

JORDAN

A Kingdom of Ancient Treasures and Modern-day Tolerance

Text & Photographs Lynett Hinings-Marshall

Jordan became an independent Hashemite Kingdom after the British relinquished its mandate in 1946. Even when its ancient Nabataean city of Petra was designated a UNESCO world heritage site in 1985, Jordan remained under the tourist radar. More visitors came after Steven Spielberg chose Petra as the site for the Holy Grail in his film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, but it was in 2007 when Petra was listed as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World that Jordan became an international tourism destination.

I arrived at Petra in time to watch the sun set from my room at the Movenpick hotel. Renowned for its intricate arabesque interior design and collection of antiques and artwork, this five-star resort sits right at the entrance to this Nabataean legacy that was lost to the world for over 1,000 years until its re-discovery in 1812. I would regretfully have to wait until the following morning to get my first glimpse of Petra.

At first light my tour guide walked me to the entrance of As Siq, a narrow 1,200-meter-long gorge that is the only way into Petra. The Beduls have claimed ownership of this extraordinary landscape and have convinced the Jordanian government that only Beduls can guide inside Petra. Consequently, all visitors must hire a horse whether they use it or not. I thought it would be more comfortable to ride in a horse and carriage. Initially, I worried that the ragged old horse may not make it, and then after a few bone-shaking minutes on the Roman-laid cobblestones wondered if I would. My young driver explained that he was studying information technology at a university in Amman and upon graduation hoped to work for one of the national banks. So

much for the local propaganda that all the Beduls are local nomads straight from the caves of Petra.

I am grateful to the carriage driver for insisting I close my eyes at the end of As Siq and open them only when we arrived at the dazzling Al-Khazneh (Treasury). Carved into the exquisite, rose-colored stone in the first century B.C. as a tomb for a Nabataean king, some scholars believe Al-Khazneh was later used as a temple. In front of Al-Khazneh, the Bedul guide who had been hired for a two-hour tour arrived. He spoke about Petra's history for about five minutes then requested an additional 27 dinar (US\$38) to stay longer. When I declined, he left in a huff.

Under a cloudless sky, this brief annoyance could not mar the dazzling sight of the Alexandrian and Hellenistic architecture. I walked around the corner toward the Street of Facades and the Theatre, anxious to see the A.D. 70 Urn Tomb, which is the largest and most imposing of all the royal tombs. Every few meters I was accosted by a Bedul hawker to buy trinkets or to hire donkeys. A polite "no thank you" was ignored by the aggressive touts. But since I was equally determined to enjoy the experience, I quoted to myself the words of T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) who wrote: "...so you will never know what Petra is like, unless you come out here. Only be assured that till you have seen it you have not had the glimmering of an idea how beautiful a place can be."

I climbed the arduous 800 steps to Ad-Deir (monastery) at the top of Petra to escape harassment only to discover that the donkey drivers were at their most aggressive here. Head down they forced their way past on the narrow cliff-hugging trail as I stepped tentatively to avoid them as well as the odoriferous





Petra tombs

donkey defecation. Fortunately, the breathtaking beauty of the carved, soft-pink rocks towering toward the heavens that greeted me at the summit would calm the most tumultuous soul. From a visitor's perspective and in the interest of preserving this world heritage site it behooves the Jordanian government to take control of the Bedul tribesmen. Perhaps Petra is an example of a leadership that is too tolerant? I would personally like to see laws prohibiting the Beduls from hammering nails into the ancient walls to hang their cheap trinkets. None of the aforementioned however should deter anybody from visiting Petra. The gigantic mountains of rock and vast, intricately carved mausoleums of a departed race and culture truly are a unique partnership between nature and man.

Jordan is a small, land-locked country of six million people surrounded by Israel and the West Bank to the west. Syria sits across the north, Iraq is northeast and Saudi Arabia runs south right down to the Red Sea port of Al Aqabah where on a clear day, you can see Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Including a substantial Palestinian population, Jordan is 98 percent Arab (mainly Sunni Muslims) and has provided refuge to many of the two million Iraqi war refugees. Such generosity has earned Jordan a reputation as the most tolerant of the Middle Eastern nations. However, the downside to this tolerance is the hyper-inflation of real estate

prices for Jordanians.

In the capital city of Amman, Western-style dress is de rigueur for young Jordanian women with their head-turning fitted jeans and stiletto heels. Downtown Amman offers five-star hotel rooms ranging from US\$100 to US\$150 a night—a real bargain. Regrettably, these low charges reflect a society with the problems of double-digit unemployment and conspicuous pockets of poverty. I arrived during Ramadan, the month-long sunrise to sunset Muslim fast, but Jordanian legendary hospitality meant that this did not adversely affect my vacation. Although I avoided drinking and eating in public during daylight hours, it was business as usual at all hotels, and I would not have been treated as a pariah if I had broken the fast. An advantage to being in Jordan during Ramadan was the evening *iftar* which was even more sumptuous on an empty stomach. It commenced with *sahlab* (a date juice drink). This was ceremoniously served from a huge copper kettle adorned with clinking bells and slung over the back of the Bedouin-attired server. Surprisingly, the hotel staff said that they sell more food and drink during Ramadan than any other time.

