



Saudi Arabia

A CHALLENGING DRIVE ACROSS LONG DESERT TERRAIN IS MADE EASIER BY THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

About Saudi Arabia

With a total area of 1,960,582 sq km, Saudi Arabia occupies most of the Arabian peninsula in the Middle East. The oil-rich kingdom shares a land border with Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, Oman, UAE and Qatar.



When To Visit

The climate is at its mildest in the winter months between November and February.

Visa Requirements

Saudi Arabia has no tourist visas. A visitor's visa can however be obtained if you are sponsored by a Saudi company or person. Muslim visitors may also obtain a Haj visa.

Getting There

There are international flights to various Saudi cities, as well as road links to neighbouring countries and ferry links to Egypt and Sudan.



Bahrain Connection

Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are connected by the 25km King Fahad Causeway, one of the longest road links between any two nations. They both belong to the Gulf Co-operation Council, and also share an oil well.

By Ali Hussain Mushaima

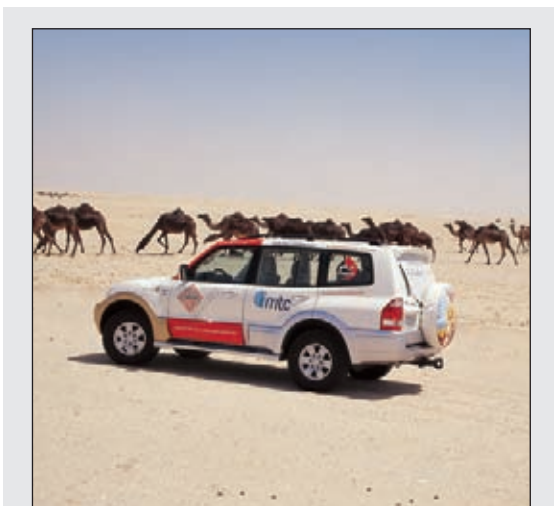
THE TORRID SUMMER TEMPERATURES AND THE endless expanse of land always meant crossing Saudi Arabia would be challenging both to driver and vehicle. Since I had been unable to get

visas for my tour companions Deirdre, Martin and Christine, it also meant that I would be travelling alone across the desert.

Actually, that's not quite true. For company I had famed Egyptian singer Um Kulthum, whose melodious voice filtered out through the stereo in my Mitsubishi Pajero. Though she is long deceased, it felt like her spirit was with me, and her words of joy, love and encouragement carried me through long stretches of my journey.

When people think of Saudi Arabia, the first thoughts that probably come to mind are oil and wealth. Travelling through the desert kingdom reveals just how one-dimensional that picture is. The average Saudi is also gentle, generous, and will go out of his way to help.

The point was driven home when I was passing through a large section of open desert in Hijrat Al Jabhan late in the afternoon. From a distance, I could see lights, and as I got closer I could see they



For long stretches on the Saudi drive, the only 'sights' were the camels.



Travel Tip
Looking for a change of scenery from the glass and steel towers of Riyadh? Try the very fascinating camel farm.

PAGE OPPOSITE:

A Saudi offers Ali a cup of Arabic coffee at a wedding tent after he stopped off for a break.



The temperature gauge in the Mitsubishi reveals just how hot it is outside. Thank goodness for air conditioning!



A bucket filled with meat that will be cooked for guests at the wedding.



were coming from a large tent. I drove towards it, thinking it would be an opportunity to take a break for a few minutes and have some tea.

It turned out to be a traditional wedding, and the hosts not only invited me in, they also insisted I stay and join in the festivities, which I did for the next four hours. They offered to put me up for the night, which was very kind, coming from complete strangers.

The Saudis were disbelieving when I told them about the trip, saying I'd never make it to Europe. Some went so far as to give me phone numbers of people they knew in the countries I was going to be driving through, just in case I needed assistance.

I was really touched.





The Mitsubishi parked outside the wedding tent in Hijrat Al Jabhan.

Fast Fact
Saudi Arabia possesses 25% of the world's petroleum reserves, and the oil sector accounts for 90% of export earnings.

Guests at the wedding enjoying the meal. At traditional events, long plastic sheets are laid out on the floor and the food plates placed on it. Guests sit on the floor and eat with their hands.



Travel Tip
Do not take pictures of Saudi airports, ports or industrial facilities. Also seek permission before photographing mosques.



Fast Fact
All devout Muslims are supposed to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, birthplace of Prophet Mohammed, at least once in their life.