

Tour 8 “Gems of Yemeni Architecture”

Programme for a 15-day tour to the most interesting buildings of the pre-history of Islamic architecture

- Day 1** Arrival in Sana’a
- Day 2** Sana’a
- Day 3** Sana’a – Whadi Dahr – Sana’a
- Day 4** Sana’a – Beit Baus – Kaukaban
- Day 5** Kaukaban – Shibam/Kaukaban – Kaukaban
- Day 6** Kaukaban – Baraqish – Marib
- Day 7** Marib – Wüste Rub-Al Khali – Seyun/Hadramaut
- Day 8** Seyun – Qabr Annabi Hud – Aynat – Tarim – Seyun
- Day 9** Sayun – Shibam/Hadramaut – Wadi Dawan – Al-Choreiba
- Day 10** Al-Choreiba– Al-Mukalla – Bir Ali
- Day 11** Bir Ali – Aden
- Day 12** Aden – Taizz
- Day 13** Taiz – Al-Janad – Gibleh – Ibb – Taiz
- Day 14** Taizz – Beit al-Faqih – Zabid- Manakha
- Day 15** Manakha – Sana’a
- Day 16** Transfer to Sana’a airport, departure

Tour 8 “Gems of Yemeni Architecture”

G*ems of Yemeni Architecture* is a special tour offered only by Adensafari. The significance and variety of the architecture in southern Arabia are not yet sufficiently well-known; sophisticated and lasting environment-friendly building has been carried on there since the 2nd millennium BCE. This 15-day tour is intended particularly for those with a special personal or professional interest in the pre-Islamic and Islamic architecture of Yemen. Yemeni architecture is amongst the finest in the world, and has produced real gems over the millennia. The Old Town of Sana’a – a UNESCO World Heritage site – is now famous worldwide and the main destination of tourists. Yemen has also a wealth of lesser-known architectural masterpieces from all ages, which are included for the first time in our route. Amongst these are the magnificent dams and irrigation systems of Marib dating from Sabaean times, temples and fortifications from the age when caravans used to stop at the edge of the Rhub al-Khali desert, allowing the cities of Baraqish, Marib and Shabwah to flourish.

Then the three very distinct towns in the Hadramaut: Shibam/Hadramaut, densely built with clay skyscrapers; Sayun and Tarim, with their splendid Indian-influenced palaces, testify to the wealth of the cities on the trade routes that led from the sub-continent over the Arabian peninsula to the Mediterranean Sea. Famous for its almost unbelievable beauty is the Wadi Dawan, a side-valley of the Hadramaut leading south to Al- Choreiba and a fertile oasis between pink sandstone cliffs. The principal Yemeni families originated here, evidenced by splendid palaces and groups of multi-storey buildings close to the cliffs. A short part of our journey leads through the mountainous region west of Sana’a, where we visit the proud ancient cities of Kaukaban, Thula and Manakha on the hills where fields and the outskirts of the city merge harmoniously. Impressive also the roads and terraces, often carved in the steepest cliffs up to 3,000 metres and showing not only the toil that went into this agriculture, but also the art of landscaping.

We shall visit several outstanding mosques and see the earliest evidence of Islamic architecture, including the Great Mosque of Sana’a, the unique courtyard mosque of Al-Janad in the central “green” Yemen, the Ashrafia mosque in Taiz, which has been undergoing restoration for years and which constantly reveals new mysteries, and the first Arabian university town of Zabid. Aden, at the southern tip of the country, has been repeatedly destroyed, so that although it is one of the oldest settlements of Arabia, few historic buildings remain. Impressive are its geographical situation on the almost impassable crater, with settlements only at the foot of the cliffs, and the headland with its salinas, between the lagoon and the open sea, leading to the mainland with its rapidly growing built-up districts. There are also remains of British colonial architecture and concrete prefabs from the Communist era between 1967 and 1991.

This tour also offers the opportunity to view the interiors of some palaces, houses and mosques to which it is otherwise difficult to gain access. We will also visit brickworks – especially in the eastern Hadramaut and in the Wadi Dawan – where, as in ancient times, the bricks are made with straw, pressed into forms and dried in the sun, and installations for burning and slaking lime as well as for making the brilliant white mortar called ganad, used for decorating façades.

The tour will be organised in groups of 12-20, in several vehicles Toyota landcruiser. Overnight stays, breakfast and dinner mostly in funduqs and hotels in historic buildings, lunch in typical local restaurants.

Day 1 Arrival at Sana’a airport

Overnight stay in Hotel Felix Arabia, Sana’a

The hotel is located in an old palace of the historical town, close to the saila, the recently restored wadi, which serves as a road during dry periods.

