

# Oman, UAE & Arabian Peninsula

## Yemen

### (PDF Chapter)

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### COVERAGE INCLUDES:

- Sana'a
- Wadi Dhahr
- the Haraz Mountains & around
- Shibam
- Kawkaban
- Thilla (Thula)
- Hababah
- At-Tawila
- Al-Mahwit
- Manakhah & around
- Amran
- Hajja
- Shahrarah
- Sa'da
- Tihama (Red Sea Coast)
- Al-Hudayda
- Kamaran Island
- Jabal Bura



# Yemen يمن

## Includes ➔

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## Best Places for Culture

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## Best Places for Nature

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## Why Go?

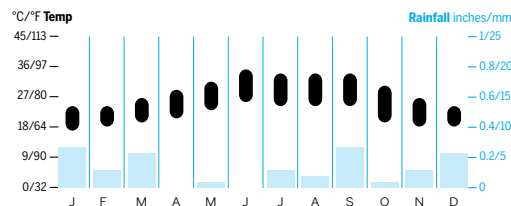
Yemen is, in many ways, the birthplace of all our lives. In days past, the sons of Noah knew it as the land of milk and honey; Gilgamesh came here to search for the secret of eternal life, wise men gathered frankincense and myrrh from its mountains and, most famously, a woman known simply as Sheba said Yemen was her home.

Yet since the book of mythology was closed, Yemen has remained largely locked away in a forgotten corner. This is a huge oversight, because Yemen is a deeply romantic and utterly unique place in which to travel.

However, there is a problem: travel here has never come easily, nor in complete safety; but today Yemen dances on the brink of catastrophe and you should assess the security situation carefully before taking the plunge. But if the security situation allows then the rewards of travelling here are enormous.

## When to Go

### Yemen



**Sep–Dec** The monsoon rains are ending, the mountains are green and the hiking superb

**Nov–Feb** This is the time to hit the Tihama Red Sea coastal regions or the eastern deserts.

**Jun–Sep** Gale force monsoon winds can make visiting Socotra island a bit of a pain

## Daily Costs

Basic living costs in Yemen are low. A simple meal in a cheap local cafe can be had for US\$2 to US\$3 or double that at a posher restaurant. Budget hotels are US\$10 to US\$15; mid-range hotels average US\$20 to US\$40. Bus travel is cheap.

What sends the cost of living right up is the fact that at present, due to the unstable security situation, you can only travel in Yemen as part of an organised tour for which you're looking at a minimum of US\$100 per day – often more.

### IS YEMEN SAFE?

The first question on the mind of every visitor to Yemen is almost certainly: 'is it safe?'. The simple answer, as of April 2013, is No. Since the political demonstrations of 2010 Yemen has been virtually at war with itself. At one point much of the country was completely out of central government hands and there was heavy fighting throughout Yemen including in the capital, Sana'a. Today things are better, but far from perfect. A degree of security has returned to Sana'a, parts of the nearby mountain areas, the island of Socotra and one or two other areas, and the first brave tourists are starting to return. However, in early 2013 Yemen was still considered highly dangerous and Lonely Planet does not recommend travelling there given the unstable security situation. For more information, see p404.

### On the Ground Research

Due to the highly dangerous security situation throughout Yemen we were unable to conduct on-the-ground research anywhere in the country. This chapter is a combination of information dating back to 2010, and remotely researched information obtained via the telephone and internet in 2012. For Sana'a, around Sana'a and parts of the Haraz Mountains, on the ground research was conducted by a Yemeni tour company.

## Itineraries

Travel itineraries in Yemen are greatly influenced by the current security situation. A few years ago most of the country was open to foreign tourists. Today, hardly anywhere is (although things are starting to improve again). At the time of writing the following was the only realistic itinerary and even that was liable to be shut down at short notice.

Start in the old city of Sana'a allowing a catlike curiosity to lead you through alleyways, up back streets and into interesting corners. Then climb into the Haraz Mountains to explore by foot the numerous villages and breathtaking scenery here in the trekking heartland. Returning to Sana'a fly to the island of Socotra for some birdwatching, beach time and more hiking.

## At A Glance

- ➔ **Currency** Yemeni riyal (YR)
- ➔ **Mobile Phones** Widespread phone network; foreign phones sometimes blocked.
- ➔ **Money** ATM's accept Visa cards in bigger towns. Also bring US dollars cash.
- ➔ **Visas** Only issued to people on an organised tour. Not available on arrival.

## Fast Facts

- ➔ **Capital** Sana'a
- ➔ **Country code** 967
- ➔ **Language** Arabic
- ➔ **Official name** Republic of Yemen
- ➔ **Population** 23 million

## Exchange Rates

|              |       |        |
|--------------|-------|--------|
| Australia    | A\$1  | YR 224 |
| Bahrain      | BD1   | YR569  |
| Euro zone    | €1    | YR280  |
| Kuwait       | KD1   | YR754  |
| Oman         | OR1   | YR558  |
| Qatar        | QR10  | YR590  |
| Saudi Arabia | SR10  | YR572  |
| UAE          | Dh10  | YR584  |
| UK           | UK£1  | YR 328 |
| USA          | US\$1 | YR 214 |

## Resources

- ➔ **Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com/yemen](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/yemen)) Tips and information.
- ➔ **Yemen Times** ([www.yementimes.com](http://www.yementimes.com)) News.
- ➔ **British Government Travel Advice** ([www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)) Travel warnings issued by the British government.



## Yemen Highlights

**1** Sigh over Sana'a's cake-icing-like houses in **Old Sana'a** (p367) and saunter through ancient alleyways created by the son of Noah and a mischievous bird.

**2** Weave a trail through a tapestry of fortresses and fields in the **Haraz Mountains** (p374).

**3** Wander the sandcastle cities of weird and wonderful

**Wadi Hadramawt** (p394) (only if it's safe) where giants once roamed and scorpions line the entrance to Hell.

**4** Act like a medieval knight and search for dragons and



the secret of eternal life in stupendous **Socotra** (p391).

5 Bargain for a camel or two and be swallowed up by the colour and chaos of **Beit Al-Faqih** (p382), Yemen's

largest weekly market, in the fascinating Tihama region.

6 Sit back with friends, relax and enjoy an afternoon **qat** session – the key to Yemeni social life (p402).

7 If it's safe, venture back through time in **Ma'rib** (p388), to the sandy streets of the Queen of Sheba's capital.

## SANA'A

سنةاء

01 / POP 1.7 MILLION

Sana'a isn't where it was supposed to be. Shem, the son of Noah and founder of Sana'a, had originally chosen the site of his new city a little further west, but just as he set out his guide ropes and prepared for some major DIY a bird dropped out of the heavens, picked up the guide rope and moved it further east. This, Shem knew, was a sign, and so it was there, where the bird had dropped the guide rope, that Sana'a was born. Today most visitors to Yemen arrive, like that interfering bird, by air. Sana'a, the

world's oldest city, will be their first taste of this most mystical of Arabian countries. It's a good arrival, for this city is one of the world's great urban centres, and its many layers, colours and patterns make it the most romantic, living, breathing Islamic city you could ever hope to find.

## History

Though the legend surrounding the founding of Sana'a may be disputed by a few boring old scientists and archaeologists, what no one will doubt is that it's a very old city.

Inhabited during Sabaean times, it later became the capital of the great Himyarite

## Sana'a





dynasty in the early 6th century AD. It also served as a power base for two foreign powers: the Abyssinians and the Persians. In the 7th century AD Islam arrived, altering forever the face of the city, as early mosques and minarets rose up to replace the old churches. The city was later expanded under the Ottomans.

After the civil war in the 1960s, Sana'a experienced a period of rapid growth, doubling in size every four years. Historically, politically and economically, it was the obvious choice for the capital of the reunited Yemen in 1990. Today Sana'a is the fastest-growing capital city in the world and this is creating a predictable range of social problems.

## Sights & Activities

### Art Galleries & Centres

Sana'a has a respectable arts scene and several galleries are scattered about the old town. The best are the **Gallery Al-Bab** (Map p368; inside the gates of Bab al-Yaman) **FREE**, **National Art Centre** (Map p368) **FREE** and the **Sheba Art Gallery** (Map p368) **FREE**.

### Old Sana'a

It would be fair to say that the Unesco-protected old city of Sana'a is one of the most beautiful cities anywhere on earth and

nothing is likely to prepare you for the moment you first pass through the gates of the Bab al-Yaman. Most people spend days wandering without aim through this enormous work of art and that's certainly the best way to absorb this magnificent city.

At the heart of it all is the **Souq al-Milh** (Map p368; NE of Bab al-Yaman). Though the name indicates that the sole product is salt, this is something of a misnomer. Everything from mobile phones to sacks of sultanias is available here. It's almost impossible to point to individual buildings, souqs or sights, but the qat market, in the centre of the old town, is frenetically busy around lunchtime. The spice souq is every oriental fantasy brought to life and the small cellars where blinkered camels walk round and round in circles crushing sesame seeds to make oil is a glimpse into a bygone age. For many the abiding memory of the city is likely to be of the topsy-turvy, cake-icing-like houses and the dreamy mosques. Walking the streets of old Sana'a as the evening prayer call rings out across the rooftops is a deeply romantic and exotic experience and something you're never likely to forget.

Finally, a compulsory activity for tourist and local alike is to climb to the top of one of the tower houses and relish the ravishing

## Sana'a

### Sights

- 1 Al-Saleh Mosque..... C4
- 2 Mosque..... B3

### Sleeping

- 3 Mövenpick ..... D2

### Eating

- 4 Al-Shaibani Modern Restaurant..... B4
- 5 El-Deewan Restaurant..... B5
- 6 Mysore Palace Restaurant..... B5
- 7 Zeyna Food..... B5

### Drinking & Nightlife

- 8 Juice Stalls..... B3
- 9 News@Cafe ..... B5

### Shopping

- 10 Yabsob Spice..... B3
- 11 Yassin Spices ..... C3

### Information

- Arabian Horizons Travel & Tourism..... (see 30)
- 12 ATG ..... B4
- 13 Dutch Embassy..... C5
- 14 France..... C3

- 15 FTI Yemen ..... C2
- 16 Germany..... B5
- 17 Marib Travel & Tourism..... B5
- 18 Ministry of Tourism..... B5
- 19 Oman..... A3
- 20 Saudi Arabia..... C3
- 21 Tourism Promotion Board..... B3
- 22 UAE..... C4
- 23 USA ..... D1
- 24 Yemen Commercial Bank ..... B3
- 25 Yemen Trek Tours..... C3

### Transport

- 26 Air Arabia..... B4
- 27 EgyptAir..... C3
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- Ethiopian Airlines ..... (see 17)
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- 31 Royal Jordanian Airlines..... B4
- 32 Saudi Arabian Airlines ..... B3
- 33 Taxis for Ma'rib ..... D1
- 34 Taxis for Wadi Dhahr, Shibam, Thilla & Al-Mahwit ..... A1
- 35 Yemenia..... C3
- 36 Yemenia..... B4

views over the city as the sun sinks below the surrounding mountains.

## Mosques & Gardens

All but one of the mosques in Sana'a are open only to Muslims, but you can often get a fleeting glimpse inside a mosque through a doorway, and the majestic minarets are there for all to enjoy. Of the many mosques other than Al-Saleh and the Great Mosque, ones to look out for include the small but elegant **Qubbat al-Bakiriyah Mosque**, built by the Ottomans and renovated in the 19th century; the 17th-century **Qubbat Talha Mosque**, with its unusual minaret; the de-

crepit mid-16th-century **Al-'Aqil Mosque** to the north of Souq al-Milh; and the **Salah ad-Din Mosque**, due east of Al-'Aqil Mosque, built in the 17th century.

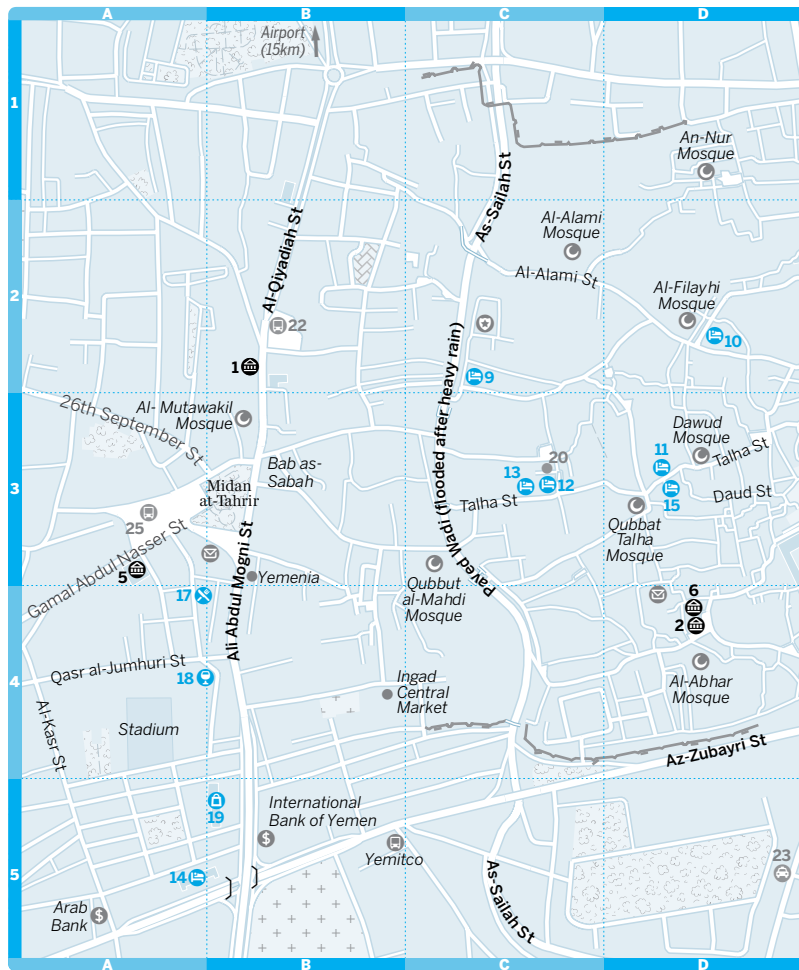
Finally, the city may not look like a lush and green place, but while exploring old Sana'a keep an eye peeled for the hidden communal vegetable gardens that once made the city self-sufficient.

## Al-Saleh Mosque

(Map p366; Mohammed Ash Shawkani St.) **FREE** In order to ensure that nobody ever forgets his 33-year reign ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh inaugurated the enormous Al-Saleh Mosque

MOSQUE

## Old Sana'a





in 2008. Costing around US\$60 million to build and holding around 40,000 worshippers it's the biggest mosque in Yemen and the only one in Sana'a open to non-Muslims. Opposite As-Saba'in Park, the mosque is undoubtedly overwhelming, (its minarets are so big they have aeroplane warning lights mounted on them!) if a little tacky. Despite some mumbling about how the money could have been better spent on hospitals and schools, most Yemenis are quite proud of the mosque. It's open to non-Muslims from dawn to dusk daily outside of prayer times – dress appropriately and take a travel permit

with you as it's not unknown for the guards to ask to see one.

## Great Mosque

MOSQUE

(Al-Jamaa al-Kabir; Map p368) **FREE** Of the 50 mosques still standing in the old city, the Great Mosque north of Bab al-Yaman, is the most significant. For centuries it served as an important Islamic school and centre of learning, and attached to it is a library containing the largest and most famous collection of manuscripts in Yemen.



## Old Sana'a

### Top Sights

- 1 National Museum ..... B2

### Sights

- 2 Dar al Hayas a Sanania ..... D4  
3 Gallery Al-Bab ..... E4  
4 Great Mosque ..... E3  
5 Military Museum ..... A3  
6 National Art Centre ..... D4  
7 Sheba Art Gallery ..... E3  
8 Souq al-Milh ..... E3

### Sleeping

- 9 Arabia Felix Tourist Hotel ..... C2  
10 Burj Al Salam Hotel ..... D2  
11 Dawood Hotel ..... D3  
12 Golden Daar Hotel ..... C3  
13 Sana'a Nights Tourist Hotel ..... C3  
14 Say'un Hotel ..... A5  
15 Taj Talha Hotel ..... D3

### Eating

- 16 Houmald Salta ..... E3  
17 Palestine Restaurant ..... A4

### Drinking & Nightlife

- 18 Al-Asdeqa ..... A4

### Shopping

- 19 Sheba Hotel ..... B5

### Information

- 20 Radfan Agency Tours ..... C3

### Transport

- 21 City Minibus Stand ..... E5  
22 City Minibus Stand ..... B2  
23 City Taxi Station ..... D5  
24 General Land Transport  
Company ..... E4  
Madne Buses ..... (see 24)  
25 Minibuses to Bab al-Yaman ..... A3  
26 Taxi to Al-Hudayda &  
Manakah ..... E5  
27 Taxi to Ta'izz & Aden ..... E5

## SECURITY – SANA'A

Sana'a was the centre of the 2011 protests. These started peacefully enough but within a few months Sana'a was reduced to a virtual war zone with street to street fighting taking place in some quarters of the city. Things are calmer than before but the city still faces major problems and frequent bombings, kidnappings and shootings.

### Qat Souqs

As well as the atmospheric old town **qat souq**, there's a bigger one further east, near the ring road, and another, the **Ingad Central Market**, just to the west of the dry wadi (now a road) that runs through the western fringe of the old city.

### Museums

#### ★ National Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p368; ☎ 271696; Ali Abdul Mogni St; admission YR1000; ☉ 8.30am-12.30pm & 4-8pm Sat-Wed, 8.30am-12.30pm Thu) Claiming to be the largest museum on the Arabian Peninsula, the National Museum is certainly one of the best. The ground and 1st floors contain a breathtaking collection of statues, figurines and other artefacts from the pre-Islamic kingdoms of Saba and Hadramawt. The 2nd floor concentrates on the medieval Islamic period while the top floor features a slightly less rewarding mishmash of stuffed lions and re-creations of the souqs of Sana'a.

#### Military Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p368; ☎ 276635; Gamal Abdul Nasser St; admission YR300; ☉ 9am-12.30pm & 3-8pm Sat-Wed, 3-7pm Thu & Fri) The ground floor contains Sabaean overflow from the National Museum, which means this military museum is more interesting than it sounds. After that the displays revert to the standard death and guns of military museums the world over, though this one also includes some graphic photos of executions during the Imamic era.

#### Dar al Hayas a Sanania

MUSEUM

(Map p368; admission YR200; ☉ 8am-6pm) This renovated old tower house is the newest museum in the city. It reveals something of the life and times of a traditional Sana'a home. The opening hours are very erratic but as

the owner lives there you only need knock on the door if it's closed to be allowed in.

### Tours

City tours of Sana'a (for around US\$50 to US\$60) are offered by local travel operators.

### Sleeping

The old city might be cramped, noisy and sometimes uncomfortable, but without any doubt its immense character and colour means that it's the best place to stay. Unless you're a businessperson requiring form and functionality, then it's very hard to know why you would opt for the soulless streets and hotels of the ugly new town.

### Old City

All of the following are converted tower houses marketed as 'palace hotels', though none were ever anything of the sort. Prior to the current problems in Yemen there were a couple of other tourist hotels in Sana'a including the **Sana'a Nights Tourist Hotel** (Map p368; Talha St), the **Taj Talha Hotel** (Map p368; Talha St; @) and the **Golden Daar Hotel** (Map p368; Talha St; ☎). If the security situation continues to improve then the owners of these hope to re-open.

