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Kuwait

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Introduction

Kuwait, at the crossroads of the Arabian Peninsula and the headwaters of the Persian Gulf, is a nation that pulses with historical depth, modern vibrancy, and a distinctive sense of place. Often evoked as both the beating heart of the Gulf and the pioneer of contemporary Arab culture, Kuwait's legacy transcends its modest physical size. This book, "Kuwait: Portrait of a Country," seeks to offer an expansive portrait of this fascinating land—a convergence of old and new, tradition and transformation.

From its humble origins as a settlement of clans and traders in the eighteenth century to its emergence as a modern oil-rich state, Kuwait's journey illuminates the story not just of a country, but of an evolving people. Its ascent from a pearling and trading outpost to one of the world's most urbanized and prosperous city-states is a tale marked by resilience, ambition, and adaptability in the face of economic, political, and environmental challenges. Throughout its history, periods of hardship—whether arising from external threats or internal upheavals—have shaped a national character grounded in pragmatism and unity.

Yet, Kuwait is much more than its storied past and abundant resources. This is a society with deep-rooted traditions: the warmth of the *diwāniyyah*, the resonance of Bedouin poetry, and the rhythm of seafaring songs still echo through modern life. At the same time, Kuwait's pioneering spirit has made it a trendsetter in Gulf arts, theatre, and media, earning it a unique cultural stature in the region. These dualities—of heritage and innovation, conservatism and cosmopolitanism—coexist in daily life, visible in its families, neighborhoods, and vibrant public spaces.

The country's demographic tapestry is as intricate as its culture. A significant proportion of Kuwait's residents are expatriates, creating a uniquely international society where diverse cultures intersect yet are met with local customs and values. This openness, while central to Kuwait's economic and social dynamism, also poses questions of identity and integration—issues that lie at the heart of contemporary Kuwaiti discourse.

Against a backdrop of regional challenges, economic cycles, and fast-moving global trends, Kuwait today is actively charting a course for the future. Its Vision 2035 aims to balance the prosperity derived from oil with the need for innovation, sustainability, and a diversified economy—objectives that speak both to national aspirations and to the wider challenges facing the Gulf states.

This book is crafted for a broad readership. Whether you are a scholar, traveler, investor, or simply curious about Kuwait and its people, these chapters invite you on a

journey: across sun-baked deserts and bustling souks, from the echoing halls of parliament to the vibrant world of Kuwaiti arts, and into the homes and hearts of its residents. In meeting Kuwait on its own terms, one discovers a country of depth, contrast, and lasting significance—one whose story is still being written.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Lay of the Land

Nestled at the northern reaches of the Arabian Peninsula, where the arid desert plains meet the azure waters of the Persian Gulf, lies the State of Kuwait. It's a country that, at first glance, might seem geographically modest, spanning approximately 17,818 to 17,820 square kilometers, making it slightly smaller than the U.S. state of New Jersey. Yet, within its seemingly understated dimensions, Kuwait holds a landscape shaped by ancient forces and modern ambitions.

The country's physical contours are largely defined by a flat to gently undulating desert plain. This expansive, sandy canvas is occasionally punctuated by shallow depressions and low hills, such as the Jal Al-Zor ridge, which reaches about 145 meters above sea level. The southern part of Kuwait maintains this general flatness, with the singular exception of Ahmadi Hill, rising to 137 meters. For centuries, this largely undifferentiated terrain served as an open transit area for nomadic tribes and caravans, a testament to its lack of significant natural barriers.

One of Kuwait's most distinguishing geographical features, however, is its intimate relationship with the sea. To its east, a coastline stretching approximately 290 kilometers unfurls along the Arabian Gulf. The coastline's most prominent indentation is Kuwait Bay, or Jun al Kuwayt, a sweeping 40-kilometer inlet that provides a natural, protected haven for the country's main port. This bay alone accounts for nearly one-third of Kuwait's entire shoreline and is considered a vital economic, environmental, and ecological asset. It serves as a crucial nursery ground for fish and shrimp larvae and is an important transit area for migratory birds.

Beyond the mainland, Kuwait's territory extends to ten islands. While many are uninhabited, two of these, Bubiyan and Warbah, hold significant strategic importance. Bubiyan, the largest of Kuwait's islands, sits at the northern tip of the Gulf, near the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and plays a critical role in controlling maritime access to Iraq's Umm Qasr Port. This strategic position has historically led to disputes, particularly with Iraq, over control of the islands. Today, Bubiyan is largely a designated nature reserve, crucial for migratory birds and biodiversity, with restricted public access. However, it is also the site of the ambitious Mubarak Al-Kabeer Port project, which is part of Kuwait's Vision 2035 to transform the country into a regional trade hub.

Among Kuwait's islands, only Failaka has a history of continuous habitation. Located about 20 kilometers off the coast of Kuwait City, Failaka has been a strategic location for millennia, settled by traders as early as 2000 BCE. Its history is rich with archaeological evidence, revealing a past as a hub for the Dilmun civilization, a

commercial station during the Parthian era, and even home to a Christian community from the 5th to the 9th centuries. Though its permanent population was expelled during the 1990 Iraqi invasion, the island remains a fascinating archaeological site, offering a tangible link to Kuwait's deep historical roots.

Kuwait's borders reflect a complex regional history. To the north and west, it shares a 240-kilometer land border with Iraq. While Iraq formally recognized Kuwait's independence and borders in 1963, based on earlier agreements, it continued to press for control over Bubiyan and Warbah islands for decades. To the south and southwest, Kuwait shares a 250-kilometer border with Saudi Arabia. This boundary was established by the Treaty of Al Uqayr in 1922, which also created a neutral zone that was later divided between the two nations in 1966. The Wadi al-Batin, an intermittent river, forms part of the border between Kuwait and Iraq, flowing in a northeast-southwest direction through the Al-Dibdibah plain. This ancient wadi, a relic of a once-flowing watercourse, is now a subtle gulley feature in the vast desert.

The country's geology is largely characterized by its desert environment, which contributes to its status as one of the most water-stressed countries globally. Kuwait has no permanent rivers within its territory, relying heavily on desalination for its freshwater supply. The history of desalination in Kuwait dates back to 1951, making it the first country in the world to utilize this technology for large-scale domestic use.

Despite its largely arid nature, Kuwait does possess diverse ecosystems. Mudflats, particularly around the southern coastal areas, are highly saline but productive, supporting a variety of plant and animal species and serving as vital transit areas for birds. The interior desert, while seemingly barren, supports perennial shrubs, annual grasses, and, in areas where rainfall collects, even attractive purple or blue flowers in season. These plant communities are essential for protecting the soil from erosion and providing food for both livestock and wild animals.

The interaction between land and sea creates a distinct coastal zone, which is a key focus for development and conservation in Kuwait. However, this area also faces challenges from urban expansion, industrial development, and the ongoing creation of artificial islands and harbors. The country's commitment to preserving its natural heritage is evident in its designation of protected areas, such as the Mubarak al-Kabeer Reserve on Bubiyan Island, a Ramsar site recognized for its international importance as a wetland and a crucial stopover for migrating birds.

The geographical realities of Kuwait, from its flat desert plains to its strategically important islands and its life-giving bay, have profoundly influenced its development. The scarcity of freshwater and the abundance of oil have shaped its economy and its relationships with its neighbors. Its position at the head of the Persian Gulf has made it a crossroads of trade and, at times, conflict. Understanding this foundational geography is key to comprehending the chapters of Kuwait's rich history, its vibrant

culture, and its ambitions for the future.

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