

# DESERT DREAMING IN JORDAN

## THE WONDER OF WADI RUM

Words Yulia Denisyuk

**B**esheer Zawaideh motions me to step into the shade of a black goat-hair-woven tent and I can barely contain my excitement. Sitting down on the layered floor – Bedouin carpet strewn over a piece of tarp that covers the red sand – I negotiate my unyielding hips and knees into a cross-legged position as best as I can while Zawaideh gathers the rest of the guests around a steaming platter. It contains *mansaf*, a legendary dish of rice and meat smothered in a tangy sauce derived from a type of fermented yogurt called *jameed*. I've

had my share of mansaf throughout my years of travelling in Jordan (the best is rumoured to come from the central Jordanian region of Karak). Something tells me this desert version is one that I won't soon forget. I am not wrong.



**Horizon highlights** (this page; top-bottom) With its 740 sq km of protected terrain, there is a reason why the alien-looking Wadi Rum has provided the backdrop for films such as *The Martian*; a lack of light pollution means the Milky Way shines brightly above Wadi Rum

On this visit – my fifth time in the deserts of southern Jordan – I get the chance to visit a Bedouin family dividing their time between the village of Disah and their true home: the Mars-red sands of Wadi Rum. This Protected Area, which was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011, is actually an ancient seafloor spread across 740 sq km of red, white and yellow sand dunes as well as granite and limestone mountains. The Bedouin community, who live in and around this area, mostly make their living from tourism; and today, they've opened their doors to welcome us.

Zawaideh's wife, Umm Omar, observes me as I scoop up a ball of rice and chicken bits with my hand and drink the fragrant jameed sauce that she poured into my cup barely a minute earlier. She nods, eyes smiling: "You've had this before."

"Never this *zaki* [tasty]," I answer and our group erupts in laughter. I've yet to find a tastier meal in Jordan.

I'm not the only traveller enamoured with Wadi Rum. In the last few decades, since the government put in place plans to develop local tourism infrastructure and the desert area got its UNESCO inscription, the number of visitors to the site has

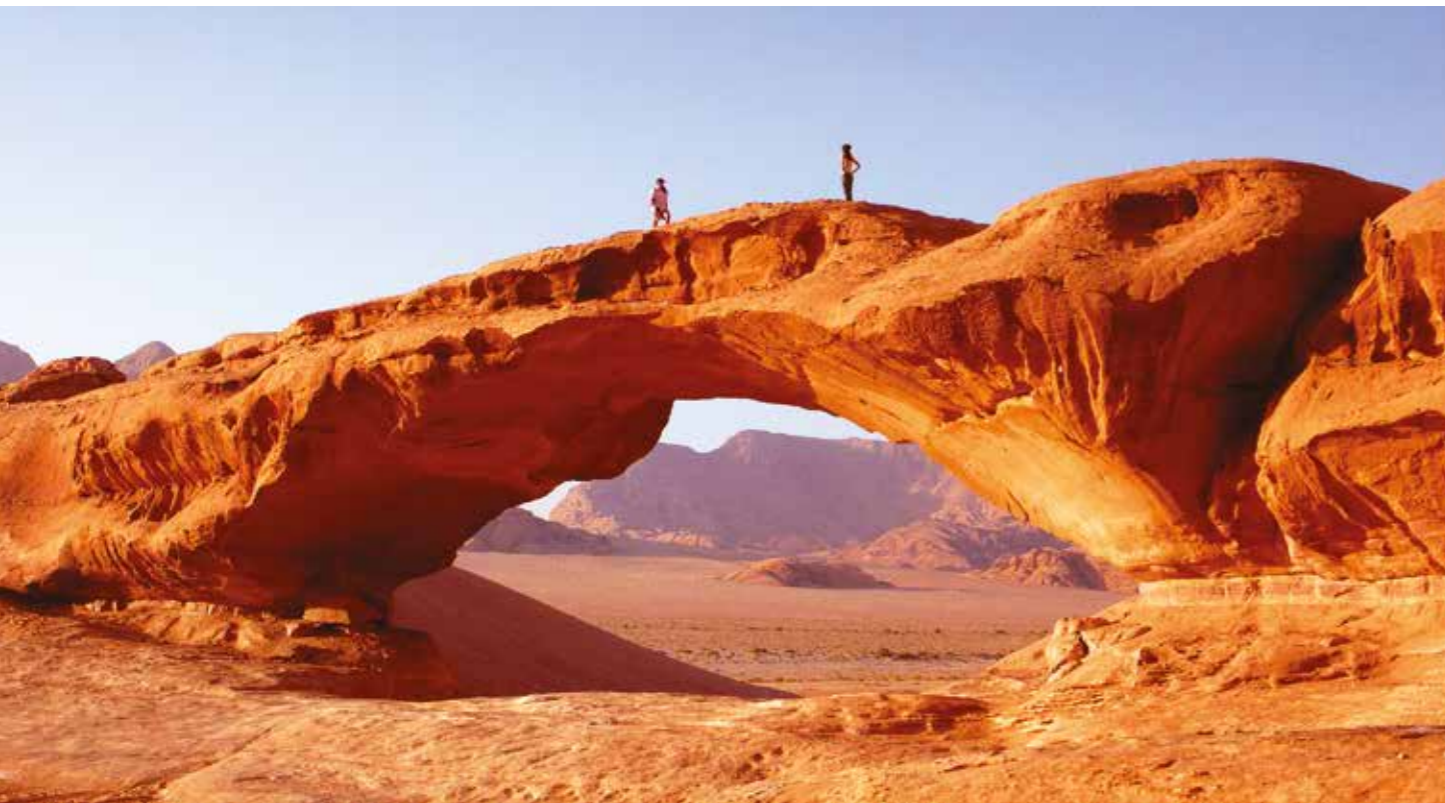
steadily grown. Many come for the thrill of outdoor adventures: 4WD Jeep tours across vast swathes of arid land; hot air balloon rides with bird's-eye views of the fantastically shaped gorges, cliffs and arches that have been sculpted over millennia by the wind and sand; and multi-day wilderness hikes on camelback towards Jabal Umm ad-Dami, Jordan's highest peak at 1,854m.

