



by Dominic James

British Construction mission to Riyadh and Jeddah – largest UK construction mission for 10 years.



It was very exciting to be in Saudi Arabia recently with the first major UK construction delegation to the Kingdom for at least 10 years (nobody I spoke to could remember the last one!). While British companies have had considerable success in winning construction work in the region over the last few years, the vast majority have focused on the UAE. This strategy worked fine during the boom, with Dubai in particular seeing a great many UK companies open offices, but as the picture there has become less rosy, UK business has started to be more adventurous and begun looking elsewhere in the region, with Saudi Arabia top of the list.

We at British Expertise have always kept a close eye on the Gulf. At a meeting here in London last November held to examine the impact of the economic crisis on the region, we identified several markets which we felt would be relatively unaffected. Saudi Arabia was thought the most promising with a combination of a healthy economy and considerable construction needs, and we felt that UK companies should be building on the positive and historic relationship between the 2 countries. We also felt that now was a good opportunity to start taking large-scale construction missions overseas again. We are therefore very fortunate to be working in partnership with EMAP, the publishers of UK construction magazines such as Construction News, New Civil Engineer and Architects Journal on this venture. EMAP's reach in the UK and overseas, combined with British Expertise's long experience of running trade missions and working with UKTI, meant that this mission to Saudi Arabia at the end of April was large (16 companies) and had real credibility. UK big business was represented by the likes of Kier and WSP, in addition to a balanced group of other

highly professional British companies. The success of the mission also owed a lot to the hard work put in by UKTI in both Riyadh and Jeddah to deliver an excellent programme – they really showed why they are such a vital partner in any similar venture.

The mission arrived in Riyadh on the evening of 24 April and in 2 hectic days in the capital visited SAGIA, Ar-Riyadh Development Authority, SAPAC and El-Seif Engineering. We also had 2 excellent business-matching events – at the Riyadh Chamber and in the evening at the Embassy, as well as briefings from the Riyadh Group for British Business and from Paul Williams, Head of UKTI at the Embassy. Travelling to Jeddah late on 26 April we had calls on Emaar, al-Mabani, Saudi Bin Laden Group, SaudConsult, Jizan Economic City and an event at Jeddah Chamber. We were also fortunate that our visit coincided with the Queens Birthday Party in Jeddah which offered a great opportunity to meet influential businesspeople.

The key to the success of this mission was flexibility – to offer as much time as possible both within the programme framework and in the afternoons for delegates to have 1-1 meetings and develop potential business relationships. Feedback has been incredibly positive from both sides. All of the delegates were impressed with the warmth of the welcome and level of professionalism on the Saudi side, as well as the opportunities that were clearly available. I am aware that many delegates will be returning under their own steam in the weeks and months to come. From our part we are very keen to return with a similar mission next winter. I hope this is the beginning of a resurgence of UK interest in the exciting Saudi construction market.

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