



Things to do in Riyadh

Phil Longwell



Things to do in Riyadh: An introduction

Whilst putting together a list of top things to do in Riyadh (the capital and largest city of Saudi Arabia) it is easy to fall into the tried and tested places without much course for adventure. Any new arrival would probably be focused on sorting out their Iqama, settling into life at the hotel, or compound, and the university system.

After the first wave of orientation, you will find you have more time on your hands and might want to venture out into the city. Beyond Riyadh's boundary lie the deserts, such as the Lawrence of Arabia landscape of the Empty Quarter, to the south, and the historic area of Diriyah, north-west of the centre.

I will list a top 10 to get you started, but do ask the locals and staff at the university to gain more insight.

About the writer

Phil Longwell (teacher at KSU, 2010) began teaching English by volunteering at an orphanage in Tanzania in 2006 before being employed at an academy for 7-16 year olds in South Korea. After completing his CELTA in March 2009, he taught on Bell's Young Learner Programmes at Bedgebury and at the Leys, Cambridge, before working for Bell at an Arts University in Beijing, China. He likes making movies, cinema, mountain climbing, discovering new places and cultures and being thrown in at the deep end.



My 10 Riyadh Recommendations:

1. Skybridge, Kingdom Tower

Standing 302.3m high and boasting a 56m long, 300 tonne steel and glass bridge, the eye-catching Kingdom (Al-Mamlakah) Tower is the number one destination for a view of the city of Riyadh. Nicknamed the 'necklace' (or 'bottle opener' if being impolite) because of its design, it is situated on Al-Urubah Road, and nestles between the main drags of King Fahd Road and Olaya Road.

It sits above a massive 3-floor shopping complex, Burj Al-Mamlaka, featuring 161 stores, plus a 'ladies only' floor. The tower houses the second highest mosque in the world. At either end of the centre are a large Debenhams and a Marks and Spencer. The lightning-fast, double-elevator ride features some interesting shooting stars, providing a sense of going into orbit. In addition, if you are feeling hungry, you can dine out at the fancy but affordable Spazio 77 restaurant, complete with Sushi bar and great views.

Current price, per person, for entering the Skybridge: 25 SAR

2. Al-Masmak Fort

The Masmak a historical, clay and mud-brick piece of architecture, dates back to 1865. Legend has it that Masmak was the scene of the Ibn Saud's daring 1902 raid, during which a spear was hurled at the main entrance doors, with such force that the head is still lodged in the doorway.

Today the fort is one among several buildings that form the King Abd al-Aziz Historical Centre, a series of restored buildings in Riyadh. It is located at Imam Turki bin Abdulla st, Al-Diriyah, It has different opening times for men and families, and it is free to enter.





3. Al-Zal Market and Souk

Smell the past as you walk through Al-Zal market, which is located at the intersection of Tarik bin Ziyah Street and Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab Street. Traditional items like blankets, cloaks, swords, rugs, shoes, pipes and clocks can be bought or bartered over. There is a gold souk dira nearby, with rows of jewellery, watches and other similar possible precious purchases. You can also head to **Souq al-Thumairi** immediately south of the Masmak Fortress in the Al-Dira area. The shops in the small lanes offer everything from carpets to coffee pots and silver daggers to silver jewellery.

4. King Fahd International Stadium

Built in 1987, the splendidly designed national stadium mostly holds football matches, but is also used for athletics. Its design is based on a large Bedouin tent, with distinctive sails. The 24 Teflon-coated fibreglass roof masts cantilever 56 m over the seating area, providing shade to spectators. The Stadium occupies an area of 500,000 m sq. and accommodates up to 80,000 spectators. This is where the Saudi national team play their games. There are also four local teams, Al-Hilal (in Al-Uraija district) ,Al-Shabab (Al-Sahafa district), Al-Nasr (Al-Uraija) and Al-Riyadh (Wadi Laban).

Admission Price: Varies depending on event. On average: 20 SAR.

5. Al-Janadriya Equestrian Club

Given the lack of entertainment in other areas, sport is vigorously followed and encouraged amongst Saudis. Horse Racing is possibly the most popular pursuit. The Equestrian Club of Arriyadh is responsible for conducting thoroughbred horse racing at its 2 racetracks in Arriyadh and AtTaif.

