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## Melissa's Travels: Just Back From Saudi Arabia



*A sneak peek at the restoration of the UNESCO site At-Turaif in Riyadh. Photo by Elizabeth Harvey*

In January, I kicked off the new year with a scouting trip to one of the least-known and least-visited destinations on the planet: Saudi Arabia.

I had first traveled to the kingdom four years ago as a guest of a royal commission developing tourism. (Tourist visas were only introduced in September 2019.) From the moment I arrived in January 2022, with KN95 masks, proof of vaccination and a negative PCR test in hand, I found that much in the country had changed—far beyond the new health safety policies. The customs agent informed me that I could remove the headscarf I had donned upon disembarking—a stark contrast from my first visit, when all women in the kingdom, foreign and local, were required to cover themselves with hijabs and billowing, black abayas. Instead, I was able to remain in modern, Western attire throughout my stay, opting for desert-friendly pants and kaftans, and long-sleeved maxi dresses and platform sneakers for city touring.

Changes in dress code are just one of many harbingers of the cultural transformation

that is occurring in Saudi Arabia, right now. This seismic shift is being driven by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's Vision 2030—an ambitious plan to transition the conservative kingdom into a modern nation and to diversify its economy away from a dependence on oil to other industries, principally tourism—as well as the fact that Saudi Arabia has a very young, and growing, population (over half of the population is under 30 years old). After spending decades shrouded in the American consciousness behind a veil of mystery, mistrust and fear, that veil is being pulled back to reveal a people eager, and proud, to welcome visitors. Saudi Arabia, at this moment, presents the ultimate traveler's secret and a trailblazer's dream—the chance to go back in time to a world where places remain undiscovered, and strangers are greeted with curiosity rather than apprehension. It reminded me of Berlin at the fall of the Wall; South Africa at the end of Apartheid; Cuba when it reopened to the West. Quite simply: It's the chance to experience history being made.

I hope you enjoy this sneak peek at the many astounding treasures, both ancient and futuristic, that I discovered on my recent trip—with in-depth coverage coming soon in our Spring/Summer Magazine.

Plus: We currently have several [Insider Journeys](#) group trips in the works for 2022 to guide travelers through a first experience of Saudi Arabia. On all of the trips, we will meet with some of the people shaping the country's future—and especially with women who can speak to how these changes are transforming the lives of Saudis. Let us know if you might be interested in signing up and if so, over which sets of dates, by [filling out this form](#).

**Related:** [Saudi Arabia: The World's Best-Kept Travel Secret](#)

**Related:** [Considerations for Travelers to Saudi Arabia: What to Know Now](#)

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- *Melissa Biggs Bradley on February 5, 2022*

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