

AFAR

TRAVELERS WHO CARE

AFAR.COM

WINTER 2023

Where to Go in 2023

THE
PLACES
ISSUE

p. 31



Graz, AUSTRIA

Shanjah, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Bangkok, THAILAND

Brescia & Bergamo, ITALY

Cambutal, PANAMA

The Great Lakes, UNITED STATES

Tasmania, AUSTRALIA

✓ *Prince Edward Island*, CANADA

Salvador, BRAZIL

Transylvania, ROMANIA

Ruaha National Park, TANZANIA

Baltimore, UNITED STATES

PLUS!

Roxane Gay
travels to
Antarctica

p. 104



SARAH KHAN

Writer

Canada-born, New York City-based writer Sarah Khan spent the formative years of her childhood in Saudi Arabia. In **Kingdom Come** (p.92), she discusses her relationship to the country and its rapidly changing position on the global stage. "It's fascinating seeing how it has evolved, and to watch [international travelers] discover it," she says. Khan's byline has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Travel + Leisure*, and she recently served as the editor-in-chief of *Condé Nast Traveller Middle East*. Find her on Twitter and Instagram @bysarahkhan.



KEITH DREW

Writer

Keith Drew is a journalist based in Winchester, England. He is the founder of the travel website Lijoma, which offers intel and inspiration for families on the road. There's no place on Earth more intriguing to Drew than **Transylvania** (p.46), which captured his heart when he edited a guidebook to Romania in 2003. "From the wilderness to the age-old traditions, I marvel at the ways locals are trying to preserve all of this for future generations," Drew says. Keep up with him on Twitter @keithdrewtravel.



KENDRA PIERRE-LOUIS

Writer

Queens, New York-based journalist Kendra Pierre-Louis has covered climate change in a solutions-oriented way for more than a decade, most recently on the podcast *How to Save a Planet*. In **The Plane Truth** (p.86), she wrestles with the challenges of flying, given its hefty carbon footprint. "How do we adapt to climate change today and how do we prevent future generations from enduring the worst possible outcomes?" Pierre-Louis asks. Learn more in her book *Green Washed: Why We Can't Buy Our Way to a Green Planet* (Ig Publishing, 2012) and follow her on Twitter @kendrawrites.



ROXANE GAY

Writer

Roxane Gay, author of the *New York Times* best-selling collection of essays *Bad Feminist* (Harper Perennial, 2014), has several titles to her name, including writer, cultural critic, and the most recent addition, the Gloria Steinem Endowed Chair at Rutgers University–New Brunswick. In her piece **Antarctica: A Love Story** (p.104), Gay recounts a cruise she took in November 2021 with her wife, Debbie Millman. "It's one of those remote places that's almost untouched by humans," Gay says. "It was incredibly surprising how eerie it was." She is currently working on two TV shows: *Negroland*, an adaptation of the writer Margo Jefferson's memoir, and *The Banks*, which is based on Gay's graphic novel of the same name. Find her on Instagram @roxanegay74.

Contributors



DEBBIE MILLMAN

Graphic Designer

Designer, author, and podcast host Debbie Millman is a native New Yorker who now splits her time between the Big Apple and Los Angeles. Even before she met her wife, Roxane Gay, Millman had a passion for travel—and big plans to ring in her 60th birthday in one of the most far-flung destinations on the planet. She documented their adventure with typography and mixed media in **Antarctica: A Love Story** (p.104). "Everything was unforgettable in Antarctica," she says. Millman recently designed a wallpaper honoring theater actors and creatives lost during the AIDS crisis for the Museum of Broadway. View more of her art on Instagram @debbiemillman.



EMMA JOHN

Contributing Writer

For AFAR's recent Journeys Issue (Fall 2022), Emma John recounted the monthlong train trip she took to reconnect with her European identity post-Brexit. During her travels, John stopped in **Graz** (p.38), the second-largest city in Austria, which was one of the most surprising places on her itinerary. "Graz is not as well-known as it should be," she says. "It has its own unique climate and an incredible amount of historic architecture." John is the author of *Self Contained: Scenes from a Single Life* (Cassell, 2021). Check out her adventures on Twitter @em_john.

