

# JORDAN

*A Cultural Excursion*



*John Alexander*

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## Jordan: A Cultural Excursion

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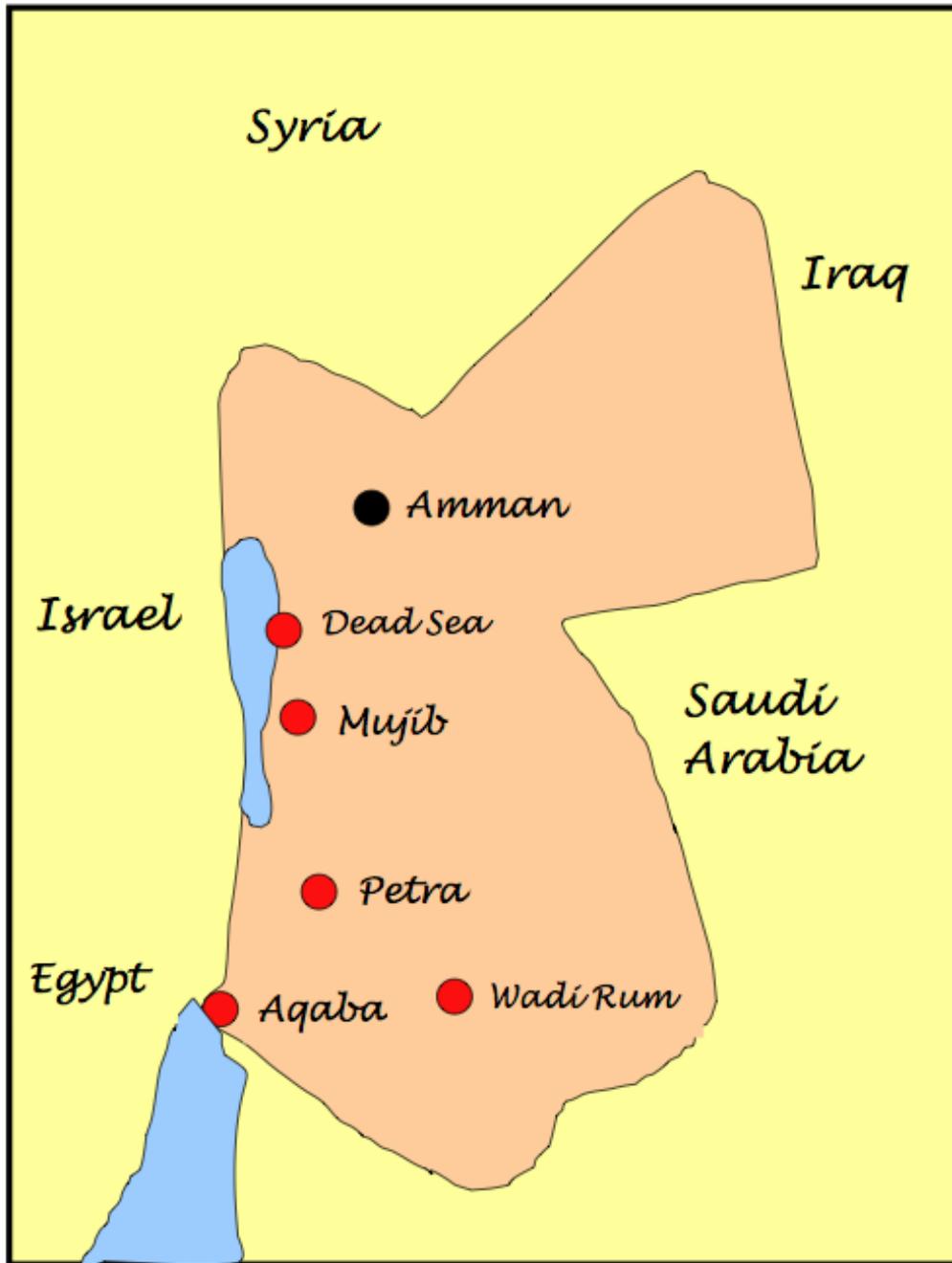
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# Jordan

# The Hashemite Kingdom

A cultural excursion to Jordan? What are the expectations of visitors to Jordan? There is Petra of course, and the ancient culture of the Nabataeans, the Dead Sea, the culture of the Bedouins, of Islam, and of Jordan itself. There are the ruins and remnants of the Romans, the Crusaders and the landmarks of three world religions. Not to forget the alien desert landscape of Wadi Rum, where gathered the tribes that led to the Great Arab Uprising and the taking of Aquaba and the story of T E Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia.

For most people traveling to Jordan, Petra is the big attraction – a lost desert city, hidden away for centuries, created by a people of which scarce little is recorded, then abandoned. A mystery. Like Tikal in Guatemala, Angkor in Cambodia, Memphis in Egypt, Machu Picchu in Peru and Palmyra in Syria. Such places are irresistible. Lost civilisations leaving behind cultural remnants – little pieces of puzzles for the following generations to come to try and figure out.

And there is another reason why I wanted to visit Jordan. In recent years the western perceptions of

Islamic culture have become deeply divided, more so than the previous years of a troubled decade. Conflicts in Iraq, in Iran, Turkey threats by Islamic fundamentalists to bomb Bali, the attempted destruction of a US airliner, by a Nigerian student 'radicalised' in Yemen. In Switzerland a people's referendum voted to ban the construction of minarets in their country, and in Sweden a mosque was fire-bombed in Malmö. In December 2009 a public-service television documentary claimed that Swedish-based Islamists were paving a way for enforcing fundamentalist Shari'a law upon the local Muslim population. An estimated one thousand fundamentalists, with a strong reactionary political agenda, were successfully manipulating the Swedish government and the immigrant Muslim population of 400,000 people down the road of Islamic conservatism. Words like *Shari'a*, *hujib*, *halal*, and 'crimes of honour' are becoming integrated into the everyday parlance of hitherto homogenous Swedish culture. Regardless of the political correctness Swedish authorities can muster, local people are becoming increasingly anxious. It is an anxiety shared by the Swiss, the Norwegians, the Finns; in other countries Great Britain, Denmark, France, the Netherlands it is expressed in rage.

I have worked in Morocco, travelled to Egypt several times, and across the Great Asian Highway through Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan; I work with Muslim students, researchers and professionals from all walks of life and from many different countries and have had the good fortune to meet only individuals that are hospitable, courteous and easy to get along with. Yet there it is – the big black cloud of Islam. What is the problem? What are we afraid of? Why are these terrible events splashed across our daily newspapers labelled Islam and Muslim and not ‘terrorist’? Why are these countries breeding grounds for terrorism and why are western cultures so fearful of Islam? Or Muslims? Or what’s the difference? What kind of conflict persists almost a thousand years after the first Christian Crusaders rode to the Holy Lands: Jordan, Palestine and Israel? [Eight crusades, from 1095 to 1291]

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Jordan has a solid reputation. It is considered the safest of all Middle Eastern countries for western travellers. It is a kingdom, yet known for political moderation compared to its immediate neighbours, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Jordan is an Islamic kingdom;

Jordanians are practicing Muslims. They speak Arabic the official language of 25 countries, stretching from Morocco in the west to Saudi Arabia and Iraq to the east. Arabic language, Islamic faith and a terrain where borders are little more than colonial constructs, as tribes and clans eked out a nomadic life since before recorded history.

So what makes Jordan Jordanian? How do Jordanian people define their culture, their history, their values, their language? Jordanian people I've before this trip have struck me as quite reserved and mild-mannered in comparison to many of their middle eastern neighbours, and most apparent of all, imbued with a strong sense of national pride. Not flag waving patriotism just proud to be from Jordan. 'No society is perfect,' one Jordanian exchange student told me, 'but in Jordan we come close.' Isn't it strange? I've heard similar reflections from my Australian compatriots about Australia, and not least my friends and colleagues in Sweden, about Sweden.

The day before we leave, the King of Sweden has presented the Nobel Prize for Literature to Rumanian author Herta Müller. In her work Herta Müller is deeply critical of the present day regime of Rumania 20 years

after the fall of Ceauçescu and the old school communists are still running the country, she laments. Swedish Radio contacts the Rumanian ambassador in Stockholm for a comment. The ambassador is a woman about the same age as Herta Müller, also as forthright and articulate. ‘Herta Müller is correct of course,’ says the ambassador. ‘Our country faces many problems and we have not yet freed ourselves of all the shackles of the past. But we are trying. Reforms are being made. No-one ever wrote the manual on how to make the perfect society. You can’t take up a book that says do this and everything will be perfect. It is a process, it takes time...’

The Rumanian ambassador is right, I think. There is no manual. Only culture. A set of values we share and try and uphold, and in every culture we convince ourselves ‘this is the right way to live together in a society.’ Culture is the bedrock that convinces us we can do it. Swedish liberalism, the American dream and the American Constitution that goes with it, Cuban socialism, Australian pragmatism, the Shari’a law adopted by some Islamic states (but not all), new China and the reforms of economic expediency culture driven regimes aspiring toward the same ideal if not the perfect society, the most expedient.

It is this conviction of cultural rectitude that drives pilgrims to pilgrimages, crusaders to crusades. A thousand years ago Jordan was the starting off point for both. Pilgrims *en route* to Mecca and to Jerusalem; crusaders likewise. I'm not sure that attitudes have changed that much. The English still take with them their empire and the French their colonialism.

I am reminded of this one morning at breakfast at the hotel in Aqaba. An elderly French couple at the breakfast room they instruct the waiter to get *baguettes* and make coffee *a la française* the breakfast *café au lait* in a large cup. '*Non non pas comme ça; comme ça.*' The old guy gets agitated as he barks off his instructions in rapid-fire French. Instructions and commands continue until he and his severe looking wife have successfully trained the natives into the rituals of the French breakfast. And guess what? The Jordanian waiter speaks French.

Crusaders and pilgrims. A thousand years ago a trip to Jordan was in deference to the Christian faith, or to impose that faith upon others. Ever since, pilgrims have journeyed to Jerusalem, or to Mecca, while the crusaders have taken different routes. Persuading others about the righteousness of the cause, is in the

rhetoric and deeds of politicians, missionaries and terrorists. Many are zealots and you cannot argue with a zealot.

Then came the merchants and the explorers. It was the merchants who founded Petra, and the explorers who rediscovered it. A city fortress where itinerant traders led caravans loaded with incense and spices, and to ensure good customer relations, created a city founded upon a fusion of faiths and deities, of temples and architectural styles. Petra, it turns out, is a tribute to ‘the good deal’, and long-term business relations. When business dries up (as it did when Petra was absorbed into the Roman empire) the merchants move on.

Much to explore in Jordan. The cultures of Nabataea, of Islam, of Jordan itself. Our excursion begins in the desert with an eco-tourist version of the Bedouin culture.

## *Some phrases...*

<i>Aywah/la</i>	<i>yes/no</i>
<i>Shukran</i> <i>Itfuddal</i>	<i>thank you</i> <i>please</i>
<i>Assalaamu alaykoom</i> <i>Wa alaykoom assalaam</i> <i>Hala</i>	<i>peace be upon you (hello)</i> <i>(reply) peace upon you too</i> <i>thank you for saying hi</i>
<i>Sabahl khayr</i> <i>Sabahn-noor</i>	<i>morning of abundance (Good morning)</i> <i>reply morning of light (Good morning)</i>
<i>Masa il-khayr</i> <i>Masa en-noor</i>	<i>afternoon/evening of abundance</i> <i>afternoon of light</i>
<i>Shoo akhbarak?</i>	<i>what's up?</i>
<i>Shlonak?</i> <i>Reply:</i>	<i>How are you? (Whats your colour?)</i> <i>Tamaam, shuag baraat ('Good.')</i>
<i>Ma assalaameh</i> <i>Allah ysalmak</i>	<i>go in peace</i> <i>God keep you safe (reply)</i>
<i>Al-hamdulillah</i> <i>Mars'allah</i>	<i>praise be to God</i> <i>with God's blessings</i>
<i>Shebab</i> <i>Maalesh or mafee mushkelah</i>	<i>guys, hi, 'supp, etc lit. youth</i> <i>its ok, no problem</i>

# Wadi Rum

December in the archipelago. Cold and dark. Arrive at Aqaba at 5pm to see the last of the sunset over the desert mountains. Picked up at the airport by Morfar calls himself Mackenzie after some years working as transport manager for the Hollywood productions made in Jordan. He was the driver for Val Kilmer in *Red Planet*. (*Mission to Mars* was also filmed in Wadi Rum same year; 2000). Mackenzie introduces us to Mohamed, our driver. Mohamed has a slight American accent.

Mohamed gets lost within a few minutes in the outskirts of Aqaba, trying to get to the main desert road. The new half-completed industrial projects financed by the French constitute a labyrinth of building sites and roadways. This road just ends. Now back on the highway. Mohamed very talkative. Another characteristic picked up from Chicago. Expressions like ‘you guys’, ‘trust me’ ‘you’re gonna love it’...

From driving taxis in Chicago to driving tourists in Jordan. At the age of 15 his family moved to Chicago. His hometown Karak south of Amman was ravaged by the battles between Jordan, Israel and the PLO in

the 1970s. Now he's back in Jordan. Now lives in Amman the capital. Married to an Italian/native American wife, who fell in love with Jordan on a family visit and convinced Mohamed to relocate. Now he's got three kids and a wife who is the ruler of the domestic domain. The kids get a proper education, he says, without the daily gun controls and security checks and gang wars. No drugs in Jordan. Chicago too much violence.

Yet here we are in the most troubled political zone on the planet, about 5 km from the Israeli border and 20 km from the Saudi border. Egypt to the south and Syria and Irak to the north. Lebanon, Hamas, Hizbollah, and Islamic fundamentalism. 'But hey', says Mohamed, 'trust me you guys. You're gonna love it.' Jordan is by comparison a haven of low-key moderation. 'Sure,' says Mohamed, 'laws are strict. But you know it's like Baretta. "If you can't do the time, you don't do the crime",' he quips. Hm. Didn't Baretta Robert Blake get off for murdering his wife? Maybe in the US, says Mohamed from Chicago; not here!

Driving out to the Wadi Rum. First the lights of Aqaba are far in the distance, then disappear. It is pitch black. The Wadi Rum is famous for the Bedouin travellers, the

pilgrims, the crusaders and Lawrence of Arabia, There was a time when the caravans journeyed the Silk Road to the East and a time when Petra – the great lost city – was a central point of trade, culture and commerce. It was in the Wadi Rum the Bedouin tribes assembled and rode on to Aqaba in 1917 – the Great Arab Uprising, to block the port and prevent foreign invasion. In 1962, David Lean who directed *Lawrence of Arabia* (Peter O’Toole as Lawrence) was faithful to the locations, up to the point when the Arab army entered Aqaba itself. ‘It doesn’t look real enough,’ he said, and created a phony Aqaba in the south of Spain for the final scenes of the uprising.



*From the film Lawrence of Arabia (1962). Despite the distance of the shot, it really is Peter O’Toole and Omar Sharif riding the camels – under the firm insistence of director David Lean.*

From the back seat of the Toyota Camry there is only darkness. From Aqaba to the Wadi Rum it is about 70 km. We are heading for the Bedouin campsite where we are to spend the night. It's already cold. The stars swirl like fairy lights.

Signs of civilisation are scarce. A petrol station in the middle of nowhere. A guy sitting in a chair outside, dressed in Bedouin *jellabah*, He gets up and walks around, smokes a cig and returns to his chair. He looks despondent but who knows? Surrounded by desert. What's this guy's life like?

