



A Local's Guide to AlUla

Explore the world's largest living museum through the lens of a true native, **Abdulaziz Albalawi**, better know as Aziz AlUla

— TEXT
Smitha Sadanandan

— PHOTOS
Abdulaziz Albalawi

If there's anyone who can curate an AlUla itinerary that steers clear of conventional to-dos and must-sees, it's Abdulaziz Albalawi. A photographer, content creator, and filmmaker, Abdulaziz – better known by his Instagram handle Aziz AlUla – is famous for capturing the raw beauty and storied landscape of the region, his lens unveiling a world beyond the ordinary. The distinct visual perspective he brings to his work – allowing him to capture soul-stirring images that transcend the predictable – is because he is a true native son of this ancient land.

AN IDENTITY SHAPED BY THE DESERT

“I’ve lived in AlUla my whole life. My family are Bedouin nomads from the desert here,” explains Abdulaziz, who enjoys being close to nature. Growing up in the desert has moulded his views, defining the person he has become today. Abdulaziz recognises the difference between learning about its heritage and history through books and experiencing it firsthand. Living in the desert isn’t just his reality; it’s a journey that intertwines with the rich tapestry of AlUla’s culture. “AlUla is where I have always drawn my inspiration from,” he adds.

A VISION BEYOND TOURISM

Although Abdulaziz feels his identity is deeply rooted in the history of the region, he is at the same time inspired by its future. AlUla isn’t merely a tourist destination; it’s much more, notes the artist and influencer. It’s a profound vision – an opportunity to show the world a history and heritage like no other, aligned with the “leadership of HRH Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman,” he explains.

A REGION OF HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

AlUla, for this native, stands as one of the Kingdom’s “heritage jewels, its history older than what the world thinks.” While many marvel at the achievements and works of the Nabataeans in Hegra or the rock art of the Lihyanites in Jabal Ikmah, AlUla predates them all.

In fact, just last week, the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) announced a new archaeological discovery – a hand axe dating back over 200,000 years, unearthed at the Qurh site. The remarkable find was discovered by an international team of archaeologists working with the RCU, established by royal decree in July 2017 to preserve and develop this region of “outstanding natural and cultural significance in north-west Saudi Arabia.”

Discoveries such as this, Abdulaziz believes, play a pivotal role in bridging the gaps in the history of human civilisation. And hopefully, further scientific research will reveal “more details about the origins and function of these objects and the people who made them hundreds of thousands of years ago,” he says.

AlUla is not merely significant for the region; its historical importance extends globally, points out the photographer. “Probably the size of Belgium, every corner of AlUla has a piece of history. Take Qurh, for instance, a site with historical significance from the early Islamic periods. It stands as one of the Arabian Peninsula’s crucial urban locales, concealing a wealth of secrets and historical treasures.”

To Abdulaziz, the history of AlUla is part and parcel of the identity of its residents, shaping not just culture but lifestyle. “If Brazilians breath football, we breath history. It has a big impact on us,” he says.

IMMERSING YOURSELF IN HISTORY AND CULTURE

With all its rich history and diverse terrain, it can be overwhelming for newcomers attempting to navigate AlUla. According to Abdulaziz, “the best way to experience these sites is with rawi, local storytellers. You can book a tour with them through AlUla’s official website.”

If you prefer following your own itinerary, the photographer suggests starting with the enigmatic stone structures of AlUla that are adorned with “horns and skull fragments, suggesting rituals were performed at these stone structures in north-western Saudi more than 7,000 years ago.”

He also recommends visiting Al Joud Farm and Tomoor AlUla. For photography enthusiasts, he suggests heading to the King Abdulaziz Park for sunset views, and the AlUla fort where scenic views and great photography opportunities are guaranteed.

PHOTOGRAPHY TOURS ON HORSEBACK

Whether you’re into a concise one-hour tour or an extended three-hour session, photography tours kick off at Dadan, taking you through the oasis and into the desert through the valleys, all the way to Elephant Rock. These tours not only promise scenic beauty but also support local horsemen. Opting for such tours allows you to give back to local communities.

“These tours also allow visitors to learn about Arabian horses and the history of horses in the region in general. And, of course, at the end of each tour, you get to take incredible pictures and a short video of your experience,” explains Abdulaziz, who also offers photography tours with horses and camels.

Meandering through the region on horses is an excellent way to familiarise yourself with the terrain. Hidden trails and nature-friendly spots for hikers and more adventurous visitors can be found by Dadan Oasis, Nabataean Oasis, and Gharameel. If you’re not keen on the usual activities at tourist destinations, such as stargazing and camping under the desert night sky, then gear up for a volcano, sand dune, or valley tour.





THE TASTES OF ALULA

A delicious way to spend your time in the region would be to indulge in traditional cuisine. “Tomoor AlUla for Saudi coffee and local hessa (a traditional dish made with dates) is a great way to scope out the food scene,” says Abdulaziz.

When it comes to his favourite dining spots, he lists places like Shawarma Khayal and Yemeni Taste. However, for true Saudi hospitality, Tomoor AlUla holds a special place in his recommendations, as well as the heritage spot, Almathaq Restaurant. “Just head to the city centre, south of the Old Town, and you’ll find a host of local eateries.”

THE LOCAL ART AND CREATIVE SCENE

With the emergence of Arts AlUla and other major events hosted in the region, AlUla’s art scene has undergone a remarkable transformation and is today thriving. Art installations and music festivals draw in large crowds, such as Madrasat Addeera, standing as a cultural hub where you get to meet a multitude of talented local artists.

“It’s worth taking time out to visit the artisans,” says Abdulaziz. For a glimpse of AlUla’s local markets and daily life, make your way to the city centre. “I encourage people to engage with the locals; they are truly welcoming. Just make sure to always ask for permission before taking pictures of private properties such as homes on farms, and of course, respect nature,” he says.

Ultimately, whatever you choose to do in AlUla, the talented photographer has one piece of advice: “Enjoy the journey, for AlUla is awaiting your visit with open hearts and open arms. We look forward to welcoming you all and share our beloved homeland with you.” 🌄

