

WELLNESS IN THE DESERT

Saudi Arabia is set on becoming one of the world's leading wellness destinations and it's making major waves. Prolific health travel writer Jane Wilson paid a visit.



Jane stayed at Our Habitas in AlUla.



Elephant Rock in AlUla.

I'M IN THE HEART OF A mysterious land more easily imagined through films and folklore than real-life travel. A place that is remote and private, its traditions tucked behind closed doors. But as the world rotates in new directions, it is witnessing Saudi Arabia's choreography into a unique destination aiming to attract those travellers with a taste for the unexpected, those adventurous and curious enough to experience what lies beyond the familiar.

I travelled to explore its deep cultural roots and to test a few long-held assumptions. The first, the notion of inaccessibility. Saudi is open to visitors, women included, and the welcome is warm. Everywhere I went, I was met with the customary egg cup of local coffee and a plate of dates. Saudi women still dress conservatively, typically in an abaya with a coordinating head covering, though neither is required for visitors, except in mosques. Respectful attire remains expected: loose pieces that cover shoulders and knees. In the shops, rows of abayas range from classic black to coloured designs embroidered and tailored with touches of Western influences.

Riyadh, the capital, mixes tradition with futuristic ambition. Kingdom Centre Tower (kingdomcentre.com.sa) stars in the skyline with a sky-bridge viewing deck, while at ground level, the Masmak Fortress rises like a sandcastle. This mud-brick stronghold has witnessed defining chapters of the nation's unification and today houses a museum. Souq Al-Zal, the city's oldest marketplace, is a sensory hub of perfume stalls, rugs and



The Fairmont Riyadh.

aromatic oud. Riyadh itself feels hip and energetic, dotted with art, high-gloss malls and a cosmopolitan restaurant scene such as the Michelin-starred Gymkhana, inspired by India's historic club culture, or traditional carpets-on-the-floor dining such as Aseeb, which is rooted in Najdi cuisine. Alcohol is prohibited throughout the Kingdom but mocktails are inventive, and the fresh juices are excellent.

Navigating the city is straightforward thanks to the new metro system, which includes female-only and accessible carriages. Taxis are plentiful and women now drive, and my flight into Riyadh was piloted by women.

WELLNESS AT THE HEART

During the trip, I attended the Women's Tennis Association Finals, watching the winner walk away with a prize of more than \$15.25 million. I stayed at The Fairmont, a stylish, spacious and contemporary hotel topped with an illuminated central dome. Rooms feature floor-to-ceiling windows and thoughtful comforts. I became a fan of the breakfast buffet spread piled high with



Open-top tours explore Hegra.

healthy nourishing dishes, protein powders and artisan temptations. And naturally, there's a luxurious spa and indoor pool.

But it was the draw of the desert that attracted me and to AlUla (experiencealula.com), a living open-air museum around 90 minutes by plane. Here, Riyadh's city buzz immediately turned into deafening silence. Huge unmovable boulders stood like protective guards grounding me. This was pure nothingness, no distractions and where you breathe a little deeper and think a little less. A stillness emanates from the sand itself, a golden emptiness stretching into the horizon. The region sits along the ancient Incense Road and once offered refuge to traders, pilgrims and nomadic communities.

At sunset, Elephant Rock is the fashionable place to be with sunken seating, lanterns and families gathered over shared dishes from nearby stalls. It feels atmospheric and distinctive. And it's no surprise that AlUla hosts an annual wellness festival each October, which celebrates personal growth, fitness and holistic wellbeing through yoga, mindfulness, fitness classes, hikes, meditation and spa visits amidst the natural and awe-inspiring landscapes.

Floating above AlUla in a hot-air balloon, time is suspended. The sun rose in harmony creating a glowing carpet below on which the monumental carved tombs of

Hegra appeared like miniature boxes. On the ground, guided tours of these grand tombs, 110 in total, are offered in a vintage Land Rover. Hegra is an ancient archaeological site and the first UNESCO World Heritage Site in Saudi Arabia. Open-top 4x4 tours explore the nature reserve, home to rewilding projects, and the possibility of spotting local wildlife including Arabian leopards, sand gazelles, oryx and red-necked ostriches.

LAND OF DISCOVERY

There is a scattering of resorts camouflaged in the dunes taking advantage of the serenity of the environment. I stayed at Our Habitas, where eco-villas are built from ethically sourced materials and blend into the canyon walls. Vintage Airstream caravans provide a quirky alternative, complete with food trucks – very cool!

Nights here are devoted to stargazing. With minimal light pollution, the sky feels infinitely close. Wrapped in thick blankets, listening to a guide explain the



Souq Al-Zal is one of the oldest markets in Riyadh.

constellations that once navigated Bedouin travellers, it felt like the sky was a glittering canopy. Daily sound bathing brings guests into the rhythm and soul of this place as the sun exchanges places with the moon. Other experiences include trekking, coffee workshops, art walks and a cinema under the stars.

For something more authentic, Dar Tantora The House Hotel occupies restored mud-brick dwellings illuminated by candlelight and lanterns rather than electricity. And for something glamorous, nearby is restaurant Maraya Social, which sits atop the world's largest mirrored building, Maraya Concert Hall, serving Mediterranean and Arabian flavours paired with inventive seasonal mocktails, courtesy of London chef Jason Atherton.

Saudi Arabia is no longer a whisper on the travel horizon. Instead, it is a country in the midst of a thoughtful transformation, steadily uncovering its heritage, creativity and wellness spirit. Ancient sites feel timeless, yet the modern energy suggests a nation stepping confidently into its next chapter.

From stargazing in desert silence to wellness rituals shaped by the elements, this Kingdom is unveiling stories engraved in stone and natural beauty rising over the dunes. Saudi Arabia is ready to be discovered.



Maraya in AlUla is the largest mirrored building in the world.

Jane was hosted by the Saudi Tourism Board. She stayed at Our Habitas AlUla (ourhabitas.com/alula) and Fairmont Riyadh (fairmont.com/riyadh). For more information on Saudi and to help plan your trip, head to visitsaudi.com.