





# Beyond The River

A land steeped in history, culture, and a rich variety of architecture, Jordan is a gem of the Middle East pleading to be explored by adventure-seekers, dreamers, and lovers of the great outdoors alike. From ancient cities, dramatic wadis and desert landscapes, to quaint towns boasting hot springs and the Dead Sea, it's time to put this soul-feeder and its stunning vistas on your must-visit list, pronto.

*Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna*



The air around me was crisp, and cold. Footsteps crunched on the gravel behind me, tiny pebbles strewn across a path made of earth that had been packed down from countless years of curious travellers passing over it, seeking the same thing that I was here to find. A man, singing in a calm, soothing voice, while the dark silhouettes of his rapt audience, sat eagerly drinking it all in with wonder, huddled closer for warmth, their faces aglow in the soft light of flickering candles. His song, echoing around the cavernous walls and up into the night sky speckled with stars, filled you up with a quiet sense of peace.

No, I wasn't at the gathering of a secret society or cult—though it did feel much like the set of a *Star Wars* movie—but in fact, I was at Petra in Jordan, where I'd spent the past 30 minutes—or was it an hour? I had become so captivated with my surrounds that I had entirely lost track of time, so much so that I could have easily forgotten I was even there during the modern day—walking through the historic ancient city. I'd finally reached The Treasury, also known as *Al Khazneh*, the main destination in the Petra By Night show. The experience begins with a walk through the entire Siq towards the Treasury, where the pathways are lit by more than 1,500 candles to add to the already impressive naturally awe-inspiring atmosphere. Once you reach the Treasury, you'll have the chance to sit back and sip on traditional Arabic tea amidst thousands of candles, as your host sings you into a state of reverence.

The setting is, quite simply, spectacular, and although we'd visited in the midst of winter, bundled up in as many layers as we could handle for a truly brisk walk, it was absolutely worth it, and in a way, almost added to the mystique of it all. As we stepped our way over rainy puddles, darkened by the shadows looming on the rock formations around us, it was easy to forget that there was anyone else around us, and it brought my companions and I closer together in an inexplicable instant bond, urging us to share secrets that

we safely felt could be kept hidden in Petra's many nooks and crannies.

The night-time excursion runs every Monday, Wednesday and Thursday of each week, and begins at 8:30pm, hosted by a licensed guide, though with the lack of modern lighting in the extremely well-preserved historical and archeological site, it felt like we were going in the dead of the night. Fortunately, we were also set to revisit the next morning, which gave us a chance to see the rose city in all of its sun-drenched splendour. A UNESCO World

Heritage Site, the ancient city of Petra has been inhabited since prehistoric times. It's easy to see why it's made it as one of the New Seven Wonders Of The World: Aside from the fact that it's incredibly rich in history—Petra is rumoured to have been established as early as 312BC, and was once the capital city of the Arab Nabataeans, a once nomadic tribe that was described as being among the most gifted people of the ancient world—the city is so beautiful that it will quite literally take your breath away. It certainly did







## “Petra was once the home of the Nabateans, *a nomadic tribe described as the most gifted people of the ancient world*” /

ours. Boasting all of the powers of a fortress with all of the appeal of a trading route—the city was a key controller in the main commercial routes in the region—it is half built, half carved, into the rock, making it one of the most famous archeological sites in the world, and Jordan’s most popular tourist attraction. A trip to Petra during the day begs for an endless stream of photos to be taken, with your biggest problem being how to capture it all, considering its walls are often so immense that it feels impossible to drink it all in, let alone capture it on film. It’s a good thing I had travelled there well-prepared, then.

I’d headed to Jordan on a short trip with a group of like-minded adventure seekers, with the goal of seeing if we could truly escape the flashing city lights of Dubai’s everyday life and lose ourselves in nature, history, and the great outdoors, just a few short hours from our adopted home city with less than a week of time for our explorative vacation. Armed with as much adventure-worthy gear as we could stuff into our suitcases, we took along everything from our GoPros (the new Hero BLACK 5, to be specific, since we’d anticipated wanting to be able to control it without needing our hands while navigating the rocky and desert terrain, thanks to its nifty voice control functions, not to mention its awesome waterproof capabilities, which we planned on using in the Dead Sea and beyond), all of the appropriate accessories (I packed everything from a head-strap and chest-strap to two types of sticks, which I refused to call selfie sticks,

since I planned to use them to photograph the scenery more so than my own visage), and my trusty iPhone, ensconced safely in a waterproof, shockproof, drop-proof, and in my case, clumsiness-proof, Lifeproof case. For clothing, it was simple: I wasn’t here to go out for wild nights on the town, so nary a heel went into my bag. Instead, I packed all of my favourite fitness gear, some 2XU compression tights to ensure my weary legs didn’t let me down, Stance socks to keep my legs warm (with flair!), and my favourite two-layer Columbia jackets that boasted zip-on-and-off hoods, and fleece alongside rain-proof layers. I was ready as I’d ever be. But what I never could have anticipated was the fact that I’d fall absolutely, utterly, and hopelessly head over heels in love during my trip.