#### Arabia Felix Tourist Hotel

HISTORIC HOTEL \$\$

(Map p368; ☎ 287330; [www.dynertia.net/arabi-afelixhotel.com](http://www.dynertia.net/arabi-afelixhotel.com); As-Sailah St; s/d/tr incl breakfast €24/25.30/33; ☎) This hotel's best asset is its small but attractive garden. Rooms are small and simple. Some include a bathroom and some don't, but the price is the same!

#### ★ Dawood Hotel

HISTORIC HOTEL \$\$

(Map p368; ☎ 287270; [www.dawoodhotel.com](http://www.dawoodhotel.com); Talha St; s/d without bathroom US\$30/45, s/d US\$50/60, ste US\$120; @ ☎) Despite some price hikes over the past couple of years the Dawood continues to offer the best value for money in town. It's a lovingly restored tower house with sparkling clean rooms full of delightful textiles, Arabian cushion seats and bundles of real and not-so-real antiques. The beds are soft and comfortable, the views memorable and the sunny courtyard overlooks communal vegetable gardens. The best thing though is the warm and friendly staff that come a-knocking each evening with frankincense for your room. Try and get one of the better rooms on the upper floors. Breakfast included.

★ **Burj Al Salam Hotel**

HISTORIC HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p368; ☎ 483333; www.burjalsalam.com; s/d/ste from US\$70/90/140; @ 📶) Burj Al Salam is a smart four-star hotel that's lost in the heart of old Sana'a. The small standard rooms are perfectly presented with heavy wooden furniture, stone floors and large windows, while the suites are big enough to get thoroughly lost in. The biggest attraction might be the arresting rooftop views and the luxurious *mafraj* (literally 'room with a view').

🏠 **New City**★ **Say'un Hotel**

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p368; ☎ 274838; sayunhotel@y.net.ye; Ali Abdul Mogni St; s/d YR4000/6000) The scrappy reception and stairway leads you to fear the worst, but the rooms are actually much cleaner and better than you might expect. The hotel is good for couples on a budget, but staff are not at all used to foreigners. There are a couple of other similar hotels nearby although they are even less sure of what to do with foreigners.

★ **Mövenpick**

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p366; ☎ 546666; www.movenpick-hotels.com; Berlin St; s/d from US\$135/155; 📶 @ 📶 📶)

This monster on the hill, which is doing its utmost to ruin the Sana'a skyline, is also undeniably the best hotel in the city. It hardly needs saying that the rooms and facilities are of the highest calibre, but the best features are a pool that's practically the size of a small ocean and the huge, impressive views. There is heavy security at the entrance gate.

🍴 **Eating**

Not surprisingly, Sana'a has the best range of restaurants in the country, including a few serving international dishes. In the evening the old city is something of a non event when it comes to filling your belly and, unless you're happy to eat in your hotel, you'll need to catch a taxi out to the new town in order to get a decent meal.

Of the hotel restaurants in the old town the standout is the restaurant inside the Arabia Felix Tourist Hotel, which has an international menu featuring curries, pasta, seafood and Yemeni staples for around YR600.

★ **Houmald Salta**

YEMENI \$

(Map p368; Souq al-Milh; meals YR400-600; ☎ noon-3pm) Next to the qat market in the heart of the old city. This restaurant is

**A CITY CAUGHT IN TIME**

Sana'a is so perfectly preserved that it is said you can walk a square kilometre in any direction without encountering a single new building. The old city is particularly famous for its 'tower houses'. Reaching up to six or eight storeys, they have been called 'the world's first skyscrapers'; Sana'a contains no fewer than 14,000 of them.

Tower houses tend to follow a set design: on the ground floor are the stables and storerooms; on the 1st floor the rooms used for entertaining; the 2nd floor is usually reserved for the women and children; and on the 3rd and 4th floors are the bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchen. At the very top of the house is the *manzar* (attic), which contains the *mafraj* (literally 'room with a view'). Serving often as windows in the *mafraj* are moon-shaped, stained-glass windows known as *qamariyas*. Today much qat-chewing takes place here.

The ground and 1st floors of the building are generally constructed of stone, and the upper levels of mud brick. Outside, the facade is whitewashed with lime (which protects the mud from rainwater) and decorated with geometrically patterned lines. The stone foundations of some houses are thought to date back at least a thousand years (the oldest building in the city was constructed a staggering two thousand years ago).

The original plan and pattern of the Sana'a tower house is said to have come from the legendary Palace of Ghumdan, a 2nd-century masterpiece whose lights could be seen in Madinah, 1000km to the north, and which was said to have been as close to heaven as you could come on earth. The Great Mosque is thought to have been partially constructed with materials from this palace.

The fighting of 2011 largely spared the old city and very little damage has been reported.

regarded as having the best *salta* (a kind of stew and the traditional lunch dish of the highlands) in Sana'a and is a pre-qat-session institution. Buy the accompanying sheets of bread from the women standing around outdoors. There are several similar places nearby.

### Palestine Restaurant

YEMENI \$

(Map p368; off Midan at-Tahrir; meals from YR600) Attracting hordes of local workers for lunch and residents of the neighbourhood for dinner this is the best of several cheap and cheerful restaurants in the very heart of the city. The chefs whip up a mean chicken and rice.

### ★ Al-Shaibani

#### Modern Restaurant

YEMENI \$\$

(Map p366; ☎ 266375; Hadda St; meals YR600-1000) This is the restaurant that all the other restaurants in Yemen want to take after. All the Yemeni staples here are done to perfection, but it's the oven-baked fish that rules the roost.

### Zeyna Food

ETHIOPIAN \$\$

(Map p366; 14th October St; meals YR500-800; ☉ noon-3pm) Run more as a hobby than a business by an Ethiopian woman, this incredibly popular lunchtime restaurant gives you the opportunity to try Ethiopia's national dish, *injira* (sourdough flatbread) and *wat* (spicy, curry like dish), a decidedly acquired taste! There's also a small range of Italian dishes for those not into acquired tastes.

### Mysore Palace Restaurant

INDIAN \$\$\$

(Map p366; ☎ 426359; off Hadda St; mains YR500-1000; ☉ 11.30am-3.30pm & 6.30-11pm) You know this is a real deal Indian restaurant by the fact that the vast majority of the customers are expat Indians. Its spicy variety makes for a delicious change after a repetitive Yemeni diet.

### Al-Fakher Restaurant

YEMENI \$\$\$

(☎ 427999; Hadda St; mains YR800-2500) The Yemeni food served at this upmarket restaurant seems to have almost nothing in common with all that fatty meat and stringy chicken that's been masquerading as Yemeni food elsewhere in the country. Put simply the food here is divine and if the *Tihama Hanid lamb* (lamb wrapped in banana skins and slow cooked in a beehive oven) doesn't make you drool then nothing will. Don't

pass up a dessert of *fatat maoz* (a stunning mix of banana, honey and custard).

### El-Deewan Restaurant

LEBANESE \$\$\$

(Map p366; ☎ 425528; off Hadda St; mains YR900-1800) One of Sana'a's top restaurants, this is where well-to-do Sana'a folk go for a splurge. The Lebanese food is without peer in Yemen and as well as eating inside you have the option of tucking in outside in the shady garden.



### Drinking

Various Turkish-style coffeehouses can be found around Bab al-Yaman, including the **coffeehouse** next to the wall, immediately to the left of the gate as you enter the old city (look out for the awning). For a more sophisticated and cosmopolitan coffee check out one of the new coffeeshops starting to spring up in the city. Probably the best known such place is **News@Cafe** (Map p366; ☎ 424170; off Hadda St) where you can get a serious caffeine fix whilst partaking in an Ethiopian coffee ceremony. It's popular with the city's Ethiopian and Western expat communities and, maybe more interestingly, a tiny community of middle-class Yemeni women who are happy to talk openly to strangers.

Excellent fruit-juice stalls are dotted around town; the best is **Al-Asdeqa** (Map p368; Qasr al-Jumhuri St; juices around YR80), or the three superb, unnamed, **juice stalls** that stand on the corners of Hadda St and Az-Zubayri St. As well as doing every juice imaginable these three make some of the best *arayesi* (p402) in the country.



### Shopping

Popular souvenirs include the *jambiya* (tribesman's ceremonial dagger) and traditional jewellery.

Yemeni honey is well known – and justly so. Honey shops are found throughout the capital, though it's not cheap: around YR3000 to YR4000 for 500g, YR6000 to YR8000 for 1kg. Beautiful honeycombs (packaged in sealed metal discs) cost YR2000 to YR8000 (depending on quality).

Rows of shops selling gold and silver jewellery can be found on Gamal Abdul Nasser St. Also well worth a look (or a sniff) are the perfume and spice shops. **Yahsob Spice** (Map p366; Az-Zubayri St) and **Yassin Spices** (Map p366; Az-Zubayri St) both have good collections of the latter.

There are very few bookshops selling English-language publications. Your best bet is the bookshop of the **Sheba Hotel** (Map p368; Ali Abdul Mogni St).

## i Orientation

The old walled city was originally composed of separate parts – east and west – divided by present-day Ali Abdul Mogni St, one of the principal thoroughfares in the city. At the crux of the division and still functioning as the administrative heart of the city is Midan at-Tahrir, where the post office, telecoms and internet cafes can also be found. The heart of the old city is Bab al-Yaman and the souqs leading off it. Many of the travel agencies, Yemenia offices, upmarket shops and better restaurants can be found among the bright lights of Az-Zubayri and Hadda Sts. Sana'a's street names are confusing. Many streets have had different names at different periods, some have different names for different sections and few actually have street signs anyway. Unless you've grown up there, trying to navigate the wonderfully winding streets of the old city is almost impossible.

## i Information

### EMERGENCY

The following emergency numbers apply throughout Yemen:

**Fire Brigade** (☎179)

**Police** (☎199)

**Tourist Police** (☎01-226663; As-Sailah St)

### INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafes are mushrooming all over the city centre. Also most mid-range and top-end hotels in the city have wi-fi or normal internet for guest use. Names and hours change like a chameleon changes colour and because of this we haven't named any particular internet cafes. If your hotel doesn't have internet ask them for the nearest internet cafe.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

For minor problems, pharmacies (where English is spoken) provide a good over-the-counter service. The **Saudi-German Hospital** (☎313333; <http://san.sghgroup.com.sa>; North Sixty St) is considered to be the best by expats.

### MONEY

Many of the main bank branches in Sana'a now have ATMs (although they often break down), which accept international cards. There's a free-standing ATM provided by the Yemen Commercial Bank on Midan at-Tahrir. There are several ATMs at the airport. Foreign-exchange offices are found along Az-Zubayri St.

## SEX & THE HIVE

Yemen may not seem like the land of milk and honey, but since ancient times it has been famous for its honey, which you'll frequently be told is the best in the world. The top-quality honey comes from the Wadi Daw'an in the far east of the country, where nomadic beekeepers transport wooden hives around in search of *'ilb* (Christ's thorn tree) flowers for the bees to feed on. Honey in Yemen is appreciated for more than just its taste and is often used by tribes in order to seal a deal as well as in traditional medical practices. When mixed with myrrh, it provides relief from constipation and with carrot seeds supposedly becomes the perfect aphrodisiac!

**Arab Bank** (☎276585; Az-Zubayri St) Has an ATM.

**Yemen Commercial Bank** (Map p366; ☎218600; fax 209566; Az-Zubayri St) The most reliable ATM.

### POST

**Tahrir Post Office** (☎271180; Midan at-Tahrir; ☉8am-2pm & 3-8pm)

### TOURIST INFORMATION

Sana'a is still awaiting a much-needed tourist office. Tourist information centres were supposed to have opened at both the airport and in the city centre years ago, but for the moment you'll continue to find nothing but a veil of secrecy. The best place for information and maps is at one of the local travel agencies.

**Ministry of Tourism** (Map p366; ☎570820; off Hadda St) The Ministry of Tourism building was completely destroyed in the recent fighting in Sana'a. It's currently located at the southern end of the city but the location may change again.

**Tourism Promotion Board** (Map p366; ☎570820; [www.yementourism.com](http://www.yementourism.com); off Khar-toum St) Staff here can smile and hand out a few leaflets but not much else.

## i Getting There & Away

### AIR

The national carrier, **Yemenia** (Map p366; ☎ toll free countrywide number 8001000; [www.yemenia.com](http://www.yemenia.com); 60 Metre St), has various offices around town, but the main one is on 60 Metre St. It offers one-way flights to Aden (US\$104), Al-Hudayda (US\$82), Ar-Rayyan (Mukalla;

US\$140), Sayun (US\$140), Socotra (US\$80) and Ta'izz (US\$82).

Private 'internet' airline Felix Airways (p380) has flights to Aden (US\$90), Al-Ghayda (US\$105), Al-Hudayda (US\$74), Al-Mukalla (US\$119), Sayun (US\$119), Socotra (US\$185) and Ta'izz (US\$74). As well as being able to buy direct online, most travel agencies also sell flight tickets with Felix.

## BUS

Currently tourists are not allowed to travel by bus anywhere in Yemen. The following is included in case the situation changes. The bus company **Yemitco** (☎ 269875; Az-Zubayri St) runs a service to Al-Hudayda (YR1300, five hours, three daily), Aden (YR1800, six hours, at least six daily) and Ta'izz (YR1500, five hours, hourly from 6am).

One of many private operators, **Madne Buses** (Map p368; ☎ 773629284; Bab al-Yaman) has daily services to Al-Hudayda (YR1000) and Ta'izz (YR1100) whilst the **General Land Transport Company** (Map p368; ☎ 480431; Bab al-Yaman) has good buses going to Aden (YR1800) and Ta'izz (YR1300).

## TAXI

As with buses, tourists are not currently allowed to travel by taxi anywhere in Yemen. The following is included in case the situation changes.

Shared taxis usually leave from spots on the outskirts of the city on the road leading to their destinations. To reach these departure points, take a minibus from Bab al-Yaman (YR50).

Shared taxis run west to Manakhah (YR1200, 2½ hours, many daily), and Al-Hudayda (YR2500, 4½ hours, six daily). They also run north to Amran (YR500, one hour, several daily), Hajja (YR1200, two hours, six per day); and south to Ta'izz (YR2500, five hours, lots throughout the day), and Aden (YR3000, eight hours, lots throughout the day).

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

For all intents and purposes there are no buses running between the airport and city centre. You can get there by bus but it involves several changes and a bit of walking. Save yourself a lot of sweat and frustration by taking a contract taxi (private hire) which charges YR4000 between the old town and the airport.

### PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Minibuses (which operate from 6am to 1am) run all around town and are quick and cheap (around YR50). Nippier still are motorbike taxis, which charge YR250 to YR350 for hops around town.

## TAXI

Meters are not normally used, so fares should be negotiated in advance. Short hops around town cost YR50 in a shared taxi, YR300 (tourists will be asked YR400 to YR500) in a contract taxi. A cross-town journey will cost around YR2500.

## AROUND SANA'A

### Wadi Dhahr

وادي ظهر

The most popular afternoon excursion from Sana'a is to the palace of **Dar al-Hajar** (admission YR1000; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-6pm) in the fertile Wadi Dhahr. Constructed as a summer residence for Imam Yahya in the 1920s, the palace has become something of a symbol of Yemen, and it's not hard to see why – it erupts forth off its rock table like a giant red-and-white toadstool.

Inside, you will find that few of the rooms are furnished, but for most the main attractions are the great rooftop views and the stunning stained-glass windows throwing flecks of multicoloured light across the floor. Don't miss the ancient subterranean wells that go right through the rock (one is apparently 275m deep).

The surrounding countryside, with its pretty little villages, is a fun place to explore on foot.

## THE HARAZ MOUNTAINS AND AROUND

جبال حراز

Rising abruptly off the steamy Red Sea coastal plains the sheer-sided Haraz Mountains have, for centuries, acted as a cultural fortress protecting the Yemeni heartland from interfering foreigners. Today the suspicion of outsiders is largely a thing of the past, but what hasn't changed one jot is the grandeur of the mountains and the beauty of their tapestry of terraced fields and fortified villages, all huddled together on the most unlikely of crags. At the time of going to print the Haraz Mountains had just reopened to tourism. This is prime trekking territory and now things are calming down it will hopefully once again be possible to spend days, or even weeks, weaving along the mule trails that link up the different villages.



## Shibam

شِبَام

Not to be confused with the town of the same name in eastern Yemen, this ancient village lies 2300m above sea level, at the foot of Jebel Kawkaban (2800m). Shibam is an ancient settlement and during the 1st century AD it even served as capital of a small, and short-lived, state. It served as the capital again for the local Yafurid dynasty in the 9th century, when its grand mosque – one of the oldest in Yemen – was built.

### Sights

Non-Muslims are, as normal in Yemen, forbidden from entering the **mosque**, but even so its exterior walls and solid minaret are pleasing to the eye. Other eye candy is the old **town gate** and the bustling little **souq**, which is the site of a very colourful **Friday market** (☉ 6.30am-1pm). Attracting people from all around, it's well worth a visit if you're in the area.

If you're wondering about the little 'caves' hollowed into the mountainside, they're old tombs – an ancient local tradition. Jebel Kawkaban is also known for its **birdlife**, particularly raptors.

### Sleeping & Eating

#### Hameda Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 450480; r per person with breakfast & dinner YR3000) The current dearth of visitors to Yemen shows in the fact that the clean, foreigner-friendly rooms complete with gorgeous window carvings, ant-sized bathrooms and soft, comfortable beds, lie sadly empty most of the time. A good breakfast and dinner is thrown in with the bargain-basement price.

#### ★ Hameda Tourist Hotel & Restaurant

YEMEN \$\$\$

(☎ 450480; lunch YR1500) Make sure you only had a small breakfast before coming to gorge on the lunchtime feast served up here. So much food, of such good quality, is dished up that you'll leave looking like you're eight months pregnant. The restaurant sits about 200m south of the taxi stop and is run by the same family as the Hameda Hotel. It's best to reserve in advance.

### Getting There & Away

Shared taxis run to Al-Mahwit (YR800, 1½ hours, three to four daily), At-Tawila (YR350, 40 minutes, 10 daily), Kawkaban (YR150, 15 minutes,

lots daily), Sana'a (YR500, 50 minutes, four to five daily) and Thilla (YR100, 15 minutes, 10 daily).

## Kawkaban

كوكان

Perched dramatically on the top of Jebel Kawkaban and lording it over Shibam, some 350 vertical metres below, is the remarkable village and fortified citadel of Kawkaban. During the 15th century, it served as a capital to the Bani Sharaf Al-Deen dynasty and was once renowned for its school of music. In times of conflict the citizens of Shibam would scurry up here to join their brothers and, thanks to some huge grain silos and water cisterns (which can still be seen today), everyone was able to continue going about their life largely unperturbed by any siege. In fact, it wasn't until the civil war of the 1960s and the coming of air power that Kawkaban was finally conquered.