Founded in 1965, racing took place until recently at the city track in Malaz, Arriyadh. The new track in Arriyadh, known as King Abdulaziz Track, is located at Janadriyah, 40Km. north east of Arriyadh close to King Khalid International Airport. This track has been recently completed and the facilities are to international standards with a grandstand accommodating 5,000 racegoers. The racing season at Janadriyah runs from September to April with races taking place on Friday afternoons extending into the evening under floodlights.

6. Riyadh Zoo

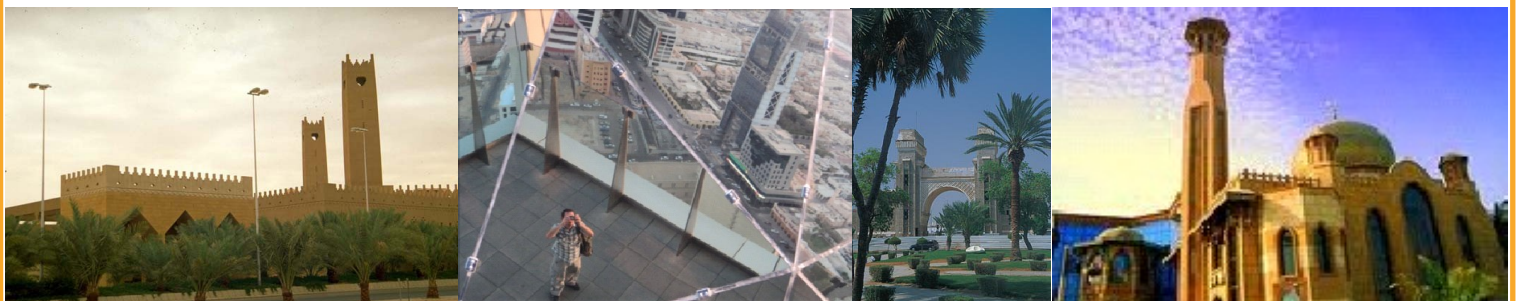
Riyadh Zoo is one of the most popular leisure facilities in Riyadh. The Zoo, first formed in 1957, was originally a small scale affair, consisting of animals presented as gift to the first three kings of the kingdom. Built on an area of 161,000m sq. in the Al-Malaz district, east of Al-Ahsaa St, the zoo includes 64 animal yards. It contains around 1300 animals of 164 species, carefully keeping animals of the same origin together as much as possible. There is a train and shuttle on site.

Price per adult: 10 SAR

7. Al-Olaya District / Al-Tahliya Street

Al-Olaya is the hub of life and one of the biggest commercial areas in Riyadh. Fine markets, malls and commercial compounds are found either side of Olaya Street and its perpendicular off roads. All the major names are here.

Head down to Prince Muhammad bin Abdul Aziz Road (aka Al-Tahliya St) for a string of coffee bars and cafes (such as Breakfast To Breakfast), Indian restaurants, Applebee's and Chili's. This street has numerous free wi-fi hotspots and is a welcome place to chill and drink a cool Lemon Mint crush. Even when the shops close for prayer you can still be online.





8. Salam Park

One of the modern, albeit slightly contrived parks in Riyadh. It features a 3.5 hectare lake, six football playgrounds, a horse riding track and walking paths. It provides one of the greener areas of an otherwise dusty, brown city. Go boating on the lake, have a long and leisurely lunch, jog around the park or simply lie in the shades of the palm trees while your kids, if you have any, entertain themselves on the playground.

Price per adult: 10 SAR

9. Al-Faisaliah Centre

This centre contains one of the most famous constructional landmarks in the whole Kingdom. Designed by British architect Norman Foster and built in 2000 by the Bin Laden construction company, Al-Faisaliah Tower was the first of the startling new structures to rise above Riyadh's skyline. It's most famous for its enormous glass globe (24m in diameter and made of 655 glass panels) near the summit. The centre features four exclusive restaurants and a fabulous outdoor viewing platform just below the globe. The shopping mall below has 150 stores.

Current price to visit the Globe viewing platform: 35 SAR (included in the price if you eat at the restaurant).