### RUST AND STARDUST

First, there was Petra. The city enraptured me. Even the hasty horse ride that I’d entered the main walls of the city in during the day had me grinning from ear to ear, despite the cries for more cold, hard cash from the shrewd yet friendly guides taking lead. I was Indiana Jones, ready to uncover my next mystery. I was Lawrence of Arabia, ready to conquer the great unknown. And I was Luke Skywalker, ready to release my inner Jedi as I discovered the feel the force. The place was a land of pure fantasy, and as a half-Arab woman who had actually grown up elsewhere in the Middle East and who was visiting Jordan for the first time, I couldn’t believe that all this time, I’d not yet discovered this enchanted city of wonder right on my doorstep. The hike







through Petra by day isn't easy: If you take your time, it's an enjoyable and easy experience, but if you're trying to see it all in as little time as we were, you have to be prepared to power walk like you've never power walked before. One of the other pieces of gear I'd taken with me was a digital watch from Polar, which had step-counting and heart-rate measuring activities. There was no doubt about it, this was a workout. Taking a selfie with a camel is pretty much a must-do in Petra—when you're in an ancient city that boasts a WiFi connection in its rugged cafes, who are you to question the normalcies of modern-day living that can apparently happily co-exist with the preservation of ancient architectural grounds and a Bedouin culture?—and if you need a little sustenance throughout your journey, you can even stop for a bite and a brew in the Basin, where you'll find a restaurant that's actually, surprisingly, run by a Crowne Plaza. As curious as Petra was by day, however, it was after

nightfall that it really captured my heart. Something about the darkness, which had fallen over it like a veil, seemed to enchant the city even further, almost making us feel as though it was ensconcing us in a protective bubble far removed from not just the hustle and bustle of everyday life, but from modern life itself, and all of the troubles that haunt it. It was a quality that I was soon to discover wasn't exclusive to Petra—next, we were headed off to Wadi Rum, where I'd soon find that the witching hour had an equally bewitching quality.

#### ARAB HOSPITALITY

It's when getting around from place to place that you really start to grasp just how large Jordan really is, at least in comparison to Dubai. Our little group, comprised of people from various backgrounds and ethnicities, used our many hours in the bus to bond, playing games like charades and pausing to collectively gush over the incredible scenery and stellar sunsets. Our pitstops

to refuel were nothing like the gas station re-feeds common in the typical road trip: Nope, no matter where we stopped, Arabic hospitality fluffed out its feathers as our hosts continually laid out beautiful spread after spread, and we had the chance to sample numerous types of Jordanian food, from the hearty and comforting chicken dishes like Mansaf and Musakhan, to fresh

grilled fish and other seafood that had been caught with the sustainability of the region's impressive diving scene in mind. But no meal on our trip even came close to the one we had in the desert at Wadi Rum, and not just because of how good it tasted.

It had been an exciting day: We loaded our little group of 10 people onto two off-road capable cars with open-





topped backs, snuggled up side by side in the al fresco seating and bracing ourselves for the onslaught of wind that would inevitably hit us as we raced (well, as fast as we could anyway) through the Wadi. And boy, was it worth it: The sky so blue it almost looked like a painting, a shade so piercing you'd not even dare to try and cover it with an Instagram filter, and the desert, vast and almost overwhelmingly beautiful, stretching beyond as far as the eye could see. We'd strapped our GoPros to the hood of the car (and every other surface we could attach them to, to get every angle that we could), which was a good idea as it turned out, since we wanted to leave our hands free

to not only hop on and off the cars as often as we could to explore the different types of rock formations found across the wadi, but to be able to photograph as much as we can. Yet no matter how much we snapped and filmed, no footage and no device could ever truly do this place justice, at least not when compared to the jaw-dropping 360-degree view one is able to drink in in the flesh.

