quality, educationally rewarding "off the beaten track" tour programmes that are geared towards providing visitors with an authentic look into the country's age-old culture, local population ambience and ancient archaeology.

"The treasures of Yemen, so ample and extremely varied, are sought by art historians, archaeologists, chefs and adventure travellers alike," explains Dr Ahmed L Al-Amari, chairman, FTI.

"Whether you consider Yemen's age-old culture, great monuments of art, nature reserves, compelling myths, colourful bazaars, tribal areas of great fascination, spice-laden cuisine or impressive landscapes, the choice is yours."

Summer Tours and Travel based at Sana'a provides overland trips within in Yemen, including architectural, historical, cultural and eco-tourism tailor-made packages. Scuba diving, trekking, camel tours and desert camping are the company's speciality.

Acacia Tours offers two to 14-day linked tours between Yemen and Jordan or Oman. One example follows parts of the Incense Road, also known as the "frankincense route", which during Nabatean times, snaked along various difficult paths along the east coast by the Red Sea, through what is now Yemen and Saudi Arabia, onto Petra in Jordan, Gaza, Damascus and finally to Egypt.

SAFEAS HOUSES

Yemen, in the south-west corner of the Arabian Peninsula bordered by Saudi Arabia and Oman, contrasts dramatically with the rest of the mostly dry, barren peninsula, for 70% of the country is mountainous, offering crisp air, unparalleled greenery and a remoteness that makes the visitor feel as if they have gone back in time by 200 years.

The country is abundant in natural, historical and archaeological attractions. It used to be known as Arabia Felix, the happy Arabia, because of its wealth, but nowadays it is the second poorest country in the Arabic world (only Mauritania has a lower per capita GDP).

Notable natural attractions are Socotra Island, known for its fascinating plant diversity; its pristine coral reefs ideal for snorkeling or scuba diving; and a section of the Rub'al Khali desert (The Empty Quarter).

History seeps out of every pore of Yemen, but perhaps the most striking tourist venues are its 3000-year-old ancient capital city of Sana'a, said to have been founded by Sham, son of Noah, and now a UNESCO World Heritage site along with the historic town of Zabid, the former capital and first university of Arabia in the ninth century, which is now an outstanding archaeological and historical site.

Other attractions include the city of Shibam with its unusual skyscrapers built some 600 years ago; Hadhramaut housing graves from pre-Islamic prophets; and Marib, the former capital of the ancient empire of the Queen of Sheba also featuring the remains of a 3000-year-old dam.

Yet Yemen has had a troubled history with civil wars and tribal conflicts predominating, and tourists are still warned against travelling there due to continuing tribal unrest, and most significantly, the incidents of tourist kidnappings, the most recent of which took place in September 2006.

Despite this, Abu Ali Monassar, vice chairman, Net Group, said recently that Yemen is one of the greatest countries to experience and that "Today Yemen is safe - really." "Unfortunately, thanks to the media, when a kidnapping takes place, it absolutely destroys the image of the country," he added.

He feels the country simply needs a major promotional campaign and to strongly emphasise safety: "I think it is a beautiful place with huge potential for tourism, but unfortunately, the government is not promoting the country that much; it is not participating enough in trade shows."

Livadiotti echoes Monassar's sentiments, claiming that "Yemen is one of the safest places on earth".

"The kidnapping is not done because of a hatred for foreigners. It is a statement of people being disgruntled, not that that is excusable," he adds.

Other Yemen-based tour operators agree that the destination is safe providing tour-

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ists do not wander off indiscriminately into unknown areas - as would be the case in many other countries in many other far more dangerous places in the world.

It is also safe if people travel with established tour operators who have knowledgeable guides that speak the language and are up-to-date with the security situation.

Abdulla Kassim, area manager for Yemen Airways in Dubai and the Northern Emirates says the Yemeni government has implemented policies that have successfully addressed the differences between tribes and as such, kidnapping incidents rarely happen at present.

"However, to ensure the safety of tourists, the ministry gives guidelines to arriving tourists regarding the places they should not travel to unescorted," he adds.

Some areas of the country are off-limits to travel without military escorts and Yemen Tourist Police permission, and other areas are no-go zones. Web sites such as <http://wikitravel.org> still have prominent warnings to potential visitors to Yemen, as do many embassy web sites, which carry similar warnings about many countries.

INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The Government of Yemen has been making slow but sure efforts to attract investment to Yemen from the nearby Gulf countries according to Dr Mohammed al-Mitami. He heads the Yemeni contingent of a joint Yemeni-Gulf Committee that will outline 40 new investment opportunities across industries including tourism, electricity and fisheries, at a conference to be held in Sana'a this February (2007). Between 400 and 600 Gulf and Yemeni corporations, some within the tourism sector, are expected to participate in the conference, which is being organised by the Yemen Ministry of Industry and Trade, in cooperation with the general assembly of the Gulf Cooperation Council (the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf).

