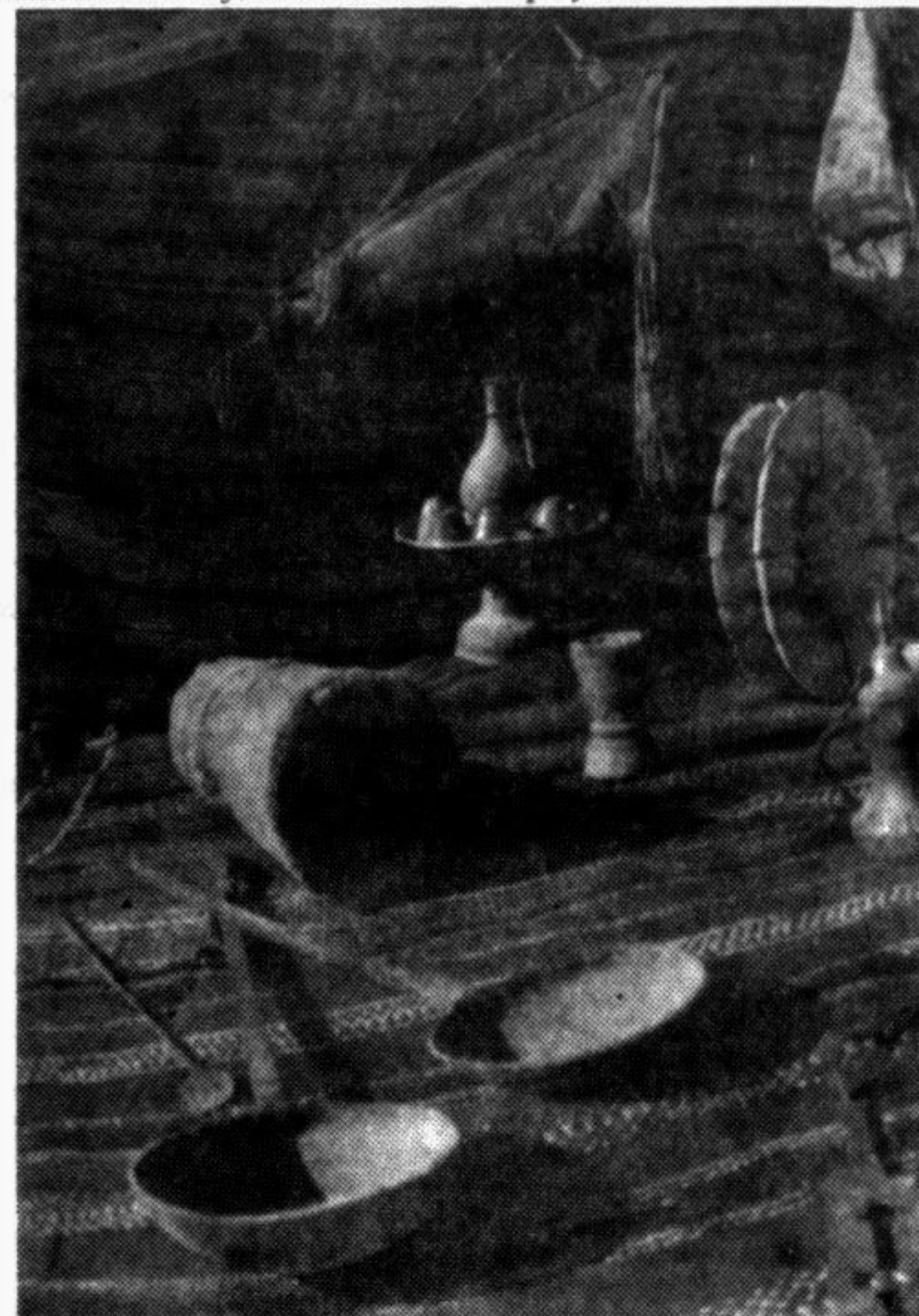




Najran: The Desert Garden of Saudi Arabia

THE world holds infinite riches for the seasoned traveller. But who can really say what the beauty of a place really is? The colour of the earth, the scent of the air, the pleasing lines of architecture, the zest and rhythm of people, music, food, spice, even light itself?