It's clear to see why Wadi Rum is also known as the Valley of the Moon: The rolling plains of sand that decorate the grounds amidst the sandstone and granite rock that the valley is cut into are so unique and grand in size that the entire place feels otherworldly, with still-visible rock

paintings reminding you of its inhabitants from long ago (which include the Nabateans). The Bedouins that name this place their home have, in the current day, taken advantage of eco-tourism opportunities, but activities that might have felt a little cliché or forced elsewhere in the Middle East felt somehow different here, more authentic somehow. Our camel trek, for instance, wasn't held over a quick trot around a well-trodden patch of desert with seemingly bored camels that were apparently tired of doing this day in and day out. For all we knew, perhaps this was the case for our camels, but if so, Wadi Rum's were better at hiding it, since our rides for the afternoon seemed just that little bit more untamed than the average, with many of us squeaking out an apprehensive giggle or two as we mounted them and began our trek. It was a considerably long ride, too, lasting anywhere between 30 minutes to an hour. To

## GETTING THERE (AND AROUND)

Jordan is just a short 3-4 hour flight from Dubai, and while most major airlines will fly to its capital, Amman, FlyDubai is a great option since it's affordable and offers a roomy business class, along with comfortable flight times. After landing in Amman, we hired a bus to take us everywhere from Petra, to Wadi Rum, to the Dead Sea, and everywhere in between. You can book one via the Jordan Tourism Board; we recommend Alpha ([alpha-jo.com](http://alpha-jo.com)). Bonus: The bus boasts a solid WiFi connection.

**“The valley is so grand that *it feels other-worldly, with rock paintings reminding you of its inhabitants from long ago*”**





## WHERE TO STAY

While Jordan has its fair share of excellent places to stay in each area, here's where we'd lay our weary heads at night.

### MOVENPICK RESORT PETRA

[movenpick.com/en/middle-east/jordan/petra/resort-petra/overview](https://movenpick.com/en/middle-east/jordan/petra/resort-petra/overview)

### KEMPINSKI HOTEL AQABA

[kempinski.com/en/aqaba/hotel-aqaba](https://kempinski.com/en/aqaba/hotel-aqaba)

### MOVENPICK RESORT & SPA DEAD SEA

[movenpick.com/en/middle-east/jordan/amman/resort-dead-sea](https://movenpick.com/en/middle-east/jordan/amman/resort-dead-sea)

### MA'IN HOT SPRINGS RESORT & SPA

[mainhotsprings.com](https://mainhotsprings.com)

say it required effort and was a good workout on the legs was an understatement. In my eyes, though, it just added to the ambiance: Sure, my thighs hurt from gripping the saddle so hard, but it was easy to see how easily the Bedouins of the days of yore had fallen victim to mirages and the like, unable to tell how long they'd been going for, with our destination in the distance teasing us mercilessly with how near it looked, yet somehow never getting any closer. It was a good thing we'd fuelled up with some hot, sweet tea at the hospitality of some of the Bedouin guides before our ride, providing us with a bit of warm and cozy respite from the cold (not to mention incredibly fragrant surrounds thanks to their local soap being used extensively—and offered to visitors for sale, of course).

By the time we reached our destination, a restaurant hidden in the middle of the desert complete with a roaring fire and a stage set for live music should its guests so wish, we were as weary as our camels must have been.

As is the Jordanian—or indeed the Arab way—small, dainty cups of hot, sweet tea were waiting, and we huddled closer to the fire despite the wafts of black smoke curling into the night, feeling as though we'd stumbled across a secret oasis in the middle of the desert. It was time, our host announced—dinner was just about ready, and we were invited to see the unveiling of our meal. We traipsed over to an empty quarter with nothing but sand in it, looking much like an unfinished room with the night sky for its roof, our





down us like butter on a warm plate, all washed up with sides of freshly-made hommous, crisp salads like fattoush and tabbouli, and delicious breads. “After this, chicken will never taste the same again—this has ruined it for me, but in the very best way,” one of my companions declared with a gloriously satiated, sleepy smile on his face, the rest of us mumbling in solid agreement. After dinner, we curled up by the fire, sipping on yet more tea and some sweets, before pulling ourselves together to leave in the dead of the night for our next destination: The illustrious Dead Sea.

