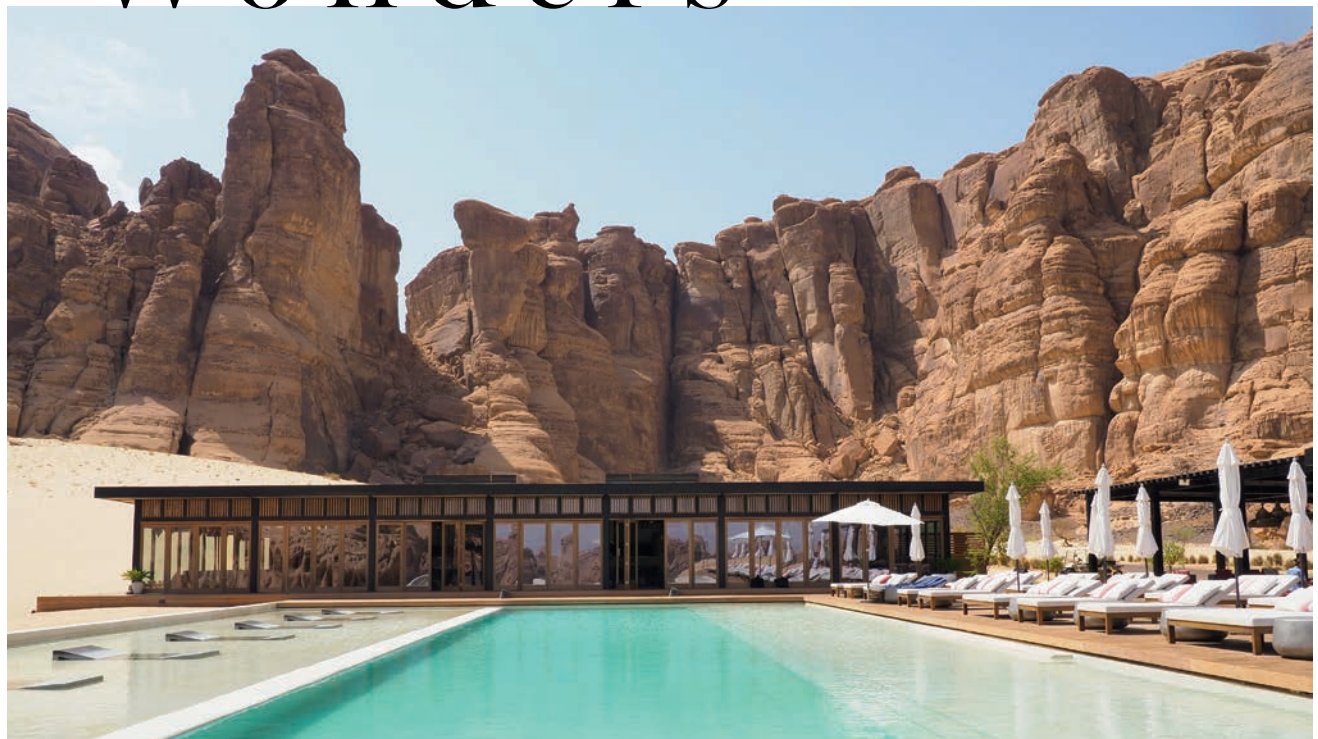


Undiscovered Wonders





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: *The rock-hewn temples of Hegra; Dining at Tama, the restaurant at sustainable tented resort Habitas; Tama infuses Middle Eastern cuisine with global flavours; Habitas is a luxe oasis in the desert.*



An ancient oasis city

The rock-hewn temples of Hegra and Dadan are the handiwork of the ancient civilisation that built Petra. Sarah Reid on why now is the time to visit AlUla.

With major historical sites such as Machu Picchu and the Pyramids of Giza so ingrained in popular culture, it's common to feel a sense of déjà vu when we finally see them with our own eyes.

It's a very different feeling visiting AlUla. While travellers familiar with Jordan's Petra will recognise the rock-hewn temples of Hegra as the handiwork of the ancient Arabic Nabataean civilisation, the mind boggles as to how the wealth of geological and archaeological riches of this remote corner of north-western Saudi Arabia went virtually unknown to the outside world for more than 2000 years.

When Saudi Arabia first opened to international tourists in 2019, the ancient oasis city of AlUla quickly emerged as its showpiece attraction. Sculpted by millions of years of erosion, the region's otherworldly landscape is worth the trip in itself, with immense boulders shaped like giant elephants and basaltic lava flows oozing from ancient volcanoes. Even more intriguing are the layers of history threaded through this ancient landscape that archaeologists are only just beginning to unravel.

In a nation known for ambitious mega projects, AlUla could have been transformed into an archaeological Disneyworld with the US \$15 billion earmarked for its development as a luxury tourism destination. To my relief, tourism infrastructure completed to date is both easy on the eye and, to an extent, the environment, with experiences led by highly trained *rawi* (Arabic storyteller guides) offering an accessible opportunity to connect with the Saudi behind the headlines. While this Gulf nation remains a deeply conservative country with a troubling

human rights record, it's my view that visiting places such as AlUla and engaging with locals helps to promote the cross-cultural understanding necessary to evolve as a global society. In AlUla, the complimentary refreshment stands located at the main historic sites are the first hint that Saudi culture is, at its essence, more hospitable than many travellers might think. While always on guard as a solo female traveller, I felt safe and welcome here.