Day 2 Sana’a Breakfast in the Hotel

Tour of the interior of Hotel Arabia or its annexe as an example of an old palace in the historical city and the structures of these ancient stone buildings: light, cooling and water systems. Visit to the recently re-opened National Museum in Sana’a, which displays treasures from all epochs of Arabian cultural history, with models of different building types (stone buildings in Sana’a, clay/straw buildings in the Marib region and Shibam/H., maharajah-style buildings in the Hadramaut, African-style house types in the Tihama). In the staircase of the museum, a series of historical photographs of the most important sites of the country gives us a first impression of the existing (or sometimes already destroyed) architectural gems in Yemen.

Lunch in Sana’a

Guided tour of the historical centre of Sana’a. The old part of the town, with its decorated and whitewashed multi-storey houses, is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Visit to the Mansur house in the Samsara with exhibition of works by Yemeni artists. The multi-storey house, with its sophisticated cooling and ventilation systems, can be viewed right up to the top floor and the roof, from where there is a splendid view over the souq to the many mosques and caravanserais. Visit to the Great Mosque, one of the oldest of the world, constructed on a former building.

Dinner in Sana'a

Overnight stay in Hotel Felix Arabia, Sana'a

Day 3

Sana'a – Wadi Dahr - Sana'a

Breakfast

Extensive walk with guided tour in the historical centre: Jewish district, saila, Tahrir Square, gates of the Old Town. Remarkable the different faces of the houses resulting if the position and sizes of the windows as well as the decorations, mainly with ganad, a special durable and shiny white mortar which is still produced and in use.

Lunch in Sana'a

By car through modern parts of Sana'a, with a view of the gigantic new mosque.

Trip to the Wadi Dahr, 15 km west of Sana'a, a popular day-trip destination with the residents of Sana'a. Every Friday, on a plateau above the valley, wedding ceremonies are held, in which the men dance the bara, a traditional dance with the djambia (curved dagger). Drive down to through fertile orchards to the valley, and visit to the "Dar Imam Yahya" or "Dar-al-Hajjar", the most popular photo motif in Yemen. This fantastic rock palace, built for the Imam Yahya, is of special interest for its sophisticated cooling and ventilation system, and all storeys are open for viewing.

Visit of prehistoric drawings of animals and a predominant God-figure on a hidden rock in the Wadi Dahr.

Dinner

Overnight stay in Hotel Felix Arabia, Sana'a

Day 4

Sana'a – Beit Baus – Kaukaban

Breakfast

We leave Sana'a and drive to Beit Baus, a former Jewish village in the southern peripheral zone of Sana'a. Standing on a cliff of green rock, you have a marvellous view over the plateau around Sana'a. At your own risk, you can explore empty houses with fine vaults, alabaster windows and staircases.

Lunch in Sana'a

We drive north and reach the historical town of Amran with its well-preserved fortification wall. Good roads take us through several mediaeval villages nesting on the ridges and summits, and we visit three Himyarite 7th/8th-century towns – Shibam/Kaukaban and Thula. Thula, which flourished in the 15th century, is a fortified town high in the mountains, built against a rock formation (remains of a Himyarite fort). Rocks jut out from the alleys in the old town and between the 25 mosques, two of which are amongst the oldest in the whole country. The rock dominates the plain in the north of Sana'a; visit of the recently restored cistern, of the old gates of the town and the palaces built in and on the rocks. Many of the houses were originally Jewish, and bear the Star of David as well as round windows above the doors, giving the houses individual "faces". Thula has a rich souq with historical and contemporary craft and arts work such as silver jewellery, textiles, djambia (traditional curved knife), lamps and other items.

We continue our trip to Kaukaban (20 km), another historic town located on a rocky ridge which offers a wide view over the fertile land, at over 2000 m altitude, and above Shibam

Dinner and overnight stay in Hotel Kaukaban in a historic palace (fresh, cold at night).

Day 5 Kaukaban – Shibam/Kaukaban – Kaukaban

Breakfast in the Hotel Kaukaban

Tour of the interior of the hotel with historical furniture and a magnificent mafradsh (saloon)

Walk from Kaukaban down to Shibam/K., which is located in the plain below the rock of Kaukaban (an hour's walk), with a fantastic view over Shibam and the surrounding landscape.

Lunch in Shibam/K. (Arwa)

Visit to the Mosque of Shibam (one of the oldest in Yemen) and guided tour in the historical centre of Shibam/K. and to the town gate with Sabaean inscription. We wind along the stony mountain road back to Kaukaban.

