



Land of the LOST & FOUND

A city lost for 500 years, history stretching back beyond biblical times and an ancient landscape of mountains and valleys dramatised by light and colour – Jordan invites the traveller into another world.

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The Treasury
(*Al Khazneh*) from
the Shaft (*Al Siq*)

On a clear spring evening, a quiet procession walks the curving path through a narrow chasm. It is a scant three metres wide in some parts, with rocks leaning in so they almost meet. The walls push more than 180m towards the sky and the only light comes from tea candles flickering in brown paper bags along the cavern floor. *Al Siq*, or the Shaft, is the geological corridor that funnels visitors 1.2km from the 21st-century bustle of Wadi Musa in southern Jordan to the ancient rose-red city of Petra, carved into the cliffs beyond.

This ghosted city disappeared from maps for 500 years until Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt rediscovered it in 1812. To follow him along the Siq is to experience the edge of that stunning recovery. This is a place with currency in many imaginations. In her memoir, *Married To A Bedouin*, New Zealander Marguerite van Geldermalsen wrote about living in Petra's caves. The site was in the explosive climax to *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade* and, more than 150 years earlier, in the lithographs of Scottish artist David Roberts. "I am more and more astonished and bewildered with this extraordinary city," Roberts wrote in 1839, "and I have often thrown my pencil away in despair of ever being able to convey any idea of [it]."

It's easy to empathise with Roberts. But then many things in Jordan – an arrowhead of land surrounded by Israel, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia – conjure superlatives. And the instant of reaching the end of this calligraphic canyon and seeing, for the first time, the smallest sliver of *Al Khazneh* (the Treasury), Petra's most famous building, lit only by candles, felt like slipping into a wardrobe and finding Narnia inside.

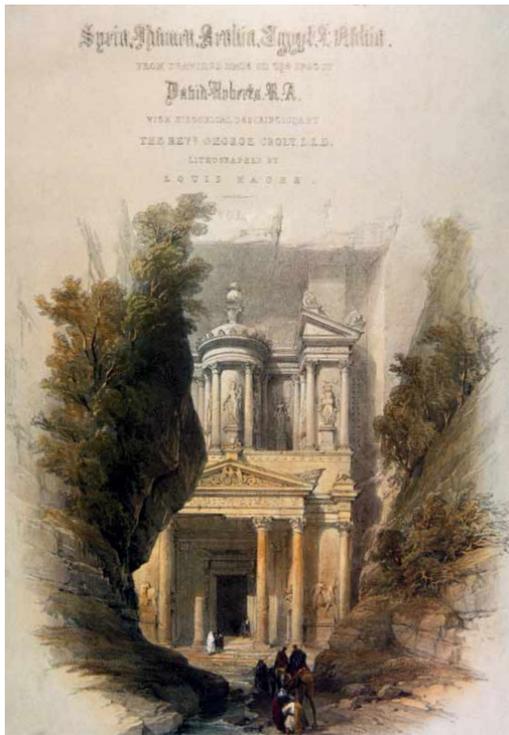
IN JORDAN there are many moments of uncanny beauty. Roadside cafes juxtapose strawberries and camels. Children parachute huge white sheets in their games, the pure fabric flaring against the red of the ground, the blue of the sky.

Amman, like a child's drawing of a city, is a series of hills covered with white-cube buildings, echoing with calls to prayer. ▶

