



# Built on the rock

In Harrison Ford style, Rob McFarland discovers some of Jordan's awe-inspiring biblical and natural wonders.

As we're walking through the Siq, the meandering chasm of rock that leads to the ancient city of Petra, our entertaining guide beckons us over to the right-hand wall. Apparently we're looking for an eagle's nest lodged high in the cliff face. None of us can see it so he shuffles us over to the opposite wall and tells us to turn around. Suddenly, it all becomes clear. Through a narrow gap in the rock we get our first glimpse of Petra's infamous Treasury, a spell-binding, 43m high Hellenistic facade carved out of sheer rock in the first century AD.

Petra, 'one of the most precious cultural properties of man's heritage,' is an archaeological site of an ancient

>



01 Facade of El Deir  
(the Monastery) at Petra  
02 The Petra Treasury  
03 The Brown Bar  
in the Evason Ma'in  
Six Senses Hotel  
04 The exquisite Dead Sea  
05 Tourists enjoy Petra,  
one of the wonders of  
the ancient world

Nabatean city cut into sandstone rock, with houses, streets, temples, royal tombs, the Monastery and the Treasury. It is the reason I'm in Jordan. Long before Harrison Ford made it famous in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, my parents visited Petra and told me it was one of the most impressive sights they'd ever seen. What I'd failed to realise is that the Treasury is just the tip of the iceberg. Stretching beyond it is the vast ancient city that once housed 30,000 people.

While you could easily spend several days exploring the site, you can see much in a day. I'd recommend tackling the 800 steps that wind their way up to the Monastery where your efforts will be rewarded with an even more remarkable carved rock facade plus a fraction of the crowds.

For an insight into life here in more recent times, make sure you say hello to New Zealander Marguerite van Geldermalsen. She wrote a bestselling book about her life married to a Bedouin and you can pick up a copy at the stall run by her and her affable son.

While Petra is what initially lured me to Jordan, over the course of the week I discover that this compact country is crammed full of Biblical sites and natural wonders.

## The White City

Our adventure started three days ago in Amman, the country's capital. Nicknamed the White City due to the extensive use of local limestone, it's a busy, thriving metropolis. While it may lack the headline sites of its more famous neighbours, Jerusalem and Bethlehem, it does have a well-preserved Roman theatre and several bustling souks.

For an authentic introduction to Arabic food, head to Hashem Restaurant located in an alleyway off Al-Amir Mohammed Street. This no-frills establishment serves warm flatbread with deliciously smooth hummus, felafels stuffed with chillies, onion and garlic and refreshing, sweet mint tea.

From Amman, we drive 300km south along the Desert Highway. The scenery is mostly arid, windswept plains punctuated by shrubs and the odd Bedouin herding a small flock of sheep. And then we hit Wadi Rum. The road squirms down a hillside toward the valley floor and suddenly we're surrounded by paprika-coloured sand punctuated by towering peaks of granite, sandstone and limestone. The rock formations are stunning – 500 million-year-old weathered escarpments stained red by iron oxide. This is where the inimitable TE Lawrence led the Arab revolt in 1917 and it was the setting for his autobiographical novel, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

The best way to explore is on the back of a 4WD – ideally with a slightly mad Bedouin at the wheel. We career along the desert floor, dodging boulders and cliffs before stopping at a Bedouin tent for some nerve-calming sage tea. Accommodation for the night is at Captain's Desert Camp, a cluster of goat-hair tents wedged into a rock face. A sunset camel ride followed by a Zarb, a traditional lamb feast cooked underground, completes our introduction to Bedouin life.

## Moses' last crusade

From Wadi Rum, we head north again to tick off three of Jordan's historical heavyweights. Mt Nebo is where Moses is said to have died after being shown the Promised Land. Today you'll find a small museum, the Moses Memorial Church and some fine mosaics. Just 9km away is Madaba, a charming town whose claim to fame is a mosaic found in 1884 in the ruins of a Byzantine church. It turned out to be the world's oldest map of Palestine, intricately handcrafted in 560 AD.

Our last stop is a site only discovered by archaeologists in 1996. Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan is the place where it's claimed Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist. Sadly, the river is a rather underwhelming trickle nowadays.

After a week crammed with epic vistas and Biblical sites, I'm ready for a relaxing day at the impressive Movenpick Hotel on the shores of the Dead Sea. At 408m below sea level, it's officially the lowest point on Earth's surface and, with a salinity level of 31 per cent, it's one of the saltiest. You don't so much float as bob. It's a bizarrely addictive sensation that leaves me grinning for days.

While languishing in the Dead Sea's mineral-rich waters, I look towards the opposite bank and see places I've come to associate with protest and unrest – Israel, Palestine, the West Bank. And yet during my week here in Jordan, I've encountered nothing but friendliness, openness, courtesy and respect. The wry comment from a Royal Jordanian airline official I met at the start of the trip says it all, "We're a safe haven in a rough neighbourhood." ●

## FOOTNOTES

Getting there: Royal Jordanian flies daily from Bangkok to Amman. [www.rj.com](http://www.rj.com)

Le Royal Hotel, Amman [www.leroyalamman.com](http://www.leroyalamman.com)

Captain's Desert Camp, Wadi Rum [www.captains-jo.com](http://www.captains-jo.com)

Movenpick Petra Hotel and Movenpick Dead Sea Hotel

[www.moevenpick-hotels.com](http://www.moevenpick-hotels.com)

Evason Ma'in Six Senses Hotel, [www.sixsenses.com](http://www.sixsenses.com)