Tour of Kaukaban, historical bath, cistern and several splendid palaces with richly ornamented wooden doors and window decorations. The precipice offers a view over the wide plain and the rocks with ancient villages.

Dinner and overnight stay in Hotel Kaukaban

Day 6 Kaukaban – Baraqish – Marib

Breakfast in Kaukaban Hotel

From Kaukaban we return to Sana'a and take the road north to Marib. The 200km drive leads us over passes at an altitude of over 2,000 metres, through fertile highlands with qat plantations watched over from towers, down to the desert. At the border of the desert, on the former caravan paths, the main capitals of the ancient Yemeni culture have been located – such as Baraqish, Marib and Shabwah. 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 circular walls rising from the plain, the town is an impressive sight. Several stages of building, from Sabaean and Islamic times, are recognisable. A newly-discovered temple is currently being excavated by a team of Italian archaeologists.

We drive about 40 km to Marib, which lies at the edge of the Rub-al Khali desert, the "Empty Quarter".

Lunch in Marib

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.

We also visit 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.

Dinner and overnight stay in Hotel Bilquis, Marib (with swimming pool)

Day 7

Marib – Rub-Al Khali desert – Sayun

Breakfast

Visit to the Awwam temple of Bilqis, the Almaqa temple with 8m-high monoliths. We spend the rest of the day (6 hours) on the road, passing first the new oil capital Safar, then crossing the Ramlat al Sabatayn desert, a branch of the great Arabian desert Rhub Al-Khali (the Empty Quarter). The desert landscape is full of variety, with interesting stone, sand, dune and mountain formations.

Lunch in Al-Air or Al-Khasa'a

Via Al-Qatn we reach the western end of the Hadramaut with its three main towns Shibam/H., Sayun and Tarim. The Hadramaut, the largest valley in Yemen, stretches across the middle of the country from west to east, 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.

Dinner and overnight stay in Hotel Al-Ahgaf, Sayun (with swimming pool)

Day 8

Sayun – Qabr Annabi Hud – Aynat – Tarim – Sayun

We drive eastwards from Sayun, pass Tarim and after 100 km we reach Qabr Annabi Hud, which is located between the Hadramaut and its geological continuation, the remote and fascinating Wadi Massilah. At the foot of a rock, an architecturally impressive pilgrims' village grew up around the mausoleum of the prophet Hud. We drive on, with a short break in Aynat (cemetery with tombs and shrines), back to the densely populated Hadramaut, stopping in some places where traditional constructing materials are produced as they were a thousand years ago: bricks made of clay and straw, shaped in the traditional moulds, dried in the sun and stored in geometrically composed piles and stacks. Lime is burned in ancient lime-burn kilns and then slaked in lime-pits. All these materials are still in use. After a short trip we reach Tarim.

Lunch in Tarim

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 empty rooms of which are impressive even without a museum collection. In the Ahgaf library there is a collection of rare and valuable manuscripts.

Dinner and overnight stay in Hotel Al-Ahgaf, Sayun

Day 9

Sayun – Shibam/Hadramaut – Wadi Dawan – Al-Choreiba

After breakfast in the hotel we drive westwards through the Hadramaut to 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. We continue west, and near the Al-Qatn junction we turn southwards into the Wadi Dawan, the best-known side valley of the Hadramaut.

Lunch in the Wadi Dawan

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.

Overnight stay in the funduq in Al-Choreiba.

Day 10

Al-Choreiba – Al-Mukalla – Bir Ali

We spend most of this day driving from the Wadi Hadramaut through the stone desert of the Djol plateau, with its almost geometrical formations, down to Al-Mukalla, a modern town with a historical centre, extending along the coast of the Arabian sea.

Lunch and short tour of Al-Mukalla

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, and stop shortly after Bir Ali on a beautiful bay shaped by the Husn-al-Ghurab (crow’s nest), a promontory with a stone-age settlement overlooking the ruins of the ancient harbour of Qana, now sunk under the sea. This is the end of the Incense Road, which for centuries was the basis of Arabia’s trading wealth.

