

A photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, there is a stone-lined water channel with some green grass growing between the rocks. The background features several tall palm trees and a sandy dune under a clear sky. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

EMERGING ADVENTURES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*Something intriguing is happening in the Middle East, with a new project set to develop a futuristic city and adventure destination completely from scratch. **Neil Irwin** heads to Saudi Arabia to discover what the future holds...*



PHOTO: Neil Irwin



HEADING OFF PISTE



WHO'S WRITING?



NEIL IRWIN is an outdoor and adventure photographer and writer based in London. With a passion for the outdoors, he is always looking for new stories, journeys and adventures to capture and document, no matter how hard they are to capture or how dirty he has to get.

Follow him on Instagram at @neil_irwin.



What do you think of when you hear Saudi Arabia? Lawrence of Arabia? Mecca? Deserts and camels, perhaps? Or maybe having one of the largest oil reserves in the world? What if I told you that by 2030, Saudi Arabia intends to have a brand new international eco-city being built, entirely from scratch, that'll be a new hub for tourists, businesses and technologies alike. You may be as surprised as I was when I first heard about it. But it's true. Work is already currently under way to make this ambitious idea a reality. The intention - to be a place where the only thing stopping you "is your imagination".

Saudi Arabia is probably the last place I would have thought that an idea like this would have been conceived and even built. Grand intentions such as this I can only akin to places such as Dubai, where the Burj Khalifa stands as high as the designers' imagination. But this is a completely different realm. A city that is intended to be apparently four times the size of Dubai. Something that is very difficult to comprehend, especially with the notion of it all to be built within the next 10 years.

The new city is being called NEOM, a hybrid name of ancient Greek and Arabic origin meaning 'New Future', and is set to be a place unlike any other. The idea is to create a new eco-city from scratch in the north-western



EXPLORING ANCIENT DWELLINGS

PHOTO: Neil Irwin



LOOKING ACROSS TO THE RED SEA

PHOTO: Neil Irwin



DISCOVERING A DESERT OASIS

PHOTO: Neil Irwin



CLIMBERS SHOW THEIR SKILL

reaches of Saudi Arabia in the Tabuk region. With the area consisting of 290 miles of coastline, including coral reefs and beaches, as well as mountains reaching heights of up to 2,500m, it has a potential for a lot more than just walks along the beach. The reason for this region being used is not only for the more climatic temperatures and conditions, but also for the city to be able to harness the use of the seawater for drinking and food production. NEOM will also be a multi-country project, with territory from both Egypt and Jordan being used to help build the city, along with a brand new link between Africa and Asia with a bridge proposed to link the two continents.

Learning more about the NEOM's intentions, it all sounded very interesting. As someone who's always keen to hear more about sustainability and technological growth, it was welcoming to hear what the city intends to incorporate into its development. The idea is to bring together great minds from many different sectors to help drive and push forward investment, technological innovation and growth, as well as making the city a desirable location for people from all over the world to travel or move to.

It does seem that the city is in a prime location, with ample sunlight and a vast amount of water close by. For instance, the energy supply for the city will be powered by fields of solar panels and wind turbines, which is achiev-

able thanks to the many hours of daylight and a decent on-shore breeze that comes off the Red Sea. Drinking water will be desalinated from the sea, while arid and seawater farming will be supplemented by green houses for growing crops and other types of food.

The makers' ambition does not just stop there. NEOM is intended to become a hub for manufacturing, with the notion to innovate and test new systems from scratch, just as the city itself is being built from scratch. Beyond that, the people behind NEOM also want it to be "the healthiest place in the world that focuses on proactive prevention and defining world-class treatment of diseases", with the help of stem cell research, nanobiology and bioengineering. This is no small undertaking, that's for sure.

But why is NEOM of interest to the international adventurous traveller? Having never experienced the Middle East first-hand, and with preconceived ideas of camels roaming around and scorching weather, I was intrigued to hear what lay in store. So, when I was presented with the opportunity to head out to Saudi Arabia do just that, I jumped at the chance. I was to be one among a small group of journalists invited to the NEOM launch event, which was to be taking part one evening in April.

