

Tour 7 On the trail of ancient kingdoms

Day 1	Arrival in Sana'a
Day 2	Sana'a – Baraqish - Marib
Day 3	Marib – Shabwah – Sayun
Day 4	Sayun – Tarim – Sayun
Day 5	Sayun – Wadi Dawan – Al-Hajjarain – Al-Mukalla
Day 6	Al-Mukalla – Bir Ali – Aden
Day 7	Aden – Taiz
Day 8	Taiz – Al-Janad – Jiblah – Ibb – Sana'a
Day 9	Sana'a – departure

Tour 7 On the trail of ancient kingdoms

This 9-day tour focuses on the ancient kingdoms of Ma'in and Saba, which dominated ancient Arabia. The Sabaeen and Himyarite kingdoms were ruled successively by three towns which lay on the incense and trade routes of the caravans at the edge of the great desert. These are evidence that the wealth of Arabia Felix – with the exception of incense production and camel breeding – came not from production of goods in the country, but from trade and transport. Whoever held sway over the routes acquired wealth and power. The history of ancient Yemen shows, however, that these rights of way were a constant source of strife between the rulers in their fortified towns and the Bedouins, who used violence to demand their rights. Our route includes the three centres of Baraqish, Marib und Shabwah, together with Shibam, which followed after the destruction of Shabwah. While at least the fortified part of Baraqish is well preserved, all that remains of old Marib is two temples and the sluice-gates of the great dam which irrigated a wide region. Shabwah, at the southern edge of the desert, must once have been large and powerful. Today, apart from well preserved fragments of the walls, only ruins remain to fire the visitor's imagination.

Day 1 Arrival in Sana'a

Accommodation in a hotel in the old quarter, in a traditional house.

Day 2 Sana'a – Baraqish – Marib

We take the north route and drive over passes at an altitude of 2,000 metres, through fertile highlands with qat plantations watched over from towers, to Marib, which lies at the edge of the Rub-al Khali desert, the „Empty Quarter“. We make a detour to Baraqish, the first capital of the kingdom of Ma'in which, under the name Yathill, dominated central Yemen at the height of its prosperity. With its well-preserved walls rising from the plain, the town is an impressive sight. Several stages of building, from Sabaeen and Islamic times, are recognisable. A newly-discovered temple is currently being excavated by a team of Italian archaeologists. We drive on to Marib, where we visit the main cultural sites, including the dam which, since it was built in the first millennium BC, irrigated several hundred hectares until it broke in the 5th century AD, and thanks to which Marib was such a flourishing town. The north and south sluice-gates are well preserved. One can also visit the moon (sun?) temple of Bilqis, the Almaqa temple with 8m-high monoliths, and Old Marib, the capital city of the legendary Bilqis, Queen of Sheba, which lies outside the town and is now almost deserted; of the former splendour, only a few vaults remain.

Overnight stay in hotel.

Day 3 Marib – Shabwah – Sayun

A six-hour drive eastwards takes us through the "Ramlat al Sabatayn" desert, a branch of the great Arabian desert Rub Al-Khali (the Empty Quarter). The desert landscape is full of variety, with interesting stone, sand, dune and mountain formations. Our destination is Shabwah, which is accessible only on a track and with Bedouin guides. Like Baraqish, Shabwah is an ancient metropolis that today lies largely in ruins. Until the 2nd century AD it was the royal city of the Hadramaut; then it was conquered by the Sabaeans. Today, the once splendid city at the southern edge of the great desert lies in ruins, with only a few temple remains and walls still preserved. In the footsteps of those who once fled from Shabwah to Shibam, we follow a spectacular track into the Hadramaut, where the three main towns are Shibam, Sayun and Tarim. We look round Shibam (after Shabwah, the capital of the old Hadramaut kingdom), with its tall clay-built houses. These "skyscrapers", surrounded by a city wall, are crammed into the

smallest possible space with narrow labyrinthine alleys between. Through the windows and openings in the façades, one can see the sophisticated cooling and ventilation system that circulates the air through a central shaft in the interior of the house. The finely crafted wooden doors and windows are worthy of note.

On to Sayun, where we spend the night.