Mohamed driving increasingly slowly. We've been driving a long way and there's no sign of anything except the sign we are parked by now Saudi border 14 km. Mohamed apologises profusely. He makes a phone call. At least there's a network out here, We drive back toward the small desert town of Disa an array of stone buildings and grilled doorways; a barber shop, a food shop, a mosque; guys walking along the dirt track at the side of the road; some kids throwing stones at a tin sign. Another phone call we've come too far the other side of Disa. A few kilometres outward into the wilderness and a four wheel drive waits by a turnoff. In the middle of the night you can't make out if it's a road

or just sand. The Toyota Camry heaves and bobs along the track that must be uncomfortable even for the pick-up truck. Twenty minutes later the truck stops and we pull up behind it.

Tents in several rows surrounded by overhanging red rocks. The rocks illuminated by subtly concealed spotlights in white and red. The contrast of the rock and the red sand and deep dark blue sky punctuated by iridescent holes of white lights. A waning moon over the horizon, a yellowish crescent, almost horizontal, hanging over a mountain.

We drag our cases across the sand past three rough looking guys, their heads enshrouded in shawls against the cold night air. They sit at a table illuminated by a gasol light. A rough looking guy, about 30, looks up. '*Marharban*,' he says although the tone seems to imply more, 'yeh?' rather than the word's more traditional meaning of 'welcome'. We look around for signs of other guests in vain.

The tent is large enough to contain a twin bed and that's all. A pile of about a dozen or so blankets lies on top of it. An ominous sign. The orange plastic floor is covered with sand. We leave our bags. Mr Rough shows

Mohamed the tent next door – and the two figures make an interesting contrast. Mr Rough is dressed in traditional Bedouin garb; Mohamed is an urbane figure from the middle class suburbs of Amman, and wearing the clothes more akin to a city businessman. Mohamed and Mr Rough exchange a few words, and the conversation ends with Mr Rough doing an Arabic gesture of resignation I recognise from my travels in Morocco and Egypt. The tilted head, and wounded look, the dismissive repose. I guess we'll find out what that means tomorrow. 'OK guys,' says Mohamed, 'I'm gonna pick you up tomorrow in the afternoon.' Mohamed drives off and here we are, in the desert with three Bedouin guys. It's about 7pm and feels cold like Sweden in January. Only in Sweden we would be wearing a thick coat by now.

Mr Rough tells us we are going to be served dinner from the traditional charcoal grill; I explain to Mr Rough that I am a vegetarian. He gives a sour look, which could be interpreted as 'more trouble' or 'too bad for you.' Either way it will be interesting to see what comes to the table. *Insh'allah*. A low table with a few cushions – out in the open with some hessian canopies not quite thick enough to conceal the

illumination of the night constellations. Orion to the right, the dazzling Polar Star above the mountain ridge.

We are served some traditional tea *shay* mixed with sage and cardamom (plant of the ginger family, used as a spice and also medicinally), and lots of sugar. Then come a variety of dishes – fatoush, bageboul, hummus, pita, olives, rice mixed with... hm black seeds.

The three guys of the camp sit there and watch as we eat; Mr Rough smokes cigarettes one after the other. So does the older guy.

Dinner was good. The hummus had the right mix of lemon and sweetener, an iridescent colourful blend of finely chopped carrot chilli peppers, onion, olive oil and a few other spices (including just a hint of cloves). Gangs of cats parade around the table and the tents and silence is punctual by a yowling cat or a sharp hiss, or Ahmed throwing a shoe to stop a cat fight. Mr Rough's name is Ahmed and his English is OK. He seems to be head of the camp-site. 'Not many people?' I observe (in fact there are none.) Yesterday, he says there were 40 tourists. And it rained. I look at the hessian covering over the dinner table. 'Very wet,' he says. He

shakes his head as if trying to dispel a particularly troublesome memory.

Some more *shay*: It's very quiet. Stars are white bullet holes against a black tapestry. The handle of Orion's saucepan hangs straight down, a signature I recollect from the clear desert skies camping outside Herat in Afghanistan during my travels in the 1970s. A lot has happened in 40 years but the stars don't change.

Tonight is clear enough, Also cold. It's eight o'clock, and we are going to sleep in what was described as a Bedouin tent. Frankly it is more reminiscent of an army bivouac. Ahmed and his two pals disappear. I think they live on the campsite somewhere – it's a huge area after all; plenty of space to hide. A sandy valley enclosed in three walls of mountains. The lights that lit up the valley are now turned off. We have a candle in the tent, and there is light bulb that lights up the toilet and shower block about 100 metres away. The wild life in this region, according to Ahmed, consists of wolves and wild dogs, hyenas and mountain cats. Scorpions, snakes and lizards come out after the sun comes up.

We crawl into the bitterly cold bed, dressed with several layers of clothing, and pile on the blankets one

by one until by virtue of the weight it is hardly possible to move. The thick silence is broken by an occasional cat yowl or wail. This will continue through the night. Any group of more than five cats will lead to altercations, and here there are maybe twenty or thirty, a collection of gangs vying for territory and food scraps, attention and power who knows? Their discussions to human ears sound like wild chilling screams that send shivers to the spine. Worse was to come.

Sleep has never come easy for me and tonight less so. Still awake after two hours heavy silence except for cat yowls at half hourly intervals. The night is getting colder. The flickering candle casting wild shadows across the tent fabric, flickers its last at the precise moment wild dogs begin to howl. First from a distance then coming closer. Howling at the stars, the moon and howling at shadows. Now you can hear them, a whole pack, running through the grounds. A few skirmishes with cat gangs follow. Some dog barking, cat hissing this goes on for thirty minutes. I check the watch it is now 1.18 am. Therese is sound asleep. If the insomnia and the hyperthermia don't get to me maybe the dogs will. A few of them are sniffing around the tent. I get up and unzip the entrance but the dogs are already far away. Some shadows on the overhanging rocks against a

background of night stars. The alpha male makes a silhouette, sits down on his haunches and howls, then walks away.

I walk around the site, the only light coming from the thin crescent moon and the myriad of stars. It was here in the Wadi Rum, gazing at the stars, that T E Lawrence somewhere around 1916, had an epiphany that led to the Great Arab Uprising culminating in the port of Aqaba some 70 kilometres to the south. What did he see up there? His own mortality? His own insignificance?

I walk around the perimeter of the site – it is dark but not that dark, and this is a good way to keep warm. Return to the tent, lie awake for a few more hours, get up again around 4.30, Half-sleep between 5.00 and 6.00 and at 6.05 it's like someone turned on a giant switch. It is dazzlingly light. I get up and watch the sunrise over the overhanging rocks that when we arrived were rough black shapes rising out of the desert. My feet are numb with cold and my neck is as stiff as a board.

An old guy wanders in at seven and starts up the fire and by 7.30 we're drinking tea and eating breakfast pita, hummus, a kind of soft feta cheese, olives and a

boiled egg. The cats prowl around and the same three guys from last night sit and watch as we eat. The younger guy interrupts his non-stop cigarette smoking to throw something at two cats closing in on the breakfast buffet. I get a paw on my knee-cap as one desperate puss lunges for some feta cheese. I remember from previous experiences in the Middle East don't feed the cats. One brief act of charity and you're stuck with a cat for the duration. Meanwhile two other cats get into an argument and punctuate the otherwise quiet morning with yelps and yowls. Howling dogs in the night and yowling cats in the morning. Mountain lions and coyotes.

After breakfast I follow some fresh-made footprints in the sand that lead to an old guy standing by the kitchen tent. 'Good morning', he says and introduces himself as Jumar. 'It means Friday,' he adds with a wink, 'You know, like Robinson Crusoe.' He is a quiet reserved elderly gent, with a stubble of white beard. 'Can I help you with something?' I ask. 'I am going to help you,' he says. 'To experience the marvels of the desert.' He points to a Toyota pick-up truck. In Australia we call it a *ute* short for utility van; a cabin at the front for the driver and open at the back. There are make-shift seats

in the back and Therese and I place ourselves prepared for the bumpy ride. And bumpy it is.

Wadi means valley and ‘rum’, well, no-one seems to know what it means. In Swedish ‘rum’ means space, and maybe endless space is as good a translation as any. It’s a rough ride across the sand dunes and as the sun hits the sand the air warms up pretty quick. First stop is ‘the valley of the many coloured sands’. There are many colours. Red, brown, grey, white, yellow and an almost green. The Cave of Lawrence and the rock formation directly opposite that has been dubbed ‘the Seven Pillars of Wisdom’.



*The Seven Pillars.*

The ‘Cave’ and the ‘Seven Pillars’ are something of a fabrication – if there are tales for old wives this is a typical tale for credulous tourists. The title of T E Lawrence’s book (first published in 1922) comes from the Book of Proverbs 9:1: “*Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars*”. The naming of the rock formation emerged sometime since the film came out in 1962. Maybe there are seven peaks, maybe five – depends on how you count. Anyway, the nomenclature has more to do with the burgeoning tourist industry than Lawrence of Arabia...



*A ship of the desert...*

Stone archways, a ship in the desert, (Jumar calls it the Titanic). a mushroom cloud: the rock formations are plentiful and range from the magnificent to the bizarre. At the stone archway Jumar rubs a red rock to get some

red rouge. ‘Bedouin women make-up,’ he says and the silence is broken by an approaching four-wheel drive. He looks up and says quietly, ‘Israelis.’

Shortly afterwards three more gleaming brand new four wheel drives pull up at the rocks, as the driver of the first vehicle jumps out and begins to shout instructions to the others on how to park in line. In the middle of this vast wasteland the Israeli SUV’s park with a precision that would leave German tourist guides envious. We have not seen any vehicles today and the desert is as large as a small country, yet still, this Israeli quest for order in an environment that borders on the chaotic.

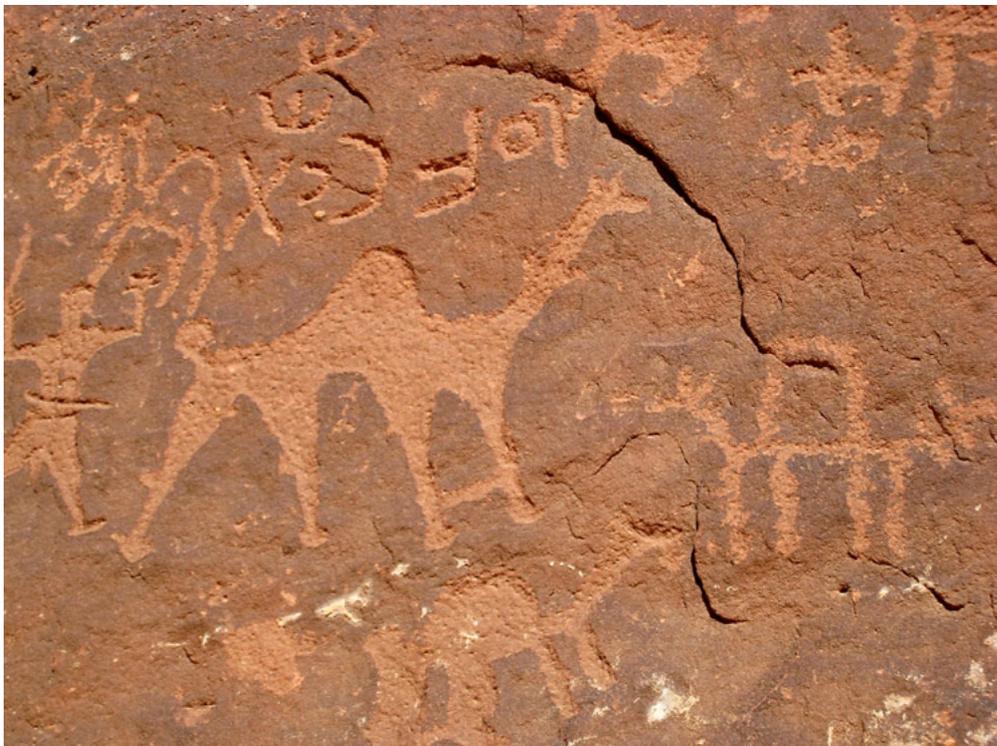
‘Maybe we should leave,’ says Jumar and we jump in the back and he drives off. We arrive at a more spectacular stone archway, hidden in a valley off the desert sands. It is a steep climb to the top, with a magnificent view. I gaze down at Jumar fixing something with his pick-up and in the distance the clouds of dust from four speeding Israeli SUV’s approaching with gusto. Once more they choose to park within a metre of Jumar’s vehicle, and once more in a precise line as the ‘commander’ shouts orders at all directions, as two

families emerge and begin setting up picnic tables and carrying baskets of provisions.

The Israeli demeanour is interesting to observe for it seems no matter which country (I met quite a few Israeli people during my stay in Japan) they have a knack of announcing their presence with the kind of confidence otherwise found with Californian natives and yes, perhaps some German tourists who ritually acquire poolside deck chairs in Spanish holiday resorts by placing their towels on them at 7am. Just as those deck chairs were proclaimed in the name of the fatherland, so is the desert now claimed by a party of 10 Israeli tourists – 7 adults and 3 kids – driving in four vehicles, glistening brand new oversized SUV's with shining white Israeli license plates.

Jumar casts his glance downwards once more as though he has seen this procedure many times before. The driver and his more solid looking companion (wearing a cowboy hat) hops out of the first vehicle, draws a line in the sand and paces out 10 metres as the other vehicles approach, guiding them in one at a time, shouting and yelling the while, as if these were aircraft landing at a particularly risky airfield. It is as if we were not there, for Jumar's tired old vehicle is almost boxed in, as the

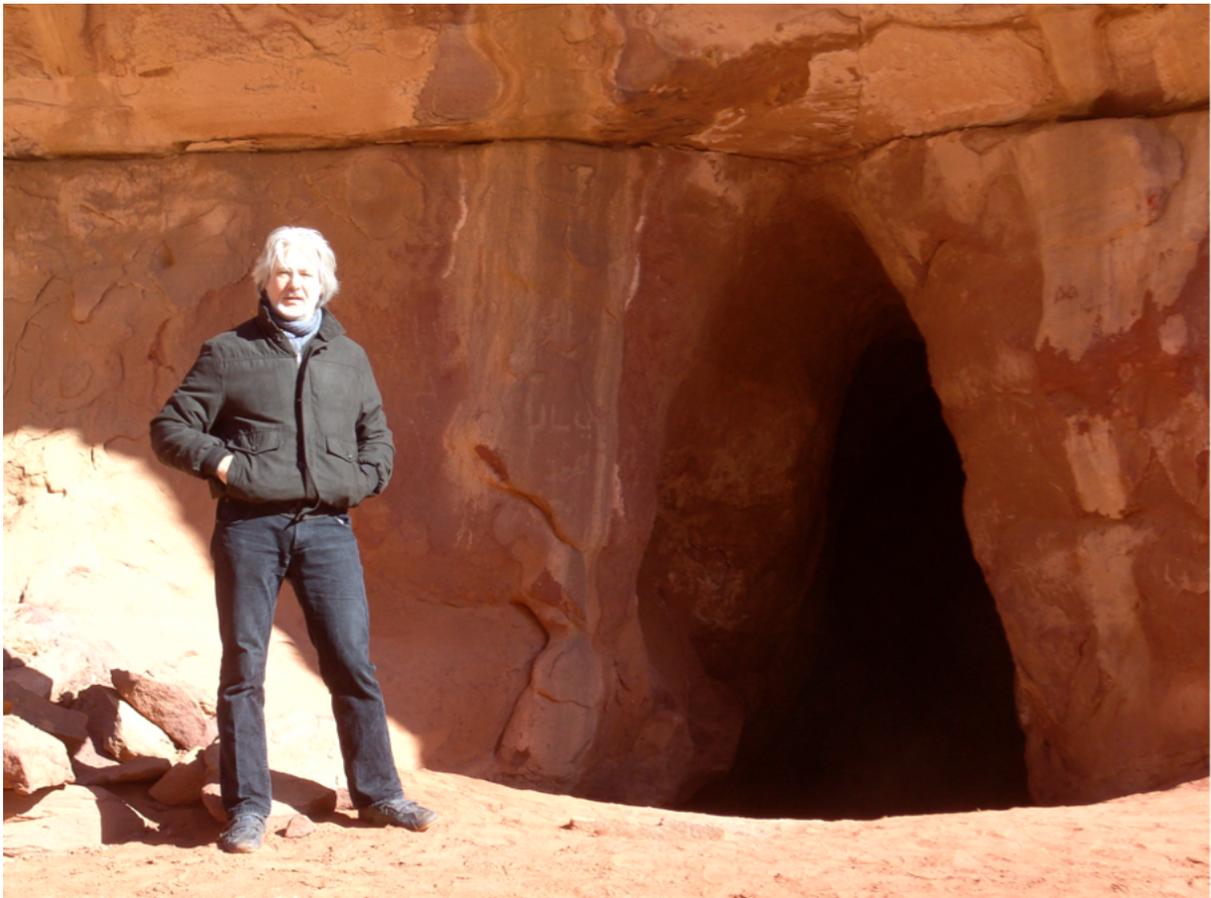
other men women and kids quickly annex this piece of desert with trestle tables, fold up chairs, picnic baskets and freeze boxes. The vehicles are now parked in a perfect straight line and as we prepare to depart the stillness of the desert is further shattered by slamming doors, the barking of orders and the sound of a ghetto blaster pounding out Israeli radio into the wilderness. Two teenage kids run up the rocks shouting ‘yi yi yi yi.’