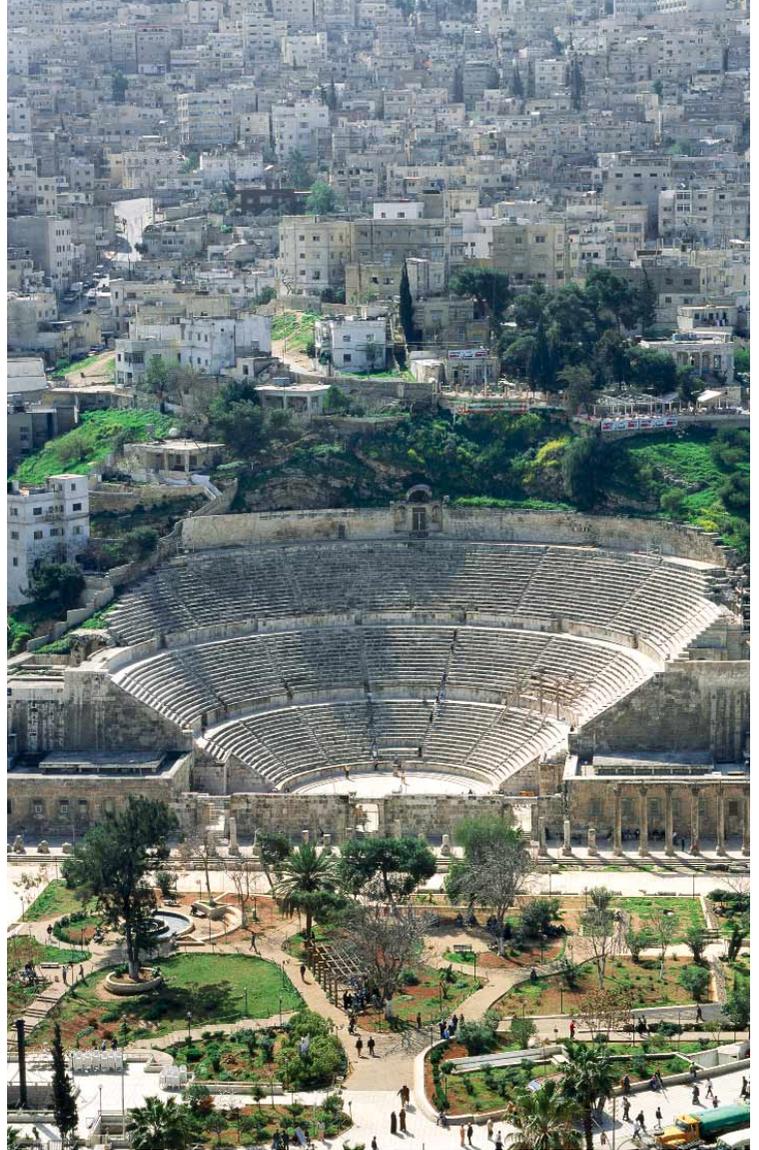
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The Treasury
(Al Khazneh)





19th-century lithograph of the Treasury by David Roberts (above); ancient Roman theatre, Amman (right)



At its heart, tucked almost casually inside the unrenovated space of the Citadel's museum, are statues made in Ain Ghazal in 7000BC. Cubic bodies and delicate necks support elongated heads from which sharp, arresting eyes stare, starkly black and white, and startling.

Beyond, there's a taxonomy of Sunday school memories – Mount Nebo (where Moses died), Bethany (where Christ was baptised) – and these biblical stories are tiled across the landscape as perfectly as the glowing Byzantine mosaic map, which was dedicated in 542AD, that covers the floor of the church of St George in Madaba.

There are cornucopian sweet shops – vast platters of *kunafa* (a cheesy dessert thick with honey syrup) and *baklava* – and mosaic shops offering delicately tattooed ostrich eggs, each dotted with bright pictures that make them look like treasure. And there's *Alf Layla Wa Layla*, a Turkish bath where you can lie face-down on a hot slab and be washed, brushed, pummelled and rinsed. Clouds of soap bubbles puff onto tired travellers and the flight from Australia is buffed away.

More and more Australians are visiting Jordan – numbers are up almost 20 per cent in the past year. For most, Petra is probably the obvious shorthand for their trip. That does a disservice to the variety and complexity of Jordan's other landscapes and destinations, from the five-star opulence of the Kempinski Hotel Ishtar on the shores of the overly buoyant Dead Sea (where lush spa treatments

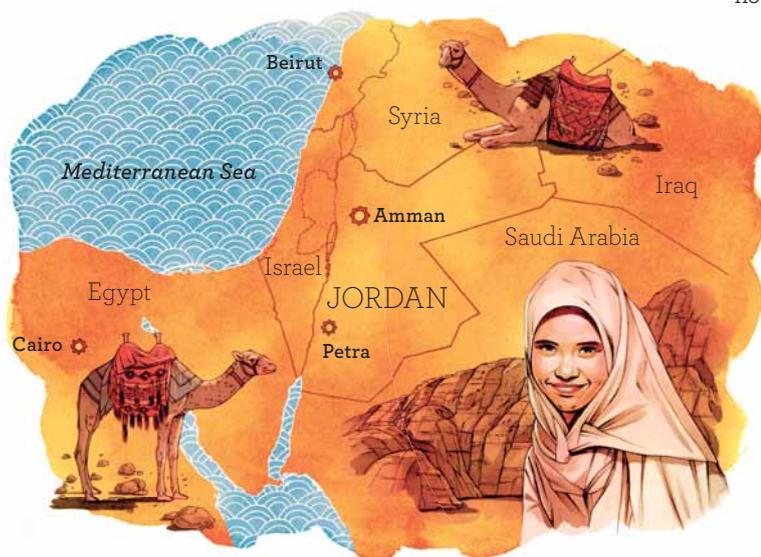
slather guests in its particular grey mud) to the very different indulgence of the Feynan Ecolodge. A 26-room candlelit haven (only the bathrooms have lights and power points, solar-powered), it sits at the western edge of the Dana Biosphere Reserve. Driving in at dusk, as a huge red sun sets and a sky full of stars and planets begins to glimmer, the candlelit compound looks like a view of fairyland.

