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Yemen

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Introduction

Yemen: Portrait of a Country aims to provide an in-depth, multifaceted exploration of Yemen—an ancient land marked by breathtaking natural beauty, profound historical significance, and a vibrant, yet often misunderstood culture. Yemen’s storied past and strategic location at the crossroads of Africa and Asia have long placed it at the center of pivotal historical, cultural, and geopolitical developments. Today, Yemen is mostly known to the world in the context of crisis and conflict, but its history stretches back millennia and is rich with dynasties, innovations, and legacies that influenced the wider Middle East and the world.

Nestled on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen boasts astonishingly diverse landscapes, from the Red Sea’s arid coastal plains and soaring western highlands, to the mystique of the Socotra archipelago. This diversity has shaped not only the environment but also the identities, livelihoods, and traditions of its people. Yemen’s society is strongly rooted in a blend of tribal structures, Islamic faith, and centuries-old customs, making it a truly unique corner of the Arab world.

The country’s historical trajectory is equally diverse and dynamic. Yemen has been a cradle of significant ancient kingdoms, a bustling crossroads of trade and exchange linking Africa, Asia, and Europe, and a mosaic of Islamic dynasties and foreign influences. Its twofold colonial experience under Ottoman and British rule, the later division into north and south, and the eventual promise of unity all left complex legacies still felt today. The interplay between history, culture, politics, and economy remains at the heart of Yemen’s contemporary challenges and aspirations.

In recent years, Yemen has drawn global attention primarily for its severe humanitarian crisis and the protracted civil war that has devastated lives, infrastructure, and prospects for peace. Yet, this hardship coexists with remarkable endurance and hope among ordinary Yemenis, whose warmth, hospitality, and creativity persevere against the odds. Understanding Yemen thus requires looking beyond the headlines—delving into its traditions, daily rhythms, and the profound connections Yemeni people have to their land and each other.

The following chapters are designed to provide a comprehensive portrait of Yemen. The book moves from natural geography and deep history, through the complexity of its society and economy, to the tumultuous present and possible futures. It also offers practical information and insight for travelers and those eager to learn more firsthand about this enduring—and, for many, enigmatic—country.

It is only by appreciating Yemen in all its historical depth, cultural richness, and

contemporary complexity that we can grasp not only the scale of its challenges but also the immense potential within its people and landscapes. Through this portrait, readers are invited to see Yemen as a land of resilience, tradition, and possibility—an essential and captivating part of the global mosaic.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land of Happy Arabia - Geography and Climate

Yemen, officially known as the Republic of Yemen, occupies a pivotal position in West Asia, specifically in the southern reaches of the Arabian Peninsula. Its strategic location at the southern gateway of the Red Sea has, for over 7,000 years, made it a significant nexus of civilizations and trade routes. Bordered by Saudi Arabia to the north, Oman to the northeast, and both the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden to the south, Yemen's diverse geography is further enhanced by an extensive coastline stretching approximately 2,000 kilometers (1,200 miles) along these crucial waterways. Including the islands of Perim and Socotra, Yemen sprawls across roughly 455,503 square kilometers (175,871 square miles), making it the second-largest country on the Arabian Peninsula.

Yemen's terrain is a fascinating patchwork, broadly categorized into five distinct regions. Imagine a journey from west to east: you'd start at the Tihāmah, a semi-desert coastal plain hugging the Red Sea. This low-lying area, varying from 8 kilometers to 65 kilometers in width, gradually gives way to a series of mountainous regions. First, the western highlands rise, followed by the central mountains, often referred to as the Yemen Highlands. Beyond these lie the eastern highlands, and finally, the vast eastern and northeastern desert regions. This dramatic elevation change is crowned by Jabal An-Nabi Shu'ayb, the highest peak not just in Yemen but across the entire Arabian Peninsula, reaching a majestic 3,666 meters (12,028 feet) above sea level.

Despite its significant landmass, Yemen is an arid country, a fact highlighted by the absence of permanent rivers. Instead, the highland regions are crisscrossed by wadis—river valleys that remain dry for much of the year, only occasionally bursting with water during periods of rainfall. This scarcity of perennial water sources profoundly shapes the landscape and human settlement patterns. The country experiences three primary climatic zones: desert, mountain, and coastal, each offering its own unique set of conditions.

The mountain regions, generally, enjoy a rather pleasant and mild climate throughout the year. Temperatures here are typically quite comfortable, hovering between 25-30°C (77-86°F) in the summer months. When winter rolls around, the mercury drops to a cooler but still agreeable 5-10°C (41-50°F). What makes these highlands truly distinct, however, are the monsoons, which visit twice a year, usually in March-April and again in August-September, bringing much-needed rainfall to these elevated areas. These seasonal rains are crucial for agriculture in the highlands.

Shifting dramatically eastward, we encounter the vast eastern desert, an extension of the formidable Rub' al-Khali, famously known as the "Empty Quarter." This region lives up to its name, characterized by its extremely low rainfall and high temperatures, often exceeding 50°C (122°F) during the day. The aridity here is largely due to the lower altitudes and its distance from the monsoon patterns that affect other parts of Yemen. It's a landscape of vast sand dunes, some reaching towering heights, and extensive salt flats. Despite its current desolation, geological studies suggest that the Rub' al-Khali was once a much wetter place, even home to a large lake system some 8,000 years ago during a period known as "Green Arabia," which supported grasslands and facilitated human migration.

The coastal plains, including the Tihāmah along the Red Sea and areas bordering the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea, experience a tropical climate. Here, temperatures can soar, occasionally exceeding 54°C (129.2°F), accompanied by high humidity levels ranging from 50 to 70 percent. Rainfall in these coastal areas is sparse and irregular, often occurring as heavy, short torrents, with annual averages around 130 millimeters (5.12 inches). In contrast to the highlands, the coastal regions typically receive most of their limited rainfall during the winter months, from December to March. This difference in rainfall patterns across Yemen underscores the country's striking climatic diversity, a direct consequence of its varied topography and position.

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