



***FLOWER POWER
IN SAUDI ARABIA***



In the southern Saudi provinces of Jizan and Asir alongside the Yemeni border, you can still find "Flower Men." The descendants of the ancient Tihama and Asir tribes have reveled in wearing colorful garlands for centuries.



Forget the Arabic keffiyeh, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair. The wreaths are not only beautiful to look at but they are also exquisitely fragrant as they are made with fresh flowers.



Many assume that Saudi Arabia is a huge desert but they are mistaken. The Kingdom is host to more than 2,000 species of flora. The garlands and wreaths are made every morning in local markets, like in Sabya or Addair.



The Flower Men come early in the morning, before it becomes too hot, to buy ready-made wreaths. However, some prefer making their own selection of leaves and flowers and preparing the garlands themselves, for a more unique look. Leaves such as wild basil or fenugreek and marigold flowers are the most popular choices.



An old man wearing traditional shoes made of palm leaves at the Mahalah Flower Men Market. Twenty years ago, they were living in total isolation without electricity or proper roads, and followed the conservative rules of tribal law. No women are seen at this market, as it is a male business.



The trendiest fashion for older Flower Men is to match their wreath and beard, which is dyed with henna. Many say this makes them look much younger and more attractive.



The wreaths are sold for a handful of euros. The most elegant ones are made with a type of white jasmin that is so fragile the sellers have to keep it in ice-boxes. A wreath like the one pictured here will be worn for two days.



The flowers are also chosen carefully to create harmony with the tribe's traditional clothing. A few years ago, the futas were woven in the Yemeni village of Bayt Al Faqih, but they are now made in India.



The wreaths are worn not only for ornamental purposes but also for health reasons. Herbal medicine is very popular in Saudi Arabia and these are believed to cure headaches. You can even see people putting wild basil in their noses when they feel unwell. Men also use kohl around their eyes because of its medicinal properties.



Flower Men can also be seen in Yemen, on the other side of the Saudi border.

The ongoing war between the two countries has generated a lot of embarrassment in the community as they are part of the same tribe.



Flower Men still enjoy living in the mountains, an old tradition that allows them to monitor the area from the highest vantage points and to get fresh air in the summer. They grow coffee on terraces but also khat, a stimulant drug. People can only chew it in this region of Saudi Arabia, an exception in a country where drug possession leads to death penalty.



In the Asir province, Flower Men used to live in this type of houses until the 1980s. They are made of red stone and mud bricks. The watchtowers were used to ensure safety but also served as granaries.



Inside the abandoned old houses, you can see walls decorated with the same color scheme as the flower crowns. This art called Al-Qatt Al-Asiri was made by women and was recently listed as intangible heritage by UNESCO. The women also wear floral garlands, mostly at home, but it is strictly forbidden to take pictures of them.



Many Flower Men still take care of old family houses or watchtowers, some of them over two hundred years old.

Local people are keen to explain that their community has lived in the region for more than 2,000 years.



The wreaths and garlands are an everyday accessory, but people tend to save their most elaborate headgear for Ramadan or weddings. Friends are often seen sporting the same style.



Despite their love of flowers, the tribes are famous for their combat skills. For an extremely long time, they were reluctant to have their photos taken or to even meet foreigners.

However, things are changing quickly with the rapid economic development taking place in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.



The Flower Men are keen to retain their tradition of floral ornaments, as it is a peaceful way to set themselves apart from the rest of the country. If some men give up the wreaths, many keep the long hair, a part of the local culture.



Some are so proud of their floral ornaments that they share them on Instagram. It is also a popular way to show off their looks to their betrothed before the wedding. While society remains very conservative, social media make it possible for young men and women to have private contacts with one another.



These children are proud to be seen wearing futas and flower crowns next to their father. They are also wearing the jambya, the traditional dagger made – for the wealthiest – from rhinoceros horn.



At a local market, this Saudi merchant is holding an antique jambya with a rhinoceros horn handle. It is worth 100,000 dollars and is kept in a huge safe. People are not aware of the rhinoceros poaching crisis.



It is a tradition to offer a wreath to visitors. Flower sellers still make these gifts for the rare tourists who travel inside the region. But soon, this exquisite tradition will likely disappear with the implementation of "Vision 2030," a Saudi government project led by Mohammed ben Salmane that plans to bring millions of visitors.



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