

Wild camping in Wadi Rum desert – a protected area of narrow gorges, towering cliffs and wind-sculpted sandstone formations.

Pathway to Petra

Starting in 2018, **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** set out on an 18-month overland journey from France to South Africa. In this final chapter of their Travel Journal, they explore Jordan.



From the top: The main road into the town of Aqaba. Yamaniya Beach Promenade, in Aqaba. Ad Deir (the Monastery) in the ancient city of Petra, where camels still walk along the Colonnaded Street.

What is it about a country that gets you hooked? Is it the people, the history, the landscapes, the food – or something else that you just can't put your finger on? Jordan is on an ancient trade route connecting Egypt, to the south-west, with Damascus in Syria to the north. Beyond Jordan's towns and cities, the country's wild and rugged landscapes seem unchanged since the times when it lay at the cultural intersection of Roman emperors, Nabataean kings and Christian Crusaders. Jordan surprised us around every turn, the Bedouin hospitality made each day special, and everything simply radiated with an intoxicating atmosphere – it has that elusive X-factor that hooks you quickly, and for good.

It's also a very organised country, offering tourists a thing called a "Jordan Pass". We bought this online beforehand: It covered our visa fees, plus access to a set number of tourist attractions, including three days in Petra which is the highlight of a visit to the country.

We had three weeks to complete a circular route from Aqaba in the south, up to Petra, Amman, the Dead Sea, and finally the desert landscape of Wadi Rum.

Strategically placed on the Red Sea, Aqaba is principally a port city, but better known among tourists for its scuba-diving spots and great beaches. The Eilat/Wadi Araba border post between Israel and Jordan turned out to be a breeze. We flashed our Jordan Pass to officials and within 45 minutes our CDP (Carnet de Passage) for Kukuza, our Toyota Hilux, was stamped.

Shortly thereafter, we checked into the Bedouin Moon Village – a budget beach resort – and ordered lunch. The place was not quite as exotic as its name suggested, but we negotiated a rate to camp in their parking lot, which allowed us more budget to gorge on their yummy food. We stayed there for two nights and sampled dishes like *maqluba* (meaning "upside-down"), which is a slow-cooked dish of rice, chicken, potatoes and vegetables. "Don't forget the sesame bread," our waiter said. "You will regret it!" He was right, the combination was delicious.

Aqaba is super laid-back, with a steady flow of Israeli visitors who revel in the cheaper hotels and restaurants on the other side of the border. (Israel is hectically expensive.) Knowing that we would return here to take the ferry to Egypt, we focused on a few bits of housekeeping. We applied for our Egyptian visas and set up the shipping for the bakkie. Kukuza also got a service – I changed oil and air filters in preparation for our journey into the desert.



Petra, via the back door

The ancient trade city of Petra is just 150 km from Aqaba. We were impatient to see one of the most mind-blowing archaeological destinations on the planet, so we opted for the tarred highway rather than our usual back roads.

The site is hidden by mountains, deep in the desert. Also called the Rose City, Petra (which means "rock" in Greek) was a cosmopolitan city in its heyday – home to the Nabataeans and also Egyptians, Judeans, Persians, Greeks and Romans involved in trade at the time.