Day 4

Sayun – Tarim – Sayun

We spend the day in the two main towns of the Hadramaut, the largest valley in Yemen, stretching across the middle of the country from west to east and ending in the Wadi Massilah, which after a 400km detour flows south into the Arabian Sea. In ancient times, the Hadramaut was called the “holy land”. Today the wadi is a fertile river oasis, surrounded by miles of date-palm plantations and bounded by imposing table-mountains. Since ancient times it has been a busy trade centre, the main towns being Shibam, Sayun and Tarim. Sayun, in the centre of the Wadi Hadramaut, is the former residence of the Kathiri sultans. The palace on the main square now houses a museum of cultural history. Note the carved windows of the palace, which provide ventilation, cooling and protection from the sun, all at the same time. The typical maharajah style of the palaces in Sayun und Tarim is evidence of the Hadramaut’s former strong ties with the Indian sub-continent. Tarim has been a centre of Islamic scholarship since the 10th century, and is still considered conservative. In the middle of the town are the highest minarets (50 m) in Arabia and many palaces, including that of the Sultan Kaf, the rooms of which are impressive even without the museum collection. In the Ahgaf library there is a collection of rare and valuable manuscripts. Overnight stay in Sayun.

Day 5

Sayun - Wadi Dawan – Al-Hajjarain – Al-Mukalla

A long trip lies before us today. Near the Al-Qatn junction we turn southwards into the Wadi Dawan, the best-known side valley of the Hadramaut. The beauty of this long north-south wadi is its almost pink sandstone cliffs, which draw closer together in the upper reaches. The valley floor is densely covered with tropical vegetation, and intensive farming is carried on. In order to save valuable arable land, the towns and villages consist of multi-storey buildings close to the rock. The two ancient clay-built towns of Khoreibah and Al-Hajjarein are the most impressive in the whole wadi. We cross the stone desert of the Djol plateau, with its almost geometrical formations, and reach Al-Mukalla, where we spend the night.

Day 6

Al-Mukalla – Bir Ali – Aden

From Al-Mukalla we drive west along the coast, through a strange and lonely coastal landscape, with black lava rock and white sand dunes. Directly by the sea is a crater to which we climb to marvel at the green freshwater lake against the blue sea. We drive through the fishing village of Bir Ali, where we stop to bathe in the bay formed by the Husn-al Ghurab (raven’s nest), site of a stone-age settlement. We swim over the sunken ruins of the ancient incense harbour of Qana, then drive on westwards through the table mountains of Habban on a road some 50 km inland down to Aden, where we spend the night.



Day 7

Aden – Taiz

We start the day with a tour of Aden, driving round the ancient quarters of Krater, Mualla and Al-Tawilah, with a brief stop at Steamers Point, where the passengers from the big steamships used to check in during the British colonial period. Then a three-hour drive to Taiz, the third-largest town, at the foot of the 3,000m Jabel Saber mountain. The town has several mosques dating from the 13th and 14th centuries. We visit the Al-Ashrafiah mosque, which stands on ancient, recently discovered foundations and has a sophisticated ablution fountain for ritual washing. We look around the curious museum, which has an incredible collection taken from a wealthy colonial house of the 1930s. Excursion to half-way up the Jabel Saber, with a view over the town, and a visit to the souq in Taiz, where we spend the night.

Day 8

Taiz – Al-Janad – Jiblah – Ibb – Sana’a

Morning departure northwards to the “green Yemen”, a varied hilly landscape richly fertile during the travel months, with three stops before Sana’a. Visit to the courtyard mosque at Al-Janad, whose minaret towers above the building and the landscape. Like the great mosque in Sana’a, it is one of the oldest; both were modelled on the Kaaba mosque in Mecca. In Jiblah we walk through the almost completely preserved old town to the building complex (burial mosque, palace, courtyard) of Queen Arwa bint Ahmed, who reigned in the 11th century. We arrive in Sana’a in the evening. Overnight stay in a hotel in the old quarter.

Day 9

Sana’a – departure

Visit to the recently re-opened National Museum, which displays treasures from all epochs of Arabian cultural history. We look around the oldest souq in Arabia, where you can buy presents typical of the region – frankincense and myrrh, a wonderful selection of spices and beauty products, all kinds of raisins, old silver and coral jewellery, or a djambia (the traditional curved knife).

Transfer from hotel to the airport.