*A Nabataean rock inscription outside Mohamed's tent, marking a cross roads for caravans: Petra to the left, Bosra to the right and Aqaba, due South.*

It's a decent drive to the next stop the caravan crossroads an ancient Nabataean rock site where ancient carvings show camels and tents in Nabataean pictographic script, a cross between Egyptian and

Sumerian alphabets. A short distance from the rock is a black Bedouin tent and Jumar shouts out, ‘*A’salaam haray kum*’, and a reply comes from within the tent folds, and opens up. A tall man of classic Arabic stature in full length grey *jellobah* and white head- dress smiles in a dignified manner and bids us welcome. Tea is on the charcoal stove, and guess what a small table replete with Bedouin souvenirs stands by the entrance (no postcards).



*The Cave of Lawrence, maybe...*

The tea is excellent *shay* with a mix of sage and cardimom (he has some packets on sale at the stand), and Mohamed (amazingly, that is his name) offers a short recital of a classic Bedouin tune a melancholic refrain accompanied by the single stringed (horse hair) cello like instrument played with a bow (also horse hair). He is a skillful player and the instrument is hand-made (Mohamed's hands), and the melody passed down from many generations. Jumar joins in half way through with wistful closed-eyed accompaniment.



*Strange shapes in the Wadi Rum desert*

Apart from Bedouin tea Mohamed's wares include Bedouin soap, shawls and *hajibs* (also assorted souvenirs of the more tacky variety), and Therese gets the two guys instructing her on how to wear the *hajib*. Three layers provide three options – cover the face, cover hair and chin, or wear it with the slit to reveal eyes only – three different veils that provide three different levels of exposure. Also helps explain why Arab women focus on eye enhancement products.



Now we are once again in the back of the van, bumping over the dunes at some speed, passing by the ‘Seven Pillars’, an old roadway, and a railway line that carries phosphate to the north (no passenger trains), finally returning to the campsite.

Mohamed (the driver Mohamed from Amman) is with ‘the guys’ his Toyota Camry parked by the campsite entrance. There are seven today. My first impression is that they are huddled around the same small table to eat lunch, but no five guys are watching two other guys play dominoes a kind of hierarchy by age. The older guys play, the less older watch, and the three young guys struggle to see between the other onlookers. Why not play your own game of dominoes? Respect for their elders? Perhaps a tableau of the human condition in the vast midst of Wadi Rum, one of the most spectacular deserts of the Middle East, to stand about watching a couple of old guys play dominoes.

As I place our bags in to Mohamed’s Camry, he confesses that he spent the night in Aqaba that a tent had been reserved for him too, but ‘I can’t afford to get sick, you know I’m the driver...’ There seems to have survived the night OK; my neck is as stiff as a board, and the wisdom of wearing head shawls day and night is now painfully apparent.

After the initial bumpy jolting across the track to the main road, it’s a smooth ride on the Kings Highway en route to Petra. Mohamed suggests the ‘scenic route’ a stretch of 20 km unmade road, and so narrow in

stretches there is room for a single vehicle. But the views are spectacular and with a little imagination it is possible to travel back in time nearly a thousand years, when pilgrims journeyed from Aqaba – the Muslims toward Mecca, the Christians toward Jerusalem; the crusaders and the merchants, and later the explorers, traversing the hidden pathways to Petra.

Mohamed suggests a detour to Little Petra – about 8km from Petra, but after a sleepless night at Wadi Rum, I'm thinking about taking a nap. According to the Rough Guide to Jordan, Little Petra is off the beaten track, and 'well worth the visit.' Oh well.



## *Lawrence and Arabia*

During World War One a young Englishman named T E Lawrence, a former clerk working at the Cairo Foreign Office, successfully united the feuding Arab tribes to bring an end to the Turkish stronghold over the Middle East. He led the assault on Aqaba which marked the beginning of the Great Arab Uprising (1916-1918), and his daring raids on Turkish lines of supplies quickly hastened the demise of the Ottoman Empire.

At least, that's the story. It is the story immortalised in T E Lawrence's account of events, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), and ensconced into popular consciousness by the film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). It is a story founded upon T E Lawrence's uncorroborated version of events, and the stuff, not of which dreams are made, but large-scale Hollywood productions. If this is not enough to plant just a few seeds of suspicion as to the accuracy of the account, it may be worth looking into some of the local portrayals of Lawrence. In Jordan where many of these events took place T E Lawrence is considered a minor character in a series of complex political events orchestrated by Sharif Hussein bin Ali, then Emir of Mecca and later King of Hejaz, the

great grandfather of Jordan's King Hussein, also father of Hashemite Emir Faisal, later King Faisal of Syria (1920), and of Iraq (1921 – 1933), who planned the attack on Aqaba.

Whatever the extent of Lawrence's involvement in the Uprising (commemorated by the enormous flag flailing to the sea-breezes between Aqaba's public beach and the passenger ferry terminal), his accounts, both in literature and film, illuminate two aspects of cultural uncertainty between the Western and Middle Eastern perspectives. Two perspectives that help define the Middle Eastern culture is 'kin' (*ahlan*), and the other is, 'God's will' (*insh'alla*). Compare this to Lawrence's England where social obligations supersede family obligations, and the will of man means the individual is responsible for their own actions.

The idea of a nation state came into prominence during Lawrence's time as an army official, yet in the Middle East still today in many respects the importance of the tribe, and family, and family ties predominate. In the colonial years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Europeans tended to define their identity through nationality or region, Arabs by tribe. (According to his own accounts this was

Lawrence's mission to unify the rivalling tribes and create an Arab nation.)



*T E Lawrence, Wadi Rum, 1916*

Lawrence never mentions family (except for the father ‘who did not marry my mother!’), he talks in terms of ‘the British, the French, the Turks. When Feysal talks about gathering a Bedouin army, Lawrence replies in a tone of jeering superiority: ‘The Arabs? Which tribe is that?’

If attitudes to family and nationhood represent one area of cultural conflict, the other must be attitudes to outcomes. The fatalist Arabic perspective (‘it is written’),

in contrast to Lawrence's British, Oxford University perspective; 'it is written only when I write it.' For every time Sharif Ali (Omar Sharif) says 'it is written,' (and he says it a few times), Peter O'Toole retorts: 'nothing is written.' The exception is on one dramatic occasion, when he decides to rally the army and attack Aqaba from the desert. 'Lawrence, it cannot be done,' says Sharif. To which Lawrence replies, pointing to his forehead: 'it is written in here!'



*Peter O'Toole, Wadi Rum, 1962*

Thus, in the film version, it is Lawrence who successfully persuades warring Bedouin tribes to overcome their personal disputes, to wage war against the Turks, take back the vital port of Aqaba, and claim

their place in world politics. This led to the Great Arab Uprising of 1916 – 1918. It also led to a lot of backstabbing in world politics, the results we are still living with today. The Turks withdrew and the British saw a chance to expand their Empire, and in doing so break the promise to give the region back to the Arabs.

But the real power of the film, and of T E Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, lies not in the description of political conflicts and the romanticised account of historical events, but of men's struggle against their ultimate adversary – the desert. Little wonder the Arab mindset is fatalistic. In Dorset, Lawrence could chop down a tree, make a fire, shoot a rabbit. In Dorset a man could make his own choices – move house, find a new job, buy a motorcycle. In the desert nature makes those choices for you.

Regarding Lawrence, it is more a story of Lawrence of England and how his Englishness provides a contrast against the culture of the Middle East. Thus Lawrence *and* Arabia, and not 'of.' We are left with an ambivalent image of a self-proclaimed self-publicist whose status seeking is abetted by American journalist, Lowell Thomas, fictionalised as Jackson Bentley in the film, a hack 'in search of a good story' and, he tells Prince

Feisal, 'looking for a hero'. Lawrence is an army official who liked to parade in ceremonial Bedouin dress, ('an Englishman in drag', as one commentator expressed it); a footnote to the Great Arab Uprising 1916-1918, and the treachery of the foreign powers, where a lack of knowledge and social skills, combined with a predilection dividing up world maps with straight lines to create a sense of geometrical precision, would lead to the traumas, dislocation and irreconcilable territorial backlashes that pervade in the Middle East to the present day.

Maybe what makes Middle Eastern politics so volatile can be read into the symbolic gesture of an English army clerk, pointing to his head proclaiming; 'it is written *here!*' *Insh'allah* is not just to say 'it is in the hands of God', but also to say, 'leave it alone. You don't know what you're getting into.'

# Taybeh

It is a perfect afternoon, around 25°, but after 2pm you can feel the intensity of the heat begin to wane. And sure, we are in the mountains about 1000 metres above sea-level. The Taybet Zaman, about 11 kilometres from Petra and Wadi Mousa, is nowadays a hotel village that was once a Bedouin village, and later, a thriving community during the Ottoman period. With the development of Wadi Mousa the community that has spread around the Petra site, the village fell into disuse. In the 1980s it was renovated and restored, the original cottages modernised with an attempt at keeping the sense of the village. We drive through a guarded iron gate, enter a stone building marked with a reception sign, and at the desk we get a ‘village map.’ The concierge indicates the village highlights restaurant, café, Turkish Bath, shops, and the village square. The key is to cottage Number Six. Why does this sound so familiar?

Cottage Number Six is a marked contrast to the desert tents of Wadi Rum. The room is beautifully decorated with a combination of Bedouin rugs and modern art in a unified colour scheme; an arched stone wall that

opens out into a glassed-in terrace with arabesque windows overlooking the valley. The sun now beginning its descent into the mountains. It will be dark in two hours.

The ‘village’ borders on the township of Taybeh, 11 km from Petra 9 km from Wadi Mousa where most of the hotels are located. It is self-contained and the restaurant door is open.



*Taybet Zaman, ‘village’ - a few kilometers from Petra*

One section of the restaurant is in the low Bedouin style squatting on cushioned seats. At 2pm we are the only guests, and a team of three waiters are at our

service. I struggle with an Arabic phrase I've been training for a week now: *'halay day kum tabak nabar tee?'* (Do you have any vegetarian food?) The waiter looks at me in a strange way and says 'huh?' Hands over the menus and says in effortless English: 'Is there anything special you're looking for? Just let me know!' We have a *mezze* of humus, warm pita bread, eggplant, spring carrot, fatoush, bougelbab. So beautifully prepared that even the recollection makes my mouth water.

After lunch we take a stroll around the village, getting lost several times, following the village map to little avail. The doorways each have their designer shabby chic wooden doorway, the uniform numbers, a Turkish bath, the village shop, the village square at the far end at the edge of the stone wall that surround the village, an iron gate with guards on each side. Why is this so familiar? Now I remember. The TV series, *The Prisoner*. Patrick McGoohan was Number Six. He was designated cottage number six in an idyllic village from where he could never leave. He knew government secrets. It was the best British TV series of the 1970s. When he arrives Number Two bids him welcome to the village. He is given a village map and cottage number six. I look at the map. Even the letter type is the same.

It is a beautiful village. OK the swimming pool is closed for the season, but the Turkish bath is open and for 20JD you get the massage, the steam room, the oiling down. I think we'll wait till the Dead Sea. Providing we ever get out of the village.

Patrick McGoochan retired to California after the end of the series. He refused to give interviews and lived a life of seclusion. He declined to explain the enigmatic plot twist of the final episode. Who was Number One who was keeping him prisoner, and refusing him to return to the outside world? In the final episode it is revealed that Number One was Number Six. The prisoner was also the gaoler. It was a sublime ending to the perfect TV series.

The sun is now descending over the valley. A rich landscape of mountains, rock formations, olive trees and other struggling straggly greenery. My neck and shoulders still stiff after the night-long ordeal in Wadi Rum. The day's warmth dissipates quickly. At 4:47pm the sun disappears from view and 4.58 pm it is dark.

We take a walk through the small town of Taybeh; as we pass the gate leaving the village, a guard calls out. 'Where you going?' he says. The guard on the other

side, operating the 2 metre high iron gate, approaches too. ‘We’re going for a walk...’ The guards look at each other and hesitate. ‘Uh...OK...’ and we keep walking. Up the road and past a few houses; there are a few general stores, a mosque, an electrical shop. Some school kids parade the streets. A woman coming out of the local hospital waits at the bus stop. The kids have the same patten as kids from Istanbul to New Dehli; ‘hello mister how are you what’s your name where you from.’ They all know the same phrases. They are all anxious to test them out on strangely dressed foreign people. Why not? You learn a few phrases at school and you wonder if they work. Let’s try them on the tourists...



*Uptown Taybeh*

Go into the local shop to buy some candles. The shopkeeper beams with pleasure but doesn’t understand a word. It’s 9 km from Wadi Mousa and apart from the Taybet Zaman, Taybeh itself is not on the list of must-

see places to visit. Yep, he has some candles. Pack of six. Cheap. It is clear that there is one Jordan for tourists, which is measured in dinars (1 dinar = 1 Euro), and another Jordan for the locals, who shop in piastras 100 piastras to a dinar.

We walk down the hill on the way back to the Taybet Zaman the village and now have a group of four kids following behind. ‘Hello mister how are you what’s your name where you from.’ By the fifth time, and still a half a kilometre to walk, Therese answers: ‘From Sweden...’ And that is enough the conversation begins. These kids are probably around 15 16, and their English is advanced. ‘We start to learn English aged nine,’ says one kid. ‘Is English difficult?’ I ask. ‘No easy.’ I’m still struggling with ‘*asalaam haray kum*’ (hello), and these kids can sustain a conversation on world affairs, Jordan politics and Islamic values and ethics. ‘Our prophet is Mohammed and your prophet is Jesus, right?’ Well, I guess it depends on what you mean by prophet...

As we approach the downhill slope to the village, the alpha leader of the gang-of-four hesitates: ‘Very nice talking to you mister and missus, we go back now...’ And surely the village must be some kind of off-limits a gated community with a clear divide between locals

and tourists, east and west, rich and poor, hence the guards and the two metre high iron gate.

In the restaurant the divide is more apparent than ever an outstanding seemingly endless buffet of mainly local dishes, and sure, why not, some wine something few locals would experience. We beat the rush within a half hour some tour groups arrive. Twenty five fifty-plusses from Philadelphia, wearing name tags and coloured caps; a smaller group from France and other assorted nationalities preparing for the invasion of the lost city of Petra. We have already planned an early start in high season up to 3,000 people a day enter what is now deemed the seventh of seven modern wonders; and at this time of year it's anyone's guess.