### Activities

The main activity in Kawkaban is **hiking**. The manager of the Hotel Jabal Kawkaban is a good source of information and can also act as a guide or else supply another reliable one. There are no set trekking routes with nicely signed way-markers or any other facilities for foreign walkers, and for all except the hour-long hike down the mountain to Shibam, you will need a guide. It's best to explain to your guide how long and difficult you would like to make your hike and let him suggest something suitable. One highly recommended route is the three- to four-hour hike to the lookout point at **Ba-kour**. Longer hikes, over several days, can also be organised and camping equipment supplied. Should you need them, donkeys can also be hired. In general the countryside around Kawkaban consists primarily of gentle plateaus interspersed with soaring peaks and the hiking is fairly easy, though this also means that the scenery doesn't match places such as Manakhah. If the mere thought of a hiking boot makes you puffed out, content yourself with a leisurely stroll through the village to check out both the cisterns and the eagle-eye view off the edge of the escarpment down to Shibam.



### Sleeping & Eating

#### Hotel Jabal Kawkaban

HOTEL \$

(☎ 451427; r per person incl breakfast & dinner YR2000) Simple dorm-style rooms full of soft

cushions and a warm welcome await. The manager is something of a one-man tourist office.

### Kawkaban Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 450154; fax 450855; s/d incl breakfast YR2000/2700) It's real luck of the draw here as to whether you get one of the dark and dastardly cell-like rooms or one of the spacious and comfortable double rooms. Either way the price remains fixed. Lunch costs an additional YR1000 and dinner YR800 each.

### Hotel Al-Taj Tourism

HOTEL \$

(Planet's Tower Hotel; ☎ 450170; r incl breakfast, lunch & dinner YR3000) Slightly tatty rooms come with larger than average bathrooms, a strangely forlorn atmosphere and a lobster and typewriter on the wall!

## i Getting There & Away

From near the Grand Mosque in Shibam, there is a steep footpath leading 2.5km up to Kawkaban.

Shared taxis use the circuitous 7km road to Shibam (YR150). For taxis further afield, go to Shibam first.

## Thilla (Thula)

ثلا

Set against a great pillar of rock mounted by a fortress, the chameleon-camouflaged town of Thilla, about 9km north of Shibam, was once an important theological centre. Today it's known more for its lovely architecture than books of learning. An impressive stone wall surrounds the town, making for a memorable arrival through one of its seven gates.

## 👁 Sights

Thilla is one of those classic Yemeni mountain towns that appears almost organic, so perfectly does it meld into its setting. There are few formal attractions, but a walk through the dusty streets is highly enjoyable. Look out for the 25 **mosques** and **tombs** that dot the town, including the **Great Mosque** (Al-Jami'a al-Kabir Mosque), with its distinctive stone minaret. Many of the houses have thrown a little razzamatazz into their largely grey-brown exteriors by adding brilliantly whitewashed stone window frames and heavy, carved wooden doors. The little souq also brings some colour to the village.

### Husn Thilla

FORT

(admission YR500; ☀ sunrise-sunset) From town, an old and beautifully constructed

stone staircase leads up to Husn Thilla. The fort remained unconquered by the Ottomans, and though the exterior is impressive, the interior is sadly devoid of life. There are memorable views, and inside the fort walls are tombs, cisterns and granaries. It's about a 45-minute uphill (very much uphill!) walk from the village.

## 🛏 Sleeping & Eating

### Dar Al-Salam Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 07665575; www.alsalamhotels.com; s/d US\$40/70; 📶) Not exactly blending in harmoniously with the small village it dwarfs, this new four-star hotel will at least please those who can't live without room service and internet connection.

## i Getting There & Away

Thilla is an easy half-day hike from Shibam.

Shared taxis run to Sana'a (YR300, about one hour, five to six daily) and Shibam (YR100, 20 minutes, lots daily).

## Hababah

حبابه

Although similar in style and architecture to Thilla (and lying 10km away), Hababah has a special feature: a large, oval **water cistern**, where people still come to collect water; drive their animals to drink or even have a swim (it's not a good idea for foreigners to join in). With the old tower houses reflected in the still water, it makes for an extremely picturesque scene. There are no facilities for sleeping or eating.

Shared/contract taxis run to Shibam and Thilla (YR100/300, 15 minutes, 10 daily).

## At-Tawila

طويلة

About halfway between Shibam and Al-Mahwit is the village of At-Tawila. The village, and its tumbling terraced fields, is stunningly located at the base of a series of rock needles, around which the afternoon mist and clouds play games of hide and seek. If you have the time, it's well worth stopping off for a walk along one of the many trails that lead up behind the village. Should you want to stay the night then the **Hotel Rest-Alhana** (☎ 07-456369; r per person incl breakfast & dinner YR3000) in At-Tawila has a couple of rooms with pretty wall carvings and communal bathrooms. It's on the main road through town, but the sign is in Arabic only.

## Al-Mahwit

## المحويت

The bustling market town of Al-Mahwit is the largest of the mountain towns to the west of the capital and, like Manakhah to the south, it makes a superb trekking base. Al-Mahwit lies in the centre of some of the most fertile country in Yemen and the road from Sana'a takes you past numerous fruit, coffee, tobacco and qat fields.

Like At-Tawila, Al-Mahwit was once an important coffee-collecting centre, as well as an administrative town during the 16th-century Ottoman rule.

### 👁 Sights & Activities

The **old town**, perched on a hilltop, marks the site of the Ottoman regional capital and is worth a walk, as is the town's **souq**. There is good **hiking** potential in the attractive surrounding countryside. A stunning but easy three- to four-hour walk begins from the hamlet of Bait Gawza a few kilometres out of town and worms its way along the edge of a sheer ledge back to Al-Mahwit via the villages of Kadha and Almasia.

Nobody, especially hikers, should miss out on the early morning pilgrimage to **Ar-Riady**, a viewpoint just to the northwest of town where the mountains cascade downwards for what seems like hundreds upon hundreds of metres and your tummy starts spinning in a vertigo-inspired twizzle. As the morning heats up you can watch the dancing clouds surge up out of the Red Sea plains and swallow up the villages precariously perched on ledges and rock needles below you.

### 🛏 Sleeping & Eating

In the past a popular hotel with foreigners was the **Al-Majed Tourist Hotel** (s/d YR2000/3000), on the main dirt road leading off the main surfaced road.

## Manakhah

## مناخة

📍 01

The largest commercial centre in the high mountains, Manakhah might be a non-descript town, but it's the centre of Yemeni trekking. From here everything from gentle hour-long rambles to serious multiday expeditions fan out across the highlands.

### 👁 Sights & Activities

Hikes lasting from one hour to a week or more are possible. Trekking is a year-round activity, but during the summer monsoon period it can be uncomfortably hot, not to mention a little damp. In the past the hotels were able to provide guides and equipment for any kind of hike. As tourism begins to pick up and the hotels re-open it's likely this will begin again.

As with other Yemeni trekking centres the lack of organised, way-marked trails means that it's much better to let a local guide suggest a route suitable for your experience and available time. The standard half-day hike is a downhill one from Al-Khutayb back to Manakhah.

Away from blisters and bivvy bags, attractions in Manakhah include the lively morning market (at its most raucous on Tuesday and Sunday), which draws all manner of characters from the surrounding villages.

### 🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Manakhah used to have some of the most enjoyable guesthouses in Yemen, but at the time of research the total lack of foreign tourists meant that all had closed down. If security continues to improve and tourists return then it's almost certain that both the superb **Al-Hijjarah Tourist Hotel & Restaurant** and the **Manakha Tourist Hotel** (Manakhah Askari Hotel) will re-open.

## Around Manakhah

### Al-Khutayb (Al-Hoteib) الحطيب

Lying 6km south of Manakhah and perched on a solitary hilltop is the pilgrimage site of Al-Khutayb (Al-Hoteib). Dedicated to a 12th-century preacher revered by followers of the Ismaili sect, the shrine attracts pilgrims from as far afield as India, and in fact the complex has a slightly Indian look to it. Ask a Yemeni about this place and they will no doubt gleefully regale you with stories about all the immoral activities that take place here – very little of which is probably true! You can walk around the area, though the shrine is fenced off to non-Muslims.

### Al-Hajjarah الهجرة

Stunningly situated on a mountain precipice 5km west of Manakhah, and a little higher

up the mountain, is the spectacular 11th-century village of Al-Hajjarah. The Ottomans found its strategic position useful when defending the roads from the coast to Sana'a. Nowadays this setting and its century-old stone and whitewashed tower houses (some up to eight storeys) have caught the eye of visitors with mountain-walking in mind.

## Sights & Activities

Until recently, the **Al-Ba'aha quarter** was inhabited by Jews. Above this is the old **Muslim quarter**, with its huge entrance gate. Look out for the painstakingly constructed **terraces**, which permit the villagers to eke out an impossible living from the very steep slopes of the mountain.

Like Manakhah, Al-Hajjarah is an excellent trekking base and as tourism picks up it's again hoped that trekking will recommence here.

## Sleeping & Eating

Al-Hajjarah's only hotel, the excellent **Husn al-Hajjara Tourism Hotel & Restaurant** was closed at the time of research. It is likely to re-open as tourism picks up again.

## NORTHERN YEMEN

The rough-and-ready north has always been Yemen's hardest and proudest region and even today its fierce tribes are regarded with trepidation and respect by the rest of the country. Parts of this area seem to be always engaged in some kind of dispute, and armed conflict between tribes and the central government is common. At the time of writing the entire region was out of bounds to foreign tourists and we have been unable to conduct on-ground research in Sa'da and Shaharah since 2007 and in the rest of the region since late 2009.

In the province of Sa'da a violent uprising has dragged on since 2004 between government forces and a group of Zaydi fighters called the Al-Houthis. The group is led by Abdul Malik al-Houthi who claims they're fighting discrimination of their minority Shia community whilst the Yemeni government claim they are trying to overthrow the government and install Shia religious rule. After several false ceasefires the government launched a full-scale offensive against the rebels in August 2009. The conflict quickly became international after clashes erupted

between the Houthis and Saudi forces. At one point the Houthis had even managed to occupy several villages in Saudi Arabia. The Yemeni government also accuses Iran of backing the rebels, while the Houthis make counter-accusations that Al-Qaeda has joined Sunni tribal fighters in aiding the government forces against them and, ironically, that the US were launching aerial bombardments against them (the US responded by saying they were attacking Al-Qaeda elements). Finally, if there weren't already enough players in the mix, a number of tribal groups opposed to the Houthis joined the fight on the side of the government. A ceasefire in early 2010 didn't stop the fighting completely but it certainly helped reduce it. However, when the wider Yemeni revolution began in 2011 the Houthis quickly aligned themselves with the protesters and by March of that year they had taken control of Sa'da city as well as much of the province; and by the middle of 2011 they also controlled much of neighbouring Al-Jawf province; by the end of the year they had advanced into Amran and Hajjah governorates; and by the end of 2012 the Houthis were even in control of parts of Sana'a governorate. Today, they have essentially carved out a state within a state.

The upshot of all this fighting has of course been the widespread creation of internally displaced people (the UN estimates that around 366,000 people have been made homeless by the conflict so far), hundreds of civilian deaths and the breakdown of normal government services in the north. Both Unicef and Islamic Relief Worldwide accuse the Houthis of using child soldiers. The current chaos in Yemen, and extreme danger for outsiders in north Yemen means that very few journalists have had access to the Sa'da region for a number of years and obtaining accurate information on what has been happening there is very difficult.

## Amran

عمران

 07

First impressions of ancient Amran, situated on an old trading route 52km northwest of Sana'a, aren't good. The town appears to be a rash of half-completed modern developments and seems to offer little reason to stop, but once past this you'll discover a fruity and flavoursome old quarter with something of a wild west feel to it. The town is also known for the quality of its leatherwork.

## Sights

The quiet **old town** is in remarkably good shape and the locals do a sterling job of keeping the streets clean. If you've been in Yemen for sometime, you probably won't think much of Amran, but if you're new to the game, you'll think its proud adobe houses and masses of excitable children quite enchanting. The highlights of a visit are walking along the city walls, which virtually surround the old quarter, and inspecting the eastern **entrance gate**. Look out for the **ancient stone inscriptions** around the entrance to the town as well as on some of the house facades. The souq in the new town is a riotous affair.

## Hajja

حجة

 07 / POP 53,887

Modern Hajja can't be described as attractive, but the journey there – which takes you over, around and along crest after crest of magnificent mountain – certainly is.

## Shaharah


شهارة

Fortified mountain villages are two-a-penny in Yemen, but Shaharah is the pick of the crop. The village lies at 2600m and overlooks

mountainous bulging swells to the south and shimmering hot plains to the north. The climb up from these plains to the village takes you through some of the most jaw-dropping scenery in the country.

## Sa'da

صعدة

 07 / POP 51,900

Ancient Sa'da was once a city of major importance on the trade routes north to Damascus, as well as one of Arabia's original, and most devoted, Islamic cities. It remains to this day the most conservative and traditional town in Yemen. Sa'da (and its region) is known for its particular style of adobe architecture, which gives the houses the impression of having a coat of mud tiles. The Great Mosque (Al-Hadi Mosque), which dates to the 9th century, is considered one of the oldest in Yemen. The town also has some impressive fortifications, including a remarkable 16th-century adobe wall and its original gates.

## TIHAMA (RED SEA COAST)

The flat and featureless Tihama is the chalk next to highland Yemen's mountainous cheese. The contrasts are more than

### BOYS WITH TOYS

The abundance of weapons in private Yemeni hands is legendary, with estimates of 60 million weapons in the hands of 24 million citizens. The most visible form of gun is the Kalashnikov, but you can also take your pick from a wide assortment of pistols, rifles, hand grenades, large jeep-mounted weaponry, surface-to-air missiles and even anti-aircraft guns. While the trade in such heavy weapons is a little more discreet, the sale of machine guns, grenades and pistols has always been very open and obvious. Before the current unrest the government had made some headway in cracking down on gun ownership and gun-markets; although only in areas where they had full control. In the tribal areas the ownership and trade in guns remained virtually unchanged. What progress had been made has almost certainly suffered a huge setback thanks to the recent turmoil and the government's near total lack of control over large areas of the nation.

For the average Yemeni, with their strong tribal background, guns are an essential of daily life. Blood feuds between tribal groups can continue for years and at times reach levels of almost all-out warfare. These ethnic vendettas result in around 2000 deaths per year. With the never-ending instability in Yemen and the larger region, it's no surprise that gun-running is big business here and Yemeni firepower has been found throughout eastern Africa and the Middle East. The Yemeni/Saudi border has always been a fairly porous and loosely defined affair, and with the tribes holding more power than the central government, in this region smuggling has long been a mainstay of the economy. Though there is no way of knowing where many of these weapons end up, most observers agree that Al-Qaeda groups both in Yemen and elsewhere do take advantage of this easy weapons supply.

just geographical. With Africa being only a stone's throw away, the flamboyant influence of that continent seems to be present everywhere. The clothing is so bright that sunglasses are needed to look at it, the solid stone houses of the mountains have turned into African-style mud-and-thatch huts, the weekly markets are even more animated and the overall attitude is much more liberal. All in all, the final package is a fascinating contrast to the rest of the country – just don't attempt to explore it during summer, when it becomes so hot that even the camels start dreaming about being polar bears.

Throughout the worst of the troubles in 2011 the whole of the Tihama was, like virtually everywhere in the country, closed to foreign tourists. At the time of writing the southern Tihama (from Kamaran Island to Al-Makha) had just re-opened to tourists though for the moment very few foreigners have ventured back. North of Kamaran Island the security situation remains something of a question mark and travel permits were not being issued. We were unable to conduct on-ground research for the Tihama for this edition and the information contained here either dates from late 2009/early 2010 or has been researched remotely via telephone and the internet.

## Al-Hudayda

الحديدة

03 / POP 410,000

With its wide and clean streets, parks full of shady, snooze-enticing benches, pleasant pavement cafes and a pedestrian-friendly seaside corniche, Al-Hudayda, capital of Tihama, is one of Yemen's most European-flavoured cities and is an immensely popular spot for holidaying Yemenis. All this makes it an excellent base for further explorations of the Tihama.

## Sights & Activities

The Al-Hudayda **fish market** (☀ 6am-noon), 2km southeast of the centre of town, is a slippery and smelly must-see that's frenetic, cocky and fun. Come early in the morning to watch the day's catch being unloaded in front of a hectic, seagull-like mob of buyers and sellers. The daily trawl nets everything from plump prawns and glistening groupers to huge hammerhead sharks. In fact, Al-Hudayda is one of the biggest shark fishing ports in the world and the local shark population is being utterly deci-

imated. The majority of sharks are caught just for their fins which supply the shark fin soup market in China. The traditional dhow boats are also very photogenic. The old and, it must be said, decrepit Turkish quarter is another possible sight, as are the nearby **souqs**.

Maybe the best way to pass an afternoon in Al-Hudayda is to do as the locals do: buy an ice cream and stroll along the **seafront corniche** (look out for Ottoman and South-east Asian-influenced buildings) or laze about with a book in one of the town's parks.

One kilometre south of the fish market is the main **town beach**. It's certainly not a place for a foreign tourist to go for a swim, but its muddy sands are packed with holidaying Yemeni families eating ice creams, taking camels rides and bobbing about in the waves in inflatable rings – the women whilst fully veiled.

## Sleeping

There's plenty of accommodation in Al-Hudayda, but none of it really represents value for money. Be warned that in the past Al-Hudayda got very busy during Yemeni holidays and all hotels tripled their prices. At such times unless you've reserved in advance then you've almost no chance of finding a bed.

In the past some of the better places to stay were the budget **Hotel Darcum** (Sana'a St), which offered great value, the equally good mid-range **Dream Hotel** (off Sana'a St) and the newer mid-range **Rotana Star Tourist Hotel** (off the Corniche).

## Eating

As with all large Yemeni towns there are plenty of places to eat including the central **Al-Sindbad Broast & Restaurant** and the **Shardi Al-Morgan Restaurant** which was renowned far and wide for its prawn dishes.

## Getting There & Away

The national carrier **Yemenia** (☎ 201474; www.yemenia.com.ye) has one-way flights to Sana'a (US\$82). **Felix Airways** (☎ 565656; www.felixairways.com; Airport Rd) covers the same route for a little less (US\$74).

## Kamaran Island جزيرة كمران

Tantalising the adventurous with thoughts of pristine reefs and ancient tales of pirates, smugglers and buried treasure is a string of



## Al-Hudayda



desert islands floating in the limpid waters of the steamy Red Sea. However, due to the fact that the pirates and smugglers, if not the buried treasure, are still out there, most of these islands, including the jewel in the crown, the Hanish Islands, have long been out of bounds to tourists.

All is not lost though; Kamaran Island, sitting a kilometre or so off the coast, offers would-be sea dogs a chance to live the life of a castaway.

Kamaran Island offers excellent diving as well as a range of organised activities, but don't come expecting balmy tropical beaches. Utterly barren and blasted by unceasing winds, this is a real desert island in every sense of the word.

The only formal place to stay, **Kamaran Island Resort** (☎ 733711742; [www.kamaran.net](http://www.kamaran.net); r per person with all meals US\$65), at the northern end of the island, has a shabby collection of Tihama style traditional huts with filthy common bathrooms and decent seafood meals (nonguests pay an unfathomably expensive US\$20 per meal). The resort rents out diving equipment and boats as well as snorkelling gear.

Other entertainment includes exploring Kamaran towns' weathered and partially

## Al-Hudayda

### Sleeping

- 1 Dream Hotel ..... B2
- 2 Hotel Darcum ..... B2
- 3 Rotana Star Tourist Hotel ..... A3

### Eating

- 4 Al-Sindbad Broast & Restaurant ..... A1

### Transport

- 5 Yemenia ..... B2

collapsed coral buildings and end-of-the-world atmosphere.

