

THE OLD CITY OF YANBU SET FOR RESTORATION

YANBU IS PROBABLY MORE WELL-KNOWN FOR ITS ULTRA-MODERN INDUSTRIAL CITY. HOWEVER, THE NEARBY OLD CITY IS RICH IN HERITAGE AND ARCHITECTURE. BARBARA SCHUMACHER EXPLORED THE AREA'S DELIGHTS.

Thanks to the efforts of the Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu (RCJY), both cities under its jurisdiction are like sisters, receive a lot of attention from the government and look similar even though they are far apart from each other.

Jubail is located in the Eastern Province facing the Arabian Gulf and Yanbu, the "smaller sister", is located in Madinah Province facing the Red Sea. Both receive government support in terms of industrial and residential investments and have impressive industrial cities with ports and green residential areas.

However, there is one difference in that only Yanbu has an old city, in Yanbu Al Bahar, and there is a plan to restore it. In fact, Yanbu consists of three major and completely different parts.


Alongside Yanbu Al Bahar at the coast of the Red Sea lies Yanbu Al Nakhal, a farm area located about 45 km inland, while Yanbu Industrial City is situated in the south and houses the headquarters of the Royal Commission. The latter is a paradise-like residential area with green parks full of palm trees and flowers due to a sophisticated irrigation system.

Musaad Y. Al Sulaim, the Yanbu Governor, said he is proud of the new developments for the city's future and believed industry not only plays an important role, but also culture and tourism.

He said: "Yanbu's history dates back more than 2,500 years; its importance comes from the fact it was a station on the spice and incense route from Yemen to Egypt."

HRH Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz, the President of SCTH, has decided to preserve Yanbu, partly because of the fact that the late King Abdulaziz and King Farouk of Egypt met here around seven decades ago. The area is also registered as an archaeological site with the commission. The Yanbu restoration project is being carried out by SCTH in collaboration with the Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu, Yanbu municipality, private companies such as SABIC and Saudi Aramco, and local community associations.

Al Sulaim said 18 new hotels would be built in the city, among them a heritage hotel near the Corniche.

He says, "It will be greener with easy access to the seaport, | 



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PROJECTS TO REVITALIZE YANBU AL-BAHAR

- Completed restoration of the old Al Zawya Mosque
- Redevelopment of the Yanbu historic seaport and its waterfront
- Refurbishment of Al Bateen House Museum
- Ongoing restoration of Jabati House Museum
- Tender underway to restore the Al Shona historic warehouse
- Historical houses and buildings such as Al-Khateeb House to be redeveloped
- Historical castles such as Madsous Castle to be restored
- Redevelopment of historical villages and markets such as Souq Al-Lail
- 18 new hotels

Source: SCTH/Yanbu Governorate

A BRIEF HISTORY OF YANBU

- Its name means "springs", due to the many springs in the area
- The city lies on the old trade route from Yemen to the Levant
- It was the location of many battles fought during pre-Islamic times involving the Prophet Muhammad
- During WWI it was used as a military base

Source: SCTH/Yanbu Governorate



IMAGE: BARBARA SCHUMACHER 03



IMAGE: FAYSAL RIFA'I 04



IMAGE: BARBARA SCHUMACHER 05

because we receive passengers from Egypt (Safaga) and Sudan (Port Sudan)."

Speaking in his office, whose walls are covered with large photographs of the old city of Yanbu, he adds: "Yes, you will see the old city with abandoned old and renovated houses and some new developments".

SCTH's Vice-President for Support Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Sheikh, who also heads the SCTH committee for Yanbu tourism development, added that the old city is an obvious candidate to become a top tourist destination due to its location by the Red Sea and its rich cultural heritage.

"This is why it has gained the attention of the government, especially the old historical Al-Sour district," he said.

"SCTH has reformed and rehabilitated many parts of the city such as the sea front, historic street, the historic buildings by preserving their heights, wooden dormers and the beautiful architectural art."

Discussing other reasons why old Yanbu has so much potential, Al-Sheikh pointed to its location near the holy city of Madinah and its abundance of historical buildings and archaeological sites such as The Oven and Al-Zaytiya

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building. There are also old castles such as the Madsous Castle, historical villages and markets including Souq Al-Lail, Al-Sewa and Sewaqah, and famous

houses like Al-Khateeb House. All of these buildings as well as the iconic seafront and port area are being redeveloped as part of an extensive SR40 million scheme, which also aims to attract more investment to the city. He said tourists should aim to visit Yanbu by July to witness the difference the redevelopments have made to the area.