KINGDOM

As part of its commitment to drawing international travelers, Saudi Arabia has stepped up its promotion on the world stage, touting new cultural attractions and major social change. But what does life look like for locals?

COME

by
SARAH KHAN

Photographs by
TASNEEM ALSULTAN



M

1 From 1983 to 2018, Saudi Arabia was home to one movie theater, inside the Sultan bin Abdulaziz Science and Technology Center. It showed educational films. By 2030, there will be an estimated 2,600 movie screens in the country.

2 Vision 2030, a plan the Saudi government released in 2016, aims to reduce the country's dependence on oil. Saudi Arabia has set a goal of attracting 100 million tourists a year by 2030. In 2022, it announced it would invest another \$1 trillion in tourism.

3 Saudi Arabia continues to have a guardianship system that requires every woman to have an official male guardian. Women still need a man's permission to marry but no longer need it to get a job or enroll in university.

MY CHILDHOOD IN Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, during the 1980s, was an eclectic idyll: a pastiche of roller discos and pool parties, monthly road trips to the Great Mosque in Makkah (Mecca), Brownies meetings, spelling bees, and shopping at ancient souks until 2 a.m. Inside my family's expat compound, a sprawling gated community with tidy subdivisions and manicured lawns, life unfolded in a bubble; it could have been the small town in Ontario, Canada where I was born. Outside its gates, certain limitations were simply facts of life: My mother never drove, restaurant guests were segregated by gender, and because of a **ban on cinemas**,¹ visits to movie theaters were reserved for our trips to the States or India.

The Jeddah I grew up in is a distant memory, with the sprawling **Vision 2030**² road map rolling out ambitious reforms to the Saudi economy, infrastructure, and society—and, in the process, transforming the way the cloistered kingdom has operated for decades. Businesses are no longer required to separate customers by gender; film and music industries are booming; and women have the right to drive, hold their own passports, and travel domestically **without a male escort**.³ Since 2019, the Saudi religious police—who once patrolled public areas to enforce the observance of Islamic law—have been largely stripped of power.

A key element of the Vision 2030 plan has been investing in tourism, by transforming long-neglected heritage sites, carving futuristic cities out of swaths of desert, and making the country easily accessible to foreigners for the first time. It's surreal seeing Saudi Arabia

advertised on splashy billboards everywhere from Dubai to New York, but on my visits back to the kingdom in recent years, I've been awed less by the flamboyant new additions—**star-studded concerts**,⁴ film festivals, striking architectural marvels—than by the effect its social transition has had on the fabric of everyday life.

During trips in the past year, I've hired women tour guides and interviewed women fashion designers. A woman wearing a **niqab**⁵ stamped my passport to welcome me back to Jeddah, and friends have told me about being driven home by women Uber drivers. There are still **strides to be made**,⁶ but women are engaged in public life in a way I never witnessed in my childhood.

No one has chronicled the nation's evolution more thoughtfully than photographer Tasneem Alsultan. Whether she's riding with women motorcycle enthusiasts in Riyadh or capturing the quotidian pleasures experienced by Saudi families, Tasneem manages to slow the breakneck speed of change into moments of contemplation frozen in time. Our journeys in the country diverged: I was a Canadian raised in Jeddah during my formative years, while Tasneem was a Saudi who grew up in the United States and England before returning to the kingdom as a young woman. We spoke about our experiences in Saudi Arabia's **future-focused present**⁷ and her approach to documenting it.

SARAH KHAN I'm curious. How did you become a photographer?

TASNEEM ALSULTAN I really enjoyed photography, but I never expected I would be able to do it professionally. When I went to **King Abdulaziz University**⁸ in 2002, there was not even graphic design—but there was home management! My bachelor's is in English literature and linguistics, and my master's degree is in social anthropology and social linguistics from Portland State [in Oregon].