Of course, Saudi Arabia is a long way to go for just one event in the evening, so we also took the opportunity to explore the country's north-western reaches to see ex- ▶





PHOTO: Scott Paterson



PHOTOS: Neil Irwin

WALKING THROUGH SAUDI ARABIA'S RUGGED CANYONS

actly what adventure-seekers have to work with on any future trips. Although NEOM will undoubtedly be looking into the future, the people behind the project don't want to ignore all that has gone before, with the nearby geological and cultural sites of utmost importance.

Exploring some of the area's ancient dwellings, which date back approximately 5,000 years, was an incredible and fascinating experience. Getting up close and personal to these dwellings, which were built intricately into the side of the rock, my thoughts were of intrigue and interest as to how the people lived within the region. To our surprise, our guide also revealed that the area is of significant religious importance due to the fact that the Prophet Mohammed is said to have lived in the area.

Heading towards the launch event, we travelled through a parched, rugged landscape with mountaintops stretching ever skyward in the dis-

tance and smaller peaks crowding around us. In each and every direction we were treated to shades of red and

“ WE TRAVELLED THROUGH A PARCHED, RUGGED LANDSCAPE WITH MOUNTAINTOPS STRETCHING EVER SKYWARD IN THE DISTANCE AND SMALLER PEAKS CROWDING AROUND US. ”

green, with the composition of iron and copper clear for all to see. The area may seem mundane at first, but scratch the surface and you'll be surprised how much lies underneath. At one point, we came across a natural spring pushing up drinkable water from underground. It was literally an oasis in the middle of the sun-dried landscape, with trees and bushes sprouting up, breaking up the sandy, desolate terrain that surrounded us.

The launch event itself was the first of its kind. There will be others following in the coming months to showcase other sectors that NEOM will offer, but this one in particular aimed at the adventure sports scene. It brought together not only Saudi royalty and

officials, but also athletes from various countries to help show that the intention is to be a multi-national affair. At



ENJOYING ARAB HOSPITALITY

PHOTO: Neil Irwin



THE RED SEA MEETS THE SAUDI COASTLINE

PHOTO: Neil Irwin



CLIMBERS IN FULL SWING AT THE NEOM LAUNCH EVENT



MEETING THE LOCAL WILDLIFE

PHOTO: Neil Irwin

the launch, there was an undeniable buzz of excitement, not only for the event itself, but for what is to come in the near future. Everyone that I spoke to thought that this new venture would be an ambitious and amazing project for the region.

If the idea for the launch was to make an impact, it certainly achieved its remit. For the first time ever on Saudi Arabian soil, we bore witness to an incredible display of BASE jumping and wing suit flying. In addition to that, the event also brought in pro climber Read Macadam and his team to set up new routes, plus names such as Neil Gresham and Juliane Wurm to climb them, showing that there is much more to offer than just the preconceived idea of deserts and camels.

I must admit, when I think of Saudi Arabia, BASE jumping and climbing are not immediate connections I'd make. Instead I would most likely associate these kinds of sports to the Alps or the States where you can think of some big walls and jumps. So to hear that the city would like to bring in such types of sports, and more, was quite refreshing. From a personal perspective, I feel it'd be quite an achievement to say that I'd summited some of Saudi's biggest peaks, or climbed some of its biggest walls, to then see the reaction on the faces of the people I'm talking to. Simply talking about this very prospect to Read Macadam was enough to get me fired up, and to see his reaction

while talking about it told me that that there is so much potential in the region; certainly more than meets the eye.

As the Tabuk region is the only province that has a good amount of snowfall each year, the peaks here are ultimately more tempting to the international mountaineer, while the clear waters along the coast should entice scuba divers and snorkelers alike. With the new and upcoming climbing scene, which is taking off thanks to the newly founded Saudi Climbing Federation, adventure is set to be on a new path within the country, with increasingly more numbers interested and the sport becoming more accessible, which is enhanced by the new routes being scouted and climbed.

The city is still a long way off from being completed, but it appears as though intentions are heading in the right direction. Dubai and other cities in the Middle East best be wary, as it looks as though there's a new kid on the block for adventure tourism. Watch this space. **AI**

FIND OUT MORE

For more information about NEOM and the project's ambitious plans for the future, head over to the office website (www.neom.com).