It was in Amman during *iftar* that I enjoyed *mansaf*, a national Bedouin dish. *Jameed* (dried yoghurt) is mixed with water to produce a creamy sauce. This is poured into a large stewing pot



Bedul women



Dead Sea Jordan



Dead Sea Beach



Jordan

with chunks of lamb and onions and placed over an open fire. As the stew begins to warm, it is stirred to prevent the yoghurt from separating. Large trays are then covered with flat Arabic bread and dampened with yoghurt. A layer of rice is heaped on top of the moistened bread, followed by the cooked lamb. Almonds, pine-kernels and other nuts are sprinkled over the dish before serving. This dish is traditionally eaten sans cutlery.

A visit to Jordan is not complete without seeing Jarash, so next morning I headed north of Amman to see the region's most complete example of a provincial Roman city. Jarash sits in a valley with a stream through the center and walnut and poplar trees along the banks. Its history goes back to prehistoric times, and on the slopes east of the Triumphal Arch can be found flint tools and weapons from Neolithic times. Outside the walls to the north was a small early Bronze Age village from about 2500 B.C. In the fourth century B.C., Alexander the Great began developing Jarash but it was under Roman rule that Jarash came into its golden age.

When Emperor Hadrian visited Jarash in A.D. 120 the citizens raised the monumental Triumphal Arch at the southern end of the city in his honor. It is recorded that during this time Jarash had a population of 20,000. The city started its slow decline around the third century and by the time the Crusaders arrived they described it as uninhabited. Fortunately, the ancient city was buried for centuries in sand which preserved it. Modern excavations began in 1925 and continue today. Allow many hours to visit Jarash. Walk through the Hippodrome to the Oval Plaza surrounded by a colonnade of first century Ionic columns. The early Islamic Umayyad houses and the second-century Roman temple of Dionysus are also worthy of contemplation. The Temple of Artemis (daughter of Zeus and patron goddess of Jarash when it was named Gerasa) is a must.

Jordan with Israel is half-owner of one of the most spectacular natural and spiritual landscapes in the world, the Dead Sea. Set in the dramatic landscape of the Great Rift Valley that extends all the way into East Africa, the Dead Sea is the lowest point on earth. The area is believed to have been home to five Biblical cities: Sodom, Gomorrah, Adman, Zebouin and Zoar. Eighty kilometers

long and fourteen kilometers wide, this vast stretch of water receives a number of incoming rivers, including the River Jordan.

Once the waters reach the Dead Sea they are land-locked. They then evaporate and leave behind a dense, rich, concoction of salts and minerals which are excellent for the skin. Main ingredients are magnesium, calcium, potassium, bromine, sulphur, and iodine and many people come to the Dead Sea to relieve arthritis, rheumatism, psoriasis, eczema, headache and aching feet. These warm, soothing waters that are almost ten times saltier than sea water have attracted visitors since the time of King Herod the Great and the Queen of Sheba. Reputedly, even the beautiful Queen Cleopatra travelled from distant Egypt to build the world's first spa at the Dead Sea. Today, it is the royalty of Hollywood who use the waters of the Dead Sea as their spa.