Getting to Kamaran is half the fun. From Al-Hudayda travel up through unremittingly desolate scenery to the bleak, wind-battered town of **Al-Salif** which is truly the town the Gods forgot. The port for Kamaran, which sits just to the south of the main fishing port, consists of a fallen-over hut and a tea shop. Boats depart to Kamaran village every hour or so.

## Jabal Bura

جبل برع

Butting outward and upward into the pancake flat Tihama, Jabal Bura (2271m) is

where the Haraz Mountains give a final mighty push toward the Red Sea and the result is little short of spectacular.

Calling Jabal Bura a single mountain is misleading; instead it's a massif comprising several peaks and valleys. The attractions for visitors are two fold; the lush, forested area around the Wadi Rayjaf forms the **Jabal Bura Protected Area** (🕒 6am-6pm), which is the closest mainland Yemen comes to a national park. For Arabia the wadi is shockingly green with water flowing down it year round, ponds full of croaking frogs and a real life genuine forest of trees (remember those?). Plenty of exciting birdlife calls the wadi home as do zillions of gaudy-winged butterflies and troops of hamadryas baboons. Signed walking trails of various lengths lead off from the road, but come early in the morning or late in the day if you want to see any wildlife. You'll need your own transport to access this part of the mountains.

The second drawback for visitors is the **trekking** and stupendous views found much higher up the mountain slopes. Trekking around these parts is still very much in its infancy and most people organise their trek through a Sana'a tour company. The best base for trekking always used to be **Al-Memkab village**. Pick-ups run here from Bajil a couple of times a day. The road up the mountain to Al-Memkab is such a terrifying swirl of switchbacks that it has been known to reduce people to tears! On reaching the village, and wiping away tears of fear, you'll be greeted by a view that's so extraordinary it'll probably reduce you back to tears.

## Beit al-Faqih

بيت الفقيه

For much of the week Beit al-Faqih lies as dormant and quiet as a winter seed, but come past early on a Friday morning and you'll think spring has sprung in the most outrageous manner possible. This is because each Friday every villager, trader and farmer from miles around turns up to be a part of the biggest, brightest and boldest weekly **market** in Yemen. For the average rural Yemeni, daily life revolves around a series of weekly markets – they're places to stock up on supplies, catch up on gossip, seal a deal and have a bit of fun. This is especially true in Tihama, which has taken the system of nomadic weekly markets to heart. As a sight

it's spectacular and as an experience unforgettable. A morning here spent bartering over spices, clay pots and even goats and camels will certainly be a highlight of any Yemeni adventure.

The famous market was first established in the early 18th century, when it served as a coffee exchange, attracting merchants and traders from India, Morocco, Egypt, Iran, Constantinople and Europe. After the deals were signed and sealed, the coffee beans were packed up and shipped around the world from the nearby ports of Al-Hudayda or Al-Makha. With the collapse of the coffee trade, Beit al-Faqih sought to diversify – today coffee makes up only a tiny fraction of the items on sale. Instead, it's the day-to-day needs of the Tihama villager that form the bulk of the trade.

The market kicks into gear just after dawn every Friday morning and by lunchtime everyone's heading back home for the week. Try to arrive as early as possible (if only to beat the heat) and give yourself at least two hours to explore properly. Should you be unlucky enough to pass through on a different day of the week, you could stop off to watch the town's famous **weavers** at work (from 7am to 1pm and 4pm to 6pm daily, except Friday). There are no recommended hotels in town, so it's best to stay overnight at Al-Hudayda (62km to the north).

## Zabid

زبيد

Zabid is Yemen's third Unesco World Heritage Site, but unlike its fellow club members, Old Sana'a and Shibam, who like to flaunt their beauty for all to see, Zabid likes to keep its secrets well hidden.

The countryside around Zabid has been inhabited since virtually the dawn of humanity, with Zabid itself built around AD 819 on the orders of Mohammed ibn' Abdullah ibn Ziyad, the local Abbasid governor. Not content with founding a city, he also established the first in Zabid's long and distinguished line of madrassas (Quranic schools). The city soon became known – both inside and outside of Yemen – as a centre of Islamic and scientific learning, and between the 13th and 15th centuries, when it also served as the capital of Yemen, Zabid played host to over 5000 students in more than 200 colleges.

The last 500 years have been less kind on Zabid and the town has gradually faded

in importance. Don't feel sorry, though, because this is just karma paying Zabid back for the pain it has caused school children the world over: it was a scholar from Zabid who was responsible for that school days torture called algebra!

The walled town was declared a World Heritage Site in 1993 and, in 2000, with over 40% of the old city houses replaced with new structures, Zabid was registered on the organisation's 'Danger List', requiring urgent funds for restoration.

Finally, as if algebra and Unesco recognition wasn't enough, Zabid has another dubious claim to fame. It's reputedly the hottest town on earth.

## 🕒 Sights & Activities

The dazzling whitewashed, low-rise town is a shy place and keeps most of its best features tucked away out of view. Without a bit of local help, a visitor will probably leave with staid impressions, having seen little but a series of plain exterior walls. Fortunately, help is at hand in the form of a friendly and generous local population. Walk the sweltering streets and an invitation for tea in somebody's house is almost a given. As soon as this happens, the hidden world of Zabid opens up before you. Plain on the exterior, the interior of the walls, which face onto small courtyards, are nothing short of carved and sculpted works of art in a hundred different patterns and geometrical designs.

Built around the central souqs, the residential areas of the city were originally divided into different quarters for the different professional classes – merchants, artisans, dignitaries and scholars. The city retains some of its low defensive wall (at the peak of its glory Zabid had four concentric walls) and also some of the original gates, including **Bab as-Siham**, **Bab ash-Shabariq** and **Bab an-Nakhl**. Various ornate buildings, such as the **Nasr Palace**, testify to the town's former prestige and wealth.

Zabid boasts 86 mosques and madrassas (a considerable decline from the 230 it's once supposed to have had), including the **Al-Asha'ir Mosque**, which was built during Mohammed's lifetime in AD 629, and the **Al-Jami'a Mosque** (Friday Mosque), which dates to the 16th century. Look out, also, for the white, 13th-century **Al-Iskandar Mosque** in the **citadel** on the edge of town. Unusually in Yemen, it's often possible for

non-Muslims to quietly enter some of the mosques with a guide.

Formerly the citadel's granary, the restored **Zabid Granary Museum** (☀️ sunrise-sunset) now serves to 'explain the history of Zabid' and exhibits the finds of the archaeological mission working here since 1983. The six sections are themed (mainly historically) and contain a wide range of artefacts, from cannon balls and fragments of fine pottery to Ottoman pipes and lovely Islamic wood-carvings. At the time of writing, we had no information on whether or not the museum was still open.

## Al-Makha

المخا

📖 04

Ask most people what mocha means and they'll instantly reply 'coffee' or 'Starbucks'. So it's somewhat ironic that Al-Makha, the original coffee port, is one of the few towns on the planet without a branch of Starbucks or its ilk. In fact, Al-Makha doesn't have a lot of anything these days – except flies and heat.

The history of Al-Makha stretches way back to the days before Islam (and Starbucks), but its heyday was during the 17th century when it became the world's foremost coffee-exporting centre. Back then, Al-Makha had a population of some 20,000 people. Nowadays it's a forlorn and wind-blown town of a few hundred hardy souls who make their bread and butter through fishing and smuggling. Africa is only a hop and a skip away and the chaos in Somalia as well as Yemen provides an endless source of income for the unscrupulous. Alcohol, weapons, drugs, consumer goods and, most disturbingly, people all enter and leave Yemen through this narrow back door.

## 🕒 Sights & Activities

Reminders of past glories are few and far between. The most impressive building is the **Masjid ash-Shadhil**, a blazing white 15th-century mosque. Nearby is an old **minaret** and a few piles of rubble that were once **merchant villas**. The newer part of town has a **qat market**, a **beach** with a few garishly painted boats and a large morning-only **fish market** and a weighing room, whose floors are ankle-deep in thick, black squid ink.

## SOUTHERN YEMEN

Yemen's south is the richest and most developed region of the country. It's also the greenest and most fertile and has long been considered the breadbasket of Arabia. There is a huge amount of historical, cultural and geographic variety in this area. In the far south is the run-down, sweltering port of Aden, the former British colony and old capital of the south. Further north, and in complete contrast, are the lush and cool highland towns of Ibb, Jibla and Ta'izz, where rain falls year-round. Until recently this was the safest and easiest part of the country in which to travel, particularly for those reliant on public transport. During research for this book, this whole region remained off limits to travellers following the unrest of 2011, but as we went to press word started coming through that although Aden, a town with deep problems, remains closed to tourists, Ta'izz, Ibb and Jibla were reportedly about to re-open.

We have been unable to conduct on-the-ground research in Southern Yemen since late 2009/early 2010 and information contained here is a combination of that period, and remote updates conducted by phone and internet.

### Ibb

إب

03 / POP 213,000

Situated 194km south of Sana'a, Ibb boasts a strategic position on a high hill in the western foothills of the Ba'adan Mountains. Settled since early Islamic times, the town grew into an important administrative centre during the time of the Ottomans. Today it's largely, and unjustifiably, ignored by most

travellers. This is a shame because its chaotic market area and pretty old town are a pure delight to explore, and when combined with nearby Jibla, Ibb makes for a perfect overnight pause on the journey between Sana'a and Ta'izz.

Ibb and its governate enjoy one of the highest rainfall levels in Yemen, which has given rise to the nickname 'the green province'.

### Sights & Activities

The large and boisterous central **market** area in Ibb is a noisy clash of colours, sounds and smells that feels more Indian than Yemeni. It's one of the most enjoyable markets in the country. Immediately behind the market is the whitewashed old quarter, which, aside from around the qat market, is a much more staid but no less rewarding place to explore. The stone houses, designed in a style unique to Ibb, are typically four to five storeys high, with facades decorated with geometrical friezes and circular *qamiriya* (usually moon-shaped, stained-glass windows).

In the middle of the old town, **Al-Jalaliya Mosque** dates to the time of the Ottomans. The **fortress** perched on the hill nearby is, sadly, closed, but you can get good views of the town from **Jabal Rabi**, around 700m from the town centre.

### Sleeping

There are a couple of basic hotels in the market area. They're all as cheap as chips, but much less appetising. It's much better to stay out on the road to Al-Udayn, on the edge of town, where there are a bunch of cleaner, quieter and far superior hotels. The **Al-Riyad Hotel** (Al-Udayn St) was always a popular one out here with foreign tourists.

## THE PECULIAR INCIDENT OF THE GOAT & THE BERRY

Most of us need our early-morning caffeine kick to get going, but have you ever wondered who discovered coffee? Well, according to the Yemenis, it wasn't a person at all but rather a humble goat. It's said that a shepherd was out in the Yemeni hills with his goats when he noticed that one of them, having eaten some peculiar berries, started behaving strangely. Mystified by this sight, the old man took a bite himself and within moments felt 20 years younger. Astonished by this discovery, he raced back to his village and spread the news. One of the people he told was a poet who accompanied the shepherd back into the mountains to try them for himself. After swallowing a few of the berries, the poet felt so enlightened that he immediately composed a poem in praise of this odd shrub. It was this poem that spread the fame of coffee around the world. And the goat we all have to celebrate for our morning rituals? Rumour has it that in thanks he was eaten for lunch the next day.

## WORTH A TRIP

## JIBLA جبلة

Situated 8km southwest of Ibb, Jibla is stunningly placed at the summit of a hill. The town served as the capital for much of highland Yemen under the Sulayhid dynasty in the 11th and 12th centuries, and was particularly prosperous under the benevolent and impossibly long-named Sayyida al-Hurra Arwa bint Ahmad as-Sulayhi. Fortunately this mouthful was quickly reduced to plain old Queen Arwa, but by the time of her death at the age of 92, she had proved she was anything but plain. By building numerous schools, roads, bridges and mosques, her policies of investing the kingdom's treasury in projects for the good of the average person mean that she's still remembered fondly today as a 'Little Sheba'.

It was thanks to this investment in education that the town gained a reputation as a centre for Islamic learning, and even today the annexe next to the **Queen Arwa Mosque** (admission by donation) serves as a madrasa. The crumbling **Dar as-Sultana Palace** is worth checking out though due to the dangerous state of the semi-collapsed building you cannot enter. If it's still open the Queen Arwa Museum contained some lovely annotated manuscripts belonging to the queen and her father. Finally, Jibla has attained local fame for its excellent **qat market**.

## Ta'izz

## تعز

📍 04 / POP 467,000

Ibn Battuta, the great 14th-century Arab traveller, once described Ta'izz as 'one of the largest and most beautiful cities'. It's still large – Yemen's third-largest city – but for beauty you need to look a little harder. The city has suffered heavily from unplanned urban growth, which has left it without any real central soul. It played a major role in the increasingly violent protests of 2010–11. These reached a bloody peak in late May when Salih's soldiers opened fire on demonstrators and killed between 28 and 64 people. After that demonstrations became increasingly violent with protesters, tribal fighters and defected soldiers all using weapons against Saleh loyalists. By 7 June 2011 the opposition had largely taken control of the city.

## 👁 Sights &amp; Activities

Bab al-Kabir is the main entrance to the **old town**, but only parts of the original 13m-high wall remain, including two of its gates – **Bab al-Musa** and **Bab al-Kabir**. Well worth a wander particularly in the early evening are the bright and brash **souqs** spread around Bab al-Kabir. Look out for the local cow's cheese (little white disks laid out in rows) and the sacks of delicious dried dates. Beyond the souqs and mosques, the old-town architecture is unlikely to do much for you. Back in the newer streets there's a large and very lively **fruit souq** off Gamal

Abdul Nasser St. Ta'izz is a good place to buy textiles and *jambiyas*. Look out also for the famous women merchants of Ta'izz, who traditionally do the buying and selling.

The **National Museum** (26th September St), which wasn't really a museum at all, but more the petrified palace of Imam Ahmed, was closed for renovations back in 2010. We have been unable to confirm if it has reopened, if it has then don't miss it, because it's an absolute treat that reveals something of the life and times of its previous and slightly peculiar owner.

It's not exactly a tourist attraction but the **university**, next to the museum, always has groups of students (men and women) hanging around and eager to make friends with foreigners.

## 🛏 Sleeping

You wouldn't describe the accommodation scene in Ta'izz as very memorable. In the past popular places to stay were the **Asia Hotel** (At-Tahrir St), **Royal Ta'izz Tourism Hotel** (Gamal Abdul Nasser St), **Al-Shreef Tourist Hotel & Suites** (At-Tahrir St) and the upmarket **Al-Saeed Hotel Ta'izz** (📍 200311; www.al-saeed-hotel-taiz.com; s/d from US\$139/158; 📶 🍽).

## 🍴 Eating

There are lots of places to eat in Ta'izz. In the past, two of the better places were the **Leyali Al-Arab** (Arabian Nights Restaurant; Asayfarah St) and the **Al-Shibani Restaurant** (Gamal Abdul Nasser St).

## Ta'izz



## i Getting There & Away

The national carrier **Yemenia** (☎217126; [www.yemenia.com](http://www.yemenia.com); Gamal Abdul Nasser St) has one-way flights to Sana'a (US\$82). **Felix Airways** (☎565656; [www.felixairways.com](http://www.felixairways.com)) has flights to Sana'a (US\$74).

## Aden

عدن

☎02 / POP 590,000

## History

According to legend, Noah's Ark was built and launched in the area, and Cain and Abel hung out for a while. Inscriptions dating to the 6th century BC are the first concrete mentions of the town, but it's clear that it has long served as an ancient trading centre. Since the 10th century Aden has also been one of Yemen's largest towns, and by the 13th century its inhabitants numbered some 80,000 people.

Initially serving as the capital of a series of local dynasties, Aden was later taken over by the Ottomans, followed by the British in 1839. After the opening of the Suez Canal in the middle of the 19th century, its strategic importance grew, and it soon numbered

among the largest ports in the world and as one of the stars of the British Empire.

Aden served as the capital of the PDRY from 1967 until reunification, when it was declared a free-trade zone. Although badly damaged in the 1994 War of Unity, it made a brief recovery of sorts with the government pouring money into developing and modernising the port. Just as things began to look shipshape, disaster again struck when terrorist groups aligned to Al-Qaeda attacked the US warship the *USS Cole* and effectively scared away most international shipping.

Even before the 2011 revolution an increasing number of southern secessionists, complaining of discrimination at the hands of a northern dominated government, wanted Aden to become capital of an independent south Yemen. Since 2009 this has led to increasing violence in the city, and, by the height of the chaos in 2011, Aden was a divided city with neighbourhood militias setting up road blocks and numerous gun and bomb attacks taking place. Fighting between government forces, tribal groups, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and secessionists throughout the south and east of the country created tens of thousands of homeless people; with around 100,000 internally dis-





## Ta'izz

### Sights

- 1 National Museum..... E3

### Sleeping

- 2 Al-Shreef Tourist Hotel & Suites..... C2  
3 Asia Hotel..... C1  
4 Royal Ta'izz Tourism Hotel..... B2

### Eating

- 5 Al-Shibani Restaurant..... B2

### Transport

- 6 City Minibus Stand..... C3  
7 City Minibus Stand..... C2  
8 City Minibus Stand..... C2  
9 Yemenia..... E2

## Aden Tanks

RUINS

(end of Sayla St) Believed to date from the 1st century, Aden Tanks were designed not just to collect precious water for the city, but also to remove water in times of flash flooding. A series of ingenious steps, arches and conduits channels the rainwater into a set of beautifully built cisterns. The 13 cisterns (all that remain of the original 53 tanks) have a total capacity of 20 million gallons. Developed by successive dynasties, the tanks eventually fell into disuse, until uncovered in the mid-19th century by the British, who, despite their best efforts and modern technology, never did manage to get them to work again.

placed people descending on Aden. Many of these people have moved into schools and other public buildings and brought many public services in the city to a near stand still. By late 2012 there was the first glimmer of hope that things were finally starting to calm down again, as the government pushed back the Islamic militants who had taken control of large parts of south Yemen.

## Sights & Activities

We have been unable to confirm opening hours, prices etc for either of the following. Descriptions are based on research conducted in 2010.

### National Museum for Antiquities MUSEUM

(off Al-Aidrus St; ☎ Sat-Thu) The excellent National Museum for Antiquities has wonderful exhibits from the ancient Kingdoms of Yemen including marble and gypsum statues of humans that look like zombies brought back from the dead. Other highlights include exhibits from the early Islamic period.

Upstairs on the 1st floor is the **Ethnographical Museum**, which has a musty and poorly displayed collection of traditional dress from across the country. Another highlight is the museum building itself.

## Sleeping

Aden used to have a number of decent places. We have been unable to update any for this edition but prior to 2011 good places to get some sleep were the **Alamer Hotel** ([www.alamer-hotel.com](http://www.alamer-hotel.com); Al-Midan St; ☎) and the upmarket **Gold Mohur Hotel** (Gold Mohur Bay; ☎ ☎).

## Eating

There are lots of places to eat in Aden. In the past, two of the better places were the **Reem Tourist Restaurant** (Ghandhi St) and the **Al-Ryan Tourism Restaurant**.