All might be part of the answer, yet perceived beauty is often linked to the mood of the observer. Despite this, there are a mere handful of places of such subtle and timeless beauty, that all trav-



Najrani handicrafts - Saudia

ellers respond with hushed awe.

Such a place is Najran, a region of serene and intimate loveliness, flourishing like a leafy fringe at the edge of Saudi Arabia's Empty Quarter, the Rub Al Khali Desert. Najran presents the charm of a uniquely refreshing world, with cool breezes and delightful scenery inviting the visitor to enter this beautiful desert oasis.

Travelling west from the airport, one enters Faysalia, a small, neat modern town of wide streets and beautiful villas, schools and govern-

ment buildings — all stylish examples of contemporary Arabian architecture.

Continuing west towards the imposing splendour of the mountains in the distance, and passing green, well-tended gardens one comes to the old town of Najran — Abu Seoud — rich in history and traditions, with its towering clay architecture and sprawling, vibrant souk.

Here local artisans still display and sell their wares,

reference to the fact that, for centuries, Najran was an oasis welcoming thirsty travellers?

Najran is also mentioned in "The Dictionary of Towns", a famous book by the Arab geographer Yaquut Al-Hamawi (1178-1229 AD). He says the town was named to honour Najran Ibn Zaydan Ibn Saba Ibn Yashub Ibn Qahtan, the first man to settle in the area.

There is no certain answer to this, nor to another question: is ancient Najran, in Arabic poetry and in the accounts of great travellers, the same place that one finds today?

We do know that Najran is the name of both a region and a town in southwestern Saudi Arabia. It is also the name of a wadi — a dry river bed which flows during the rains.

The Najran region is bordered by the vast Rub Al-Khali desert in the east and the mountainous Asir region in the west. The Najran region, with all its towns and villages, forms one of the basic administrative divisions of the Kingdom.

The renowned fertility and beauty of the town of Najran are based on its geographical setting — it is intersected by three wadis, river beds with rich earth lining their banks.

The Najran wadi has its source in the cliffs of the western mountains and runs southeast through the town before being swallowed in the sands of the Rub Al-Khali. It is this wadi which provides a mild climate and a serene environment for its inhabitants.

Towns and villages surrounded by dense groves of palms, lush gardens and fields have developed on the banks of the Najran wadi. The houses, hidden in the cool foliage, are built from beige clay, blending with the surrounding mountains.

The Najran is bordered on the north, south and west by rugged granite mountains. The southern range, called Najran's Ridge, is the most elevated and at its highest point — Mount Abu Hamadane — rises to some 1,450 metres.

Scenes of great natural beauty abound in the mountainous areas. One of these is

the Abi Rachache wadi in the northwest of Al Faysalia. The waters which feed it cascade down a rocky mountain before ending in a lake encircled by fruit trees.

In the same area can be found Al Madhiq ("the crevice") which as its name suggests is a narrow opening where the waters from the mountains of Yemen descend. There are also the Nohaga wadi and Mount Raoum, two areas of great charm which are pleasant for walks and hikes.

The Najran wadi runs through and forms the area's rich agricultural lands, forming zones of fertility as wide as two to three kilometres. Several tributaries flow into the Najran wadi from the Asir region and from Northern Yemen.

The other two major wadis in the Najran region are the Habona wadi and the Beder al Janub wadi. Habona is considered as important as the Najran wadi, running from west to east with very fertile soil. Several villages have developed on its banks.

The two most important quarters of the town of Najran are Al Faysalia and Abu Seoud, perfectly symbolising the new and the old aspects of the area.

Construction of Faysalia began only in 1966, and it is a flat, modern complex which is also the administrative centre of the region, providing regional services and offices for the government, the Emirate and the municipality as well as schools, hospitals and the headquarters of a number of private companies.

The ancient town of Abu Seoud perfectly expresses the spirit of old Najran. Once the administrative capital of the area, the town is built according to traditional circular city plan, in sharp contrast to the modern grid of Al Faysalia.