In December last year Mutahar Taqi, chairman of Yemen's General Tourism Development Authority said it was imperative to spread awareness of the importance of eco-tourism both at home and abroad. He emphasised the need for a careful approach to devel-



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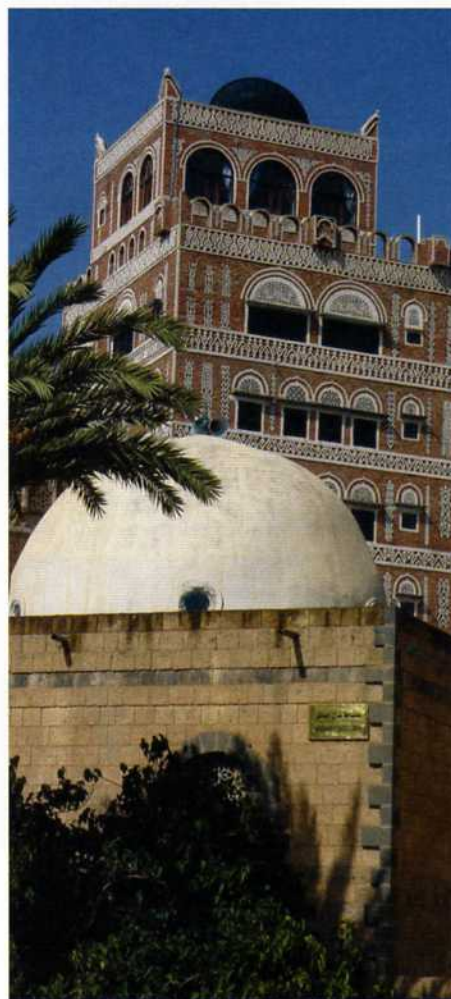
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oping all aspects of Yemen's tourism industry, and specifically, to link tourism projects with improving the income of the local people.

The authority has 17 tourism investment projects earmarked, which will be presented during the February conference.



Net Group's renovated Burj al Salam boutique hotel in Sana'a.

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A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Hotel investment is one possible opportunity as Yemen's hotel industry is fairly underdeveloped, particularly compared to some of its Gulf neighbours.

Sana'a houses just three-five star hotels – the Taj Sheba, Sheraton and Movenpick, and there are two more in Aden – the Gold Mohur Hotel & Resort and the Aden Movenpick. There are more options in the two-, three- and four-star categories and local guesthouses and funduqs, both of which have very basic accommodation, are also widely available. A recent addition to Sana'a is the Burj al Salaam Hotel, a renovated palace located in the heart of the old city.

Abu Ali Monassar, vice chairman of the Dubai-based Net Group, managed the renovations of the property under the supervision of UNESCO, to create what he terms “a beautiful boutique product”. After 10 years meticulously working on the décor to reflect true Yemeni lifestyle, including hand-made furnishings, the hotel became operational in September last year, although the official opening is due to take place this month.

“This boutique hotel combines tradition and the 3000-year-old city architecture with the comfort needed by today's tourists,” he says.

“We have worked inside the city without touching the existing architecture, creating a unique product comprising 47 rooms and suites, with three F&B outlets, including a panoramic roof top restaurant with views of the old and new city.”

“We wanted to create something linked to the tradition and heritage of the region. We wanted to create a cultural theme and place where you feel you are living like the locals,” Monassar concluded. **AIN**

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THE SALES PITCH

GETTING THERE:

Air Arabia: from Sharjah to Sana'a, two weekly.

Egypt Air: from Cairo to Sana'a, two weekly.

Emirates Airlines: from Dubai to Sana'a, five weekly.

Gulf Air: from Bahrain to Sana'a, two weekly.

Qatar Airlines: from Doha to Sana'a, four weekly.

Royal Jordanian: from Amman to Sana'a, three weekly.

Saudi Arabian Airlines: from Riyadh to Sana'a, two weekly.

Syrian Airlines: from Damascus to Sana'a, two weekly.

Yemenia Airways: 30 flights weekly from 11 destinations across the Middle East.

public of Yemen. All other travelers to Yemen can obtain entry visas at ports of entry. Visitors are no longer required to have an affiliation with and arrange their travel through a Yemeni-based individual or organisation to enter Yemen. However, individuals may be asked for supporting evidence of their character, purpose of visit and length of stay. Visa regulations may be subject to change, but upon arrival, visitors are generally issued a visa valid for 30 days from the date of issue. Arriving visitors will need to complete an arrival form, which has the unusual requirement of providing one's father's name and one's grandfather's name.

bedroom and include an economy return flight and transfers. A three-night package at the three-star hotel, Sam City, is Sana'a is priced AED1650 (\$449) per person. Four-star accommodation at the Mercure the priced AED 1920 (\$523) per person and at the five-star Movenpick, AED 2095 (\$570) per person. Children pay AED 960 (\$261) to cover the airfare but the accommodation is free. Prices for hotels in Aden lead in at AED1640 (\$447) at the three-star AlShami hotel; AED 1720 (\$468) at the four-star Crescent; and AED1890 (\$515) at the five-star Aden Hotel. Prices for Riyan start at AED 1630 (\$444) for the three-star Ryboon City; AED 1795 (\$489) for the four-star Hadhramout hotel; and AED 1910 (\$520) for

economy flights on Yemenia, half-board (breakfast and dinner) at a choice of hotels on a twin-bed basis, transfers to and from the airport, 4x4 plus driver (mini bus for Sana'a), mineral water during the tour, one dinner at a local restaurant and a Yemeni gift. Children up to nine-years-old pay 50% of the tour price. Not included are departure taxes and visa expenses. Prices vary depending on group size. A six-night package to Sana'a staying at the five-star Sheraton is priced AED 2470 (\$673) per person based on a group of four people; AED 2670 (\$727) for three people; AED 3080 (\$839) for two people; and AED 3860 (\$1051) for one person. Included is a tour of Sana'a market and the old city, an overnight visit to Mahwit, overnight stopover in Hodeidah,

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