When I moved back to Saudi in 2008, I couldn't find a job. My mom said, "You have a camera: photograph whatever you see, just to keep busy." And I did. Very quickly, I gained a large audience on Facebook, and when I got a job at a university in Bahrain, I opened a studio. Later, I moved to Dubai to teach, but most of my time was consumed with photography. I realized I loved it so much more than being a lecturer. So I quit teaching, and I've never looked back.

SARAH Today the creative scene has come such a long way from when you started. In the

4 Artists including Justin Bieber, Janet Jackson, and the K-pop group BTS have all performed in Saudi Arabia since 2019.

5 A niqab conceals the hair and face, except the eyes. It is different from a burka, which covers the whole body and typically has a mesh screen over the eyes to allow the person to see.

6 While women's rights are advancing, Saudi Arabia's treatment of journalists and activists has come under worldwide scrutiny. "We discussed human rights and the need for political reform," President Joe Biden said after meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2022.

7 Among the modern development projects is the new city of Neom, which the country has budgeted \$500 billion to build from scratch.

8 The coed university in Jeddah counts more than 82,000 students, making it the biggest in Saudi Arabia. The world's largest women's university, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, is in Riyadh. Nearly 28,000 women attend, studying everything from law to physical education.



↑ This page: A view of the Great Mosque in Makkah (Mecca), Islam's holiest city. It is believed to be the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad.

↩ Previous page: Saudis at the opening of a fashion pop-up store in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia.



← Families gather at one of Jeddah's private beaches on the Saudi side of the Red Sea. Some are for members only, while others offer day passes to visitors.

↓ A concertgoer enjoys Riyadh's MDLBeast Soundstorm festival. Launched in 2019, the festival spans three days, includes more than 150 artists, and draws roughly 450,000 visitors.



↑ Iftar, a meal eaten after sunset during Ramadan, often includes sweet and savory offerings. Friends and family gather to break their fast, then start prayer.

→ Iraqi women who recently completed a pilgrimage to Makkah stop along Jeddah's 18-mile waterfront.



↑ An audience listens to a performance by Italian singer Andrea Bocelli at the Maraya concert hall, which opened in 2019 in the historic city of AlUla.



← A traveler walks at Al-Hijr—also known as Hegra and Mada'in Salih—an ancient archaeological site of carved tombs and monuments. In 2008, it became the first Saudi Arabian location to be inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The country now has six properties on the World Heritage List.



↑ Ouhood, photographed before the driving ban was lifted in 2018, said she felt alive under water. “We can’t drive, but we can dive,” she said.

9
Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is the architect of many of these social reforms. A September 2022 order named him prime minister, further solidifying his power.

10
30.3 percent of the kingdom’s population is between the ages of 0 and 14, and 36.7 percent is between the ages of 15 and 34.

11
Saudi Arabia opened its first McDonald’s in 1993; today, the kingdom has 214 of the fast-food franchises. None serves pork, which is forbidden in Islam and is not allowed in the country.

12
Only Muslims are permitted in Makkah. More than 2 million Muslims typically travel to Makkah for the annual hajj, or religious pilgrimage.

13
Two years after Saudi Arabia lifted its ban on women driving, 2 percent of women in the country had been issued a driver’s license.

past five years alone, it feels like a different country every time I return. Yet what I find interesting is that Jeddah is visually the same—it’s the feeling, the vibe, that seems to be different.

TASNEEM I agree. Jeddah is aesthetically slow to change. But in mindset, it depends on who you are. As much as **the government**⁹ is trying to change things, it’s happening so fast that I think, in the next five years, more people will see, “Oh, this is [the new] normal.” The **younger generation**¹⁰ has more confidence in asking for more concerts, more outdoor areas. We want to wear what we’re comfortable in. These changes have made the country great for my daughters, who are 17 and 15, whereas my generation was expected to just keep our thoughts to ourselves and not really push back on our families and society.

SARAH When you’re photographing this type of social change, what are you looking for? What draws your eye?