On cable TV it's *The Anchorman* with Will Ferrell, and the ads are the same as anywhere else. What a curious medium TV is. The same the world over. Show movies to sell 'stuff.' In between are the standard international ads for Snickers bars and Coke and airline companies, and also a couple of local idiosyncrasies. An ad for Nivea facial and body cream shows a woman applying Nivea to face and hands, then goes black for 10 seconds as she is about to start on her thighs. The seductive tones of the female Arabic voice continues in the

background. Maybe the ad is showing a bit more skin than is acceptable... The next ad is a local production with a hard-pressed Jordanian housewife in traditional *hajib* becoming increasingly agitated as her husband and children leave messy shoes and clothes in the kitchen and bathroom, while she stands there with mop and bucket. But her exasperation turns to bliss when she adds a few drop of Dettol to the bucket, the bottle of Dettol having magically manifested itself in the top right hand corner of the screen. Her immaculately made-up eyes light up with pleasure, and the generations of feminine oppression and the burden of domestic chores are instantly allayed by a product I've not come across since my formative years in Australia, the very name of which conjures up memories of the smell of disinfectant in school corridors and doctor's waiting rooms.

Nod off during *The Anchorman* and wake up to see the last few idiotic minutes, then can't sleep for an hour. Where are those damned tablets?

## Vegetarian Mezze...

In the Middle East being a vegetarian is considered an exclusively western eccentricity – unlike in Japan, China or India where Buddhist and Hindu traditions provide a social framework for not eating meat. In Morocco, off the tourist track, a vegetarian diet is a challenge; in Egypt, not even an issue. The abundance of Mediterranean vegetable dishes makes Egypt a culinary haven for non meat-eaters. In Jordan too, there is plenty to eat for vegetarians. Some things to ask for include:

*Hummus* – chickpeas mashed with *tahini*, lemon juice, garlic and olive oil. Every place has their own way of making it. Great for dipping *khubez* (pita bread) but always with the right hand only.

*Shanklish* – goats cheese with tomato

*Warag aynab* – stuffed vine leaves, as in Turkey and Greece

*Makdoos* – pickled aubergine

*Baba-ganoosh* – aubergine dip; like *hummus* only thicker

*Labneh* – somewhere between crème fraiche and yoghurt

*Fattoush* – comes from Lebanon; a salad chopped up finely and covered with strips of fried bread

*Tabbulah* – parsley tomato and carrot chopped up, a little olive oil and lemon; sometimes cloves. Always tastes fresh and zingy

*Mujeddrah* – lentils rice + onions

*Batatas* – French fries

*S'laata* is salad

*Khoodar* – means vegetables

There are usually also little spinach pies, and goat cheese pies, also *falafel* and *couscous*, as elsewhere in the Middle East.

For dessert there is:

*Halva* – sweet and hard, made from sesame seeds, Quite dry

*Mushabak* – pastries covered with honey. Very sweet like most desserts and pastries

*Awameh* – in India called *gulabjam*; an acquired taste

*Hareseh* – semolina cake with almond taste and very sticky

*Baglawa* – like Greek pastries – sweet and sticky

*Knaffy* – wheat biscuits with sweet goat cheese filling, covered in hot syrup

# Petra

Early breakfast ready for an early start. The Philadelphia tourist buss driver has started up his engine, belching diesel fumes into the chilly morning air. Mohamed picks us up at seven and it takes just a few minutes to Wadi Mousa. In the town centre the traffic seems pretty heavy, but a truck has collided with a taxi at the main intersection. A police car with flashing blue light while people jostle around conversing intensely add a sense of chaos to the early morning rush hour. No queues at the Petra visitors centre entrance however, and the layout is well-organised to accommodate tourists from all nations. Two big hotels, the Mövenpick and the Crowne Plaza, are close to the entrance, and up on the hill are all manner of smaller hotels and hostels; the Petra Moon, the Petra Venus, the Petra Palace... bare and spartan constructions against the rocky and barren façade.

We arrange a meeting place to re-join Mohamed later in the day, and are introduced to the guide, a guy called Souffian, and a couple from Hong Kong who will be joining us. I'm not crazy about guides. Nor guided tours. I've gotten into heated discussions with Egyptian

guides when it was obvious they didn't know what they were talking about. Also in Greece and Thailand and Sweden... actually many countries. In some places a guide is obligatory and it's a good way of promoting local economy. The best guides I've met were at Tikal (Guatemala) a young guy who couldn't speak English and left me to my own devices. I explored the ancient Mayan city for as long as I liked. Also the local guide at Angkor (Cambodia) who was simply a nice person, and over three days we enjoyed a lot of conversations and kept in touch a few years after the visit.

My favourite guided tour was on a visit to Chechen Itza in Yucatan. I made friends with a Dutch fellow on the long bus trip to the site and by the time we got there he looks at me and says, 'You seem to know a bit about this place, right?' 'A bit, sure.' 'Do you really want to go with the tour guide?' All along I'd intended not to. 'Can I join you?' he asks, 'You can tell me about the place right?' Well, it was the best guided tour I've ever been on. And, with the aid of a few books\* I had in my backpack, and an extensive background knowledge of Mayan astronomy, the most informative. I was the guide.

\* Fodor's Guide to the Yucatan, *The Mayan Factor* by José Argüelles and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* by John Stephens, first published in 1843, beautifully illustrated by Frederick Catherwood.

The Petra guide, Souffian, instantly affirms my prejudice against guides. Within less than 30 seconds I'd pegged him as a dominating *besserwisser*. I am one myself, so it's easy to tell. 'I meet you after the horse ride,' he says.

Part of the Petra 'experience' is the 800 metre horse ride to the Siq, which is the main entrance into the city. Once I'm on the horse I tell the guy to let go of the straps for heaven's sake, it's not a pony ride on a Devon beach. When you grow up in rural Australia you learn to ride horses. In addition four of the eight months I spent in Iceland was on a farm 60 cows, 100 sheep and 200 Icelandic horses. I was riding and getting thrown off Icelandic horses on an almost daily basis. Icelandic horses and the volcanic Icelandic terrain, are not to be messed with. Having some guy lead the horse was an insult to the injury of having to pay the tip to the horse handler at the end of ride. I give the guy 5 JDs and he says it's not enough; he wants 5 JDs per person. Outraged! I give the guy a look of severe contempt to teach him a lesson he will not forget in a hurry.

Such are the traps of tourism greedy horse handlers and *besserwisser* guides; it is a dance as old as tourist

sites and tourism, whether it is the pyramids of Egypt or the Stonehenge or the Eiffel Tower.

Souffian is an archaeologist who spent three years at Suffolk University, a self-proclaimed expert on the cultures of Egypt, Jordan and the Nabataeans. He bears an uncanny resemblance to High Priest Imhotep in *The Mummy, 1999* (played by Arnold Vosloo), but whereas Imhotep talks very little, Souffian talks very much. At places like this the facts and the information are all secondary. It is the experience that counts, not the babble.

It is a two and half kilometre walk before we get to the Treasury House – the most celebrated image of Petra – a walk down what is called the Siq, with towering cliff-sides and carvings and artifacts on each side of the ancient paved pathway.

We come to a particular point along the descent that faces a stone carving of al'Uzza the Nabataean goddess of love, equated with Greek Aphrodite, Roman Venus and Egypt's Isis.

This is the site where betrothed Nabataean couples would pledge their vows under the auspices of the high priest.

‘Anyone planning to get married?’ asks Souffian. Therese volunteers on behalf of us both – something we’ve been half planning since we met 11 years and 3 months ago. Souffian is in his element now, coordinating a re-enactment of an ancient Nabataean ritual that goes back almost 2000 years.

‘You stand there, and you stand there... you, what is your name again?’ he looks at the introvert corporate finance consultant from Hong Kong, ‘Phillip’ he says. ‘Phillip – you are going to be the priest, you stand there – you see, there are two spaces carved out for your feet, and the couple stand on the stone platform above you.’ So we stand there, and Souffian, very hyper now, starts shouting; ‘Witnesses, witnesses ... we need two witnesses.’ Two women are sauntering down the otherwise empty Siq some 50 metres away. He calls them over. ‘Where are you from?’ he asks. The women look nervous as the older one replies ‘Curaçao.’ Souffian looks perplexed, obviously aggravated at having chosen people from a county he has never heard of. ‘Never mind’ he says, ‘Can you be witnesses here?’ Before they can form an opinion he instructs them to stand on each side of Phillip; Phillip, under Souffian’s instructions, takes our hands and we take each other by the hand, to form a heart shaped ‘energy flow’.



*Nabataean Wedding Ceremony - the official wedding photograph*

‘OK,’ says Souffian, revelling in the moment, “Under the auspices of the Nabataean deity of wedlock you are now man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

And that was how Therese and I got married at 09.12 am on the day of Lucia according to the Swedish calendar the ancient pagan goddess of light, before al’Uzza the ancient Nabataean goddess of love. Souffian took a picture, and maybe the excitement was too much it is blurred from camera-shake.

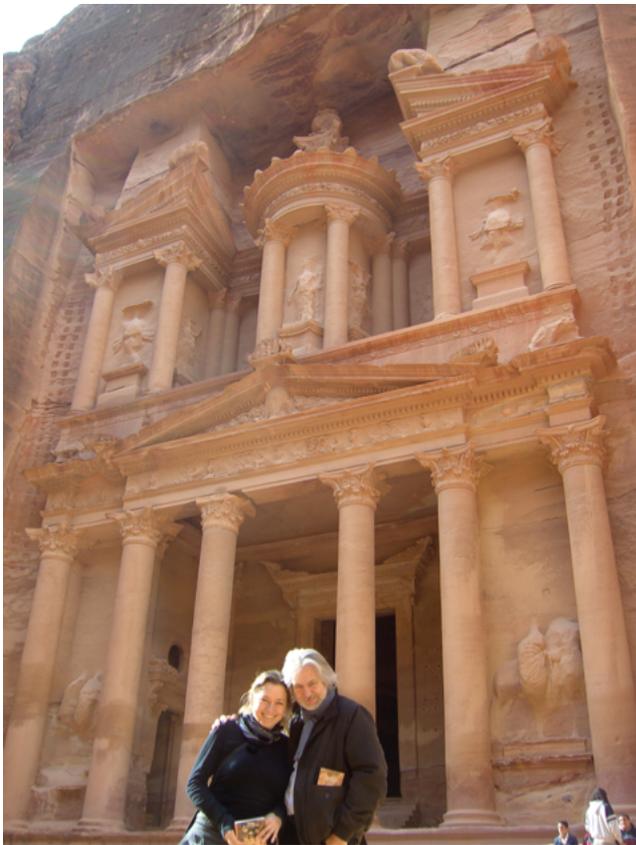
We continue down the long descent of the Siq, the morning light enhancing the beautiful hues of pink and

red\* (the epithet ‘rose-red’ comes from Petra, ‘a rose-red city half as old as Time’ from the poem by John William Burgon, 1840), and the quiet sometimes broken by the clattering wheels of horse and cart carrying lazy tourists that would do well to soak in the ambience at a more leisurely pace. Strange carvings and archaeological remnants prompt Souffian’s keen exposés of knowledgeable tit-bits. I wander down the Siq a bit, out of range, to admire the towering pinnacles of the rock face, when a voice shouts out: ‘Where do you think you’re going? I haven’t finished yet!’ No way to speak to a married man.

Souffian makes a big staging of the first glimpse of the Treasury House – not only superfluous but unnecessary. Anyone who knows anything of Petra is quite aware of this classic view, regardless if they have seen the Indiana Jones movie or National Geographic covers – it is the unmistakable image of ‘the lost city’ rediscovered in 1812 by Swiss explorer, Johan Wilhelm Burckhardt, though let’s face it, it was never lost to the Bedouin tribes who had lived here uninterrupted since its founding until they were relocated in 1985.

\*see Augé and Dentzer, *Petra – The Rose Red City*, 2000, p. 48ff

Back to the view of the Treasury House – the paintings and photographs and film clips can barely do justice to this amazing structure – the columns and reliefs carved into the rocks, still in pristine condition after a 1000 years. The square is huge – large enough to absorb the many visitors wandering around, pointing camera lenses and taking their eyes from guide books to the building and back again. No problem getting unhindered views, and wandering up the stairs and into the alcoves. Yet this is just a tiny part of Petra, and before proceeding into labyrinths of the city, we have a tea break at the outdoor café, which Souffian sees as one more opportunity for grandstanding.



I exchange a few words with out nuptial witnesses, Nicole from Curaçao and her daughter Helene. ‘We are on a business trip’ she says, ‘coming from Egypt and we have a few days in Jordan.’

‘Curaçao?’ I ask, ‘Is that Dutch Antilles?’ ‘Not any

more’, says Nicole. And I get a brief history of Curaçao from someone who knows.

In May 2009, the people of Curaçao (population about 140,000 people) voted for the dissolution of Dutch Antilles. Curaçao becomes officially an autonomous associated state under the Kingdom of the Netherlands a separate country like Aruba. Nicole and Helene have a somewhat Venezuelan countenance (suffice to say I’ve met a number of Venezuelans from different college courses one of whom was very proud that at the time Venezuela ranked as the second most corrupt country in the world. ‘They must have bribed someone’, she laughed. ‘We are without doubt *the* most corrupt country in the world!’)

Anyway, Curaçao in the Carribean is not far from the Venezuela mainland, and part of what is referred to as the ABC islands: Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao. People speak English, Dutch, Spanish and Papiamentu - most people on the island (says Nicole) speak Papiamentu, the local *creole* language (See [www.papiamentu.com](http://www.papiamentu.com)). Many people can speak all four languages.

‘We have a big carnival for New Year,’ says Nicole, ‘It is a celebration of our local music *tumba* (upbeat), *tambu*

(sad) what we call *muzik di zumba*. You and your wife must come to visit. *Bon bini*.' A tempting offer, particularly when you discover that the local dance was considered so erotic by the Catholic church, they tried unsuccessfully to have it banned. In Sweden for New Year, Swedes watch TV and listen to poetry.

She is a little furtive about the nature of her 'international assignments' and, who knows, maybe Nicole is a Curaçao ambassador on a diplomatic mission now immortalised in our wedding photo, together with her daughter.

We continue along the winding trails of Petra, all manner of ancient houses and buildings, in their ruin and splendour, long since abandoned. Pola is about to take a picture of the beautifully preserved amphitheatre, but Souffian forbids her. 'No don't take a picture I'll show you a much better place.' He leads us along 'a secret path that no other guide knows about.....' (yet strangely, just two minutes later, another guide leads a party of four up along the very same 'secret path'). Sure enough the views and panoramas framed by stone archways looking down to the amphitheatre and across to the royal tombs, are breathtaking.

At this end of Petra, before the strenuous walk up to the Monastery, are the tea stalls, the souvenir stands, and the donkey handlers and camel trainers. A café owner lures us to a table all smiles and courtesy: ‘Please sit down no charge please have some tea’ but when we leave the ‘free tea’ costs ‘2 JDs’ and without the smile. But Petra is not Jordan, it is one of the world’s seven wonders, and 7000 tourist traps, where the stall owners and the donkey handlers must also pay outrageous rents and fees which they pass on to the people who can afford to pay them.



*Petra's abandoned cave dwellings*

At the stand opposite the tea stall is a souvenir booth with a large poster featuring the book ‘I Married a Bedouin’ by a Dutch New Zealand woman who gave up suburban life in her home country for the Bedouin life

with a man she met as a tourist in Petra in 1978. I'd come across her website before the journey\* [[www.marriedtoabedouin.com](http://www.marriedtoabedouin.com) also featured in the Rough Guide], and her account of the relocation when the Bedouins were moved to Wadi Mousa and their traditional way of life came to an end. Her Bedouin husband died at an early age, but they had a son, and today he is minding the shop, selling his mum's book and designer jewellery to passing tourists. He is a world weary 25 year old, former university student in Sydney and Wellington, but now back to the Bedouin fold – or the Bedouin fold that is now the domain of the international tourist community. Pola buys a bracelet and drives a hard bargain (she is a corporate lawyer from Hong Kong); and I buy a ring for Therese appropriately – a silver full moon design, and go along with the antipodean accent and promise of 'fixed prices.' (It took Pola the Hong Kong corporate lawyer to unfix them).

