

Meda'in Saleh a well kept secret

SAUDI Arabia is one of those rare places that has managed to keep many of its most beautiful and fascinating visitor sites a well kept secret from the globe trotting culture seeking tourists who are constantly on the look out for "unspoiled" destinations across the globe.

For those who are able to gain entry to this fascinating kingdom, the immediate attractions of Riyadh and Jeddah, not to mention the religious tourism destinations, are often the only places that travellers will visit. Yet for sheer breath-taking splendour, variety, historical interest and something that is so very "different", it is hard to beat Sa'udi Arabia's "Little Petra", known as Meda'in Saleh.

This is truly the kingdom's premier archaeological and tourist sight, with ancient tombs that are part of the ruins of the Nabataean city of Saleh, known as Hegra in ancient times. Mada'in Saleh itself covers nine square kilometres and includes about 80 fabulous tombs built on a 450 metre plateau.

ELEGANT EAGLE ETCHINGS

These monumental mausoleums were carved into the sandstone about 2,000 years ago by Nabataeans who originated in Iraq and migrated to Petra in present day Jordan and to Meda'in Saleh in Arabia.

No one knows for sure what happened to the ancients who lived at Meda'in Saleh. Legend has it that Saleh was a pre-Islamic prophet from the cities that bear his name.

The people, however, rebuffed his monotheistic teachings and continued to worship idols. According to the fable, a bolt of lightning came from heaven, killing scores of people and driving the survivors away.

The first tomb near the entrance is that of Al Sanai with its towering facade featuring elegant etchings of eagles and roses. Al-Khasraf is a cluster of 17 tombs with mysterious, elevated entrances. The

largest and was never finished. The Girls' Palace consists of 23 bi-level tombs with carvings that depict family life in the community.

Many of the tombs feature etched inscriptions which depict names of the family dynasty and those chosen to be buried there. Many are dated. Several bear the carver's signature.

As in Petra, you can wander into most of the chambers and see inscriptions and chisel marks on the roughly hewn walls. Small ledges, supposedly graves for children, were cut into walls of some of the rooms. Other graves were dug into the floors.

And just as in Petra, there is a "siq", or narrow gorge that separates two huge sandstone outcrops. It leads to an open hall cut into the rock. Several small niches with inscriptions are carved into the walls and many believe they once held figures of deities.

GHOST TOWN

Many travellers to Meda'in Saleh plan side trips to the Hejaz Railway stations as well as the archaeological sites at Al-Ula, which include a ghost town - empty now for over 50 years - together with many rock carvings.

One of the reconstructed Hejaz Railway stations (made famous by Lawrence of Arabia who destroyed the railway in 1917 in an attempt to thwart the Turks who controlled it) lies next to the archaeological site. It has a rusty old German steam locomotive in its shed, whilst the platform areas have been reconstructed with extra modern lighting.

Further up the line you can see derailed locomotives, coal tenders and wagons, riddled with bullet holes, but most of are accessible only with a four wheel drive vehicle. Many of the railroad embankments, culverts and bridges remain intact, along with a few Turkish forts from the days of the Ottoman Empire.

Getting to Meda'in Saleh involves a plane flight to either Medinah airport (situated outside the Haram zone, so non muslims are able to land here) or to Al Wadj on the Red Sea coast. It is located about 845 kms from Jeddah, halfway between Tabuk and Medinah. The hotels at Meda'in Saleh will pick up from these two airports, even though they are 400kms and 200kms away respectively. The Medinah trip is much more interesting, and normally a stop is made on the way to admire the

pre-Islamic Khaibar dam.

You need permission to visit Meda'in Saleh, though, from the Ministry of Antiquities in Riyadh, but if you stay at a local hotel or use a tour operator, they will normally sort this out for you as long as you give them a few days notice.

Recommended months to visit Meda'in Saleh are from November to March, as it can get very hot wandering around the area. The Department of Antiquities publishes a self-guide tour booklet that is available at the site for SR25 (US\$7).

Note that in common with other archaeological sites, video at Meda'in Saleh is not allowed, though stills photography is not a problem. ■

By Brian Salter



The ghost town at Al Ula with the modern town in the distance. Here you can stroll around and imagine what life might have been like 50 years ago.