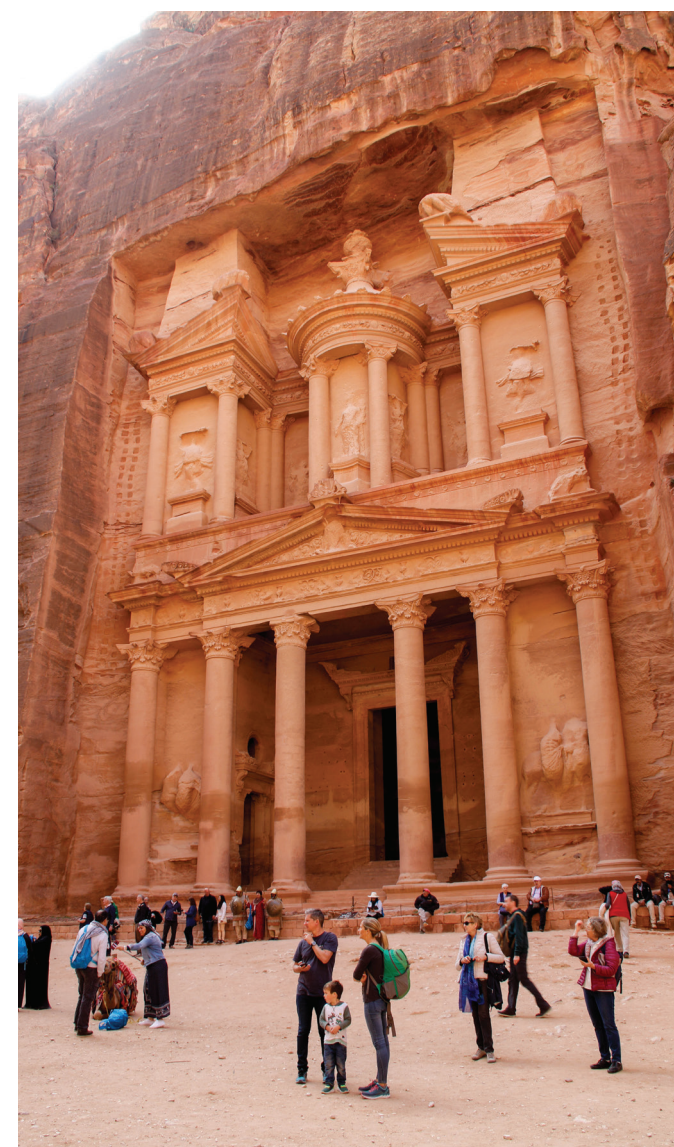
Highlights include rock-cut temples, intricately detailed tombs and an amphitheatre that could seat thousands, all built between 300 BC and 106 AD. There are pools and gardens, fed by a complex water capture and storage system that sustained up to 30 000 people at its peak. Trade goods like textiles, incense, spices, ivory, and precious minerals were brought through here.

The party ended when new maritime trade routes overtook the slower and riskier overland routes. This left Petra obsolete, deserted, and in near ruin for centuries. In the early 1800s it was "rediscovered" by a Swiss explorer named Johann Burckhardt, and it quickly captured the imagination of tourists everywhere.

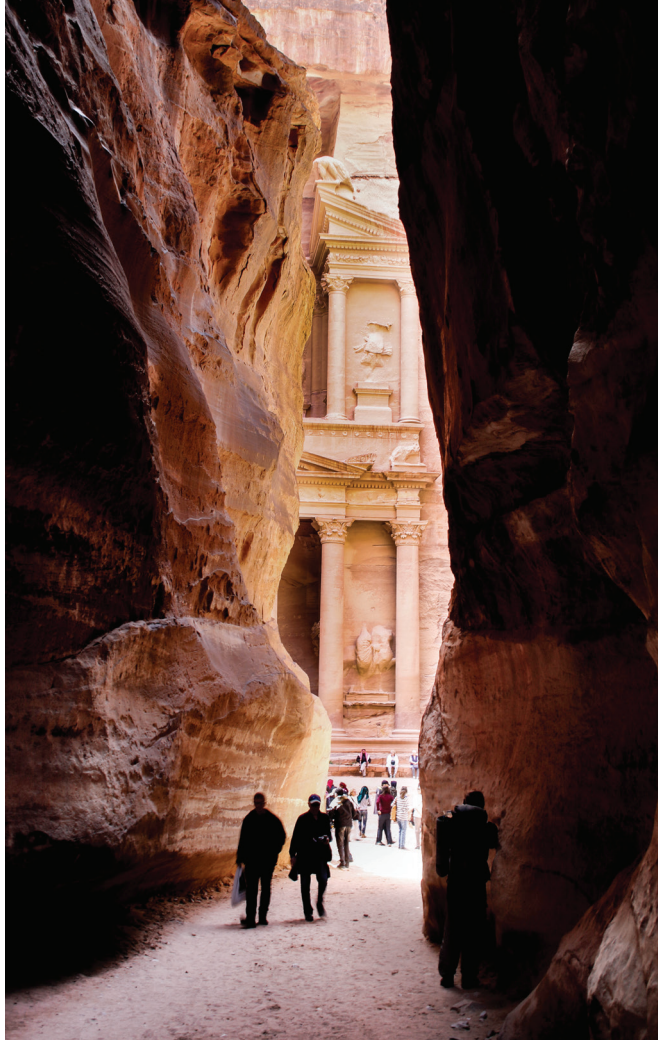
We were keen to get our cameras clicking, but first we needed a wild camp spot for our impending three-day exploration. We settled in Little Petra, an area 6 km north of the historical city, which was where all the camel caravans used to camp out. The location was beautiful, but also strategic, as it gave us easy access to Petra's "back door".

