



UNCOVER

Saudi

CULTURE & HERITAGE

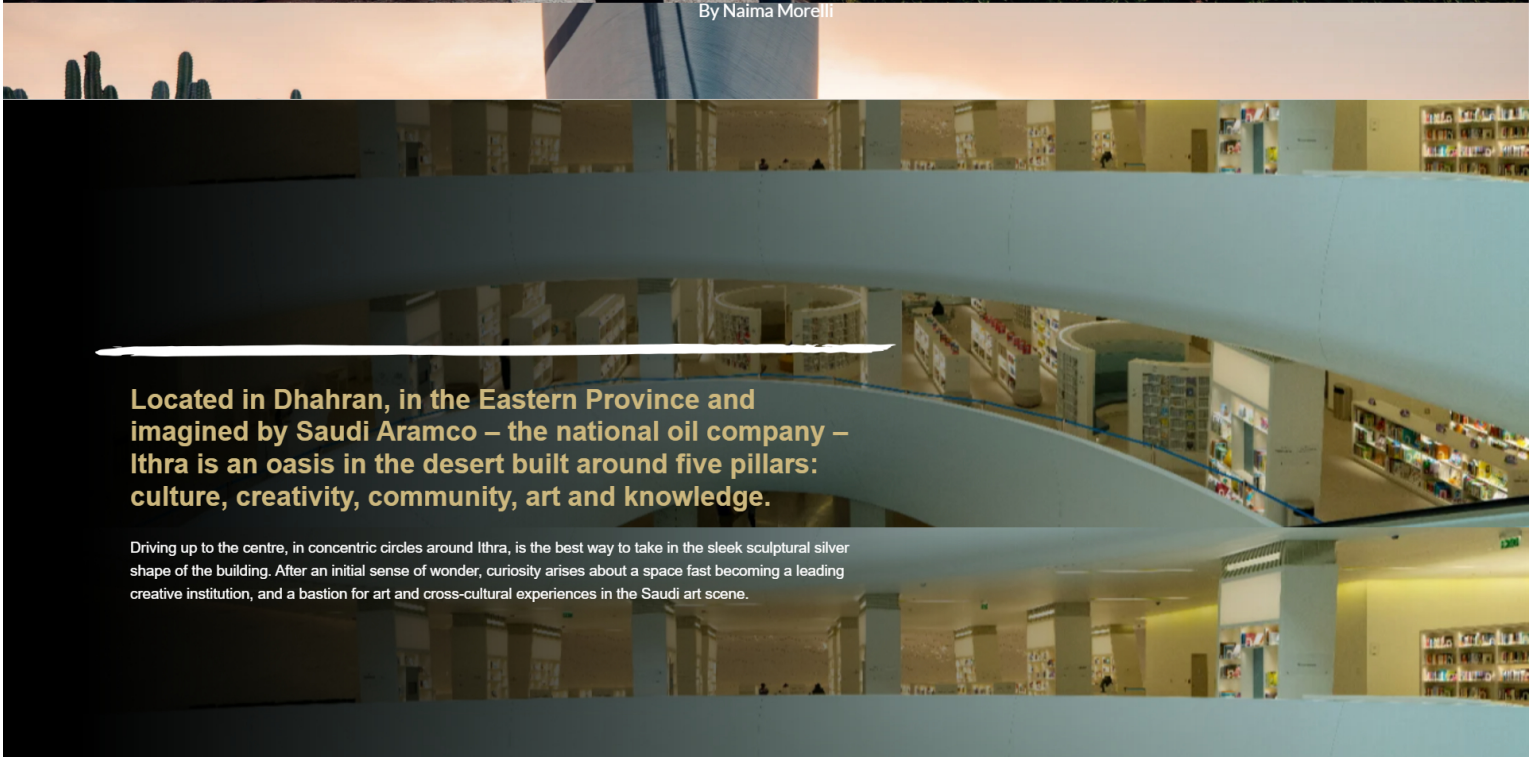
Ithra: A need-to-know guide

It's worth venturing beyond the beaten path to visit Ithra, The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, a new site in Saudi that's making waves.

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By Naima Morelli



Located in Dhahran, in the Eastern Province and imagined by Saudi Aramco – the national oil company – Ithra is an oasis in the desert built around five pillars: culture, creativity, community, art and knowledge.

Driving up to the centre, in concentric circles around Ithra, is the best way to take in the sleek sculptural silver shape of the building. After an initial sense of wonder, curiosity arises about a space fast becoming a leading creative institution, and a bastion for art and cross-cultural experiences in the Saudi art scene.