We come to the start of the Monastery trail – a winding steep stony climb – 'an hour by foot, 20 minutes by donkey' according to Souffian. Phillip and Pola opt for lunch at the luxury Crowne Plaza restaurant. Therese and I bid farewell to Souffian (he gets a modest tip) and start up the trail. We are soon overtaken by a party of a

dozen Australian tourists – boys and girls in their 20s with the hats and the dumb-down T-shirts and boisterous loud voices. Ah for the stereotypes of culture – they are riding donkeys and shouting each other on, while the foot-walkers scramble for safety to the side of the perilously steep trail.

The mountain walk is a tough one in 30° (how it is in 40+° summer heat doesn't bear thinking about), but we do it in 40 minutes and I can't see how the donkeys do it that much faster. They don't look too happy bearing the burden of many overweight and wide-eyed terrified tourists. The walk might do them good. In the immortal words of Ringo Starr (aged 70 and looking great), 'a good walk cures anything.'



*Petra ruins*

These are the words that come to mind when the hugest fattest American woman possible to imagine, in bulging tight training pants and rolls of fat flopping over front and back and sides trundles on the downward path on the back of a donkey. It is hard to know who looks more terrified – her, the donkey, or the donkey handler beating the poor beast down the spiralling pathway. White knuckles holding tightly onto the donkey’s reins, her face grimacing in agony with every bumpy step – and this on the way down. Comic, tragic and as caricatured as Sancho Panza were it not for the sad suffering face of the donkey, in contrast to the stick wielding vehemence of his Arab driver.



*The Monastery*

The trail of pilgrims saunter toward the Monastery, as *chauceresque* an image as the day can endure (having just left the priest and the priest's wife); stands and stalls that line the narrow twisting pathway, a reminder of the seemingly endless capacity for human enterprise. At every corner, at every fathomable interval, a chance to sell 'stuff,' And someone there to sell it. 'Hey mister. Come have some tea. Not must buy nothing.' Cute faced kids begging and pitiful faced crones begging too. Brazen donkey drivers shouting 'open air taxi mister 2 dinars.' Everyone embracing their chosen role, we are all performers.

Stop and chat with a young woman running a souvenir stand she has an earnest face and open disposition. 'I wait when you come back,' she says, and most likely she will.

It's worth the walk. The Monastery is high up with far reaching views across many valleys, The afternoon sun hits the ochre stone and the shadows and contours blend into its rocky backdrop. We sit at the tea stall the view of the monastery in front, and the vista of mountains behind. While a local cat forages through Therese's shoulder bag, the Australian group, now arrived on their donkeys, all start to cheer and shout at

the same time. Very loudly. What's going on? Aha. At the top of the monastery a red faced moustached guy with a digger hat and an 'I'm with stupid' T-shirt, waves to the crowd below. He has skillfully transgressed all the 'forbidden entry' signs to scale the rocks beside the monastery and climb onto the roof. A real crowd-pleaser. Less so for the Tourist police. Two guys in uniform scramble up the no entry side, and one of the young women in the Australian group starts to shout: 'Run Steve run,' Her companions join in: 'They're onto you mate,' and 'Get outta there...' in loud voices that echo around the valleys.

Steve is escorted down the from the monastery roof, and the cat foraging in Therese's shoulder bag gives a sharp bite on my wrist as I try to persuade him to forage elsewhere. Blood is drawn.

We begin the downward descent and sure enough the young woman at the souvenir stall stands on the pathway and says: 'I have been waiting for you.' Her name is Sara. She tells us about the tribulations of running a stall in Petra, the role of women in a male dominated society, and, of course, the special prices of a genuine locally crafted silver owl ornament. Therese goes for a hand bracelet for 4 JDs and I have only a five.

Only too glad to let her keep the change, but she swiftly takes up the silver owl, 'For madam a gift,' and smiles broadly. I am about to shake her hand, then realise it is not good practice in this part of the world, all the more so as I notice one of the uniformed tourist police casting a suspicious eye in Sara's direction. Maybe he thinks the conversation has gone on just a little too long, and eye contact with a western male is simply not appropriate. It is OK for Therese and Sara to embrace farewell, and by the time we get to the bottom of the trail, it seems only fair to have a moderately extravagant lunch at the conveniently located Crowne Plaza next to the bookshop and museum.

By three o'clock there is a chill in the air, though the sun is shining and the sky as blue as blue can be. We meet Mohamed drinking coffee and talking on his mobile, then set off across the mountains toward the Dead Sea.

Therese takes a nap and in my thoughts I'm trying to unravel the mystery of Nabataean culture, and the fusion of cultures, religions and commerce. We know so much about the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans but what can anyone say about the Nabataeans? By the time we get to Mujib it's been dark for an hour.

## *The Nabataeans*

Petra is an amazing place. There is an atmosphere of some great moment in time, now lost. Like Giza, Tikal, Angkor Wat we come to these places like time-travellers, filled with questions like who were the people that lived here? What were their thoughts, beliefs, ambitions? Why did they leave? So many questions. Petra was a city that flourished for five hundred years, was 'lost' for another five hundred years, and still its name is unknown. The name Petra, an afterthought, and the people that created it, an enigma. Petra comes from the Greek word for 'rock', either because it is a city hewn from rock, or a city inside rock. But what did the Nabataean people call their city?

The Nabataeans by all accounts were an ancient and gifted people. They combined the traditions of nomadic tribal life, with a propensity for commerce and cultural eclecticism. By 500 BC the Nabataeans dominated the market in the perfume and spice trade, and especially incense. What remains of this vast site are especially four artefacts that continue to inspire the modern imagination. The *Siq* the main thoroughfare, the Treasury the Amphitheatre and the Monastery. Yet you listen to the guides the experts in the field, read the

literature, and wonder if our modern minds have really grasped the significance of these sites.

For the *Siq* is not a thoroughfare, the Treasury is not a treasury, nor is the Monastery a monastery, and in regards to this beautifully preserved theatre what plays were performed? Greek? Roman? Egyptian? Or maybe Nabataean? In which case what was Nabataean drama who were their heroes? Their villains? Who were the gods of the Nabataean *deus ex machina*?



*Petra - favored archaeological site for Indiana Jones, Tin Tin and many others*

Let's start with the *Siq*. If for nothing else, the Petra experience is worthwhile, just to walk the shady kilometres through this long gorge, with towering red rock on each side. Preferably early morning and off-season where the only sounds are the clatter of one's own footsteps, and perhaps some echoes of footsteps in the distance, and the cries of early morning birds. It is not just a thoroughfare, nor merely the path that follows a complex and brilliantly engineered waterway system. More than this it is a parade of Nabataean gods and goddesses, a descent into a domain where the traveller encounters images and idols, stone blocks and strange edifices. For a native returning home, surely an uplifting experience, and for strangers and interlopers, a daunting journey into an unknown world.

By all appearances Nabataean culture is a mix of Arabic and Mediterranean and a merging of faiths and deities from Egypt, Syria, Babylon, Greece and later Roman. The 'God-blocks' at intermittent intervals along the *Siq* – square chunks of stones representing deities as objects of worship – seem to be a local custom. In the edifices of rock are the worn remains of local deities. Firstly, Dushara, the head of the gods, like Zeus and Syrian Hadad. Dushara means 'He of the *Shara*.' The *Shara* are the mountains around Petra. Maybe

Nabataean religion was a pantheistic nature-worshipping religion? Where the overwhelming and harsh elements of nature created a need to worship rocks, trees and mountains. Jane Taylor suggests that Dushara is also associated with the sun represented by an Egyptian-like obelisk, and later with the Greek god, Dionysius.



*Fragment of the Nabataean zodiac*

Although Dushara was the principle god of the Nabataean pantheon, Petra's citizens payed homage to al'Uzza one of the three daughters of Allah; Allat,

al'Uzza and Manat. Al'Uzza was the goddess of love she was the principle goddess of Petra, and has been compared to Egyptian Isis, to Aphrodite, and Venus. Also to the Greek goddess, Tyche, the goddess of fortune. But al'Uzza presided it was before al'Uzza that local entrepreneurs sought favour, and couples would pledge their vows. Today, two thousand years later, here we are, with a wedding photograph in which we and our acolytes appear as apparitions before a goddess long disappeared, in the ancient walkway of a once lost city.

'Al'Uzza outshone all other goddesses,' writes Jane Taylor. Whereas elsewhere in Arabia, Dushara carried most favour, also Allat the goddess of fertility and war (like Athena, goddess of wisdom and war). But she was not worshipped at Petra most of the shrines and temples are dedicated to al'Uzza. Two other deities are also represented at Petra: Al Kutba god of commerce and writing (writing developed in Sumeria, ostensibly for keeping accounts), and Shay' al-Qaum the god protecting caravans, often referred to as, 'he who accompanies the people.' I am reminded of the beautiful and simple inscription on the rock outside Mohamed's cave in Wadi Rum. A message that reads 'your caravan is safe here.'

At the end of the *Siq*, is the Treasury. With the colouring of the early morning sun, it is a breathtaking sight. But it is not a treasury, so how did it get this name? Perhaps because of the Nabataean reputation for trade? The first record of Nabataean traders comes from the 1st century BC and Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily. Diodorus goes at lengths to describe how the Nabataeans founded their trading empire in spices and perfumes.

Because of their isolation, the Nabataeans kept their independence, and according to Diodorus were ‘a sensible people’ who prepared common meals together with a king ‘so democratic that in addition to serving himself, he sometimes even serves the rest in turn.’ Diodorus wrote that this egalitarian society extended to the sexes: Nabataean women inherited and owned property in their own right, and queens were often featured on coins as well as kings.

If the Treasury was not a treasury what was it? By all accounts, a tomb, a mausoleum, a burial site for ancient kings, like Westminster Abbey, the Valley of Kings, Machu Picchu. The *Siq* was not just the entrance into the city, but a rite of passage. Over fifty niches adorn the passage that according to Jane Taylor ‘transform the

*Siq* from ‘a mere thoroughfare into a sacred way of the Nabataeans.’\*

The Theatre, once thought post-Roman, has been dated according to recent archaeological finds, to around the turn of the millennium 4BC to 27 AD. Audiences of up to 5000 people gathered here. But which dramas did they watch? The plays of Aristophanes? Or the Greek tragedies? Or the dramas and rituals of ancient Egypt? Perhaps the oratory precursors of *Alf Layla wa Layla*, stories of the *Arabian Nights*, that existed for centuries before being written down around 800AD.

The Monastery is also a misnomer. It was converted into a monastery by Christians in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, five hundred years after it was carved out of the rock. Archaeologists in the 1990s uncovered evidence to reveal that this beautiful edifice was constructed as a *triclinium* a feasting hall for holding banquets in honour of the dead: wakes for the wealthy.

\* ie., in the sense of a ritual that marks a change in a person's social status. In social anthropology a rite of passage defines social hierarchies, values and beliefs that are important in a specific cultures.

It seems appropriate that the city begins with a royal tomb and ends with a feasting hall to celebrate the demise of a dignitary. Equally appropriate that it is a city built upon the prosperity of trade and commerce, and dedicated to a goddess of love, fertility and wealth.

\*

At the time when Christ was gathering followers to the north, while Herod ruled with mad paranoia, and while the Roman Empire was expanding through Egypt, Syria and Judaea, the Nabateans prospered in quiet isolation. At least until the death of the last recorded Nabataean king, Rabbel II in AD 106. Thereafter the Nabataean kingdom was annexed as a Roman province. The Romans, famous for their roads which survive today throughout Europe, Africa and the Middle East, constructed a paved road from Bostra in the north to Aqaba in the south. By 114 AD Petra was no longer a necessary stop for the caravans across the desert, and without a royal lineage, Petra transformed over the centuries from a city in the desert to a gathering place for Bedouin tribes.

The decline of Petra is described in an array of fanciful stories. For example, in 423 AD, when a band of

Christian monks decided to put an end to Petra's pagan ways, and raided the main buildings. The local rulers gave up (so the story goes) because the raid which coincided with a heavy rainstorm, ending four years of drought. Maybe the Christian monks knew something after all, figured the city's patron fathers. So they converted to Christianity.

But Petra was already in decline by then an earthquake in 363 had damaged the city, and when Byzantine rule ended in 630, Petra's demise was assured. The traders, merchants and citizens abandoned the already crumbling city to the nomadic Bedouins, who used the caves and buildings intermittently while herding goats and camels. Petra disappeared from the minds of emperors and maps of antiquity.

\*For an idea of what Petra would have looked like at its heyday, with a population in the tens of thousands, check out the website of artist Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos.

\*For more on Nabataean culture: [www.nabataea.net](http://www.nabataea.net)

# Mujib

Phosphate is one of Jordan's chief exports and the southern part of the Dead Sea is lined with phosphate and salt refineries – huge ugly blotches on an otherwise tempered landscape. It's pitch black outside and no road signs or roadways, although a way back was a tourist board announcing the Mujib Nature Reserve. Mohamed stops a few times, backtracks, and finally asks a policeman orchestrating the towing away of a vehicle.

The instructions leave Mohamed even more confused – we are on the way to the Mujib Reserve Chalets, and the only road curves off into what could be a phosphate refinery or a military installation. Strangely, this road leads to both a phosphate refinery *and* a military installation, but eventually, after a shocking jolting kilometre or so, to the Mujib Reserve Chalets by the Dead Sea.

The place seems deserted and I cast a worried eye toward Mohamed, who probably thinks if we can overnight in Wadi Rum we can sleep anywhere.

A stern looking guy comes to the reception desk, and says, yes, we have a booking for Mr and Mrs Alexander, (Only been married for nine hours and everyone seems to know. Although I heard about one couple travelling in Jordan, trying to book into a hotel, and were asked to produce their marriage license.)



*Mujib Reserve chalets on the Dead Sea*

The chalet is booked, but the walk is not, and I tell the guy that whole point of staying at the Mujib Reserve chalet is to be able to walk the Mujib Reserve ‘Ibex Trail’. Not possible, he says. You have to be at least three people. You are only two. So what if we paid for a ‘third person’? He shakes his head solemnly. You must be three people. I’m about to try and persuade Mohamed to join us on the walk, but he is keen to get back to his family in Amman. Mohamed calls the travel agency, they talk to Mr Serious for ten minutes, and at the end of the conversation, he nods, and says, OK, you can walk tomorrow; start 08.30am.

Ecotourism is catching on in Jordan – there are two main reserves, the Dana Reserve, and Mujib. Most of the trails at Mujib are closed in the off-season, due to the treacherous terrain and the risk of flash-flooding. The trails open from April to October, take adventurous walkers through the mountain trails down to the gorge and across the river (wading), and to the gorge waterfall. Guides are obligatory and at the Mujib Visitor's Centre the risks are outlined in pretty clear terms. At this time of year guides are still obligatory, but only the Ibex trail is open, so-named because of the Ibex that roam these rocky hills; mountain goats with long spiral horns – the pride of Jordanian wildlife. The chalets and the reserve are run by the state controlled national parks association, the fees are quite high, but all the money goes back into parks and ecotourism and preservation of wildlife. Only too happy to pay the few extra dinars.



