

# DESERT TREASURE

JORDAN IS A JEWEL OF THE MIDDLE EAST, A PLACE WHERE REMARKABLE HOSPITALITY AND FOOD COMPLEMENTS THE CAPTIVATING RUINS OF ANCIENT CITIES. **BY AMY MUSCHIK**

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At 6:30 a.m., the desert sun was already heating the ruins of Petra, an abandoned prehistoric city in southwestern Jordan — the once-thriving centre of the Nabatean empire (400 BC to 106 AD) in what's known as the Valley of Moses.

But in the canyon surrounding the city, which is now a UNESCO World Heritage site, towering red stone walls rose up on either side, allowing only slivers of sunlight from an opening more than 80 metres above.

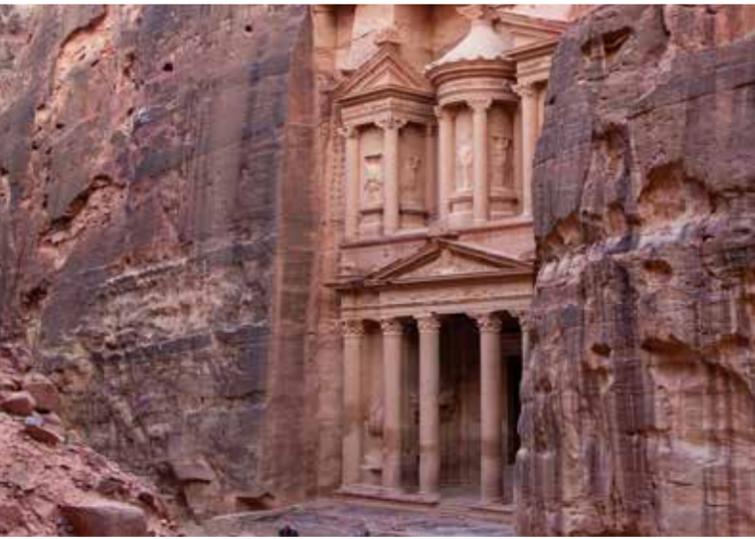
As my companion and I wound our way through the cool, dim and sometimes narrow canyon, the occasional clip-clop of hooves and the clatter of rickety cart wheels announced the approach of a horse-drawn buggy, far in advance of its arrival. I imagined the bustle of bygone travellers and merchants coming and going from the ancient city.

Along the twisting ancient passage, corridors periodically open into large caverns before narrowing again as each bend in the road reveals new rock formations, ancient carvings and cave entrances.

Even though I was anticipating it, I momentarily stopped breathing when I rounded the corner and, through a keyhole, caught my first glimpse of Al Khazneh, also known as The Treasury.

This towering facade, with six massive pillars and ornate spires carved into the side of a red sandstone cliff, rises 45 metres high and creates an imposing backdrop for the hustle and bustle of Bedouin vendors, camels, donkey carts and tourists. Given its name by the Bedouins, who believed it contained treasures, The Treasury is merely an entranceway with no massive caverns behind it, despite appearances to the contrary in *Indiana Jones and*

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*the Last Crusade*, which shot several scenes here. The small interior room behind the facade is believed to have been a mausoleum for a Nabatean King.

When my partner Dan and I decided to take advantage of an opportunity to travel with a small group to Jordan to celebrate our 25th year together, I admit the Hollywood version of Petra, in all its mysterious glory, was probably on my mind. Although there were no caverns filled with gold, as a travel destination Jordan offered many treasures. On our first day, just an hour outside the capital city of Amman, we arrived at the ancient city of Jerash. Lost to the desert sands for centuries, Jerash is undergoing restoration, and its Roman and Byzantine ruins are some of the largest and best-preserved in the world.



Massive columns line the wide, stone streets where ruts from Roman chariots can still be seen, and you can't help but feel small as you meander down to the impressive outdoor amphitheatre to imagine the events that took place here 2,000 years ago, when Jerash held a spot as one of the 10 great cities of the Decapolis.

Returning to Amman for a visit to King Abdullah Mosque, the women in our group donned full-length hooded robes loaned from the gift shop. Women are asked to wear headscarves and cover their arms when they enter the mosque, and all are required to remove their shoes.

Inside was a surprisingly simple – a large, open, carpeted room with no benches, since prayer is offered while kneeling on the floor. Entry and exit was through a lovely gift shop, with the customary offering of sage tea that is common throughout Jordan. It is impolite to turn down the sweet liquid, so we accepted it and spent a few moments browsing the beautiful handcrafted items, including mosaics, textiles and hand-painted ostrich eggs. The Citadel and Temple of Hercules was the perfect place to end the day. The Roman ruins at this location make an impressive backdrop for the best sunsets in all of Amman.



After an overnight in Amman, we headed to Petra. A UNESCO World Heritage site since 1985, Petra was voted one of the new Seven Wonders of the World in 2007. It had been a closely guarded secret, hidden from outsiders, until Johannes Burckhardt, a scholar of the Arab world from Switzerland, arrived there in 1812.

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He is believed to have been the first European to have entered Petra for many centuries.

A 1.2-kilometre canyon passage known as The Siq leads to The Treasury, but that is only the beginning of what Petra has to offer. Walking through the lost city there was much to discover, including multiple facades, tombs, caves, lookouts, passages, a temple and a theatre. By the time we reached the edge of the city, I was glad we had arranged a camel ride back. This option seemed less appealing, however, when it came time to mount the desert beast.