10. Al-Thumama Park

Recommended by my students and fellow teachers, Thumamah is a wild desert, north- east of the city. The visitor can enjoy different terrains and there are opportunities to go horse riding and quad-biking. Youngsters, who like to 'drift' in their vehicles around the city, come out to the roads around Thumama to 'drift' for show, in a more appropriate setting, although it is still dangerous.

Alternatively, you can just bring a picnic and escape the hustle and bustle of the city. Wildlife lovers will find 195 plant species, four mammal classes, 148 bird species, and 21 reptile and insect species that have been preserved for the past two decades.

This completes my top ten Riyadh recommendations. Read on for general information and tips on shopping and dining in the capital.



Shopping in Saudi

While Riyadh lacks nightlife (no cinema, bars, or clubs) it makes up for it with shopping malls. Most of these are brand-spanking new, clean and smoke free. The numerous malls are the one noticeable area of the whole city in which the women, usually driven door-to-door, do outnumber the men. Aside from the already mentioned Kingdom and Faisaliah Centres, there are numerous other malls to entice you in.

Granada Mall

Granada Mall ('Ghirnatah') is located on the north-west side of the city, off ring road, close to exit 8. It is a huge place featuring, amongst other gems; Extra, Paris Gallery, Carrefour, Debenhams, Etam, Fun Oasis, Obeikan, Traditionals, Dr. Cafe, Splash, Terranova, Calliope, BSB, Alexi Andriotti, and Starbucks.

Olaya Mall

In the 'shadow' of Kingdom Tower, on Olaya Street, a reasonably functional place with 3 floors and over 180 stores providing women's and children's clothing, perfumes, watches, shoes, food court, and children's play area.

Al Jazeera Mall

Al-Jazeera is a place where you will find almost everything under the same roof. From clothes, shoes and accessories to electronic goods and household items - it's all available here. This is an ultimate shopping destination with 100 stores to choose from. You can also shop for gifts here as they have a wide variety. Contains Al-Jazeera Supermarket and a recreational centre for both kids and adults.

AlSaraha Centre / Saraha Annex

Located at the intersection of King Abdul Aziz Rd and Prince Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz Rd, this is another plush, clean and well-stocked mall on the northern side of the city. The mall has 180 shops, a Tamimi supermarket and features a huge multicultural food court. In what appears to be a theme of modern Riyadh malls, there is a large adventure playground, called 'Adventureland', for children.



Riyadh Gallery

A very modern, spacious mall with fountains and 'garden'. It is definitely good for families but also great for clothes shopping. There is a wide range of facilities, coffee bars, ice cream and crepe diners. There is an inexpensive, wide-ranging 2nd floor food hall which serves, amongst others, Mongolian, Turkish and Indian fare. It even has Vikings Fish & Chips. There is also a huge fun land area for kids called 'Oceanica'. It is definitely good for families but also great for clothes shopping. There is also a 'hyper Panda' (which conjures up some lovely images) super-market on the 1st level for ALL your grocery needs.

The Localizer Mall

With free Wi-Fi throughout, the Localizer is conveniently situated in the main drag of Al-Tahliya St (see no.7). It contains a female-only gym, 'Fitness First' and random stalls selling expensive perfume. Amongst its 4 levels, it contains Cinnabon, Zyng Asian Grill, Colcci, BMI, Haute Couture J, Armani Exchange, Outback steakhouse, Diamond Restaurant and Japiano – a fusion food place. Security is laid-back compared to some other malls.



Grocery Shopping and Eating

Once settled into your hotel or compound you will want to stock up on some provisions. There are big stores on the main roads and freeways (**Carrefour, Panda, Tamimi**) as well as medium-sized supermarkets (e.g. **Balsharaf, Al Jazeera**) and plenty of little convenience stores. Look out for a great selection of olives, feta cheese and Turkish Labneh (cream cheese). Bottled water is between 2-4 SAR, whilst fresh coriander is a snip of 1 SAR for a bunch. Peppers (capsicums) are expensive, but Chilli's are cheap. Bread is cheap and widely available, while many imported familiar brands (e.g. Nescafe coffee, Kellogg's cereals) are present and correct.