## Getting There & Away

**Yemenia** (☎ 253969; [yemenia.com.au](http://yemenia.com.au); Queen Arwa Rd) has flights to Sana'a (US\$104). **Felix Airways** (☎ 565656; [www.felixairways.com](http://www.felixairways.com)) has

flights to Sana'a (US\$100), Al-Mukalla (US\$102), Socotra (US\$173) and Sayun (US\$102).

## EASTERN YEMEN

Eastern Yemen is one of the few places left in Arabia where the desert world of Thesiger still clings on, albeit with increasing precariousness. Home of nomadic Bedouin tribal people, ruined cities of legend and startling oases, this massive chunk of apricot dunes and bleak stone-escapes is for many the most romantic corner of Yemen.

### Ma'rib

مأرب

06

It's hard to imagine that this rotting desert town was ever a seat of power, but it was from these very same streets that a woman of intense beauty once came forward and changed the story of Arabia. Bilqis, guardian of the frankincense trade routes, lover of Solomon, mother of the throne of Abyssinia, daughter of the devil and known to the world simply as the Queen of Sheba is rumoured to have based her capital here. The Quran relates other, equally fantastical stories of Ma'rib, famously describing it as a paradise on the left bank and a paradise on the right bank. By all accounts this was a true description – the city, built on taxes from the incense trade, was impossibly wealthy and, thanks to its famous dam, very fertile. It's said that a person could walk for four days in any direction and not leave the shade of the palm groves and orange trees.

Even in good times tribal tensions run high in Ma'rib and the town could never be

described as safe. Many tourists have been kidnapped in and around Ma'rib over the years and the area is a hotbed of militant activity. As such Ma'rib has been closed to tourists for a number of years and we have been unable to conduct on-the-ground research here since 2007. In the unlikely event that the town reopens to tourism during the lifetime of this book we urge you to exercise extreme caution.

### History

Ma'rib has been inhabited almost since the dawn of time and is one of the world's oldest towns. It is, of course, famous above all else for being the supposed home of the Queen of Sheba, though whether or not she really did grace the streets of Ma'rib is unknown. What cannot be doubted is that the Sabaean capital quickly became the most important staging post on the frankincense trade route, and it was during this period that the dam was constructed. The good times couldn't last, though, and with the bursting of the dam the people of Ma'rib scattered across the deserts of Arabia, and the town virtually ceased to exist. Some say that it was the dispersal of the peoples of Ma'rib after this event that led to the birth of the Arab peoples. It wasn't really until the modern age and the discovery of oil that the fortunes of Ma'rib started to revive – a point that has been made most clear with the construction of a new dam and the greening of the desert.

The last few years haven't been all plain sailing, though; Ma'rib is consistently one of the most troubled places in Yemen. Since 2011 the central government have had almost no control over Ma'rib and Islamic militants have filled the power vacuum.

### THE GREAT DAM & THE IRON RAT

Ma'rib's great dam was enormous, measuring 720m long, 60m wide and about 35m high. It was capable of irrigating about 70 sq km of desert and sustaining a population of between 30,000 and 50,000 people.

The ingenuity of the dam lies not just in the choice of its site (where water collects at the base of a number of valleys), but also in its brilliant and complex construction. Aside from the dam there was a complex and sophisticated series of drains and channels surrounding it.

However, the dam was eventually destroyed by a rat with iron teeth chewing away the base of the dam (apparently the rat made its way down from Syria by jumping from hump to hump along a huge camel caravan). One silver lining to this cataclysmic event was that with the destruction of the dam the people of Ma'rib were turned into nomads who set off to conquer and colonise every corner of Arabia, and if some medieval texts are to be believed, they even got as far as Tibet.

## WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS?

The most beautiful and alluring woman ever to live had hairy legs and the cloven foot of the devil. Her fame has lasted 3000 years, yet nobody remembers her name. She's a player in the ancient legends of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, yet no one knows where she lived. She's the most famous daughter of Yemen, mother of the throne of Ethiopia and the original Jerusalem pilgrim. Even today, she remains a household name, and any girl seen to be getting above herself can expect to be compared to her. She is, of course, the Queen of Sheba, but she may never even have existed.

Legend holds that the Queen of Sheba's first public appearance was when she paid a visit to the court of King Solomon in 10th-century BC Jerusalem. The reasons and results of her visit vary depending on whether you are using Jewish, Christian, Islamic or Ethiopian accounts, but the general consensus is that it was rumours of Solomon's wealth and wisdom that drew her to his court. The best-known story in the West is the Ethiopian tradition that recounts how Solomon became enraptured with her beauty and devised a plan to have his wicked way with her. He agreed to let her stay in his palace only on the condition that she touched nothing of his. Shocked that he should consider her capable of such a thing, she agreed. That evening the king laid on a feast of spicy and salty foods, and after all had eaten well, Sheba and Solomon retired to separate beds in his sleeping quarters. In the night Sheba awoke thirsty from all the salty food she had consumed and reached across for a glass of water. The moment she put the glass to her lips Solomon awoke and triumphantly claimed that she had broken her vow. 'But it's only water,' she cried. To which Solomon replied, 'And nothing on earth is more precious than water.'

Ethiopian tradition holds that the child that resulted from the deceitful night of passion that followed was Menelik I, from whom the entire royal line of Ethiopia claim direct descent. Though all the ancient sources agree that a meeting took place between the two rulers, things become a little murky after that point. The Bible doesn't even give Solomon's mysterious visitor a name, Jewish legend kindly gives Sheba hairy legs and a cloven foot, and Quranic accounts say that Solomon heard rumours of a kingdom ruled by a queen whose subjects worshipped the sun. He commanded a *jinn* (spirit) to bring her to him, and when Bilqis, as she is known in the Arab world, arrived at Solomon's crystal palace, she immediately accepted the Abrahamic tradition of worshipping one god alone.

Finding out whether Sheba existed and where her capital was located has not proved easy. The strongest claims have come from Ethiopia, which believes that Aksum (Axum) was her capital, and Yemen, which says it was Ma'rib (others claim she came from northwest Arabia or Nigeria). Both cities were important trade and cultural centres and it's likely that both were, if not ruled by the same monarch, then closely tied through trade. So far neither has any evidence to suggest that the Queen of Sheba ever existed. Whatever the truth, the legend persists and every Yemeni will swear that Ma'rib was the home of the most beautiful cloven-footed woman to have ever lived.

## Sights

### Great Ma'rib Dam

RUIN

Lying 8km southwest of town is the extraordinary Great Ma'rib Dam, justly Yemen's most famous monument. The dam is believed to date to at least the 8th century BC. It was periodically repaired; the last recorded time that major works were carried out was in the 6th century AD, after which it probably fell into disuse. Sadly, much of the remaining walls have been used to build the new town. Only two sluice gates (look

out for the Sabaean inscriptions) remain. The vast stones, used for the dam's foundations, were covered in a kind of 'waterproofing' consisting of clay and plastered with stones and gravel on the sides. At the tip of the dam, two gaps in the wall channelled the water into the irrigation canals.

### 'Arsh Bilqis

RUIN

Lying on the Safir road, the ancient and enigmatic 'Arsh-Bilqis (Bilqis Palace/Bilqis Throne/Temple of the Moon) is the site of the famous five-and-a-half columns often

## SECURITY – SHABWA

For the past few years Shabwa has been the domain of Islamic militants aligned to Al-Qaeda and is the scene of frequent battles between militants and the Yemeni army as well as US drone strikes. Consequently, this is currently one of the most dangerous places in the world for a westerner and we have been unable to conduct on-ground research here since 2007.

seen in tourist brochures. Although linked to the legend of the Queen of Sheba, archaeologists now believe that the temple predates the queen, and is actually around 4000 years old and was dedicated to the moon.

The temple consists of a square with an open courtyard, at the centre of which lies the old sacred well. Twelve steps lead from the open area to the hall, and there's a row of fixed marble seats on the western side and a plinth on which a 6m statue of the Sabaean Holy Oxen once stood.

### Mahram Bilqis

RUINS

The kidney-shaped Mahram Bilquis (Temple of Bilqis/Awwam Temple) is believed to date from at least 800 BC and was dedicated to the sun god. Measuring 94m by 82m, it's the largest of all the Sabaean temples. Remains include a 9m-high wall, a hall with columns and a row of eight, 12m-high columns.

### Old Ma'rib

OLD TOWN

Rising like a spectre from the surrounding landscape is the eerie silhouette of Old Ma'rib. Originally built long before the 1st millennium BC and sitting on foundations that are vastly more ancient, it suffered much damage from bombs during the 1962 civil war, but for the layperson it's the most romantic of the archaeological sites. A number of years ago the last family finally moved out and with their departure one of the oldest inhabited towns on earth effectively ceased to exist.

## Shabwa

شَبْوَا

Shabwa, the political, economic and religious capital of the ancient kingdom of Hadramawt, situated on the bank of Wadi Arma, has been described as 'a city forever beyond the hills', an appropriate description

for a place that has remained fantastically remote right up until today.

The town, which is thought to have been founded sometime between 1500 and 1200 BC, was an important collection point for the camel caravans traversing the desert. Traditionally, the caravans were obliged to pay the high priest of Shabwa one-tenth of the total value of their load. As a result, the city grew rich – rich enough to turn the surrounding desert into a 4800-hectare garden of trees, fields and flowers.

Much of Shabwa awaits further excavation, but for the moment there are the remains of the old **city walls**, the ruins of an **ancient temple**, various **storerooms** and what is said to be the **royal palace** to the east of the site.

## Al-Mukalla

المكلا

📍 05 / POP 182,500

## 👁 Sights & Activities

Al-Mukalla's **old town** and **corniche** are interesting. The former is reminiscent of Zanzibar and India, and has an exotic (but incredibly dirty) feel to it. It's not at all like an inland Yemeni town. The corniche has a more European flavour and used to make a great place for an evening walk. The **Mukalla Museum** (Corniche), occupying part of the elegant former Sultan's Palace, contains displays relating to the sultan and to the town's history.

## 🛏 Sleeping

Al-Mukalla used to be a popular holiday destination with both Yemenis and Saudis wanting to dip their toes in the sea. Today, most hotels probably stand empty or have closed down. In the past popular places to stay with western tourists were the cheap **Al-Salama Hotel** (📞 305210; Al-Mukalla St), the mid-range **Ryboon City Hotel** (📞 303606; Fouah St; @) and the very pleasant top-end **Al-Bustan Hotel** (📞 318770; www.albustan-mukalla.com; @ 📷).

## 📍 Getting There & Around

**Yemenia** (📞 303444; www.yemenia.com.au; Al-Ghar al-Amar St) has flights to Sana'a (US\$140). **Felix Airways** (📞 565656; www.felixairways.com) has flights to Sana'a (US\$119), Socotra (US\$118) and Aden (US\$102).

The airport (based at Ar-Rayyan) lies 40km from Al-Mukalla.



## Hiking

There's great hiking potential, with the green hills and granite outcrops of the 1500m Hajhir Mountains providing dragons, cave dwellers and views. Unless you're planning a long trans island hike, you'll need a vehicle to reach some of the best walking areas. It's compulsory to take two guides – one from a Hadibu tour agency (YR5000) to act as a translator and one local guide to act as a, well, guide (YR5000). There are two standard high-mountain walks each taking a minimum of four hours excluding stops. In general experienced hikers will find the walking fairly easy.

For a different kind of hike, camel trekking (camel per day YR8000, guide per day YR5000) in the foothills can be organised. This is a fantastic adventure that involves staying with nomadic families and trekking for up to a week. Serious naturalists and botanists will appreciate the knowledge of a guide and any of the tour agencies should be able to line you up with someone experienced.

## Caving

Caving is a new activity for which Socotra (and the Dhofar Mountains around Hawf) has immense potential. The island is thought to boast one of the world's largest cave systems, though they remain almost entirely unexplored to date. The Dogub Cave on the south coast has huge stalagmites and stalactites, and is one that everyone can enjoy, while the immense Hoq Caves will require a guide to lead you 3km underground deep into the bowels of the island – keep your eyes peeled for dragons.

## Windsurfing & Surfing

With day-in day-out strong to gale-force winds through the May to September monsoon season and heavy swells, Socotra could one day be a massive name in the windsurfing world. For the moment it's just for the hardcore. Surfers will also find some excellent breaks hidden in the more remote reaches of the island, but the same heavy winds that are such a delight for windsurfers are anything but for surfers. However, wind-related problems will be the least of a surfer's worries – it's the sharks that are the real problem!

## Sleeping

Although Hadibu has the only hotels and restaurants on the island, few people spend

## SAFE HAVEN

Until the construction of an airport in 2002, the island remained almost as unknown as it did in the days when adventurers came here to do battle with dragons in their search for the secret of eternal life. Ironically, because of the turmoil on the mainland, Socotra is today one of the only places in Yemen that tourists are still safely visiting and for which travel permits are being freely issued. There have been protests in the island capital, Hadibu, but Socotra has escaped the violence that has devoured much of the mainland and there have been no security incidents involving western tourists.

more than a night here at the beginning and end of their trip. Prior to 2011 there were several places to stay in Hadibu, including **Socotra Holiday Hotel** (r from YR3500), **Taj Socotra Hotel** (☎ 660627; tw YR3500) and **Socotra Tourist Hotel** (☎ 660725; r YR3500). We have been unable to contact any of them, and prices listed are from 2010. We were, however, able to update Summer Land Hotel's prices remotely.

Camping is not permitted everywhere (so check first). Some good, established spots include **Wadi Dae'rhu** near the freshwater pool, **Nojed** on the south coast, **Homhil** and **Dihamri** in the east and **Detwah Lagoon** in the west. Facilities vary in all of these 'campsites' ranging from a toilet and some pre-erected tents and huts (Dihamri and Detwah Lagoon) to nothing at all. At most of these sites someone can be found to cook an evening meal (though not always, so it's good to be prepared). Pitches cost YR1000 per person. It's often possible to arrange to stay in villages, though this sort of thing is hard to organise in advance. If you are invited to do so, be generous with how much you donate (YR2000 per person should be sufficient – more if meals are provided).

If you need to hire camping gear, any of the island's tour operators can provide all the standards.

## Summer Land Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎ 660350; www.summerlandsocotra.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$60/100) This whitewashed hotel is the height of Socotran luxury and has stylish, modern rooms with stone tile floors



and oh-so-comfortable beds, but with cold-water-only showers it's mega overpriced (although hot water is apparently on the way). The staff know the island well and can sort you out with tours, car hire and camping equipment.

## Eating

There are few eating options in Hadibu and none at all outside the town. **Taj Socotra Restaurant** (meals YR700-1000), below the hotel of the same name, is every local's favourite eating establishment.

## Shopping

**Socotra Women's Association Shop** CRAFT (☺ 7am-11am & 3-5pm Sat-Thu) Situated on Hadibu's main road, this small but interesting shop – which sells locally made handicrafts, incense and even small packets of 'dragon's blood' – was closed throughout much of 2011-12, but the word is that it's about to re-open. Money raised goes towards local women's projects.

## Information

All of the services below are found in the capital, Hadibu. Two excellent publications on Socotra are *Socotra – the Birds & Plants* and *The Lost World of Socotra*, by Richard Boggs. The former

is available in Hadibu the latter in Sana'a or abroad.

**Dragons Blood Tree Agency** (☎ 660136; [www.socotraislandadventure.com](http://www.socotraislandadventure.com)) One of the best regarded of the island's handful of tour companies.

**El Ahmed Tourism Agency** (☎ 0777210276; [www.atsi-socotra.com](http://www.atsi-socotra.com); Main Rd)

**National Bank of Yemen** (☎ 660192; ☺ 7.30am-2pm Sat-Thu) Changes US dollars and euros (cash only).

**Soqatra Eco-Tourism Society/Visitors Information Service** (☎ 660253) The official HQ for the Soqatra Eco-Tourism Society, which was set up in early 2003 with the aim of promoting and developing tourism and infrastructure projects on the island in a sustainable manner for the benefit of all. It has some maps and brochures. Ring before visiting, as its opening hours are erratic. There's a branch office at the airport, which opens (sometimes) for flight arrivals. It also organises good tours of the island.

## Getting There & Away

The national carrier **Yemenia** (☎ 660123; [www.yemenia.com](http://www.yemenia.com); ☺ 7am-noon & 3.30-5.30pm) flies from Socotra to Sana'a (US\$234). **Felix Airways** (☎ 565656; [www.felixairways.com](http://www.felixairways.com)) has flights to Sana'a (US\$184), Aden (US\$173) and Al-Mukalla (US\$118). It's essential to book well in advance.

## AN ARABIAN EDEN

The remote Socotran archipelago has been described as an Arabian Garden of Eden and is known for its high number of endemic plants and animals. There are around 850 plant species, of which approximately 230 to 260 species are found nowhere else on earth. The Hajhir Mountains and the limestone plateaus contain the richest variety of endemic plants. The most famous of these is the stumpy Dragon's Blood Tree, whose red sap was for years sold as dragon's blood and used as a cosmetic and for medical reasons. Another favourite is the Cucumber Tree, the only cucumber plant to grow in tree form. In total, 52 of Socotra's endemic plants are included on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species.

The fauna also includes a large proportion of endemics. Only seven types of terrestrial mammals call the island home and most of these were introduced. Two, a bat and a shrew, are considered endemic. Officially a phoenix hasn't been seen for donkey's years, but even so the bird life is spectacular and consists of 140 species, 11 of which are endemic. These are the Socotra buzzard, Socotra scops owl, Socotra pipit, Socotra golden-winged grosbeak, Socotra white-eye, Socotra warbler, Socotra bunting, Socotra sunbird, Socotra starling, Socotra cisticola and the Socotra sparrow. New birds are still being discovered on a yearly basis. The most visible bird on the island, though, is the Egyptian vulture. For an excellent twitching trip report on Socotra, including a rundown on the island's best birding sights, see [www.worldtwitch.com/socotra\\_yemen\\_birding\\_des.htm](http://www.worldtwitch.com/socotra_yemen_birding_des.htm). There are 26 reptile species, 23 of which are endemic and while most are small lizards or little harmless snakes, we swear we caught a quick glimpse of a fire-breathing dragon flying past one evening.

## i Getting Around

One of the biggest construction projects in recent years (well, OK, recent centuries) has been the construction of an island ring road, as well as linking trans island roads. Despite this there is currently only a very limited public transport network which comprises the odd minibus travelling between Hadibu and Qalansiyah, so you will need to rent a jeep (US\$75-100), which can be done through any of the island's tour agencies.

## WADI HADRAMAWT

وادي حضرموت

06 / POP 1.09 MILLION

Hemmed in by so much sun-blasted desert, the vast Wadi Hadramawt, a dry river valley lined with lush oases, is like another world. In an instant, sterility is replaced by fertility and ochre browns give way to disco greens. It's the sort of place where stories can grow tall, and magic and mystery seem to permeate the very air. It was originally populated by a race of giants called 'Ad, who, according to legend, were given wealth unlike anyone else. But instead of thanking God for his generosity, they wasted their time worshipping idols, building fabulous cities

and generally running about living life like it was meant to be fun. In retaliation for this behaviour God sent violent winds, tremendous sandstorms and, according to some sources, a plague of dog-sized ants who tore the 'Adites apart limb by limb. With a past like this, it's hardly surprising to learn that this magic kingdom has skyscrapers built of mud, camels that turn into rocks and honey that tastes of liquid gold.

