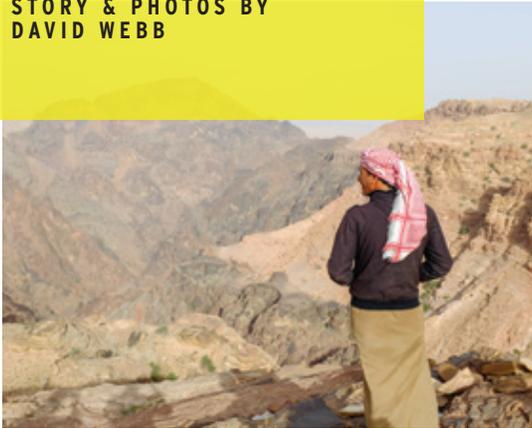


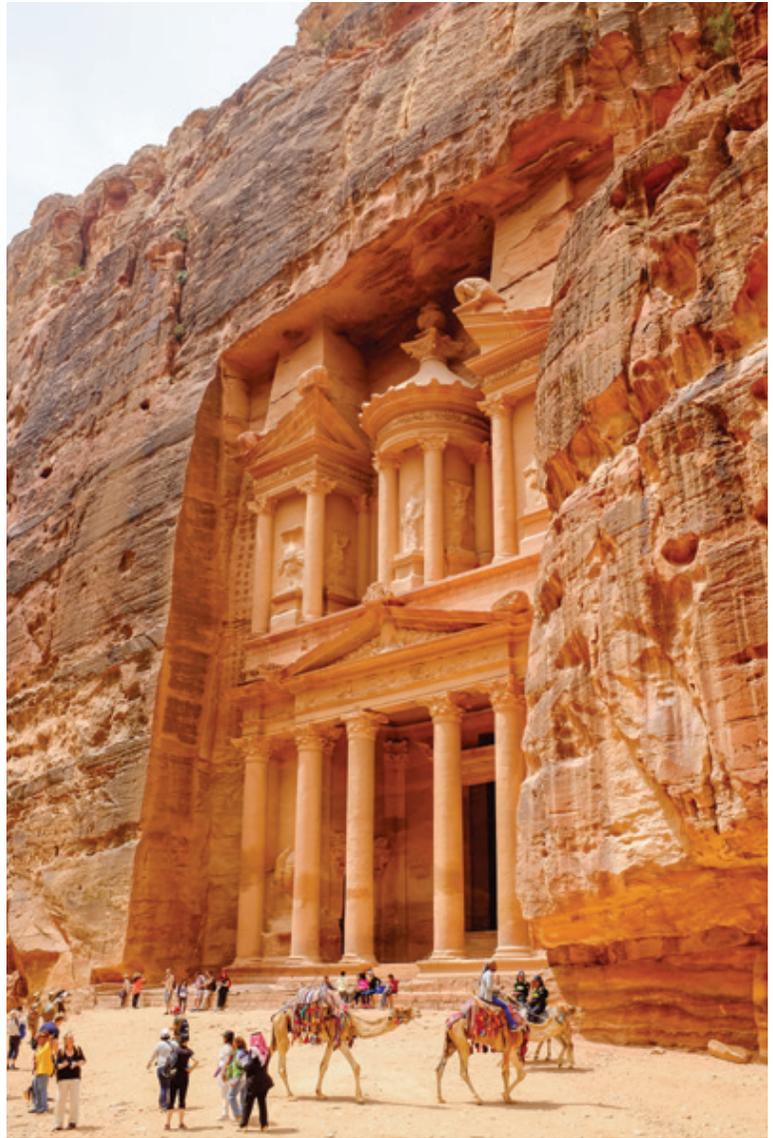


EXPLORE THE WORLD: JORDAN

STORY & PHOTOS BY
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TOP: Guide Khalid led us through a remote sandstone canyon into Petra—through the less-travelled “backdoor.” RIGHT: The famed Treasury, Al-Kaznah—the Crown Jewel of Petra. BOTTOM: Petra Mars Bedouin Camp, our rustic respite in the desert of southern Jordan.



PETRA THROUGH THE BACKDOOR

Hiking through a desert canyon reveals one of the great wonders of the world—before the crowds arrive

A sandstorm kept me awake for hours. The only suggestion of sleep was simple logic—I couldn't have stared at the multicoloured drop-cloth of a Bedouin tent *all night*, could I?

It's 5:30 a.m. and my friends are already milling around the dining tent at Petra Mars Bedouin Camp, our base in the desert of southern Jordan. The gale has eased. We're sweaty, hungry and ready to hike before the brutal sunshine sears away dawn's thistle-coloured cloudcover. Our destination is Petra—the archeological gem of Jordan and a global tourist

attraction. We'll hike through a remote red-rock valley and sneak into Petra's sandstone ruins before the hordes cluster our viewfinders. It's Petra through the backdoor—the adventurers' choice.

WHEN CHRIST WAS BORN, Petra was already a masterwork of architecture, commerce and religion. Once home to the Nabataean people, and originally settled as far back as 9,000 BCE, this citadel saw its heyday some 2,000 years ago—when seminal facades like the Monastery (Ad-Deir) and the Treasury (Al-Kaznah) were carved into sandstone cliffs. By the time of The Crusades, and once the Nabataeans

had swirled into the dustpile of history, Petra was abandoned. It was known only to the nomadic Bedouins until a Swiss fellow named Johann Ludwig Burckhardt grew a beard, got a tan and snuck in, lured by rumour. That was 1812—when the modern excavation of this city, buried literally in the sands of time, saw its beginnings.