With a huge numbers of migrant workers there is an endless array of different cuisines available in Riyadh. The best thing to do is just walk into a place and try it out. Often menu-less but usually with a good view on what is on offer, you can get a cheap meal, starting from just 6 riyals, for a curry with rice. Bangladeshi, Turkish, Lebanese and Sudanese food can be easily found, along with the more staple Saudi fare, like Kabsah. Look hard enough and there are Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Mexican places, too. There are also plenty of famous fast food names – Pizza Hut, Burger King, Dominoes as well as Kudu and Herfy's – a Saudi McDonalds.

Ya Mal Ash'am

Halfway between the two towers lies a spacious, ambient-free and fairly cheap chain offering shawarma heaven. They also offer Mutton Chops, Veal Feet, Fetta Monazala, Indian Kabab, Hamour Panee and numerous salads and fresh fruit cocktails, too. It can also be found in Dabab Street, Malaz (Steen Street), Badeah (Al Madena Street) and Rahmaneih (King Aabdallah Road). They also do home delivery if you can't be bothered to leave your hotel.

La Campagne

Though roomy and rambling, the place gets packed - it's rated by some as Riyadh's best Lebanese. The mezze are freshly made and the grills are something of a speciality. In warm weather, head for the lovely covered terrace at the back.

Breakfast to Breakfast

A spacious place with a range of affordable local food from Kafta, Saj and Foul to internationally recognised fare, such as steak sandwiches, French-style salads, mixed grills and pizza.



Grocery Shopping and Eating

Beit al-Hashi

Though located just over 10km north of the centre, this restaurant is worth the trek for its famous speciality, baby camel. The sign is in Arabic only (look for the appropriately camel-coloured sign). It's next to Mama Noura Juice Centre, just west of the Sheraton.

Mama Noura

Large, bright and clean, this Turkish place remains perennially popular among Riyadh's, who come for the succulent shwarma (available in a sandwich or on a plate) or famous felafel (deep-fried balls of chickpea paste with spices). Take-away is possible.

Al-Noura

This is a fabulous fish and seafood restaurant with a high reputation, service and atmosphere. It offers a wide selection of Saudi, grilled and Lebanese food.

Mirage

Mirage is a Chinese restaurant which offers Thai flavours, too. The décor - illuminated fish tanks and water channels running down the centre - is, like the food, full of fun and panache. Excellent service, but 80-120 SAR pp. Try the crispy duck or the pigeon if you are so inclined. Stay for the complementary tea.

Ners

Right in the heart of the Filipino district, and located on the 2nd floor of the Manila Plaza, the Ners is an old fave among Riyadh's Asian community for its freshly-prepared Filipino and Thai food at fabulous prices. It's clean, waiter-served and very friendly. Dishes such as Tom Yum soup or chicken chilli with coconut milk are delicious.

The Globe

For top-of-the-range dining, the Globe is also one of the most romantic. Cosy, dimly-lit and with spectacular views of town, it's the place to go to gaze over candlelight. The *haute cuisine* cooking of the Austrian chef includes dishes such as pan-roasted foie gras, and butter-roasted wagu beef.

Just remember that everything revolves around moveable prayer times. When the call comes, places will close suddenly, although you will usually be given the chance to finish your meal if already ordered or asked to pop outside for 20-30 minutes.



References and further information

www.sauditourism.com.sa

<http://wikitravel.org/en/Riyadh>

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/saudi-arabia/riyadh/things-to-do>

Lonely Planet Guide to Oman, UAE & Arabian Peninsula, 2nd ed, 2007

'Discover Riyadh' booklet (c/o www.sauditourism.com.sa)

'Discover Riyadh' booklet (c/o www.sauditourism.com.sa)

'Discover Riyadh' booklet (c/o www.sauditourism.com.sa)

<http://www.arriyadh.com/Eng/Sports/Left/Traditional>

<http://www.zoo.com.sa/riyadhzoo/AboutZoo.aspx>

http://travel.yahoo.com/p-travelguide-12421426-salam_park_riyadh-i

<http://www.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=http://www.aukettfitzroyrobinson.com/>

Lonely Planet Guide to Oman, UAE & Arabian Peninsula, 2nd ed, 2007

<http://www.skyscrapercity.com/archive/index.php/t-303629.html>