





01-03 VISIT HARAJ SOUQ FOR A COLORFUL MIX OF COMMODITIES, CHAOS AND CHARM

IMAGES BY AVESHAMALIK

01



LEANNE MILLS ENJOYS A RUMMAGE AT ONE OF RIYADH'S COLORFUL SOUKS

# BARGAIN HUNTING AT HARAJ BIN GASSEM

**It's possible** to find practically anything and everything at Riyadh's Haraj Souq, so long as you're prepared to rummage.

This sprawling second-hand market, in the south of Riyadh, is a treasure trove if you're looking for a bargain. You'll find bedroom suites, mirrors, carpets, rugs, soft furnishings, household appliances, doors, bathroom taps, hardware, quad bikes, motorcycles and an overwhelming accumulation of second-hand clothes.

All the pre-loved clothes can be found in the very centre of the market, an area draped in multi-coloured tarpaulins and plastic sheets. The clothes racks are crammed into stalls owned by men who are willing to barter on the already very low price tags. Thobes hang covered in plastic wrapping, as if freshly dry-cleaned, and the abaya range is extensive.

The mix of floral summer dresses, kaftans, shoes, handbags, coats and suits provides plenty of choice, while ball gowns are displayed with pride. Some of the colours are a little garish and the designs can be over-fussy for some western tastes, but it's these garments that have contributed to the market's informal moniker of 'Princess Souq' – started by a rumor that party dresses are donated by Saudi royal princesses who have

grown tired of their beautiful gowns.

The clothing stalls are surrounded by units selling pieces of rolled up carpet and rugs. A little farther along there are curtains, fabrics, cushions, blankets and foam mattresses – all catering to a home-maker on a budget.

Initially, the souq seems chaotic but different items are grouped together, so if you're searching for a particular thing, say a pair of curtains, then you'll find all the curtain outlets conveniently located near one another.

The bedroom furniture area was a dusty plot of ground where heavy carved wooden hunks of furniture such as beds, wardrobes, mirrors and chests of drawers were arranged. Each arrangement was a huddle of matching items but most looked a little forlorn and worn by the elements.

The grand turquoise and gold-edged chairs pictured stood in the middle of this windy square surrounded by piles of rubbish and an old mattress. These beautiful chairs exhibited such faded glory and looked forgotten, but the striking colours and design of the throne-like chairs seemed appropriate for a 'princess souk'!





IMAGES BY AWESHA MALIK

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In a narrow lane, off one of the market's bustling streets, we found sofas and matching lounge suites, some with florid textiles and others with some very tasteful fabrics and designs. We saw a small group of expat women bargain with a furniture owner – and could tell they had previous experience as they seemed relaxed and confident in the low price they had in mind. Their passion, they said, is for buying and repainting ornate Arabic chairs, recovering them with fabrics bought at Al Noor (near the Gold Souk, Dirah).

After skilful negotiation, the price of the chairs dropped from SR800 to SR300 and a deal was struck. A man in a striped shirt stood close by – he had a truck and had agreed to transport the goods back to their compound for a small fee.

Some of the soft furnishings could adorn the most modern or traditional households. Brightly coloured handcrafted cushions and rugs in deep reds were plentiful. In the foam souq, a man used a metal saw to literally split a handmade cushion in half and told he was going to re-stuff each half with foam and make two separate cushions. But the covering was badly damaged from the sawing which seemed a terrible shame.

We headed deeper into the market streets and the stalls turned into brick-built units and retail outlets. The roads became busy and we dodged traffic as we crossed to shops selling plastic plants, chairs shaped as fingers and thumbs and homeware like vases and glass dishes. We'd obviously moved away from the second-hand goods as these outlets sold all new products.

We didn't dwell for long in the motorcycle souq as the smell of petrol was overpowering, but did notice an area that sold metal doors, iron gates, generators, and other odd machine parts.

04-07 FROM FURNITURE TO BALL GOWNS – PRINCESS SOUK IS NOTHING IF NOT ECLECTIC

“IT'S POSSIBLE TO FIND PRACTICALLY ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING SO LONG AS YOU'RE PREPARED TO RUMMAGE. THIS SPRAWLING SECOND-HAND MARKET IS A TREASURE TROVE IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A BARGAIN”

**VOYAGER TIP**

*Most taxi drivers will know the name Haraj bin Gasseem, but if not:*

- 7253 Al Nuh, Manfuhah
- GPS coordinates: 24°35'57.48"N, 46°43'51.35"E

We found children's bicycles and a few new adult push bikes on sale. Second-hand office furniture also featured heavily in one area, with some very good quality chairs, bookshelves and desks.

A few hardware stalls reminded us of Owais (or Kuwaiti) Souk on Olaya Street, where kettles, jars, incense burners, coffee pots, ceramics and cutlery sets were available – all new. We bought a metal 'tiffin set' for SR30 and had a chat with the friendly proprietor. He seemed thrilled that we'd chosen to spend money with him and proudly brought attention to this by showing off to others close by. His cheerful willingness to try out his English and his friendly face was gratifying after we'd encountered plenty of hard stares elsewhere in the market.

There are treasures to be found among the tumult and it's an enjoyable – yet sweaty – experience. It's a hot, grimy, eclectic assortment of odds and ends, but the choice and the prices make a visit to the 'Princess Souq' a must. ■



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