JEWELS OF SAUDI ARABIA’S PAST

Five Saudi sites on UNESCO’s World Heritage List tell a story of universal historical importance.

1. DIRIYAH: AT-TURAIF

Nestling in a bend of the Wadi Hanifa, in the heart of Riyadh, are the remains of an earlier capital. At-Turaif is a collection of mud-brick palaces, houses and mosques that became the heart of the First Saudi State, established in the oasis of Diriyah in 1744. When they migrated from Diriyah, the House of Saud therefore brought the name of their old home with them. Salwa Palace, on which work began in about 1770, is the largest such structure in the Najd region. Adjacent to it is the remains of Bait Al-Mal, the state treasury, built between 1804 and 1814.

2. HISTORIC JEDDAH

Jeddah’s historic heart, Al-Balad, may date back to the 16th century. The mud-brick buildings of At-Turaif became the heart of the First Saudi State, established in the oasis of Diriyah in 1744. When they migrated from Diriyah, the House of Saud therefore brought the name of their old home with them. Salwa Palace, on which work began in about 1770, is the largest such structure in the Najd region. Adjacent to it is the remains of Bait Al-Mal, the state treasury, built between 1804 and 1814.

3. HAIL: ROCK ART

Designs left by ancient peoples in the rocks of Hail region constitute a magnificent collection of carvings. Adopted by UNESCO as “the product of the interaction between man and nature.” There are more than 2.5 million palm trees in the world’s largest and perhaps oldest oasis. The site is composed of 12 separate elements scattered over 85 sq km. Occupied for at least 8,000 years, Al-Ahsa has survived the rise and fall of great powers, including the Chaldeans, the Achaemenids, Alexander the Great and the Roman and Ottoman empires.

4. ALULA: HEGRA

Hegra, on a plain southeast of the Hijaz Mountains, is studded with hills of antiquities, isolated or grouped together to form mandals. In addition to creating the colossal canvases upon which the Sabaeans carved their story, the winds have also formed strange shapes, such as the three-story rock massif north-east of the modern town of AlUla. Sculpted over millions of years to resemble an elephant, Archaeologists believe it was the perception of Hegra by the Bedouin as a cursed place that has helped to preserve much of its fabric over the centuries.

5. AL-AHSAN: OASIS

Al-Ahsa is associated with the Dilmun civilization that flourished in the third millennium BCE in what is now eastern Saudi Arabia. It is listed by UNESCO as “the product of the interaction between man and nature.” There are more than 2.5 million palm trees in the world’s largest and perhaps oldest oasis. The site is composed of 12 separate elements scattered over 85 sq km. Occupied for at least 8,000 years, Al-Ahsa has survived the rise and fall of great powers, including the Chaldeans, the Achaemenids, Alexander the Great and the Roman and Ottoman empires.

One of the objectives of Saudi Arabia, as set out in the Vision 2030 reform plan that aims to create a more diverse economy, is to open up the kingdom to visitors as a destination for heritage tourism. One objective is to increase the number of heritage destinations in the kingdom from 241 to 447. Among the attractions are sites that date back to prehistory and form key chapters in the story of humankind’s evolution and migration out of Africa. Five of the sites, which have been recognized by UNESCO for their “outstanding universal value,” are the jewels in the crown of Saudi Arabia’s past.