



The Abadia show at Riyadh Fashion Week.



An evening look by Waaed Aloqaili, designed by sisters Waaed and Ahlam Aloqaili.

FASHION

Riyadh Fashion Week Opens Up to the World

The third edition of the event spanned six days and welcomed international brands, press and buyers.

BY MILES SOCHA AND RITU UPADHYAY

The third edition of Riyadh Fashion Week marked a step change for the fledgling showcase, attracting international labels, retailers and editors to transporting, open-air runway venues and showcasing the appeal of its homegrown modest fashions – and spectacular special-occasion wear.

"Honestly, I didn't expect that much, and it's been fantastic," said Manel Aboudaoud, owner and designer of Manel, a Dubai-based eveningwear-focused brand and one of five international names participating in fashion week for the first time. "Eight stores want to work with me....I will be all over the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council countries]."

Aboudaoud staged an intimate salon show on Oct. 19 and also displayed her designs in a commercial showroom set up within the golden sphere atop the Norman Foster-designed Al-Faisaliyah Tower, the first skyscraper to be built in Saudi Arabia in 2000, kicking off its urbanization drive. The offering ranged from fun slogan T-shirts and loose linen separates to lavish evening gowns and jewelry.

The schedule stretched over six days, with 45 brands staging runway shows or presentations. There were up to six back-to-back shows at remote venues that often ran as much as 90 minutes late, testing the patience and stamina of editors from various international Vogues, NSS Magazine, Les Echos and Dazed Korea – in addition to a wide swathe of regional press.

Participants ranged from local couture stalwarts Ashwag Almarshad, Timia Abid and Adnan Akbar to popular mall-based brands like Leema and Fem9, which gifted straw hats with lace chin straps to front-row guests, dovetailing with its Victorian-inspired collection.

There were two days devoted to

casual and streetwear brands in Riyadh's warehouse district, with several models in the RBA show on Sunday accessorized with hooded falcons, which didn't seem to mind the pounding dance music.

The up-for-it crowd at those shows clamored for seats and photo ops at the step-and-repeat walls, wearing an array of looks stretching from abayas to board shorts and sneakers.

Demure fit-and-flare silhouettes predominated on the runways and presentations, with fringe and crystal among the popular embellishments.

While the kingdom has relaxed dress codes in recent years – bare arms, shoulders and backs were seen on front-row guests and on runways – fashion week organizers must still clear all provided images from the shows with the Ministry of Culture, which funds the Saudi Fashion Commission, organizer of the Riyadh showcase.

Organizers are hip to the burgeoning interest in Asian stars, hence, there were paparazzi frenzies over Thai actors Fay Peray and Win Metawin, along with international notables like Georgina Rodriguez, Cristiano Ronaldo's fiancée, who turned up at Monia Alshebili's show in a trenchcoat with broderie anglaise detailing.

On the sidelines of the runway shows were launch events including a late-night dinner at Carbons that eyewear retailer Eyewa hosted to launch its collaboration with el.Seed, a French Tunisian calligraphy artist and muralist.

The fashion week offered an opportunity to exalt Saudi hospitality – coffee, dates, canapés and juices were proffered at every turn – and the city's myriad facets, from its luscious groves of date palms to imposing skyscrapers like the Kingdom Centre Tower, which lights up with advertising at night.

Demand for Saudi brands in the kingdom is surging, as wearing a Saudi label is increasingly becoming a point of pride.

"I'll be wearing a dress from a Saudi designer in Paris, and people ask me about it. I feel so proud," said Nouf Almamlah, Farfetch's first senior stylist in Saudi Arabia,

who now works with high-profile clients. "People really love a good Saudi brand – something from our own that represents us in a way that understands our needs."

According to designer Reem Alkanhal, "Saudi women have always been naturally stylish. I witnessed this growing up with my grandmother, mother and their friends. That's where I largely draw my inspiration."

That said, style has evolved organically among younger generations.

"What is unique is how they're living the now, but still loving our traditional abaya," Alkanhal said. "They combine and embrace the modern with the traditional, play around more and experiment with styles and colors. It's vibrant, joyous and fun. It's not something new to Saudi women, it's just new to the world."

Alkanhal's last collection featured cropped jackets with detachable sleeves, giving women the option to use pieces with versatility.

"You can have a sleeveless look or a peekaboo effect if you prefer to cover your arms." This, she noted, isn't just for Saudi women, but resonates everywhere. "Many women all over the world don't prefer to show arms, so they have the option to [offer a peekaboo of] some skin without feeling insecure."

Multiple showgoers were seen wearing

T-shirts declaring "Saudi Arabia Is the Future," a design that went viral after appearing on the catwalk in Hindamme's show last year.

Many streetwear brands emblazoned their designs with optimistic slogans like "12 new chapters, 365 new chances" written across an anorak by Cargo, or "Mercy," spelled out in English and Arabic on a T-shirt from House of Cemnar.

Saudi heritage and national pride figured across many collections, with geometric rooflines a graphic detail on the loose men's alterna-stitching from Noble & Fresh, and odes to various regions spelled out in spirals of Arabic characters on Hindamme's second-skin dresses.

Most participants showed fall 2025 collections on the runway as a see now, buy now effort, while taking orders for spring 2026 collections in the commercial showroom, operated by White Milano.

Italian streetwear brand Ih Nom Uh Nit, participating in Riyadh for the first time, said it expanded its wholesale client roster in the region and noticed an immediate surge in sales fanned by social media posts in the wake of its runway show. "Our e-commerce went crazy," sales manager Carlotta Tassi said.

The Saudi fashion industry is expected to reach \$42 billion by 2028, with fashion contributing 2.5 percent to the kingdom's gross domestic product.

And the Saudi Fashion Commission was working overtime to give local brands a leg up, hosting 70 buyers, most of them international.

Among major retailers in attendance was Judd Crane, executive director of buying and brand at Selfridges, which hosted a clutch of Saudi brands at its London flagship over the summer for what he said was a "very successful" pop-up. ▶



One runway venue, set in a dramatically lit canyon, was anointed Bedrock.