

# Sana'a, Yemen

## Central Highlands

### History

There are cities that belong to history, and there are cities that are history. Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, is one of the rare places on Earth where time does not feel linear. Instead, it feels layered, stacked like stone and mudbrick, like generations of families living one above another in tall tower houses that rise toward the mountain sky.

Sana'a is ancient in the deepest sense of the word. It is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, and its story is inseparable from the story of Yemen itself: a story of trade and empire, faith and scholarship, architecture and identity, and—more recently—war and endurance.

Sana'a's power begins with its geography. Built high in Yemen's central highlands, more than 2,000 meters above sea level, the city sits in a mountain basin protected by ridges and natural barriers. This elevation gave Sana'a a climate and security that shaped its entire history. While coastal cities were exposed to foreign fleets and desert towns were vulnerable to raids, the highlands offered defense and stability. In Yemen, mountains are both landscape and politics. They determine who rules, who resists, and what kind of society forms.

Since 1000 BCE it was the home of sophisticated kingdoms and a global economy centered on trade. Ancient South Arabian civilizations such as Saba (Sheba) and later Himyar controlled routes that carried incense, spices, and luxury goods across the ancient world. Frankincense and myrrh were the oil and gold of their era, demanded by temples and palaces from Rome to Persia. Sana'a grew within this world of caravans and wealth.

In the centuries before Islam, Yemen became a meeting ground of religions. Jewish communities flourished, Christianity arrived through trade and politics, and the 6th century saw dramatic conflicts involving local rulers and foreign empires. One of the most famous figures of this era is Abraha, associated in Islamic tradition with the "Year of the Elephant." Whether literal or symbolic, the historical reality is clear: Yemen mattered, and Sana'a was part of its political heart.

When Islam arrived in the 7th century, it reached Yemen early, and Sana'a became a major Islamic city. The Great Mosque of Sana'a is among the oldest mosques in the world. The Sana'a manuscripts—early Qur'anic texts discovered in the mosque—are among the oldest known Qur'an materials in existence, making Sana'a a rare archive of Islam's earliest written history.

Over the following centuries, Sana'a's identity was shaped profoundly by the Zaydi Imamate. Zaydism, rooted in Yemen's northern highlands, developed as a political and religious tradition defined by scholarship, legal reasoning, and negotiation of authority. Power was rarely absolute; it was contested between scholars, tribes, and military forces. Sana'a became known not only for political importance but for intellectual life, producing scholars, jurists, poets, and manuscripts.

Sana'a's architecture is perhaps the most visible expression of this identity. The Old City is famous for its tall tower houses built from mudbrick and stone, decorated with white gypsum patterns and crowned with qamariyya windows—half-moon stained glass that filters sunlight into soft glow. These buildings are functional and defensive, conserving space within city walls and regulating temperature. The city remains a living urban system of markets, mosques, bathhouses, gardens, and narrow alleyways.

Sana'a's history also includes confrontation with empire. The Ottomans attempted to rule Yemen more than once, and Sana'a became a battleground between imperial ambition and Yemeni resistance. The mountains made occupation costly, and local legitimacy made foreign rule difficult to sustain.

In the 20th century, Sana'a entered an era of revolution. After the Ottomans withdrew, Yemen became a kingdom ruled by an imam-monarch. In 1962, a republican revolution erupted in Sana'a, overthrowing the monarchy and plunging the country into civil war. The conflict became internationalized, with Egypt supporting republicans and Saudi Arabia supporting royalists. Sana'a endured siege and warfare.

In 1990, Sana'a became the capital of a unified Yemen when North and South Yemen merged. Unity brought hope, but internal divisions persisted. Political rivalries, tribal power, economic inequality, and regional tensions continued to shape the state.

Since 2014, Sana'a has stood at the center of one of the world's most devastating conflicts. The war reshaped daily life and damaged parts of the Old City—one of humanity's great architectural treasures. Shortages of fuel and resources have made restoration difficult. When Sana'a is harmed, it is not simply a capital under attack. It is a library of civilization at risk.

And yet, Sana'a endures. It has survived rivalries, invasions, revolutions, civil wars, and modern catastrophe. Its houses still rise like stacked memory, its streets still echo with markets and prayer, and its windows still catch sunlight in moon-shaped glass. Sana'a represents Yemen's soul: proud, complex, wounded, and unbroken. It is a place where history still lives—refusing, against all odds, to become the past.