Others travel to Wadi Rum for its heritage. TE Lawrence famously made the area his base during the Arab Revolt (1916–1918); now visitors come to narrow Siq Umm al-Tawaqi canyon to see a carving

of Lawrence's bust and visit a cave where he allegedly hid from the Ottoman forces. Dig deeper, though, and you'll find traces of even earlier stories. The mysterious Nabataean civilisation once marked its presence

**Warm welcome** (this page; bottom right) The Bedouin community living in and around Wadi Rum make most of their money from tourism and can provide guests with an authentic and memorable experience of the desert on overnight camping trips with meals in the desert and fireside storytelling





with tens of thousands of inscriptions on windswept rocks, which are now open for all to see. Before this, prehistoric humans settled in Wadi Rum as early as 10,000 BC, with traces of their presence still visible in the many petroglyphs left behind.

I, too, have my reasons for coming back to this extraterrestrial terrain. The first is the special kind of peace that I only ever discover when I am in Wadi Rum: a quiet broken only by the rustling of the wind reshaping the nearest dunes, the bellows of camels returning from their daily excursions and the crackling of the nightly fire. It helps that cellphone reception in the area is fickle at best and the wifi signal is slow. After spending a few nights at a traditional Bedouin camp by the foot of a granite mountain, I can return to the world of deadlines, emails and hustles recharged and rejuvenated.



The second reason is the people. Wadi Rum is home to a Bedouin community descended from the nomadic peoples that, for centuries, criss-crossed the deserts between the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant (the region covering present-day Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon). Mostly settled in and around Wadi Rum today, they maintain the strong cultural traditions of their ancestors: fierce hospitality, a deep connection to nature, and the practical wisdom of desert survival.

As we wrap up our mansaf lunch and bid goodbye to Zawaideh and his wife, my host, Ahmad Marayeh, tells me about the couple's children, who have built homes in the village and won't live in the desert in the way that their parents do. Marayeh is playing his part in preserving the culture of Wadi Rum in a sustainable way. A few years ago he co-founded Rum Planet Camp, a 30-tent sustainable camp offering small-group experiences and encounters with people such as Besheer Zawaideh. Marayeh's plans are ambitious: using solar energy panels for power, banning single-use plastic and replacing the 4WD Jeep tours that are so popular with tourists with lower-impact camel treks.