*Walking the Ibex Trail, Mujib Reserve National Park. Israel on the other side of the Dead Sea*

We arrange to meet Mohamed the following afternoon, and take our bags to chalet is it possible? Chalet number six. Solitary prisoners this time; the place seems deserted. A single light over chalet number six, a little concrete bunker with a patio just a few metres from the shoreline of the Dead Sea, and a hammock extended between two concrete pillars. From a thousand metres above sea-level (Petra) there was a good deal of ear-popping down to Mujib, described as the lowest wildlife reserve in the world. Here on the shoreline of the Dead Sea we are some 450 metres below sea-level. The air is warm about 25°, and across the water you can make out the lights of Israel or Palestine depending on your political inclinations. The communal shower block is in pristine condition, and generally it's worth noting the contrast between travelling in Egypt (not too clean) and Jordan (very clean), most apparent in that a trip to Egypt will invariably result in a day or two of stomach problems, uncommon in Jordan.



We walk back to the reception building which also houses a modest restaurant, and a young man in national reserve park red shirt says that normally you have to book ahead if you want meals, but he'll see if he can fix something. 'Something' is plain spaghetti, some water and shay, which is quite OK considering the extravagant lunch at Petra's Crowne Plaza restaurant.

The rest of the evening is spent in the sheer exuberance of sitting on a terrace, with the sound of the lapping waters of the dead sea, with temperatures of a balmy summer's night (by Swedish standards anyway it is a pleasant 25°) listening to the cool sounds of lounge music and jotting down a few thoughts and impressions on the visit to Petra.

Don't sleep much tonight either, but don't mind. The problem with sleeping is that you can miss so much. I'd hate to have missed the sound of lapping water on the stony shore. And the warm feel of the balmy night air of the Dead Sea. In the middle of December when it is 10° in the Stockholm archipelago, and snow blizzards bring traffic to a halt.

Breakfast is also a modest affair but before we finish the morning shay, a couple sit down at the table next to us, dressed in eco-tourist light khaki shorts and shirts and

hiking boots. They are Hatim and Ferago; a couple originally from India, but Australian citizens since 20 years back, living in of all places, a township called Lilydale, just a stones throw from the township where I grew up – Sassafras, in the Dandenong Ranges. Not only have they heard of Sassafras, but know it well, including the antique shop, which still bears the name the Jack and Jill Stores, which in the 1950s and 1960s was the management of the Alexander family. It was the local general store, selling groceries and bread and milk, cigarettes and ice creams in the tourist season.

Here's the thing. They came to the Mujib Reserve, also to do the Ibex Trail (they are certainly dressed for it) but were told they needed to be three. Well wait a minute; we are two, they are two, and doesn't that make...? OK, I'm confused. Only now they cannot do the walk anyway, because earlier this morning... well, this is what happened:

Hatim and Ferago tell us that their car was parked outside the reserve chalet main building. Around the main building is a vast expanse of desert, and some kilometres away, a phosphate refinery and a military installation (currently not in use) then leading down to the gently lapping shores of the Dead Sea. Theirs is the

only car parked in a place where there is place for about 200 cars, a dozen tourist buses and possibly a military convoy. The guy delivering vegetables to the main building happens to run into another car. Their car. It's the only other car. It is also a rented car so they are tied up with police and insurance forms probably for the next 3 hours. They are planning on getting to the Dana Reserve later in the day to do a celebrated walk from Dana village down to an eco chalet, four hours walk away, at a place called Feynan. 'Highly recommended in the Lonely Planet Guide to Jordan,' says Ferago, describing the candlelit pathway and absence of electricity with some relish. Sounds great. Must remember this tip for another trip. (Later I look up the walk in the Rough Guide, which describes the same walk in glowing terms, but points out that this trail is also closed between October and April. Oops)

We take the jeep ride to the Mujib Reserve visitors centre, and at the centre there are a group of five people also waiting to do the walk (what's this? 'You can't go? You are only two people?') It could have been nine. If I'd succeeded in persuading Mohamed, ten!

Four of the group are women from South Africa looking ill-prepared for a strenuous walk in a harsh

mountain desert landscape. The male of the group is their travel guide, a locally dressed guy about fifty, with a moustache, dyed black hair and leering grin. He is loud and jocular and flirting heartily with the more buxom member of the South African party. He introduces himself as Moustafa. But hah ha ‘I am not going to walk in the mountains of course, ha ha’; ‘I am here to look after these lovely ladies ha ha’; and Ms Buxom laughs in delight and Moustafa touches her shoulder, glancing down her scantily clad top. We are seven in all plus our guide and his assistant, Mohamed and Ali (where do they think up these names?) dressed in knee length shorts and bright red Mujib Reserve ranger sports shirts.



*Ibex...*

At the ranger station about 4 km along the rocky track, we see a group of ibex (we are after all walking ‘the ibex trail’), sitting in the back a four wheel drive covered in spilled oil and debris.

We are led into the ranger station and looks like we are getting to get an eco-talk from Mohamed, but it is difficult not to feel restless. Why not silence and enjoy the view? A guide is obligatory – it's easy to get lost in the mountains – many people have, locals included.

Mohamed's English is a strain to the ear, as he struggles and mispronounces the same stuff I read in the Rough Guide and on the website pages. The room is hot and basic, filled with flies, and in the corner is a TV set with a VCR. I have a horrible feeling he might be putting in a video tape soon to explain the principles of eco-tourism. Instead he shows the dead skulls of an ibex and how the swirls in the horns represent years of maturity. Right. I read this. Shouldn't we be out walking?

The walk is exhilarating when we get to it, and we keep to a pace that accommodates our friends from South Africa. At a hilltop I stop with Ali – Mohamed's trainee assistant – and admire the stretch of view to the Dead Sea and to the Palestinian shoreline. He points to a buttress over a hill, and the movement of five or six ibex. 'Keep watching,' he says. More appear on the horizon, and they stand and stare back at us.

Later a herd of twenty or so run across the rocky terrain, and you can pick out the alpha male, larger than his companions, standing watching us, as the herd heads for safer climes. As the herd disappears he stands on top of the cliff looking down at us, a proud silhouette breasting his authority. Then he too disappears.



*The remains of the Qasr Riyash*

At about a third of the distance along the trail, on top of a craggy mountain, can be made out the ruins of an old fortress. On the map it is named as Qasr Riyash, and there is an old story that it is one of four castles in these mountains, built by a Bedouin sheik (Riyash), for each of his four sons. But the sons fought over grazing rights, and they killed each other. One looks around the rocky terrain, the barren mountains, and you think you want to fight for this? Grazing, here? But there it is, an old ruined fortress. Someone built it for something.

As the day progresses so does the heat. The terrain looks like the landscapes of the Utah Death Valley so often used in Hollywood westerns. Ali moves away from the group, toward where I am climbing up a peak to get a better view. His mobile phone rings, he answers and hangs up. That's the third time I've seen him do that. 'The network reaches up here?' I ask Ali. 'We're checking for reception,' he says. 'In case of trouble. Now we know where we can phone for help.' 'Trouble?' I ask. 'What kind of trouble?' 'Earlier this year we had a guy go missing. Had us worried.' 'What happened?' 'Local man' he says, 'a member of our walking group. Said he was not feeling well, and decided to return to the rangers station by himself. We had only been gone an hour, he was a local, and he said he would have no trouble returning to base.' Ali looks over the valleys. 'Problem is, this reserve is 220 sq kilometres of sandstone mountains and if you don't know it, all looks the same. No paths, no tracks.' The highest point is 900 m above sea-level, and the lowest is 400 m below (which makes it the lowest ground level on the planet). Valleys and peaks. Very tiring. They found the guy after two days, behind a rock, in the shade, dried out and exhausted. Lucky guy, I thought. The ibex may not be a threat, but what about the striped hyenas and Syrian wolves that roam these mountains? Or the Caracal, the

wild mountain cats that live in the rocky valleys, and can leap into the air and pluck a decent sized bird from the air with its large paws? And look up there! Two large birds circling slowly and looking in our direction. ‘Ali are those vultures?’ ‘Yes’, he says, ‘Griffon vultures. Protected species.’



*The Ibex Trail, Mujib Reserve*

We reach the roadside by early afternoon, when the day is hottest. More than 30°. Mohamed pulls up in the now familiar silver coloured Toyota Camry. Miracle. So the mobile phone calls were not just for reception. Soon after Moustafa in his mini-van pulls to the roadside to

pick up his group as well. We arrange to meet them back at the visitors centre for a short tour of the gorge that runs into the Dead Sea. They never show up. I guess Moustafa is in a hurry. Or he has convinced his South African girl troupe that the gorge thing is a waste of time.

But it is not. Mohamed joins Therese and I through the gate, along a pathway that opens up into a panoramic vista of the gorge, that now has a little water, but in the spring is a river flowing into the Dead Sea. At the centre, worn out after the walk, we have mint tea with Ali and his colleague Mahmoud. Straight forward Jordanian hospitality this time. RSCN members are not allowed to accept tips. Mint tea is miraculously energising. But the flies. Lots of flies. Flies around the glass rim, and flies all over. As I'm brushing away some flies Mahmoud, says this is nothing to worry about. 'The fly has bad germs only on one wing,' he says. 'On the other wing is good germs. So if you get a fly on the edge of the glass, you push the fly into the tea.' (As he speaks, he does so – he pushes in a fly sitting on the edge of his glass). 'Now the good germs and bad germs balance each other out.' Jordanian humour.

## Drinking Tea • 1

Arabic coffee is famous in the Middle East but most of the time people drink *shay* (it's the same word in China, Japan, India and Africa...)

In the Middle East *shay* is usually black tea added with, say mint in Morocco, sage and cardamom in Bedouin tradition, in Türkiye drunk through a sugar cube (or in the smaller villages more a sugar lump, held between the front teeth. I'm not sure if this has any bearing on the number of elderly Turkish men missing their front teeth...). Also in Türkiye the tea has a more bitter and black taste, but like everywhere else in the Middle East, is drunk in a glass, sometimes with a handle, sometimes without. This is good because you can see straight away just how strong the tea is.

In Jordan when they ask if you like it light or medium or heavy, they are referring to how much sugar, not the strength of the tea. Teabags are becoming increasingly popular, and the tag looks like a Liptons Yellow Label, but actually it's local tea and quite OK. On a hot day *shay* is always good with a lot of sugar and some mint.

In the *souk*, the bazaar, by the road side, people will often invite you for tea a Middle Eastern tradition since way back, unfortunately increasingly connected to the rituals of tourism, and 'how much is this going to cost me.' Sure, it's a business practice too in the more tourist areas, but if you're polite and enjoy some local gossip it's just as good an opportunity for some socialising and conversation.

## Drinking Tea • 2

Some different kinds of *shay* you are most like to encounter in Jordan:

*Naana shay* mint tea

*Yansoon shay* fennel tea

*Zaatar shay* thyme

*Helbeh* like Greek herbal tea

*Marrameeya* mixture of sage and cardamom; seemed to be the most popular Beduoin *shay*

*Babbonidj* camomile tea

There are also different kinds of ginger tea.

If you want tea with milk (English style) *shay* means tea and *haleeb* means milk.

Sometimes tea is served with something sweet. Like figs covered in syrup (*asabya zaynab*), or in the morning, *um ali* (coconut cake) or *mamul* biscuits with a taste of rose-petal jam.



# The Dead Sea

Mohamed misses the turn-off to the Dead Sea resort hotel, and it's the biggest resort hotel on the Jordanian side. It's OK. Mohamed has not yet *not* missed a turn-off. 'No signs,' he tells us. 'No signs.'

Checking into the Kempinsky Hotel on the Dead Sea is one of those moments of astonishment, like the first time you get e.mail, or the first time you a website comes up on your mobile telephone, or when see your own life story come up on Google search. It is considered the classiest hotel on the Dead Sea, it rates six stars, and according to one hotel travel forum, it is 'the best hotel in the world.' What can I say? We are not rich people. It is low season and we got a good rate. Also we'd booked an 'ordinary' room but because of ongoing renovations we got a sea-side villa. With our own terrace, filled with fragrant shrubs and flowers and overlooking the sandy shore of the Kempinsky Ishtar Dead Sea resort private beach. I jump in at 3pm and float around till the sun sets at 4.46 pm. An exhilarating experience.

There she does the Dead Sea mud bath (supposed to be good for the skin, but how do you know?) and the only other bathers are two young Russian girls, that every time they get out of the water, snap photos of each with expensive Nikon system cameras, posing like fashion models. If the Russian mafia can afford to stay here I guess it must be expensive.



*Two and a half hours floating in the Dead Sea*

An early memory from Sassafras State School is a teacher telling us about the Dead Sea. How the water was so salty you could float, and read a newspaper. It was a strong image to leave with an impressionable eight year old, and now, here I am. 8,500 miles and 42 years from Sassafras floating in the Dead Sea until the sun sets. You come out of the water and the salt leaves a slimy residue, that makes you feel wet until it's all washed off. I'm not sure why the salty water should be so beneficial to the human body, but I can say that it

has done wonders for my stiff neck and swollen shoulder muscles contracted in the coldness of the Wadi Rum.

Take a walk around the resort and enjoy the ambient excesses of the embellishments – fountains, cascading waterfalls, lagoon like swimming pools, some heated, some not. One pool is named ‘infinity’, where the water’s edge merges with the vista over the Dead Sea – a cool blue on blue, like a David Hockney painting.



The resort is named Kempinsky Ishtar – after the Sumerian love goddess – appropriate enough for the days following our Nabataean nuptials. The main building, closest to the Dead Sea Highway (and far away from the shore-side villas), is designed in pseudo Babylonian architecture – an imposing structure that looms majestically over the gardens behind it. If life in

a luxury hotel feels excessive, then it serves as a fitting contrast to all those nights of rough living, of sleeping by roadsides, in parks and tents. Like a rainy night huddled in a boat house in the port of Rapallo on the Italian Riviera, or seeking refuge under a workman's shack off the road to Hammerfest in Norway, too cold and too wet to wipe away the spiders crawling across my face. Or spending the night under a tarpaulin in a car park in Venice, listening to the rats scurry over my feet, the tap tap tap sound over hardened canvas. Or unrolling my sleeping bag under the bushes next to the 'af Chapman' youth hostel in Stockholm, broke and hungry. Nights spent huddled in car backseats, staving off cold or thunderstorms, in England, in Australia, France, Germany, Ceaucescu's Rumania, Greek islands and Yorkshire moors. At the Kempinsky Ishtar the beds are larger than a room, and the bathroom is the size of a suite. A full mini bar with 'compliments of the management', and 24 hour room service, with a menu that would shame most of the chic restaurants of Stockholm.

Yet here is the strange thing and it is universal. First the astonishment. ('An electronic do-not-disturb sign? What luxury!') Then the attitude. ('You wanna order room service?') And finally ennui. ('Typical. Nothing on

TV!’) Maybe it takes an hour, maybe ten minutes. From amazement to ‘so what’. The astonishment passes, and world-weariness sets in. No wonder movie stars overdose.

Forty five minutes in a luxury villa in what one traveller described as ‘the best hotel in the world’, where chauffer-driven electric carts pick you up to take you to a restaurant or to reception or to the spa (‘the largest in the Middle East’, according to the guide book) and it all seems so acceptable, so quickly. How much better can the night be here, say, than the night at the Mujib Reserve chalet, thirty minutes drive southwards along the shore-line? Is it this sense of ‘if this is the best what next?’ that drives celebrities to their moments of madness – trashing hotel suites, hurling televisions out of penthouse floor windows, and draining mini-bar spirits bottles and mixing them with barbiturates, anti-depressives and whatever else comes to hand?

So not much sleep here either, even at the Kempinsky Ishtar, with the largest and most comfortable beds this side of Santa Monica. Spend some hours on the terrace and take in the fragrances of the evening plants, make friends with a cat, who has half an ear missing, and read up on the depressing politics of the Middle East from 1917 to the present day.



*View over to the other side*

The next morning our attention turns to the ‘largest spa in the Middle East’, where most of the time is spent floating in a pool filled with Dead Sea water, heated to a temperature of 35°. Pure bliss. One falls asleep. One does not drown. One floats. It is the experience of the float-tank, without the darkness and restraints of space; it is the *primal* experience, that in a movie with William Hurt, (*Altered States*), reduced him to a babbling two million year old homonid.