Unpacking the rooftop tent, the desert around us was alive with smoke rising from countless Bedouin tents. It was the weekend and locals were out enjoying the countryside, having picnics.

Wind and sand are a given, so the Bedouins usually create a simple kitchen area inside their tents. A rectangular metal frame (about 100 cm x 50 cm, and 10 cm deep) is placed on the floor of the tent and filled up with sand. On this raised sandy base, they light a small wood fire to boil tea and to cook basic dishes. Since wood in the desert is in such short supply, the Bedouin are very frugal, using the minimum of coals to cook their food. A regular "braai" meal might include *shrak* (flatbread), eaten with onion, tomato, cucumber and courgette; and dessert might be watermelon, figs and dates. Meat is less common and reserved for special days or guests.



From the top: The Place of Sacrifice provided a good vantage point to photograph Petra's Street of Facades. Standing in front of the impressive Treasury, it's easy to imagine the old city as a thriving place of trade.



From the top: The Siq, a dim, narrow gorge, is the main entrance into Petra. Patrick is flanked by Royal Guards of the Treasury. You can also enter Petra via a “back door” – a 12 km hike through a desert valley.

Taking the “back door” route into Petra entails a 12 km hike through mountains. After a peaceful night, we woke early. A Bedouin man pointed out a little security hut in the distance – we had to get our Jordan Passes stamped there. It was 6.30 am but already the sun was beastly hot, even though it was technically winter in Jordan.

The rocky landscape revealed little signs of life and we were alone for most of the three-hour route, which took us through deep gorges where paths hugged the mountainside. A hike to the top of the plateau rewarded us with incredible views over Wadi Araba, and we bought delicious fresh tea brewed by local Bedouin traders. It was a great way to enter Petra for the first time. It felt like we were on our own private voyage of discovery.

Setting eyes on Ad Deir (the Monastery) resting silently in the rock felt like a holy moment. Ad Deir is massive and possibly more impressive than the Treasury, which is the more recognisable site at Petra. After the long hike, we sat down to grab a bite to eat at the conveniently placed Ad Deir restaurant: a simple breakfast of hummus, tomatoes and cucumber, with Bedouin bread.

The sights just kept coming: enormous rock-cut temples and spectacular tombs. The planning, engineering and attention to detail required to carve these facades is mind-boggling, let alone hollowing out the cavities within. Petra is also one large cemetery, for behind many of the beautiful facades lie huge rooms carved directly into the rock where families entombed their loved ones.

We didn’t do the hike every day. On subsequent days, from our camping spot in Little Petra, we drove around to the main entrance and walked in along the narrow Siq – a 20 m-deep gorge that is barely 3 m wide and can get quite congested with tourist-laden donkeys and horse-drawn chariots.

Having three days in Petra afforded us time to find shady viewpoints to take it all in. We usually try to avoid the tourist hordes, but in Petra, watching the large groups walk down the Colonnaded Street helped us to imagine this trading city in its heyday. To complete the scene, Jordan tourism even pays a few locals to randomly hang around in traditional Nabataean battle outfits, which make for classic photo opportunities.

We ticked off all the best-known sights, like the Great Temple, Royal Tombs, Street of Facades, Place of Sacrifice, Theatre and of course the Treasury, which was clearly designed to impress. These guys even built a huge fountain (Nymphaeum) just for the fun of it!