Origins of Ithra

Ithra, which means 'enrichment' in Arabic, was inaugurated in 2016 by King Salman bin Abdulaziz. It sits in a symbolic location where the Prosperity Well – the first commercial Saudi oil field – was found in 1938.

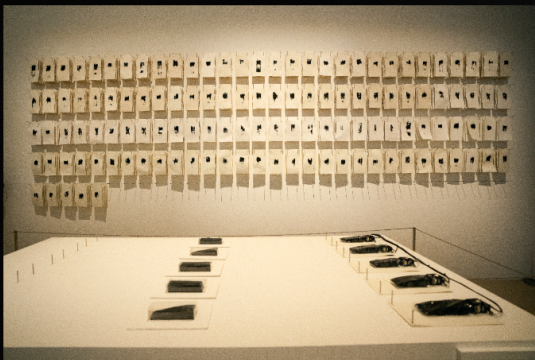
Driven by a strong community spirit, the centre opened to the public in 2018 and has been offering unique learning and cultural experiences ever since. Designed by Norwegian architectural firm, Snøhetta, and standing in the scorching heat of the desert, the spaceship-like building resembles a collection of stones supporting each other. Symbolising cultural interdependence, the building is made of a 110-metre tower surrounded by pebble-like sculptures.



A centre for art and culture

Ithra's exhibition programme caters to local as well as international audiences, and contemporary artworks are presented side by side with videos, informative materials, calligraphy, and antiquities. The museum boasts five galleries hosting permanent collections dedicated to contemporary Middle Eastern Art, Saudi culture, Islamic art, the natural history of the Arabian Peninsula, and an Archive gallery.

Throughout the year the centre runs a rich programme of temporary exhibitions which in 2023 included the inspirational 'Hijrah: in the Footsteps of the Prophet', an immersive experience recreating the Prophet Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina. This moving and inspiring exhibition is currently being shown in the National Museum in Riyadh until 30 December 2023. The centre also created the annual Ithra Art Prize to fund, promote, and help launch Saudi and Saudi-based artists' careers in the arts.



A centre for literature

One of the most spectacular features of Ithra is the large library sprawling across multiple floors and hosting more than 326,000 books for all ages. One of the largest public libraries in the region, it was designed to foster individual and collaborative learning, with the mission of nurturing a love of reading and the pursuit of knowledge among the Saudi population.

Besides the library, Ithra also offers a Literature and Creative Writing programme, exploring all types of writing, from classical, contemporary and experimental poetry projects, to novels and short stories, with specific grants to support poetry, a cornerstone of Arab culture.



A centre for forward-thinking

Encouraging new ideas is also a core function of the institution and it has developed a hands-on programme called the "Idea Lab" which offers classes to grow the creative community and foster innovation in the Kingdom. With access to the lab, creatives are supported throughout the design process all the way to completion a revolutionary approach that will allow the creation of sustainable projects and truly innovative products ready to be launched on the market.

Another programme offered by the library is Tanween, which focuses on one creative concept per year and aims to jumpstart the local creative scene following closely the Kingdom's Vision 2030 reform plans.



A centre for art performances

The centre also hosts a magnificent auditorium where a wide range of events from opera, symphony concerts, musicals and lectures are performed and held, as well as a large exhibition hall.

The programme includes cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary productions, such as The Cuban-Khaleeji Project, an ensemble that explores the music of Afro-Latin and Arabian Gulf traditions, sounds, and rhythms. Past performances have included Japan's Shizuoka Performing Arts Center and renowned oud player, Naseer Shamma and his orchestra.

The idea here is to develop Saudi's performing arts industry, reiterating Saudi social and cultural values, but also moving beyond them. This is definitely the go-to place for local actors, directors, and script-writers to learn and hone their craft.



What to do when you're there

There are an array of activities available beyond Ithra itself, in Dharan, nearby Al Khobar and Dammam. South of Al Khobar lay many spas and hotels, while the city centre offers the choice between many restaurants and cafés with Saudi, Italian and Japanese fare.

Don't miss the Al Khobar Corniche. Facing the gulf, it is well-visited by joggers and locals out on a stroll. You will also see families visiting the Scitech Technology Center, located on the waterfront, which has entertaining and informative exhibits. When it comes to museums, head to the Taybeen Museum for voyage through the golden era of Saudi – it has more than 10,000 artefacts from the country's recent past on display. Finally, an array of private companies offer various tours of Dammam and trips to explore the area's natural and historical heritage, including Al-Ahsa Village, Al-Qara Hill, and the Jawatha Mosque.



Practical Information





Visas



Getting there & around



Local customs



Weather



FAQ

Is English spoken in Saudi?



What's the currency of Saudi?



What's it like travelling in Saudi as a female?



What's the time difference in Saudi?



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