Much of the ancient history of the region is embodied in stone, in paintings, lettering and carvings men left behind in centuries long past.

In the 1880s an Austrian orientalist Edward Glisser undertook an extensive expedition in the region. He discovered numerous symbols, some carved and others written in Hymyarite, the

script of the state of Himyar.

According to the Greek historian Strabon, Najran once formed part of Himyar, which flourished between 115 BC and 340 AD. Glisser was able to decipher some of these symbols by their resemblance to Arabic script.

Numerous other forms of script can be found engraved in the stones of the Najran countryside. In the area between the village of Al Qabil in the north, and the mountain villages of Assouda, Al Hamra and Alarq in the south, Egyptian and other hieroglyphics have been found.

On Mount Al Hamar, south of the site of the town Al Okhdood, Kufic script has been found dating back to the first Islamic period. The same script is found on the

manner have been discovered. These mark the ruins of either the ancient historical town of Al Okhdood or perhaps Raqamat, which according to the historian Philby, was the ancient capital of Najran.

Today Najran has begun to attract visitors from throughout the Kingdom and beyond. The weather is moderate in both winter and summer — the rainy season is mild and lasts from March until May, replenishing the wadis. Strabon described Najran as a calm and prosperous region because of its agriculture and commerce. Arab writers have described the area as a "beautiful, very fertile region, with incomparable fruits, plants, and vegetables."

Joseph Halevy, a European orientalist who visited Najran in 1870, described it as

while narrow enough to provide protection from attack. The thick clay walls make these homes as strong as small fortresses — some are over 300 years old.

The multi-coloured facades of these dwellings are often decorated with painting and designs which add to their charm.

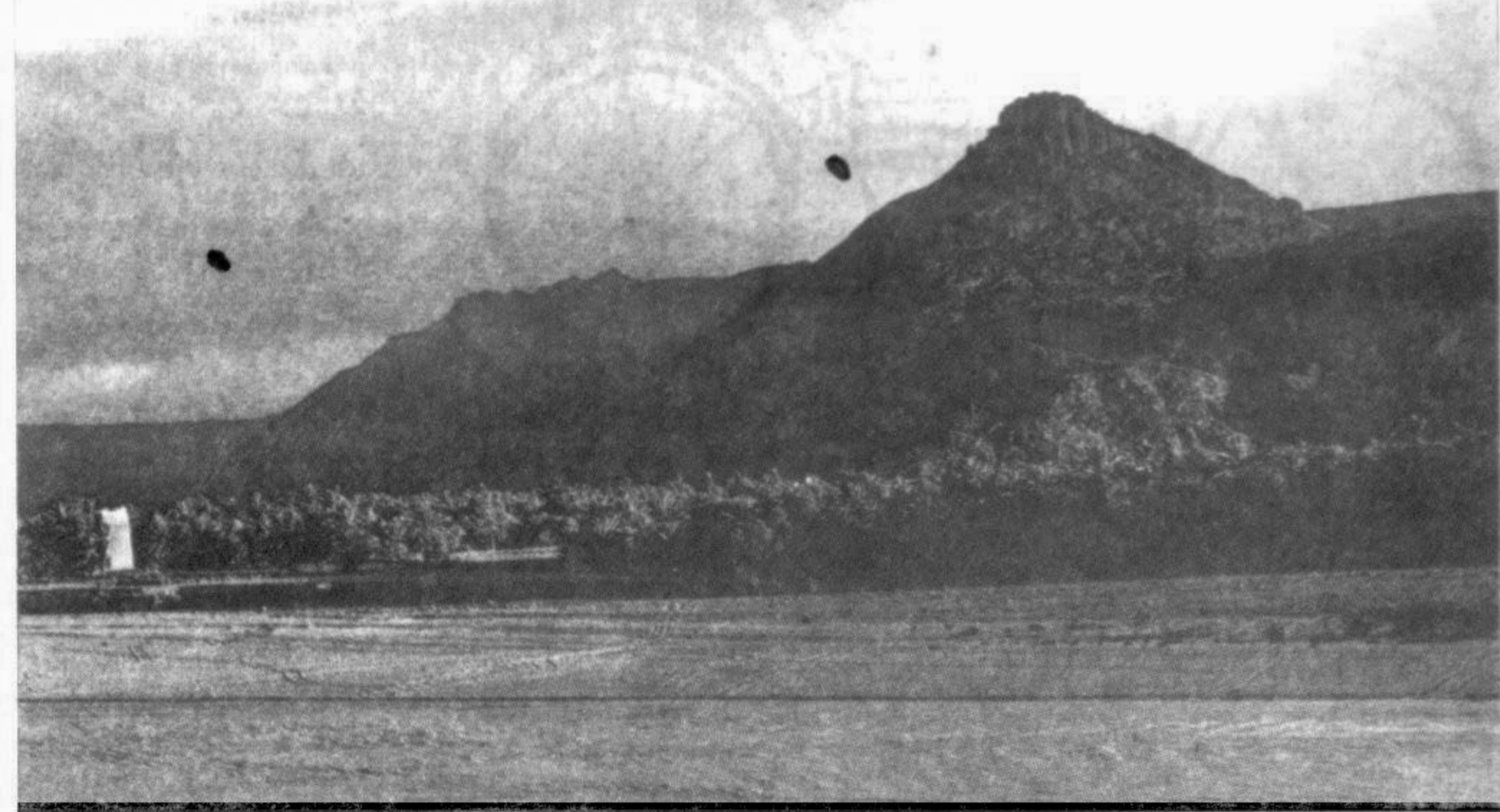
Najrani craftwork in wood and stone and clay are considered some of the finest of regional handicrafts. The distinctive Najran embroidery, silver-work, baskets, blankets, carpets and tools embody ancient handicraft skills which have been practised for centuries.