The luxury of the resort and free time provides occasion to catch up on some reading and writing and popular culture, in the form of locally produced TV soap operas. The first one is a family drama where the sympathetic and understanding wife must put up with

her husband's emotional tirades; frustration over – well not sure what, but she spends some time in the living room leafing through a coffee table book, while her attention is diverted by angry husband sulking in the bedroom next door. Finally she gives in, and goes to comfort him, but he is a tough cookie, and of course she could never really understand just how tough it is to be a man. There's sub-plot concerning their teenage daughter, and an entire scene of 10 minutes comprised of said daughter in her bedroom, talking on the mobile phone. Fill in the blanks. Back to tormented husband and consoling wife. Lots of close-ups. Her eye make-up is exquisite as it is for all Jordanian women.

After the advertisements a more dramatic sub-plot emerges, where a jealous boyfriend confronts his sympathetic girlfriend. He is flying into a rage, prepared to kill a young man who looked at his girl 'in an inappropriate manner', but the girl calms him down – there is nothing going on – that boy means nothing to me. I can see that this sub-plot may be stretching over the next few weeks. The young man has an intense look and a severe temper. But the principle plot seems to revolve around the kindly wife, and her brooding husband, Mr Angry.

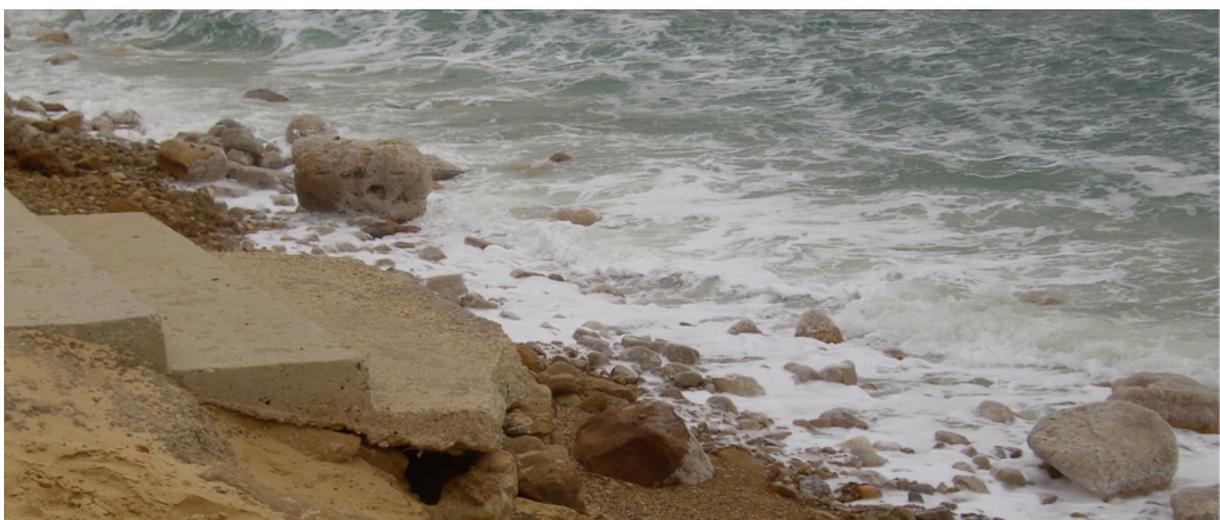
There is a music video – an older woman singing in a hotel bar, pursued by a younger jealous admirer. It all looks so familiar, till you realise the entire sequence has been filmed here at the Kempinsky Ishtar. There's the pool she stands beside, the gardens where she sings her mournful song about unhappy love and jealous young lovers. She has only herself to blame.

The late evening big-budget production soap opera features a career woman as the main character; her job is to dub Arabic voices to Disney characters. In this scene she is the voice for Dumbo the elephant. After the recording her male friend comes in with some good news and hands over a signed contract. (Television is wonderful – even without the subtitles you get the plot). Whatever the terms they must be good, They are both very happy about it, open a bottle of champagne (how politically incorrect is that?), and while their attention is diverted, the wicked looking technician takes a chance, and steals the papers. This turns out very badly for Ms Career, who goes ballistic when she discovers the papers are missing. What next?

The local productions – in a market dominated by Egyptian shows and films – seem more subdued than the Cairo based productions. I saw a couple on a long

bus ride (filled to capacity with a highly appreciative exclusively Egyptian audience), where the unhappy husband stabbed his long suffering wife with a meat cleaver several times over. In the same TV show three more women meet with equally ill a fate, and the men tormented by their deeds, seemed to have no inclination to desist from slicing up young women with meat cleavers, knives and scimitars.

I go down to the water's edge to take some photographs of the disappearing Dead Sea at the rate of a metre every year. The stone steps at the far end of the resort 10 years ago led bathers directly into the sea. Now these steps hang over the sandy bank, a living monument to the diminishing waters of the saltiest lake on earth.



*A stone stairway abandoned to the receding Dead Sea*

## *12 Facts About The Dead Sea*

- *it is the world's saltiest body of water*
- *it is the lowest point in the world – 420 m below sea-level*
- *it is the culmination of the River Jordan*
- *it is also known as Tongue Lake or Salt Sea*
- *every year the water level sinks by about 1 metre*
- *it has been recognized to have healing properties for at least 2000 years*
- *it has ten times more salt than average sea water: 34% compared to 3.5% sea water*
- *it also contains chlorine, bromine, sodium, potassium and magnesium*
- *it was named the Dead Sea because it was thought nothing could survive in such saline water. However, halophilic bacterium and algae live out their precarious lives at the bottom of the sea*
- *the Dead Sea has two basins: the northern basin is the deepest, (713 metres below sea-level) and a shallow southern basin*
- *it is 80 kilometres long, and about 14 kilometres wide. Deep in the north – 430m; shallow in the south – 4m.*
- *five Biblical cities are connected to the Dead Sea region: Sodom, Gomorrah, Adman, Zebouin and Zoar*

# Aqaba

We arrive in Aqaba on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Muharram, the Islamic New Year, which this year falls on December 18<sup>th</sup>. When I mention the New Year to Mohamed he shrugs and says, ‘Really? It’s today?’ Maybe he was too long in Chicago. Like many good folk stateside he has confused Sweden with Switzerland at least once. ‘You don’t want a French speaking guide? But I thought you spoke...?’ Oops. And Swedish people have most definitely not voted against minarets.

The Captains Hotel is in the middle of Aqaba. Acknowledged for its fine restaurant and quirky style. In the foyer is a sign: ‘The captain knows best.’ Apart from the Islamic New Year, the Jordan weekend starts today (Thursday afternoon is half-day closing, and Friday and Saturday the week-end). This means many Amman families come to Aqaba for the weekend to escape the Amman winter – the wealthier families have their weekend cottages down here on the coast. Today it is 30° in Aqaba, and in Amman 15° and raining.

The public beach is fifteen minutes walk away, down the leafy esplanade, past the commemorative fountains. Large families sit in small independent enclaves

usually three generations, and in groups of six and upwards. And mostly covered in clothing – men and women, but especially the women, who have even their heads covered when they dip into the water, either paddling with their kids, or submerging themselves completely – no bathing costumes, but traditional Arabic clothing. It is a strange sight, especially from an Australian cultural perspective, where the bathers of the beach strips around Melbourne’s Mornington Peninsula, or the Sydney-siders soaking up the sun at Manly or Bondi, regardless of gender, are dressed to a minimum, and the colourful gashes of fluorescent sun-screen covering more skin than the bathing costumes.



Some youngsters carrying some blankets and a freeze-box to a little patch of sand, then helping grandpa to his place, lighting up his hubbly-bubbly, and building sand castles. It is 30° and grandpa wears his trousers, and shirt, shoes and socks, a waist-coat and heavy tweed jacket, reclining on the blanket, a cushion on one side, puffing out smoke as he gazes out toward the Red Sea, and the cliff-sides of the Egyptian coast-line clearly visible. Grandma pours herself a cup of shay, and waves away a couple of kids parading the beach selling bright pink candy floss wrapped in plastic, and Macadam nuts in cellophane bags.

The wooden pier stretches out to sea, and gaily coloured 'glass bottom boats' are tied to the wooden railings, and another half dozen or so are pulled up onto the shoreline, like the Thai boats on the beaches of Ao Nang and Kao Lak. But here the glass bottom boats share the insignia of the Egyptian eye, adorning boats throughout the Mediterranean, from Lebanon to Malta, from Cyprus to... well Egypt. The eye of Isis has long been considered a good omen for sea-farers with the power to ward off bad luck, and let's face it; if you plant that idea in people's minds even two three thousand years ago, why dispense with it?

A couple of teenagers wait for customers; one sits on the brow and the other squatting on the beach. They have a ghetto-blaster playing from inside the boat, a loud mix heavy metal and Arabic music. Or maybe it's just the volume. Out at sea some tankers and cargo ships are anchored in the calm bay, and parading the beach are the donkeys and the camels. Not the most hygienic of beach environments that might help explain the complete absence of non-Jordanian players in this long sandy stage of ongoing leisurely family dramas. The kids, the mums and dads, their mums and dads, and maybe some brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins little tribes populating the sands of the public beach, fully clothed, dignified, well-behaved and presumably, very hot.



One glass bottom boat leaves from the pier, filled to over-capacity, with speakers bellowing local music. At a colourful café overlooking the bay, three guys sit and play cards, one fellow immersed in the pleasures of the hubbly-bubbly.

Walk to the Place of the Great Arab Uprising, dominated by a magnificent flag-pole, at the top of which is said to be the world's largest unsupported flag. At every gust, the Jordanian colours – red, white, green and black – spread over the sky-line, to the delight of the families that have gathered here, now as the sun is descending into the Red Sea.

Walk through the *souk* on the way back to the Captains Hotel. While Therese gets a lengthy pitch from the spice stand guy I walk into the chemists shop and ask for some headache tablets, 'something strong – a mix of paracetamol and codeine...' The pharmacist looks up with a severe glance; 'Codeine? No, there is nothing with codeine.' I need something for a headache. The noise of the beach and the market, the diesel fumes, and the endless 'hello mister what's your name, where you from...' propels the brain into paroxysms of pain. I return to the souk and Mr Spice has a knack of sizing people up as they enter his domain. Then he offers tea

that he thinks best suits their personality. Therese gets rosehip (I drink it on her behalf), and I get a mixture of ginger and... hm, not sure; cloves maybe?

Behind the market, an outdoor café and a lot of commotion. A football match broadcast live and projected onto a large screen draped over a brick wall; about 50 guys in brightly coloured plastic chairs, smoking cigs and *hubbly-bubblys*, their smoking pleasures interrupted only by near misses and foul plays. On the return walk through the *souk*, three different offers for ‘private boat trips for diving and snorkelling’, but taking up offers from strange guys in *souks* is something I gave up long ago.



*Late night football in the back streets of Aqaba*

The next morning the hotel manager tells us about three places that offer diving and snorkelling trips. We settle for Mr Frogman just around the corner.

‘Sure’ says the guy running Mr Frogman (his name is Mohamed – do Jordanian parents have no imagination?) ‘Ten JDs for about four hours. We’ll take you to South Beach, show you the best places.’ Sounds good. We hop in the van, together with his colleague, Ahmed, and a guy from Singapore, Chen, who’s out for a day’s diving.

South Beach is a public beach, clean, well-kept and not so many people today. Chen gears up and Mohamed walks us to the wooden pier. A glass bottom boat, filled to capacity, tied to the end of the pier. It doesn’t stop the boat captain from hustling. ‘See fish? See coral?’ he beams. ‘Best glass bottom boat ride.’ Kids are sitting on their mothers laps, while the older kids are scrambling for a place on the roof. In vain. Full up. ‘Where are we going to sit?’ I ask him. ‘Plenty of room,’ he says. ‘Plenty of room.’ I show him our snorkelling gear and he shrugs. Some families are at the end of the pier fishing. From the pier you can already see the thousands of fish in the clear waters. Just across the way is the Egyptian coast line and some kilometres north lies Israel.

‘Over there,’ says Mohamed pointing to some rocks under the water. ‘That is Japanese Gardens. Plenty of fish. Keep going – you come to Gorgon Number One, and Gorgon Number Two.’ We nod, and spit into the masks, testing the straps. He points to a large white buoy about a hundred metres out. The water there is deep blue and deep. ‘That is ‘the wreck’,’ he says. ‘A sunken ship. Most dramatic.’



*‘Japanese Gardens’, a short snorkelling distance from South Beach, 15 kilometres from Aqaba.*

We jump in – the water is temperate, and once the over-filled glass bottom boat chugs off, the sea is empty. Beneath the surface, completely silence. The water here is quite shallow so the complications of diving

equipment would have felt superfluous. The corals are rich with colour – purple, red, green, blue. A wide assortment of colourful fish. The underwater landscapes are not as dramatic as Queensland's barrier reef, but it's easy swimming and no mention of the dreaded box jelly-fish, the scourge of the Australian Pacific. Sharks have a bad reputation, but there is nothing more fearsome than the box jelly-fish.

It takes a bit of a dive to get to 'the wreck' and here the diving equipment could have been a bonus. Diving is exhilarating but there is a lot to be said for the simplicity of a snorkel, a mask and a pair of flippers.

Back on shore and resting at the beach shelter. More locals have arrived now – families in little groups like the public beach at Aqaba. A group of kids playing beach football. And the young entrepreneurs parading their wares – bright red candy floss and cellophane bags of macadam nuts.

The tranquil scene is suddenly shattered. Two mini-vans pull up to the edge of the beach and ten persons emerge from each; one group take over the three beach shelters, while the other group grab plastic containers of diving equipment. Israelis! Loud boisterous and

unmistakably confident. The kids improvised football field becomes a dumping ground for the Israeli group's diving equipment – they don't even notice there is a football match going on. The kids stand there for two minutes, scurry out of the way, and improvise a new playing field a hundred metres away.

The Israeli group have taken the beach. Like a military operation. Seventeen guys, three women. The men are overweight, the women anorexic. Loud, posturing, and as organised as parking SUV's in a straight line on the sands of the Wadi Rum. Oxygen tanks there, masks, there and now... everyone into black shiny new wet-suits. For one very fat guy this is a struggle.

The two kids roaming the beach, move southwards to continue selling brightly coloured pink candy floss wrapped up in cellophanes bags (the additives!), candied almonds and chic peas, and chewing gum. For the Israeli diving team it takes at least an hour from arriving to suiting-up to finally *en masse* flip flap toward the shore-line and submerge beneath the surface. And suddenly, it is quiet.

Mohamed joins us in the beach shelter now. 'You get many Israelis coming here?' I ask. 'Many Israelis come here,' he says. 'Very very many. Better diving than Eilat.'

‘You do a lot of diving?’ I ask. ‘All over,’ he says. ‘Egypt, Saudi, the Dead Sea...’ ‘Wait a minute,’ I ask. ‘You go diving in the Dead Sea? Is that even possible?’

‘Just for the work’, he says. ‘Part of the Red Dead Project, creating a canal from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea so the Dead Sea doesn’t disappear completely. You know’, he said, ‘that it is decreasing at the rate of one metre per year...’