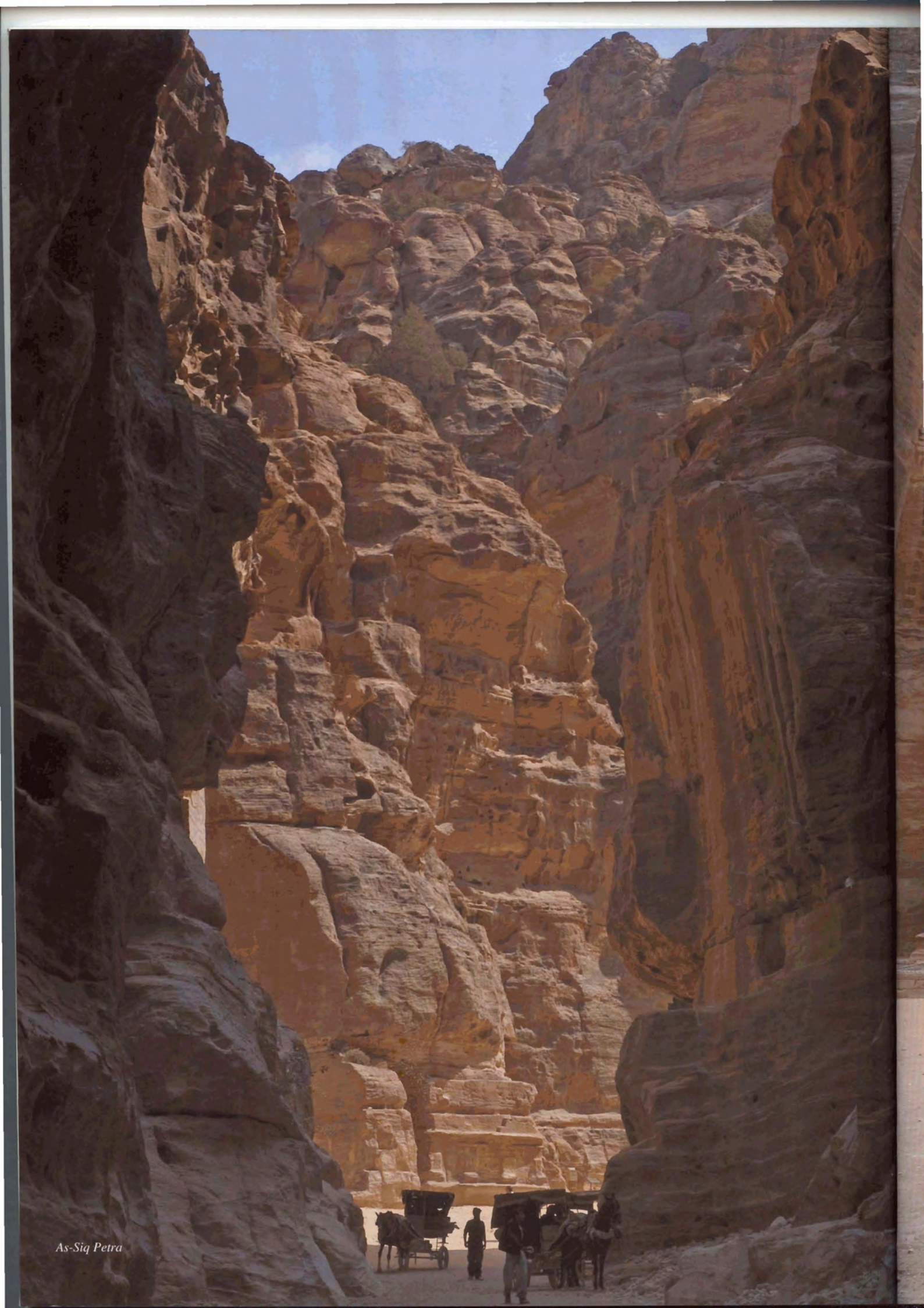
Alarmingly, the Sea has fallen 18 meters since 1970 and is now 418 meters below sea level. The effect is dramatic. When the Ein Gedi Spa opened 20 years ago, guests walked just a few steps from the main building into the sea. Today they have to walk or ride three-quarters of a mile. The Dead Sea's precipitous drop is mostly caused by the diversion of the Jordan River for agriculture. Two years ago Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority signed the "Two Seas Canal" agreement to bring in fresh water from the Red Sea, but several environmental groups have raised concerns that this will negatively impact on the natural environment.

If time permits, a trip south from the Dead Sea along the Kings Highway is recommended. First stop was Mount Nebo where Moses gazed upon the "Promised Land" but was never permitted to enter. We then headed to Madaba best known for its exquisite sixth century mosaics. Inhabited for at least 4,500 years, it is mentioned in the Bible as the Moabite town of Medeba, and after the spread of Christianity became a Byzantine ecclesiastical center.

Karak, a fortress since biblical times, was next. It was reportedly here that the King of Israel besieged the King Mesha. Centuries later the Crusaders erected the vast castle that remains today, silhouetted against the horizon, on a promontory. It was in Karak that Crusaders and Muslims traded with each other, each imposing taxes, while at the same time their armies were locked in battle. In the twelfth century after Saladin attacked Karak it reverted to Muslim hands and eventually became the capital of the entire Mamluk kingdom. Ottoman Turks then followed as rulers of Karak until the Great Arab Revolt of 1918.

Jordan may not be wealthy like its oil-rich cousins in the Gulf but it is a hospitable and generous country and I was touched by their humanity toward refugees. October was an attractive time to travel there as the days are just this side of hot and the evenings cool and dry for walking in this safe and friendly Kingdom. You need to walk a lot to appreciate the ancient splendors, so dress accordingly and allow four to five days if you can.

Shokran and Ma'a salama. A



As-Siq Petra



Al-Khazneh (Treasury) 1st century B.C., Petra