TASNEEM I’m aiming to capture a moment that’s mundane but important. Change happens in a superficial way when it’s architecture, or when it’s an event. But I try to photograph when people are happy or in shock. I like sharing perspective on Saudi Arabia: the first time women were allowed to enter a cinema in Saudi, and they’re eating popcorn; the woman driving a car, with a **McDonald’s**¹¹ in the background.

SARAH I was in **Makkah**¹² in 2017, and I was talking to a woman who said, “We all drive when we go overseas. But drivers in Saudi are crazy, so I don’t mind not driving.” It felt a bit like a rationalization. It’s been almost five years since **the ban**¹³ was lifted. What’s it like now?

TASNEEM I was one of those women who never wanted to drive in Saudi because of the roads, the drivers, the cars—like you said, I rationalized it. And now that I’ve been driving, I don’t remember or realize how there was a world where women couldn’t drive. It was such a big issue. The most important one was emotional, feeling like you don’t deserve to be in control of your own life. It’s important for women to have all the same rights because sometimes society governs us more than governments or religions do.

SARAH One of those tropes you hear about countries is “The locals are so friendly.” Now that the kingdom is opening up to tourists, do you think Saudis are excited to have visitors they can show their country to?

TASNEEM Saudis are very intrigued by foreign visitors, like, “Wow, you came to Saudi, of all places? What brought you here?” There’s excitement. As a society, we have so much that we want the world to see. There’s just never been that access. In Western media before, we were either victims—women, especially—or we were villains, especially men. So I’m very happy to have **this conversation and dialogue**,¹⁴ even if it’s visually, which I think is more authentic. My work is not altered. And it’s important for the world to see our normal, daily lives.

SARAH Do you feel like the Saudi Arabia being promoted to international tourists is authentic to your experience as a Saudi?

TASNEEM They have all these taglines—Umluj is “the Maldives of Arabia.” It sounds very cliché, until you go and see it, and then you’re like, *OK*. It’s real. The water is pristine—so clear and amazing and natural. There’s no one [around]. We have so many untapped beautiful natural spaces.

SARAH When I went to **AlUla**¹⁵ the first time, everywhere I looked, it was a sea of **thobes and abayas**.¹⁶ It seems like locals are really thriving on discovering the country, perhaps in a way they hadn’t [in the past].

TASNEEM We Saudis had never heard of AlUla before. We didn’t know we had access. And suddenly it became a tourist attraction for locals. When the COVID-19 lockdown happened, for a year and a half Saudis weren’t allowed to leave the country. So I went to Umluj. I went to Abha. I saw Tabuk. And those places [earlier] I wouldn’t have really been interested in, but now I’m telling my family and my friends, “You need to go.”

SARAH My grandfather was an ambassador of India to Saudi, and my grandparents visited AlUla in the 1980s; he must have had some diplomatic access. Now that Saudi Arabia is opening up to international travelers, what tips do you have for people who are finally able to visit?

TASNEEM It’s such a huge country. It’s more than three times the size of France. The beaches in Jeddah and the west coast are just beautiful: Go to Umluj and book a caravan and stay there for a couple of days. The diving is surreal, and the Red Sea is amazing. Try to find someone to contact before you come to the country. Saudis are very hospitable people. As soon as you know one person, they **invite you to their house**.¹⁷ You make friends, and that’s it.

14
Saudi Arabia hosted more than 4,000 exhibitions and conferences last year, including the 22nd annual World Travel and Tourism Council Global Summit; its 2022 theme was “Travel for a Better Future.”

15
AlUla is an ancient city currently being developed into one of Saudi Arabia’s top tourist destinations.

16
Thobes are robes with long sleeves, commonly worn by men. Abayas—traditional body-length dresses—are often worn by women. In 2018, the Crown Prince said women didn’t need to don a head cover or abaya: “The decision is entirely left for women to decide what type of decent and respectful attire she chooses to wear.”

17
Offers are typically extended multiple times. Declining the invite initially—and then allowing the person to insist—is part of the expected exchange.

Writer Sarah Khan is profiled on page 17.