## Shibam

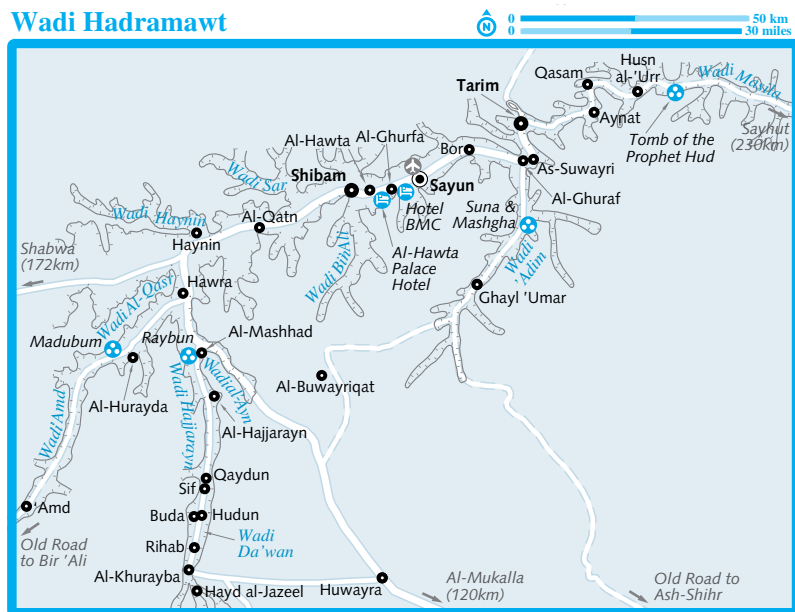
شِبَام

As you get closer the heat haze lifts and you realise that what you are looking at is not really a group of fossilised giraffes rearing up out of the palms, but something even more improbable. It's Shibam, a 2500-year-old city of seven- and eight-storey tower blocks built entirely out of mud and faith.

## History

Shibam is thought to date from the 4th century BC, but was built on the ruins of an even older city. It was later settled by citizens of old Shabwa after their city was destroyed. Later the town grew to boast the most important market in the region, and served for centuries (right up to the 16th century) as

## Wadi Hadramawt



an important capital for local dynasties. The current structure of the city is around 500 years old. In 1982 the town was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site.

## Sights & Activities

### Old Town

HISTORIC SITE

(☉ 7am-6.30pm) Although old Shibam covers a very small area, it manages to pack over 500 dwellings into this confined space. The exterior of the buildings tends to be dull and featureless, but keep an eye open for the magnificent decorative doors and windows.

Shibam is a silent and reserved place and in the mid-afternoon heat, when everyone else is safely tucked away indoors, it can feel a little like a museum or a library. It's worth taking a late-evening stroll along the **city walls**, which date from the 17th century, and out into the fields of date palms. Other worthy sites include the **Sultan's Palace**, built in AD 1220, and the various **mosques** (none of which are open to non-Muslims), including the **Sheikh ar-Rashid Mosque** (also known as the Al-Jami or Great Mosque), which dates from the 10th century. Next door to this mosque is the tiny **Minbar Museum** which contains a stunningly restored medieval minbar (pulpit) from next door's mosque. At the **souq** next to the mosque, look out for the frankincense that has been sold here for centuries.

A bit of a tourist tradition used to be to climb the rocky hill above the 'suburb' of Sahil Shibam, opposite the town, to watch the sun fall behind the city.

## Sleeping & Eating

Currently all the tourist class hotels in and around Shibam are closed. If tourism starts up again they will surely re-open. There were two main hotels: the very pleasant **Shibam Motel** and the **Al-Hawta Palace Hotel** (@ ☒), which was probably the nicest hotel in all of Yemen.

## Sayun

سيئون

☎ 05 / POP 49,100

Sayun has a distinguished history. From the earliest days, it was developed by the local Hadramawt clans and dynasties, and since the 15th century has been the wadi's capital. Today, despite being the heart and soul of Hadramawt, dusty Sayun is a town with a

## SECURITY – EASTERN YEMEN

Unfortunately, during the political crisis of 2011–12 large parts of this region fell out of central government control and into the hands of Al-Qaeda affiliated groups. Throughout 2012 the new Yemeni government, backed by what are assumed to be US drone strikes as well as US intelligence information, has been fighting back and much lost ground has been regained. For the traveller though the entire area is completely closed due to the extreme danger of visiting. Sadly, it's unlikely the situation will improve much during the lifetime of this book.

slow beat set against a background of hills and palm trees.

## Sights

Sayun is home to a number of interesting mosques and tombs, such as the Al-Habshi Tomb, opposite the cemetery, and the 16th-century Al-Haddad Mosque, south of the cemetery. Non-Muslims cannot enter any of them, however.

### Sultan's Palace

MUSEUM

(☎ 402285; Central Sq) Originally built as a 19th-century defensive fort, the Sultan's Palace was converted into a residential palace by the Sultan Al-Katheri in the 1920s. The sultan wasn't a subtle man and his house, containing a mere 90 rooms, towers over Sayun like an exaggerated wedding cake. So proud was the sultan of his new home that it's said he beheaded the main architect in order to prevent him building a copy anywhere else. It now houses one of the best museums in the country.

## Sleeping

In the past the most popular hotels with western tourists were the budget **Rayboon Hotel** (☎ 406921), the midrange **Hotel BMC** (☎ 428040; fax 428042; Al-Ghorfah St; @ ☒) and the quite plush **Samah Seyun Hotel** (☎ 403623; @ ☒).

## Getting There & Away

The national carrier **Yemenia** (☎ 402550; www.yemenia.com) flies to Sana'a for US\$140. **Felix Airways** (☎ 565656; www.felixairways.com) has flights to Sana'a (US\$119) and Aden (US\$102).

## Tarim

📍 05

Situated 35km northeast of Sayun, the ramshackle town of Tarim has served as the seat of kings since ancient times, and was Wadi Hadramawt's capital before Sayun. It used to be famous as a centre of Islamic learning, as testified to by its library, and at one time had a mosque for every day of the year. During the past century many of the people of Tarim have set off to seek their fortunes abroad, and those who have succeeded have often returned to build sumptuous 'palaces' in and around the city.

Today it feels as if Tarim's day is done – a few more years and it will have melted back into the desert dust from which it sprung.

### 👁 Sights

Tarim is famous for the quantity and quality of its mud-brick 'palaces', many of which were constructed by Yemenis returning to their homeland after making their fortunes in the Far East.

#### Al-Kaf Palace

HISTORIC BUILDING

('Ish Shaa Palace; 📍417500) As-Sayed Omar bin Sheikh al-Kaf built the Al-Kaf Palace, Tarim's most flamboyant, apparently using a book of different architectural styles as a template, in a kind of 'pick-your-own' project! The result is an unlikely mishmash of styles – art nouveau, art deco, baroque, Southeast Asian and Hadrami. Back in its day, it must have been beautiful, but now it's a crumbling relic and a visit here is a little

sad as you think about the marvellous lifestyle that this building once represented.

#### Al-Ahgaf Manuscript Library

HISTORIC BUILDING

(📍41522; admission free) Housed in the back of the Great Mosque (or Masjid al-Jami), Al-Ahgaf Manuscript Library is the second-largest library in the country and contains over 5000 manuscripts, though most are hidden from prying eyes. Some of the more beautifully illustrated manuscripts are on display in glass cabinets. All captions are in Arabic.

#### Al-Muhdar Mosque

MOSQUE

The large and dazzling-white Al-Muhdar Mosque, built in 1915, is the symbol of Tarim and until the construction of the new Al-Saleh Mosque in Sana'a it boasted the tallest minaret in Yemen; it soars nearly 40m into the air.

## Wadi Daw'an

وادي دوعن

📍 06

It is hard to imagine how anywhere in the Yemeni desert could be more spectacular and mysterious than the Wadi Hadramawt, but sitting quietly on the sidelines, there is one such place. The Wadi Daw'an might only be small, but it packs one hell of a punch – everything you thought breathtaking about the Wadi Hadramawt is here in force, but unlike the camouflaged mud villages of the main wadi, these villages come in a lush patchwork of shades and colours.

Some of the wadi's most attractive villages, in a north to south direction, include

### OF PETRIFIED CAMELS & TORTURED SOULS

Travel half a day east of Sayun, to the Wadi Masilah, and you will come across an extraordinary sight: a small town of prim and proper houses set at the foot of a tomb. This is the tomb of the Prophet Hud, and this is no ordinary town. The great-great-grandson of Noah, Hud was a giant of a man, the size of a palm tree according to some. He was sent by God to make the 'Adites – the race of giants who were the original inhabitants of Hadramawt – change their immoral and lax ways. This wasn't well received by the 'Adites. They chased Hud and his snow-white camel up to the far end of the wadi, where he eluded his pursuers by riding straight into the cliff face which parted for him and all of his camel but its hump, which was instantly turned to stone.

It's said that Hud is the father of all south Arabians and his tomb, where the camel's hump can still be seen, is the location of an annual three-day pilgrimage. Aside from these three days, though, the tomb and its surrounding town is utterly deserted and lifeless, haunted, it's said, only by ghosts.

Not far away is rumoured to be the mysterious Well of Barhut, a bottomless well whose walls are lined with scorpions and snakes. It's said to be the place where fallen angels and the souls of infidels end their days.

**Al-Mashhad**, which, with the 15th-century **Tomb of Hasan ibn Hasan**, is a local pilgrimage site and a near-deserted village. Next down the line, and clambering up the side of a cliff, is maybe the most impressive village of them all, **Al-Hajjarayn**, which is also among the oldest villages in the region. One of the biggest villages in the wadi is **Sif**, whose pastel-fringed houses sprawl across the wadi bed, and whose old quarter sits proudly atop a knuckle of rock.

**Al-Khurayba** is the final village in the wadi and is famous for its massive acid-trip 'palace' of rainbow-coloured squares. It was built by a Saudi businessman with roots in the area, who is also responsible for a wave of new schools, clinics and roadworks.

The valley is currently unsafe for westerners to visit and is closed to tourists.

## UNDERSTAND YEMEN

### Yemen Today

For a couple of years following Yemen's 2006 presidential elections, the country appeared to be on the rise and was the most stable it had been in years. However, the good times weren't to last and things started to spiral out of control. In Sa'da province, in the far north of the country, a bloody uprising that had rumbled on since 2004 between the army and the Houthis, a Zaydi rebel group, flared up again and since then a stop-start civil war has engulfed the far north of Yemen. For more on the Houthi rebellion and the Sa'da War, see p378.

As if conflict in the north wasn't bad enough trouble was also brewing in the south where secessionists started calling for independence of the former South Yemen due to claims of discrimination and the unfair distribution of the oil wealth. Anti-Sana'a protests started to turn increasingly violent and a number of unarmed protesters were killed by government security services.

As these two events were threatening to tear the country apart Al-Qaeda's influence started to grow, unemployment rise and levels of corruption grow. The seeds had been sown for major social unrest and it was now just a case of waiting for something to spark the fire.

### The Arab Spring & the End of an Era

When the Arab Spring protests erupted across the wider region in late 2010 and early 2011 it didn't take long for the people of Yemen to come out onto the streets to call for change. Initially the protests were calling for action against high unemployment, dreadful economic conditions and high levels of corruption, as well as against the government's proposals to modify the constitution of Yemen. It didn't take long though for protesters to start demanding the resignation of President Saleh.

The first really big demonstration took place in Sana'a on 27 January 2011 when an estimated 16,000 people took to the streets. Within three weeks tens of thousands of Yemenis were protesting in the streets of towns right across the country. By the start of March the protests were becoming more violent and on 18th March, 52 protestors were killed in Sana'a after government security agents fired on the protestors. This led to an increasing flow of government ministers and military leaders defecting to join the protesters.

By April a Gulf Cooperation Council-brokered plan allowing Saleh to cede power in exchange for immunity was put forward. Three times Saleh agreed to sign only to back down at the last moment. All the while the protests became more and more violent and the government started to lose complete control of much of the country. When, towards the end of May, Saleh refused to sign the deal for the third time, Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar, the head of the Hashid tribal federation, one of the most powerful tribes in the country, declared his support for the opposition and brought his armed supporters to Sana'a. Almost immediately fighting erupted between them and loyalist security forces with the result that Sana'a was turned into a battle ground as gunfire and heavy artillery rocked the city. Things culminated on 3 June when Saleh was seriously injured in an attack (it remains unclear whether this was a bomb blast or a shell) on a mosque he was praying in. The next day he was flown to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment and Yemenis celebrated the fall of Saleh. Or so they thought.

Saleh's vice-president, Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi, was made acting president, but from his hospital bed Saleh kept indicating

that he would return to Yemen. For three months Yemen was trapped in a kind of limbo; the protests continued unabated and, taking advantage of the chaos, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula started taking control of huge swathes of the east and south of the country. Everyone was predicting the end of Yemen as a functioning state. Finally, in September 2011, Saleh suddenly re-appeared in Yemen, but his time was up and on the 23rd November he finally signed a Saudi brokered agreement to resign.

## History

### Sabaeans & Himyarites

Aside from legend, a shroud of mystery still envelops the early origins of southern Arabia. The area now known as Yemen came to light during the 1st millennium BC, when a sweet-smelling substance called frankincense first hit the world's markets. Carefully controlling the production and trade of this highly lucrative commodity were the Sabaeans, initially based in eastern Yemen.

Over the ensuing centuries, the Sabaeans Empire expanded and came to dominate almost all the rest of modern-day Yemen. The temples and Great Dam at Ma'rib date from this period.

As Sabaeans power waned, new powers and empires began to rise in its wake. The greatest of these was the Himyar empire. Initially based in the central highlands, the Himyarites' power grew, and by the late 3rd century AD they had seized control of nearly all the remaining country.

### Foreign Powers & the Coming of Islam

Over the succeeding centuries Yemen was invaded many times by hungry regional powers looking for expansion.

Among the powers that passed through its portals – but never managed to fully control the country – were the Ptolemaic dynasties, the Abyssinians and the Persians (from modern-day Egypt, Ethiopia and Iran respectively). Today, Yemenis are still proud of the fact that no foreign power has ever managed to conquer the country completely.

In the early 7th century AD there came a new invasion. It was to prove far more significant than any that had come before: it was the arrival of Islam.

Initially most Yemenis converted to Sunnism, but over the next few centuries individual Shiite sects, such as the Zaydis, were born. During this time, various mini-states grew, ruled by such dynasties as the Sulayhids and Rasulids.

### Ottoman & British Occupation

From the 15th century onwards foreign powers, including the Egyptians and Portuguese, vied again for control of the Red Sea coast. But it was the Ottomans (from modern-day Turkey) who made the greatest impact. Occupying parts of Yemen from 1535 to 1638, and again from 1872 to 1918, they ignored, or failed to capture, the remote inland areas ruled by local imams (prayer leaders). During the 17th century the Qassimi dynasty ruled over much of this region, but its power declined with the demise of coffee trading, upon which it had relied.

In the middle of the 19th century a new power rocked up. From 1839 to 1967 the British occupied and controlled parts of southern Yemen, including the port of Aden, which was declared a British protectorate. Strategically valuable to Britain's maritime ambitions, the port soon grew into a major staging post.

Meanwhile in the north, after WWI and the defeat of Germany (with whom the Ottomans were allied), a new royal Zaydi dynasty, the Hamid al-Din, rose up to take the place of the former occupiers.

### Civil War

Until 1962 central and northern Yemen had been ruled by a series of local imams. However, on the death of the influential imam Ahmad, a dispute over succession broke out, embroiling the whole region in a war that dragged on for the next eight years.

On the one side, army officers supported by Egypt proclaimed the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), while on the other, the royalists based in the north, and backed by Britain and Saudi Arabia, were loyal to Ahmad's son and successor. The YAR forces eventually won.

Following the National Liberation Front's victories in the guerrilla campaign against the British, the colonialists were forced to withdraw from southern Yemen in 1967. Three years later the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) was born. It be-



came the first and only Marxist state in the Arab world.

In the north of the country, meanwhile, Field Marshall Ali Abdullah Saleh had instituted a progressive rule of the YAR with his General People's Congress (GPC). Conflicts between tribes were contained, and the constitution vowed to respect both Islamic principles and Western values, such as personal freedom and private property.

In the PDRY, however, there was turmoil. Power struggles within the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP) had led to rising tension. Finally, in Aden in January 1986, a two-week civil war broke out. The situation was aggravated by the collapse of the Soviet Union, previously the major benefactor of the PDRY. As a result, the south was thrown into a state of bankruptcy.

Additionally, border disagreements between the two states had led to short conflicts in 1972, 1978 and 1979. Yet, despite the political differences, most Yemenis hated having a divided country.

## Reunification

On 22 May 1990 a reunified Republic of Yemen was declared and in 1991 Yemen made regional history. The country became the very first multi-party parliamentary democracy on the Arabian Peninsula. Saleh took the position of president and Ali Salim al-Bidh (the leader of YSP, the ruling party of the former PDRY) became vice-president.

Things didn't get off to a good start for the new nation. During the 1990-91 Gulf War, Yemen appeared to side with Iraq (by choosing not to support UN economic sanctions against the country), and in doing so managed to alienate not only the US and its allies, but also its Gulf neighbours, in particular Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. This led to the expulsion of over one million Yemeni emigrant workers from Saudi Arabia and devastated the economy.

On the home front things also began to sour and the YSP and its members started to feel increasingly marginalised by the GPC and its coalition partner Islah.

Eventually tensions came to a head, and in 1994 civil war again broke out between the north and the south. Bidh's attempts to secede from the north were quashed, and he fled the country.

The country was reunified shortly afterwards and the GPC again swept to power in elections held in 1997.

In September 1999 the country held its first-ever presidential election, and Saleh was re-elected as the country's president.

## September 11 & Beyond

Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, Yemen was viewed with suspicion by the US. With its remote, unruly and little-policed interior, Yemen was suspected of providing – even unwittingly – a refuge for Al-Qaeda members and supporters, as well as supplying a bolt-hole for militant Islamists. A number of incidents encouraged this perception. In October 2000 the US warship the *USS Cole* was bombed in Aden harbour, killing 17 US servicemen. Following this the French supertanker, the *Limburg*, was bombed in 2002. In an effort to avoid further isolation, the Yemeni government was very quick to sign up to the USA's 'War on Terror'.

In the 2006 presidential elections, Saleh was re-elected by a large margin in elections that international monitors declared largely free and fair. The general consensus among the populace, however, was that after so many years under his rule it was a case of better the devil you know.

## Government & Politics

Yemen's first constitution came into force in 1991. Under this system, the president is head of the executive and is elected every seven years; the last presidential election was held in September 2006, the next one was due in 2013. However, the protests of 2010-2012 and the fall of Saleh led to special elections being held in February 2012 (further elections will be held in 2014). The president also selects the prime minister, who in turn chooses the cabinet. The main legislative body is the Yemeni parliament, which counts 301 members. Parliamentary elections are held every six years (the next parliamentary election is due to be held in 2013).

There are more than 40 active political parties, but the main two are: the ruling General Peoples Congress and the JMP, which is an alliance of five opposition parties including the largest, Islah, the main Islamic party in the country. Yemen's legal system is based on Sharia'a (Islamic law).

