20 km north from Riyadh, Diriyah is considered to be one of the historically most important cities that flourished in the beginning of the 18th century. It used to be the biggest city on the Arabian peninsula with inhabitants coming from Hijaz, Iraq, the Levant, Oman and Yemen. Surrounded by fertile areas and easy access to water, it enjoyed long lasting trading relationships with the surrounding cities. Most significant is an event that changed the fate of the region: in 1744 Imam Mohamed bin Saud (Emir of Diriyah) and the religious reformer Imam Mohamed bin Abdul Wahab struck an agreement of mutual support and loyalty - that up to now is the base of today’s Kingdom. Less than a hundred years later Diriyah was destroyed and burnt by Ibrahim Pasha and his Turco-Egyptian army in 1818 and the empty ruins were left abandoned.

Diriyah since 2001
On my first visit to the National Museum in Riyadh in 2001, I learned about Diriyah, especially about the Turaif Quarter: Some historical facts and figures came together with an amazing aerial photograph that made me decide to visit Turaif. Next to the mosque, in the Bujerai quarter I walked over a bridge, crossing the Wadi Hanifah (a valley) and carried on to the top of a hill. Only few visitors could be met and it took me several hours of walking, along narrow sandy streets, passing eleven mud palaces, to finally arrive atop. At the time only the two-stored Saad Bin Saud Palace were renovated. However in 2013, I was able to admire the architecture of bath, mosques and hundreds of ruins of mud buildings on sandstone fundaments up to the horizon, surrounded by a partly renovated city wall with small watchtowers. The ceilings of the houses were made of tamarisk- or aithl-wood and palm material, many in surprisingly good condition. Most walls of the palaces are designed with fine geometrical patterns. Additionally Turaif comprises the biggest number and most important buildings in the area, for that reason Diriyah became an UNESCO heritage site. Since 2015 the area is closed for renovation, nevertheless the Diriyah Historical Development Program runs an excellent showroom nearby. In 2017 it was already possible to see renovated areas in Turaif from the outlook in Bujerai.

Turaif: Palaces turn into museums
Turaif will be a cultural hub and a huge open-air museum in line with the archaeological and historical meaning of Diriyah. Apart from an impressive visitor center there will be two documentation centers – one for the restauration works and one about the locations history. Most importantly the Imam Mohammed Bin Saud Grand Mosque will be renovated. Five new museums will be established in palaces and the neighboring mud houses: Salwa Palace will be the home of Diriyah Museum showing the fate of the First Saudi State. The facade of Salwa Palace will be one of the areas for multimedia shows; two more will be established on the facades of Faisal Tower and on the opposite side of the city wall. The Omar bin Saud Palace will be home to the Social Life Museum, Therniyah bin Saud Palace will house the Military Museum and a Trade and Treasury Museum, as well as a market for locally produced handicraft items. In the mud buildings adjacent to Imam Abdullah bin Saud Palace, visitors will find the Arabian Horse Museum featuring a real Asil Arabian Stud.

BARBARA SCHUMACHER has published as a renowned travel journalist more than 600 articles about the Arab world.

DISCOVER DIRIYAH
A mud “ghost city” became UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2010 and one of the most ambitious restauration projects of the Saudi Commission for Culture and Heritage (SCTH): Diriyah, capital of the First Saudi State from 1744-1818.

Historical capital: The Turaif district in Diriyah was the original home of the Saudi royal dynasty.

Bujeirī - Cultural gateway to Diriyah
The Diriyah Historical Development Program not only includes Turaif (south from Wadi Hanifi), but also Bujeirī on the opposite side of the wadi. “Bujeiri is considered to be the first university in Najd area, from which many generations of the Wahabi movement scholars graduated”, says an SCTH spokesman. “The new Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdul Wahab Foundation will be an academic institution concerned with the Sheikh’s scholarly and intellectual heritage, his school of thought and the Da’wah (mission) faith studies. The mud building of Atthowaihi Mosque will be restored in the traditional way, this project is supported by H.R.H. Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, the president of SCTH”. Visitors enjoy parking facilities, a park and a central square with access to shops and restaurants and they will hopefully enjoy “the glorious past and the bright future” of Diriyah soon. Originally the opening was planned for end of 2017, but has yet to be confirmed officially.

Photos: Barbara Schumacher (3)