Najrani life is marked by numerous festivities which usually include the performance of Najran dances and singing. The most colourful include the Razfa dance, in which the men tap their feet to keep the beat while singing a chant, and the Zamel, a

traditional procession. The Najranis' love of dancing and singing is matched by their love for their oral literature, including folk songs and tales, proverbs and bedouin epic poetry.

In this way the noble and inspiring past is kept alive by the spirit of the Najrani people today.

Source: Saudia World



The wide expanse of mountainous desert

rocks of the mountain Al Masmah, 15 kilometres from Najran.

Besides these writings, elaborate and beautiful carvings of horses, camels, ostriches, antelopes and snakes have been discovered in the region.

Important artifacts have also been discovered in Najran. Tools to mill grain and an artesian well built in a sophisticated architectural

"fertile, charming and highly organised land" with villages hidden in the palm groves.

Crops are cultivated throughout the year due to the generous rains that feed the wadi. The wells of the area are dug no more than 15 metres deep, an indication of the very high water table. It is estimated that 3 million cubic metres of rain water seep into the earth annually, while 11 million cubic me-

dwellings maintain a harmony with the environment while expressing style and imagination not found anywhere else on the Arabian peninsula.

The houses are built of a light tan clay in the shape of a rectangle, and reach as high as nine stories, becoming narrower as they rise.

The tops of these fascinating structures have openings which permit light to enter

— Saudia

Travel Briefs

Dragonair Helps Provide The Gift of Sight: Dragonair, in close cooperation with Project ORBIS, will launch a major fundraising campaign — "Change For Vision" — on its Beijing, Shanghai and Xiamen flights.

The appeal invites Dragonair passengers to place their spare change of any currency into specially designed envelopes. The envelopes, carrying the message "Make your spare change count" in English and Chinese, are collected during flight and then delivered to Project ORBIS for processing.

In October, the flying eye hospital and its team of health care professionals are scheduled to visit Dalian — one of Dragonair's 14 China destinations. This will provide the airline with the opportunity to introduce staff and VIPs to ORBIS's sight saving work. The DC 10 will be in Hong Kong in November and more Dragonair staff will be given the same opportunity.

ORBIS is non-profit organization dedicated to restoring sight and training doctors and nurses in developing countries.