A 30-minute drive north of AlUla town, Hegra – Saudi's first UNESCO site – is AlUla's crown jewel. Also known as Mada'in Saleh, the southern capital of the Nabataean Kingdom may only have 111 rock-cut tombs to Petra's 600-odd, but they're similarly magnificent, hewn from a series of golden sandstone boulders between 1 BCE – 1 CE in contrast to those of Petra, carved from a narrow rose-coloured canyon at around the same time. With visits restricted to guided tours by bus or Land Rover that visit only a fraction of the 52-hectare site, I leave Hegra feeling somewhat short-changed. Nonetheless, the tour stops provide a fascinating glimpse into this remarkable lost city.

And Hegra isn't AlUla's only ancient city. Before the Nabataeans arrived, the picturesque valley south of Hegra was home to Dadan, which served as the capital of two other ancient Arab kingdoms, Dadan (9th–8th century BCE) and Lihyan (5th–2nd century BCE). With excavations >>

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FROM LEFT: Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO site, Hegra is made up of more than 100 rock-cut temples; Habitas is hidden away in a sandstone canyon of the Ashar Valley.

still in their infancy, the current highlight of Dadan is its string of tombs chiselled into the cliffs. Look for the skilfully crafted funerary monuments, including the seated lion sculptures that may have marked a royal burial.

On the opposite side of the valley is Jabal Ikmah, another remnant from the Dadanite era inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World register in 2023 for its rock carvings chronicling the evolution of Old Arabic languages.

"Welcome to my library," says rawi Amal Aljohani as she guides us into a canyon featuring more than 300-odd inscriptions depicting everything from daily life in the region to animals that once roamed these lands. The significance of this astonishingly well-preserved time capsule is not lost on our awestruck group as Amal interprets some of the ancient text and images.

Nestling between these two sites is AlUla Old Town, which emerged in the 12th century as the valley became part of the historic incense trading route. Exploring its labyrinth of alleys on a guided tour, it's hard to believe its last residents didn't move out of the eroded mudbrick and stone buildings until the 1980s.

Astride AlUla Old Town (two kilometres north of the modern town of AlUla) lies the oasis – the ancient agricultural heartland of AlUla still used today. Guided tours along the three-kilometre Heritage Oasis Trail are available, but it's worth seizing the rare opportunity to explore one of AlUla's ancient wonders independently on a self-guided meander between plots of fragrant mint, citrus trees and date palms. More modern cultural attractions including the mirror-walled Maraya concert hall and the AlJadidah Arts District, as well as a bevy of adventure activities from zip-lining to *via ferrata* (rock-climbing obstacles), tempt a longer stay in AlUla – or a repeat visit, as this surreal landscape continues to reveal more of its forgotten treasures.

A Traveller's Checklist

GETTING THERE

The town of AlUla is a 30-minute drive north of AlUla International Airport. With taxis in short supply, it's best to book transfers in advance. A low-carbon tramway currently in development will be a game changer for exploring the region.

STAYING THERE

HABITAS ALULA is a luxury tented resort-style hotel (with an excellent incense route-inspired restaurant, TAMA), which has been sustainably constructed in a spectacular sandstone canyon in the Ashar Valley near Hegra. ourhabitas.com

The recently opened BANYAN TREE ALULA, in the Ashar Valley, also welcomes non-guests at its two restaurants. banyantree.com

EATING THERE

AlUla has a good range of contemporary dining options, including international restaurant SOMEWHERE, a short walk from AlUla Old Town. [@somewhere on Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/somewhere_oua).

The HEART OF OASIS, in the dappled shade of date palms, offers an atmospheric farm-to-fork dining experience. [@heartofaoasis on Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/heartofaoasis).

PLAYING THERE

Book local experiences at experiencealula.com

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Hiking the Great Inca Road

The Inca Trail gets all the glory, but it's just part of one of the most incredible feats of ancient engineering, with the Great Road system, or Qhapaq Ñan as the Inca knew it, stretching some 40,000 kilometres from present-day Colombia to Chile. Now a less-visited section of the network in Peru has become more accessible, with Intrepid Travel among the handful of operators now leading hikes on a section weaving past ancient ruins and traditional villages, east of Huaraz. *Sarah Reid*

HOUSTON'S CAVE OF WONDERS

The best music venue in Beyoncé's hometown isn't some fancy new arena. It's a subterranean vault that used to hold Houston's drinking water. A forest of 221 columns rises from the gloom in a cavernous reservoir modelled on Istanbul's magnificent Basilica Cistern. But when our guide bursts into song, the entire structure is transformed into an instrument, her voice bouncing off the concrete walls so that each note shimmers in the air. When she begins to harmonise with herself, it sounds like we're being serenaded by an angelic choir and, as the last notes fade, even our whoops of delight are magnified by this atmospheric cave of wonders. *Alexis Buxton-Collins*

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The Roman ruins of Libya

It's likely not the first place that springs to mind when it comes to Roman ruins. But Libya is home to some of the world's finest remains of Roman architecture, culminating at Leptis Magna, a Phoenician city on the Mediterranean coast near modern-day Khoms, expanded under Roman Emperor, Septimius Severus. Off limits since the Arab Spring, Libya's Roman relics are finally becoming easier to visit again, with adventure travel specialists Untamed Borders and Lupine Travel both launching tours in 2023. *Sarah Reid*



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