Floating in jelly

We arrived in the capital, Amman, barely 24 hours after a torrential downpour caused a rare and devastating desert flood. To get into Amman, we were forced by the police to take an alternative route through the mountains, which turned out to be a great choice. The views over the Jordan Rift Valley and the Dead Sea from our wild camp spot were unforgettable.

Not much more than a village until the middle of the 20th century, Amman is now a bustling capital city with a population of four million. Although we only spent two days there, we managed to see the 8th-century Umayyad Palace, also with a very large Roman amphitheatre; and the Roman-built Temple of Hercules, where two colossal statues once stood. Only a fragment of a hand remains, but you get an idea as to how big these statues must have been.

The real treat was discovering *limonana*, a mint-lemon drink like no other, and devouring *mansaf*, roasted lamb with yoghurt sauce, widely regarded as Jordan’s national dish.

Next up was the Dead Sea, which we’d mostly skipped on the Israeli part of our trip. The Jordan Rift Valley drops to about 430 m below sea level at the Dead Sea – the lowest natural point on the surface of the earth.

It’s not a sea, but rather a very salty lake – nearly 10 times saltier than any ocean. Nothing lives in it (hence the name) – no fish, no frogs, not even weeds. Apparently, the water level is dropping at an alarming rate of one metre per year, and we were warned not to camp along the water’s edge due to the frequency of sinkholes.

The northern section of the Dead Sea, which is close to Amman, is a money-spinner. Plenty of swanky hotels hug the shoreline. We opted to stop off at Amman Beach, which is a resort-style spot with a few swimming pools. They have a day-pass package (which cost about R240 per person) that included access to change rooms and the use of their swimming pools.

A guide reminded us not to enter the water if we had any open cuts (it stings like hell) and to avoid water getting into our eyes and mouth. It was mid-afternoon and the sun was strong when we headed for a swim. For an extra R25 each, we ceremoniously lathered black mud all over our bodies (which dried to a crust in seconds) before wading into the world’s largest flotation pool. It felt odd entering the water, like swimming in jelly, and we had plenty of laughs. A few metres from the beach, we gingerly laid back (making sure to keep our faces dry) and floated on top like wine corks. It’s impossible to sink!



From top left: This enormous Roman amphitheatre in Amman dates back to when the city was known as Philadelphia. One of Amman’s recent attractions is the colourful umbrella staircases. The Gurneys found a wild-camping spot overlooking the Dead Sea, and didn’t hesitate to try the Dead Sea mud treatment.

From the top: A local guide in Wadi Rum prepares a *zarb* or Bedouin barbecue – an ancient technique where food is cooked in an underground pit. When you visit this protected area with a guide, as part of a tour group, you stay in a camp like this “martian dome” camp. After helping a local Bedouin called Hussein find his camels, Patrick and Marie were invited back to his place where Patrick also learnt the art of camel appreciation.

Opposite page: Patrick takes in the Wadi Rum landscape from a natural rock bridge.

Goat stew in Wadi Rum

After a 260 km, four-hour drive from the Dead Sea, we arrived at the super-efficient Wadi Rum Visitor Centre. We were flying by the seat of our pants. We had ogled many photos but not done a stitch of research – not even knowing if we could camp within the protected area. We soon learnt that nobody takes in their own 4x4, but rather joins a group. Luckily, we met a local Bedouin tour guide who signed our paperwork, stating that he was our guide and responsible for us during our stay. Thanks to this loophole, we could take in Kukuza and go where we pleased. Six nights of wild camping in Wadi Rum!

Tar took us up to Wadi Rum village – Toyota country! Old Land Cruisers and Hilux bakkies of all ages were everywhere. Most had been converted into tourist transportation with bench seats at the back. Over the next six days of camping, we bumped into Toyotas all over – it felt like we were part of a Toyota Desert Club!

We stocked up on water and what we could find in the tiny shops, then we headed out. Immediately, we encountered deep sand. A few tracks quickly become hundreds of tracks, all leading into the 720 km² Wadi Rum protected area. We had no idea where to go or which track to take. Google Earth became indispensable (there was plenty of signal) and helped us identify our location against the enormous mountains dotted around the red-and-yellow sandpit. It was awesome driving those first few kilometres to find a campsite – I felt like an ant on Mars!