Mohamed tells this story... He was working on the Red-Dead canal project laying pipes on the floor of the Dead Sea. They were working with a Dutch diving team. They wear jeans and 25 kilo weights just to keep them under water. Otherwise they would just float to the surface. One guy who’d been shaving that morning, came up screaming. (It’s the salt). After that they all grew beards. ‘After two months the people at the resorts seeing us come up from the water thought we were terrorists,’ says Mohamed. The water is so salty that just swallowing a mouthful is enough to send anyone to the hospital. Then you get the kidneys flushed out. And two mouthfuls is enough to stop the kidneys completely you die. If you think it’s buoyant on the surface of the water (and sure it is possible to float and read the newspaper, just like the pictures in the tourist books),

when you're down ten metres it's twice as buoyant. Thus the 25 kilo weights and jeans and heavy clothes. Screwing the pipelines together, says Mohamed was a very slow process. Every two weeks all the gear has to be thrown out wetsuits, oxygen cylinders, masks, the lot. The salt corrodes through everything. But here's the sad story. A Dutch diver is at the bottom of the Dead Sea. There is just layers of salt down there, nothing else. It is so salty you can barely see more than a metre in front of you. Imagine how difficult it is adjusting pipes. The visibility is so poor you can be standing just a couple of metres from someone but you can't see them. The Dutch guy's weights get loose and drop off. He floats to the surface, which would have been OK, except directly above is the work platform. He can't move. He is just floating. The guys on the platform see the air bubbles and figure he must be OK. Then the bubbles stop. By the time they got underneath the platform it was too late. His oxygen had run out and he'd drowned. The Dutch team decided they were not able to continue. Diving in such saline water was too risky. They returned to the Netherlands and the underwater work was suspended.

In yesterday's copy of The Jordan Times, is an article about the Red-Dead project. Delays continue and time

is running out. Queen Rani expresses deep-felt concern. At the rate of one metre per year the Dead Sea is disappearing.

The kid with a box of chewing gum returns. He starts hassling, gives up, then starts on Mohamed. What a relief. And fascinating to watch. This kid wouldn't give up. Hustling a local guy to sell a stick of gum. No was not an answer. For us tourists this is a real revelation the hustlers hustle everyone no-one is immune. They keep fishing no matter what. Throw in a line and see what you get. This little angler had his hook in Mohamed, but Mohamed wasn't biting. For every ten rejections maybe you get one bite. Taxis, hustlers, tour sellers 'hey mister', 'taxi', welcome, where you from?' and the dance goes on...

We go to the beach café. Closed. That's strange. A guy comes up and tells us that it's closed for prayers, and the café guy will be back soon. Take in the beach life. Small family groups like islands in the long sandy shore-line. All wearing clothes from top to toe.

The café guy turns over the closed sign to open, takes a place behind the counter, and his young assistant take his place behind the desk. No menus anywhere. The

guy at the counter points to the guy at the desk. He has a menu printed on an A4 sheet of paper placed inside a plastic cover. You chose what you want then tell the other guy, then pay the first guy and get a slip of paper. It is like the shopping system in the Soviet Union days, and for good reason, 'Very cheap prices,' I say to the guy behind the counter. 'Of course,' he says with a big grin 'This is a government sponsored café, By King Abdullah himself.' 'The King owns this café?' 'King Abdullah says the beach is not just for rich people, but for everyone.' Which is why the prices are so low - in piastras, not dinars, and the choice, rather limited.

For the vegetarian there is only chips; 'Chips please.' 'You cannot have chips without the hamburger. Hamburger always comes with chips,' says the guy behind the counter. 'But if I order the hamburger and chips and you keep the hamburger, is that OK?' 'Not possible. You must have chips *and* hamburger.' Yep, just like shopping in the Soviet Union. I settle for an orange drink.

Back at the beach shelter Chen has finished his dive and as we pack up the van the army of black clad Israeli divers emerge from the clear blue waters. Good timing.

It's like a sleepy Sunday afternoon in downtown Aqaba. We have a long slow lunch at the Lebanese restaurant with its garden, and artificial lagoons and bridges. The sun is deliciously warm and we are the only guests having lunch at 3pm in the afternoon.

Later in the evening, walking back from a stroll down the Public Beach, we meet Singapore Chen outside the esplanade fountain. We are on our way to 'The Jordan Experience', the kind of display/film show that has emerged in tourist centres everywhere. 'Can I join you?' he asks, and we head off, three of us, to The Jordan Experience. It is tucked away in an underground floor of a shopping mall that consists of a McDonalds and a security guard standing by a metal detector. They always beep when you walk through but no-one ever seems to mind.

Normally, of course, something like 'The Jordan Experience' should be avoided at all costs, but behind this particular experience is a sad story of a Hollywood director with a big vision. A guy called Yeaworth who directed Steve McQueen in *The Blob* (1958) comes to Jordan and has a vision of creating an omni-max film experience long before omnimax existed. Before he could finish the project he was killed in a car accident

in Telifah, about 300 km north of Aqaba. What remains of the project is The Jordan Experience, a combined display and film show.

The guy behind the desk looks at the three of us and says: 'Minimum four people.' 'But if we pay for four?' I ask. 'Is that OK?' He considers the proposition and then nods. But it is a half hour to the last session of the day, and no-one showed up for the five o'clock session. 'If we pay for four the maybe we can go in 5.30 and not 6pm? What do you think?' He considers this new proposition, and realises the benefits of an early evening. 'OK,' he says.

It turns out that the guy behind the desk is also the tour guide – it is not just a picture show, but an 'experience.' The experience consists of tableaux reconstructions of excavations at Petra, and tableaux of a starry night in the Wadi Rum. There is a little cinema with some film clips of large scale productions that have been filmed in Jordan. It is a selection of three films (from the hundred or so that have been made in Jordan according to the Internet Movie Data Base); and Lawrence and Indiana Jones predominate. A short clip from Mission to Mars with Val Kilmer, where the Wadi Rum stood in for a Martian landscape.

Then comes the ‘big cinema’ and a 20 minute large format film of aerial footage from Aqaba, across the Wadi Rum, Mujib, the Dead Sea and to Amman. A grainy copy with the washed-out hues of 1970s Eastman colour. And the seats move and vibrate as you fly over the landscape. Wouldn’t have missed it for anything. Three of us in a cinema built for three hundred.

The lights tone up and the ticket guy emerges from the darkness and shows us graciously to the exit. Just a block away from the Captains Hotel is the vibrant ‘youth quarter’ of Aqaba, and we go the Tchai Café.

Drink mint tea and order hubbly bubblies. Reflect on the politics and economics of Jordan. It’s a small country and the borders to Iraq and Syria are not far away. According to the Transparency Agency amongst the most corrupt countries. Saudi to the south with its more fundamentalist interpretation of the islam faith.

Only the day before a front page article in the newspaper declared that King Abdullah, returning from a state visit to Switzerland, replaced his entire cabinet to allay allegations of graft.

## *Hubbly-bubbly*

In Jordan *hubbly-bubbly* is the common name for a water-pipe, and what you are offered or ask for at cafés. Its more correct name is *argileh* (Jordan, Turkey, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon), or a *hookah* in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan. In Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the rest of North Africa it is called a *shisha*, and in the Farsi speaking world (Iran, for example), an *aghalyoon*.

Each session lasts around 40 minutes, and at the café a waiter will top up the glowing charcoal every 15 minutes or so. It is quite different to smoking a cigarette. The tobacco is sweet and flavoured – apple, cinnamon, lemon, mint, coca-cola are a few of hundreds of flavours you can see lined up in market stalls,

My first experience was in Kandahar Afghanistan. After a huge Christmas dinner with the local guys, we stood around a gigantic *hookah* placed in the middle of an otherwise plain room. The incredible buzz, I discovered, was due to the tobacco being laced with *hashish* – not uncommon in Afghanistan in the 1970s, but unthinkable in Jordan in the 2000s.

Even without the illegal substances it is a relaxing ritual, I think largely aided by the 'hubbly-bubbly' sounds of smoke mixing with the water. But it still involves smoking tobacco and according to the World Health Organization regular users subject themselves to the same risks of lung-cancer and smoking-related diseases as cigarette smokers. Best considered a once-a-year summer evening ritual.

The Tchai Café is quite full now and sleepy Aqaba has certainly come to life in this quarter. The waiter tops up the bubbly bubbles every twenty minutes or so, and looking around the tables seem filled with local people. The division of gender is apparent. Young women at their tables, young men at their tables. Some women are dressed in western clothes, others wear a hijab; some of the men dressed in western clothes, some in jellabahs. Like Mohamed says: in Jordan people wear what they want – some like ‘traditional’ and some like ‘modern’.

\*

Between the Captains Hotel and luxury resort hotels of the north beach lie the old ruins of Aila, like a dusty park with a few information signs describing the excavations. Aila was the original settlement, and the entrances are exotically named the Egyptian Gate, the Syrian Gate the Hejaz gate. It's open all day, costs nothing to get in, and like so many places on a sleepy off-season afternoon, completely empty. In the distance the giant flag of the Place of the Great Arab Uprising, shifts slowly in the slight breeze.

A few minutes further along is the gargantuan Intercontinental Hotel and what better way to spend a final afternoon than just lying in the sun a little warmth before the onslaught of four months of cold and dark, Walking past three uniformed guards and through the beeping metal detector and into the palatial reception area. On the other side of the building and through the huge sets of doorways, the gardens and pools open out into the beach. We take a couple of beach lounge chairs and stretch out. Oh sunshine. A young man in a uniform approaches, and we think we've been rumbled the jig is up, he is going to ask our room number, etc, but not at all. He introduces himself as Ahmad: 'If there is anything I can get you, just let me know.' We say yes to a couple of cold bottles of water, some extra cushions and the big fluffy white towels.

I take a walk along the private beach, read a book, watch a glass bottom boat slow down as it comes close to the shore line so the locals have a view of spoilt visitors in luxuriant surroundings while the music blares out of shrill discount-price speakers. A final act of defiance before chugging off back to the direction of the public beach.

And always the giant flagpole, and the Jordanian flag, forever reminding the local people of the Great Arab Uprising, and the liberation of Aqaba from the Turks in 1917, when the Bedouin army with the Hashemites at the forefront, began as a process of nationalization culminating with the declaration of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan al 'Urdunn as an independent nation in May 1946 and declared the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1950.

## Jordan: A Cultural Excursion



*The present-day flag is almost the same as that raised in the Place of the Great Arab Uprising when Aqaba was taken in 1916. Three bands; black white and green, representing the caliphates of Abbasid (Bagdad) Umayyad (Damascus) and Fatimid (Cairo) respectively. The red triangle was added for the 1916 uprising, and the seven pointed white star came later. It symbolises the opening verse of the Koran: faith, humanity, national pride, humility, social justice, virtue and hope.*

*"We are not selling..."*

What is that Europeans (Brits, Americans, Australians) find most trying when travelling in the Middle East? Most would answer that it is the constant harassment from sellers, taxi-drivers, kids in the street, traders, you name it. If you are white and a tourist and on the street, then you are fair game. 'Hello mister where you from?' By the tenth time, even the most jaded traveller yearns for peace. 'Best price for you sir?' Shouldn't 'no' be enough? Shouldn't 'no' ten times, be enough? Why is everyone trying to sell you something? And why won't they leave you alone?

I put this question to Ahmad who is running a market stand in the normally busy Aqaba *souk*. But today is *essebt*, the Sabbath, many of the stalls are closed, and we are drinking mint *shay* and enjoying the unusually leisurely pace of the afternoon. 'So, Ahmad, why is it that everyone is always trying to *sell* something? And why won't they leave you alone?' 'We are not selling,' says Ahmad, taking another sip of *shay*. 'We are fishing.' 'Fishing? Please explain.'

'You know, when you throw out a fishing line, you don't always expect to catch a fish. When you throw out a fishing line *maybe* you catch something, probably you won't, but you always hope you do.' 'So what has this to do with taxi drivers following you down the street, tooting their horns, kids pestering you at market stalls, and the guides at tourist sites who never take no for an answer?' 'They are not selling,' says Ahmad. 'They are fishing.'

## Jordan Defined

A single phrase or word can never define a culture, but many phrases and words do provide insights into how cultures work. ‘The American dream’, the English sense of ‘fair play,’ the Italian *bella figura* or the Swedish idea that ‘moderation is the best policy’, encapsulated in a single hard-to-translate word, *lagom*. A phrase one hears a lot in Jordan is ‘*Ahlan wa sahlan*’ which means ‘welcome’. But it goes deeper than that. ‘*Ahlan*’ means ‘family, kinfolk’ and ‘*Sahlan*’ means ‘easy.’ So really it means ‘come in relax, make yourself at home, be part of the family.’ It is a phrase much in keeping with Middle Eastern hospitality. As a visitor you cannot say ‘*Ahlan wa sahlan*’ this is reserved for the host. The visitor replies: ‘*ahlan beek*’ (or ‘*ahlan beeki*’ for a woman). ‘Thank you for allowing me to be part of your family.’

A more poetic and perhaps more accurate translation of ‘*Ahlan wa sahlan*’ might be: ‘May you arrive as part of the family, and tread an easy path (as you enter).’ Arabic, may sound harsh to the unaccustomed western ear, yet is rich with poetic subtlety. When you greet someone in Arabic, you are saying ‘may peace be with you’; ‘good morning’ is actually ‘may your morning be filled with abundance and light.’ (‘Good afternoon’, the

same.) And when you ask how someone is, you are actually asking: ‘what is your colour?’

Arabic is the official language of 25 countries, stretching from Morocco in the west to Iraq in the east. Like any language Arabic is rich with dialects and accents. Most people in the Middle East can understand Egyptian Arabic, thanks mainly to the Egyptian film and television industries everyone follows the Egyptian soap operas on TV. ‘But’, said Ahmed, our Jordanian diving instructor, ‘there are big differences from country to country, from region to region. No-one here will understand anything from Morocco it may as well be a foreign language.’ Ahmed (from Aqaba) looked at his assistant, Mohamed, and said: ‘I hardly understand anything this guy says. You know he has that snobby dialect from Amman!’ Mohamed laughs: ‘The trouble with you Aqaba types is that you’ve never learned to speak properly.’ Accents, dialects and cultural differences - it’s the same anywhere.

Another phrase one hears a lot as much in Jordan as elsewhere in the Arabic speaking community – is *Insha’Allah* ; ‘In God’s hands’, or ‘if it is God’s will’, or ‘God willing’. As mentioned in the first chapter and a night in Wadi Rum the phrases referring to ‘family’ and ‘God’s will’, tell us something about the cultural

priorities in Jordanian society. Family values and religious faith.

In western culture *insha'Allah* can be regarded as a fatalistic approach to life, a view mistakenly perceived as resignation. *Insha'Allah* is an expression found in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu and Bengali, and the 14 nations that make up the Arabic speaking 'home countries' the *Al-waton al-Araby*: (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran and Iraq).

In cultural terms the difference between determinism and self-determinism is quite simple: 'we control our own lives' (self-determinist); 'we cannot foresee our own destiny.' (determinist). This was the dilemma of Lawrence in the film of Lawrence of Arabia. And as Lawrence discovers both views are valid, but they need not be as contradictory as many cultural studies make out. The idea that a culture is either A or B (determinist or self-determinist; individual or collective) is a Westernised concept to begin with - we love our dichotomies, dualities and polarities. Which is not easy to explain to people from the Middle East. 'If you want to be like this, that's OK. If you want to be like that, that's OK too. It is *insha'Allah*, in the hands of God.'

The will of God finds its expression in what Muslims refer to as the five pillars of Islam: faith, prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage. A good Muslim is expected to practice and carry out all five. In addition, a good Muslim must pray five times a day, as the traveller is reminded, with the calls to prayer from the minaret at dawn, midday, mid-afternoon, sunset, and two hours after sunset. The crackling voice over discordant loudspeakers is saying: ‘hasten to prayer.’

In 2004 King Abdullah published an article, ‘What is Islam and What is Not.’ He proposed balanced Islamic solutions for essential issues: human rights, women's rights freedom of religion and just and democratic government. It is the most liberal of the Islamic countries in this troubled region; government officials are removed if there is any indication of corruption, as King Abdullah’s bold move in December 2011 revealed. If there is a ‘middle path’ to follow the Kingdom of Jordan seems to be following it.