The "Change For Vision" appeal will run through to January 1996 and Dragonair welcomes the opportunity to support this very worthwhile cause. — Dragonair

Best Supervisor of July: Lucas Gomes, 1st Cook of F&B kitchen, of Hotel Sonargaon has been selected as Best supervisor for July 1995. Lucas started, working for the hotel from July 1982. He is now 34. — Sonargaon Tattler

Excellent service of Dragonair: Simon Tang, Regional manager of Dragonair in Eastern China, received a compliment letter from a passenger who flew from Shanghai to Hongkong with Dragonair (KA).

Mr. Massol and his colleague, May Chow, were passengers on a Dragonair flight. The incoming flight from Shanghai was delayed due to technical reason until the next day. The KA Shanghai team informed passengers and acted promptly to ensure that they had accommodation.

The professional manner with which this incident was resolved was complemented in Mr. Massol's letter. — Dragonair

A new way to shop: From August 1, Japanese residents travelling on KAs (Dragonair) Japanese flights have been able to purchase gift items through a new mail order service provided by KA and Empire Airport Sales Co Ltd in Tokyo.

Passengers can order and select from the inflight brochure a wide array of products ranging from Chinese tea to cosmetics. Goods are then delivered to their homes in Japan in just seven days. — Dragonair

Customer support centre in China: Airbus Industrie and China Aviation Supplies corporation (CASC) have begun construction of the first dedicated training and service centre in China.

It is located near Beijing Capital airport, with good transport connections throughout China. Thus, the centre will make training and spare parts more accessible to Chinese airlines flying Airbus Industrie flights.

This represents the consortium's first training centre in the Asia-Pacific region. — Dragonair

THE noise is indescribable, what with the submarine gurglings of the camels, in need of water or food? The donkeys deserve a sympathy for the braying and the whinnying of ponies as they are unwillingly ridden up and down the hill, the cows and other animals are tethered, or hobbled in their thousands. Add to all this the rumbling of the trains and the loudspeakers blaring in strong decibels.

They are all at Nagaur for the cattle fair organised by the Animal Husbandry Department and the Rajasthan Tourism. The inconspicuous little town in the heart of Rajasthan is transformed into a great cattle market, not only for the prospective customers but for the tourists in pitched tents to share the cultural finale that follows the brisk business in buying and selling of animals far about a fortnight. Circus, cinema and juggler — apart from the fair attracts a sizable number of men for its dancing girls, folk dances and other similar entertainments.

Nagaur is an old Marwari city, having borrowed its name from its traditional Naga founders — Naga Garh (snake place). As it stood in the centre of the route from Delhi to Sindh, the city must have witnessed the sauntering caravans and invading armies march past its territory. Nagaur was once replete with Jain temples as their teachers often visited this place, built structures and a number of Jain manuscripts are said to have been composed here. Penance and peaceful pursuits of the Jains came to a grinding halt with the advent of Rajput warriors followed by Muslim invaders vying for power in the region.

The settlement of the city finds an interesting mention in the medieval history. The last of the great Chauhan rulers had sent Rai Bisala to establish a city in the wilderness supported by a tank. The assignment was based on a report that lean and sick horses from the royal stable had recovered after grazing

Nagaur — More Than The Cattle Fair

by Shahid Akhter Makhfi

in the locality and further a lamb born here is said to have fought a wolf!

Today Nagaur is famous for the breed of bulls and milch cows. The Nagauri bullocks are known for their beauty and speed in carts, however, the camels of this area are slow in movement but stronger and more enduring



The Cattle market at Nagaur

than those of Jaisalmer. The flourishing trade in livestock is not confined to Nagaur cattle fair but under the care and control of Animal Husbandry department various fairs are organised at different places in and around Nagaur.