The Bedouin men all wear eyeliner (like Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*), which complements their dark hair and the obligatory head scarf. Their friendliness and generosity were inspirational.

We hopped around the desert, sleeping in different spots over the next couple of nights. Travelling by ourselves, we became another local attraction. Every day, a Hilux or two pulled up to say hello or offer us food; even entire tour groups popped in to meet us. The freedom in Wadi Rum was refreshing. It's huge, and you can set up anywhere knowing that the tourists all go back to their respective camps.

We were also getting a little too cocky – trying out new moves in the deep sand with our heavy Hilux – and we almost rolled the vehicle while cresting a dune. We cruised around looking at attractions like the petroglyphs, various rock bridges and arches, and the house and spring named after Lawrence of Arabia.

We helped some Bedouin find lost camels at night and were invited back to their camp to drink mint tea and eat spicy goat stew cooked in a *zarb*, a traditional underground oven, served with vegetables and pita. I was gifted a traditional dagger by the head of the family, and I gave him a rechargeable torch in return. Marie was even offered a gold ring, which she respectfully turned down.

Wadi Rum is one of the most dramatic deserts we've ever seen. Deep, rugged canyons and large wadis (a wadi is essentially a dry riverbed) lead out into undulating sand dunes and towering mountains. A patchwork of red and yellow desert sand changes colour with every changing degree of the sun. Silent contemplation comes naturally in a place like this, and every night offered amazing stargazing.



All too soon, we were packing up the rooftop tent for the last time and saying goodbye to our new Bedouin friends. We got back on the road to Aqaba to catch the ferry across to Nuweiba in Egypt.

We explored the country by car, but you can do it on foot if you have the time. The Jordan Trail (675 km, 40 days) covers all the attractions, from Umm Qais in the north to Aqaba in the south. If we ever decide to walk such an extreme distance, we both decided that Jordan would be the country to do it in. Their culture is characterised by hospitality at levels we had never experienced. It was also consistent. Regardless of whether we stayed in the city or the countryside, we were treated the same way: like royalty.

Everyone greets you with the same phrase, “Welcome, welcome, thank you for coming.” What a place!



Fast facts

These prices are from 2019 and are meant to provide a rough idea of what the Gurneys spent on their trip. Prices would have gone up since then.



AQABA
Bedouin Moon Village (hotel): R480 per night for two people (camping in the parking area)
Maqluba (upside-down stew): R265 per person
Bakkie service: R288 (new oil, diesel and air filters)

PETRA
Entrance into Petra: R1 320 per person, which gives you access for three days. (Free if you have a Jordan Pass, like we did.)
Donkey ride through the Siq: R400 per person (return trip)
Horse-drawn carriage ride: R460 for two people (one way, from the entrance to the Treasury)
Toasted sandwich opposite Ad Deir (the Monastery): R216

AMMAN
Alanbat Hotel: R890 per room (two people) per night
Entrance to Umayyad Palace Citadel: Free if you have a Jordan

Pass, otherwise R66 per person
Entrance to Roman amphitheatre: Free if you have a Jordan Pass, otherwise R48 per person
Mansaf (lamb and yoghurt dish) for one: R320

DEAD SEA
Amman Dead Sea (full-day package): R240 per person
Light lunch for one: R208

WADI RUM
Entrance to Wadi Rum: Free if you have a Jordan Pass, otherwise R110 per person per day

OTHER FEES
Jordan Pass: R1 680 per person (this covered, among other sites, three days in Petra, plus an entry visa into the country)
AB Maritime ferry for our vehicle from Jordan to Egypt (3 hours): R2 880
Ferry cost (passenger): R1 040 per person



NOTE

We have previously published the African leg of Patrick and Marie's journey – see issues #158 to #166 for their travels through Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

This European part of the trip preceded the African leg. See issues #175 to #179 for their travels

through France, Italy, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey and Israel.

In the end, they visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km before arriving back home in Joburg on 19 December 2019.

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