

# Sailing Saudi

Kelly Ranson reports from the first international cruise to the destination in 17 years

From untouched ancient cities to islands and coral reefs, Saudi Arabia is an intriguing destination ready to be explored. But how does a country that has been closed off begin to build its tourism? With the help of the cruise industry, it appears.

Superyacht *Scenic Eclipse* spent six months in Saudi last year – and I was among the first international cruise tourists to visit the kingdom in 17 years. Meanwhile, operators have been adding Saudi to their 2022 programmes and several cruise lines are either homeporting or making stops in the destination.

There is still a way to go for tourism and infrastructure, but there has been a marked change since 2019, when tourist visas were introduced. And while it is no doubt a controversial holiday destination, with more than 70% of the population aged under 30, there's a sense of a shift away from how things used to be. There are still strides to be made on

human rights law and gender equality, but things are improving. For example, many tourist guides are now women, and as a female traveller, I felt genuinely welcome, although there is still a curiosity among locals when Westerners wander the streets.

Also, while Saudi Arabia is a dry country, alcohol is allowed to be served to cruise passengers when ships are 12 miles off shore.

In line with Saudi's Vision 2030 strategy – to promote the country as a tourist destination – Cruise Saudi was launched a year ago to redevelop the ports and establish new cruise hubs.

Mark Robinson, chief commercial and operations officer for Cruise Saudi, said: "In 2019, 96 ships passed by Saudi Arabia on world cruises or going to Dubai, and they had nowhere to stop. Now, with our development, they could stop in Saudi ports. It is a new market, but for a seven-day cruise, it's ideal – the weather is great ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## CRUISE | SAUDI ARABIA

### ASK THE experts



**Nikki Seymour Mead**, head of sales UK, Audley Travel:  
"Saudi Arabia

is fast opening both its mind and heart to foreign visitors, as well as its attitude towards women. Its potential to wow is huge. To be able to explore all this from the comforts of *Scenic Eclipse* was a treat."



**Rebecca Turner**, head of product and commercial, Elegant Resorts:

"Discovering Saudi Arabia as it is opening up was just fantastic. With our DMC, every itinerary will be bespoke and I think cruise-and-stay will be a really good option."



**Julie Barker**, head of reservations and operations, Carrier:

"In terms of *Scenic Eclipse*, you cannot fault the ship – the cabin, the crew, the food. We have clients it would without question appeal to, with its unique itineraries, onboard technology and intimate size."



**Gregor Miller**, sales manager, Ramsay World Travel:

"The elegance and beauty of the ship is what struck me – *Scenic Eclipse* oozes class. I would certainly recommend a Red Sea cruise itinerary to my clients, but I'd also recommend they do their research on what they are looking to get out of their trip."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Scenic Eclipse*; Yanbu; Hegra; *Scenic Neptune* submarine  
PICTURES: Mindaugas Oginskas; Saudi Tourism Authority



and the cultural element is there. The more people we can get here, the better, and fam trips are a big part of that."

*Scenic Eclipse* was sailing private charters and a one-off trade cruise in 2021, but sister company Emerald Cruises' new ship *Emerald Azzurra* will operate Red Sea cruises from Jeddah this year. Likewise, MSC Cruises' *MSC Bellissima* spent time sailing from Jeddah in 2021 and is continuing to do so in 2022.

The luxurious 228-passenger *Scenic Eclipse* was the line's 'first six-star Discovery Yacht' when it launched in 2019. It boasts two onboard helicopters, a submarine and 10 dining venues, including a chef's table and a sushi bar. Chanel No 5 perfume is available as standard in the restrooms, while attention to detail is also evident in the service – every crew member knew my name.

The 114 sleek suites all feature butler service, slumber beds that can be adjusted for comfort, Dyson hairdryers and sizeable balconies. *Scenic* refreshed some of the ship's spaces in 2020, removing the pool from the Yacht Club dining venue and adding more seating, a new bar on deck 10 and an enhanced spa and fitness programme (I particularly enjoyed sunset yoga).

I found *Scenic Eclipse* made for an ideal base from which to dip my toes into the culture that Saudi Arabia is beginning to offer to visitors. Instead of navigating independent travel in a country where tourism infrastructure is still growing, we were seamlessly transported to places such as the archaeological wonders of Hegra in AlUla and able to enjoy the stunning Red Sea islands straight from the ship.

Tourism may be in its infancy in Saudi Arabia, but cruising is certainly helping to steer it forward. **TW**

## OUR PORTS OF CALL

**Jeddah:** Discover the intricately designed wooden buildings of the old town of Al-Balad. The largely derelict historical centre is set for restoration as part of Vision 2030, while Jeddah's port is set to gain a dedicated cruise facility.

**Jabal Al-Lith Island:** The Red Sea's clear waters await on this private island. Guests can enjoy watersports, or dive into the reef aboard the ship's *Scenic Neptune* submarine.

**Yanbu:** This fishing port, once home to Lawrence of Arabia, is being transformed into a tourist hotspot. The souk and night markets offer a charming, if rather Disney-esque, version of what life would formerly have been like for locals.

**AlUla:** An hour's flight (or a four-hour drive) from Yanbu lies this archaeologist's dream, which in 2008 became the first location in Saudi Arabia to be designated a Unesco Heritage Site. At its heart lies Hegra, home to more than 100 untouched tombs from the Nabataean Kingdom. For a contrast, visitors can head to Maraya, the world's largest mirrored building, which sits in the middle of the desert.

## BOOK IT

**Emerald Cruises'** *Emerald Azzurra* calls at AlUla and Neom in Saudi, as well as ports in Egypt and Greece, on a 12-day Ancient Wonders of Red Sea and Mythical Greece sailing, departing Jeddah on April 4, 2023, with prices from £5,610. [emeraldcruiises.co.uk](http://emeraldcruiises.co.uk)