Dinner and overnight stay on the beach at Funduq Bir Ali

Day 11

Bir Ali – Aden

After breakfast in Bir Ali we have the longest drive of our tour. Following the coast, we see a series of lime-kilns along the road in which lime is being burned at a high temperature before being slaked and used as construction material as well as for lime-white mortar. The coastal road through the province of Shabwah having recently been completed, we drive more than 400 km westwards along the uninhabited (apart from a few fishing villages), unspoilt, if sometimes monotonous coast of the Arabian Sea to the Gulf of Aden. Towards evening we reach Aden, the second-largest town; its history and thus that of its architecture – especially during recent centuries – has been completely independent. Although it is an ancient town, numerous catastrophes and destruction by conquering forces have left no historic monuments apart from the cisterns in the crater. A few remnants of British colonial architecture, and the Communist prefabs on the western slope of the crater, dating from the Southern Yemen government of the '70s and '80s, are the main attraction, together with the harbour, protected by the crater and the headland.

Overnight stay in Aden.

Day 12

Aden –Taiz

In the morning, a 3-hour drive northwards from the heat of the coastal plain to Taiz, the climatically most pleasant city, which lies in the beautiful “green Yemen” between mountain massifs, with good water and fresh air – an attractive resort for rich Yemenis, as the large villa district on the slopes of the Jabel Saber mountain shows. Taiz has also a rich fund of art treasures from the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras. Much of the city is modern, but near the slopes are the remains of the old town, with 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 a viewpoint half-way up the Jabel Saber. In this area, the inhabitants proudly maintain an independent tradition – the women do not wear the veil.

Evening: visit to the souq and overnight stay in Taiz.

Day 13

Taiz – Al-Janad – Jiblah – Ibb – Taiz

Today we visit three places representative of the country's Islamic architecture, chronologically equivalent to our Middle Ages. First the courtyard mosque at Al-Janad, whose minaret towers above the building and the landscape. Al-Janad is one of the very earliest mosques and was built when Al-Janad was the capital of Southern Yemen in the lifetime of the Prophet Mohamed. Like the great mosque in Sana'a, Al-Janad was modelled after the Kaaba mosque in Mecca. Today it appears to be drowning amongst the surrounding sand dunes. The spacious ablution fountain for ritual washing is well preserved. 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. Unlike the brilliant white Al-Janad, here the stone façades of the minaret and the mosque are richly ornamented with decorative bands. The whole complex has been little researched as yet, and occasionally new layers are revealed.

In Ibb, the labyrinthine old quarter lies at a higher level. We stroll through the winding lanes and stairways and the narrow squares with their typical stone façades. The houses vary widely in style, but small, round windows are a common feature.

Return to Taiz; overnight stay.

Day 14

Taiz – Beit al-Faqih – Zabid- Manakha

After breakfast we take the road westwards from Taiz into the Tihama and on to the Red Sea, breaking the journey in Zabid and Beit Al-Faqih. We drive through countryside quite different from what we have seen, more reminiscent of the African coast. The vegetation consists of prickly bushes; the scattered villages of round straw huts are surrounded thick fences of local vegetation. In the Tihama much of the furniture is woven from wood – loft beds, tables and chairs upholstered in palm-fibre material. The coastal regions on the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea (Tihama) are warm or hot all year round. We continue north on the well-surfaced road to Zabid the site of one of the oldest and most important universities in Arabia, ancient mosques and an interesting museum of cultural history.

From Zabid it is only a short journey north to the town of Beit-al-Faqih, where the old quarter, with its many mosques and a large palace, is gradually falling apart and being smothered in refuse.

Beit-al-Faqih is famous for its weekly market, with products from the Tihama, including the typical woven furniture, all kinds of basketwork and ceramic ware.

As we drive north, the Tihama gradually gives way to mountainous country, and we drive through former orchards at an altitude half-way between mountains and plain. We make a short walk in the Wadi Surdud, which runs between the plateau west of Sana'a and the Red Sea. We approach the town of Manakha, which lies in a cultivated terraced landscape at an altitude of 2,250m in a particularly impressive region of the Haraz mountains.

Day 15

Manakha – Sana'a

Breakfast in Manakha Hotel and tour of this small town glued to a rocky massif, with its winding paths and its massive houses built from the stones of the surrounding rocks, so that they seem to be growing from the top of the mountain. A walk of one hour leads from Manakha to the fortified village of Hajjarah, accessible only by a single gate and spectacularly framed by the mountains. Below Hajjarah lies Al-Hotaib, a place of pilgrimage for the Ishmaelite Bohra sect, which has its largest following in India.

Lunch between Manakha and Sana'a

The afternoon is free for your own explorations and for shopping in the world-famous souq of Sana'a which offers a vast variety of wares – old silver jewellery and fine fabrics, incense and myrrh, spices, henna, kajal and oriental perfumes, raisins and dates.

The souq offers presents typical from 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).

Overnight stay in Hotel Felix Arabia, Sana'a

Day 16

Transfer to Sana'a airport, departure