

Festivals of the Happy Arabia? Camel-Jumping & Much More...

While exploring Yemen's rich cultural history through a visit of its diverse landscapes and charming people is an enchanting experience in its own right, partaking in one of the country's festivals can turn a simple visit into a unique celebration. Some festivals have sprung from ancient traditions while others are more recent developments created to please the expanding tourist market, but all of them afford an opportunity to delve a little deeper into this country's mystery – not to mention a chance for Yemeni's to extend their infamous hospitality.



The capital city is a good place to start – here the big and colorful **Sana'a Summer Festival** is held for over a month, beginning mid-July. Among a plethora of performances to choose from, one can attend famous folkloric dances, military band performances, Yemeni poetry readings, as well as fashion shows displaying traditional attire. The events are held throughout the city, in the streets, open-air parks, theatres, and historical and tourist locations, creating a vibrant context for exhibitions of art, photography, crafts and industrial items on display. Visitors should not forget to add a walk around the old city of Sana'a, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to see some of the world's oldest skyscrapers.

To the East there lies quite a different city, Mukalla. Now a bustling port city, Mukalla is young by Yemeni standards, becoming something more than a mere fishing village in 1625 when Qu'aiti Sultan Ahmed al-Kasadi made Mukalla the seat of his power. Known for its shoreline composed of white-washed buildings presiding over curving sandy beaches, Mukalla takes advantage of its beautiful backdrop for **Al-Badah Festival** held on August 10th and named after a star that is visible on the same date. It is said that the presence of the star makes the seawater cold and people travel from all over to bathe in the refreshing sea, along with its resident dolphins. Around this time, Hadramout also organizes public games, artistic displays, and presentations of their national folklore. To round out a trip to this region, spend a night sleeping open-air on a beach in the coastal area of Ras Sharma, just a two-hour drive to the East and witnessing the hatchings of a colony of thriving green sea turtles that make it their home.



Perhaps a bit less ethereal but no less captivating is **Eid al-Adha, the “Festival of Sacrifice”**, a major Islamic celebration commemorating Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son. The festival occurs throughout the country for 4 days during the last month of the Islamic calendar, when almost all Muslim families sacrifice a goat or a sheep. As a consequence, the streets literally run with blood. However, it is the hospitality of the Yemenis that is most memorable – with an abundance of meat people are keen to share their delicacies with others. A short walk on the streets is thus likely to result in numerous offers to share local peoples’ bounty with you. This generosity is a demonstration of their willingness to give up what they consider precious for the sake of strengthening ties of friendship and helping those in need – an uplifting touch to what may seem on the outside a gory celebration. During this time, Yemenis don their best clothes and enjoy all the events and socializing that take place in the towns.

In the lush and historically rich governorate of Ibb, every August a celebration of culture, arts, sports, and poetry comes alive for a week in a different location each year (though the exact location is only determined a few weeks in advance, so leave room for spontaneity if you want to catch this one!). During the **Ibb Tourist Festival**, as this modern event is known, exhibitions of environmental and tourist heritage abound, as well as displays of women’s clothing, Yemeni photography, agriculture, and books. Also, be sure to watch out for the enthusiastic artistic and sporting competitions. For a break from the hustle and bustle, a stroll around Ibb’s peaceful countryside affords one the chance to spot the intriguing Yemeni Chameleon.



The littoral mainland of Yemen, known as the Tihama, is distinctly different from the rest of the country, with African influences visible in the people, culture and architecture. The region’s capital, Al Hodeidah, is often likened by visitors to the Mos Eisley Cantina from the first Star Wars. An important port of the Ottomans when the coffee trade at Mukha declined, it retains its old and stunning Turkish quarter and every morning, the mammoth fish market comes alive and is a sight to behold.

However, for something truly bizarre, travel about 25 km south to Al-Husayninah and behold the spectacle of the camel-jumping competitions. For over 100 years, the people of al-Duraihimi have celebrated the end of the palm season with a **festival called al-Khamis** which includes horse and camel racing and, naturally, camel-jumping. The aim of the game is simply to jump over as many camels as possible. To do this, the contestants take a long run-up and sprint at top speed towards the camels. Just when it seems that a humorous (and possibly grotesque) collision is unavoidable, the men

spring off a half-metre high dirt mound and sail over the seated dromedaries. A clearance of six is usually enough for victory, with more audacious efforts often rewarded with amusing tumbles and gasps of concern and awe from onlookers. If you miss the festival, which takes place in mid-August, young men will often arrange an impromptu competition for a small financial incentive.

Aptly called 'Arabia Felix', or Happy Arabia, by the Romans and Greeks, it is nowhere else more visible that Yemen still honors its name than from the heart of one of its many unique festivals. With celebrations as distinct as the regions of the country in which they are held, there is sure to be something that will intrigue, delight, and entertain us all.

Photos: TR, Flickr

By Anna Cote & Christopher Imbsen (Yemen Tourism Promotion Board, UK & Ireland)

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