Climbing onto a camel on the ground with its legs folded under doesn't seem too troubling, but then the camel gets up, pitching you wildly forward and back in a jerky dance while you try to remain seated. Clumsy though it was, I did manage to stay topside. The ride through rough stone paths of people, donkeys, vendors, carts and tourists, was a slightly harrowing experience, but not one I would miss even though the dismount was as equally lacking in grace as the mount.

The following morning our further explorations of the park were cut short when we accepted an invitation from a local man for tea in his Bedouin cave. Most Bedouins live in apartments in the village outside the Petra archaeological park but a handful remain, preferring their traditional caves. Stripped fabric lined the cave walls like a Bedouin tent.

We sipped our tea from clear glasses while sitting on the floor, listening to our host sing and play the lute. He told us about a nearby Bedouin who rents his cave to tourists on Airbnb, and decided he might try that someday. The chance to catch a glimpse of Bedouin life and experience Bedouin hospitality was worth the hike, but we were running late for our cooking class at the Petra Kitchen. We ordered some donkeys to bring us back to town, and bid our host farewell.

Now I must tell you Dan was very concerned that he was going to be starved on this trip, but it was quite the contrary – the food was delicious and plentiful.

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We were treated to spreads of meats, cheeses, olives, falafels, flatbread, hummus and more at every meal. This afternoon's cooking class was a special treat since we were preparing many of the local dishes we had come to enjoy like baba ganoush, tabbouleh, and fattoush, but we were also making mansaf. This traditional Jordanian specialty is a lamb dish made with fermented dried yogurt and served on a large platter of rice for gatherings and special events. The time we spent in the kitchen was a fun group bonding exercise and we enjoyed a wonderful traditional meal that we helped to make ourselves.

In the evening, we returned to the park for a completely altered Petra experience. More than 1,500 candles lined both sides of The Siq, creating a magical glow on the red walls as shadows danced in the flickering light. Emerging through the keyhole, the entire treasury was lit with candles. As we found a seat on the stony ground, I secretly wished I had brought my kneepads. Following a simple musical performance and a Bedouin tale, The Treasury lit up with coloured lights. It was magical.

Wadi Rum (also known as Valley of the Moon), in Jordan's far south, was the next stop on our adventure, where we stayed in Bedouin tents in the desert. Actually, with a queen-sized bed, fully equipped bathrooms and solar electricity until 9 p.m., it was more like staying in a yurt. From our camp, a Jeep ride into the desert where no roads exist brought us to the ruins of Lawrence of Arabia's house.

Moving onward, awe-inspiring desert vistas presented themselves as we bounced in the back of the Jeep to a lookout, arriving just in time to watch the golden sun slip behind the sandy dunes. Returning to camp in the dark, we were treated to a dinner of meat and vegetables that had been cooked on coals underground all day. The desert nights can be chilly, so we abandoned the campfire, opting for the relative warmth of the open air lounge tent. Here we lounged on low-cushioned benches like sultans, gazing out at the starry night and sharing the bubbly vapours of lemon mint shisha, which is popular in the Middle East. It's not an experience I need to repeat anytime soon, but hey, when in Middle Eastern desert...

Before dawn we rose for a sunrise camel ride in the desert. Yes, more terrifying mounting and dismounting, but the spectacular desert sunrise was worth it! After breakfast we

moved on to the Dana Biosphere Reserve, where we were met by a driver in a hippy van, complete with a fringed front window and fake grass carpeting, for the drive in to Feynan Ecolodge. Wow, trippy!

In contrast to the wild ride, the lodge was a tranquil, unplugged environment. Here they practice sustainable tourism, lighting the rooms with candles made on the premises. The soap is made by local women, and solar panels provide the power for the hotel. We attended a breadmaking demonstration at a local Bedouin home, where our hostess baked bread straight on ash and coals using only three ingredients. We returned to our lodge for a completely candlelit dinner, then retired to candlelit rooms, and had a hot water bottle delivered to our rooms for the night — it felt like living in a medieval castle.

In the morning we left Feynan reluctantly, but the Dead Sea was calling. Dead Sea products can be purchased all over Jordan, so we were excited to get to the source, to coat ourselves in the youth-producing mud, before floating effortlessly in the super-salty Dead Sea. Unfortunately, a freak flood closed the Dead Sea for bathing, so we slathered on that mud extra thick — but no floating for us. We consoled ourselves with a massage at the spa.

The final day we returned, full circle, for a farewell dinner in Amman. Discussing the highlights of our time together, we agreed that, although our first glimpse of The Treasury was a defining moment, and no trip to Jordan is complete without a visit to Petra, we all learned that Jordan has so much more to offer. ■

*Amy Muschik is a freelance writer and photographer whose work has appeared in Readers Digest UK, on TV's The Tonight Show, and in several other print and online publications.*



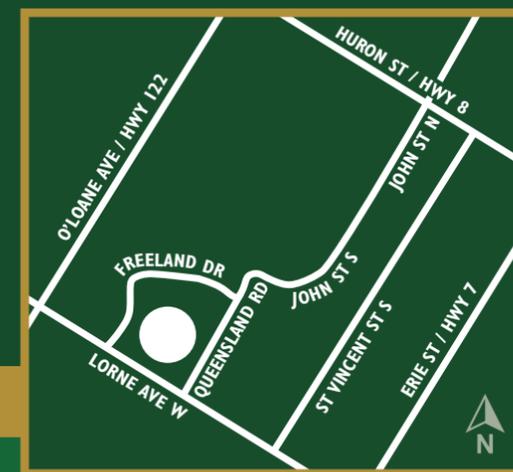
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