Tasneem Alsultan photographed Abu Dhabi for the January/February 2022 issue of AFAR.

Reem is an artist →
and computer
scientist. In 2020,
women comprised
33 percent of
Saudi Arabia's
labor force.

Also known ↓
as the Jeddah
Corniche, the
waterfront hugs
the Red Sea.



← Hessah took to
the road the day
the driving ban
was officially
lifted. Her first
stop: McDonald's.



Hundreds of men ↑
gather in Riyadh
to break their fast
during Ramadan.
Each day, an anony-
mous person will
cover the expenses of
the iftars.

Saudi high school ↓
students, from
Al Ahsa, pose for a
selfie at a conven-
tion in Riyadh.



← Um holds weights
at her local gym in
Medina, one of Islam's
holiest cities. It is
home to the Prophet
Muhammad's tomb.



↑ A young Saudi girl near AlUla's Maraya concert hall, the largest mirrored building in the world. In Arabic, maraya means "reflection."

How to Visit Saudi Arabia

Planning a trip to Saudi Arabia can seem mystifying since it's been off-limits to most international visitors for so long. But the kingdom's opening to tourism is bringing with it new infrastructure and processes to make the destination accessible: In a matter of minutes, travelers can apply online and receive a multiple-entry eVisa, valid for one year, for about \$142. Tour operators such as U.K.-based **Wild Frontiers** host immersive trips that take travelers from the world's largest camel market outside Buraydah to ancient petroglyphs around the Jubbah oasis—as well as to the cities of Jeddah and Riyadh. A travel advisor can also help with planning a trip. Visit afar.com/about/travel-advisory-council to connect with AFAR's **Travel Advisory Council** members. —Sarah Khan

WHEN TO GO

November to March brings the most pleasant weather in Saudi Arabia, ranging from the 50s in the Hijaz Mountains to the 70s and 80s on the coast. It's also when the country comes alive with events: AIUla Moments, the MDLBeast music festivals, the Islamic Arts Biennale, the Red Sea International Film Festival, and others.

ETIQUETTE

In recent years, guidelines around women's attire have relaxed considerably, and it's no longer mandatory to wear an abaya (the traditional body-length dress) and scarf in public. However, both men and women travelers should respect cultural norms with modest clothing options covering the shoulders and knees when in public. Women should have a scarf on hand if they plan to visit a mosque, as head coverings are required.

Alcohol is prohibited in Saudi Arabia and is not available at restaurants, hotels, venues, or events.

During the month of Ramadan (March 22 to April 20 in 2023), many restaurants will be closed until after sunset. While some hotels continue to serve meals throughout the day for those who aren't fasting, you should avoid eating or drinking in public during daylight hours out of respect.

In general across Saudi Arabia, it's best to avoid public displays of affection.

WHERE TO STAY

As the country's financial, cultural, and culinary hub, **Riyadh** is the most dynamic city in the nation. The Four Seasons sets you inside the capital's most distinctive skyscraper, the Kingdom Centre, capped by the soaring Sky Bridge.

On the Red Sea, **Jeddah** is a relaxed, cosmopolitan city with history dating back to the 7th century. Opened in February 2022, the gleaming Shangri-La Jeddah is a new addition to the hotel landscape, while the House Hotel Jeddah City Yard, which opened in late 2021 as the nation's first Design Hotel, promises to be the first of many sleek boutique hotels in the country.

With Nabataean tombs carved into rocky outcrops across a vast desert, **AlUla** sits approximately 423 miles north of Jeddah on the historic incense route. It is home to Al-Hijr, Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage site, which was inscribed in 2008. In 2021, the government unveiled a \$15 billion plan to turn the ancient city into an international arts and culture hub. Change is already evident: The hotel Habitas AlUla and Habitas's nearby caravans blend into an ochre valley studded with contemporary art installations; the Banyan Tree AlUla also debuted in late 2022 near the Maraya concert hall. Three additional resorts from Aman will launch in the AlUla area in 2023, including a tented camp and a "ranch-style" property. 🏠