## Economy

Yemen is the poorest country in the Arabian Peninsula. The economy did grow at a rate of between 3.3% and 7.7% between 2000 and 2010, but as the state itself collapsed so did the economy. In 2011 the economy shrank to -10.5% and it remains in a shambles. Oil is Yemen's economic mainstay and prior to 2010 accounted for around 70% of government revenue. Nevertheless, compared to other peninsula countries, Yemen's oil wealth is modest, and the country's oil supplies are forecast to completely run dry by 2017. Another thorn in the side of economic growth is corruption. In 2012 Transparency International ranked Yemen 156 out of a list of 174 countries in its Corruption Perceptions Index (with number one being the least corrupt).

The country is highly, and increasingly, dependent on foreign aid and development money.

## People & Society

### The National Psyche

The notion of nationality is almost completely lost on a Yemeni. First and foremost is clan, and men with city jobs may still hurry homewards if their tribe or tribal land comes under threat. Second comes the family. Finally, at the bottom of the chain, comes nationality. Pervading all is Islam, a firm fixture and focus in most Yemenis' lives.

## Lifestyle

According to UN figures, the average Yemeni is poor (47% of the population lives below the poverty line of US\$2 per day and 17.5% on less than US\$1.25 per day), illiterate (just 63.9% are literate; divided into 81.2% of men and 46.8% of women) and hard-pressed to find a job.

Yemeni society is very traditional, conservative and steeped in superstition. With 3 doctors per 10,000 people, many Yemenis still rely on traditional medicine for medical treatment and healing. Keep an eye out for people bearing scars on their head or neck, where bad spirits have been expunged by 'cupping'.

Women are more 'liberated' than they look. Many work and drive, but on average still have more than four babies each.

## Population

With 24 million inhabitants Yemen has one of the largest populations on the Arabian Peninsula, and one of the highest growth rates (2.57% annually) in the world. The country's population has increased tenfold in 30 years and Sana'a is the fastest growing capital in the world. It is a very young country, with nearly half its population (42.5%) under 15 years old. Yemen is also still a firmly rural society, with 68% of its population living in the countryside.

Along the Tihama, the population is more closely linked to the African mainland. In the interior, the lighter skin of the Semitic 'Arabs' is visible. Bedouin tribes inhabit parts of the desert region to the east.

### TRIBAL POWER

Yemen's tribes still wield a lot of power, sometimes more than the government, and for most Yemenis tribal loyalty comes before national loyalty. Groups of tribes form bigger federations. There are three such federations in the northern part of Yemen – the Hashids, Bakils and Zaraniqs – and no government can be formed without an equal representation of these groups. In the southern part of the country, where the government of the former PDRY did its utmost to erode the powers of the tribes, the tribal structure is weaker, though since reunification a certain amount of 'retribalisation' has taken place.

In the mountainous central regions and the Tihama each tribe has a fairly rigidly defined 'territory', which is still passionately defended from other tribes. This rule doesn't apply to the nomadic Bedouin of the desert regions. Conflict between the tribes is common in many areas. If a person kills someone from an opposing tribe, his entire tribe will be held liable. In this way blood feuds between tribes can continue for years.

Every tribe is led by an elected sheikh, whose job it is to resolve conflicts or, if that is not possible, to raise a tribal army and lead the battle.

## Religion

Islam is Yemen's state religion. Most Muslims are Sunnis, many of whom follow the Shafa'i sect. Of the Shiites, most follow the Zaydi sects and are based primarily in the far north. In some parts of Yemen (Hadramawt in particular) many pre-Islamic beliefs have been incorporated into daily life.

The majority of the Jewish population emigrated to Israel in the 1950s. Emigration has continued, and now only one or two families are estimated to remain in Yemen (largely in the north, in and round Ar-Rayda and Sa'da). In early 2007 the last of the remaining Jewish families were told by Islamic fundamentalists to leave immediately or be killed – most were subsequently airlifted to Israel.

The influence of Saudi inspired Wahhabi Islam is growing in Yemen and with it the country seems to be becoming ever more conservative.

## Arts

For the traveller, Yemen's arts can most easily be appreciated in the varied architecture of its towns and villages, and in its museums. Beautiful examples of ancient art can be found in the latter, as well as more contemporary examples of artisanship. In the larger towns, galleries showcase modern works.

## Literature

Poetry – originally oral literature – has been an important art form in Yemen since pre-Islamic times. The most famous Yemeni poet by far is Al Baradouni. Novelists include author of *The Hostage*, Za'id Mutee' Dammaj, one of the very few writers who has been translated into English.

## Music

Yemen's music varies greatly from region to region and reflects the different influences of the areas. Tihama music, with its frenetic beat, for example, resembles East African music. The best known Yemeni singer is Abu Baker Salem Balfaqih.

Among the most popular instruments are the oud (or lute), played by virtuosos such as Ayoub Tareh, the *semsemiya* (a kind of five-stringed lyre) and the *mizmar* (reed or

## TAWAKKOL KARMAN

Joint winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, Tawakkol Karman is a Yemeni journalist and human rights activist who played a leading role in the 2011 anti-government protests. Although it was her role in these protests that really brought her to international attention her political career began back in 2007 when she began organising protests in Sana'a calling for press freedom in Yemen.

Known in Yemen as the 'Iron Lady' or the 'Mother of the Revolution', she was the first Yemeni to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, only the second Muslim woman and the youngest ever recipient of the prize.

pan pipes). Look out also for the *doshan*, a kind of minstrel, paid today to entertain at celebrations such as weddings. Yemeni pop music hasn't exactly conquered the world but one interesting name to watch out for is Hagag AJ; a Yemeni-American rapper who fuses English and Arabic lyrics.

For a time (under the Imam Yahya in the 1940s), music was banned in Yemen.

## Dance

Like music, dance forms an important part of Yemeni social traditions. The best known is the *jambiya* 'dance', in which men perform a series of steps and hops in small groups brandishing their *jambiya* (dagger). Technically, this isn't actually a dance but a bond between tribal members, and each region has its own variation. Women and men always dance separately in public.

## Architecture

Like Yemen's music, its architecture varies from region to region. Building design depends on available materials (such as mud, reeds or stone), the local climate (seen by thick and high walls to counter the heat or cold) and the region's historical links with other regions or powers (such as Africa, Southeast Asia or the Ottomans).

As Yemen endured a war on average every seven years throughout the 20th century and a similar rate of violence for centuries prior to that, many rural homes are perched

on the highest hilltop, sometimes surrounded by walls and towers for added defence.

Water has long played an important part in Yemen, and some of the country's oldest architecture also represents extraordinary civil-engineering feats, such as the Great Ma'rib Dam.

## Food & Drink

Yemeni food is simple but good. Breakfast usually consists of little more than a cup of *shai* (sweet tea) accompanied by fuul (a kind of paste made from beans, tomatoes, onions and chilli) or what is, in our opinion, the world's finest scrambled eggs! Lunch is the main meal of the day and Yemenis tuck in eagerly. A hunk of mutton is the favoured fare, or beef, goat or chicken. Dishes are of-

ten served with a thin but delicious broth, such as *shurba wasabi* (lamb soup), a small salad and a huge sheet of flat bread (over 40 mouth-watering kinds of bread exist in Yemen).

The dish of choice in the highlands is *salta*, a piping-hot stew containing meat broth, lentils, beans, fenugreek (giving it its distinctive aroma) and coriander or other spices. Add some meat and you get *fahsah*. For dinner, *fasouliya* (beans) or fuul often suffices. Other regional favourites include *Hanid lamb* from the Tihama which is lamb wrapped in banana leaves (or more likely just tinfoil) and slow cooked in a beehive oven. *Borma* is a soup made of lamb meat and *kidba* is an Ethiopian-style seasoned fried liver. For dessert tuck into some delicious *arayesi* (a traditional wedding dessert

### EATING THE FLOWERS OF PARADISE

The first thing every new arrival in Yemen will notice are the bulging cheeks of the qat chewer. Qat, khat, chat or miraa are the leaves of the shrub *Catha edulis*. Originally from Ethiopia, the qat plant has spread across parts of East Africa and into Yemen where the afternoon qat-chewing session has become almost the pivotal point of many Yemeni lives.

Classed by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a drug of abuse that can produce mild to moderate psychological dependence, it has been banned in most Arab and Western countries, including Saudi Arabia where possession is a serious offence, the US and almost all European nations except for the UK where it's currently legal.

Chewing qat is an important social activity in Yemen and around 80% of the male population are thought to be regular chewers. Women also chew but to a lesser degree (45%) and much more discreetly, as do an increasing number of young children. Qat plays an important part in the Yemeni economy, both good and bad. For farmers the profit on qat is five times that of crops, and these profits have done something to slow down the drift to urban areas. On the negative side, 17% of the average family's income is spent on qat and, with each chewer often spending four hours every afternoon chewing, over 14.6 million working hours are lost daily in Yemen.

Environmentally the consequences of qat are bad news. The total amount of land given over to qat has grown from 8000 hectares in 1970 to 103,000 in 2000. Qat is also a thirsty plant and 40% of all the water used in Yemen goes on watering it.

The effects of qat have long been debated – most Yemenis will insist that it gives an unbeatable high, makes you more talkative (at least until the come down when the chewer becomes withdrawn and quiet), suppresses hunger, prevents tiredness and increases sexual performance. Others will tell you that it gives no noticeable high, makes you lethargic, slightly depressed, constipated and reduces sex drive!

If you're going to chew qat, you need to make sure the setting is perfect in order to enjoy the experience. Ask for the sweetest qat you can get (most Yemenis regard this as poor quality, but first-time chewers find even this very bitter) and get a good group of people together to chew with, because qat is, above all else, a social drug. Take yourself off to a quiet and comfortable spot (ideally a *mafraj*: literally 'room with a view'), sit back, relax and enjoy the conversation while popping leaves individually into your mouth where you literally just store them in one cheek and gently chew them. All going well you'll be a qat 'addict' by the end of the day, but remember when it comes to the end of the qat session you should spit the goopy mess out – only Ethiopians swallow.

that's basically a thick mash of fruit topped with nuts and jelly).

Meat is a luxury for the well-off, so there's usually a good selection of vegetarian options available. Apart from fuul, plates of boiled or fried vegetables, rice or a salad are also offered.

On the coast fresh fish – often cooked in a traditional clay oven – provides a treat not to be missed. Lebanese starters have made it onto many posher menus and fast-food joints serving burgers and kebabs are increasingly common in bigger towns. Meals in Yemen are rushed affairs with little time devoted to lingering conversations.

Fresh fruit juices are filling, healthy and delicious, but are likely to contain tap water at cheaper stalls. *Shai* is normally hot, black and sweet, and often spiced with mint or cardamom. For some reason the *shai* served in hotels is usually dreadful. Yemeni coffee is not what you'd expect from the original home of *mokha*. It's a cloudy, amber and very weak brew called *qishr* which is made from coffee husks and infused with cloves or other spices. If it's the caffeine buzz you're after, ask for *bunn* or buy a jar of instant coffee from any grocery store and just ask for hot water to mix it with. Various saccharine soft drinks are widely available, as is bottled mineral water.

## SURVIVAL GUIDE

### Directory A–Z

#### ACCOMMODATION Camping

Aside from a couple of sites in Socotra there are no established campsites in Yemen, but it's possible to pitch a tent in most rural places (except obvious restricted areas, such as near military bases). Camping equipment can be rented from the Sana'a-based travel agencies.

#### Hotels

Although rock-bottom places can be unearthed in all of Yemen's towns (for YR800 to YR1200), they're not recommended. The filthy dormitory rooms have rope beds with no mattresses and, if you're lucky, rotten blankets. Qat chewers and itinerant merchants (invariably male) are the main clientele, so foreign men will have raised an eyebrow at them and foreign women will simply be turned away.

Similar but cleaner and more accustomed to travellers of both sexes are the budget hotels, which offer singles/doubles with shared

### SLEEPING PRICE RANGES

The following price ranges refer to a double room with bathroom. Unless otherwise stated tax is included in the price.

\$ less than YR4000

\$\$ YR4000–YR8000

\$\$\$ more than YR8000

or sometimes private bathrooms for around YR2000/3000. Some of these are converted traditional tower houses, which offer simple but attractive and cosy dormitory-style accommodation aimed squarely at foreign tourists. In the smaller towns and villages where few eating options exist, these traditional tower houses may also offer half-board for a few hundred riyals.

In all of the larger towns and in many of the smaller ones, there's usually at least a couple of midrange options where singles/doubles with bathroom cost from YR3500/6000. Cheap but clean, and occasionally well loved, they offer great value.

In the capital and one or two of the larger towns, there are a few top-end options, where rooms cost from US\$60 to just over US\$150.

All the rooms listed by Lonely Planet come with private bathroom (and often a TV) unless otherwise stated. In highland Yemen air-con in hotels is rare as the altitude makes it unnecessary. In coastal and desert regions air-con tends to be pretty much universal even in the cheaper places.

#### BOOKS

♦ *Arabia Felix – An Exploration of the Archaeological History of Yemen*, by Alessandro de Mai-gret – for anyone hooked on Yemen's ancient history, this book is considered the definitive introduction to the subject. Hard to find.

♦ *A History of Yemen*, by Paul Dresch – another superb historical account of Yemen's past.

♦ *Yemen – Travels in Dictionary Land*, by Tim Mackintosh-Smith – this award-winning book is a modern classic: it's a witty, erudite but very wordy account of contemporary life and is probably the first book you should read on Yemen. It was published in America as *Yemen: The Unknown Arabia*.

♦ *Motoring with Mohammed*, by Eric Hansen – tells of action-packed and amusing travels around Yemen in the late 1980s.

♦ *Eating the Flowers of Paradise*, by Kevin Rushby – a brilliant and, at times, hair-raising exploration of the world of qat in both Yemen and Ethiopia.

♦ *The Zanzibar Chest*, by former war correspondent Aidan Hartley – focuses primarily on the battles of Africa, but includes many forays

## GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

- **Australian Department of Foreign Affairs** ([www.smartraveller.gov.au](http://www.smartraveller.gov.au))
- **French government** ([www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr))
- **UK Foreign Office** (<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/travel-advice-by-country/>)
- **US Department of State** ([www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov))

into Yemen and is one of the most powerful books you are ever likely to read.

- *Sheba*, by Nicholas Clapp – an interesting and easy-to-read account of Clapp's search for the origins of the myth.
- *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, by Freya Stark – a travel classic written by English woman Stark who journeyed through the Hadramawt in the early 1900s.
- *Yemen – Land and People*, by Sarah Searight – a good textual and pictorial overview of the country.
- *Yemen: Jewel of Arabia*, by Charles and Patricia Aithie – this glossy coffee-table book whets the appetite before a trip and serves as a good souvenir after one.
- *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*, by Paul Torday – this best-selling novel was for many people the one and only time they've ever heard of the country. It's a light-hearted read with some good descriptions of Yemen's mountains.
- *Socotra: A Natural History of the Islands and Their People*, by Catherine Cheung – if you're interested in the natural history of Socotra this is the one for you.
- *The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al-Qaeda and the Battle for Arabia*, by Gregory D Johnsen – a fascinating and well researched account of the terror group in Yemen.
- *Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, by Victoria Clark – a brilliant run-down on modern Yemeni politics and tribal culture.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Travelling anywhere in Yemen (except Socotra) has become a much more dicey prospect than it was just a few years ago and most western governments warn against ALL travel to Yemen (and note that by ignoring these warnings you may well be making your travel insurance invalid). On the plus side petty crime, even in the big cities, is almost non-existent.

## Mines

During the 1994 War of Unity, unknown quantities of land mines were planted. After a sus-

tained anti mining campaign, many have been cleared, but mines remain, particularly around the old North/South Yemen border. During their retreat from parts of Abyan province, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula planted numerous landmines. So far at least 3000 have been removed from around Zinibar and Jaar. It's almost certain that further mines were laid during the recent unrest. As well as Abyan, the most likely areas for this to have occurred are Sa'da province, Shabwa, Hadramawt and Ma'rib, but the simple truth is that for the moment no-one really knows.

## Terrorism

Yemen is the home of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. According to the US government this is the most active and dangerous branch of Al-Qaeda. The group, which had previously been confined to remote regions that were largely out of bounds to foreigners, used the recent chaos and the collapse of the government to expand their territory massively. In fact at one point they were basically in control of more of the country than the government and their influence extended almost to the doors of Aden and to within less than 100km of Sana'a. By early 2013 they had lost a lot of ground to a resurgent Yemeni army but they remain highly dangerous and a major threat to the stability of the nation. Al-Qaeda has vowed to kill all 'infidels' (that means you!) in Yemen and you should keep a sharp eye out for any suspicious behaviour. It's also a good idea to be careful in any hotels frequented by tourists – and anywhere that expatriates gather. In general expatriates working for international corporations are at a higher risk than casual tourists, but only because they have a more set pattern of movement. Recent Al-Qaeda attacks in Yemen include shootings, bombings and kidnapping (for more on this see below).

Those arrested in the past for connection with terrorism have almost always turned out to be foreign Arabs living in Yemen illegally. Again this is now changing and more Yemenis are now working with Al-Qaeda. The Yemeni government though, has been at pains to express its absolute condemnation of terrorism, and the majority of Yemeni people their disgust and horror of it.

The following are just a few of the more notable recent attacks on foreign tourists or expatriates. In 2007 seven Spanish tourists were killed in an attack in Ma'rib; in January 2008 two Belgians were shot and killed in Hadramawt; and in 2009 a suicide attack left four South Koreans dead in Shibam, Hadramawt. In June 2009 a group of nine expatriates of mixed nationalities were kidnapped near Sa'da, in 2008 there were two attacks on the US embassy in Sana'a resulting in 17 deaths and an attack on the Italian embassy. In July 2011 a British national was killed



in a bomb attack in Aden. In 2012 an American teacher was killed in Ta'izz.

Although this list makes it appear that fewer foreigners have been involved in terrorist attacks in the past couple of years, bear in mind that this is because there are now very, very few foreigners remaining in Yemen. In contrast hundreds of Yemenis have died in terror attacks since 2010.

To sum up, at the time of going to print, anywhere the government allows you to travel should be considered fairly safe (but the situation can change fast: attacks can occur anywhere at any time and you could well be the first target in an area considered safe). Anywhere else in the country should be considered as very dangerous. Do not try any heroics. Socotra island has escaped the violence and can be considered safe; though even here you should still keep your wits about you. Whatever you do remember that the security situation is very fluid – check and check again with embassies, tour companies and on the Thorn Tree forum on the Lonely Planet website.

### Kidnappings

Heavily armed tribes have long taken to kidnapping foreign tourists and expatriates in order to publicise their grievances with the government. Normally the victims have been well treated and released unharmed after a few days when the government agrees to the kidnappers' terms (normally for a new road, school or for fellow tribal members to be released from prison). At one point the spate of kidnappings became so common that a speaker in the Yemeni parliament described being kidnapped as 'a great adventure for the tourist'. Today, this is no longer the case. Now kidnapped foreigners are routinely 'sold' to Al-Qaeda and few are heard from again. The rate of kidnap of foreigners also seems to be accelerating and is occurring throughout the country including in the middle of Sana'a in broad daylight (as was demonstrated by the kidnapping in December 2012 of three foreigners studying at a language school in Sana'a).

For expats working in Yemen, in order to lower the risk of kidnap you should not stick to a daily routine; you should change your route to work and do not frequent the same restaurants and other public spaces on a regular basis. Tourists are at a lower risk of kidnap in Sana'a but only because they don't have a set pattern. Outside Sana'a everyone is at equal risk.

### EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

With the current situation in Yemen it's a very good idea to register with your embassy in Sana'a and enquire about any current security concerns. For those countries without diplomatic representation in Yemen (such as Australia,

Canada and Ireland), you can register (via email or online) at your embassy in Riyadh.

Most embassies and consulates open between around 9am and 1pm from Saturday to Wednesday.

**Dutch** (☎ 01-421800; <http://yemen.nlembassy.org>; off 14th October St)

**French** (Map p366; ☎ 01-268888; [www.ambafrance-ye.org](http://www.ambafrance-ye.org); off Khartoum St)

**German** (Map p366; ☎ 01-413174; [www.sanaa.diplo.de](http://www.sanaa.diplo.de); off Hadda St)

**Italian** (☎ 01-432587; [www.amsanaa.esteri.it/Ambasciata\\_Sanaa](http://www.amsanaa.esteri.it/Ambasciata_Sanaa); Hadda St)

**Omani** (Map p366; ☎ 01-208874; Al-Hoboob Corp St)

**Saudi Arabian** (Map p366; ☎ 01-240856; <http://embassies.mofa.gov.sa/sites/yemen/AR/Pages/default.aspx>; Al-Qods St)

**UAE** (Map p366; ☎ 01-248777; Circular Lane)

**UK** (☎ 01-302480; <http://ukinyemen.fco.gov.uk>; Thaher Himyari St (Nashwan al-Himyari St) East Ring Rd.

**USA** (Map p366; ☎ 01-755 2000; <http://yemen.usembassy.gov>; Sa'wan St)

### FOOD

For information about Yemen's cuisine see the Food & Drink section (p402) and the Flavours of Arabia chapter (p459).

### LEGAL MATTERS

Breaking the law can have severe consequences. For more information, see the Expats chapter (p33) and consult your embassy.

### MONEY

The unit of currency is the Yemeni riyal (YR), divided into 100 fils. Banknotes come in denominations of YR10 (rare), YR20, YR50, YR100, YR200, YR500 and YR1000. Each note is translated into English on one side. Only YR5 and YR10 coins remain, and though both sides of these coins are in Arabic only, they are of different sizes (the YR10 coin is the larger). Many people won't accept ripped or damaged banknotes.

Some midrange hotels, all top-end hotels and most travel agencies quote in US dollars or, increasingly, in euros. Where appropriate Lonely Planet also quotes in these currencies,

### EATING PRICE RANGES

The following price ranges refer to a standard main course. Unless otherwise stated tax is included in the price.

\$ less than YR650

\$\$ YR650–900

\$\$\$ more than YR900

## AL-QAEDA & YEMEN

Nothing stirs excitement in media circles like Al-Qaeda, and so when, on Christmas Day 2009, an Al-Qaeda group based in Yemen attempted to blow up an airliner over Detroit in the US, the world's media went into a frenzy and descended en masse on Yemen.

This was far from the first time that Yemen and Al-Qaeda have been mentioned in the same sentence. In 2000 an Al-Qaeda cell blew up the *USS Cole* in Aden harbour and killed 17 US service personnel. Since then Al-Qaeda-attributed attacks have been a frequent occurrence in Yemen and have included suicide attacks against foreign tourists and attacks on Western embassies and Yemeni government and security personnel. One of their bloodiest attacks came in May 2012 when a suicide bomber killed nearly 100 Yemeni soldiers in Sana'a.

But it was the attempted aeroplane bombing that really shone the spotlight on Yemen as this was the first time this group had attempted to launch a direct attack on the US. So, who is this group and what is it doing in Yemen? Known as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the group was formed in January 2009 as the result of a merger of Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia with that of its Yemeni branch. It's thought to be led by Nasir Wuhaiishi, a Saudi who was one of 23 Al-Qaeda members who escaped from a Sana'a prison in 2006. In August 2011 Wuhaiishi was rumoured killed in a battle with Yemeni troops in the south of the country. However this was denied by AQAP and in December 2011 Wuhaiishi released a statement on a jihad website. Several other high-profile members of the group are former Guantanamo Bay detainees. Experts think that AQAP is one of the best funded and most stable of all the Al-Qaeda groups and the one that poses the greatest threat to the West.

Prior to the 2011 protests the group was largely confined to remote corners of Shabwa, Ma'rib, Abyan and Hadramawt where they found shelter with the tribes. However, the recent power vacuums in Yemen gave AQAP the opportunity they needed to expand their influence. Using the alias of Ansar al-Sharia the group essentially took total control of the province of Abyan (just east of Aden) and greatly expanded their presence in many other parts of the country. By mid-2012 the Yemeni army was engaged in heavy fighting with the group and by the end of the year had pushed AQAP/Ansar al-Sharia out of the regional capital of Zinjibar and other towns. However, at the time of writing the group still hold territory elsewhere including Rada close to Sana'a and large parts of Ma'rib, Shabwa, Hadramawt and Abyan.

The US, through the use of unmanned drones, military training for the Yemeni army and the use of special forces, are thought to be heavily involved in the fight against AQAP in Yemen and drone attacks on suspected militants are now a common occurrence (the US never confirms the use of drones). In September 2011 the US scored a notable success with the killing of Anwar al-Aulaqi, an American-Yemeni thought to be a talent recruiter, motivator and publicist for AQAP, in a drone strike in southeast Yemen. The drone strikes though are also thought to have led to the death of a large number of women, children and other innocents (including a government mediator) and these have done much to increase tribal anger against the Yemeni and US governments and increase support of Al-Qaeda.

but payment is always acceptable in the Yemeni riyals equivalent.

### ATMs & Credit Cards

Most of the bigger bank branches in the large towns have ATMs that accept foreign cards. Most will only allow you to withdraw the equivalent of US\$200 per transaction up to a daily limit of US\$600. Problems with foreign cards are very common and you shouldn't rely solely on them. There are several ATMs at Sana'a airport.

Credit cards (Visa commonly, MasterCard sometimes and Amex rarely) are accepted for payment by airlines, some tour operators and some top-end hotels, but you'll incur a steep 5% to 10% surcharge.

### Cash

Cash is by far the simplest form of carrying your money and, as there is little petty theft, carrying around big bundles of money is not a huge worry. US dollars and euros are the currencies of choice.

Banks offer slightly lower rates for cash than foreign-exchange offices, but are more likely to change travellers cheques. There's no black market, so there's no advantage to changing money on the street.

### Moneychangers

Numerous (and well-signposted) foreign-exchange offices are found in the cities and larger towns. They offer shorter queues than the banks, faster service, longer opening hours (usually 9am to 9pm, except Friday) and almost always offer a better rate of exchange (at least for cash). Check out a few first, as rates can vary slightly between offices. Commission is seldom charged, but check in advance.

### Travellers Cheques

As in many countries travellers cheques can be difficult to change outside the largest towns (and increasingly even in them). Also, changing them generally incurs a 3% to 5% commission or more.

### OPENING HOURS

Business hours in Yemen vary. Outside the central highlands, where the climate is hotter, there is often an extended midday break (but businesses open earlier and close later). Some businesses close at 1pm regardless and re-open around 6pm. It's best to try and get stuff done in the morning though before 'qat time' kicks in...

**Banks** 8am to noon Saturday to Thursday, open only until 11am on Thursday

**Government offices** 8am to 3pm, although in practice many close by 1pm or 1.30pm

**Post offices** 8.30am to 1pm and 3.30pm to 7pm Saturday to Thursday. Usually open for an hour from 7pm to 8pm on Friday

**Restaurants** 7am to 11pm, although they may open earlier and close later in larger towns

**Shops & private businesses** 9am to noon and 4pm to 8pm Saturday to Thursday. Some open on Friday as well.

**Telecom & internet centres** 7am to 11pm

**Yemenia** 8am to 1pm or 2pm and 5pm to 7pm or 8pm Saturday to Wednesday, 9am to noon Friday

### PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

In addition to the main Islamic holidays, Yemen observes the following holidays:

**May/Labour Day** 1 May

**National/Unity Day** 22 May

**September Revolutionary/Anniversary Day** 26 September

**October Revolutionary/Anniversary Day** 14 October

**Evacuation/Independence Day** 30 November

### VISAS

Everyone, except citizens of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, requires a visa to enter Yemen. Visas are not available on arrival. Visas must be obtained from an embassy or consulate beforehand and they will only be issued to people on an organised tour with a recognised Yemeni (or foreign) tour company. This essentially means independent travel around Yemen is no longer possible (with the exception of Sana'a and Socotra; although even here you will still need to employ the services of a tour company in some form or other in order to obtain a visa). If there is no embassy in your home country, you can obtain a visa from an embassy/consulate in a neighbouring country (neighbouring your country or neighbouring Yemen). Note that Israelis or travellers to Israel (with an Israeli stamp in their passport) will be denied a visa/entry to Yemen.

If you're staying more than two weeks you must register at any police station (although try to do it in Sana'a) within the first two weeks of your stay. It's a fairly painless procedure that costs YR1000 although at the time of research the rule was brand new and not everyone knew about it. If you don't register you will be fined YR5000 on leaving Yemen. With the situation as it is in Yemen at the moment, it would also be a very good idea to register with your home embassy on arrival in Sana'a.

Take note also of the travel-permit restrictions.

### Travel Permits & Closed Areas

Due to civil war and tribal tension, as well as problems with kidnapping and terrorism, certain areas are completely out of bounds to foreign visitors – everywhere else except Sana'a and Socotra require a travel permit and the services of a tour company.

Currently, the only areas open to foreign tourists on an organised tour are: Sana'a and environs, the Haraz Mountains (including Shibam, Kawkaban, Thilla, Hababah, Al-Mahwit and Manakhah and around), parts of the Tihama Red Sea coastal areas and, further south, Ta'izz, Ibb and Jibla as well as the island of Socotra. However, most Yemeni tour companies are only willing to take tourists to Sana'a and Socotra as they still deem the risk of visiting other parts of the country too high.

Note that the situation changes very fast – often on a day-to-day basis and there is often confusion as to where is, and is not, open. The tourist police and tour companies in Sana'a are the best people to ask for up-to-date information and the Yemen branch on Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree forum ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) also has plenty of to-the-minute information.

Travel permits, which are free, can be obtained from the Tourist Police (p373) in Sana'a (your tour company will generally arrange these for you). Although officially open 24 hours, if you

do go and get permits on your own, you're best advised to come to the office between 8am to 6pm Saturday to Thursday, when you're more likely to get somewhere! To gain a permit from the tourist police, you'll need the following:

- passport and photocopy of passport (including personal and visa details)
- itinerary (showing where you're travelling to, when and for how long)
- means of transport, eg air, car hire (including the name of the car-hire company or travel agency)
- names of everyone in your group
- details of your return journey home (date of departure, flight etc).

Take wads of photocopies of the permit (around seven or eight per day of travel), as you'll have to dish them out at the checkpoints across the country.

If you significantly change your itinerary, you should inform the tourist police and/or the travel agency within 24 hours. Alternatively, obtain another permit from the nearest major police station. If it's just a minor change, you won't have any problems.

Note that if you are only flying around Yemen (and not using overland transport), you do not need travel permits.

You should not attempt to visit closed areas. Fortunately, the police turn back the occasional foolhardy visitor long before they can put themselves and other people into serious danger, by trying to visit a closed area.

### Police Escorts

At the time of writing, it was compulsory to take a police escort everywhere in Yemen except Sana'a and Socotra (including while just walking around any towns). Again, your tour company will organise this.

### WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Yemen's attitude towards and treatment of foreign (and local) women is more relaxed than its neighbour, Saudi Arabia, although things do seem to be becoming more conservative. Female tourists can drive rented or private vehicles, and do not have to wear head coverings although in all areas head covering is advised, if only as a gesture of respect (some readers have reported stone-throwing, spitting and glares from local women and children when not dressed 'appropriately'). Conservative dress is expected. Female toilets can be hard to find, but many restaurants have 'family rooms' with toilet facilities.

## i Getting There & Away

### AIR

Most international traffic arrives and departs from **Sana'a International Airport** (<http://>

[sanaa.airport-authority.com](http://sanaa.airport-authority.com)). Not many airlines outside the Middle East now serve Yemen. A few airlines, particularly from Middle Eastern countries, also use Aden. Since 2010 both these airports have been subjected to last minute closures for security reasons.

Yemen's national carrier, **Yemenia** (Map p366; ☎ 8001000; [www.yemenia.com](http://www.yemenia.com); Hadda St, Sana'a), flies to dozens of destinations across the Middle East, Europe (including Paris and Rome), Africa and Asia. Yemenia has a reasonable safety record (see [www.airsafe.com](http://www.airsafe.com) for details), although in 2009 one of its planes crashed en route to the Comoros Islands, resulting in the deaths of 152 people. Yemenia flights sometimes experience delays or cancellations (particularly during Ramadan and the hajj pilgrimage), so reconfirmation is essential. In late January 2010 the British government banned all direct flights between Yemen and the UK. Any traveller arriving in their home country or a third country from Yemen can now expect to be subjected to significant security checks.

### Airlines Flying to/from Yemen

**EgyptAir** (MS; Map p366; ☎ 01-273452; [www.egyptair.com](http://www.egyptair.com); Az-Zubayri St) Hub: Cairo.

**Emirates** (EK; Map p366; ☎ 01-444442; [www.emirates.com](http://www.emirates.com); 60 Metre St) Hub: Dubai.

**Ethiopian Airlines** (ET; Map p366; ☎ 01-427993; [www.ethiopianairlines.com](http://www.ethiopianairlines.com); Beirut St, off Hadda St) Hub: Addis Ababa.

**Gulf Air** (GF; Map p366; ☎ 01-40922; [www.gulfair.com](http://www.gulfair.com); Hadda St) Hub: Bahrain.

**Qatar Airways** (QR; Map p366; ☎ 01-506030; [www.qatarairways.com](http://www.qatarairways.com); Hadda St) Hub: Doha.

**Royal Jordanian Airlines** (RJ; Map p366; ☎ 01-446064; [www.rja.com.jo](http://www.rja.com.jo); Hadda St) Hub: Amman.

**Saudi Arabian Airlines** (SV; Map p366; ☎ 01-402992; [www.saudiarairlines.com](http://www.saudiarairlines.com); Az-Zubayri St) Hub: Jeddah.

### LAND

#### Border Crossings

At the time of research all land border crossings are closed to foreign tourists. In the event of this changing in the lifetime of this book, there are buses from Al-Mukalla and Sayun to Oman.

### SEA

Although cargo boats sometimes connect Yemen (the ports of Aden, Al-Mukalla and Al-Hudayda principally) to ports on the Peninsula, as well as to Egypt, Eritrea and Sudan, there are currently no regular services or timetables, and finding a vessel willing to take a foreigner is likely to prove almost impossible at the moment. One option that was being used by tourists prior to 2010 was to hitch a ride on a *sambug* (boat) between Al-Makha and Djibouti. From Djibouti you can journey on into the highlands of Ethiopia or

the lowlands of Somaliland. At the current time though it's unlikely you will be allowed to do this.

## TOURS

Currently the only way to visit Yemen is with a tour agency. However, few tour operators outside the country offer tours to Yemen. Fortunately, there are a number of good local companies based in Sana'a that can help organise your trip.

The standard rate among travel agencies in Sana'a is US\$70-100 per vehicle per day. This is for a large 4WD and also includes the driver's fee, his food and accommodation, petrol and 230km to 250km free mileage per day. The rate increases to US\$150 per day for longer trips (ie more than 250km or about six hours' driving). Good discounts can usually be negotiated for longer trips.

Guides (costing from around US\$40 to US\$50 per day, including food and accommodation) speaking English, French, Italian, Spanish, German or Russian can also usually be organised.

**Arabian Horizons Travel & Tourism** (Map p366; ☎ 01-506010; www.arabianhorizons.com; Hadda St) Branches in Aden, as well as in the USA and Canada.

**ATG** (Formerly YATA; Map p366; ☎ 01-441260; www.atg-yemen.com; just off Hadda St) Offers all the standard tours and specialises in diving.

**FTI Yemen** (Map p366; ☎ 01-253216; www.ftiyemen.com; Al-Qiada St) A slick professional outfit that can arrange almost any kind of tour almost anywhere in Yemen. It has its own boat for diving trips in the Red Sea.

**Marib Travel & Tourism** (Map p366; ☎ 01-426832, 01-426831; www.marib-tours.com; Beirut St, off Hadda St) Probably the most helpful tour company in Sana'a, this friendly and well-regarded outfit values customer service and really goes out of its way to try and help. It can organise standard tours throughout the country as well as specialist trips, including diving, mountain hiking and travel for senior citizens. Highly recommended.

**Radfan Agency Tours** (Map p368; ☎ 01-272231; http://visityementours.weebly.com; Talha St) Friendly, long established agency.

**Yemen Trek Tours** (Map p366; ☎ 01-516957; www.yementrek.com; Ta'izz Rd) These guys are good and we receive lots of positive feedback from happy punters. Trekking and camel tours are its speciality. The owner also speaks fluent French.

## Getting Around

### AIR

The national carrier is **Yemenia** (☎ 8001000; www.yemenia.com; ☎ usually 8am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu).

It's considerably cheaper to buy Yemenia tickets in Yemen through a Yemenia office rather

than through a travel agency. For the cheapest fares, book flights well in advance. Yemenia offices can be found in all of Yemen's main towns, and accept Yemeni riyals, US dollars, euros and usually Amex, MasterCard and Visa credit cards.

Yemenia flights are prone to both delays and cancellations. Always reconfirm flights.

A private, alternative airline is **Felix Airways** (p380). The cheapest tickets are those bought online but foreigners can only travel on the more expensive H fare. It has a route network that roughly matches Yemenia, but it seems to be more reliable and a bit cheaper.

### BUS

At the current moment foreign tourists are not allowed to travel by bus across Yemen. If this changes then buses travel to almost all the larger towns (sometimes several a day), and services are pretty punctual and safe.

The longest-established bus company is **Yemitco** (Yemen International Transport Company; ☎ 8007000; www.yemitco.com; ☎ 5am-8pm, in the south 9am-1pm & 3-8pm Sat-Thu, 4-8pm Fri), which offers comfortable seats in air-conditioned buses. In the last couple of years it seems to be losing out to a multitude of newer companies and now generally only runs a reliable service in the most-populated central areas.

### LONG-DISTANCE TAXIS

#### Shared Taxi

Connecting all the main towns and villages, and operating very much like buses, are the shared taxis (known as *bijou*). Although rarely more comfortable than buses, they tend to be faster, and leave at more convenient times and more frequently. However, they only leave when full, so you can be in for a long wait. When travelling to more remote places, try and catch the first departure. As with the buses, foreigners are not currently permitted to use these.

### LOCAL TRANSPORT

#### Bus

Minibuses (which run from 6am to around midnight) ply the streets of all the major towns. They're cheap, but unless you know exactly where they're heading, taxis are an easier, faster and certainly more comfortable option.

#### Taxi

In a shared taxi, short hops around town cost YR50 and for a cross-town contract taxi (private hire) you'll need to negotiate, but Yemeni taxi drivers are generally more honest than most of the world's cabbies!

#### Motorcycle Taxi

If you want to beat the traffic in the larger towns, you can always hop on the back of a motorbike taxi.

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