"People want what's popular," Marayeh tells me over a cup of freshly

**Desert delights** (clockwise from top) Wadi Rum is filled with otherworldly rock formations and makes for exciting hiking, especially with the help of a local guide who knows the desert like the back of their hand; Jordan's most iconic UNESCO Site is Petra; choosing locally run restaurants is a great way to support small communities on your travels; seek out sustainable tour guides such as Ahmad Marayeh, who is swapping out 4WD Jeep tours for low-impact camel rides; at 423m below sea level, the shore of Dead Sea is the lowest point on earth not covered by water or ice



brewed sage tea later that night. "We're trying to educate both Wadi Rum visitors and the local community about a sustainable way of growing local tourism initiatives."

Later on, I continue with my travels in Jordan. I float in the saline waters of the Dead Sea. I marvel at the almond blossoms in Ajloun, northern Jordan's verdant garden. I hike parts of the 675km Jordan Trail in As-Salt with Treks Jo, a community-based adventure tour operator. I count the stars at the Feynan eco-lodge, a low-impact tourism project inside Dana Biosphere Reserve. I wander through the Nabataean city of Petra and browse the stalls of the downtown souk in Amman. And every time that I leave Jordan, there is always a longing in the back of my mind for the peace of the desert, beckoning me to return as soon as I can.

Visit Jordan; Fadi Amrah

# JORDAN AT A GLANCE

## JORDAN'S 5 OTHER UNESCO SITES

**1 Petra** Created by the Nabataeans some 2,000 years ago, the intricate caves, temples and tombs of Petra in south-west Jordan are, understandably, the country's most iconic heritage site.

Flaunting an 8,000-seat amphitheatre and a 39m-high mausoleum known as Al-Khazneh, or The Treasury, the rock-carved site of Petra has provided a backdrop for many a Hollywood film. The Rose City, as its often known, also takes on an ethereal quality when visited at night.

**2 As-Salt** The city of As-Salt, distinguished by its hotchpotch of yellow limestone architecture, is found in the Balqa highlands of the west-central region and was once a vital trading link, attracting merchants and skilled craftsmen from places such as Nablus, Syria and Lebanon between the late 19th century and 1930s. Lose yourself in its winding streets of European and Ottoman architecture and the 300m-long Hammam Street.

**3 Al-Maghtas ('Bethany Beyond the Jordan') Baptism Site** Pilgrims from all corners of the world visit Al-Maghtas, east of Jericho, in the southern Jordan Valley. This Biblical site, around 8km north of the Dead Sea, is part of Western Jordan's

'Holy Land', and many Christians believe Jesus was baptised there. After centuries of religious leaders confirming its importance, it finally gained UNESCO status in 2015.

**4 Quseir Amra** The archaeological ruins of Quseir Amra, discovered by Czech explorer Alois Musil in 1898, are one of many desert castles built by the Arab Umayyad dynasty. They served as trade centres, *caravanserais* and places for powerful rulers to interact with the region's Bedouin tribes. But this particular one, built in the 8th century by Yazid ibn Abd al-Malik, is also believed to have served as a hunting lodge for its residents. With a still-intact reception hall and a traditional hammam, it was also very decadent.

**5 Um ar-Rasas** Despite being among the country's lesser-visited attractions, this UNESCO site – inscribed in 2004 – still takes the eye, with its archaeological findings spanning three historical eras. While the Ancient Romans built the original military camp here, the site became a religious hub during the Byzantine era and became an Islamic centre during the Early Muslim period. Amazingly, it is thought that the site may have also been inhabited as far back as the Iron Age.



### MEET THE LOCALS Iraq al-Amir Women's Cooperative

As well as selling handmade ceramics, fabrics and gifts, this women's cooperative also offers hands-on cooking classes and paper-making workshops.

### Summaga Café

Golden olive oil, fresh honey, zaatar-infused flatbreads... this community café and shop has a menu of home-cooked dishes and serves organic produce from family-owned farms across Ajloun. For many local women, it also offers their first opportunity for full-time employment.

### Beit Khairat Souf

Hearty breakfasts and lunches are served at this small village restaurant set in a beautiful tree-shaded garden. Run by a local women's cooperative, this family home is now a community hub that offers jobs and training for women and young people.

### GETTING THERE

The Royal Jordanian airline ([rj.com](http://rj.com)) operates daily flights from London's Heathrow Airport to Amman's Queen Alia International Airport. Once in Amman, private car hire or a taxi can take you to Wadi Rum in four hours. The Jordan Pass ([jordanpass.jo](http://jordanpass.jo)) provides entrance to over 40 must-see attractions in Jordan, including admission to Wadi Rum Protected Area.

**JORDAN**

Jordan Tourism Board