It is difficult to know how many animals there are in the fair because they are constantly on the move in and out of the fair. The department accounts for as many as 2,00,000 livestock. The department encourages the show by awarding prizes for the best animals in various categories and this cer-

tainly helps in pricing the star cattle of the fair. The prices have multiplied in the recent years. A camel today costs between 12 to 25 thousand rupees while a similar soul in 1970 was worth less than a thousand rupees. A pair of Nagauri bullocks in

bastions were renovated by Mohammad Bahlim (a governor of Ghaznavis) in 1119 AD. Bahlim's ambition to become independent resulted in his downfall. Thereafter a number of Turkish governors changed hands till 1270 AD. By this time Nagaur had be-

home town of the celebrated scholar, Abul Fazal and his brother in the Mughal court. It was 1572, when Akbar granted Nagaur to the Chief of Bikaner and in the eighteenth century it was acquired by the rulers of Jodhpur and till date it is the private property of the Maharaja.

The fort today is dilapidated but still worthy of a visit. The beautiful fountain with 17 jets, the grand mosque of Shah Jehan and the glorious edifices exist only in the old records while what is left to be seen are only the skeletal remains of the bygone glory. Glazed and decorated panels have lost their luster, however, a guide takes you around the fort with plausible explanations for each member of the fort. A small museum won't take much time to examine the remaining curios that have survived the pillage amounting to several lakhs of rupees. In some of the buildings, portraits and narrative illustrations are still in fairly good shape. The Sheesh Mahal no longer glitters but the Baradari is still intact and interesting with 85 pillars worth comparing with the Diwan-i-Aam in Delhi's Red Fort. Women's quarter, better known as Hathipol Jenani Deodi is a nicely painted hall with murals depicting the queen and her retinue. The guide leads you to the fountain, explaining the ventilation and the water drainage systems to keep the palace cool in the midst of summer desert. The Mughal style and influence is notably seen in most of the airy pavilions and mahals. The Abha Mahal is believed to be the palace of Amar Singh Rathode to whom the fort was gifted by the Mughals for the second time. To the west of the fort is the cenotaph of Rao Amar Singh who was done to death to avenge the killing of another courtier in the court of Shah Jehan. Although Amar Singh was cremated on the banks of Agra, his wives

— S A Makhfi

come an important strategic junction for commercial and military purposes. Amir Khuro, a thirteenth century noble, mentions Nagaur as the farthest point of Mongol plunder under the rule of Khiljis. Then came the Tughlaqs, followed by the Lodhis with their own set of governors. Coins of slave king Iltutmish (1210-35) suggests the establishment of a mint at Nagaur during his rule.

The Mughals ruled Nagaur after its capture by the successors of the Pathan king, Sher Shah. It was during the reign of Akbar that Nagaur once again came to prominence for it was the

committed Sati at Nagaur as evident from the palm inscriptions left behind.

The medieval desert town, once surrounded by strong and massive walls, has six gates of entry leading to major cities of medieval India. Some of these gates are still in use but the fortification has given way to various places. Atop the fort, one can see two mosques, locally known as Akbari Masjid. One of them is fairly in good state of preservation with blue tiles and interior inscriptions. It also serves as a madrasa where local children assemble for their early morning lessons.

The town has several temples of recent make but surprisingly enough not a single Jain structure of architectural antiquity exists. Rajput and later the Muslim occupation probably dismembered them for their use.

The best piece of architecture in Nagaur can be seen in the shape of a very graceful facade, magnificently sculptured in every part and the geometrical patterns profusely carved in every imaginable form. Locally known as Tarkin ka Darwaza it marks the entrance to the mosque and shrines of saints like Hazrat Hamiduddin Sauli Nagauri and Sultan Tarkin, the first among Muslim missionaries to come across from Arabia during the reign of Rao Bisala. The thirteenth century darwaza (gateway), rising to the height of 16 mtrs, is made of yellow and red limestone while the summit is of white marble. A large ostrich's egg hangs suspended by a chain from the apex of the arch and it is believed to be something sacred. For some it contains diamonds while others contend it to be some holy relic.

The road distance between Jaipur and Nagaur via Ajmer is 235 kms. Nagaur from Udaipur is 410 kms. As the Nagaur Cattle Fair comes under the ambit of Rajasthan Tourism, things are well organised and cared for. Tourists are provided Swiss cottage tents as well as dormitories.