When asked how much tourism could be worth to Yanbu in the future, he replied it would be hard to quantify.

"It will depend mainly on the volume of demand that will be stimulated as a result of the projects SCTH and its partners are undertaking currently in the city and the areas surrounding it," he said.

"But generally speaking we expect that Yanbu will become a major tourism destination that may be as important as the current destinations in the Kingdom such as Jeddah, Asir and the Eastern Province."

Part of SCTH's strategy to attract tourists would be to encourage Umrah and Hajj pilgrims to stay a few days in the

city and explore its sights, said Al-Sheikh.

He expressed appreciation to Prince Sultan bin Salman and Madinah Governor HRH Prince Faisal bin Salman bin Abdulaziz for their vision in turning Yanbu into a major tourism hub, and said the project's ongoing success was also down to the support of the Yanbu governor and the private sector partners.

Our guide for the old city is Yousef A. Wuhaib from the Tourism Development Committee in Yanbu.

He said, "We organize around 14 cultural festivals yearly with music, dance, handicrafts and traditional food in Yanbu; they take place around the old city's mosque and the nearby renovated heritage souk. The mosque was donated by the Libyan King Senussi, marks the beginning of the old city and faces the front of old buildings – most of them in need of redevelopment – but you can still admire the architecture and the former beauty of the wooden doors, windows and balconies. You find about 100 abandoned houses in the old city; they are between 120 and 150 years old. The former inhabitants left around 35 years ago."

Ahmed Eid joins us, wearing an outlandish costume. He says the beauty of the buildings inspires him to recite poetry.

"I show up here for the entertainment of our visitors," he says. "I was born in Yanbu and before retiring I had been a teacher and fisherman and know the old city and the old Al Jar port very well. This port is older than the one in Jeddah and up to today you might find some antique pieces there. The old houses were built of stones from the mountains; the wood for the balconies came from India, all hand carved by local craftsmen."

Of course, Ahmed Eid knows the names of the former owners of the old houses. "There is an agreement between the government and the owners in that the government is the owner now, invests SR20 million to renovate the houses for 20 years and after that it will give them back to the owners. In November 2014 Prince Sultan bin Salman visited the location."

From the mosque we continue to the most impressive building of the old city where restoration has been finished. The white representative building has wonderful hand carved wooden balconies.

Wuhaib says, "This is Babteen house, the future museum managed by SCTH. It houses SCTH's Yanbu Antiquities Office as well. There is a second

DESTINATION

famous house almost as big as this one; it is called Jabati house and this is still under restoration.”

While walking through the narrow streets and looking around, another wonderful old city only 350 km south of Yanbu comes to my mind – Al Balad, the old city of Jeddah, which recently acquired the status of being named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

On the way to the heritage souk we meet Mohammed, an old man who warmly welcomes visitors. He was born in the old city and sells handicraft and household goods in his little shop. The location of the original souk with small stalls and traditional wooden doors that can be locked individually has not changed but is currently being cleaned

for an upcoming festival.

“Among many attractions you can see here are the local ladies selling their handicrafts – a very colourful event in an unforgettable atmosphere”, Yousef says while guiding us to the future heritage hotel. Although the white, one-story building that incorporates a traditional style around an inner courtyard is still under construction, we are able to sneak a quick look to form a real impression and admire the architecture.

From the first floor there is a nice view over the neighbouring old houses and narrow streets to the east and the new port tower to the west – our next destination. From the top of the tower the 360 degree view is splendid. To the north we saw the Corniche that features

the yacht and fishing harbour, while to the south some ships have docked at the commercial port. The pink building of the Passenger Terminal is brand new – some tugboats are anchored and in front of us we see the old city and new buildings under construction.

There are also hotels from the well-known international chains and restaurants in the city. A unique place is the Al Ahlam Marina Restaurant, a short drive along the Corniche and Yanbu Sharm Road to the north. Here you can try the catch of the day – fresh fish from the Red Sea – and choose your yacht for an afternoon trip. Ahmed Eid points to one of the fishing boats: “May I invite you for a fishing trip on my boat?” We politely tell him, next time! ■

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