Feynan offers a variety of local Bedouin experiences – from cooking classes to shepherding, but families are moving less these days, and those that do joke about choosing campsites for their mobile phone coverage rather than anything to do with their animals.

Before sunrise, visitors can climb the ridge with a Bedouin guide. The colours change as the sun comes up, sharpening textures and shapes across the ground. To the south-east, it's a four-day walk to Petra (hikers can send their luggage from camp to camp); to the north-west, Jerusalem (travellers used to cross the border by taxi to visit Petra for the day). The ground is a mosaic of shale and pebbles, with touches of verdigris and tiny white snail shells. It resembles the remnants of an ocean and it feels like walking on time.

To move through Jordan is to be repeatedly surprised by geology at its most dramatic. On the drive into the Wadi Rum Protected Area – one of Lawrence (TE Lawrence) of Arabia's bases during the Arab Revolt of 1916-18 – granite and sandstone formations rise up like relatives of the Purnululu beehives or Monument Valley in Utah. ▶

Infinity pool, Kempinski Hotel Ishtar, Dead Sea



Away from the road, the sand is velvet soft, the tones impossibly various and vibrant. It takes conscious effort not to photograph every rock and colour. On a short camel ride across the wadi, the landscape and its silence reach a perfect harmony with the animals' slowly rocking pace. The world, and all its space and time, seem spread to vastness – but Petra is getting closer; just a 90-minute drive away.

IF PETRA BY NIGHT is a gentle secret, a single building lit and revealed, then Petra during the day – with its sprawling 264ha Archaeological Park – is expansive and busy.

Deep in the Siq, a small boy starts to sing and the sound echoes and rises with his breath towards the sky. This passageway has been carved and smoothed by water and in the past flash floods have rushed along its course, killing anyone in their path. The boy sings, the sun shines, the rocks glow. At the canyon's end, the Treasury flashes into view with the sensuous luminosity of sunlight.

Listed on UNESCO's World Heritage Register in 1985, Petra is not only Jordan's premiere archaeological site, but one of the world's most impressive. Established more than 2000 years ago as the capital city for the Nabataean people, it comprises hundreds of buildings, shrines and monuments carved straight into the bright and patterned stones of its mountainous cliffs. Its wide streets are set with rows of intricate facades – some, almost eroded, give the reverse illusion of new buildings emerging straight from the granular stone. Deep antechambers swirl with the rock's natural stripes and markings, and there are banks of tombs – more than 800 in all – including the Urn Tomb, the Silk Tomb and the Palace Tomb. At one turn comes the vast space of a 1st-century AD theatre; along another avenue appear the columns of the Great Temple, still under excavation by Brown University. It is estimated that only 15 per cent of the ancient city has yet been unearthed.

Even so, to try to explore Petra in a single day verges on the overwhelming. To the south-west, at the top of 900 rock steps, is the *Ad-Deir* monastery, a simulacrum of the famous Treasury below – although it is possible to scramble into its interior chamber, unlike the Treasury, which has been closed for the past three years. Panning from the elaborate facade to the view of valleys and the distant mountains, it's hard to decide which is greater, the magnificence of the site, or the surprise of being here at all. I had seen photographs of this place, but those flat reproductions only make the experience of standing in bright sun in the middle of the desert, feeling the shadows of the mountains, all the more intense.

Hauling up the single high step to enter the monastery's relative dimness, the air is cool and sharp against the hard light outside. It's beyond words, beyond comparison; a moment to be breathed. To get into Narnia was to find another place; in Jordan, there's this chance, too, to feel another time. Standing small in the oversized doorway of this vast carved space, you're off the map and out of the world.

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