Today, Petra comprises some 250-square-kilometres of UNESCO World Heritage Site wonder. It's mostly known for the Treasury, made famous in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, but while Al-Kaznah is arguably the most spectacular of the ruins, it's a voice in a choir. Petra has tombs and temples at every turn.



TOP: The Monastery (Ad-Deir) is the largest façade in Petra and our first sight as we entered the citadel. RIGHT: If the desert sun wears you down, there are camels for hire in the heart of Petra.

Most visitors stay in the town of Wadi Musa and enter Petra through the Siq, a mile-long slot canyon that reveals the Treasury as their first, and perhaps only, stop. For us, it'll be our last glimpse as we exit against the flow of looky-loos, having wandered end-to-end before most even finish their breakfasts.

DEPARTING MARS CAMP, our driver shifts his Toyota Hilux into four-low to climb over the gritty stone. Crawling at a donkey's pace, it seems to take an epoch to travel from the bitumen to the drop zone, a featureless plateau a few hundred metres ahead of a rift through the mountains of Arabah.

Our guide, Khalid, speaks little English; though more than I of Arabic. Dressed in earthtones with a red-and-white headscarf indicative of his Palestinian roots, he points us toward a valley path carved before history had been written. Jordan is like a highlight reel of humanity. Moses was said to have "brought water from the ground" in Petra. His brother Aaron's tomb is possibly nearby. Mount Sinai, where Moses was said to have received the Ten Commandments, has a theoretical location in the region. But it's the present that has me gripped.

A Bedouin herdsman clip-clops up a steep stone staircase on the back of a donkey, brandishing a knowing smirk while we tourists sweat for the sake of sweating; his goofy-eyed goats *baa* in objection as I trek past. The trail bends around rocky outcrops with the sloped path tumbling hundreds of metres into blowing redsand. There's a photo-op at every turn. It's wisest not to get distracted—this is canyon hiking and you need your wits.



Just as the redrock gets repetitive and the sun crests high enough above the waves of eroded peaks to escape obscurity, we round a curve and spot Ad-Deir—the Monastery. The final destination for tourists strolling in through the front door is our first glimpse of Petra for real.

Fifty metres tall by 47 wide and as imposing as a Tyrannosaurus, the Monastery knocks me back like I'd been headbutted by a Bedouin's goat. The largest monument in Petra, it was carved in the second century AD under the rule of Nabataean King Rabel II. It's an homage to the architecture of the Treasury, which had been carved a century earlier—a collection of large-scale pillars and bas reliefs difficult to imagine being crafted with 21st century tools, let alone with ancient chisels.

There is no one here but a merchant selling watery Nescafe—you'd have had to sprint through Petra to arrive at the

Monastery ahead of our dawn patrol. But they are arriving. We walk down 900 stone steps from the Monastery into the heart of Petra while travellers climb up. We visit the Lion's Triclinium without interference, but by the time we reach the centre—home to ruins like the 23-metre-tall Qasr al-Bint, the most important temple; Colonnaded Street, the commerce centre; the Royal Tombs and more—we're in the thick of things. Our mountain hike has morphed into a sightseeing walk. Hawkers holler. Camels are offered for-hire.

Rather than ogle from behind a velvet rope, we walk right into the ruins; touch ancient blocks; measure ourselves against Romanesque pillars. Broken urns litter the ground leftover from a time when the assassination of Julius Caesar was still fresh news. It's gargantuan and accessible. To fully explore the menagerie of Petra, I'd need five days.

The Siq comes into view; its outflow a gathering point where tourists congregate for selfies. Lounging camels steal my view and I'm suddenly standing beneath Al-Kaznah—the Treasury—the 40-metre-tall showpiece of Petra. Once said to house the "treasure of the Pharaohs," this carved façade has captured my imagination since I was 10 years old.

I'll admit to being manipulated by pop culture. *The Beach* sent me to Thailand. *The Long Way Round* made me buy a motorbike. And *Indiana Jones* has me standing in simple awe under the influence of Al-Kaznah.

Today, the Treasury is a magnificent culmination; our final reward before this ancient site floods with the tide of tour busses. Few will see what we've seen. A crack-of-dawn start; a remote canyon grind; the goats and their herders; the shocking first sight when natural stone morphs into the façade of Ad-Deir—that's Petra done right. It feels like the difference between watching *Indiana Jones*, and living it. ✕

IF YOU GO

Petra Mars Camp offers rustic wall-tent accommodation, friendly hospitality and sumptuous food. Shuttles to Petra (including the "backdoor") can be arranged. petramarscamp.com

Connect with **Wild Jordan** and the **Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature** (RSCN) to visit nature preserves throughout the country—

including the lush and mountainous north, the Dead Sea and Wadi Rum. wildjordan.com

The **Jordan Trail** is a 650-kilometre through-hike that offers daytrips and multiday regions (Region 7 includes Petra), or tackle it in one 40-day push end-to-end. jordantrail.org

Learn more about visiting **Petra** at visitjordan.com.