### SALT OF THE EARTH

After days spent wandering through the rocky desert landscape, we had lost track of time and felt as though we’d been gone for weeks, our cozy quarters inspired by our surroundings, heading to a luxury hotel right on the cusp of the Dead Sea was a world away. Also known as the Salt Sea, at 997 feet deep, the Dead Sea is the deepest hypersaline lake in the world. It boasts more than 34% salinity, which means that it’s at least 9.6 times more salty as the ocean, making it an extremely harsh environment for plants and animals to flourish in. It’s from this hostile reputation for living creatures that the sea gets its name, but what it lacks in a liveable environment, it more than makes up for in its incredibly rich mineral content, in its mud anyway: The minerals found in the mud of the Dead Sea, and the salt itself, are so pure and precious that it’s now equally famous for its cosmetics and herbal benefits as it is for the fact that you’ll float rather than sink or swim if you try and enter the water here (we don’t even dare you to head in with any nicks or cuts on your skin, because trust us, it’ll hurt: You won’t even want to shave any part of your body for days before going for a dip here). It’s for this very

reason that while it does boast a certain beauty for its views alone—as with the rest of the landscapes we’d seen so far in Jordan, the Dead Sea also boasted stunning sunsets—it’s the beautifying, detoxifying and purifying qualities that make it such a popular destination for spa-goers from all over the world, men and women alike. Unfortunately, the sea is said to be receding at an alarming rate, and we can only hope that The Red Sea–Dead Sea Water Conveyance project, carried out by the country of Jordan, which aims to provide water to neighboring countries, while the brine will be carried to the Dead Sea to help stabilize its levels, will work. The project is set to begin in 2018 and completed in 2021. As for that mud? It’s said to have countless benefits: Rhinosinusitis patients were reported to have exhibited improved symptom relief after receiving Dead Sea saline nasal irrigation, while Dead Sea mud pack therapy is rumoured to help temporarily relieve pain in patients with osteoarthritis of the knees. On a more aesthetic level, the mud is said to help detoxify the skin, aid in boosting circulation, improve skin health and treat sensitive skin conditions, as well as relieve aches and pains. In our case, it left our skin baby-soft and smooth, well enough that we were convinced to promptly buy a couple of sachets to take home.

The Dead Sea isn’t the only part of Jordan renowned for its naturally restorative and beautifying properties, however: Ma’in Hot Springs,

a series of hot mineral springs and waterfalls found not far from the Dead Sea and in the Madaba area of Jordan, are equally lusted after by visitors and locals alike for their ability to rejuvenate. The springs, which are nestled into a truly spectacular mountainous landscape that’s 264 metres below sea level, are flanked by a hotel that houses a luxurious spa, a standalone building aptly named the Cascade Spa that offers a view of the stunning waterfall from pretty much any angle. And at the spa, you’ll have the chance to douse yourself in water from those very mineral springs. Warm and refreshing, the natural hot spring waterfall that cascaded into the spa’s pool and relaxation area was the perfect place to wind down, and restore our bodies and spirits after our days of travel. Guests are allowed to abide by spa rules, which include staying as quiet as you possibly can, ensuring that it’s all a very zen-like experience. After our session under the falls, we dashed out of the place positively beaming, despite the fact that rain was drizzling down outside. Perhaps it was all of that electro-charged goodness in the air, maybe it was the effect that days spent in nature—and the glorious outdoors that the country offered, at that—or maybe there was just magic in the air. But Jordan, and its unforgettable secret discoveries that had bound us together, had a lasting effect on us that made us all promise that, without question, we would be back. ■

## THE GOOD GEAR

Want to take the same items we did? Of course you do. GoPro, Stance and Lifeproof can all be found via AI Boom Marine ([alboommarine.com](http://alboommarine.com)), or at all major technology and sporting stores that sell similar equipment. Polar and 2XU can be found via Sport In Life and its distributors ([sportinlife.net](http://sportinlife.net)).

curiosity whetted almost as much as our appetites. Yanking the cover aside with a flourish, our hosts pulled out a surprisingly tall metallic structure that housed an entire lamb, chicken after chicken, and thick, juicy chunks of beef that had been cooking underneath the sand for hours on end, alongside seasoned rice and rows of foil-wrapped potatoes and other vegetables. The method of cooking, our host explained, was called Zarb: A traditional Jordanian dish that started with the Bedouins, the meat is seasoned then placed in an underground pit under the sand to cook until it’s so tender that it practically falls off the bone at a mere touch. And that it did—we scooped up the warm, flame-grilled chunks with eager and hungry hands, sliding